



## QUEST FOR SELF THROUGH MYTH, SYMBOL AND EPIPHANY IN JAMES JOYCE'S *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN*

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### ABSTRACT



The twentieth century was an age torn with strife and subsequent breakdown of age-old values and customs. The two World Wars caused large scale devastation leading to total loss of faith in human goodness, religion and God. All touch was lost with cultural heritage and tradition. There was a deep sense of distrust about everything. The changing socio-cultural conditions gave rise to materialism and erosion of values which deeply impacted the psyche of the people. Thinkers like Sigmund Freud, C.G. Jung explained through their studies the importance of the sub - conscious in determining human behaviour and how traumatic experiences in childhood can impact us for our entire lifetimes. The present paper takes up James Joyce's exploration of such a phenomenon through the story of the hero Stephan in his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to show that is it possible to shed the weight of accumulated anxieties and emerge as one's own person.

**Keywords:** Search, Self- Discovery, Artist, Myth, Symbol, Epiphany.

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*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is an autobiographical account which marks the psychological development of its central character and his journey to attain self-discovery. The book is also an overt consideration of the role of the artist and his destiny at a time when Ireland was going through turbulent times, when new socio-cultural-economic concepts were gaining a strong foothold by dismantling the old order. Instances are organized in the pattern of significant memory, there are only a few which change us as a person. Those instances of time were called 'lived time' by Bergson as opposed to 'empty time'. These moments of time when we experience something significant are epiphanic moments. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the central character moves from one epiphany to another.

The novel has only five chapters. Joyce writes a particularly link-less narrative which has an internal logic of its own. Joyce begins the account with Stephen's recollections about his childhood. The language of the opening page of the text is 'baby language'.

*Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moo cow coming down along the road and this moo cow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo... (Joyce, p 1)*

These recollections are not in a linear sequence but in a mixed up one with incidents here and there, visits to so and so places, etc. In the very first page Stephen is a bit older. We know this because the language of the narrative has changed a little. It is no longer baby language. Stephen's mother scolds him for something but like a typical little child the scolding goes over his head. What stuck him was the rhyme. Another significant thing is that right from the start there is pressure on him to conform, to fit in. His next memory is that of the school playground swarming with boys. Stephen was the only child in a family of adults, very sheltered. So the first thing he notices is the playground thronging with boys. His immediate reaction is that of fright and insecurity. Hence, he does not remember the interview and other things. The flow of memory is patterned on

those significant things which impinged upon his mind.

Joyce gives us an extremely realistic account of Stephen's days at school. Stephen is a quiet, shy and imaginative boy. Therefore, he is the target of the rebuke of other boys. He feels diffident when he replies in the affirmative to Wells' question-

*Tell us, Dedalus, do you kiss your mother before you go to bed? (Joyce, p 8)*

At the beginning he is strongly motivated to be like other children and feels insecure. The memory of home is so vivid that it blocks out where he is at present. *"He longed to be at home and lay his head on his mother's lap."* (Joyce, p 7). Due to their bullying, he longs to go back home but even at home he faces problems though he is very small. Children feel intensely about small problems as they cannot see the larger perspective. When we are small, we look up to our parents and consider them to be our ideal. Unfortunately Stephen has a problematic father who cannot keep a job, a mother who is frail and docile and who is bullied by other women. Being at home for the Christmas holidays, which he had looked forward to so eagerly, left him feeling all the more insecure and fretful. A heated argument broke out among the guests which ruined the dinner party and left him 'terror-stricken'. This is another revealing moment when he feels insecure. Home was Paradise to him but that Paradise is shattered. He realizes that not only boys his age are bad, even the adults are not perfect. It is an epiphanic moment.

When he goes back to school, he is a very lonely person, doesn't have anyone to turn to. He feels he has been betrayed by the adults. Boys make fun of his surname and he feels defensive about it. They tell him, *"You have a queer name, Dedalus."* (Joyce, p 17). Stephen is an unusually sensitive child who is deeply affected by such cruel behavior of his peers. In fact, even the grown-ups are insensitive, cruel and unfairly judgmental. Stephen's glasses are broken and he could not do his home-work. However, the teacher, Father Dolan did not believe him and called him a 'Lazy little schemer' and made a jelly of his palms with his pandybat. This atrocity



leaves him emotionally shattered, physically battered and unjustly humiliated.

