

## Who in their right mind would want to read *Ulysses*?

### Séamus Cannon

There are two good reasons in my view why one should read *Ulysses*. The first is that the text is so wonderful: Joyce captures the human experience like no other, with all its complexity, and with great humour. Secondly, when you embark on reading *Ulysses* you'll find yourself mixing with a really interesting group of eccentrics and, in no time, the eccentric in you is released and you'll enjoy it enormously.

*Ulysses* is not an easy read, but neither is learning a language or a craft. It's best to do it in a group, desirably led by someone who can explain what is going on in the background and who help you over the difficult bits. For instance, *Ulysses* is divided into 18 chapters (Joyce called them episodes) and each episode has a title. However, this title is not included in the text – you're supposed to know it! Moreover, the titles come from Homer's *Odyssey*, the story of Odysseus' return home from the siege of Troy to his wife Penelope on the island of Ithaca. Throughout *Ulysses* there are close parallels with the story of the *Odyssey*, but Joyce transforms them in a most extraordinary way. Odysseus, the great hero becomes Leopold Bloom, a decent man who lives a very uneventful life as an advertisement canvasser for the Freeman's Journal; whose wife Molly is unfaithful; and who is abused during the day for being Jewish. The Mediterranean, which Odysseus travels for 10 years on his tortured journey home is Dublin. And the ten years is one day, the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1904. With Joyce, the epic becomes ordinary and the ordinary epic!

Joyce puts himself into the story as well. He is Stephen Dedalus who sets out from the Tower in Sandycove early in the morning and who, like Bloom wanders around Dublin for the day.

And one more thing: why the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1904? That was the day that James Joyce had his first date with Nora Barnacle, with whom he eloped later that year to live abroad until he died in 1941. During that time he wrote of nothing but Dublin, including *Ulysses*.