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## The use of Fiction in Management Research: The Journey of *Ulysses*

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### Abstract

An influential account of the use of fiction in management studies was published 20 years ago (Phillips, 1995). Since then the field has burgeoned with studies on particular writers (e.g. McCabe, 2014; De Cock, 2000), particular sites (e.g., McCabe, 2014), and particular phenomena (e.g., Patient, Lawrence and Maitlis, 2003) and particular forms (Holt and Zundel, 2014). With this paper we extend De Cock and Land's (2005) inquiry into how organization and literature are co-articulating and interdependent concepts using Joyce's *Ulysses* to advance the claim that "literary fiction can reveal important truths about organizational life without recourse to the representation of factual events" (Munro, and Huber, 2012:525). Specifically, we compare and contrast Joyce's work with the myth and its inherent properties of ambiguity, identity and power. Myths are accepted as containing some truth but existing in many forms: one definitive version is not to be found. Joyce does not offer a finished story, a 'how to' handbook of takeaways, but an incomplete journey that requires our own interpretations. In *Ulysses*, Joyce confronts the reader with the everyday world of Dublin and its array of relationships and organizations. Joyce's use of the everyday and ordinary provide an insight into the 'lived' world and the 'management' of real, lived experiences. At the time of publication *Ulysses* shocked people by what Kiberd (1992) refers to as its 'ordinariness'. Too often management knowledge is presented as stable information which fails to impart management as difficult-to-interpret, lived experience. Joyce documents a major shift in our understanding of time and place, and management research is catching up. We are beginning to understand that the coherence of organizational life is something we make up as we go along. We are sense-making as we organize. Our organizations are sense-making devices. They are rhetorical acts. Literature helps to restore what the professional-scientific literature necessarily omits or slights: the concrete, the sensual, the emotional, the subjective, the valuational' (Waldo, 1968). We interpret *Ulysses* as a critique of the modernist understanding of management and organization and show how it offers an alternative to traditional forms of research.

**Keywords:** business and management , the novel, fiction, organization studies, research methods

### 1. Introduction

This paper examines the world of management and organization presented by James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, which is set in Dublin, the location of the 2017 ECRM conference. We follow Knights and Willmott (1999:iix) in seeing "management as an everyday activity that involves interactions between people", and we contend that the novel, and here in particular, *Ulysses*, can inform the

reader in a way that offers an alternative to text books, case studies and more traditional forms of data. Maybe the case study is an introduction for managers to acquire the skills for analysing novels? As Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux (1994) suggest, cases are tales for the beginner to awake interest in more complex and ambiguous stories. "Even managers who find little professional relevance in arts and aesthetics tend to find case reading useful" (p.2). The framing of our paper is: What do we learn about management and organization from *Ulysses*.

## **2. Fiction and Management**

Much as many researchers have looked into the links between management and fiction, this remains a relatively undiscovered area in that each piece of fiction, like each real-life situation, can offer new insights and new knowledge. As rapid change and growing complexity increase the need for techniques in understanding organizations, research in the field of Business and Management increasingly is open to exploration in new fields responding to the call for diversity and willingness to innovate, and looking beyond traditional subject boundaries. This includes the study of fiction in order to gain an understanding of real-life phenomena (De Cock, 2010).

Czarniawska (2012a) shows how literary theory and criticism could "lead the way." (p. 669). She speaks of "subjective reality", not seeing historical (narrative) sources as "inanimate objects" but as objects to be questioned and entered into dialogue with, (p. 660). The data-gathering a novelist carries out is often similar to that of ethnographers. Access to a population can be more willingly given to a novelist than to an academic management researcher whose motives are unclear (Knights & Willmott, 1999). These advantages are often missed by people who have issues with novels as 'fiction' and fail to see the 'non-fiction' in them. Joyce wrote in exile about a city he knew well.

Czarniawska (2009) comments that "anthropologists should have given organization theorists a clue long ago: they made the stories of their exotic locations interesting by using a variety of fictional approaches in their reporting." (p.257). Easton and Araujo (1997) point out that, "Even the most radical positivist accepts that theory is an abstraction or simplification of the 'real world'; in other words a fiction. For a conventionalist or constructionist the difference between truth and fiction in any case immaterial." (p.100). They stress that literature aims to provide a greater understanding of the world and that management research or theory can also be regarded as intentionally fictional. Rhodes and Brown (2005) trace the use of such material, including novels, poetry, films and television programmes, back to *The Organization Man* (Whyte, 1956) in which in two chapters about "The Organization Man in Fiction" the author refers to popular novels and films. They note this practice as "not main-stream, but certainly present and accounted for" (Rhodes and Brown, 2005:469).

