

## Autobiographical Peculiarities in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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### Abstract

This paper traces the autobiographical elements in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) is rich with literary techniques. Joyce experiments with the structure of the *kunstlerroman* (the novel of or about the artist), conveying the narrative through the perspective of the growing artist, literally from infancy to adulthood. His syntactical and grammatical style maps both the development of the mind and abilities of the young artist, beginning with the fragmented and simple style and associative logic of a child, and moving to the complex logic and subtle perception of a sensitive and artistic young man. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the autobiographical structure of the novel. Thus, the very structure of Joyce's novel is noteworthy: He portrays Stephen's growth to manhood through key episodes of his youth. In part, in order to cover so much of his youth, Joyce tells Stephen's story in episodes, focusing on the most formative events or moments in Stephen's life. Thus, these textual insights will be revealed as the autobiographical aspects of the novel.

**Key words:** Autobiography; Joyce; *Kunstlerroman*; Narrative; Stream of Consciousness

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### INTRODUCTION

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) is rich with literary techniques. Joyce was experimenting with the structure of the *kunstlerroman* (the novel of or about the artist), conveying the narrative through the perspective of the growing artist, literally from infancy to adulthood (Anderson 14). His syntactical and grammatical style maps both the development of the mind and abilities of the young artist, beginning with the fragmented and simple style and associative logic of a child, and moving to the complex logic and subtle perception of a sensitive and artistic young man through narrative episodes (Atchison 62). Through these episodes, we become familiar with Stephen's key characteristics—his weak sight, his sensitivity to the music and meaning of words. These episodes also afford insight into Stephen's fierce refusal to quietly comply with the values and expectations of others (Burt 201). The novel is structured by these formative experiences of Stephen's life: his alienation from others, his intelligence, and his rejection of a calling to the priesthood, his refusal to blindly serve family and nation (Coyle, p.32).

James Joyce is, of course, best known for his radical stylistic experimentalism, which came to its ultimate realization in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Yet, even in this early novel, we see Joyce's nascent experimentalism (Baldick, p.163). Here, Joyce uses a unique episodic development of the narrative to reveal the emerging character of the artist as a young man. He employs free indirect discourse, which allows for a slippery point of view throughout the novel (Barnett, p.71). He employs an epiphany, Joyce's own term for this sudden sort of insight, to convey the moment of revelation when the young artist sees and embraces his calling (Boulton, p.165). Finally, Joyce uses repetitive patterns and phrases to layer meaning and understanding. Joyce's experimentalism here is young, like the writer

he was and the artist he is portraying, but it is consistent throughout the novel and successful in telling the “story” in an appropriately unconventional way (Berry, p.32). By the use of the word *unconventional*, one means to signal not just Stephen’s refusal to abide by the “rules” of his country, but Joyce’s refusal to convey Stephen’s refusal in anything like a typical story (Abu Jweid, 2020, p.7).

The novel is composed in a stream of consciousness style, which allows the story to unfold directly through the thoughts and comments of the central character, Stephen Dedalus. This style further reinforces the purpose of the novel to convey a portrait of Dedalus, the artist, as a young man, for we see the world through his eyes, uninterrupted by an omniscient narrative perspective (Kershner 68). Yet this stream of consciousness style is further complicated by Joyce’s use of free indirect discourse (Abu Jweid, 2020, p.16). Because free indirect discourse allows telling of the narrative to slip from the direct statements of characters to a more omniscient intelligence authoring the text, it makes it difficult to discern who is “telling” the story (Mackay 49). At the very beginning of the novel, for example, we are introduced to a “once upon a time” sort of opening that rapidly unravels into numerous narrative points of view under one organizing narrative consciousness (Norrick, p.75). This pattern continues throughout the novel, leading readers to experience the very same tension of multiple and competing voices with which Stephen struggles. Yet, almost as a tool for coherence amidst this unsettling narrative technique, Joyce uses repetitive words and motifs such as “weak,” “blind,” and “flight” that reinforce key ideas and insights throughout the novel (Pavel, p.67). This is because the narrative fiction conveys the characters’ identity through the plot (Abu Jweid, 2016, p.529).

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## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

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Joyce’s use of symbols and motifs to convey essential themes is fundamental to the emerging portrait of the artist. A *motif* is a word or an image that repeats throughout the work to such a degree that it upholds or enhances a central theme (Abu Jweid, 2020, p.102). Thus, one significant motif in this novel that is evident early on and develops throughout is blindness (Abu Jweid and Kaur, p.8). Early in the first chapter, the narrative relates a rhyme that Dante repeats when young Stephen is called upon to apologize for some misdeed: “Pull out his eyes, / Apologise, / Apologise, / Pull out his eyes” (p.4). Here, the threat of blindness is used to reform the young boy’s behavior at the same time that apology is equated with enforced blindness. Later, Stephen will observe that the central institutions of his world (family, church, and country) all require a kind of blindness to himself and to the logic of his own heart and mind.

