

# **The Onelegged Sailor and a Woman's Arm: the Boer War Music Hall Songs and Molly's Ambivalence**

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In Episode 10 of *Ulysses*, a onelegged sailor wanders through Dublin, singing the song "The Death of Nelson." As he walks along Eccles Street, a woman's arm appears from a window and throws a coin to the man. And, in Episode 18, we are finally told that the arm was Molly Bloom's. This information, however, seems only to deepen the mystery of the scene rather than solve it. We are tempted to ask the following questions: Why is Molly referred to only in terms of her arm in the first place? Why does she throw a coin to the onelegged sailor? Who is the sailor and what do he and his brief contact with Molly signify ?

I believe clues to those questions can be found in the history of the Boer War, which ended in May 1902, and in "The Absentminded Beggar," a jingoistic song for the war written by Rudyard Kipling. Molly once sang this song for a concert, and her former British lover, Lieutenant Gardner, lost his life in the war. It seems not only that the song reminds Molly of Gardner, but also that the song, along with other patriotic songs, exerts a strongly ideological influence on the characters' psyches. Recent increasing interest in various aspects of British imperialism and colonialism has greatly influenced Joyce studies, and the significance of the Boer War in his texts has already been pointed out by some scholars.<sup>1</sup> However, in relation to the historical and cultural connotations of the brief contact of Molly and the onelegged sailor, thorough analysis is yet to be done.

In this essay, I would like to demonstrate how the discourse of patriotic songs affects Molly, and how her affair with Gardner, along with the onelegged sailor's uncertain identity, can be subversive to the imperialist ideology which is imbued in the songs. Then I will show that Joyce was interested in Ireland's ambiguous relationship with British imperialism, and that this ambiguity is registered in Molly's affair with another "English" officer: Mulvey. By considering these aspects of Molly's private life

represented in her monologue, we will be able to understand that her brief contact with the onelegged sailor is richly charged with colonial ambivalence.

### **Molly and the Boer War**

The Boer War's origin goes back to the Napoleonic wars during which the British obtained Cape Town, its first foothold in South Africa. The discovery of gold in the Transvaal in 1886 increased tension between the British and the Boers, the Dutch farmers of the Cape, and the war finally broke out in October 1899. Upon the outbreak of the war, "The Absentminded Beggar," written by Kipling and set to music by Arthur Sullivan to raise a fund in support of British soldiers in South Africa, immediately became a great hit and "[n]o music hall program would have been complete without this song"(Schneider 84). The song's popularity, however, was lost within a year, along with the jingoism it evoked. The public began to realize the war had cost, and would cost, too much in terms of money and personnel. In fact, from the very beginning of the war, there had been a group of people who organized an antiwar movement; they were called the "pro-Boers" with disdain by those who supported the war. In England, the movement reached its peak when Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, a Liberal, decried the "methods of barbarism" with which the British army waged war on the Boer.<sup>2</sup>

In Ireland, the pro-Boer movement was even stronger, combined with Irish animosity against British colonialism, which the British government had to "hold down with the iron heel of martial rule"(Koss 179- 80). In "Lotus-Eaters," Bloom recalls Maud Gonne's campaign against enlistment in the British army: "Maud Gonne's letter about taking them [British soldiers] off O'Connell street at night: disgrace to our Irish Capital" (5. 70- 71). Gonne herself clearly said to Dr Leydes, the Transvaal representative in Europe: "This is Ireland's war as well as yours. Ireland and the Transvaal Republic are both fighting for their independence" (Gonne 283). As for Bloom, he was almost crushed by mounted policemen when he was among the protesters against Joseph Chamberlain's visit to Trinity (8. 426). Chamberlain was secretary for the colonies under Lord Salisbury's regime and believed to be responsible for the outbreak of the Boer War.

