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Critical Analysis of the Protagonist of *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*: Modernist Features, Deconstruction, Role of Women in his Life

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Abstract:

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man published in 1916, an autobiographical text by the renowned writer James Joyce (Irish). It adopts a Modernist method that incorporates elements of realism, verisimilitude, and Marxism, that emerged in the mid to late 19th century. However, the predominant style employed in this novel is realism due to its historical context. Engaging with Joyce's entire body of work may immerse readers in a captivating and enigmatic world referred to as "chaosmos" (*Finnegans Wake*, p. 118.21), representing a poetic and mysterious realm achieved by only a few writers. This study aims to explore the central protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, in *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and analyse his connection with the writer.

Keywords: Autobiographical, Realism, Poetic.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is a better form of the earlier novel *Stephen Hero*. Primarily autobiographical in nature, it was initially serialized in the magazine *The Egoist* from 1914 to 1915 before being published as a book in 1916. The novel was widely acclaimed as a work of genius by James Joyce, the author. It follows life of the protagonist Stephen Dedalus, who serves as Joyce's own depiction, drawing an allusion to mythical figure Daedalus. Within the narrative, Joyce vividly depicts last years of 19th-century Ireland and identifies religion and oppression of the working class as contributing factors to the decline of his people and country. The story unfolds through the narrator's consciousness, as he progresses from a devout Catholic upbringing to an early adulthood marked by a desire to become an artist and pursue his ambitions in Paris. Joyce portrays his alter ego, Dedalus, with a blend of sympathy and irony, chronicling his journey from early childhood until his departure for Paris. Throughout the narrative, Joyce

explores various epiphanies and significant moments of realization that shape Dedalus' understanding of the world.

"Joyce extends across two boundless prospects by naming his wellknown protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, after the builer of the Cretan Labyrinth "Daedalus" from classical Greek title meaning "cunningly wrought" muffle our sense of Stephen's individuality by suggesting a mythical analogue and possible type quality in his name" (Online Encyclopedia, 2014).

James Joyce's remarkable affinity for language manifested in his groundbreaking approach to writing, wherein he skillfully employed history, literature and mythology to forge an inventive dialect rich in symbols and diverse narrative styles. Joyce's intellectual prowess and boundless vision have drawn comparisons to the monumental contributions of Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, two iconic figures in human history. The novel, in both material and technique, stood out as best in its time period. Joyce popularized the stream of consciousness method through this work, enabling the reader to traverse the narrative path by delving into Stephen's innermost thoughts and perceptions.

"The basic myth that is prevalent in Portrait, is the Greek legend of the escape from the island of Crete by Daedalus and his son Icarus. Daedalus, a great architect, created a large maze called the Labyrinth to house a half-man, half-bull called the Minotaur. The Minotaur was birthed to King Minos' wife as punishment for keeping a sacrificial bull that was to be given to the sea-god Poseidon. Therefore, Poseidon made Minos' wife fall madly in love with the bull. Minos, to keep the secret of the Labyrinth safe, imprisoned Daedalus and his son Icarus in the Labyrinth on Crete. The only escape from the island was by air. Daedalus created two pairs of wings from feathers and wax and he and his son flew from the island together. Yet this story is not without a lesson to be learned. Icarus, who did not heed his father's warning took his

pride and himself high into the sky. The wax melted and Icarus fell to his death " (Hamilton, 1969, p. 144-45, 157)

Materials and methods

The novel by Joyce is structured into five distinct chapters. In the opening chapter, reader is in the world of Stephen as a young child, where his thoughts and experiences are vividly portrayed. Stephen is depicted as a five-year-old boy, youngest student attending Clongowes Wood College which is for boys. Opening can be divided into four parts: Stephen's early childhood, his time at school encompassing the playground, classroom, dormitory, and infirmary, his return home for the Christmas dinner, and his subsequent return to the school setting, including the playground, refectory, and a visit to the rector's study to voice a grievance lodged against Father Dolan. Opening chapter serves as an introduction to the key influences that shape Stephen's character, namely Irish nationalism, Catholicism, and his profound sensitivity.

