

Discuss language in James Joyce's *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*.

James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a novel which expresses a profound concern with the nature of language. Through both the astute consciousness of its protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, and the author's experimental stylistic and structural techniques, readers of the novel are encouraged throughout to reflect upon the complexities of linguistic communication and unravel the narrative framework of the text. However, any analysis of language in *A Portrait* is twofold as Joyce highlights the symbiotic relationship between the worldview of the text and the lexis of its characters. In this way, the novel can be seen as emblematic of the distinctly modernist fixation with the limitations of expression, encapsulated in Wittgenstein's aphorism, "The limits of my language means the limits of my world" (74). Indeed, Thomas Singer sees a clear connection between Wittgenstein's language theories and Joyce's semi-autobiographical work, suggesting that both exhibit "a fascination with the relation between our language and our world" (Singer: 460). In its efforts to offer up a panoramic vision of the life of Stephen Dedalus, *A Portrait* allows for an appreciation of the pervasive power of the underlying 'superstructure' of a society dominated by superstition, religion and nationalist concerns. Consequently, analysis of language in the text is inextricably linked to the underlying theme of flight, which explores Stephen's determination to escape the stultifying impact of Irish culture, to which his identity and language and are inexorably bound.

Throughout the course of the novel, Joyce exhibits an unwavering consciousness of the insufficiency of language and the limitations that it imposes upon Stephen's expression both within and without the text. Consequently, we are consistently encouraged to consider the way in which language colours Stephen's perception of the world, and in turn the reader's understanding of Stephen. Indeed, as an adolescent, Stephen muses on the true nature of language when considering the word "suck". He writes, "Suck was a queer word...But the sound was ugly" (Joyce: 14) as he concludes that the word signifies the noise made by "the hole in the basin" (Joyce: 14) of a sink. In this way, Joyce uses the unfledged consciousness of Stephen to interrogate the primacy of the onomatopoeic function of words, uncorrupted by context and connotation. In doing so, he also echoes Saussurian observations of the arbitrary relationship between the signified and the signifier and, in turn, propagates a distrust in the mimetic function of language. This is a subject that remains troubling for the protagonist throughout the novel. In a conversation with his dean of studies, Stephen debates the term used to signify "the funnel through which you pour the oil into your lamp" (Joyce: 188), insisting that it be referred to as "a tundish" (Joyce: 188). With his parodic repetition of the word tundish,

uttered no less than five times in their short conversation, Joyce again seems to hint at the futility of any labeling-system dependent upon a mode of communication so subjective and relative. As Eric Bulson asserts, for Stephen, “words have an independent existence” (Bulson: 54): from the outset, the possibility of language as a neutral entity is refuted and Joyce lays the foundations for his momentous quest to, as Stephen declares, “express myself as I am” (Joyce: 202).

In his exploration of the problems of representation, Joyce mirrors the way in which language warps Stephen’s perspective with his use of the revolutionary technique of stream of consciousness. In the opening lines of the novel, Joyce introduces an unprecedented and wholly original form of narration, in which the speaker assimilates Stephen’s point of view, yet remains firmly in the third person. The narration begins, “Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming along the road” and with his use of colloquialisms, simplistic grammatical structures and limited observations, Joyce reflects the consciousness of Stephen as an infant whilst narrating from the perspective of his father. Philip Brockbank points out that Joyce’s consideration of multiple perspectives “remind us of the modernist obsession with relativistic modes of perception” (62). Indeed, Joyce’s explicit recognition of the need to impose design, structure, and form onto language can be seen as redressal of the failings of language and an acknowledgement of its capacity to pervert Stephen’s message, as well as advance it. This can be further supported by Joyce’s decision to conclude his novel in the form of a diary entry. Many have argued that the sharp transition from third-person narration to the cryptic first-person diary entries that mark the end of the novel signify Stephen’s resolution to find his own voice. However, readers must also consider the powerful message Joyce sends with such an abrupt transformation of perspective and style. Kenneth Grose has called it a “flat ending” which contains “many trivialities and unexplained references”¹ (Levenson: 1017). Yet, this is to ignore the metafictional messages that Joyce interweaves into his complex novel. With the words “11 April: Read what I wrote last night. Vague words for a vague emotion” (Joyce: 250), Joyce concludes with a complete reversal of the straightforward opening style. In this way, Stephen’s intellectual development climaxes in a narrative framework which displays a deeply sceptical view of language, presenting a protagonist “trapped in the various styles of [his] own thinking” (Brockbank: 61). The novel therefore ends with a powerful acknowledgement and communication of the limitations of any linguistic portrait, as it simultaneously seeks to engage with its reader and critique the very mode of communication it employs

