The Social Isolation of Neurotic Bloom in James Joyce’s Ulysses

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Abstract
This paper studies Leopold Bloom’s social isolation and detached personality through the lens of neurosis in James Joyce’s Ulysses. To achieve this, this paper draws on Karen Horney’s theory of neurotics, in which people with detached personality feel as though they do not belong among other people. Such neurotics not only separate themselves from others but become alienated even from themselves. According to Horney, three neurotic elements lead to the formation of a detached personality: the need for “self-sufficiency,” “perfection,” and “narrow limits in life.” In Ulysses, Bloom distances himself from other people because of his anxiety and his desire for freedom, which results in his social alienation. To deal with his isolation, Bloom needs to flaunt his superiority, prove his independence, and set limitations on his life to relieve the pressures imposed on him by people and society.

Keywords
James Joyce, Ulysses, detached personality, Karen Horney, social isolation

Introduction
To present and develop inner desires, neurosis, dreams, alienation from society, etc., the influence of psychoanalysis, in the form of various literary devices, in modernist writers like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, William Golding, and Frank O’Connor has been inevitable. Joyce regularly read and was influenced by his contemporary psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, and Ernest Jones; although, he fervidly denied this influence. Jung in his letter, about Ulysses, writes to Joyce that “Your Ulysses has presented the world such an upsetting psychological problem that repeatedly I have been called in as a supposed authority on psychological matters” (Adler, 1975, p. 98). Availed himself of psychoanalysis, Joyce presented his writing style to be more neurotic than pervert, which is commonly believed. Later on, Karen Horney challenged the theory of neurosis as a distortion of typical human needs in interpersonal and social relationships rather than instinctual and sexual factors that Freud believed in. Horney categorizes the people with insecurities, alienations, and social isolation in three trends of “moving away from others,” “moving against others,” and “moving toward others.” Social isolation, according to Horney, is well-placed among the neurotic people who experience isolation and detached personality, and move away from other people in the society. Her theory of neurosis very much overlaps, in Ulysses, with the detached personality and sense of isolation of Leopold Bloom as an outsider in society, mostly because of his Jewish heritage, personal insecurities at home and society, unwelcoming views on the notion of nation and Irish nationalism, and homosociality (Sedgwick, 1985) and weak masculinity.

Isolation occurs when an individual feels that he or she is not meaningfully connected to their society through shared beliefs, practices, and values. According to Biordi (2016), “Social isolation ranges from the voluntary isolate who seeks disengagement from social intercourses for a variety of reasons to those whose isolation is involuntary or imposed by others” (85). Melvin Seeman classifies the sense of isolation as one of the major features of social alienation. Thus, a sense of isolation causes an individual to withdraw from people either voluntarily or involuntarily. According to Horney (1945), for a neurotic person with a detached type of personality (who tries to move away from others), the spirit is like Robinson Crusoe’s: he has to be resourceful in order to live; it is the only way he can compensate for his isolation” (76). In Ulysses, as Bloom experiences a sense of isolation in the society and at home, he attempts to survive by adopting several distorted behaviors to defend his freedom and “to free his mind from his mind’s bondage” (Joyce, 1922, p. 306). Bloom’s withdrawal from other people, as they treat him with rudeness and contempt, is inspired by his desire to attain freedom and find a solution for his loneliness: “Last
rose Castile of summer left bloom I feel so sad alone” (Joyce, 1922, p. 370). He refuses to allow anybody to divest him of his freedom. Therefore, he struggles to remove himself from the circle of social interactions. In order to deal with his isolation, he needs to flaunt his supremacy, prove his independence, and place restrictions on his life to eliminate the pressures he experiences from people and society.

