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Mapping Dublin, Mapping the Self: A Geocritical Reading of Joyce's Ulysses

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ABSTRACT

***Mapping Dublin, Mapping the Self: A Geocritical Reading of Joyce's Ulysses*talks aboutthe author James Joyce who transforms Dublin from a mere geographical location into a dynamic cartography of consciousness. This research article explores how *Ulysses*yolks urban setting with its characters, detailing how place becomes special and inseparable from memory, identity, and cultural belonging. Taking inspiration from the principles of geocriticism, the study considers Dublin as a subjective agent rather than merely an objective setting. Its streets, quays,pubs, and lanes emerge as living archives that records and register political tensions, colonial residues, and shifting perceptions of the modern self.In this modernist novel entitled *Ulysses*we find characters like Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus very interesting, the place Dublin reveals itself as a multilayered space where physical routes reflect inner trajectories of different characters.**

Each movement in the plot—whether Bloom's gentle behaviour or Stephen's restless drift—charts a subtle negotiation between personal history and communal geography. It is noteworthy to find that the city becomes a kind of city map that records the desires, doubts, fears, and fleeting revelations of its dwellers. The narrative style of James Joyce has special fluid like stream of consciousness technique and shifting geographical points. It further reinforces the idea that space is never fixed; it is continuously reshaped by the characters who inhabit and grow in it.

This research paper argues that Dublin in *Ulysses* is not simply a setting but mentally rewritten at every step. Streets are customized by memories and desires of daily life that gain spatial resonance, and the act of moving through the city becomes an act of self-revealing. By treating Dublin as both text and terrain, *Ulysses* demonstrates how literature can illuminate the intimate relationship between geography and selfhood. Ultimately, this geocritical reading reveals how Joyce crafts and designs a narrative in which mapping the city becomes inseparable from mapping the mind—turning Dublin into a space where identity is constantly negotiated, layered, and rediscovered.

Keywords: Geocriticism, Spatial Imaginaries, setting, Identity, geography.

INTRODUCTION

James Joyce's *Ulysses* is not merely a novel set in Dublin; it is a novel that thinks through Dublin. The city is not a passive background against which characters move, speak, remember, desire, and suffer. Rather, Dublin becomes an active textual, psychological, historical, and cultural field. Joyce's famous ambition, as often recalled through his remarks about reconstructing Dublin from the pages of *Ulysses*, suggests that the city functions as both geographical reality and imaginative architecture. In this sense, *Ulysses* offers one of the richest examples of literary mapping in modernist fiction. The novel does not simply represent space; it produces space through movement, memory, language, bodily experience, and cultural history.

A geocritical reading of *Ulysses* helps us understand how Joyce converts Dublin into a layered literary map. Geocriticism, as theorised by Bertrand Westphal and later developed by Robert T. Tally Jr., studies the relationship between literature and spatiality, paying attention to how places are represented, multiplied, contested, and experienced. Westphal argues that literary space is never singular or stable; it is shaped by multiple perspectives, temporal layers, and cultural meanings (Westphal 122). Joyce's Dublin fits this model powerfully because it is simultaneously real and symbolic, local and universal, colonial and cosmopolitan, external and internal.

The title "Mapping Dublin, Mapping the Self" indicates the central argument of this article: in *Ulysses*, the mapping of the city becomes inseparable from the mapping of identity. Leopold Bloom, Stephen Dedalus, Molly Bloom, and other figures do not merely pass through Dublin; they are formed, fragmented, and revealed by their movements through its streets, homes, pubs, newspaper offices, libraries, beaches, cemeteries, and night-town spaces. The self in *Ulysses* is not fixed inside the individual. It is dispersed across urban routes, social encounters, memories, advertisements, sounds,

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smells, historical echoes, and linguistic experiments. Joyce's Dublin therefore becomes a geocritical space where personal identity and urban geography are mutually constructed.

Geocriticism and the Literary City

Geocriticism begins from the belief that space is not an empty container. It is lived, imagined, represented, and contested. Westphal's geocritical method emphasises multifocalisation, polysensoriality, stratigraphic time, and the interaction between real and fictional places. These ideas are particularly useful for reading *Ulysses*, where Dublin is perceived through different consciousnesses and narrative styles. The same city appears differently to Stephen, Bloom, Molly, the citizen, Father Conmee, Gerty MacDowell, and anonymous crowds. No single perspective owns Dublin. The city is created through a plurality of gazes.

