

James Joyce: The Rise of the Artist

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Abstract

Stephen is considered by most critics to be James Joyce's alter ego i.e. a character who represents many of the author's own personality traits. This fact legitimizes this attempt to explain Joyce's own ideas regarding the process of becoming an artist through an analysis of the struggles Stephen goes through. This paper, concentrates on understanding the needs of Joyce's creative psyche as depicted in Stephen's process of becoming an artist with an emphasis on the emotional and psychological demands that the necessary fusion of intellect and emotion within the creative process places on the artist.

James Joyce (1882-1941) comments on Stephen Dedalus to Frank Budgen emphasizing how much Stephen's struggles reflect his own: "I haven't let this young man off very lightly, have I? Many writers have written about themselves. I wonder if any of them has been as candid as I have?" (qtd. in Budgen 51). This self-confessed alignment of Stephen's personality traits with his own legitimizes the attempt to understand Joyce's creativity through a study of Stephen's own struggles to become an artist as depicted in *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*¹.

The struggles of a literary artist begin long before the literary piece takes form. In A General Introduction for my Work Yeats, states the influence of life experience on writing thus "A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria" (Larissay 379). Reconnecting to one's experiences through writing is what helps artists make sense out of their struggles and pains. We know that Woolf's writing of *To the Lighthouse* (1927) led to a more acceptable and clear understanding of her mother and her relationship with her. In *Moments of Being* she writes: "Until I was in the forties [...] the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings (93)". It was only after she had written *To the Lighthouse* that she was purged of the obsession with her mother. She explains the cathartic effect: "I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it, I explained it and then laid it to rest" (94). Her mother's spirit had haunted her whole existence and she was successfully exorcised only after she came to terms with what her feelings. In writing *To The Lighthouse* she performed a kind of cleansing of her soul that brought about a maturity that was to pervade her subsequent writings.

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Similarly, as much as Woolf protested against the experimentation and themes in Joyce's *Ulysses* and records her experience thus, "I have been amused, stimulated, charmed, interested, by the first two or three chapters—to the end of the cemetery scene; and then puzzled, bored, irritated and disillusioned by a queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples" (Woolf *Diary* 188-189), the writing of *Ulysses* did for Joyce what working on *To The Lighthouse* had done for her.

For Joyce, too, the memories of his mother were there to haunt him. At the news of his mother's illness he returned to Ireland from Paris in 1903. Before she died she pleaded with Joyce to take the sacraments but he refused to do so. He did not kneel at her deathbed in defiance of the order of a much hated uncle (Stanislaus and Giovanelli 491), and the guilt he later felt is fully depicted in *Ulysses*. In that text, through the portrayal of Stephen's guilt he tries to understand his own emotions and deal with the intensity of his suffering. He later confessed to his wife Nora in a letter written on 29 August, "My mother was slowly killed, I think, by my father's ill-treatment, by years of trouble, and by my cynical frankness of conduct" (Ellman 169). His distancing with religion had a very negative effect on his mother who was, in accordance with her belief, was afraid for his soul. This is understandable from her point of view since as "a child Joyce was very religious, and overcome by remorse for certain boyish transgressions, he went through a critical period of repentance" (Stanislaus and Giovanelli 487). After seeing her son so religiously akin to her, one can easily understand what the change in his religious beliefs had on her.

What Stephen once thought fatal for his aesthetic theory and becoming an artist, he gradually realizes, is an essential component and necessity for creativity. It takes the whole of *Ulysses* for Joyce to explain this through Stephen's suffering and meaningless human existence which has not yet been able to encompass and transfigure the mundane through his art. Thus, we notice Stephen is surrounded by mother-figures who are possible substitutes for his absent one. In *Ulysses* we find mentions of Swinburne's "great sweet mother," "The snotgreen sea," "The scrotumtightening sea" (U 13), "old mother Grogan"(U 14), the milkwoman with her "Old shrunken paps" (U 15), Cyril Sargent's doting mother (U 33), to all the mothers Mulligan sees "pop off every day in the Mater and Richmond" (U 8), Josie Breen, whom Bloom wonders is pregnant, Mina Purefoy and obviously, Molly Bloom.

