

This essay considers anti-heroism as a response to modern man's uncertainties about traditional values and as a feature of modernity's zeitgeist. Modern anti-heroism captures the sensibility associated with modernism, with its attempts at cultural renewal, and it ranges between the low mimetic and the ironic mode.

The Anti-Hero in Modernist Fiction: From Irony to Cultural Renewal

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Those who have crossed

With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom

Remember us—if at all—not as lost

Violent souls, but only

As the hollow men

The stuffed men.

—T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"

The hollow men speaking in the epigraph are not much different from Eliot's famous Prufrock, the inadequate modern man whose introspection, self-

deprecation, and hesitation are all emblematic of a new heroism. The hollow men are spiritually and culturally lacking in the substance of traditional heroes. However, they are aware of their communal, representative insignificance during the post-World War I era in Western culture—and even sing it. This lack of traditional heroism, what I call "anti-heroism," is not particularly modern, as examples can be found in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature.¹ However, modern anti-heroism in the early twentieth century is a response to the uncertainties of people about traditional values; it is a response to the insignificance of human beings in modernity and their drab existence; it is a feature of modernism and its zeitgeist. With rapidly changing

times and cultural upheavals, the human race questioned moral values. Coherent meaning was lost, and essences were devalued within an atmosphere of cultural decline. Hence, people tried to find meaning in a confusing life, to construct a pattern, or to impose some order on a world they could neither control nor understand. When they could not heroically thrive in a mechanized age, they tried to live minimally and internally within the enclaves of art and the subjective mind.² I am aware that my thesis about the deficiencies of modern heroes, or their different heroism, does not necessarily break new ground. However, my goal is more of analysis and interpretation. In this essay, I bring together existing theory about heroism and apply it to literary texts in order to examine the nature of (anti)heroism in modernity. And although I use the word “man” in a general sense to denote human beings be they male or female, modernity affected men and women differently and, to some extent, effected a change in gender roles and expectations.

One characteristic of modernism is what J.A. Cuddon calls “fresh ways of looking at man’s position and function in the universe” (551). Within a philosophical framework, Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx dealt a heavy blow to man’s belief in his dignity, innocence, and secure position. Man was found instinctive, lacking in self-control, and subject to economic and social variables. Existentially viewed, and in line with the modernist sensibility, man was seen as an outsider who had lost historical continuity and had no redemption in the past. Existential alienation and angst made modernist writers represent social misfits, brooding men, and suffering victims of incomprehensible forces in a hostile world since man felt lost and despairing. A product of environment and heredity, man was also viewed as an ordinary victim living in squalid conditions. Scientific and philosophical ideas associated with naturalism, and in tune with the modernist temper, made writers depict diseased, impoverished, and unprivileged characters. Moreover, with the upheaval of the Great War and the collapse of the traditional consensus about the nature of reality and the belief in an ameliorable history, the anti-hero became the expected presence in many modernist novels. People no longer believed in traditional heroism as a declining society was inadequate for it and as man had a sense of “powerlessness in the face of a blind technology” (Hawthorn 143). Modern anti-heroism captures the intellectual, moral, and cultural sensibility associated with modernism. A changing society with a changing cultural climate necessitated a change in the models of heroism. Literary genres such as classical epics, tragedies, and romances were no longer there for the display of extraordinary heroism, and the modern anti-hero became the novelistic “everyman.”

Many critics have captured the cultural sensibility of the early twentieth century, especially the Great War and the interrelated notion of “heroism.” They often relate