Robert Tally sees literary mapping as a way of organising experience in a confusing world. For him, narrative often functions like cartography because it gives shape to social and existential space (Tally 3). In *Ulysses*, however, Joyce complicates the idea of mapping. His map does not simplify Dublin; it multiplies it. The novel records roads, shops, bridges, churches, tramlines, public houses, markets, and domestic interiors with remarkable precision, yet this precision does not create a simple realistic city. Instead, the realistic map becomes overlaid with myth, memory, fantasy, colonial history, religious symbolism, bodily sensation, and linguistic play.

Henri Lefebvre's idea that space is socially produced also clarifies Joyce's method. Lefebvre argues that space is not natural or neutral; it is made through social relations, institutions, habits, and power structures (Lefebvre 26). Dublin in *Ulysses* is exactly such a produced space. It is shaped by British colonial authority, Catholic morality, Irish nationalism, capitalist advertisements, gender codes, class anxieties, and everyday routines. Michel de Certeau's distinction between the planned city and the walled city is also relevant. For de Certeau, pedestrians create their own meanings through the act of walking, producing "spatial stories" that differ from official maps (de Certeau 97). Bloom's wandering through Dublin is a perfect example of this pedestrian authorship. His walk turns the city into an intimate text.

Dublin as Real Map and Symbolic Space

One of the most striking features of *Ulysses* is its geographical exactness. The novel follows the events of 16 June 1904, and its characters move through identifiable Dublin locations: Martello Tower, Sandymount Strand, Glasnevin Cemetery, O'Connell Street, Eccles Street, the National Library, Barney Kiernan's pub, Nighttown, and many other places. This realism gives *Ulysses* the quality of an urban archive. Joyce preserves the material Dublin of his youth with extraordinary attention.

Yet Joyce's realism is never plain documentation. The city is real, but it is also mythologised. The Homeric structure of the novel transforms Dublin into a modern equivalent of the ancient Mediterranean world. Bloom becomes a modern Odysseus, Stephen a Telemachus figure, and Molly a Penelope-like presence. This mythic overlay gives ordinary places epic resonance. A newspaper office becomes a modern rhetorical battlefield; a cemetery becomes a meditation on mortality; a maternity hospital becomes a symbolic site of birth, language, and historical evolution; Nighttown becomes a distorted underworld of desire and guilt.

Joyce's achievement lies in making Dublin both particular and universal. The city remains unmistakably Irish, yet it also becomes a map of modern human consciousness. This double movement is central to geocriticism. Westphal argues that literary places often exist between referential reality and imaginative transformation (Westphal 75). Joyce's Dublin is not a copy of the real city; it is a re-created spatial organism. Its streets are material, but they are also mental passages. Its landmarks are geographical, but they are also symbolic coordinates in the mapping of memory, exile, sexuality, nationhood, and identity.

Stephen Dedalus: Intellectual Space and Alienated Selfhood

Stephen Dedalus's relation to Dublin is marked by alienation, intellectual restlessness, and unresolved historical burden. At the beginning of the novel, in the Martello Tower, Stephen occupies a liminal space. The tower stands near the sea, between Ireland and the wider world, between military history and personal homelessness. Stephen is physically present in Dublin, but emotionally and intellectually estranged from it. His mind is crowded with Shakespeare, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hamlet, Irish history, guilt over his mother's death, and anxiety about artistic vocation. For Stephen, space is rarely innocent.

Every place becomes a site of thought, argument, or symbolic pressure. Sandymount Strand, in the "Proteus" episode, becomes a shifting landscape of perception. Stephen walks by the sea while meditating on vision, language, creation, and the instability of reality. The beach is not merely scenery; it becomes an epistemological field. The changing sand, tide, shells, dog, and seaweed reflect Stephen's unstable consciousness. His famous concern with "ineluctable modality of the visible" shows that space is experienced through philosophical uncertainty (Joyce 3.1). The external landscape becomes a map of internal hesitation.