Modernism in A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man

This is a forerunner of the Modernist novel and serves as a response to the dominant writing form of that time. Authors like T.S. Eliot, Joyce, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf emerged as originators of literary works that reflected the continuously varying period and raised questions about established institutions such as religion, social order, and capitalism.

As the protagonist Stephen transitions from childhood to adulthood, his journey from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to *Ulysses* showcases centrality of language in shaping his character. Stephen's personal identity is first introduced to the reader through a conversation at Clongowes Wood College with other classmates when he is 6. In exchange, his classmate asks him meaning of Stephen's name, indicating the identity crisis Stephen will later experience when he finds himself unable to provide a satisfactory answer.

And one day [Nasty Roche] had asked:

—What is your name?

Stephen had answered:

—Stephen Dedalus.

Then Nasty Rocke had said:

—What kind of a name is that?

...Stephen had not been able to answer... (Portrait, 1991, p. 5).

Shortly thereafter, during Stephen's weakened state, another classmate named Athy makes a statement... "you have a queer name, Dedalus" (Portrait, 1991, p. 23).

The modernist writers revolutionized the conventional approach to literature, deviating from established norms and structures. They frequently employed first-person narratives and fragmented storytelling, occasionally disorienting readers by rearranging the chronological sequence of events. Joyce, in particular, embraced "stream of consciousness" term, offering readers a idea about the inner workings of the narrator's thoughts. Like his contemporaries, Joyce aimed to depict the struggle of finding meaning amidst the chaos prevalent in the aftermath of World War I.

According to Virginia Woolf, the ideal novel should possess elements of both poetic elevation and the everyday quality of prose. In her essay "Poetry, Fiction and the Future," she suggests that this novel should not rely heavily on the factual recording ability often associated with fiction. It would provide minimal information about characters' material aspects such as their homes, income, and occupations, and would not align closely with sociological or environmental novels. Despite these limitations, the novel would vividly and intimately convey the emotions and ideas of its characters, albeit from a different perspective. It would explore human relationships with nature, destiny, and the realm of imagination and dreams. Simultaneously, it would capture the complexities and contradictions of life, incorporating elements of irony, contrast, questioning, and the intricate nature of modern existence. In essence, the novel would reflect the amalgamation of disparate elements found within the modern mind

"Stephen's perceptions of self and struggles with identity begin in Portrait with the questioning of his name. The significance of his name precipitates in questions of paternity. He tries to be loyal to his blind acceptance of authority, but his ability to do so is ruined by the argument at dinner at

home, and later by the unfair punishment he receives at school. When he is punished it is too much for his scheme, and his confusion and disappointment are emphasised by the way he thinks the priest is going to shake hands with him" (Mcbride, p. 32).

Modernist features and techniques in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

This novel incorporates several modernist features and techniques that reflect the influence of the literary movement on James Joyce's writing. These elements not only shaped the novel itself but also contributed to James's prominence as a modern writer. Key examples of modernist techniques found in the novel include the use of the *kunsterroman* plot, employment of the "stream of consciousness" writing style, the exploration of discrete versus common ideas, and the development of a distinct and innovative language.

Stunted maturity

Prior to Stephen discovering his artistic calling, his primary understanding is rooted in a sense of dissent towards his environment. Despite his efforts to embrace a modest and devout Catholic lifestyle, he realizes that there is a fundamental disconnect between his beliefs and the expectations imposed upon him.

“[t]o merge his life in the common tide of other lives was harder for him than any fasting or prayer, and it was his constant failure to do this to his own satisfaction which caused in his soul at last a sensation of spiritual dryness together with a growth of doubts and scruples” (Portrait 164).

In this novel, we are presented with a young man who exhibits several unfavorable character traits that do not align with a mature individual, indicating a concerning pattern of development. However, the story also implies that Stephen's emotional unrest and inability to take decisive action may stem from his lack of a solid foundation and a sense of self-worth. As an example, when considering the possibility of entering the priesthood, he candidly acknowledges as:

“it was partly the absence of an appointed rite which had always contained him to inaction whether he had allowed silence to cover his anger or pride or had suffered only an embrace he longed to give” (Portrait 172).