anti-heroism to a sense of crisis in twentieth-century civilization. Cuddon speaks of the establishment of “the post-war anti-hero type” (47). Malcolm Bradbury elaborately argues that “the moral certainty, the monumental attitude, the progressive view of history, the sense of cultural stability, that still remained in the experimental works of the Edwardian and early Georgian era had now largely gone” and were replaced with “war, battlefield slaughter, the loss of a whole part of a generation, political uncertainty, historical doubt, sexual freedom, psychic tension” (139). The Great War, as Bradbury continues, had a formative impact on heroism in literature as well as the representation of reality and the way we conceive language: “The war was a crisis not simply for the subject-matter of fiction—heroism and bravery, the value of individual life and social history—but for its very power of representation” (143). Bradbury dwells on the role of the Great War in effecting the cultural decline and temperament associated with modernism, and the concomitant loss of heroism, by stating that it “seemed to abstract and empty life itself, creating a landscape of violence and uncertainty in which the human figure was no longer a constant, the individual self no longer connected naturally with the universe, the word no longer attached to the thing. Culture now seemed a bundle of fragments, history no longer moved progressively” (142). Steven Matthews highlights the role of the Great War in changing sexual and gender roles, and thus notions of “heroism” and masculinity, as it “raised further doubts about issues of social policy, gender, sexual difference, and masculinity which had been held across the Victorian era to be the basis upon which the empire rested” and strengthened such doubts “with the return of the maimed, wounded, and shell-shocked from the Western Front” (63). Similarly, Paul Fussell comments on the cultural climate the war changed, even with relation to language and pluralized meaning: “But the Great War took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable. Everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honor meant” (21). Fussell, hence, implies that “Heroism” as an abstraction also acquired new meanings or at least lost its stable meaning. The Great War, just like the philosophical ideas associated with modernism, contributed to the strong emergence of anti-heroes in modern fiction since mass slaughter reduced men to puppets before a mechanized warfare. In addition, urbanization, commercialization, industrialization, and mass culture were contributing to the cultural atmosphere of pessimism that produced anti-heroes.

Modern anti-heroes are lacking in largeness, grace, power, and social success. When conditions of crisis outside were confirmed, modernist writers took their anti-heroes to the domestic realm or to the privacy of the mind. Astradur Eysteinnsson

speaks of an introverted modern anti-hero “in whom heightened consciousness and social isolation and paralysis go hand in hand, as do the exaltation of individuality and its erasure” (29-30). Theodore Ziolkowski implies the indecisiveness of modern anti-heroes and yet generalizes it to suggest that moments of hesitation or wavering among the heroes of great works throughout the world and from antiquity to the present can be seen as “exemplifying crises in the cultures that have brought them forth” (3). Changes in value systems and cultural climates, Ziolkowski contends, form the heroes we encounter in literature: “If we look beyond the psychology of the characters to the cultural myths that engender and sustain them, the ‘heroes’ and ‘heroines’ we imagine can inevitably be read as the projection of each age’s endeavor to confront humanity’s collective dreads and dreams” (146). A fragmented society—torn by war, conflicting values, cultural crisis, and different aspects of modernity—produces its own heroic model: sick, anti-social, and introspective anti-heroes whose salvation is individualistic in the midst of social and cultural disarray.

But what is heroic about the modern anti-hero? In a dehumanized machine age, humanity and honesty, or what remains thereof, can redeem. Robert Torrance argues that the modern comic hero, a sub-category of the anti-hero, can retain our sympathy and “is comic because he differs from others and heroic because he is always himself. What others mock is the grounds for his celebration, and in the end he commands our assent by willful adherence to the truth of his own invention” (1). Torrance adds that the comic hero “mocked for his insufficiencies, vices, and foibles is never delimited by them. He persistently eludes one-sided judgments and quite frequently engages reluctant admiration” (5). Although anti-heroes lack accomplishment and strength, this does not make them utterly unheroic. They can be magnanimous and can show courage or steadfastness under pressure. They can sometimes defend themselves when necessary. As Victor Brombert argues, anti-heroes are often “weak, ineffectual, pale, humiliated, self-doubting, inept, occasionally abject characters—often afflicted with self-conscious and paralyzing irony, yet at times capable of unexpected resilience and fortitude” (2). Hence, the modernist anti-hero can transcend the ironic to effect some sort of regeneration or salvation.

As Joseph Campbell argues in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, while the archetypal/mythical hero of universal myths undergoes a process of departure, initiation, and return through which he faces trials and has adventures and then returns triumphant, the modern anti-hero can undergo the same pattern internally or without the grandeur associated with myth. The journey without becomes a journey within the mind or within mundane surroundings; the initiation becomes a lesson he learns

about his limitations and weaknesses, and the return journey can be a survival in a chaotic world reinvigorated by the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. The ability to distract themselves from the muddle of reality and reconcile conflicts internally can be the very substance for heroism in anti-heroes. Hence, Jesse Matz rightly asserts that there is “real heroism in anti-heroism, in an unheroic world” and that modern writers find “much to like in just such passivity, weakness, and failure” as such traits are “more truly heroic, in a way, than classical heroic ones, because they showed people shouldering the stranger burden of modern futility” (46). Modern anti-heroes are heroic because their times disallowed them to be traditionally heroic. They are true to their times and their authors’ nuanced conceptions of them.

