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Stephen Problematized! A Study of the Curves and Colours of Irony in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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Abstract

Stephen Dedalus is the mirror of consciousness in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. All the other characters in the novel are perceived in terms of Stephen's perception and relation to them. But how to perceive Stephen's own character? According to many critics, Stephen's character is treated with a degree of irony in *A Portrait*. There are certain sections and episodes in the novel which, indeed, suggest that Joyce may have intended or implied deliberate irony in his portrayal of 'the artist as a young man.' It seems that irony, the most pervasive technique of Joyce's *oeuvre*, does not spare even Stephen, the character created in the image of his author. The present paper intends to explore the character of Stephen Dedalus in a new light and expose the latent ironies in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Keywords

Irony; Character; Perception; Stephen Dedalus; James Joyce; *A Portrait of the*

Artist as a Young Man.

Irony, it has been recently observed, has replaced symbol as the primary quarry of close readers. One of the most elusive and slippery instances of this prey is the question of the consistency, scope, intensity, and tone of the irony directed toward Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The determination of appropriate terms for judgments of Stephen's various stages of growth is a vexing one, affording a wide range of possibilities. To draw the extremes, Stephen may be seen as a courageous artist-hero, casting off the forms and conventions of society as inappropriate to his gifts and destiny, freeing himself to soar away from Ireland to the fulfilment of his mission as a fabulous Dedalian artificer; or, Stephen may be seen as a callow and affected poseur, a "farcical pedagogue," a morbidly sensitive pseudo-artist, whose literary theory is weak Thomism, and whose literary practise a faded aestheticism.

For many critics, the interpretative crux of the novel rests on the question of irony and the point of view adopted towards Stephen in the novel. Hugh Kenner argues that the narrative tone in *A Portrait* is heavily ironic, seeing the presentation of Stephen in the novel as almost entirely unsympathetic: "The dark intensity of first four chapters is moving enough, but our impulse on being confronted with the final edition of Stephen Dedalus is to laugh" (149). For Kenner, the ironic rendering of Stephen as a humourless egocentric makes it impossible to read *A Portrait* as anything but highly critical of the young man's pretensions to the artistic calling. Wayne Booth, on the other hand, argues that it is impossible to decide on the perspective one should adopt towards Stephen and sees it as a symptom of Joyce's own ambivalent attitude towards his protagonist, who is both a version of the author himself and a fictional character. For critics, such as Patrick Parrinder, however, the ironic perspective on Stephen is the result of "Joyce's balancing of the different points of view it is possible to adopt towards the young Stephen" (72), that is, the very fact that readers are asked both to see Stephen sympathetically and to judge him critically. This

'balance' largely arises from the use of free indirect speech – which enables an identification with Stephen's perspective – in conjunction with the third person voice, which prevents a complete acceptance of this perspective and allows an ironic distance to emerge in the treatment of Stephen.

In recent times *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* has been analysed from a variety of theoretical positions, such as those represented by poststructuralist, feminist and postcolonial criticism. The poststructuralist theorists whose work appears in the important collection of essays entitled *Poststructuralist Joyce* resist attempts to reduce texts to one singular, unified meaning, but instead seek to open up a plurality of possible meanings that often work in opposition to one another. Thus Stephen Heath's reading of *A Portrait* highlights that the ways in which the irony directed at Stephen in the text produces an instability that makes any single interpretation of Stephen (and Joyce's attitude towards Stephen) impossible: "the writing of *A Portrait* proceeds not from the position of Stephen but, as it were, in the 'between' of that position and its opposite. The strategies of hesitation place Joyce's writing not in some fixed outside (the illusion of "reality") but within a continual process of fragmentation, destruction, hesitation" (Heath 36). Poststructuralist readings not only highlight contradictions or discontinuities in the text, but also focus on the construction of Stephen's identity through language and on the contentious question of how individual identity is constituted. In her poststructuralist account of *A Portrait*, Maud Ellmann argues that, rather than showing Stephen's development over the course of the narrative, the novel in fact demonstrates the impossibility of Stephen forming a coherent or stable sense of self through the unreliable medium of language.