In 1903, a year after the war, Molly sang "The Absentminded Beggar" as

part of the program at St Teresa's Hall on Clarendon St. She recalls it as follows:

the last concert I sang at where its over a year ago when was it St Teresas hall Clarendon St little chits of missies they have now singing Kathleen Kearney and her like on account of father being in the army and my singing the absentminded beggar and wearing a brooch for Lord Roberts (18. 374-78).

In the same hall where Molly sang the jingoistic song, Irish nationalists in turn held concerts to promote cultural nationalism, and Molly seems to be concerned about her anti-Irish performance in the past (Gifford 614). Why did she sing "The Absentminded Beggar" in the first place?

According to J. H. Raleigh's *The Chronicle of Leopold and Molly Bloom*, it is Bloom who had Molly sing "The Absentminded Beggar" because he wanted to "publicly atone for his pro-Boer sympathies during the war"(182). Yet, considering the fact that the pro-Boer campaign was supported by the majority in Ireland, and that a year had already passed since the war ended, why did Bloom have to atone for his pro-Boer sympathies? One possible answer is that Bloom had actively participated in the pro-Boer movement to the extent that he now fears the imperial power of the police. Vincent Cheng, for example, argues that Bloom fears the police because of his experience of nearly being beaten and arrested by policemen at the time of Chamberlain's visit at Trinity (213, 227). Yet, whether Bloom actively participated in the movement, or unwittingly got involved in it when he was walking there by chance, is a matter of argument, and no direct information to clinch the argument seems to be given in the text except for a hallucinatory accusing voice shouted at him in "Circe": "Turncoat! Up the Boers! Who booed Joe Chamberlain?" (15. 791).

As for Molly, she would not sing the song only because Bloom puts it in the concert program. I think that Molly has her own reason to sing "The Absentminded Beggar." It seems most likely that Molly associates the song with her former lover, Lieutenant Gardner, who lost his life in the Boer War, and that she has suggested to Bloom that the song should be included in her concert program. The exact time of their affair is not clear; it could have been

at any time between 1899 and 1901 (Raleigh 174). She remembers the scene of Gardner's departure to South Africa as follows:

I hate the mention of their politics after the war that Pretoria and Ladysmith and Bloemfontein where Gardner lieut Stanley G 8th Bn 2nd East Lancs Rgt of enteric fever he was a *lovely fellow in khaki* and just the right height over me Im sure he was brave too he said I was lovely the evening we kissed goodbye at the canal lock my Irish beauty he was pale with excitement about going away [my italics] (18. 387- 92)

The phrase "a lovely fellow in khaki" is perhaps an echo by Molly of "a gentleman in khaki" from the Kipling's "Absentminded Beggar." The song goes:

"Will you kindly drop a shilling in my little tambourine / For a gentleman in khaki ordered South? / ... / There are girls he walked with casual. They'll be sorry now he's gone.... / We must help the girl that Tommy's left behind him!" (Bauerle 309- 14)

If Gardner plays the role of the "Tommy" of the song, then Molly is "the girl that Tommy's left behind him." Cherly Herr demonstrates in *Joyce's Anatomy of Culture* how influential music hall songs were to the public at the turn of the century, arguing that "the stereotypes offered in the halls of men, women, love, marriage, family relations, and the working life are those that Joyce's characters measure themselves against" (195). "The Absentminded Beggar" is a good example of this. Probably, Molly is unwittingly affected by the song's discourse and imposes on herself the role of a woman who is left behind by a soldier going to the imperial war.

A similar discourse is repeated in another popular Boer War song, "Good-bye, Dolly, I Must Leave You."<sup>3</sup> This song typically represents a masculine aspect of imperialism to the extent that the gender roles are strictly split. A man leaves his girl behind in order to face the foe at the front. Dolly's voice is not represented at all in the song; she is expected to stay at home as a passive supporter of the imperial war.<sup>4</sup> The jingoistic song directly appeals to a patriarchy in which woman's role in the war is defined from men's

perspective.

