



Stephen Dedalus's modernist journey in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Nilanjana Sinha

Nilanjana is a writer and researcher.

Abstract

Dublin, 1904 Trieste, 1914. The time period during which James Joyce wrote the novel is the same period that produced revolutionary developments in science and arts. This revolutionized knowledge became the ultimate foundation for modern arts. The art forms had begun to show a progressive inclination towards a certain preciousness in ways of exhibition, representation and innovations. In Literature, the novel writings showed new ways of rendering how people experienced the world around them. The novelists inward turned to the everyday complexities of human lives, the self-conscious perseverance, the attempted efforts to capture the chaotic order and in such collective ways, authentically established the modernist intelligence and ways of writing the 'modernist novel'.

Keywords

Chaotic, complexities, modernist novel, revolutionary.

Modernism, primarily, was a set of new ways of seeing and interpreting the world, and the narrative forms were the literary manifestations of those ways. Modernist novel, then, was essentially how these developments were captured in the novels of the period. The novelists concerned themselves with the consciousness, the subconscious and the unconscious of the human mind and their protagonists were molded upon such structures where the external objectivity completely dissolved itself in the internal introspection and reflection within the protagonists' mind. It is almost like the novel takes place inside the mind of the protagonist, familiarizing the readers with the internal workings of the human mind. We do

not externally analyze Stephen Dedalus. We internally become Stephen Dedalus.

Now, since the novel is literal interpretation of the mind of the protagonist, or rather the mental life of the protagonist, which brings us to the aesthetic modernist method of the 'stream of consciousness' wherein thoughts of the individual forms a part of his awareness and associations. The narrative is written in a pattern that resembles human thought. This directly relates to a complex handling of time in the narrative structure since it runs along the psychological time, rushing back and forth through sudden disruptions. Throughout the course of the novel, several events across Stephen's life are counter interacted with, which overall manifests towards the final awakening of the protagonist.

Stephen Dedalus is very typical of a modernist character creation and Modernists writers created characters who were 'a mass of sensations whose ego boundaries are blurred with identities distributed between themselves and others or outside objects' (Kern 21). Now, the question of identity and representation began to surface greatly during the era of Modernism. Ideas, notions were put forth about what it is to be an individual, what were the elements that comprises towards establishing one's individuality, and how the existence of it precedes the essence of it. A typical modernist method of aesthetics. The title of the novel, as a "Portrait" quite explicitly gives the impression of representing something, and the portrait of the young man appears vague and fragmentary. This 'Young Man' struggles to define his creative vocation, "every event and figure of which affected him intimately, disheartened him or allured, filled him always with unrest and bitter thoughts" (Joyce 80). The portrait of this young man presented, initially, is in a state of fragmented sensations and complexities that constitutes the self as closed and autonomous. This fragmentary state of affairs that was very much the socio-economic-politico face of the 1900's were

captured by artists and in their works created a space for introspection, reflection and analysis of the prevailing time. Naturally, the protagonist in the modernist novels were individuals whose experiences in such social sphere characterized by insecure environments and fragmentations gradually mirrored inward, within themselves and their vision about life. From school bullying to artistic conceptions to spiritual discoveries, Stephen Dedalus is quite a fictional product of the Modernist Age.

Another feature that very much outlines the Modern Age was the loss of faith. Revolutionary developments like Darwin's theory of evolution, progress in science of the ages, challenged faith in religious authorities. The increasing domination of the Roman Catholics were prevailing across Europe along with the interferences with politics of the nation. James Joyce, himself, was against the religious interferences in political matters, especially in Ireland. : "I left the Catholic Church, hating it most fervently. I found it impossible for me to remain in it on account of the impulses of my nature." (Joyce cited in Ellmann, 1984: 1). In, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, characters like Simon Dedalus and Mr Casey argued against the Church whereas Dante believes religion itself is ones identity.

"-its religion, Dante said. They are doing their duty in warning the people."

"- And preach politics from the altar, is it? Asked Mr. Dedalus." (Joyce 30).

These complexities around religion and identity were challenged that had very much pervaded the western European societies and heightened the modernist approach of perceiving the world. The Modernist argued against morality and rather believed in artistic individuality that allowed free expression of identity. This renunciation of religion in favor of the artistic self, 'the construction of Stephen's identity in the

course of his childhood, adolescence and transition into young adulthood and the claim of the artist to have freed his soul from the constraints of religion' (Akca 55) is in entirety the modernist aspect of the novel. The epiphanies, moments of revelation, that Stephen experiences also provides climax of his search for identity (Childs 199). By the end of Chapter four of the novel, Stephen denounces priesthoods and the following narrative show casts Stephen in his highest "call of life to his soul" (James 175). Stephen's realization of the self is paralleled with the rise of Daedalus, the mythological figure, the fabulous artificer, soaring across the sky towards freedom.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! 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 176). This artistic expression of one's identity was a very important notion that Modernists truly adhered to.

Other than major features of the Modernist novel, there are few common methods of aesthetics that modernist writers structured their writings upon. The Artistic Narrative structure usually employed refers to single life story. Writers of the Modern Age like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce wrote novels that revolved around one particular individual, their private life experienced inward, their projection of sentimental subconscious, and the social behavior arising out of it. The modern fiction flows along the train of thoughts, or what they called the stream of consciousness of that one particular individual upon which the narrative revolves around and it captures how the chaotic outer world was experienced from within. This was enabled with the employment of an all knowing omniscient narrator.

The modernist novel had no real beginning since it plunges the readers into a flowing stream of consciousness with which we gradually familiarize ourselves with. The endings are

usually open or ambiguous left open to the readers own interpretations of the final destiny of the characters. We do not know for sure how Stephen Dedalus life is destined, but rather are left open to interpretations.

As such, we see that James Joyce's narrative in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* structures around the Modernist aesthetics and is by all means a modernist novel.

References

1. Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Fingerprint Classics, New Delhi, 2018.
2. Kern, Stephen. *The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge University press, New York, 2011.
3. Akca, Catherine. *Religion and Identity in Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. www.researchgate.net/publications/38100737, December, 2008.
4. Childs, Peter. *Modernism*. Routledge, London, 2000.
5. Ellman, Richard. *Light Rays: James Joyce and Modernism*. New Horizon Press, New York, 1984.



Nilanjana Sinha

Nilanjana is a writer and researcher, exploring literatures of the sub-Himalayan narratives. Having her Master's in English Literature, she also writes on literary issues, book reviews, and academic papers for numerous journals.

[Get Your Book Reviewed](#)

If you have got any book published and are looking for a book review, contact us. We provide book review writing service for a fee. We (1) write book review (2) publish review in CLRI (3) conduct an interview with the author (4) publish interview in CLRI. [Know more here](#).

[Authors & Books](#)

We publish book releases, Press Release about books and authors, book reviews, blurbs, author interviews, and any news related to authors and books for free. We welcomes authors, publishers, and literary agents to send their press releases. Visit our website <https://page.co/Vw17Q>.