

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN-AN INQUIRY INTO THE CHARACTER'S EVOLUTION¹

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Abstract:

James Joyce, a prominent figure in the modernist literary movement, created the character Stephen Dedalus and revealed an example of how consciousness functions when one searches for direction in life. The chaotic nature of human consciousness is revealed through literary devices and techniques that prove the lifelikeness of the character and the way fiction represents not only the reality of a specific time but the reality of the multitude of meanings present within the content of fictional writing, namely literature.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the evolution of the main character in the novel “A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man” by James Joyce to reveal the way Stephen Dedalus builds his consciousness and finds the tone of his “voice”. The metaphor of the voice is to be considered the conceptual term used to describe the different phases of the character’s evolution and the way he succeeds in creating order among uncertainties, quests, and struggles. The term “voice” is used within the neuro-scientific frame of thought, as defined by Antonio Damasio as being “the representation of the conscious self” (Damasio 2010: 45).

Both terms, namely consciousness and voice, lead to psychological content; thus, the nature of the analysis is psychological, literary, and symbolic as well. The mythological dimension is to be interpreted through symbols and their significance. The literary dimension revolves around literary

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techniques such as interior monologue and stream of consciousness, and the psychological frame includes elements that connect literature and psychology.

Keywords: consciousness; literature; myth; reality; voice.

Modernism entails broad areas of study, and it is, at the same time, the notion referring to the twentieth-century shift in thought and perception of the human being. Besides the historical events that affected people in an unprecedented manner, there was the emergence of cultural factors such as the avant-garde, psychology studies, and artistic movements that questioned the nature of the person differently. The new sensibility of people meant coping with time perceived within the axis of recollections, feelings, inwardness, and everything that happened in society.

James Joyce's writings are a rich source of meanings analysed by many critics who revealed not only the literary richness of his work but also the philosophical, historical, and language use aspects, which marked the beginning of interdisciplinary studies developed in postmodernism. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* has not only powerful autobiographical elements, but the language is open and relevant in meaning for any reader because the evolution of thought is visible along with the formation of the self, an artistic self that praises art in all the forms: "Joyce indeed wanted to be interpreted; in this he follows one of the central aims of early modernism, which was to attract an audience which was willing to attempt to decode the relationships between stylistic medium and message" (Butler in Attrige, 2004: 83).

Our interest focuses on *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* published in 1916. Among the other main references to his works are *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans*

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Wake (1939). Beginning with Richard Ellmann and his biographical study entitled *James Joyce* (1959) with its revisited edition published in 1983 and Don Gifford's annotated edition, *Joyce Annotated Notes for Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1982), many other critical studies mirror the connections between James Joyce's life and his character's, Stephen Dedalus, life. *A Portrait* is referred to as an autobiographical novel due to the similarities between the character's evolution through life and the author's real life and education.

Nonetheless, character and author are still two different formal innovations analysed as connected but separate entities. Along with the emergence of New Criticism and New Historicism, the author's life came to represent just a portal of contextualisation. The biographical details related to the author's life in any book would help any reader identify the cultural background of the literary creation and the available educational tools at the time of its release.

James Joyce's novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, pictures the evolution of Stephen Dedalus from childhood to youth. The character changes his perception throughout five chapters and the narrator presents a total first-person narration only in the last one. The character's consciousness seems to be divided into third-person narration and first-person narration until the last part, which confirms that everything was actually perceived by him. Written in the form of a diary, the last pages are a stream of thoughts confirming the character's advanced use of the English language and his new mode of being, namely being an artist and a writer of his nation. His becoming and his ultimate awareness of his way of being implied distancing himself from home regarding mentality and eventually physically leaving the familiar environment, Dublin.

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Following the evolving consciousness of the character, we approach the novel by focusing on language and cultural examples that challenged his understanding of identity, religion, art, society, and life. As main investigation tools engaged for the present analysis is the analytical method of Michel Foucault and hermeneutic interpretation. Identity and Self-awareness are the main themes discussed in relation to the other aspects that contribute to shaping the character's sense of awareness. Their acknowledgement leads the character to a higher sense of awareness, to literary consciousness, in the context of inner struggles and answers searched for in the language uses and meanings. The character discovers the intrinsic power of language and words together with his increasing understanding of everything. The lens of culture allows him to open his perspective towards identifying himself as an artist and identifying his wishes for the future. His preoccupations and enquiries grow into a different awareness that entitles us to classify it as literary and thus, prove that Self search acquires a new development in this novel.