*His whole body was shaking with fright, his crumpled burning livid hand shook like a loose leaf in the air ....but though the tears scalded his eyes and his limbs quivered with pain and fright he held back the hot tears and the cry that scalded his throat. (Joyce, p 37)*

Stephen presents a heart-rending picture of physical and mental abuse. Goaded by his peers, Stephen musters up enough courage to go to the Rector and apprise him of the truth. The experience of shaking hands with the Principal is a big moment for him. He experiences a feeling of happiness and freedom. This is another epiphanic moment.

The whole of the first chapter is a learning experience for Stephen as he learns to fend for himself by being himself. He finds out about himself that he does have positive qualities which are strong and different from those of his peers. It is a quest for self - identity though he is far from knowing that he is going to be an artist but has gained faith in himself. Like the Romantics and the Post- Romantics he looks for inspiration within himself and learns that he is worthwhile. By the end of chapter 1 he knows he is shy, boyish, and not good at sports and cannot mix well with other boys, but he also knows what he wants and can go out and get it. He can now assert himself. Attaining an understanding of one's own potential is the theme of this novel.

The underlying logic behind this episodic structure is the concept of Bergsonian time, significant time. Once his father took him to a pub and began boasting. He has always been an exhibitionist. Stephen knows that he is lying but he does not know how to react. It seemed as if "...he had faded out like a film in the sun." This is a traumatic experience for Stephen and he suddenly feels much older than his father. He also realizes that his father is much more insecure than Stephen himself. When Stephen's friends tease him, he does not pretend but his father feels the necessity to pretend. The roles get reversed and Stephen realizes that his father has a child-like need to lie. Things like

these change you as a human being. "His childhood was dead or lost and with it his soul capable of simple joys..." This is another learning experience for him. He falls back on his own resources.

On another occasion Stephen's father throws a lavish treat to the kids. The little children are thrilled but Stephen knows this is very dangerous. His father is a person who needs to bolster his image to show he is someone while his mother is helpless. She is tense and cannot enjoy even a spoonful because she knows that precious money is being unduly spent. These kinds of experiences make one grow up. To make matters worse, his father's creditors keep calling for payments, Stephen feels cooped up, fed up. A 'nice house' becomes an address he is ashamed to tell in school.

Joyce has dealt with a challenging type of characterization. There are a lot of psychic problems in a hero who is too young to articulate and communicate them, much less comprehend them. Joyce could have used the omniscient narrator but this method was not preferred by the writers of the modern age because the writer does not get in direct communication with the reader. There the emphasis is on what happened not what it felt like. Feeling is absent. The reader is not experiencing along with him. The 'modernist' writer will not 'tell' but 'show' according to Henry James.

Joyce wanted to 'show' Stephen's feelings and not 'state' them. He shows by recording his emotions. Stephen felt completely drained as though he had wandered out of himself and was looking at himself. Physically he is very small but his mind is as if he has seen the whole world. We are able to feel for ourselves what Stephen is feeling.

Every chapter is in a sense a learning experience. Stephen's learning experience operates in two ways. On the level of the text he has to come to terms with the sudden and traumatic change that comes in his life due to the collapse of his family's fortune. He is taken out of the protective academic environment, he meets with kind people whom he has not come across before and gets swayed by them. He is now a young adolescent. He falls in company that is sexually very licentious and he has to



cope with his own sexuality. A type of situation prevails where he meets prostitutes who treat him as a young boy and he finds out things which are usually not understood by boys of his age. But he copes with this emotionally disturbing situation in a way that he gets the strength to come out of it. He reads and re-reads a lot to forget. His favourite book is 'The Count of Monte Christo'. It is about totally improbable adventures. During this time he also meets Irene. Stephen carries on a very adolescent love affair with his imaginary lady love and this sees him through this difficult period of his life. This is how he is preparing to be an artist, albeit, unconsciously. This ability to identify himself with an imaginary character cannot be done by all. In fact, it is art which saves him. His devotion to his ideal lady love is stronger than the immediate image of Irene and the other women. This pulls him through a difficult and neglected childhood.

(An)...artist... (is) a sensitive and gifted human being who sees more deeply into reality than ordinary men and who, as a priest of the eternal imagination, is able to transmute the dross of life into the beauty of art. (Karl, p 210)

Stephen as a child could not give the actual mental responses. Therefore, Joyce devices a sub-text where he uses certain myths and symbols as objective co-relatives to express Stephen's mind.