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Stephen's Dublin is also haunted by colonial and religious history. He feels trapped by Ireland's political paralysis, Catholic guilt, and cultural dependency. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he wishes to fly beyond the nets of "nationality, language, religion" (Joyce, *Portrait* 203). In *Ulysses*, these nets remain spatially visible. Dublin's institutions—the school, church, library, and pub—reflect the pressures of history and authority. Stephen's mapping of Dublin is therefore defensive and intellectual. Unlike Bloom, who moves through the city with sensory openness and social curiosity, Stephen often experiences space as burden.

Leopold Bloom: Walking, Memory, and Urban Belonging

Leopold Bloom's movement through Dublin forms the emotional and spatial centre of *Ulysses*. Bloom is a walker, observer, consumer, mourner, husband, father, outsider, and citizen. His route through the city is not heroic in the conventional sense, yet Joyce gives it epic dignity. Bloom's Dublin is made through practical errands, bodily needs, advertisements, food, smells, memories, glances, kindness, embarrassment, and private pain.

Bloom's walk demonstrates de Certeau's idea that walking creates a personal city beneath the official city. Bloom does not control Dublin, but he reads it continuously. He notices butcher shops, funeral processions, newspaper notices, women's clothing, tram movements, religious rituals, political conversations, and commercial signs. His consciousness turns the city into a flowing field of association. A smell may lead to memory; a street may lead to grief; an advertisement may lead to speculation; a public encounter may awaken private humiliation.

Bloom's Jewish identity also shapes his geocritical position. He belongs to Dublin and yet is treated as an outsider. In Barney Kiernan's pub, nationalist aggression exposes the exclusionary nature of certain forms of Irish identity. The citizen's narrow nationalism cannot accommodate Bloom's hybrid identity. Bloom's famous insistence that a nation is "the same people living in the same place" is immediately complicated by his own position as both insider and outsider (Joyce 12.1422–23). The city maps belonging, but it also maps exclusion.

Bloom's Dublin is therefore a space of ethical testing. He encounters death in Glasnevin Cemetery, maternity in the hospital, sexuality at Sandymount, violence in the pub, hallucination in Nighttown, and possible paternal relation with Stephen. Unlike Stephen, who often abstracts experience into theory, Bloom responds to the city through sympathy and embodied attention. His identity emerges through movement. He is not defined by a single essence but by a series of urban relations.

The Domestic Map: 7 Eccles Street and Molly Bloom

If Bloom maps Dublin through movement, Molly Bloom maps it through memory, desire, and bodily interiority. The house at 7 Eccles Street is one of the most important spaces in the novel. It is home, but not a stable home. It contains marital betrayal, memory of the dead son Rudy, sexual tension, ordinary domesticity, and the possibility of return. The novel begins away from this home and gradually moves toward it. Bloom's wandering becomes meaningful because it is also a return.

Molly's final monologue transforms domestic space into a vast inner geography. Though she lies in bed, her consciousness travels across Gibraltar, Dublin, lovers, marriage, music, menstruation, motherhood, sexuality, and memory. Her body becomes a site of mapping. The famous final "Yes" affirms not only erotic memory but also the fluidity of female subjectivity (Joyce 18.1608–09). Molly is not simply Penelope waiting at home. She remaps the home from within, turning the bedroom into one of the most expansive spaces in the novel.

A geocritical reading must therefore recognise that Joyce's spatial imagination is not limited to public streets. Interior spaces are equally significant. Rooms, beds, kitchens, and private thoughts are part of the city's geography. The domestic sphere is not outside Dublin's map; it is one of its hidden centres. Through Molly, Joyce shows that the self can travel without physical movement. Mental mapping can be as powerful as urban wandering.

Colonial Dublin and the Politics of Space

Dublin in *Ulysses* is also a colonial city. British rule is not always foregrounded directly, but it structures the social and political atmosphere. Streets, monuments, newspapers, institutions, and conversations all reveal Ireland's uncertain position under empire. The city is full of historical memory, but that memory is fragmented and contested. Irish nationalism appears as both necessary resistance and dangerous simplification.

The "Cyclops" episode is central to this political geography. Barney Kiernan's pub becomes a compressed nationalist space where masculine aggression, mythic exaggeration, and xenophobia collide. The citizen represents a narrow and exclusionary nationalism. Bloom, by contrast, offers a more humane and plural idea of belonging. His presence disturbs the fantasy of a pure national community. The pub becomes a symbolic map of political identity: who is allowed to belong, who is marked as foreign, and who defines the nation?