Buchanan and Huczynski (2016) in their popular Organizational Behaviour text book provide examples of novels (and also films) at the end of every chapter to enhance learning in the topic. De Cock and Land (2005) draw complex parallels between the writing of fiction and that of research, which Rhodes and Brown (2005:469) seem to simplify as "fictionality can be seen to be a characteristic of research writing in general". In other words, a story is 'fabricated' (Latour, 1999) from the data to explain a phenomenon.

Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux's work (1994) comprises many works of fiction analysed to learn more about organization. This includes a look at the works of authors such as Zola, Strindberg, William Dean Howell, Musil, and Spanish and Italian literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present with focus on the origins of the modern department store, Swedish public sector reforms, entrepreneurship and modernity. Short and Reeves (2009) concentrate on education and advocate the use of storytelling via the graphic novel as an effective strategy to communicate business strategies (p. 415).

An analysis of plots evident in the 2007-2010 financial crisis leads Czarniawska (2012b) to comparing strong plots with works of fiction and to advocating the analysis of fiction not only in organizational studies but also in accounting. She quotes Todorov, the Bulgarian-French literary theorist (1977:11): "An 'ideal' narrative begins with a stable situation which is disturbed by some power or force." (p.758). She sees this reflected in various scandals regarding (rare) female traders in the financial world and women in Euripedes' tragedies leaving their natural environment. The Nick Leeson rogue trading scandal of the 1990s was already described in Evelyn Waugh's 1945 *Brideshead Revisted*. Czarniawska sees in this the predictability and cyclicity of plot. "Current research indicates that whatever legitimacy has been lost by financial institutions, it is being reconstructed in a way that is quite familiar." (p.770). Czarniawska (2012a:662) takes this analysis further in analysing Dodge's detective novels as revealing of accounting practices and related events. She refers to suggestions to teach accounting via classic writers such as Chaucer and Joyce. She quotes Stone (2001:464): "Fictional writing, by not claiming to represent any particular individual's experience, opens the possibilities for exploring previously marginalised characteristics and overtly political theories." (p.662). Certainly not all fiction is appropriate for the study of management; however, literary texts are on the reading lists of leading management schools such as Edmonton, Stanford, Harvard, Stockholm. "Novels have the most unique capacity to render the paradox without resolving it in a didactic tale." (Czarniawska, 2009:13). Czarniawska (2009:361) says we need to see novels as an "act of readings of the world, which in turn need to be interpreted."

### **3. Ulysses**

Specifically, we examine Joyce's work focusing on his treatment of the ordinary, the mythical framework, knowledge and detail and complexity and identity. Knights and Willmott (1999:9) emphasise that "because people working in organisations, including managers, are first and foremost human beings, insights into the experience and dynamics of life at work can also be derived from novels not ostensibly about work."

#### **3.1 The ambiguous, the ordinary**

Joyce does not offer us a finished story, a guru handbook of 'how to do it', but an incomplete journey where we can only rely on our own interpretations. No 'take home' is provided to learn and reproduce when needed. Constant readjustment and learning are what we need. Whilst the aim of research is to come to some sense of how things are, the claim that 'this is how things are' is made quite differently in the physical sciences and the social sciences. Management ('science', sometimes) sits, usually awkwardly, between the claims of the physical sciences and

the social sciences. Management books often fail to see management as lived experience, but concentrate on knowledge as 'information'. They help to sustain the image of knowledge as a fixed and objective entity. Knights and Willmott (1999:1) criticize both the idea that 'management' consists of learnable knowledge and the failure to see it as 'lived experience'.

'Textbooks and guru guides tend to take for granted what may loosely be termed the personal and political (small p) dimensions of managerial and organizational work, or these dimensions are (dis)regarded as an irrelevance for getting the job of management done.' (Knights and Willmott, 1999:17).