Thus, both “The Absentminded Beggar” and “Good-bye, Dolly, I Must Leave You” disseminate this imperial-patriarchal ideology as well as being produced by it. Those two songs are combined in Dolly Gray’s words in *Ulysses*: “Cook’s son, goodbye. Safe home to Dolly. Dream of the girl you left behind and she will dream of you” (15. 4419– 20).<sup>5</sup> Why Molly is referred to only as an arm in Episode 10 can be analyzed in terms of this ideology. Of course, this metonymical representation of Molly can be explained as a technique of realism or as an experiment of modernism, but I would like to suggest that the metonymy also demonstrates the society’s dominant discourse which is imbued with patriarchal-imperial ideology. In this discourse, Molly is reduced into “a plump bare generous arm” (10. 251) in a fetishistic manner, and we cannot hear her real voice until we reach the last episode of *Ulysses*.

T. L. Williams argues that the characters in *Ulysses* may reflect that the “gentleman in khaki” of Kipling’s song “probably in real life would have ended up like the one-legged sailor, begging for pennies” (390). Developing Williams’ argument a little further, I would like to suggest it is the song, or its discourse produced by the combination of patriarchal-imperial ideology, that pushes Molly to throw a coin to the onelegged sailor. Also, I believe that the sailor reminds her of Lieutenant Gardner because the sailor presents himself as a wounded soldier from a British imperial war. In other words, the onelegged sailor is what Gardner would have been if he had been lucky enough to lose only a leg instead of his life in the war. Molly may want to express her condolences to the late Gardner by throwing a coin to the onelegged sailor as well as by singing “The Absentminded Beggar” at her concert.

### **The Onelegged Sailor’s Spuriousness and Molly’s Ambivalence**

I would like next to consider the onelegged sailor in terms of the significance of his singing “The Death of Nelson,” the early nineteenth century English patriotic song.<sup>6</sup> The song dramatizes Nelson’s death and his victory in the Battle of Trafalgar. Nelson’s victory destroyed Napoleon’s hopes of Eastern conquest and ensured the supremacy of British naval power for more than a century, which led to England’s ultimate global imperialism. It

was during the Napoleonic wars that the British captured Cape Town in South Africa, which turned into a remote cause of the Boer War. In Joyce's time, Nelson returns as a statue standing on the top of his namesake pillar in central Dublin. In "Aeolus," Stephen employs this pillar in his parable as a symbol of Dublin's paralysis or its sterility under the colonial regime.

As for the identity of the onelegged sailor, Vincent Cheng calls him "a victim of British military recruitment efforts" and adds:

the effect of the one-legged sailor singing this song is terribly ironic — for the duty to "England, home and beauty" comes at the cost of one's leg, even when England is not even your own "home" and country (but its oppressor). (225–26)

This argument will hold effective if we believe what the onelegged sailor wants us to believe. Molly at least seems to do so, as she throws a coin to him. But whether the sailor is a real victim or simply a fraud can be a matter for argument because we never know the real reason for his having lost his leg. Also, we know that sailors in Joyce's literary works such as Frank in "Eveline" and Murphy in "Eumaeus" of *Ulysses* are not necessarily trustworthy characters. For my argument, the sailor's real identity is not as important as the fact that he probably evokes in Molly the memory of the late Lieut. Gardner.

By singing the patriotic song "The Death of Nelson," the onelegged sailor can assume the role of a returnee from an imperial war and evoke people's sympathy and charity. For most people in Dublin at the turn of the century, "an imperial war" must have meant the Boer War. Also, the sailor's physical loss not only alleges his active involvement in action but also works as an allusion to Nelson's impaired body. Nelson lost first his eye and then his arm in action. In other words, the onelegged sailor mimics Nelson and succeeds in having his own body express a specific meaning in the context of imperialism: a victim of the imperial war. We may say he tries to make up for his lost leg, a symbolic castration, by associating himself with Nelson's phallic pillar. As I have already demonstrated, the context the sailor counts on comes to exist through the discourse of popular songs which is imbued with the patriarchal-imperial ideology.