Among notable critics who provided relevant theorizing on modern heroism, two figures are T.S. Eliot and Northrop Frye. Their contributions are congruent with the general thrust of this argument about cultural renewal. In “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth,” Eliot manifests his support of classicism in literature and a return to myth. He commends the use of myth in the form of allusion and juxtaposition by James Joyce and others like W.B. Yeats. This mythical approach, he argues, is something to be praised and imitated as a need: “It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177). Eliot argues that a mythical rather than a narrative method is “a step toward making the modern world possible for art” by giving it order and form (178). For Eliot, Joyce’s juxtaposition of the mundane against the mythical in *Ulysses* was an attempt not only to show the grandeur of the past as opposed to the present but to prove that modern times have their own brand of “heroism” when cultural degeneration was not allowing grander forms of heroism. For Eliot, Joyce’s method of mythical parallel to the *Odyssey* makes the book an expression of our present age and times—which also gives the book its attempt at cultural renewal. On the other hand, Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* explains his theory of modes and classifies literature according to myth, romance, high mimetic mode, low mimetic mode, and ironic mode. Frye argues that fiction “may be classified, not morally, but by the hero’s power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same” (33). We immediately exclude from such an argument about anti-heroes the heroes of myths, romances, epics, and tragedies, as they tend to be more privileged than us in terms of the “power of action.” The hero of the “low mimetic mode” we often see in realistic fiction and comedy is, Frye argues, “superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity, and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience.” Within Frye’s frame, such literature was dominant from Defoe’s

times to the end of the nineteenth century. In the “ironic mode,” which is more relevant here, the hero is “inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity” (34). Frye argues that most modern literature “has tended increasingly to be ironic in mode” (35). This means that looking at the condition of modernity, many writers probably felt they were observing “a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity,” in Frye’s terms, or a scene of an “immense panorama of futility and anarchy,” in Eliot’s terms. Using Frye’s and Eliot’s parameters, we can argue that the modern anti-hero can hover between the “low mimetic mode” of typical humanity and the “ironic mode” and more often falls within the ironic one. In modernist literature, the ironic becomes the new version of, or the opposite of, the heroic. By implication, ironic heroes as emblematic of cultural degeneration are also essential for cultural renewal since the reappearance of myth in the ironic is a sign that the ironic mode moves a full circle toward the mythical.

Joyce’s *Ulysses* explores how we can find the potential for modern heroism in the very anti-heroic. Leopold Bloom, a Dublin Jew and an outsider in Catholic Ireland, is a middle-aged advertising canvasser cuckolded by his wife, Molly. This domestic man brings his wife a porn novel, hands her a letter from her lover Blazes Boylan, and brings her breakfast in bed. However, he is not entirely devoid of heroism. His heroism stems from the internal effort of his mind to endure betrayal, reconcile life conflicts and demands, and impose order on the chaotic flux of modern experience. In contrast to his frail, aging body, his imagination is very rich and his mind is constantly active, observing minute details around him and planning what to do next. Hence, it is no wonder that Joyce dwells on Bloom’s thoughts and feelings through interior monologue as an apt message about his internal heroism. His heroism is being a sensitive human and a pacifist in a dehumanized, violent age. Like Stephen Dedalus, he is overwhelmed by a sense of frustration and loneliness. However, he always looks within himself to evaluate situations and seek the better for himself and his family. He admits his responsibility for his wife’s infidelity and acknowledges his weaknesses; he is patient and caring; he visits women in labour, attends funerals, and is worried about Stephen in an immoral company. He tries to deal psychologically with the pain of Molly’s adultery by insisting on its inevitability and accepting it rather than by dashing and destroying. His redemption is what Robert Kuehn calls his “instinctive humanity” (209), his “largeness of soul” (211), and a suffering endured “willingly, resignedly” (213). He is a man of equanimity rather than emotional extremes. He is neither highly educated nor rich. We see him defecate, urinate, and masturbate, yet he