The interpretation of novels is ambiguous. The material they contain is not analysed within them: it is 'tacit knowledge' (Czrniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994:9). As Knights and Willmott (1999:8) explain, "[the reader is] influenced by impressions that will be triggered and as in all texts, alternative interpretations can be offered." This ambiguity can be compared to most myths where there is normally not one single, official version. Joyce's *schemata* exist in two non-identical versions: there is no 'final' edition of *Ulysses*. "The endless work of finishing it he determined to hand to his readers" (Kenner, 1980:157). This openness provides a challenge to anyone wishing to reach a conclusion, a happy end. Joyce will not provide it. However, Joyce does have a 'system', he has places, events, characters, roles, time. To accuse him of no organization is totally missing the point. The world he portrays or has organized, is organized down to the minute and square inch. Stephen and Bloom between them cover 30 miles during the day. *Ulysses* is intensely specific about time and place. (Joyce was supposed to have claimed that if Dublin were ever razed its geography could be reconstructed from his book.)

We see the contradictions, the pull of conscience, the weaknesses, the struggles – not only in more significant decisions such as Stephen's to stay with the Blooms, but in apparently minor considerations of how to order the events of the day. This ordinariness and dealing with everyday issues can give a false sense of 'disorder' or 'un-order'. Knights and Willmott (1999:127) examine the terms of 'manage' and 'management', i.e. how we 'manage' our lives, 'manage' to do things etc. as *lived experience*; there remain continuities between the process of managing (in) organizations and the process of managing mundane everyday activities. As Kenner shows (1980:103) the book may appear to be "adrift" at times, but in fact the actions are well staged and time is of the essence in understanding. Bloom may well be "adrift", but he knows he cannot return home due to his wife's assignation with Blazes Boyle. He is not free to go home, but neither is he clear on when to return. His actions are motivated by filling time. In fact as Joyce's *schemata* show, the day is divided up into clear stages and times. What may to the casual reader, if there is such a thing of *Ulysses*, appear simultaneous or random, is part of a carefully planned division of time. We the reader hear church bells and watches are referred to (not always working as shown by Bloom on the beach), providing the reader with a feeling of what Kenner (1980:15) calls "calculated disorientation." This emphasis on 'the real' is also in juxtaposition with 'the unreal'. Bloom's hallucinations are not at first recognizable as such and the border between 'reality' and 'delirium' is at times fuzzy. This refusal to give us the 'facts', but to replace these with a mixture of context, conversation, thought, delirium, and dream provides an intricate 'reality' for

us to interpret. Messages are not given to us, we must find and interpret them. As Kenner (1980:51) points out, Ulysses “was long regarded as an eccentrically detailed account of a man spending a Dublin day: ‘the dailiest day possible’, it was even called. Not at all.”

Joyce documents a major shift in our understanding of time and place, and management research is catching up. We are beginning to understand that the coherence of organizational life is something we make up as we go along. We are sense-making as we organize. Our organizations are sense-making devices. They are rhetorical acts. “We are beginning to see that organization does not exist *in space and time*” (O’Doherty et al., 2013:1431). Sense making is problematic rather than a means of resolution. Literature helps to restore what the professional/scientific literature necessarily omits or slights: the concrete, the sensual, the emotional, the subjective, the valuational’ (Waldo, 1968):

‘A day in the life of ...’ is a useful framing device to capture actual everyday experience. If we compare what Stephen, Bloom and Molly do with what effective general managers do (Kotter, 1999) we can see this contrast at play. Kotter’s Michael Richardson arrives at work at 7.55am and leaves the office at 5.45pm. Like other successful GMs, he spends a lot of time with others, regularly sees people who seem to be unimportant outsiders, discusses a wide range of topics often unrelated to work, wastes time even in his own opinion, and spends most of the day in unplanned meetings and in short disjointed conversations.

Yet Joyce’s work is transcendent. This is another reverse of the global financial expert who is at home in any city/financial centre, and thus has no home. He (it is usually a he) is a global citizen with no local loyalty. Who are today’s managers serving? Who is being served by Stephen, Bloom and Molly? The insights provided by Joyce can show the modern student that analysis of systems and organizations did not begin with the corresponding course books and that they certainly do not provide an unequivocal solution or answer. The case study is accepted as a fiction but it has traditionally entailed two important assumptions that are precisely why it has become so criticized: the problem is defined and all relevant information is available and all available information is relevant. We know what we need to know to make a decision. This is not real life and actual managers do not experience this (cf Kotter, 1999).