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Joyce's Dublin also exposes paralysis. Public life appears full of talk, repetition, resentment, and performance. Political energy often becomes rhetorical noise. This connects *Ulysses* to Joyce's earlier representation of Dublin in *Dubliners*, where the city is associated with stagnation and moral paralysis. However, *Ulysses* is more generous. It does not merely condemn Dublin; it animates it. The city is wounded but alive, colonised but creative, provincial but cosmopolitan.

Narrative Form as Spatial Mapping

Joyce's narrative technique is itself cartographic. Each episode of *Ulysses* creates a different spatial form. The novel does not use one stable style because Dublin is not one stable space. The "Aeolus" episode uses newspaper headlines, turning the newspaper office into a space of rhetoric and public discourse. "Wandering Rocks" offers multiple simultaneous movements across Dublin, producing a panoramic urban montage. "Oxen of the Sun" maps the history of English prose onto the space of maternity. "Circe" transforms Nighttown into a hallucinatory theatre of repressed desires and social fears.

This formal experimentation supports a geocritical reading. The city is mapped not only by location but also by style. Every narrative mode creates a different Dublin. Realist description, interior monologue, parody, catechism, drama, and stream of consciousness become different cartographic instruments. Joyce's form suggests that no single language can fully represent modern urban life. The city must be mapped repeatedly, from different angles and through different textual systems.

The "Wandering Rocks" episode is especially important because it resembles a moving urban map. Various characters cross Dublin in overlapping routes, and the narrative shifts from one perspective to another. This episode decentralises the novel. Bloom and Stephen are important, but the city exceeds them. Dublin becomes a network of simultaneous lives. Such multifocality is one of the essential principles of geocriticism. The place is not reducible to one character's experience; it is created through many partial trajectories.

Mapping the Fragmented Modern Self

Modernist literature often presents the self as fragmented, unstable, and relational. *Ulysses* maps this modern self through space. Stephen's identity is divided by guilt, intellectual ambition, and historical burden. Bloom's identity is shaped by mourning, desire, Jewishness, marriage, fatherhood, and social exclusion. Molly's identity moves through body, memory, sexuality, and speech. None of these selves is complete or fixed.

The city intensifies this fragmentation. Urban modernity surrounds characters with advertisements, machines, crowds, commodities, newspapers, rumours, and rapid sensory impressions. The self becomes porous. Bloom's thoughts are interrupted by signs, songs, smells, and faces. Stephen's thoughts are invaded by literary and theological echoes. Molly's monologue moves without punctuation because consciousness itself refuses fixed borders. In this way, the mapping of Dublin becomes the mapping of modern subjectivity.

Joyce's method also suggests that identity is spatially distributed. A person is not only what he or she thinks internally. A person is made through routes taken, rooms inhabited, streets remembered, bodies desired, institutions entered, and places avoided. Bloom is Bloom partly because of Eccles Street, Glasnevin, Sandymount, the butcher's shop, the pub, the hospital, and Nighttown. Stephen is Stephen partly because of the tower, the strand, the school, and the library. Molly is Molly partly because of the bedroom, Gibraltar, music halls, and remembered landscapes. Place is not outside identity; it is one of its conditions.

CONCLUSION

A geocritical reading of *Ulysses* reveals that Joyce's Dublin is not merely a setting but a dynamic spatial text. The novel maps streets, institutions, homes, public rituals, private memories, colonial tensions, and bodily experiences. At the same time, it maps the modern self as fragmented, mobile, relational, and historically situated. Dublin and identity are written together.

Joyce's achievement lies in transforming one day in one city into an immense literary universe. Through geocritical attention, we see that the greatness of *Ulysses* does not rest only in its technical experimentation or mythic structure. It also rests in its spatial intelligence. Joyce understands that human beings do not live in abstract time alone; they live in streets, rooms, memories, routes, borders, and imagined geographies. Dublin becomes the medium through which selfhood is tested, wounded, dispersed, and partially recovered.

Thus, *Ulysses* may be read as one of the most profound literary maps of the twentieth century. It maps Dublin with documentary precision, but it also maps the invisible territories of consciousness. In Joyce's hands, the city becomes a living archive of history, desire, politics, language, and human vulnerability. To map Dublin is therefore to map the self; and to map the self is to discover that identity, like the city, is always plural, unfinished, and open to reinterpretation.

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