Stephen’s weak sight is also reflective of his naiveté

and initial lack of insight into the ways of the world around him. Early in the novel we learn of Stephen’s weak eyes and his “blindness” without the aid of glasses. Later, Stephen is beaten with a pandybat by Father Dolan, the prefect of studies at the school he attends, for allegedly breaking his glasses and, therefore, for willfully causing his inability to see well enough to complete his lessons. In many ways, the novel elaborates on both Stephen’s shortsightedness and initial emerging insight into his world. But, by the end, although Stephen may have seen into the pitfalls that Ireland holds for the artist, he is still weak-sighted and in need of glasses, a point that leads readers to consider just how enlightened Stephen has become as a young man.

Just as the motif of blindness serves to introduce the theme of the limitations placed upon the artist by church, nationalism, and personal limitations, the repetition of voices and words leads to the development of another theme. Stephen is profoundly attentive to voices and words throughout the novel (Abu Jweid and GhadaSasa, 2020, p.338). It begins, in fact, with fragments of the voices most central to Stephen in his infancy. Stephen grows to awareness in large part through his meditation on voices and words. These early snatches of the supposedly real world come together to reveal a world that Stephen finds increasingly discouraging and depressing.

Yet words remain a central fascination for Stephen, and ultimately, they will be his art. Stephen reflects upon words when he has at last rejected numerous false paths: “Did he love the rhythmic rise and fall of words better than their associations of legend and colour? Or was it that, being as weak of sight as he was shy of mind, he drew less pleasure from the reflection of the glowing sensible world through the prism of a language manycoloured and richly storied than from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions mirrored perfectly in a lucid supple periodic prose?” (180-81). As an artist, Stephen reflects the Modernist fascination with language and the “inner world of individual emotions.” He has left behind the traces of Victorian and Edwardian realism and fidelity to plot and begun to explore the associative qualities of language and prose that attempts to capture the fluid quality of individual consciousness (Abu Jweid and GhadaSasa, 2014, p.164).

As Stephen sees into his father’s failures, the church’s deceptions, and his own shattered hopes of finding companionship, his increasing isolation reinforces his study of words. But this study does not relieve him of his sense of duty to family, church, and state. Indeed, Stephen’s uneasy alienation is an important theme throughout the novel. His emerging confidence in his own insights does not alleviate this isolation. In fact, Stephen’s growing acceptance of isolation leads him to visions of flight and escape. In his journey to discovering his future, the “end he had been born to serve” (p.178), Stephen takes

many wrong turns: He rejects the path of his father, subtly ashamed by his father's retreat to alcohol and poverty even as he occasionally affects an easy camaraderie with "false friends." He rejects the path of nationalism, which his father and his friend Davin exhort him to follow. Even after a sustained experiment in religious piety, Stephen rejects the path of the priesthood, recognizing its false power and piety. In each case, Stephen ultimately recognizes the error of the path and seeks escape. But escape becomes "flight" as Stephen has an epiphany and begins to see his future in art. This is where the repeated and subtle references to flight and the myth of Icarus come together to convey a vision of Stephen's future as an expatriate man of letters.

Considering his recent rejections of the call to become a priest that his mother, among others, would have him embrace, Stephen notes that "the end he had been born to serve yet did not see had led him to escape by an unseen path" (p.178). This escape conjures images of Icarus and the means of escape that he used. Stephen observes that the "end he had been born to serve beckons him like music," music that he likens to "triplebranching flames leaping fitfully, flame after flame, out of a midnight wood" (p.179). This reference to flame so suddenly following his consideration of escape echoes Icarus's escape with wax wings that his father, Daedalus, fashioned. For Icarus flew too close to the sun's flames and his wings were melted, tragically ending his flight. Whether Stephen will crash like Icarus or succeed like Daedalus, both of whom escaped by flight, remains to be seen.

As Stephen reflects on his choices and, therefore, on people he has rejected, it occurs to him as never before that his name, Dedalus, is a "prophecy." It is a prophecy of "the end he had been born to serve ... a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable, imperishable being" (p.183). Stephen will serve his spiritual father's path, turning life into art through writing. The references to flight that follow Stephen's insight are numerous, leaving the accrued impression that Stephen has at last found his calling and will be able to escape the ties that Ireland would use to hold him back. As he has his great insight into the destiny he has been seeking, the language he uses is rich and repetitive with images of escape by flight: "His heart trembled, his breath came faster and a wild spirit passed over his limbs as though he were soaring sunward. His heart trembled in an ecstasy of fear and his soul was in flight. His soul was soaring in an air beyond the world" (p.183). As Stephen soars, he realizes the "call of life" for him is not bound in the "dull gross voice of the world of duties and despair," nor in the "inhuman voice" that would call him to the "pale service of the altar." Stephen is metaphorically "reborn" in this moment, aware of his life's calling to "create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul," just as the "great

artificer whose name he bore" had done (p.184). Stephen embraces his namesake and the grand mythic destiny that he represents.