The abundance of mother figures in *Ulysses* are an indication that, in order to be reborn as a successful artist, Stephen has to modify his aesthetic theory so as to accommodate for an androgynous mind that can both think logically and still feel deeply. Joyce turned the desperation of the loss of his mother into fuel for hardwork that went into his literary creations. Coupled with his passion for Nora he had the unique blend of strength and resistance to pave his way to being the great artist that he is. Mark Shechner, in his essay "The Song of the Wandering Aengus: James Joyce and His Mother," tracks Joyce's development as a serious literary artist to have begun about five months after his mother's death with the writing of an essay, "A Portrait of the Artist," which was submitted to a new journal of "free thought," Dana. The editors Ryan and Magee rejected it because of its overt sexuality. Joyce

was outraged and began to expand it into the autobiographical novel, Stephen Hero, the greater part of Chamber Music was complete, and later that summer, he was to write "The Holy Office," and begin work on *Dubliners* (Shechner 79). All this writing happened in the period between his mother's death and his flight into exile with Nora. Joyce had tapped into his creativity in a way that Stephen was aspiring to do. We can easily infer that Stephen the Joyce that would have remained incomplete as an artist if he had not been able to overcome the guilt of psychological matricide and channel it into his creative force with the help of Nora's womanly presence pull in his soul between the demands of two opposite forces i.e. faith and creativity.

Such deep passion for someone or something, be it in imagination or in reality, is a necessary, it seems, as a component of artistic creation. As David Weir quite rightly speculates, "Ulysses, in fact, may be set on 16 June 1904, not so much out of tribute to Nora's love but as Joyce's way of speculating about the person he might have been on that day if he had not experienced Nora's frank, aggressive sexuality" (Wier 225) Joyce thought Nora was exactly what he needed and quite frankly told her, "You made me a man" (Ellman 156). In Nora he was able to merge his fantasy and reality. She enabled him to strike a balance between his intellect and bodily fascination and needs, therefore, "until his death in Zurich, he never left his wife's side [. . .] except for a few weeks, and then with the great reluctance" (Stanslaus 506). As an artist he felt the strong need for a passion that would seep into his own creative consciousness, something he was initially so afraid of and what he felt he was missing, and what he eventually found in Nora.

His feelings for Nora allowed him to sympathize with the opposite gender as well as fantasize and imagine male creativity as analogous to female gestation. Referring to his literary creation *The Dubliners* Joyce writes to his wife:

I went then into the backroom of the office and sitting at the table, thinking of the book I have written, that child which I have carried for years and years in the womb of the imagination as you carried in your womb the children you love. (*Letters* 308)

This letter, by using the metaphor of child-birth, clearly reminds us of the androgynous identity of the artist who experiences the act of birth, not physically but psychologically.

The problem, though, for Stephen is that from a young age he is bound by religious teachings which, in the long run, contradict his need for expression as an artist. For example, the pressure put on him by his mother and Dante to apologize, otherwise eagles would come and pull out his eyes reflects, as Elliot B. Gose informs us, "his first choice between punishment and submission" (Elliott 259). The fear of bodily pain that ensues as well as the conflict that this event gives rise to, affects the way he responds to his surroundings. For Stephen, the body becomes an instrument of degradation linked to fear, shame and vulnerability.

The physical body is important as an object based in reality and from whence the imagination can take cue and transcend the image of the body in creation. As McDougall comments, "The artist, in whatever field, is inevitably inspired by the external world, and once the impressions, perceptions, emotions, and thoughts thus

