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Artistic Alienation in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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Abstract

James Joyce draws the character of his protagonist Stephen Dedalus in the mould of an alienated artist. Throughout the novel Stephen struggles to forge amicable bond with people and places of his immediate surroundings. His inherent romanticism finds it difficult to come to terms with drab realities of life. Stephen explores various escape routes to emancipate himself from fetters of mundane reality. He takes refuge in the world of physical pleasure but finds no solace. He further turns to religion but feels disillusioned from it. He tries to find comfort in the family circle but feels even more isolated. In the present paper an attempt has been made to foreground tumult in Stephen's psyche in the face of burgeoning animosity of the outside world. Stephen's growth as an artist goes hand in hand with his alienation from his social, religious, and cultural milieu which gives rise to the eternal dilemma whether art is for art's sake only or it is for life. James Joyce delineates his theory of aestheticism through the character of Stephen who finds his true calling as an artist detached and disenchanted from his environs.

Keywords: James Joyce, Modernism, Alienation, Artist.

James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Youngman*, as the name suggests, is an account of the artistic growth of the protagonist Stephen Dedalus. Christopher Butler gives the novel "a crucial position in the development of a distinctively modernist mode of presentation" for marking author's distance from his material (61). In the gradual unfurling of the pages, it is not just the artistic growth that catches fancy of the readers, the growing alienation of Stephen from his family, nation and religion also goes hand in hand with the former. Tobias Boes remarks, "Stephen is constantly struggling to synchronize his internal beat with an ever changing environment" (771). There is no doubt that Stephen is gifted with extraordinary artistic sensibility right from his childhood as evident in his love for rhymes—the way he turns Dante's "threat into a rhyme" (Crooks 381): Pull out his eyes/Apologise/Apologise/Pull out his eyes (Joyce 8); and in his eye for beauty—the way his mind rejoices at the thought of "white roses and red roses," "lavender and cream and pink roses" (Joyce 12). But it is from childhood itself that Stephen feels himself dissociated from his immediate community i.e. his fellow students in Clongowes Wood College:

All the boys seemed to him very strange. They had all fathers and mothers and different clothes and voices. He longed to be at home and lay his head on his mother's lap. But he could not: and so he longed for the play and study and prayers to be over and to be in bed. (Joyce 13)

Stephen's alienation in Clongowes, nevertheless, is not without reason, since everyone feels isolated in a new surroundings, and in Stephen's case a couple of mishaps further aggravate his misery. First of all he is shouldered into a ditch by Wells because "he would not swap his little snuffbox for Wells's seasoned hacking chestnut" (Joyce 140), the cold slime of the ditch causes fever and he has to go to the school infirmary for his treatment. Secondly, he is "pandied" by Father Dolan in front of the whole class without any fault of his own:

It was unfair and cruel because the doctor had told him not to read without glasses and he had written home to his father that morning to send him a new pair Then to be called a schemer before the class and to be pandied when he always got the card for first or second and was the leader of the Yorkists! . . . It was cruel and unfair to make him kneel in the middle of the class then . . . The prefect of studies was a priest but that was cruel and unfair. (Joyce 52)

Stephen feels more and more distanced from his fellow students and also from the teachers after going through this bitter experience. Towards the close of the first chapter he, however, gets back some sense of companionship when he is given a huge wave of applause by the students for going before the rector and registering a complaint against the unjust act of Father Dolan. But before that Stephen could deepen the bonds of friendship with his fellow students in Clongowes he is called back to Blackrock.

In Blackrock also his stay could not be longer, he is forced to move to Dublin due to the financial degradation of his family. This frequent movement from one place to the other also played a crucial part in making Stephen a socially aloof creature, for he could never nurture a sense of bonding with the place of his birth. During his stay in Dublin “a vague dissatisfaction grew up within him . . . he continued to wander up and down day after day as if he really sought someone that eluded him” (Joyce 66). In fact, it was the time when sexual desires started taking birth in his juvenile consciousness. He craved for the company of women and hoped to find a remedy for his lonely and tortured psyche by delving deep into the sea of carnal desires. Ben Foley suggests that at this crucial moment,

Were he able to voice these half-formed feelings amongst like-minded young men, perhaps he would feel less isolated. The strict Catholic nature of their education and the widening social gap between him and his peers brought about by his father’s downfall cements his alienation and otherness; his artistic yearnings remain ‘monstrous reveries’ without any real articulation or development” (3).