**Bloom’s Struggle for Superiority**

The sense of superiority majorly arises due to a comparison with other individuals in a group. The significance of superiority and its association in neurotics with a detached personality is “the need for feeling superior; although common to all neuroses, must be stressed here because of its intrinsic association with detachment” (Horney, 1945, p. 29). In *Ulysses*, Bloom, as a Jewish man, is driven away from people as an outsider. In the “Hades” episode, for instance, his eagerness to put himself in the discussion with his fellow mourners fails when “Martin Cunningham thwarted his speech rudely” (Joyce, 1922, p. 133). In order to flee from this alienation, Bloom becomes deluded about his inflated importance compared to others and his need for perfection. Accordingly, this pursuit of perfection leads to a detached personality. To cope with this detachment, Bloom neurotically wishes for “superiority over others” (Gregory, 2004, p. 368) by using his non practicing religion as a tool wherever necessary, being benevolent more than other people, thinking about his children more than Molly (his wife), taking care of Stephen as a son, etc. However, these neurotic deeds leave Bloom to experience exclusion from the society and distaintness in the personal life. He is excluded both from his broader social circle by his friends and colleagues and is rejected in his personal life by his wife because of the existing Icoldness, who states that “I’m not an old shriveled hag before my time living with him so cold never embracing me” (Joyce, 1922, p. 1036).

According to Horney, when a detached person’s sense of superiority “is temporarily shattered, whether, by a concrete failure or an increase of inner conflicts, he will be unable to stand solitude and may reach out frantically for affection and protection” (Horney, 1945, p. 29). Hence, as a father who has a superior position over a son in family, Bloom misses his dead son Rudy very much. As soon as, he meets Stephen, he enthusiastically acts the role of a supportive father to Stephen, who has an unsupportive father in reality: Bloom fatherly transforms into other beings during the course of the ‘Circe’ episode (Mubarak, 2017, p. 47). In episode six, “Hades,” Bloom attends Paddy Dignam’s funeral and reflects on the “centuries-old ‘blood-libel’ the superstition that Jews kill Christian children in order to use their blood to make matzoh, the ritual unleavened bread eaten on Passover” (Reizbaum, 1999, p. 12). In the same episode, he meets people who are attending Dignam’s funeral. It is then that readers first witness him being treated as an outsider because of his religious roots mainly.

Moreover, the stereotype of Jews, as “moneylenders and usurers,” is frequently associated with Bloom throughout the social exclusion, conjugal failures, and distorted masculinity leading to weak homosociality, create in Bloom a need to perceive a significant difference between himself and the people in society who try to exclude him.

Firstly, a sense of social exclusion may initiate the need for supremacy. According to Hutchison (2007), “It has far-reaching consequences for individuals and groups and has been linked to a host of negative outcomes, including poor health and well-being, academic underachievement, antisocial and criminal behavior, and reduced access to housing, employment, and social justice” (30). In *Ulysses*, Bloom is largely excluded by both strangers and his peers because of his Jewish heritage, which is a “national problem” (Joyce, 1922, p. 30) against the Jews in a nationalistic Society of Ireland. Thus, in order to stay away anxiety and insecurity, Bloom feels the need for supremacy from the sense of being excluded by others. Bloom is a sceptic, although he is baptized as a Catholic, whereas his father is Jewish. His otherness becomes more serious in light of his religious roots due to “anti-Semitism prevalent at that time, not only in Ireland but all over Europe; a thematics of Jewishness, antisemitism, and Bloom as a scapegoat are pervasive as a motif through the entire narrative of *Ulysses*” (Mubarak, 2017, p. 46). Bloom’s Jewish ancestry, which makes him alien to Irish society, renders him an object of ridicule and menace, like when Citizen threatens him to death at the pub, “I’ll brain that bloody jewman [. . .], I’ll crucify him so I will.” (Joyce, 1922, p. 498). According to Shapiro, Jews are othered because “the Jewish uncanny represents the Jew(s) as spectral, disembodied spirits lacking a national home and, thus, as unwelcome guests or aliens wandering into and within other people’s homes, disrupting and haunting them, making them ‘Unheimliche’ unhomely” (Shapiro, 2004, p. 160).