More importantly, however, this ideology is threatened both by the onelegged sailor and by Molly at the same time. This is because their identities oscillate to the extent that they produce ambivalence. As for the onelegged sailor, there always remains the possibility that he may be a fraud who swindles money out of people by pretending to be a Boer War victim. Also, since one of the reasons for the outbreak of war was imperialist territorial ambition over gold in Transvaal, the onelegged sailor's uncertain identity may be a metaphor for the war's spuriousness. Thus, we can interpret the sailor singing a patriotic song as a parody of imperialism itself.

As for Molly, although she encourages Gardner with a good-bye kiss in such a manner as demonstrated in the Boer War music hall songs, the fact is that Molly is an Irish woman committing adultery with a British soldier. Needless to say, adultery is a main theme of *Ulysses*. If the adulterous relationship of Molly and Boylan plays on the taboo in the Victorian family code and tends to threaten the patriarchal society, Molly's affair with Gardner shifts the theme into the context of colonialism and imperialism. Their affair reveals the hypocrisy about women's roles implied in the discourse of the jingoistic songs. After all, neither "the girl that Tommy's left behind him" in Kipling's song nor Dolly Gray in "Good-bye, Dolly, I Must Leave You" has to be an English girl; she could be a prostitute or a colonized native woman as long as she plays the role of a girl left behind. In fact, Molly, who has exotic dark eyes, is not simply Irish; she is half Irish and half Spanish Jew, originally from Gibraltar, another British colony. In her monologue, Molly says: "I was afraid he [Gardner] mightnt like my accent first he so English" (18. 889). Molly seems to be concerned about her multiply ethnic background.

In other words, those jingoistic songs are intended to produce an imaginary unity in which people's racial and cultural backgrounds are dismissed.<sup>7</sup> They also conceal subversive realities of the imperial-colonial society, such as adultery and sexual exploitation. It seems hard to believe that all women left behind by Tommys behaved like Penelope, just as it is almost unrealistic to believe that all Tommys who were sent to fronts and other parts of the Empire were solely devoted to the imperial cause and faithful to their women left in the home country. As I have mentioned above, Gonne was concerned about the British soldiers wandering about downtown Dublin at night, and the skirmish between Stephen and two British soldiers in the 'Circe'

episode seems to underpin Gonne's concern. Molly refers to the red-light district of Gibraltar where men can choose "what they please a married woman or a fast widow or a girl for their different tastes" (18. 1389- 90). Though here Molly speaks of men in general, it is obvious that imperialism traded on the patriarchal society's institutionalized sexual exploitation.

Thus, those songs are doubly hypocritical: first, they disguise the reality of disintegrating Victorian family ideology; secondly, they conceal a form of sexual exploitation in colonial society. Molly's ambivalent identity along with her adulterous relationship with Gardner reveals this latent significance of the songs. Consequently, when Molly throws a coin to the onelegged sailor singing "The Death of Nelson," the scene is not a simple, transitory moment any more, but one richly charged with colonial ambivalence. On the surface, both the onelegged sailor and Molly are subjected to the patriarchal-imperial ideology, but their oscillating identities can be disruptive to the ideology.

### **Irish Ambiguity and Molly's "female" Discourse**

In spite of political and cultural nationalism combined with animosity against British colonial rule, historically, Ireland had been a significant component of the British Empire and had supplied human resources to other British colonies. In his lecture on Irish political and cultural history delivered to the Triestine audience in 1907, Joyce himself alludes to how essential the Irish contribution was to the Boer War:

At that time, the English debacle in South Africa in the war against the Boers had made the English army an object of scorn in the European press, and if it took the genius of the two commanders-in-chief, Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener (both of them Irishmen, born in Ireland) to redeem its threatened prestige ... it also took Irish recruits and volunteers to demonstrate their renowned valour on the field of battle. (qtd. in Mason 164)

Though whether Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener can be called Irish would be a matter of argument, this passage at least shows that Joyce had not a little interest in Irish involvement in English war efforts.