These insights coalesce in an epiphany that reiterates the expansiveness of the life Stephen has chosen: The path he will follow will not lead to a sterile and cloistered life, but will lead to a quest for the spiritual within the physical world. The key moment of his epiphany is conveyed when Stephen observes a young girl standing in the waves and "gazing out to sea" (p.185). Stephen sees her as transformed by magic into a sea bird or a dove. They exchange a lengthy gaze that reveals a new world to Stephen, and he sees his life's path: "To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life / A wild angel had appeared to him" (p.186). Thus, returning to the myth of Icarus and embracing his spiritual and mythical father Daedalus, in this epiphanic scene Stephen's future is revealed: a life in the world that will be committed to art and engage the very "stuff" of life.

Finally, "the artist" is both an abstract concept and an actual person that Joyce's novel evokes and considers. It may indeed convey a portrait of an actual young artist, Stephen Dedalus, but it also invites readers to contemplate the nature of "the artist" in the abstract. It suggests that the artist has the harder path, for he must cast off all conventional rules and live by his own strict rules, to express himself "in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning" (p.269). When Stephen tells this to his friend Cranly, he also adds that he does not fear the isolation and rejection that this fidelity will no doubt cause. He knows that he has chosen the hardest path, the path that is not chosen by many. Thus, he calls his mythic father to stand him in "good stead" as he seeks to do no less than forge "the uncreated conscience" of his race (p.269).

In the novel, we see Joyce's nascent experimentalism. Here, Joyce uses a unique episodic development of the narrative to reveal the emerging character of the artist as a young man. He employs free indirect discourse, which allows for a slippery point of view throughout the novel. He employs an epiphany, Joyce's own term for this sudden sort of insight, to convey the moment of revelation when the young artist sees and embraces his calling. Finally, Joyce uses repetitive patterns and phrasings to layer meaning and understanding (Abu Jweid, 2020, p.207). Joyce's experimentalism here is young, like the writer he was and the artist he is portraying, but it is consistent throughout the novel and successful in telling the "story" in an appropriately unconventional way. By the use of the word *unconventional*, one means to signal not just Stephen's refusal to abide by the "rules" of his country, but Joyce's refusal to convey Stephen's refusal in anything like a typical story (Abu Jweid, 2020, p.94).

Thus, the very structure of Joyce's novel is noteworthy:

He portrays Stephen's growth to manhood through key episodes of his youth. In part, in order to cover so much of his youth, Joyce tells Stephen's story in episodes, focusing on the most formative events or moments in Stephen's life. Through these episodes, we become familiar with Stephen's key characteristics—his weak sight, his sensitivity to the music and meaning of words. These episodes also afford insight into Stephen's fierce refusal to quietly comply with the values and expectations of others. The novel is structured by these formative experiences of Stephen's life: his alienation from others, his intelligence, his rejection of a calling to the priesthood, his refusal to blindly serve family and nation.

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A feature of Joyce's prose that is particularly idiosyncratic but also revealing is his unique use of the language and imagery of Catholicism. Over and over as Stephen struggles to see his life's calling, he uses the language of Catholicism to describe his experiences. Through this, we see how informed Stephen's (and Joyce's) consciousness is by his religious background, for Catholicism is clearly everywhere he turns: in his home with Dante Riordan and his mother, in schools run by Catholic priests, and in the confusion of nationalism and Catholicism in Irish politics. Thus, when Stephen at last begins to forge his own philosophy, his language is distinctly religious. Borrowing from and altering the language of the Catholic Church, Joyce often uses the term *epiphany* (adopted from the Catholic religion to signify a moment of transformative insight experienced by a character). Epiphanies function in Joyce's prose to signal a moment of secular, transformative insight

for his characters. Though secular, these epiphanies are described in terms that come directly from Joyce's religious background. For example, Stephen's epiphany in this novel is described with repeated reference to God and Church. Seeing the young girl who is central to his epiphany, Stephen experiences a "holy silence" of ecstasy. He describes her as a "wild angel" and cries to God in "profane joy" (p.186). The work is replete with examples of Joyce drawing on the language of Catholic experience to describe his secular insights.

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## CONCLUSION

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