As the mind will grow and develop, the symbol will have to be flexible to accommodate the growing mind. It has to be multi-dimensional to be able to express the various layers of meaning. The dominant symbol is the 'Rose'. The dominant sentiment during Stephen's childhood is a desire for something different. He does not know what he wants. This is a quest and to indicate this quest, he uses the symbol of the rose. Stephen is obsessed with a 'green rose'. When he is very depressed, he searches for the green rose which signifies the unrealizable.

In European culture the symbol of rose has two important references. First, In medieval romances, for example in 'Roman de la Rose' - a dream allegory, the poet is obsessed with writing the perfect poem. He gets information that if he plucks the rose of art he will succeed in life. Hence, rose is a

symbol of art, poetry, inspiration and quest. The same structure Joyce employs in this novel when Stephen is trying to find his dream wish in life. Second, in Dante's 'Divine Comedy' Canto 30 through the dark forest (of life) one cannot find one's way out. Through struggle he is able to reach the summit but cannot see God. However, he sees one brilliant point of light which grows and grows around him like the petals of a flower. It is the cosmic rose with Dante at the center of the flower. He faints due to this radiance but is happy and realizes that God is a perception, it is the cosmic rose of divinity.

Similarly, when Stephen grows up he understands and sees the cosmic rose of art and dedicates himself to it. A real dedication to art is also a way to art. A quest for more than what is available in the limited world can be very painful and lonely. Before his quest for the 'green rose' begins, it is the 'wild rose' which is important for him. The 'wild rose' denotes that it has not been tamed by the gardener into a flower bed. Symbolically, Stephen wants to be a wild rose, he wants to be what he wants to be and not what others want him to be. It is only later that he changes it to the 'green rose' of inspiration and poetic vision. Rose is also present as the 'white rose' which symbolized Virgin Mary, purity. In Chapter 3, Stephen experiences guilt for having committed sexual sin. He became so disillusioned with his family that he wanted to take revenge. One way of punishing his family for letting him down is to let them down by doing what he was not expected to do. Hence, he forays into the domain of precocious sexual adventures. But this phase does not last long. His Roman Catholic upbringing fills him with fears. He decides to pray. It is Easter time and he goes to church and listens to sermons delivered during the seven day Retreat. He gets terrified. All the traumatic experiences which he had experienced and which had not had an outlet surfaced in his dreams. This tortuous anxiety makes him realize that he has to have peace in his own mind. He did not believe in confession but now he confesses and experiences a sense of absolution, of having all his sins washed away after repentance and confession.

It is commendable to note that Stephen manages without any outside help. He looks within



himself and finds the way out. The 'white rose' attains significance in his life from this episode otherwise right from his childhood he had an aversion to the colour white-'the white look of the lavatory' (Joyce, p 6); 'the white rose' (Joyce, p 7); 'white sheets' (Joyce, p 12); 'white cloak' (Joyce, p 12); "...Could not eat the damned bread...all white things were cold and damned."(Joyce, p 7); 'the white chapel' (Joyce, p 9). Even at school he belongs to the York House which has the white rose as its symbol. Anything associated with white has bad associations for him.

Apart from these symbols, there are symbols of birds. Birds symbolize the spirit of the soul. Stephen is compared to many birds as he goes through the journey of his life. Stephen is compared to a peacock and then finally to the hawk which flies the highest of all the birds. Here Stephen's soul has transcended his daily life which had bothered him so long.

Joyce also compares Stephen to mythical figures like Prometheus who rebelled against Zeus, the king of Gods. He was punished by Zeus but being immortal, Prometheus was rejuvenated every day. Prometheus is a great Greek figure of rebellion. Only a person who is very strong can stand up against Zeus. By using this mythical analogy Joyce communicates to us that Stephen is going to be a rebel. No matter what happens he is going to be a writer. He may not succeed in the material sense of the term but he will do what he wants to do nonetheless. A rebel does something because he believes in it and not because he wants to succeed. Success or failure become unimportant. What is important is that he has the courage to do what he wants to do and go where he wants to go.