However, what Joyce does is make the reader work. Joyce does not make scenes depict information purely for the readers’ understanding, or characters describe purely to explain a situation. We learn the reason for Leopold Bloom wearing black by a sequence of events, why on earth Bloom has a potato in his pocket is only revealed after the potato has been repeatedly referred to in the book. When reading, we must notice the details to establish these connections and in fact to decide which details are periphery and which are essential for our understanding of this journey. “*The reader should not be told what no one present would think worth an act of attention.*” (Kenner, 1980:31, italics in original). This is in sharp contrast with much fiction which allows characters to speak or act purely to inform the reader. Joyce is making our work harder; we are not presented with a text purely for entertainment, but a series of stages that we must analyse to even acquire a basic understanding of what those stages are. According to Slote

(2012:x) it is important to pay attention to the small particulars of the text, "since, as they accumulate, patterns that might not otherwise be clear can start to emerge".

Again, how much of this is peripheral and how much 'we need to know' may only be evident on a closer reading. "*Ulysses* will neither hold together in one simultaneous mental grasp, nor repeat itself as we traverse once more its 260,000 words." (Kenner, 1980:155). In fact it is highly likely that the parallels we find in the text were not necessarily seen by Joyce and several he deliberately used have not yet been seen by the reader. This interpretation is personal, it is questionable how much we need to see to 'understand' the book and the journey. On further reading we may notice repetitions of names and places which link characters, but they may be coincidental or accidental. We teach management students to concentrate on the 'core' issues, but looking at *Ulysses* we find that a skilled analysis is needed to find those core issues and even when found can we be sure another reader will have identified the same points? Characters reappear or are they different characters with the same names; does it matter? Certain elements are almost certain only to be noticed on a second reading or with the help of annotation: "Most readers never realize that Bloom by Jewish standards isn't Jewish, that Stephen's mother has been dead for fifty-one weeks (...), or that he has been all day without his glasses." (Kenner, 1980:152). In fact, can any reader claim to have understood all sections and all styles on first reading?

### **3.2 The mythical**

*Ulysses* takes the myth and places it in the everyday. Although Joyce leaves out much in his recounting of a day in the life, such as tram and foot journeys, he does not leave out the defecation, spitting and dirt of life. "It was Flaubert, who taught readers of fiction to read furniture." (Kenner, 1980:144). Joyce is similarly asking us to analyse the situation and context. We experience his characters in what Kenner (1980) calls "immediate experience". We are moving with the characters through the day and experiencing with them. In fact making the myths 'ordinary' is not new. As Munro and Huber (2012) point out, Kafka presents Poseidon as a bored bureaucrat dreaming of being in the waves with his trident. Joyce does not give us the gods, but does show his 'mythical' characters, Stephen, Bloom and Molly with all their warts and pimples. It is Homer's title which leads us to expect a journey with a beginning, a middle and an end, with characters reflecting the properties we know from the myths of Ancient Greece. In fact we expect a modern day myth, whatever that may entail. The myth leads us to expect certain characters: the hero, the traveller, the warrior. Again here Joyce is playing with the reader in fulfilling certain of our expectations while turning others on their heads.

Stephen is clearly Telemachus and having got to know him in *Portrait of the Artist* his search for his father is already established. Yet here we discover that he has maybe found his father earlier than he would wish in the sense that although the two do not really communicate in *Ulysses*, Stephen is clearly on the drunken path of his father. He plays a character of many roles: he mourns his mother, has literary aspirations, he works as a teacher, whilst also amassing debts through drinking. We read, expecting or hoping for a 'solution', a climax, but in reality, reality

wins. There is no happy end, there is no glorious revelation of 'true' character. The character Stephen remains as complex, or as simple, at the end as at the beginning and also that which path wins out, is in his hands, he faces choices.

Similarly, although we can see Bloom as Ulysses and Molly as Penelope, Joyce does not allow his central characters to purely represent 'a type'. All travel, the day is full of movement. We do not travel with them, we have to 'understand' where they are and how they got there. There is no reassurance that any of the epic actions in *Ulysses* (Stephen's coming of age, Bloom's homecoming, Molly's affirmation of her husband) are or will be lived through to completion. However, by the novel's end we know what conditions the central characters and the chorus will have to meet if the epic destiny that is possible is to become actuality (Gifford, 1988).

### **3.3 Identity and communication**

Identity proves to be a very complex issue. Here again we can see that novels "grasp the complexity without simplifying it." (Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994:13). The complexities and even uncertainties of this society are portrayed in Bloom. Is he indeed a man, or a woman, or both? Does he belong to the Irish race, or does his Judaism exclude him and make him a member of the Jewish race? In fact he would surely be excluded from the Jewish race by his Irish mother and Protestant and Catholic baptisms. Is his attempt to lure Stephen a search for identity, comparable even to him joining the Freemasons?