We mention R.B. Kershner Jr.'s article *Time and Language in Joyce's Portrait of the Artist* published in 1976, where he analysed Stephen's increasing consciousness in connection with time spans and language use. He traced the way Stephen developed his perspective in stages and the functions of language enquiries in the process of his growth. The subjective time of the character is contrasted with the objective/outer time of the third person narrator and distinguished on the aesthetic level (Kershner, 1976: 605). Even if the narrator's voice and the character's voice merge and focus on Stephan's consciousness, there is still a dual layer throughout the narrative.

One main point of departure when understanding consciousness in relation to the Self entity is revealed in

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the analysed modernist novel through the stream of consciousness as defined by William James: "A 'river' or a 'stream' is the metaphor by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life" (James, 1918: 155). The flow of thoughts constantly running in the mind leads to the classification of consciousness in terms of "ordinary flow of ideas" (James, 1918: 374) and "higher consciousness" (James as cited in Johnson, 1987: 2). William James and his brother Henry James discussed these levels of consciousness to highlight the continuity of thought and the different 'selves' that derive from the assimilation and understanding of the world. A particular aspect of this division is that there are degrees of evolution. Therefore, one cannot haste or urge the attainment of any 'higher' level of consciousness if the 'ordinary', everyday thinking is not fed with the constant challenge of words and wording, meaning that one can discover his or her levels of consciousness only if communication stands at the basis of each step-in life.

Moving on with premises related to the stream of consciousness, we shall focus on the aspects concerning inner talk since we claim that it plays a key role in developing degrees of awareness. The purpose is to trace the development of these degrees and how they contribute to forming a Self-image. Contemporary researchers have analysed the layers of consciousness by adopting scientific or philosophical perspectives. For example, Luc Steels argued that the inner voice could be viewed as a mechanism that leads to a self-model, meaning that it contributes to the person's conscious negative or spiritually stimulating experience (Steels, 2003: 11-12). Daniel Dennet adopted a cognitive point of view, and even if he supported the materialistic claim about the human brain and all its functions, it is worth mentioning that he

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showed that consciousness has to be associated with other concepts to be explored or to some extent understood (Dennet, 1992: 24).

Therefore, we associate the notion of consciousness with the Self and inner thoughts and experiences. Regarding inner thoughts, they are viewed as 'personal navigation' (Ferrari & Sternberg, 1998: 221). The difference between the present approach and Ferrari and Sternberg's definition and use of the concept is that here we talk about a voyage towards discovering the character's focus on his step-by-step stages of deciphering himself. In contrast, their theory focuses on controlling one's journey throughout life. Instead of 'control', we choose 'becoming aware' since the proposed degrees of consciousness precisely mirror the person's awareness increase.

Regarding the effect of James Joyce's writings, the way one perceives the text is very direct and personal. The reader enters the world created by the author and experiences the character's thoughts, feelings, actions: "the modernist period [...] was a turn not just against idealism, but against metaphysics as such" (Bell in Levenson, 1999: 19). The intermingling of the world perceived through senses and the world formed through means of language use can be identified in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Thus, the act of reading is challenged by the many-sidedness of the text: "From its very title, *A Portrait* brings together two distinct modalities of representational thinking: the visual and the linguistic" (Docherty in Milesi, 2003: 120).

The title of the novel is not only defining the nature of the following writing but it leads the reader straight to the importance of the character, the artist who is revealed through a piece of art painted and shaped through creative and subliminal language: "Much more importantly, *A Portrait* is conditioned uncertainly between being and

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becoming: it is a portrait of an artist – indeed, of the very artist who makes the portrait (and thus of something whose essential being can be described with more or less mimetic adequacy)” (Docherty in Milesi, 2003: 120).

Therefore, the evolution of the reader who enters not only the world, but the mind of the character has been emphasised by criticism: “Joyce tries to make us read experience and to experience reading, and not to read *of* experience nor to *have* the experience of reading, both of which have been the normative post-Romantic modes” (Docherty in Milesi, 2003: 120).

The main character, Stephen Dedalus, evolves from childhood until his young age in an apparent constant rhythm throughout the chapters of the book, but it reveals itself as a fast and challenging rhythm. The character seems to develop what we name ‘literary consciousness’. We use the terms *self-consciousness* and *literary consciousness* to observe and reveal higher forms of awareness attained by the character until the end of the novel.