In *Ulysses*, Bloom reflects the author's concern with this issue to a considerable extent. For example, immediately after recalling the demonstration against Chamberlain's visit, he utters: "Few years' time half of them magistrates and civil servants. War comes on: into the army helter-skelter: same fellows used to"(8. 438-40). In the "Circe" episode, he says to the British soldiers who are about to attack Stephen: "We fought for you in South Africa, Irish missile troops. Isn't that history? Royal Dublin Fusiliers. Honoured by our monarch"(15. 4606-07). Bloom repeats a similar observation in "Eumaeus": "Irish soldiers had as often fought for England as against her, more so in fact"(16. 1041-42). According to Gifford's annotation, "Irish regiments fighting for the British were balanced by Irish brigades that fought on the side of the Boer"(524). In "Ithaca," Percy Apjohn, one of Bloom's friends, is referred to as being "killed in action" at the Moder River during the Boer War (17. 1251). This Irish ambivalence is epitomized in the rivalry between Major Tweedy, who once served with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, and the Citizen, the belligerent ultranationalist, in "Circe" (15. 4617-24).

As Bloom suggests, Irish nationalism overtly expressed its antagonism to British imperialism while Irish collaboration with imperialism seems to have been an open secret. Of course, it is problematic whether we should focus on antagonism or collaboration. For example, Linda Colley, who discusses how imperialism served to cover up differences among Britons and mold the unified British identity, points out Ireland's otherness:

And although Irishmen were always an important component of the British armed forces, and individual Scots-Irishmen like Macartney and Anglo-Irishmen like the Wellesley clan played leading imperial roles as diplomatists, generals and proconsuls, Ireland's relationship with the empire was always a deeply ambiguous one. (327)

While Colley puts emphasis on Ireland's antipathy against English colonial rule, Joyce seems to be more interested in registering Irish collaboration.

Molly's relationship with Harry Mulvey, with whom she had her first kiss while she was still in Gibraltar, also reflects this Irish ambiguity. Bloom suspects that Milly's real father might be Mulvey as she has blond hair in spite

of his and Molly's hair being dark, and recalls him as "lieutenant Mulvey, British navy" (17. 868-70). Apart from Milly's legitimacy, however, Bloom's words about Mulvey's identity are rather misleading, because Molly's monologue suggests that Mulvey is not from England but from a small town in County Wexford, Ireland (18. 779; Also see Gifford). If so, Mulvey would be another example of Irishmen serving in the British Empire. In fact, after his brief relationship with Molly, he left for India. Molly recalls him as follows:

Molly darling he called me what was his name Jack Joe Harry Mulvey was it yes I think a lieutenant he was rather fair he had a laughing kind of a voice ... he said hed come back Lord its just like yesterday to me ... perhaps hes dead or killed or a captain or admiral its nearly 20 years ... if he came up behind me and put his hands over my eyes to guess who I might recognise him hes young still about 40 perhaps hes married some girl on the black water and is quite changed.... (18. 817-23)

We never know whether Mulvey's rank was really lieutenant as Gardner's or Molly simply confuses the two men's ranks. In either case, they seem to be interchangeable for Molly as she gave the ring which Mulvey had presented her to Gardner leaving for South Africa (18. 867). This confusion contributes to Molly's notoriously fusing pronoun "he" as her monologue develops.