Religious rituals are considered as another reason for antisemitism. Kristeva (1982) elaborately traces the origins of antisemitism to Jewish religious rituals such as circumcision, which raises the fear of castration in males. The dreaded Jew becomes “an object of the law of the Father, a piece of waste, his wife as it were, an abjection” (p: 185). Bloom is a typical Jewish figure that arouses unconscious anxiety in xenophobes and extremists. He has been portrayed as “a wandering figure, a flaneur, sometimes referred to as a ‘ghost;’ he changes identities, names, and even transforms into other beings during the course of the ‘Circe’ episode” (Mubarak, 2017, p. 47). In episode six, “Hades,” Bloom attends Paddy Dignam’s funeral and reflects on the centuries-old ‘blood-libel’ the superstition that Jews kill Christian children in order to use their blood to make matzoh, the ritual unleavened bread eaten on Passover” (Reizbaum, 1999, p. 12). In the same episode, he meets people who are attending Dignam’s funeral. It is then that readers first witness him being treated as an outsider because of his religious roots mainly.
novel. For example, “On the way to the cemetery, Bloom has been linked with the moneylender Reuben J. Dodd, who although Catholic in extra-literary life, is regarded as a Jew in the novel since he fits the stereotype; he is in this sense Jewish” (Reizbaum, 1999, p. 13). In addition, Bloom is separated from the pub community because of his Jewish heritage and his “need to pass in this fantasmic thus consolidates the ideological myth that Jewishness is not actually an ‘other’ or alternative identity at all, because it is a nonidentity” (Devlin, 1995, p. 55). Hence, the social pressure that Bloom faces is palpable, and the pub-goers’ hostility toward him makes him anxious. In order to avoid this hostility, he begins to withdraw from people, becoming detached from them and believing he is not only different from them but is actually superior. This is evident when he takes advantage of his Jewish root to show the superiority: “Mendelssohn was a jew and Karl Marx and Mercadante and Spinoza. And the Saviour was a jew and his father was a jew. Your God” (Joyce, 1922, p. 497). The novel confirms that Bloom retreats from people in order to find the perfection level of self among people.

Secondly, feelings of superiority by any of the partners in a conjugal relationship can devastate “passion, intimacy, commitment, and sexual satisfaction” (Donyadari & Yousefi, 2015, p. 37) and result in insecurity and separation. In married life, both parents have their own rights as well as responsibilities towards each other and their children. In Ulysses, Bloom’s position as a father is very strange. In order to prove his male supremacy over his wife, he tries to play the role of mother for his children. However, he fails at this role and is unable to gain his children’s attention. As a result, he becomes alienated from his wife, Molly, emotionally and sexually. He is more motherly to his children than his wife. When Bloom receives a letter from his daughter, Milly, who is working as a photo girl in Mullingar, she “communicates to her father much more than to her mother. Bloom recollects the day of his daughter’s birth when he rushed to the midwife; it is her father that Milly wakes up, and not her mother, when her growing pains come at night” (Wheat, 2015, p. 60). Bloom knows that his wife and daughter are alike in their habits, but he still loves his daughter very much. He thinks it is better for her to live in Mullingar “Better where she is down there: away” (Joyce, 1922, p. 92) because at home, “her mother is being unfaithful to her father and he does not want her to know it” (Wheat, 2015, p. 60). Similarly, Bloom feels more grief than his wife does over the death of their son just eleven days after his birth: “Bloom had a special attachment to his son who died eleven days after his birth. Bloom dotes on him a great deal” (Wheat, 2015, p. 59). Only after the death of their son do Molly and Bloom become alienated from one another: “Could never like it again after Rudy” (Joyce, 1922, p. 239). Although he struggles to surpass his wife, Bloom is never as popular as she. The reader often witnesses people enquiring Bloom after his wife. In one instance, Bloom is introduced merely as the husband of the famous soprano, Madame Marion Tweedy. When Ned Lambert asks John Henry Menton who Bloom is, Menton’s reply is quite revealing: “Madame Marion Tweedy that was, is, I mean, the soprano. She’s his wife” (Joyce, 1922, p. 150). Therefore, Bloom’s failed attempt to outdo his wife both shapes his frustrated personality and encourages him to distance himself from her in order to reduce the anxiety of exclusion in both his social and private lives.

