

## MODERNIST TECHNIQUES IN A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN BY JAMES JOYCE

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**ABSTRACT:** IN HIS NOVEL ENTITLED *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN* JAMES JOYCE PREFIGURED MODERNISM IN A RESPONSE TO A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD IN WHICH INSTITUTIONS LIKE RELIGION, SOCIAL ORDER AND CAPITALISM WERE QUESTIONED. ALL THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERNISM: THE DESIRE OF BREAKING AWAY FROM TRADITION; THE QUEST FOR FINDING NEW WAYS TO VIEW MAN'S POSITION AND FUNCTION IN THE UNIVERSE AND EXPERIMENTS IN FORM AND STYLE ARE TO BE FOUND IN JAMES JOYCE'S NOVELS. MANY ASPECTS OF MODERNISM DEPICTABLE IN THIS NOVEL HAD A GREAT INFLUENCE UPON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODERNIST MOVEMENT ITSELF AND TURNED JOYCE INTO A PROMINENT MODERNIST WRITER. THE MOST RELEVANT EXAMPLES OF MODERNIST TECHNIQUES IN *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST* ARE THE KÜNSTLERROMAN PLOT, THE “STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS” LITERARY STYLE, , INDIVIDUAL V. UNIVERSAL THEMES, AND UNIQUE LANGUAGE. BY USING THE INTERIOR MONOLOGUE AND THE STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS, BY HIS CONCERN WITH THE INDIVIDUAL RATHER THAN THE EXTERNAL REALITY, JAMES JOYCE FORESHADOWS HIS LATER TECHNIQUES.

**KEY WORDS:** MODERNISM, TRADITION, STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS, INDIVIDUAL, INTERIOR MONOLOGUE, MODERNIST TECHNIQUES

### Introduction

One of the most influential modern writers, James Joyce constantly explored the total resources of language in all his writings and he extensively influenced the fictional technique of twentieth-century writers, from traditional realists to experimental postmodernists.

His novel entitled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is semi-autobiographical and it was first serialised in the magazine *The Egoist* from 1914 to 1915, and only afterwards published in book format in 1916 by B. W. Huebsch, establishing Joyce's reputation as a writer of genius. The novel renders the story of the formative years of the life of the Irish Stephen Dedalus, a fictional alter ego of Joyce also alluding to the craftsman of Greek mythology, Daedalus. The world of Dublin is presented through the consciousness of the narrator who grows from Catholic boyhood to an early adulthood when he yearns to be an artist and goes to Paris to fulfil his ambitions

In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a semi-autobiographical novel, Stephen Dedalus, the main character, is Joyce's mythical representation of himself. The story presents in detail the process of Stephen growing up and ending in cultivating an artistic aesthetic. In the last chapter of the book, Joyce uses the first person narrative which means

that the writer Joyce and the narrator Stephen become one and the same. Stephen is mature enough to adopt his artistic identity and he is united with Joyce, the creator.

Joyce treats his alter ego with a mixture of irony and sympathy and the story of Stephen Dedalus is told from earliest childhood until his decision to leave Ireland for Paris and become a writer and in his pursuit he experiences various epiphanies.

In the first chapter of the novel we see Stephen as a very small child and we, as readers, are completely integrated into his little world, even though the character is hardly able to put together a coherent stream of thought. Further on the novel chronicles Stephen's confusions as a small boy at a strict Jesuit school, his discontent with his father and the financial situation of the family and his growing feeling of alienation. Stephen's leaving the Whitsuntide play in a tizzy (Chapter Two) marks the ending of the first period of his childhood and the beginning of his restless quest for identity. In his adolescence, he goes to prostitutes and gives in to lust but later, he becomes religious and even considers entering priesthood, Father Arnall's brutal series of tirades about hell triggering Stephen's religious crisis (Chapters Three and Four). Finally Stephen decides to dedicate his life to art and we see him take over the narration – and thus take control of his life his decision to leave everything behind (Ireland, his family, and his entire past) signals the true beginning of his life as an artist. Stephen's epiphany at the seaside at the end of Chapter Four, helps him to find an answer to his questions of identity and self-knowledge, thus setting him on the way to his ultimate destiny. Joyce not only registers in words the impression of a reality perceived and recorded by the mind, for him that impression is conceived by language itself.

### **James Joyce and Modernism**

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a precursor of the Modernist novel written in response to the Realist style which was prevailing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Joyce, like Gertrude Stein, T.S.Eliot, Virginia Woolf or Ezra Pound were the creators of literary works responding to a rapidly changing world in which institutions like religion, social order and capitalism were questioned after World War I.

The novel of the age should combine “something of the exaltation of poetry” and “much of the ordinariness of prose” as Virginia Woolf states in an essay entitled “Poetry, Fiction and the Future”(reprinted as “The Narrow Bridge of Art”)[1]. “It will make little use of the marvelous fact recording power which is one of the attributes of fiction” she says further on. “It will tell us very little about the houses, incomes, occupations of its characters; it will have little kinship with the sociological novel or the novel of environments. With these limitations it will express the feelings and ideas of the characters closely and vividly but from a different angle...It will give the relations of man to Nature, to fate; his imagination, his dreams. But it will also give the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life. It will take the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things-the modern mind.”[2]

### **Modernist Techniques in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man***

Modernism as a literary movement particularly influenced James Joyce's writing, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* reflecting many of its ideals. Many aspects of modernism depictable in this novel had a great influence upon the development of the modernist movement itself and turned Joyce into a prominent modernist writer. The most relevant examples of modernist techniques in *Portrait of the Artist* are the *künstlerroman*

plot ,the “stream of consciousness” literary style, , individual v. universal themes, and unique language.