In other words, Gardner, a British, and Mulvey, an Irish, are fused in Molly's monologue; their difference in nationality is almost nullified at least in the level of her language. This fusion, however, should be distinguished from the imperial unity which the jingoistic songs planned to achieve. While the latter is constituted by patriarchal ideology and aims to produce a unified British identity, the former is characterized by the "female" discourse which seems to revitalize people's multiple backgrounds and connect them in a more liberal manner. Molly, who is referred to only as an arm in Episode 10, recovers her full body in the final chapter, and the masculine struggle for power based on clear-cut identities is likely to be suspended at least for a while.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have focused on the scene of Molly's throwing a coin to a onelegged sailor, and tried to explore its historical and cultural dimensions. In the imperial-patriarchal ideology, the role of woman is defined by men's perspective as that of domestic supporters to men in the Empire. This is reflected in the contemporary music hall songs I have mentioned above. Molly's relationship with Gardner can be seen as a product of the discourse of these songs, and she repeats the relationship in a symbolic manner when she throws a coin to the onelegged sailor. Yet, because of Molly's ambivalent identity and her adulterous relationship with Gardner, and because of the sailor's dubious identity, that symbolic repetition can reveal the hypocrisy of the imperial-patriarchal ideology and of the Victorian family ideology which works behind the discourse of the songs. As for the sailor's identity, we might add one more possibility, namely, he might be a wreck of Mulvey's former self. We should remember that Molly recalls him saying that he would come back in her monologue. Thus, the scene of Molly's encounter with the onelegged sailor and her monologue refer to each other in a mutually proliferating manner.

## Notes

1. Barbara Temple-Thurston, for example, calls our attention to the significance of the South African motif: "Joyce has deliberately and carefully placed his South African references in the text. His early allusions to South Africa appears as simple incidental references, but Joyce progressively develops his metaphors, granting them increasing complexity and significance toward the end of the novel. To understand Joyce's political view, we must learn how the South African metaphors work." See Temple-Thurston, "The Reader as Absentminded Beggar: Recovering South Africa in *Ulysses*", *James Joyce Quarterly* 28 (1990): 249.
2. For the general idea of the Boer War and the pro-Boer movement, I am indebted to the following references: L. C. B. Seaman, *Victorian England: Aspects of English and Imperial History 1837-1901* (London: Methuen, 1973) 416-34.; Stephen Koss, *The Anatomy of an Antiwar Movement: The Pro-Boers* (Chicago:

- U of Chicago P, 1973); Simon C. Smith, *British Imperialism, 1750 – 1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 84 – 95; Okakura Takashi, *Boa Senso* (Tokyo: Kyoiku-sha, 1980); J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism*, trans. Yanaihara Tadao (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1951).
3. For the sake of my argument, let me quote the refrain of the song: “Good-bye Dolly, I must leave you, / Tho’ it breaks my heart to go./ Something tells me I am needed at the front to fight the foe./ See the boys in blue are marching, / And I can no longer stay./ Hark! I hear the bugle calling, Good-bye Dolly Gray!” (Ruth Bauerle, *The James Joyce Songbook*, 523 – 26).
  4. Clare Midgley, however, says as follows: “[J. Bush ] provided a counterpoint to the ‘powerfully masculine myth of late Victorian empire’ in the aftermath of the Boer War. Women’s propaganda stressed the impulse of ‘imperious maternity’ and described female emigrators as ‘the future nursing mothers of the English race to be’.... Marriage and motherhood were brought to the heart of the imperial enterprise, providing women with an imperial role which was complementary, rather than subordinate, to men.” See Midgley, “Ethnicity, ‘Race’ and Empire,” *Women’s History: Britain, 1850 – 1945*, ed. June Purvis (London: U of Portsmouth, 1995) 264.
  5. See Schneider (86) and Cheng (231).
  6. The song was composed by John Braham, an English tenor of Jewish parentage, who lived 1774(1772?) – 1856. Words to the song are by S. J. Arnold, who managed the Drury Lane Theatre in London in Braham’s time. Braham was an extremely popular English tenor, who gave concerts all over the British Isles. In 1809 he sang at the Theatre Royal, Dublin, for 15 nights, and “The Death of Nelson” was most likely in the program. For this note, I am greatly indebted to Ruth Bauerle, who kindly provided me the information through personal communication. Also see her *The James Joyce Songbook*, 344 – 48.
  7. Angus Wilson says: “[‘The Absent Minded Beggar’] asserts that somewhat nebulous dream of an England undivided by class differences, united in patriotic service which was to be at the centre of Kipling’s social thinking in all his high hopes for the next six or seven years.” See Wilson, *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling: His Life and Works* (London: Pimlico, 1977) 213.

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