When on a visit to Cork in the company of his father, Stephen is told about the flirtatious youth of his father, he feels still lonelier:

He had known neither the pleasure of companionship with others nor the vigour of rude male health nor filial piety. Nothing stirred within his soul but a cold and cruel and loveless lust. (Joyce 96)

It is not that Stephen does not make any attempt to stay close to his family. He tries to buy all the possible creature comforts for himself and his family with the money earned by him from exhibition and essay prize, but the money soon exhausts, and he realises that “he had not gone one step nearer the lives he had sought to approach nor bridged the restless shame and rancor that divided him from his mother and brother and sister” (Joyce 98). His “savage desire” was increasing with every passing day and ultimately he finds himself “wandering into a maze of narrow and dirty streets” of the brothels (Joyce 100).

Stephen’s brief spell of sexual indulgence also fails to provide any solace to his distorted psyche; it gives him, rather, a sense of guilt that haunts him day and night. His sin guides him to the “refuge of sinners” and after listening to the sermon of Father Arnall about the tortures of hell, Stephen decides to atone for his sins by kneeling in prayer before the Almighty. He starts on a course of strict religious piety, subjecting his senses to “rigorous discipline”. But even this did not satisfy him for long:

It surprised him however to find that at the end of his course of intricate piety and self restraint he was so easily at the mercy of childish and unworthy imperfections. . . . To merge his life in the common tide of other lives was harder for him than any fasting or prayer, and it was his constant failure to do this to his own satisfaction which caused in his soul at last a sensation of spiritual dryness together with a growth of doubts and scruples. (Joyce 151-52)

The moment of his complete break away from the religion can be identified as the one when the director of Belvedere encourages him to priesthood. It is this very moment “that the awareness of the ‘vital circumstances’ concealed in his memories comes, opening the way to his artistic vision” (Crooks 393). He realized that his “destiny was to be elusive of social or religious order” (Joyce 162). Thus he finds himself alienated from the religion as well.

Disengaging himself from the bonds of family and religion, Stephen initiates the life of a university scholar. His mind becomes a dwelling place for the ideas of the great thinkers like, Aristotle, Aquinas, Ben Jonson, Newman, Guido Cavalcanti, and Ibsen. He also forms his own aesthetic theory in the light of the ideas taken from Aristotle and Aquinas. In his theory he divides art in three forms—the lyrical, the epical and the dramatic. According to him the art progresses from one form to the other and “the dramatic form is reached when the vitality which has flowed and eddied round each person fills every person with such vital force that he or she assumes a proper and intangible esthetic life” (Joyce 215). Stephen’s aesthetic theory also defines gradual evolution of the artist’s personality in moving from lyrical to dramatic form:

The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself . . . The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails. (Joyce 215)

Acting upon his aesthetic theory, Stephen wants to be indifferent not only to his handiwork but also to the society at large. He emphatically declares that he does not feel any affiliation to his nation, language, and religion. For him these are nothing but a trap to limit the free soul of an artist. Expressing his resentment against Ireland he says,

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. (Joyce 203)

And this is precisely what Stephen does towards the end of the novel. He decides to leave Ireland “to discover the mode of life or of art,” so that his “spirit could express itself in unfettered freedom” (Joyce 246).

Stephen’s growth as an artist seems suspect when he expresses his intense desire to be free from the bonds of family, society, nation, and religion. This grave flaw in his aesthetic theory is highlighted by MacCann when he says, “I believe you’re a good fellow but you have yet to learn the dignity of altruism and the responsibility of the human individual” (Joyce 198-99). Lynch also comments sarcastically on Stephen’s aesthetic theory that asks for complete artistic detachment:

What do you mean . . . by prating about beauty and the imagination in this miserable God-forsaken island? No wonder the artist retired within or behind his handiwork after having perpetrated this country. (Joyce 215)

Even Cranly does not agree with Stephen when the latter says that he does not “fear to be alone or to be spurned for another or to leave whatever” he has “to leave” (Joyce 247). Cranly asks him whether he knows what it means to be alone, to be without even a single friend. Cranly’s words strike “some deep chord” in Stephen’s nature and he realises that loneliness is something that he has always feared, so his claim for leading a lonely and alienated life does not hold water. In fact, his desire for complete freedom makes him akin to Lucifer, who brought about his own damnation with the notion of *non servium*. This led the critic Wayne Booth to observe two contradictory Portraits in the novel one “that of the artistic soul battling through successfully to his necessary freedom,” and the other “that of the child of God, choosing, like Lucifer, his own damnation” (327). What fate Stephen meets, whether he gets his desired artistic freedom or else is damned eternally like Lucifer, is not known, for the novel ends at the point of a new beginning in the life of Stephen.

Taking a more optimistic stance it can be said that in the novel Joyce is giving us “precisely a portrait of the artist *as a young man*, and the tension between his ambition” (Joyce 5), but the process of mental development is not complete at the end of the novel, since there are still some grave flaws in his artistic vision, which, it is hoped that he will remove once he takes flight in the world at large with a vision “to forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Joyce 253).

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