Thirdly, the estrangement caused by distorted masculinity may lead to isolation in one’s social and private lives. In Ulysses, Bloom is more feminine than masculine. In the episode of “Circe,” Bello places “a ring on [the womanly Bloom’s] finger,” (Joyce, 1922, p.731) and claims Bloom his wife: “And there now! With this ring I thee own” (Joyce, 1922, p. 731). Bloom’s weakness in masculinity can be further seen from several perspectives. He expresses his femininity in his home where he prepares breakfast for his wife and serves her in bed. He is very careful not to make any noise while he is making his and Molly’s breakfast. One day, Bloom leaves home for work, and, after closing the door, realizes that he has left the keys in his previous day trouser pocket. However, he cannot go back inside since Molly is sleeping and he does not dare disturb her. Thus, keyless Bloom spends the whole day wandering the streets of Dublin. Bloom’s failed masculinity and homosociality are also evident in the male community of Kiernan’s pub. In the “Cyclops” episode, Bloom is excluded in several ways from the bar patrons’ community. It is noted that Bloom becomes anonymous or in possession of a non-identity by his refusal to acquiesce to the unspoken communal ethos of gift exchange. Additionally, Kimberly Devlin claims that Bloom’s Jewish heritage excludes him from constructing his identity in an Irish pub: “he is not a part of a nation nor opposed to a nation, but, in fact, excluded entirely. With neither a positive nor negative example of nationhood available to the nationless Jew, Bloom’s definition of nationhood is expectedly pedantic” (Zeller, 2013, p. 12).

**Bloom’s Need for Independence**

An overstated need for independence, as another element for neurotics, ultimately leads an individual to isolation. Bloom’s frustration and alienation from society and his home life—where he is not even sorry to be left alone—cause a neurotic need for independence. In order to achieve independent thought, Bloom shares his distorted views of social issues, which are strange enough to surprise readers. Although Bloom helps others, he does not desire any assistance from others. Moreover, he intends to show how resourceful and knowledgeable he is when debating people around him. Bloom neurotically retreats from people, while his real self still requires emotional and psychological support from other people. Thus, in order to feel independent, Bloom typically offers bizarre ideas on common topics, introduces himself as benevolent and demonstrates his resourcefulness.
Firstly, holding bizarre opinions on common topics demonstrates the impracticality of Bloom’s need for independence. An individual’s extreme viewpoints generally cause one’s social group to separate itself from that individual, leading to aloofness and isolation. Bloom’s first contrary opinion is his view on suicide. During the “Hades” episode, Bloom and some of his acquaintances attend Dignam’s funeral in a carriage. Mr Power, one of the acquaintances, is unaware that Bloom’s father committed suicide and declares suicide a disgraceful action.

—But the worst of all, Mr. Power said, is the man who takes his own life. Martin Cunningham drew out his watch briskly, coughed and put it back.
—The greatest disgrace to have in the family, Mr. Power added.
—Temporary insanity, of course, Martin Cunningham said decisively. We must take a charitable view of it.
—They say a man who does it is a coward, Mr Dedalus said.
—It is not for us to judge, Martin Cunningham said.

Mr. Bloom, about to speak, closed his lips again. (Joyce, 1922, pp. 135–136)

This discussion between Power and another acquaintance, Martin Cunningham, greatly troubles Bloom. Although Bloom is Catholic, he disagrees with the two men and even believes suicide may have been the best choice for his father. Dwelling on his father’s suicide while others condemn the act, Bloom thinks about how, when a person committed suicide in the past, “They used to drive a stake of wood through his heart in the grave” (Joyce, 1922, p. 136).

Bloom’s definition of nationality is similarly shocking to his acquaintances. Bloom independently and fearlessly defines a nation as “the same people living in the same place” (Joyce, 1922, p. 481), and, because he lives in Ireland, he identifies himself as Irish. The Citizen, however, scoffs at the thought of Bloom as an Irishman because Bloom, a Jewish man, “retains an ancestral yearning for Zion” (Stanford, 1954, p. 215), and thus, according to the Citizen, is not truly and wholly Irish. The people witnessing this argument, including the narrator of the chapter, seem to side with the Citizen and make disparaging comments about Bloom: “whatever be his religion or ethics or nationality, nobody wants him in Ireland” (Wheat, 2015, p. 58).