garnered are incorporated mentally, their impact fertilizes the inner world of the creative mind” (McDougall 252). That is why the images of the female are such an important part of Stephen’s consciousness. Though, “[t]he female and art are most obviously associated in Stephen’s composition of the villanelle” (Elliott 262), what is to be noticed is the negativity associated with the female image where the image of the virgin is drawn as that of a temptress (*The Portrait* 220). He is angry because he considers his desire as sinful and against religion. This anger moves from the object of desire, the female body, to the priest. Only then his, “desire for a woman outside allows him to meld with the female soul and muse within, to become intimate with the source of creativity” (Elliott 267). Sexual desire in an artist, as seen in *The Portrait* is something complicated as it is connected to extreme and violent emotion—a complex combination of fear and anger. Interestingly, this can be explained in an analogy where McDougall envisages the “internal universe of a creative individual as something like a volcano. The live volcano conceals within its depths continual heat and churning energy and will send out sparks, rocks and flames at appropriate moments; but if prolonged blockage were to occur this would precipitate an explosion” (McDougall 249). Joyce was afraid of “apprehensive womanhood (with its piteous, insistent attempt to impede the adventures of the spirit),” that his mother came to symbolize which as he styled it, is “the most puritanical form of Christianity, the vigilant, pitiless enemy of intellectual freedom and the joy of living” (Stanislaus and Giovanelli 492). Though Joyce truly regretted hurting his mother at the beginning of his becoming an artist, he thought his vocation demanded something that neither she nor her religion could give him. He felt that he needed a passion to overwhelm him if he were to become an artist – a passion that she could not afford him. He also feared that he might be drowned in it and the chaos that would ensue from it, if he gave way to the passion he felt. If he felt too passionately the emotion itself might become another net binding him down. This is, indeed, what we see in Stephen and his mortification of the flesh. Passion, thereby, would be a double edged sword that would have the power to both free and imprison his soul.

Stephen suppresses his emotional need without even trying to understand his condition. If he were to accept that he was fascinated with the human form and strike a balance in his mind between what is possible and what not with a central understanding of why he is so conflicted, then he would not be in denial of his emotions and would readily be able to minimize the effect of those emotions on his actions. At this stage, even if one does not read into it all the Oedipal conflict of Freudian analysis or the Symbolic mother-son unison of Lacan, still the event sits strong in Stephen’s mind because of his initial religious education at home and at Clongowes that makes his revolt against it all the more traumatic.

The trauma intensifies as a result of his feelings of incompleteness. He feels at once suffocated and empty at the same time. To be an artist he felt long ago that he needed to escape Ireland and all it stood even if it meant disregarding and pushing away the ideals of his mother and motherland. As he mentions in *The Portrait*, “When the soul of a man is born in this country, there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (P 171). The realization of this wish is not at all easy to for Stephen. To relocate one’s

self and senses when the soul is connected at so many points is undeniably traumatic and strongly apprehended once the initial euphoria of being able to emancipate oneself wears off. At this point the soul is weighed down by the burden of loss and alienation as Stephen searches for meaning, questioning the decisions he has taken. Stephen is in such a state of self-questioning and doubt though he is still in denial. And, the denial is where all the anger and frustration comes from. To create great art he has to be able to understand himself and his needs as an artist.

To successfully create and represent characters of any gender and social background a literary artist has to have the intellect to decipher and analyse as well as the sensitivity to empathize. Because, as we are informed in *Scylla and Charybdis* about the writer, as artists “[w]e walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves” (U 273). So, every character that a writer creates is somehow a projection of the writer’s understanding of himself and of the possible Other as conceived by him. Declan Kiberd clearly notes in his introduction to *Ulysses*, the androgynous temperament is necessary for an artist to initiate his artistic development, thus, in the case of Stephen “the womanly man is indeed the object of his quest” (Kiberd lxii). Similarly, Virginia Woolf, a contemporary of Joyce, quite aptly advocates for the necessity of androgyny within the mind of an artist and warns against the effect of the strict division of gender and as being fatal for creation: “[I]t is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (Woolf 99). She advocates for the “woman-manly” or “man-womanly” which would allow space for a greater understanding and better representation of the Other. In this regard, whilst referring to creativity, Joyce McDougall (1995) infers bisexual fantasies are delicately balanced in the unconscious mind, and there is a possibility “all creative acts may be conceptualized as a fusion of the masculine and feminine elements in our psychic structure” (MacDougall 258). In analyzing the aesthetic theory as appears in “The Portrait” and then in *Ulysses*, what becomes clear is that Joyce also advocates for the androgynous mind of the artist, as the proper source of creativity.