is not undermined by his essential humanity. The naturalistic stance Joyce gives is part of a slice-of-life effect meant to enrich Bloom as a rounded character rather than deprave him. Like others, Bloom has hopes, fears, longings, defeats, and triumphs. He is a human being to whom we can relate, which justifies why Joyce makes him one of the most realized characters in fiction. John Raleigh rightly argues that Bloom has “a whole array of virtues or prized qualities, both ancient and modern, religious and secular” (596). Bloom is honest, responsible, and philanthropic. A “complete” hero and a parallel to the mythical Odysseus, he is a husband, a father, a son, a friend, and a lover. As Daniel Schwarz argues, Joyce redefines the concept of heroism in Bloom “to emphasize not only pacifism but commitment to family ties, concern for the human needs of others, sense of self, tolerance, and decency” (170). Michael Seidel argues that part of the task of a writer whose scope is as broad as Joyce’s “is to reflect the transmigration of values from one age to another, one culture to another” (99). Joyce shows how the nature of heroism modern life demands is just different. The ironic parallels to the Homeric myth make the ordinary the very ground for cultural regeneration. I highlight next instances of Bloom’s anti-heroism and alternative heroism.

Upon first meeting Bloom, we notice that his heroism is rendered in naturalistic, anti-heroic terms: “Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine” (45). His heroism is not slaughtering but eating “with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls” (45). This womanly, domestic man quietly prepares his wife’s breakfast while she is still in bed and feeds his cat. His sexual vigor is substituted by anal fetishes and voyeurism. When he runs to the butcher’s shop, he is keen on buying a pork kidney and leaving quickly to catch a glimpse of a woman’s “moving hams” (49). When he comes back, Molly orders him around the house. He carries her breakfast upstairs (51). Her bedroom demands make him forget his cooking kidney, and he finds it slightly burnt (53). After he eats, he feels “heavy, full: then a gentle loosening of his bowels” (55). He then reads a paper at stool content to find “that slight constipation of yesterday quite gone” (56). In a sign showing Joyce’s disdain for popular culture or at least the affirmation of the individual over the disorienting aspects of modernity, Bloom wipes himself with the paper he just read and is ready to start his typical day. Like other modernists, Joyce shocks our sensibilities by the apparent (anti)heroism of everyday life.

While his wife is having her affair, Bloom enters Barney Kiernan’s pub to meet two other men to go see the widow of Dignam, an acquaintance who just died. He is attacked there by a bigoted Irish nationalist and confronted with male violence. The nationalist is a half-blind drunk who terrorizes Bloom and represents violent Irish politics. Even his dog growls “at Bloom that was skeezing round the door” (249).

However, Bloom acts “heroically” when he meekly asserts his Irish nationality, defends the Jews, and argues against violence. The altercation of the citizen and Bloom restores Bloom some of his manliness. Bloom defines the nation as “the same people living in the same place” (272), and the men present laugh at him. He then talks about injustice, being hated and persecuted as a race, and defines love as “the opposite of hatred” (273). The citizen mocks him as “the new Messiah for Ireland!” and calls him a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” (277). Bloom responds by way of self-defence that “Mendelssohn was a jew and Karl Marx and Mercadante and Spinoza. And the Savior was a jew and his father was a jew. Your God” (280). The citizen threatens to “brain that bloody jewman for using the holy name” and swears to “crucify him,” ironically, with a “biscuitbox” (280). However, Bloom, heroically or equally anti-heroically, storms off and flees for safety (281). As for the citizen, he is blinded by the sun, and symbolically castrated: “Mercy of God the sun was in his eyes or he’d have left him for dead” (281).³ An anti-hero, Bloom is saved not by physical prowess but by chance and escape.

When the submissive Bloom goes home at night, he sees signs of Boylan’s visit and accepts his wife, kisses her, and sleeps meekly trying to forget. His reaction to his wife’s infidelity is initially a temperate one of conflicting emotions. He feels: “Envy, jealousy, abnegation, equanimity” (602). However, the punishment he wants to inflict on his wife or her lover is never external: “Assassination, never, as two wrongs did not make one right. Duel by combat, no. Divorce, not now” (603). He mentally overcomes his feelings and is reconciled, and when satisfied: “He kissed the plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump” (604). Toward the end, he seems to reverse the new power/gender relations; he asserts his power on her and asks her to prepare and bring his breakfast in bed the next morning. This way, Bloom runs the gamut from the ironic to the regenerative.

In Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, anti-heroism is symbolically generalized within a moral wasteland of war damage, empty relations, drunkenness, and promiscuity. Jake Barnes is the emasculated, anti-heroic narrator, a product of a violent modernity. The genital wound he received fighting with the Italians in the war, the fictionalized Great War, is symbolic of the psychological, physical, and moral damage of the war for an entire generation—the expatriate group. Jake, in mythical terms, becomes Hemingway’s postwar Fisher King in his impotence and victimization by the war machine.⁴ War made him and his generation of young people homeless, restless, alcoholic, and emotionally paralyzed. They became skeptical of religion and family life. Their sexual and social roles were changed by the war as men became crippled and wounded and women became sexually ambivalent. They stand for post-war disillusionment, spiritual void, and feelings of inadequacy. This anti-heroic generation lost

its faith in such traditional values as love, religion, womanhood, and manhood. Jake's personal plight that he carries from the war contrasts with the emotional and social plight of other survivors who are intact in body yet touched in soul. However, Jake is not absolutely anti-heroic. In the midst of cultural chaos, and despite his frustrations in love and physical inadequacies, he still conforms to the ideal of cultural renewal.

Jake is more stable emotionally and more pragmatic than his coterie of reckless people. At least, he knows where to find meaning and purpose in life. In the midst of cultural debris and a moral wasteland, he has a vision to guide him. His possible redemption lies in sports, nature, stoicism/moral strength, skill, and true friendships. With an epigraph and a title from the Book of Ecclesiastes and another epigraph from Gertrude Stein about the lost generation—"You are all a lost generation"—the novel comments on an entire generation destroyed by the war. However, the futility of sex, alcohol, and violence will not uproot all human values, as something will inevitably endure. The abiding sun and the passage of time and generations in the novel's second epigraph offer some hope and redemption: "One generation passes away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abides forever. . . . The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he arose."

Hemingway captures the essence of the post-war modernist sensibility in terms of disillusionment with the war and cultural dislocation. The sickness motif generalizes the decay and destruction of the war and highlights the impotence it effects and the heroism it takes. Jake accidentally meets a prostitute in Paris. They take a cab ride, and she tries to touch him. He takes away her hand, affirming he is sick. "Everybody's sick. I'm sick, too" she replies. Jake, in his alienation, picked her because of his alienation, because "of a vague sentimental idea that it would be nice to eat with someone" (16). When she asks about the nature of his sickness, he just says "I got hurt in the war." The ambiguous war injury is meant to allegorize the whole sickness of the war and the botched civilization it resulted in. She responds "Oh, that dirty war," and Jake acknowledges the futility of such a discussion: "We would probably have gone on and discussed the war and agreed that it was in reality a calamity for civilization, and perhaps would have been better avoided. I was bored enough" (17). Masculinity had to be redefined in modernity as the injury done to the male body by machine guns and heavy artillery made it weak and impotent. Hence, the new liberal woman represented by the English Lady Brett Ashley is a reaction to the disrupted gender roles and Jake's counterpart. While Jake is anti-heroic in his maimed male anatomy, she is anti-heroic in her promiscuity. Heroism now is to be found in dignity, precision, honesty, direct confrontation with reality, and passion, all embodied in bullfighting and manly sports.

The cynical attitude characters have is typical of the post-war lost generation expatriating itself in France. Bill Gorton, a war veteran, captures the essence of the anti-heroic expatriate life when he tells Jake: "You're an expatriate. You have lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafés" (115). However, Jake is morally stronger than other Paris café society expatriates. Cohn sees in him his only friend and begs him for forgiveness after he insults him (194). Others express to him their anxieties and fears, even beat him and apologize and he accepts. Unlike other expatriates who turn to alcohol, sex, art, and violence as alternatives in the post-war cultural futility, he finds meaning and order in bullfights, bravery, earnestness, self-control, and integrity. He is not physically strong, yet he can mentally endure under pressure. The code of values of the bullfighter Jake admires and tries to follow seems to be untouched by the destruction and loss of values left after the war. The owner of a hotel, Montoya, considers Jake an "aficionado": "Aficion means passion. An aficionado is one who is passionate about bull-fights" (131). Jake is able to find purpose in life by learning from bullfighters. For example, he observes that "Romero's bullfighting gave real emotion, because he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements and always quietly and calmly let the horns pass him close each time" (168). He learns from Romero that even if his body is risked and hurt his soul should remain intact, which allows for an experience of rejuvenation from the culture wasteland surrounding him. When Cohn, a boxer, beats Romero in a fight, Jake feels that Romero did not yield: "The fight with Cohn had not touched his spirit but his face had been smashed and his body hurt. He was wiping all that out now. Each thing that he did with this bull wiped that out a little cleaner. It was a good bull, a big bull, and with horns, and it turned and recharged easily and surely. He was what Romero wanted in bulls" (219). Jake sees in honestly risking one's life as the bullfighter does in the ring without trying to evade what might become an avenue for heroism. A fishing interlude with Bill Gorton in the Spanish countryside and bullfighting are, temporarily for Jake, a way out of the sexual restlessness and violence of the expatriates. When he goes fishing, he is at peace: "There was no word from Robert Cohn nor from Brett and Mike" (125). He and Bill lose track of time in the healing countryside. The English man they meet while fishing is named Harris. We know he was in the war, and Bill and Jake find affinities with him. Male friendship is also redeeming in keeping friends together and providing them with comfort. It is one avenue for redemption and meaning in an unheroic post-war age.