Bloom’s need for independence is also inspired by others’ rejection of his benevolence. “Benevolence” usually implies a selfless desire to help others; however, if one’s benevolent acts are performed only for personal benefit, they will be rejected by society. Thus, when Bloom asserts his independence and freedom from dogma by offering help to others, rare people accept his benevolence. Despite his strange behaviors, Bloom is active in charitable deeds. For example, as Bloom walks through the streets of Dublin, he comes across a blind stripling, whom everyone else ignores or jostles, and helps him across the street. At midday, Bloom attends a funeral for Paddy Dignam, a man he does not seem to have known well. However, upon learning that Dignam has left behind a widow and several young children, Bloom takes it upon himself to arrange a subscription for Dignam’s family: “As a matter of fact I just wanted to meet Martin Cunningham, don’t you see, about this insurance of poor Dignam’s” (Joyce, 1922, p. 453). Bloom later visits Dignam’s widow, in person, to help her understand the life insurance policy. Nonetheless, when he meets Cunningham in Kiernan’s pub for that purpose, he is accused of “Defrauding widows and orphans” (Joyce, 1922, p. 490). Later that evening, Bloom goes to the maternity hospital because he is concerned about the condition of Mrs Purefoy.

Finally, Bloom’s disappointment in being resourceful causes his need for independence. In order to survive in a hostile society, a neurotic individual must be resourceful. According to Horney, resourcefulness seems to be the only way for neurotics to remain independent and self-sufficient and to compensate for isolation and alienation. Bloom tries to be rational in debates and creative in his occupation. Bloom tries to behave intelligently in his arguments with people like the Citizen. He acts as “the prudent member” (Joyce, 1922, p. 440) of the group at the bar, refusing to drink with the other men. When the men, led by the Citizen, begin to gossip about Joe Brady, a man who got an erection as he was being hanged, Bloom responds, “That can be explained by science” (Joyce, 1922, p. 441), demonstrating his maturity and wisdom in contrast to the other men’s childish humor. As the men continue to discuss capital punishment, “Bloom comes out with the why and the wherefore and all the codology of the business” (Joyce, 1922, p. 440), establishing himself as a knowledgeable man.

**Bloom’s Resignation to Restrictions**

Restricting one’s experience of life’s joys makes an individual helpless and isolated. However, Bloom enjoys any possible restrictions on his life in order to make the lonely world he has created small enough to experience freedom to its full. According to Horney, “Feeling threatened and undeserving, the neurotic person will be content with relatively little, restricting their own ambitions and material desires” (42). In order to create boundaries around his life, Bloom attempts to separate himself from his religion and the responsibility of being religious. Likewise, Bloom does not enjoy the restrictions of a steady job and, therefore, repeatedly changes jobs after being employed only for a short time. He also struggles to rid himself of the pressures of his social and personal lives. Fleeing his personal and social responsibilities, Bloom becomes increasingly alienated and detached from his community. To further narrow his life, Bloom even becomes indifferent to immorality.

First, restricting one’s life often begins with a withdrawal from religious duties. Following a religion comes with certain duties and a failure to accomplish those duties may suggest an individual has withdrawn from said religion. Bloom attempts to separate himself from his religion and the
responsibility of being religious. He eats pork, which is a non-kosher food. He also visits Jewish Duglacz, who is ironically a “porkbutcher” (Joyce, 1922, p. 80). He is not enthused of reading an advertisement about a Zionist company, “Agendath Netaim: planters’ company” (Joyce, 1922, p. 82). He is not in touch with his faith even after converting to Catholicism: “Bloom is perhaps the most irreligious hero without any particular religion” (Wheat, 2015, p. 50). His indifference to Catholicism is confirmed by his view about Catholic mass, where he “prefer[s] an ounce of opium” (Joyce, 1922, p. 111) to stand up for it. Bloom’s father is born Jewish, but he later converts to Irish Protestantism. Accordingly, Bloom was raised Protestant, but, in order to marry Molly, he embraced Catholicism. Obviously, religion is not important to Bloom, as he converts and adopts new beliefs with no compunction. For him, practicing a religion is humorous rather than sacred. Currently, Bloom is not a practicing Christian and Molly is even afraid that Bloom will tease her if he knows she is going to church because Bloom hates the idea of attending church even after becoming a Catholic. The Church, for him, is only a nice “discreet place to be next some girl” (Joyce, 1922, p. 112). For Bloom, the holy water sprinkled on the dead is only for “shaking sleep out of it” (Joyce, 1922, p. 147). He knows that the cemetery is not a place to lift, but he does it in spite of himself.