The androgynous mind is a fusion of the characteristic psychological and emotional differences traditionally associated with the two sexes i.e. masculinity (intellect, logical thought) and femininity (intuition, feeling, sensitivity). Through Bloom, Joyce advocates for an androgynous mind that will allow the artist to give a sincere and unbiased depiction of the experiences for both genders. womanly man,” and that “He is about to have a baby” (U 493-94). Thus, Bloom is able to express in fantasy one of his deepest desires: “I so want to be a mother” (U 494). Thus, Bloom is a man who can share the pain a woman goes through in childbirth, not as a physical experience but as an emotional and empathetic one.

The character Bloom in Joyce’s *Ulysses* is, therefore, an important component in Stephen’s artistic development. He is not an artist nor is he aspiring to be one. But, through him Joyce shows us how important it is to empathize with the opposite gender and accept the role of the mother in creation, in order to have a fuller experience of life. Bloom can empathize with a woman in childbirth because of this

androgynous attitude and in the *Circe* episode he fantasizes about being pregnant. As Kiberd suggests, Bloom is that “imperfect androgyne” (Kiberd li) in whom a balance has been achieved between male and female elements to the extent that “in Bloom sexual desire is slowly ebbing away” (Kiberd lxiii). His empathy causes him to no longer see women as objects of pleasure present solely for male satisfaction.

Joseph Boone observes that Joyce grew up in an Ireland, as reflected in his literary works, where “male characters are obsessed by shows of power, force, virility, and sheer brawn, the women believe themselves to be passive, receptive, and intuitive creatures who complement their “feminine” virtue with a forgiving indulgence of ‘masculine’ bravado” (Boone 69). As a result, of this power-play of dominance and submission on his consciousness, Stephen’s aesthetic theory as proposed in “The Portrait” is based on a masculine view of the world denying the feminine as a positive and respectable force within his vision of the artist.

When referring to Stephen’s aesthetic theory and the birth of the artist, Sam Slote in *Joyce’s Nietzschean Ethics* rightly observes: “Although ‘A Portrait’ closes with the plea to his ‘Old father,’ Stephen is not just a paternal offspring, but also a maternal offspring. The main modification to his temperament in *Ulysses* involves a strained and sustained consideration of maternity, which is, of course, haunted by the absence of his mother”(40). Stephen’s patrilineal aesthetic theory as expressed in *The Portrait* is a negation of the mother role in creation and, as such, demands emotional detachment, denial and matricide to come into effect. This denial is exactly what is wrong with the initial theory. And what has made it sterile causing Stephen to remain an unsuccessful artist as he aspires for freedom from all his maternal bindings, including that of his country.

When the novel *Ulysses* opens, the reader finds Stephen, who at the end of *A Portrait* left Ireland with the intention to discover the mode of life or of art whereby his spirit could express itself in unrestrained freedom, still struggling to define his artistic identity. This seemingly unending battle within himself continues through the massive expanse of *Ulysses*. Although by the end of the novel, through experience and a more mature understanding of his situation and himself, Stephen begins the process of freeing himself from his own guilt of betraying his mother, consequently creating the possibility for his artistic potential to thrive and flourish. Joyce’s works, especially *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*, represent all the struggles Joyce has had to come to terms with and develops in himself to be the artist he wants to be.

In this analysis, I have briefly shown the emotional and psychological struggles that the literary artist undergoes before and through the creative process. Also, that the underlying message of *Ulysses* suggests the need for a rewriting Stephen’s initial theory to accommodate empathy and understanding toward his mother as a positive presence devoid of repulsion and fear thereby enabling the birth of the artist with an androgynous mind essential for creation. This was indeed Joyce’s struggle in coming to terms with his life and art through the explorations of possible artistic perspectives through the character of Stephen Dedalus.

Notes

1. Further references to A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (Henceforth A Portrait) will be cited parenthetically in the text by P and the page numbers and to Ulysses by U and the page numbers.

Works Cited

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