In the absence of conventional morality and religious sentiments, characters seek salvation, especially after the war effected a loss of faith in divine benevolence and

human innocence. Jake tries to create his own morality or at least rationalize his attitudes. Although he sometimes hates Cohn's superiority and sexual vigor, and likes the insults other characters hurl at him as a Jew, he then feels "disgusted" at himself: "That was morality; things that made you disgusted afterward. No, that must be immorality" (149). Jake is not atheistic either. In Spain, he attends church a couple of times, once with the secular Brett. She has blurred notions of religion. She wants Jake to "go to confession" (150), and Jake tells her that a confession would be "impossible" and also "in a language she did not know" (151). In a San Fermin chapel in Pamplona where the fiesta started and where Brett wants to pray for Romero, they enter, and she gets nervous and leaves immediately: "I'm damned bad for a religious atmosphere," she says (208). She later says that religion is not working for her as she has never got anything she prayed for (209). She decides to give up Romero so that she does not corrupt him and to return to Mike, who is her "sort of thing" (243). She thinks that deciding not to be a bitch in a post-war moral wasteland is what "we have instead of God" (245). These characters are not able to have stable relations in the aftermath of the war. Jake's war injury terminated the possibility of a fruitful relationship with Brett, while the hedonistic sex around him is sterile. However, Jake patiently endures. He has the moral honesty to triumph over his suffering. He is there to help Brett when she is deserted by Romero in Madrid. When she tells Jake in a cab ride that they could have made a nice couple, he has the moral courage to imagine that and say "Isn't it pretty to think so?" (247). Like Bloom, Jake finds in human relations and personal integrity the potential for heroism and cultural renewal in an unheroic age. Jake is a product of the wasteland of modernity: irrational violence, alienation, capitalistic indifference, and spiritual crisis. Such a sick world robs men of their masculinity and, by contrast, demoralizes women. The modern anti-hero is a blunderer, not a redeemer, but regeneration is not impossible. Whereas Joyce's Bloom is an ironic anti-hero because he is a cuckold and Hemingway's Jake is emasculated, Samuel Beckett's Murphy is symbolically paralyzed.

The title character in Beckett's *Murphy* is reduced to nothingness in an explosion in his garret. While Bloom and Jake hover between the low mimetic mode and the ironic one theorized by Frye—as people like us but with certain limitations—Murphy apparently belongs to the ironic mode where we have "a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity" (Frye 34). Beckett, an experimental writer working at the intersection of modernism and postmodernism, uses black humour and absurdist philosophy in his depiction of his (anti)hero Murphy to comment on the meaninglessness of modern life. To put aside narrative structure that privileges the active narrator rather than the character Murphy, the novel is an enactment of the futility of all action. Modern life,

Beckett suggests, needs anti-heroic tramps who dissolve and end up nothing. Seeing the futility of all life and bodily desires, Murphy is thus on strike against life. All he needs is a state of utter stupor so that his body is numb and his mind is free. Murphy assumes “the passive quietist role” (Pilling 30) one would expect from an anti-hero. He is pale, yellow-complexioned, and has nothing special about his features. His typical dress is an unusual wardrobe. He is prone to heart attacks and walks with noticeable deliberation. When we encounter him, he is actually tied to his rocking chair. Celia, a reformed prostitute and his fiancée—his anti-heroic feminine counterpart—wants him to find work so that their relation can thrive, but he refuses. Her desire is “to make a man out of Murphy” (41). When she implores him to work, he responds: “Providence will provide” (16). He is an embodiment of the modern fragmented individual, a man with too many or no personality rather than a unified consciousness. Despite his self-effacement, however, Murphy is constantly sought by others, especially women, who find in him some unexplained fascination. Miss Counihan, his former mistress, pursues him in London. One character tries to justify this fascination by referring to Murphy’s “surgical quality” (39). Defending Murphy, Celia responds to an inquiry about Murphy by saying that “Murphy was Murphy” who “belonged to no profession or trade” and “did nothing she could discern” and “sometimes had the price of a concert” (14). His apparent weaknesses and stasis seem the basis for his brand of negative “heroism.” As H. Porter Abbott argues, Murphy is the disinterested centre of events, “the unmoved mover of all action in this novel” (309). If he is a hero, it is because he realizes the futility of his existence. The ultimate (and ironic) disappearance of his body is a positive step toward a symbolic rebirth from such absurd life.