¹ Cited in

Joyce not only explores the way in which language affects Stephen's perception of the world as he also interrogates the reverse effect, showing that Stephen's worldview pervades his language. Written in a period of European history which saw a growing recognition of the rights of small nations that found expression in the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, Joyce's portrayal of Stephen illustrates the way in which the language of the time was steeped in the rhetoric of nationalism. When addressing Irish culture, Stephen frequently refers to it throughout the book as a latent, invisible power, infiltrating all aspects of life. We are told, "His nurse had taught him Irish and shaped the rude imagination by the broken lights of Irish myth" (Joyce: 181) and Stephen refers to, "the hidden ways of Irish life" (Joyce: 181). In this way, he demonstrates the way in which the Irish instinct to promote their identity and history is a quality which had been hardwired into Stephen's consciousness and, in turn, his language. During his conversation with his English dean of studies, he reflects:

How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master* on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. (Joyce: 189)

Once again, Joyce self-consciously explores the way in which Irish history, culture and identity both enriches and skews his language, highlighting its capacity to absorb the deeply personal nature of Irish history. Buslon supports this interpretation of Anglo-Irish as a distinct language, with its own set of connotations and undertones, as he argues that "Stephen may never feel at home in the English language, but by using it to articulate an Irish experience he can make it foreign to the English." (Buslon: 56) Moreover, Joyce demonstrates the influence of the superstructure in Stephen's language not only through the theme of nationalism, but also with his treatment of religious language. In his evocative description of the Catholic retreat the young Stephen Dedalus attends, Joyce demonstrates the stifling power of a Catholic rhetoric emphasizing guilt, judgement and obedience; as Stephen is so hypnotised by the priest's words, he believed that, "Every word of it was for him" (Joyce: 116). In his presentation of a Catholic lexical field and his consistent use of this vocabulary throughout the text, Joyce again demonstrates the way in which Stephen's language is immersed in his religious background. As Colin MacCabe contends, "It is well known that Joyce, like Stephen Dedalus, considered himself to be slave of two masters, one British and one Roman." (168). In Stephen's conversation with Cranly, when asked if he were happier as a Catholic believer as a boy, Stephen replies, "I was someone else then... I was not myself as I am now, as I had to become." (Joyce: 239). By this we understand the forceful grasp of Catholic rhetoric and, much like the influence of Irish nationalist sentiment, the way in which language defined Stephen's development, and the intellectual revolt which ultimately liberated him.

Having demonstrated the power of language both to absorb and convey Irish culture, Joyce interweaves a third layer of language to his text when depicting Stephen's exile: the language of Ovidian mythology. His epigraph, "*Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes*" (Ovid: VIII.188.), meaning, "And he turns his mind to unknown arts", is one which epitomises Joyce's use of mythology to escape the oppressive force of his own cultural background, as his reference to such a distant text mirrors the sentiment of the epigraph. In Stephen's final conversation with Cranly he declares, "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely and as wholly as I can" (Joyce: 251). In this way, Joyce uses Stephen to express the necessity to use modes of writing outside of the language of nationalism and religion and gives explanation for the motif of flight which he incorporates into the novel. As Richard Ellman asserts, "Part of achieving his independence involves wresting language and art from the religious, political and social institutions that attempt to co-opt them." (52). In this context, Stephen's association with Daedalus, the great artificer of Latin mythology, who fashioned wings from wax and feathers to escape his imprisonment in King Minos's kingdom, signifies an ability to use his craft, in Joyce's case, art, to elude oppression and confinement. Like Daedalus, Joyce's skill facilitates both his repression and liberation; his intellectual engagement with language and literature allows him to both perceive its limitations and to conceive his deliverance. Thus, when declaring, "You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets." (Joyce: 203), Stephen acknowledges his need to achieve distance from the sway of "nationality, language, religion", and yet recognises their ineluctable influence on his identity. The use of the words "fly by those nets" indicate his inability to fully escape these defining powers, whose linguistic footprint remain visible even in his final rebellious oath to "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (Joyce: 252). In this way, "Stephen's emergence as a practicing artist in private is interwoven with his renunciations of home, nation and religion in public" (Bulson: 58) and his use of mythological language and reference allows him to bridge the two domains in *A Portrait*.

In conclusion, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce not only explores the way in which language limits Stephen's perspective, but also shows how his protagonist's outlook is warped by his language. With his analysis of religious language and the rhetoric of nationalism, Joyce demonstrates the power of language to assimilate world-views and impose a frame of reference onto Stephen's consciousness. His invocation of Latin mythology signals a desire to escape such profound boundaries, both in Stephen and in Joyce, and marks a recognition of the stifling impact of culture, background and tradition. The novel thus "compels us to undertake a retrospective inquisition into our

larger inheritances of language and civilization” (Brockbank: 168) in its consideration of the artistic autonomy of Stephen Dedalus. In this way, Joyce furnishes his text with an astute awareness of the complexities of expression in all its forms, paving the way for the ingenious parody and intense characterisation to be found in his magnum opus, *Ulysses*.

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