His artistic calling prompts him to adopt a strategy of emotional detachment, aiming to gain an objective viewpoint on his artistic subjects. This transformation of his immature insensitivity into an artistic ideal encourages him to sever his friendship with Cranly, who had been one of his closest companions throughout the novel. Stephen asserts to Cranly that he has no fear of complete solitude and is willing to abandon whatever is necessary to move forward his artistic work:

--Alone, quite alone. You have no fear of that. And you know what word means? Not only to be separate from all others but to have not even one friend.

--I will take the risk, said Stephen.

--And not to have one person, Cranly said, who would be more than a friend, more even than the noblest and truest friend a man ever had. His words seemed to have struck some deep chord in his own nature. Had he spoken of himself, of himself as he was or wished to be? Stephen watched his face for some moments in silence. A cold sadness was there. He had spoken of himself, of his own loneliness which he feared.

--Of whom are you speaking? Stephen asked at length. Cranly did not answer. (Portrait 269)

Result and discussion

The novel stands as a notable instance of a *Kunstlerroman*, or an artist's coming-of-age story, within the realm of English literature. Within its pages, we witness the growth and turmoil of an artist as he challenges and defies both Irish and Catholic rules and regulations ingrained in his raising. It focuses on the artistic development of a protagonist, rather than an ordinary young

man. With its compelling narrative, the book has garnered widespread readership and serves as a significant teaching tool in English literature, leaving a profound impact on writers worldwide.

In this novel, Joyce employs a style that mirrors the protagonist's stream of consciousness. This technique is a fundamental aspect of modernist writers, as it forms an alternative actuality detached from the conventional world. "Stream of consciousness" method was extensively utilized by these modern authors, with Joyce, in particular, emphasizing individuality over societal themes. Through the use of interior monologues and streams of consciousness, the writer gives a glimpse of his other terms employed in this novel. The novel incorporates various early twentieth-century isms, including symbols, images, expressions, Marxism, existentialism, and feminism.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man stands as an early example in English literature where stream of consciousness is prominently employed. This term aims to capture the fluid and unpredictable nature of human thought, without imposing logical or coherent order. The author presents the character's consciousness as it unfolds, resembling an interior monologue. By blending the two other characters, the author constructs a distinct personal reality. The novel is narrated in the third person, with minimal dialogue. Throughout the story, the style evolves to depict Stephen's life from childhood to adulthood, culminating in his decision to leave Ireland. The language exhibits modernist features, progressively intensifying throughout these stages of development.

F. Parvin Sharpless asserts at the ending of text, Stephen has partly attained his artistic excellence of transitioning from an emotionally involved state to a detached, objective perception of the events in his life. However, concerns are raised regarding sacrifices during the process. As Stephen turns his life into art, he finds himself losing the ability to fully live it.

Pity is an emotion which drains away kinetic passions which, while they may be painful, constitute the vital springs of the average sensual man's basic motivations, particularly his ability to relate to and love objects and people. Joyce undoubtedly recognized the dangers to the artist of this aesthetic. Being refined out of existence, as Stephen recommends for the artist, is a kind of

death, a death in which the sensual reality becomes less and less real, falling contemplatively into a lifeless formality, like Yeats's Byzantium, where everything is perfect and passionless, where the bird sings only to a drowsy emperor and to bored lords and ladies looking on in objective detached stasis. (Sharpless 328-29)

CONCLUSION

The importance of beginning of 20th-century literature is evident, and it has sparked extensive discussions on subject matter along with formation of modern fiction, driven by experiences of contemporary life. James Joyce's writings encapsulate all the defining characteristics of Modernism: the exploration of new forms and styles, a desire to break free from tradition, and the quest to redefine humanity's place in the Universe. Modernist novels often adopt a first-person perspective, and the use of fragmentation is a common technique, with the serial wise arrangement of events occasionally rearranged to delve into the inner lives of the characters.

Virginia Woolf eloquently captures the essence of modernist writing in a frequently cited passage, encapsulating its core principles and themes

“Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions-trivial, fantastic, evanescent or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old... Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. It is now the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and un-circumscribed spirit whatever aberration or complexity it may have with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible”. [3]

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