Murphy struggles with the Cartesian body/mind dualism and attempts to free himself from his body and release his mind. He habitually sits naked on his chair and ties himself with scarves. He once violently falls to the ground with the rocking-chair above him, still fastened with the scarves: “Only the most local movements were possible, a licking of the lips, a turning of the other cheek to the dust, and so on. Blood gushed from his nose.” When he is untied, he remains “prostrate in the crucified position, heaving” (20). He is the quintessence of comic anti-heroism. His heroism, though, is blatantly internal. He feels he is “split in two, a body and a mind” (64). As he represses his body, “he felt himself coming alive in mind, set free to move among its treasures. The body has its stock, the mind its treasures” (65). He takes his body to be totally unrelated to his mind. He feels he does not need to defend “his courses of inaction” or his mental life of speculation (26). He is accustomed to “remaining still for long periods” (20). If traditional heroes are dashing in the outside world, Murphy chooses the life of the mind as his terrain where forms and fragments are in gestation:

“Murphy’s mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without. This was not an impoverishment, for it excluded nothing that it did not itself contain” (63). In his inertia and preference for the dark, he dehumanizes himself. He takes to “spending less and less time in the light, spitting at the breakers of the world; and less in the half light, where the choice of bliss introduced an element of effort” (66). He is reluctant to find a job to marry Celia because the outer realm is not the place for such a domestic man. He finally becomes an orderly in a mental asylum and identifies with the insane inmates. He befriends an anti-heroic version of himself, a schizophrenic who wants to die through cessation of breathing. He plays chess with another inmate, a game of returning the items to their original positions. His degradation is no less, and his lack of ambition in life is even clearer. His asylum employment dictates that he should tolerate whatever from the insane and their abuse, “no matter how foul and unmerited,” and he was never expected to forget that “he was a creature without initiative.” He is employed on the basis of his “demerits” (91) for a very menial job, cleaning, in the place of a man who resigns his post. He is expected to “keep his mouth shut” (92). However, his post fits his uncommitted, indifferent nature. It does not make a difference to him what he does or where he works. He gets along with the insane and finds them his “kindred” (102). His popularity with them is indicative: “It meant that they felt in him what they had been and he in them what he would be” (104).

As an anti-hero, Murphy is the converse of progress or the quintessence of stasis. He ties himself to his chair to reach a state of inaction and concomitant introspection. He is fed up with breathing and wants to get an artificial respiration machine. In his anti-heroic self-effacement, he is on a vacation from life. Although he absurdly prefers stasis and non-involvement in anything significant, he ironically dies violently in an explosion caused by leaking gas pipes and is identified only by a mark on his “buttocks.” He comes to embody the opposite of what he tries to stand for: “To die fighting was the perfect antithesis of his whole practice, faith and intention” (26). True to the absurd life he leads, he avoids life to be found by death; he finds work to desert Celia; and he leaves his place to find death. His ashes, which he wanted to be flushed down a lavatory at the Abbey Theatre, where his “happiest hours have been spent” (151), are instead trampled underfoot during a fight. Cooper is entrusted to flush his ashes and during a fight with another man, he throws the bag at the man and Murphy’s ashes are scattered in a Dublin pub. Murphy’s tragic end literally reduces him to nothingness and makes him an abject (no)thing even in death. In this absurd ending, the bag “bounced, burst, off the wall on to the floor, where at once it became the object of much dribbling, passing, trapping, shooting, punching, heading and

even some recognition from the gentleman's code." By the end of the fight, what was Murphy was "freely distributed over the floor of the saloon; and before another dayspring greyned the earth had been swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit" (154). Death is not a sufficient redemption for existence, and what was Murphy paid the price in death and dissolution. Beckett's ironic tone finds its culmination in Murphy's tragically absurd end. If violent death is an apt conclusion for such an anti-heroic life, it is also the threshold for rebirth. Murphy did not leave progeny, and the disintegration of his ashes should allow for cultural renewal in the midst of ruins.