Joyce also compares him with Lucifer who too opposed the monopoly of God who is a totalitarian figure and in doing so Lucifer became from the Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness - Satan. But Joyce never calls Stephen Satan, only Lucifer. Because Joyce is not accepting the moral framework of God as good and Satan as bad simply because he rebelled. A person who is different is put down as odd by society and given certain negative labels.

Society discredits a person who challenges established norms by giving him a bad name which is sometimes more effective than killing him. Joyce says that in our society we have rebel figures. Rebellion has been a perennial response throughout history. Stephen is compared to these rebel figures, albeit failed rebels, only to convey that like them Stephen stuck to his principles and beliefs. You may not win by rebellion but you will do it all the same. Any gesture of non-conformism requires courage, strong principles, strength of personality.

The sub text of the myth gives the work a universality, a grandeur. Moreover repetition always strengthens the argument. Stephen's surname Dedalus is also an obvious reference to another mythical figure Daedalus, the master craftsman who fashioned wings of wax for himself and his son Icarus in order to escape from their prison. In equating him with his namesake that 'fabulous artificer', Joyce is drawing a parallel between his own self-imposed exile from Ireland (from 1904 till his death) and that of Stephen's decision to go to Paris in pursuit of his dream.

On the seashore Stephen saw "*...a hawk-like man flying sunward above the sea, a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood and boyhood, a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop...*" (Joyce, p 132)

Stephen realizes that this was the call of life to his soul. His soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood "*...He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable.*" (Joyce, p 132)

It is only now that he makes peace with his surname. This was followed by his ecstatic vision of the girl on the beach whom he describes in the imagery of a sea-bird. This is an epiphanic moment which reached the crescendo of ecstasy experienced by him. A profound sense of mystery pervades over him when... "*He halted suddenly and heard his heart in the silence.*" (Joyce, p 132) This spiritual revelation made his path clear to him. He determines to be a





writer and rejects everything else. The comparison of Stephen with the mythical master craftsman brings together the force of the device of myth and epiphany with the result that the entire passage becomes more like an invocation to the Muse.

Stephen decides to be an artist and an artist is a rebel figure and a creative artist is a potentially subversive force in society because he has something else to say or convey that too in a totalitarian society. A daunting task! Daiches in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Novel* says "...the artist had to be outside all conventions, ... must be outside society in order to be objective and he must be objective ...The artist's function was thus not to render his own personal viewpoint, but to take all points of view and to construct in his fictional world an enormous inter-relating, punning kaleidoscopic verbal universe which it might almost be said, presents everything as also everything else."

Ibsen's view of the artist, which Joyce implicitly follows, is that he is a man separated from other men by his vocation, and he must strive to separate himself still further from all ties of family, community, nationality which would hold him to the everyday, bourgeoisie world. (Hodgart, p 57)

This is an autobiographical novel. Like Stephen, Joyce had remained aloof from society and rebelled against the inhibiting forces of family, church and native country. But by creating a spatial distance, one cannot separate oneself from one's experiences, one's education and one's upbringing. These are things which impinge themselves upon our psyche. Joyce conveyed all these with the power of "...his phenomenal memory ...keen observation...delicate patterning of apparently casual accumulation of seemingly unrelated details..." A.C.Baugh further says, "...Joyce had an astonishing command of the resources of the English language, and when conventional vocabulary and syntax failed to meet his requirements, he had recourse to neologisms, truncated and telescoped words, and a sort of counterpoint derived from his knowledge of music."

The last chapter gives us a glimpse of Stephen's life at the university and a shaping of his aesthetic ideas which he profusely discusses with his

colleagues. The novel ends with Stephen's diary entries. In the last five-six pages of this chapter Stephen tells his own story. So long Joyce had been telling Stephen's story. The indication is that now Stephen can speak out his own mind. He has found his way, his identity and can tell his own story. Once this becomes possible there is no further use of symbols or myths. They are used only when direct articulation is not possible. But now Stephen can talk directly. As for epiphanies, they are a lifetime phenomenon, we continue to experience realisations of profound truths which dawn upon us in intensely felt moments or even otherwise. By way of conclusion it may be said that with the help of myths, symbols and epiphanies, Joyce has shown how the modern phenomenon of the creative artist took shape despite the disruption of society for potential artist takes recourse of withdrawing into the stronghold of his own personality and comes out equipped to face the challenges of life in order to shape his destiny. "*Welcome, O life, 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.*"

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