Literary consciousness does not necessarily imply a total equilibrium in judgement, self-perception, and self-image, but it represents a level of understanding that places awareness into the realms of literature and culture. In other words, reaching this level of consciousness means connecting with the language of art and then developing a self-image that can be complete and open to future growth only through reading, writing, questioning, and connecting with the help of words. The use of language is not anymore trapped within the everyday, familiar landscape, but it is a tool of investigation used to reveal the connection between art and the human being’s consciousness.

Following the order of the five chapters in the novel, we explore some key moments and events that influenced and shaped Stephen’s perception and

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formation of his way of thinking. We focus on cultural and psychological aspects, such as the activity of reading or listening to music.

The first chapter begins with an atmosphere of tales and music. Stephen is recalled as part of his father's story about 'a moocow', a supernatural creature which transcends children away from parents to shape their victorious character (Gifford, 1982: 131). The father's story is Stephen's first memory of childhood, a fact that announces the child's initiation and development of imagination. Given the fact that the author precisely chose this fantastic creature which influences the growth of the child at a symbolic significance, we might assume that our character is projected as reaching heights or attempting to cross limitations. As the mythological name of the character suggests, the name Dedalus leads to a cluster of symbols, knowledge and creativity describing best the main traits of this mythological figure. Stephen Dedalus is prone to intellectual growth, developing his sense of awareness along with his desire to quest and understand the issues and challenges of life.

The beginning of his memories implies the tunes and tones of music as well. The repertoire presents an opposition of feelings and emotional states. On the one hand, the child could recollect lyrics from the American song of sorrow entitled *Lilly Dale* (Gifford, 1982: 133). On the other hand, the sound of his father's dance on the sailor's hornpipe played by his mother on the piano would recall joy. The hornpipe dance is part of the Irish culture, and the footwear is specially designed to perform this dance nowadays. Studies acknowledge the variations of this dance since it was first danced in Scotland and Wales (Rinaldi, 2004: 18). Nonetheless, the Irish dance differentiates itself through distinctive features such as the lack of arm movement while performing: "From the early

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1900s arm gestures were removed from the jig, in the same way that all arm movements have been eliminated from the Irish hornpipe” (Flynn, 1998: 33), the footwear intended to release the noise of each step and the different stresses of the beats in the hornpipe tunes.

The contrast between the significance of the first lyrics, which lead to references regarding death: “O, the wild rose blossoms/ On the little green place” (Joyce, 1992: 7) and the lyrics of the sailor’s hornpipe: “Tralala lala,/ Tralala tralaladdy” (Joyce, 1992: 7) which suggest a sort of childish joy announces the future struggle of Stephen Dedalus, namely flourishing abroad, but struggling to death to survive on foreign lands or live happily at home, according to the norms of the imposed society. The decision has already been foreseen in *Dubliners* (1914), where the thoughts of the character Little Chandler from the story *A Little Cloud* argue against living in Dublin, considering the city too small and too narrow for intellectual development and success as a writer: “There was no doubt about it: if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin” (Joyce, 1947: 83). We consider life abroad as a symbolic ‘death’ for the character since the lyrics of *Lilly Dale*, the first song recollected in the novel, were written by an American writer in the 19th century, the author thus placing the mental map of the character abroad, outside of his native land and contrasting it with the comfort zone of the homeland, referred to by us as ‘happiness’ since the intellectual effort differs when living in the native country.

Moving on with another key moment from the first chapter, the character identifies himself as part of the universe, an order established in his mind due to the written list of words that he conceived as a result of his will to arrange his thoughts somehow and find his place: “Stephen Dedalus/ Class of Elements/ Clongoves Wood

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College/ Sallins/ County Kildare/ Ireland/ Europe/ The World/ The Universe” (Joyce, 1992: 15-16). This orderly list and the upcoming rhetorical question: “What was after the universe? Nothing” (Joyce, 1992: 16) follows the gradual intellectual passage of the character from written words, questions about the intrinsic meaning of words and linking words to express ideas towards the character’s ability to intermingle words so as to investigate existential issues and find answers to his quests.

The second chapter highlights the increasing doubts of the character regarding religion, love and family. During one of his summer holidays at home, in the company of his uncle, Charles, he mechanically followed his uncle’s gestures of praying without feeling or understanding the effect of prayers: “Stephen knelt at his side respecting, though he did not share, his piety. He often wondered what his granduncle prayed for so seriously” (Joyce, 1992: 62). The question of faith was not clearly understood and interiorised by Stephen who was still questioning the uncertainties of religious issues. Even if he responded ironically to his uncle’s behaviour: “Perhaps he prayed for the souls in purgatory or for the grace of a happy death” (Joyce, 1992: 62), he would still be aware of the reality of death.