The novel is one of the most significant examples of a *Kunstlerroman*(an artist’s *Bildungsroman*)in English literature in which we see the development of an artist in his questioning and rebellion against the Catholic and Irish conventions of his upbringing. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is also cited as a Coming of Age novel as it shows the development of the main character through his experiences and his thoughts and can successfully replace the term *Bildungsroman*. To be more specific, the German terminology includes the term *Kunstlerroman* which is a subgenre of *Buidungsroman* and which is about the development of an artist, not just any young man. Owing to its story it is one of the most widely read and taught novels in English literature and has had a great influence on novelists all over the world.

The final pages of the novel represent Stephen’s diary for the period before leaving for Paris and it is the reader who decides whether Stephen will succeed. Like Icarus, the son of Daedalus, he may fall into the sea with melted wings. There is a close identification between the author and hero and no distinct omniscient narrator to comment on the action.

Stephen’s diary announces Joyce’s later experiments and the process of rendering Stephen’s consciousness by representing his thoughts in a continuous flow makes *A Portrait of the Artist* a precursor of the stream of consciousness novel and Joyce believed that modern fiction needed to depart from previous conventions in order to express modern life properly in a subjective realism as opposed to the social and mimetic one.

The modernist novel also derived from the focus on the subjective consciousness of the individual mind and the term comes from William James’ description of mind’s experiencing of thoughts, perceptions, memories, associations and sensations in their multitude. Conscious experience in William James’s view, expressed in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) is described as continuous and unbroken, referring to the never-ending associative flow of thoughts, perceptions and feelings.

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce’s style is uninhibited and free-flowing , following Stephen’s unrestrained conscious thought. This is an essential technique of modernism as it creates a psychic reality which has little to do with the true reality.

The “stream of consciousness” technique was amply used by Modernist writers, particularly by James Joyce who preferred to write about individuality rather than society. By using the interior monologue and the stream of consciousness , by his concern with the individual rather than the external reality, James Joyce foreshadows his later techniques in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Various isms of early twentieth century are present here: symbolism, imagism, expressionism, Marxism, existentialism and feminism.

The stream of consciousness technique consists in rendering the inner life of the characters in a continuous flow of thoughts, impressions, feelings and fantasies, sometimes independently from the chronological order of events. The writer does not intervene in rearranging this flow of consciousness in a logical, coherent way. He simply renders the consciousness of his characters as it occurs and the style resembles an interior monologue . By mixing second and third person, the writer creates a personal reality.

The universal themes developed in this novel: humanity, freedom, individualism and exile are modernist in the writer’s attempt to focus on the development of the individual and not on the problems of society. Joyce’s intellectualism is apparent in his mixture of mythology, history and literature used to create innovative symbols and narrative techniques. For example, the most obvious symbol in the novel is flight and birds. This reflects both the

theme of freedom, and the myth of Daedalus, the name of the hero evoking the myth of the hero who, in Greek mythology, is an architect and inventor becoming trapped in a labyrinth of his own construction. He creates wings of feathers and wax for his son (Icarus) and for himself, in order to escape. They fly away but Icarus tries to fly higher and finally, as he flies too close to the sun, the wax melts and he falls into the sea.

The novel is a third-person narrative and the dialogue is minimal. The style of the novel evolves throughout all its five chapters to describe Stephen's life from the time he was a child to his young adulthood when he decides to leave Ireland. The complexity of language gradually increases in all these stages of evolution. The book's opening pages render Stephen's thoughts and conscious experience as a child and as he grows language is used to describe indirectly his state of mind of the protagonist. Joyce's intent being rather to capture the subjective experience through language than to present actual experience by prose narrative.

The significance of early twentieth century writing is obvious and there has been a long debate on the issues of the subject matter and the form of modern fiction responding to the experience of modern life. In Jose Ortega y Gasset's view expressed in his book *The Dehumanization of Art and Ideas and the Novel* the novel "may be compared to a vast but finite quarry, in which the workman of the primal hour had no trouble finding new blocks—new characters, new themes which resulted not only in the change of narrative perspective and thematic focus but also in an increased consciousness and meticulousity." [3]

All the characteristics of Modernism: the desire of breaking away from tradition; the quest for finding new ways to view man's position and function in the Universe and experiments in form and style are to be found in James Joyce's novels. Modernist novels were generally written in the first person and fragmentation was a device currently used, the chronological order of the events being sometimes rearranged to follow the inner life of the characters.

Writing about James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, Deborah Parsons in her book *Theorists of the Modernist Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf*,) stated that "All three writers actively extended questions of literary history, aesthetic theory and artistic strategy across their critical and fictional writings. Each felt that the novel reached a moment of crisis, its generic conventions out of date and irrelevant for the expression of the character and conditions of a new age; each shared a heightened awareness of the disjunction between social action or language and internal states of consciousness and each was committed to the belief that art could reveal the truth beneath our familiar assumptions about the look and feel of reality." [4]

In Deborah Parson's view a fundamental aspect of their realism (Joyce, Richardson and Woolf's) was a shift of focus in the representation of character and consciousness, in the light of the pervasive influence of psychological thought at the turn of the century, and how it repositioned the individual in relation to the world around him.

But as Bonnie Kime Scott noted in her study *The Gender of Modernism* "the making, the formal experiment, no longer seems to suffice as a definition. Mind, body, sexuality, family, reality, culture, religion, and history were all reconstructed" [5]

In one of the most frequently quoted passages of her critical writing, Virginia Woolf seems to capture the essence of modernist writing :

"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 uncircumscribed spirit whatever aberration or complexity it may have with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible”.[6]

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