Novelists, and here in particular Joyce, examine how identity 'works' and, more importantly, how identity has to be 'worked at' in contemporary organizations and everyday life. In *Ulysses*, Joyce confronts the reader with the everyday world of Dublin and its array of relationships and organizations. Joyce's use of the everyday and ordinary provide an insight into the 'lived' world and the 'management' of real, lived experiences. Joyce's treatment of the myth of *Ulysses* can be seen as 'domesticating the epic' (Corcoran, 2010).

Communication plays a large role in Joyce's *Ulysses*, be it in what he, or the other characters, communicate, or in what is left out. This communication is evident in the text, but also in Joyce's communication, or lack of it, with the reader. Kenner (1980:155) refers to a "symbiosis of observer with observed." (cf Kotter, 1999 above) and the unstable narrator or "free indirect discourse" (Slote, 2012: viii). The narrative voice shifts from third to first person and in and out of interior monologue. Slote calls it "a lack of narrative signposting" (2012: ix).

Joyce allows the reader no rest; as perspectives change the narrator changes. We are observing Stephen, we are Stephen, we move to Bloom. We not only need to know who we are, but as discussed above we have to establish our own intentions, where we are and how we got there. This change of perspective allows us to see the turmoil of Bloom's thoughts, yet contrast it with Gerty MacDowell's daydreams of a husband and a marriage from romantic fiction. The thoughts of the characters show different perspectives and allow us to achieve an all-round vision of urban Dublin.

Communication between the characters is everyday in its content, yet the era the book is written in places it clearly in the historical period and encompasses the issues of the times. We do not



need in-depth analysis to notice the role of verbal and non-verbal communication. Bloom and Molly understand the true meaning of Blazes Boylan's letter, meeting and planned singing tour without words being spoken. Gerty MacDowell does not speak to Bloom, but an understanding passes between them. Is he the masturbating observer in the powerful position? As the reader knows he is one of few who have 'made it', and despite ups and downs he survives in contemporary Dublin. Or is she in the powerful role, leading him on and knowing she can manipulate his reactions?

### **3.4 Context**

The Irish myths of heroism are rejected against the harsh reality of exploitation and dominance by the English. The question of power, powerlessness, motivation, organization, self-will and politics in general show a thread throughout the novel. The home rule question is addressed here, but also the main characters' abilities and strength to actually achieve an 'end' to their one-day journey. Anti-Semitism is a theme throughout the novel, yet with none of the addressed issues does Joyce provide direct comment. We simply see a xenophobic Ireland critical of all other nations. The analysis is left to the reader, although the voice of certain characters can be seen to represent Joyce's ideas: Bloom's concern at the venereal disease carried by the whores and the lack of health care, is a clear comment on health care provision. We can place this in a larger context and generalize from this work of fiction, to Dublin, to Ireland, to Europe in the early 20th century. However, we cannot expect the book to give us answers.

The role of money is very strong in *Ulysses* – there are those who are certainly on their way down and out. Professions/trades play a role: we have Corny Kelleher the undertaker employee, Hynes the journalist, the head teacher Mr Deasy, Stephen the teacher; but the majority of characters seem to be on the streets of Dublin with no regular income. In fact borrowing enough to survive is a permanent theme. Prices are mentioned in exact amounts as Stephen counts what is left at the end of the day when he meets Bloom and Bloom's expenditure and income for the day are presented as a double entry account. Not having enough to pay the rent and being in arrears seems a common situation to be in. However, how the economy of this city works, we are not made privy to. We are looking at the fate of individuals and the decisions made and faced within 24 hours. From this concentrated vignette we can predict survival chances, but no end to this tale is given. The overview of current issues and the importance of context can be seen here as in all management situations and decision making contexts.

### **4. Conclusion**

This paper does not claim that all fiction is relevant for the study of management or that all management courses should include the study of fiction. However, management and organization should be acknowledged as part of ordinary everyday life. Reading *Ulysses* as a management text, conscious of it as fiction, attending to its tensions, its play on structured meandering, and its constant fragmenting of identity may enrich the way we read management texts, with their fictions, and claims of stable knowledge and assumptions of stable identities.

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