Dwelling a little more in the imaginary world of books, Stephen would experience the joy of playing with memories, images, and characters: “and in his imagination he lived through a long train of adventures, marvellous as those in the book itself, towards the close of which there appeared an image of himself, grown older and sadder, standing in a moonlit garden with Mercedes” (Joyce, 1992: 63). Choosing Alexandre Dumas might also suggest and reaffirm the increasing will of the character towards travelling and escaping the borders of a closed world, his present world. The scene might also mirror James Joyce’s

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taste for travelling, searching for knowledge, and living in culturally advanced cities. The French novelist was well-known for his adventure books and Stephen experiences adventure through reading Dumas and shapes his self-trust regarding language use and the courage to express realities in fiction. If Alexandre Dumas transcends the reader into a chain of adventurous activities, James Joyce proposes adventures and mazes for thoughts. Stephen Dedalus has not yet reached the stage of completing the maze of his artistic life, but he still struggles to decipher parts of it. He initially acknowledges him being different from others, and then, eventually, that he is, not anymore, a child: “The noise of children at play annoyed him [...] he was different from others. He did not want to play. He wanted to meet in the real world the unsubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld” (Joyce, 1992: 65).

Already a college student at Belvedere, Stephen Dedalus experiences a new kind of silence. The encounter with his father and some acquaintances makes him acknowledge his detachment and isolation. The utterance of lines from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s unfinished poem *To the Moon* (Gifford, 1982: 173): “Art thou pale for weariness/Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth,/Wandering companionless...?” (Joyce, 1992: 96) might be a moment of ‘contemplative silence’, a concept defined and theorised as “a mode of capable being” (Petersen, 2021: XVII). In her study, *A Hermeneutics of Contemplative Silence: Paul Ricoeur, Edith Stein, and the Heart of Meaning* (2021), Michele Kueter Petersen theorises and proves the existence of a hermeneutics of ‘contemplative silence’. She connects the religious phenomenon to Paul Ricoeur’s theories in order to highlight how the practice of contemplative silence creates meaning and “the actualizable possibility to live as a transformed human being” (Petersen, 2021: XVII). The contemplative mode

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experienced by the character proves his ability to distance himself from others and get to understand his own manner of thinking. He was quite aware of the fact that education and critical thinking were the portals towards a freed self-consciousness.

The character's ultimate effort to connect with family and friends marks the last pages of this chapter and his last actions to change their mentality. Money which has been won from an essay contest is spent on theatre tickets and other presents: "Every day he drew up a bill of fare for the family and every night led a party of three or four to the theatre to see *Ingomar* or *The Lady of Lions*" (Joyce, 1992: 98). The two plays representing stories of love and its triumph against all odds are in sharp contrast with Stephen's feeling of distrust and loneliness. In his case, his love of art and knowledge would make him decide and fight for his intellectual freedom.

The third chapter recounts remnants of old music, 'Shelly's fragment': "The music came nearer, and he recalled the words, the words of Shelly's fragment upon the moon wondering companionless" (Joyce, 1992: 103). This poetic music is altered by a new awakening of his consciousness struggling with the idea of sin. Surrounded by the Catholic learning environment of the Jesuit school he attends, Stephen seems to face new feelings, remorse and regret for his previous lustful deeds, even if he associates the lessons of the church with those of doctrines: "he read it in a veiled voice, lulling his conscience to its music [...] It was strange too that he found an arid pleasure in following up to the end the rigid lines of the doctrines of the church" (Joyce, 1992: 105-106). The effect of poetic music seems to cease in front of the whole religious dogmas he hears. The sermons related to the notions of death, judgement, and hell trigger his mind and produce the character's increasing realisation of his

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inner condition, such as the feeling of pain and heaviness of the soul. He would acknowledge that besides a foggy mind, one can sometimes experience torments of the soul: "As he walked home with silent companions, a thick fog seemed to compass his mind" (Joyce, 1992: 111); "The preacher's knife had probed deeply into his disclosed conscience and he felt now that his soul was festering in sin" (Joyce, 1992: 115).