Anti-heroes were used in modernist literature to express a sense of cultural apocalypse and fragmentation. Modernity created such a brand of "heroism." The fragmentation of identity of such heroes is symptomatic of modern cultural fragmentation. A sense of crisis and absence of moral values just before the Great War makes many talents useless in a chaotic sociopolitical atmosphere. If Hemingway rejuvenates the mythical theme of the Fisher King and Joyce that of the Homeric hero, it is because they want to revive a declining culture. Beckett offers no redemptive vision, but death seems a step away from the ironies of such modern life and toward cultural renewal. All, however, praise the human nature of such characters and the suffering contingent on being human.

Modern anti-heroes reflect the philosophical and literary traditions associated with modernism and modernity. With the breakdown of cultural norms and beliefs, modernist writers turned to inadequate individuals by way of valorizing the modern man in the face of numerous oddities, by way of challenging tradition and yet reinvigorating it. The humour with which many anti-heroes are treated may have provided the comic endurance necessary for dealing with changing times. Such cultural and existential models of (anti)heroism, however, are not the only ones we might find in the modernist novel. The model of the artist figure was frequently used alongside that of the anti-hero. Both models overlap sometimes and enrich each other. Some modernists found an underlying order out of the decadence of modern life in art and in the way of living life. For example, Bloom's counterpart in *Ulysses* is Stephen Dedalus. He is the brooding artist who returns to Dublin from Paris after the sickness of his mother. He is tormented by feelings of guilt for refusing to pray for his mother at her deathbed and having rejected the Roman Catholic Church to dedicate himself to his vocation as an artist. He has literary ambitions of writing poetry and a theory of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. His friends bully him, and he feels exiled and humiliated. Like other misfits, he is cynical, introspective, and frustrated; he feels abortive and unappreciated as an

artist. He is anti-heroic in being careless, poor, fearful, and withdrawn, yet he is heroic in his sensitivity, intellectual ability, and richness of mind. As an artist, he feels wronged in an indifferent muddle of exploiters and undereducated people.

Another modernist, Virginia Woolf, finds in the artist as heroine an alternative to modernity's lack of heroism. In *To the Lighthouse*, she offers a more hopeful vision that contrasts with the gloomy vision of male anti-heroism. Mrs. Ramsay is a beautiful, loving hostess. She cares about her guests, supports her husband, and makes a lasting memory out of the ephemeral. She is a sensitive artist in the art of life. Her dinner party is her canvas. She creates unity, hope, and harmony amid the ravages of passing time and war. She is the ordering female principle that brings together disparate mentalities around her dinner table. Lily Briscoe is a clearer artist figure. She is a young painter anxious about her work being undermined by men. She achieves her artistic vision and completes her portrait of Mrs. Ramsay through a strike in the middle, and thus connects two separate masses of shapes and colours on her canvas. She imposes order on a chaotic modern experience by providing a centre to hold things. She produces the lasting and beautiful out of the transient, and art is her hope in a world of change and indifference. This feminist vision of art counters the havoc of a destructive modernity that produced despairing anti-heroes. Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe counter the negative forms of female heroism which, in turn, counter the inadequate male heroism I discussed.

NOTES

1/ Examples include Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. More modern (and non-English) examples are worth citing, but they are beyond the scope of the essay. Iganazio Silone's *Bread and Wine* and Albert Camus's *The Stranger* are cases in point.

2/ It is no wonder then that modernists like Virginia Woolf, Robert D. Richardson, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce turned to and justified their preoccupation with the mind and used the stream-of-consciousness technique to highlight this move inward.

3/ Within the scheme of mythical parallels Joyce employs, Bloom fleeing the sun-blinded citizen tossing the biscuit tin finds an ironic mythic parallel in the scene of Odysseus escaping the blinded Polyphemus hurling great stones.

4/ In this sense, Hemingway's anti-hero is a parallel to Eliot's employment of the Fisher King legend in his pivotal modernist poem *The Waste Land*. The maimed King/hero exists in a wasteland. He cannot heal himself, and there are no heroes to accomplish such a task. Sterility is a necessary end because in the absence of restoration the land will suffer, just like its King/hero.

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