Second, in accordance with his well-rounded nature, Bloom is not satisfied with a single profession. His present position is that of an advertisement canvasser for the Freeman. However, advertising was not the most well-respected occupation in Dublin at that time, and, in a way, Bloom’s role as an ad man further contributes to his peripheral social status. Moreover, he is known to have been engaged in several other occupations previously. He was at one time an “outdoor hawker of imitation jewelry, a dun for the recovery of bad and doubtful debts, a poorly rated deputy tax collector” (Joyce, 1922, p. 958) and occasionally peddles lottery tickets and trades in cast-off clothes. Molly herself comments on the various jobs Bloom has held, saying, “He puts his big foot in it Thoms and Helys and Mr. Cuffs and Drimmies” (Joyce, 1922, p. 1228). She also talks about Bloom’s being in danger of going to prison that occurred during his jobs selling lottery tickets, “either he’s going to be run into prison over his old lottery tickets that was to be all our salvations” (Joyce, 1922, p. 1028). Sticking to a single job makes Bloom bored and anxious. He is not eager to get accustomed to a situation since it makes him feel restricted. The novel demonstrates that becoming accustomed to a job would force Bloom to engage with people and return to normalcy; however, he refuses to accept this normality due to his neurotic attitude toward people and life.

Finally, unresponsiveness to immorality can also originate from limiting one’s life. An individual who is unresponsive to immoralities expresses indifference and wishes to avoid the stress of responding. In *Ulysses*, to lessen the pressure of his personal and social life, Bloom becomes indifferent and unresponsive to numerous issues including his wife’s adultery, which is commonly considered an immoral action. Although adultery is widely condemned in his culture, Bloom, as a neurotic person, does not want to involve himself even in private issues such as marital infidelity. Bloom’s passivity and indifference are noticeable in his willingness to accept Molly’s sexual adventures with Boylan. Bloom “thinks Boylan’s and Molly’s type of liaison is natural to the human species: it is an irreparable act, and to exact any form of retribution would actually benefit no one” (Cosby, 1974, p. 77). Molly’s infidelity is the main conflict in the whole novel, as it forces Bloom to muster enough courage to face the situation. Molly’s infidelity gives Bloom the chance to act independently and assert his own self and to handle this situation in a unique way. It is in the peculiar way that “Bloom manages this situation that he deserves to be called a polyphonic hero; he does not take revenge on his wife or her lover for what has happened in their house today” (Wheat, 2015, p. 80). He does not even plan to seek a divorce from his wife or sue Boylan for this outrage. Although Bloom reads Molly’s letter from Boylan and knows when Boylan will arrive at Bloom’s house, Bloom ventures out rather than stay and confront Boylan. Bloom could have immediately quarreled with his rival or his adulterous wife. Instead, he experiences several antagonistic sentiments, including “envy, jealousy, and abnegation,” (Joyce, 1922, p. 967) before attaining equanimity.

In conclusion, as evidenced, social isolation forces Bloom to adopt a detached personality. People in his society exclude Bloom not only from their circle of friends but also from polite interactions so Bloom finds them hostile to his self and freedom. To cope with his detachment, Bloom tries to adopt the senses of superiority, independence and self-imposed restrictions on his life. Bloom’s reactions to his alienation are a means of avoiding anxiety and hostility; however, his three coping mechanisms to avoid anxiety do not satisfy him and, in fact, simply lead him deeper into his social alienation and loneliness. On the other hand, his detachment from other people makes him yearn to find someone who can help him overcome his helpless alienation.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors wish to acknowledge support from: (i) the China National Social Sciences Fund Major Project, by the project name of “Research on the Overseas Dissemination of Chinese Contemporary Literature (1949-2019)” (Funding Code: 20&ZD287); and (ii) the Sun Yat-sen University Special Incubation Project for Major
Achievements in Liberal Arts, by the project name of “A Study of the Dissemination and Reception of Contemporary Chinese Literature in ‘the Belt and Road Initiative’ Countries and Regions.”

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