The character's inner voice has been challenged to talk about his feelings and dare to ask for help when needed. This episode of weakened consciousness would evolve until the end of the chapter towards a more confident one: "He had confessed and God had pardoned him. His soul was made fair and holy once more, holy and happy" (Joyce, 1992: 146).

The fourth chapter finds the character continuing his pious life, reading from religious books. Nonetheless, this lifestyle and the grasping of holy images and lessons would still generate doubts and questions for the young Dedalus, who was not ready to commit his life to the priesthood: "A restless feeling of guilt would always be present with him: he would confess and repent and be absolved, confess and repent again and be absolved again, fruitlessly" (Joyce, 1992: 153). The stream of consciousness technique reveals the character's flow of untamed thoughts and his individual intellectual evolving pace: "The wisdom of the priest's appeal did not touch him to the quick. He was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world" (Joyce, 1992: 162).

A new kind of silence describes the character's inwardness. The mythological layer intermingles with the psychological one and Stephen Dedalus is due to decide his upcoming path. By means of alliteration, the narrative voice creates the image of an unbalanced inwardness but

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suggests how the character can act and change the course of his life: "He had not yet fallen but he would fall silently, in an instant. Not to fall was too hard, too hard; and he felt the silent lapse of his soul, as it would be at some instant to come falling, falling, but not yet fallen" (Joyce, 1992: 162). The mythological symbolism of the successful or unsuccessful flight is in direct relation to the inner silence felt by the soul. The character is about to change the course of his flight and risk the possibility of failure but at least be at peace with his inner desires.

As a university student, Stephen explores more the meaning of words and invests time in his artistic quests. Two main key moments of this last part would be the character's observations regarding the aesthetics of beauty, the role of the artist and his thoughts concerning his awareness.

The attention of the character is increasingly directed inward rather than outward. He is concerned with the inner effects of an artist's art and describes beauty in terms of powerful inner emotional states and rhythm. In his view, art should be a source of beauty, meaning that art generates mental states, feelings, or emotions meant to awaken the consciousness: "Beauty expressed by the artist cannot awaken in us an emotion which is kinetic or a sensation which is purely physical. It awakens, or ought to awaken [...] an aesthetic stasis" (Joyce, 1992: 206). These statements prove the commitment of the character to art and reflect, in fact, the main feature of literary modernist writings, namely, to explore and create aesthetic experiences rather than simply illustrate instances of reality: "The narrative is no longer purely personal. The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea" (Joyce, 1992: 214).

Literary modernism flourished within a very

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dynamic environment that would form diverse critical opinions about modernist aesthetics. Many critics identified an acknowledgement of a cultural background that could be divided into 'high and low culture', 'elitist and popular art', 'high and mass culture', 'high and consumer culture'. All these dichotomies were, in essence, referring to the reaction of artists, writers and intellectuals to the increasing capitalist landscape of the 20th century based on selling products. Early examples of such reactions would be *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, known for coining the term 'culture industry', and Clement Greenberg, known for his essays on abstract art. Wilson Ross observed how Adorno and Horkheimer discussed mimesis as a sort of assimilation of the imitated reality or object (Ross, 2007: 20). More recent studies understand this assimilation as a mythological and lyrical revival of our oneness with nature (Dragana & Molnar, 2014: 66). Thus, we may approach modernist fiction not only as an imitation of reality or a reaction against the consumerist environment of the 20th century but as an aesthetic experience that places self-awareness in direct relation to cultural consumption.

Stephen Dedalus is an example of an artist who assumed his status as a creator of art and attained an awareness which allowed him to think free of restraints and free of any limitations but his: "I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can" (Joyce, 1992: 247). The voice of the character found the tone and the necessary intrinsic power to choose his future goal and confirmed his intellectual evolution strongly related to and informed by culture, life and education: "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (Joyce, 1992: 253).

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In conclusion, the key moments described in the present interpretation reflect the character's intellectual evolution and transition from self-consciousness towards higher forms of consciousness connected in relation to and developed through the character's constant encounter with cultural aspects and forms. The music of his consciousness illustrated through the stream of consciousness, interior monologue, and literary devices such as the figures of speech completed the evolving pace of his inner expression and increasing understanding of himself and others.

Literature, namely the novel by James Joyce in the present case, is a source of culture and a challenge for readers prone to discover life-related issues and meditate on their intellectual evolution. The present analysis is relevant not only for an interpretation of fiction but for acknowledging a sense of awareness regarding the real identity of the human being and the way every person is ultimately responsible for their life.

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