Feminist critics such as Suzette Henke and C. L. Innes view Stephen from a different perspective. In their opinion, through *A Portrait*, Stephen manifests a psychological horror of woman, as a figure of immanence, a symbol of unsettling sexual difference, and a perpetual reminder of bodily abjection. Towards the end of the fourth chapter, in the climactic epiphany Stephen sees a dove-like girl

wading in the sea. Critics such as Henke find Stephen's reaction to the girl somewhat ironic. Instead of responding to the girl with desire, he immediately retreats into a visionary mode which sublimates his longing into a quasi-religious revelation of his destiny. Suzette Henke observes:

The young man catches sight of an attractive nubile form and immediately detaches himself from emotional participation in the scene. His reaction is self-consciously static, theoretically purged of desire and loathing. Once again, his leap into aesthetic fantasy quenches an initial impulse to approach the girl, to reach out and touch her, or to risk the possibility of social intercourse. (74)

At the conclusion of chapter five, Stephen prepares to flee from all the women who have served as catalysts in his own adolescent development. His journey into exile will release him from what he perceives as a cloying matriarchal authority. He must blot from his ears "his mother's sobs and reproaches" and strike from his eyes the insistent "image of his mother's face" (*A Portrait* 180). Alone and proud, isolated and free, Stephen proclaims joyful allegiance to the masculine fraternity of Daedalus, his priest and patron:

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...Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead. (*A Portrait* 196)

Suzette Henke argues that the hyperbolic resonance of Stephen's invocation leads us to suspect that his fate will prove Icarian rather than Daedalian:

Insofar as women are concerned, he goes to encounter the reality of experience not for the millionth time but for the first. Much of the irony in *Portrait* results from Joyce's satirical rendering of Stephen's logocentric paradigm. The sociopathic hero, pompous and aloof, passionately gathers phrases for his word hoard without infusing his 'capful of light odes' (*Ulysses* 14:1119) with the generative spark of human sympathy. (93-4)

Henke goes on to assert that the conclusion of Joyce's text seems to imply that the artist's notorious misogyny will prove to be still another dimension (and limitation) of his youthful priggishness. The pervasive irony that tinges the hero's scrupulous devotions and gives his aesthetic theory a 'true scholastic stink' surely informs his relations with women – from his mother and Dante Riordan to Emma and the unnamed bird-girl he transfigures on the beach. In a tone of gentle mockery, Joyce makes clear to his audience that Stephen's fear of women and his contempt for sensuous life are among the many inhibitions that stifle his creativity. Before he can become a true priest of the eternal imagination, Stephen must first divest himself of 'the spiritual-heroic refrigerating apparatus' that characterizes the egocentric aesthete (Henke 94). Narcissism and misogyny are adolescent traits he has to outgrow on the path to artistic maturity. Not until *Ulysses* will a new model begin to emerge, one that recognizes the need for the intellectual artist to make peace with the mother/lover of his dreams and to incorporate into his masterful work those mysterious breaks, flows, gaps, and ruptures associated with the repressed and sublimated flow of male-female desire (94).

The question of how to judge the villanelle Stephen composes in the final chapter illustrates many of the problems involved in negotiating the 'double vision of Stephen as hero or as poseur' (Deane 186). For Kenner, this villanelle marks out Stephen as an 'aesthete' who "writes Frenchified verses in bed" (124), someone who, despite having highly developed theories of beauty and art, produces few convincing examples of his own artistic abilities. In contrast, Wayne Booth points out that, without the sort of explicit guidance from the narrator that is available in *Stephen Hero* – in which Stephen is described as writing 'some pages of sorry verse' (72) – it is truly impossible to decide whether to see the villanelle as a promising, if immature, artistic effort or as evidence of Stephen's pretentious diletantism. Crucially, in the final pages of the novel, Stephen does reveal an instance of self-irony:

Talked rapidly of myself and my plans. In the midst of it unluckily I made a sudden gesture of revolutionary nature. I must have looked like a fellow throwing a handful of peas into the air. (*A Portrait* 195)

In providing a glimpse of Stephen's potential to become self-aware and self-critical, Joyce holds out the possibility that Stephen may in future escape from the trap of his own egotism, and in so doing make the connections with others that are necessary if one is to become a fully developed artist.

As Innes, Henke and many other critics have noted, before judging Stephen's artistic pretensions too harshly, one should take account of the title of the novel: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The indefinite article (*a Portrait*) asks us to consider the possibility that the view of Stephen presented in the text is only one of many possible portraits that might have been given of the development of an individual 'conscience' from infancy to fledging steps towards independence; that this is a portrait of a young man also warn us that Stephen's ideas of life and art remained largely untested and untempered by experience by the time he has chosen to try his wings and 'fly' from home and Ireland. In light of this, it is significant that the ending of *Portrait* is open – considered in terms of the conventions of the realist novel, it seems not much of an ending at all. In fact, readers must wait until *Ulysses* to discover that Stephen has returned to Ireland, frustrated in his attempts to escape the 'nets' of home, church and nation. However, the open ending of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* seems the most appropriate conclusion to a work whose primary concern is to trace the development of the mind and conscience of the artist. Ultimately, the end result of Stephen's development is less important than the documenting of the arduous journey to the point of being ready to encounter life.

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