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## **Joyce's Experiment in the use of Language in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man***

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### **Abstract**

As a novelist James Joyce surpasses his predecessors in the experimental use of the use of stream of consciousness technique and the interior monologue. The most impressive and innovative method in the art of Joyce's novel writing is found in his use of epiphany, and in his symbolic parallels drawn from history, mythology and literature. As a modernist, he is also a great exponent in the brilliant and innovative use of language in the literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The present paper is an attempt to make a study of Joyce's experimental use of language in his novel 1916 novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

**Key Words-** *James Joyce, Irish, Modernism, Language, Style*

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### Introduction

James Joyce, the Irish novelist, poet, playwright and critic, was the towering figure of the literature of the modern period. He was one of the pioneers in the experimentations of the theme and style in the literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He brought a new approach in technical innovations and the use of language, and breathed new sensibility to the art of writing novel representing a breakthrough from the traditional naturalistic novels of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries of Henry Fielding, Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Gustave Flaubert and others. The innovative style and literary technique of Joyce predominantly include his use of the interior monologue or the stream of consciousness narration method. His most impressive innovative method in the art of novel is found in his use of epiphany, and in his use of the symbolic parallels drawn from history, mythology and literature. He has created a language of his own through the invented words, puns and the allusions. Joyce's linguistic experimentation is extensively found in his early novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and it reached its pinnacle in the outright avant-gardism in the later novels like *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegan's Wake* (1939). It was Edward Albert who calls Joyce as 'A ceaseless experimenter' (514). Joyce's experiment with the language is superb and engages our attention most. Known for his playful and innovative use language, he has invented a host of outlandish and new English words and phrases in his novels. Each word, each image and each sentence contribute immensely to the overall effect of his novels. Let us now reflect on Joyce's brilliant and innovative use of language in his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Towards the end of his writing of the novel *Finnegan's Wake*, James Joyce wrote in one of his letters "I have discovered I can do anything with language I want". Joyce has made language quite flexible and a handy tool in expressing his innermost thoughts and his characters' too. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the several changes in literary technique were noticed. The writers turned away from the conventional realism and naturalism, and the attitude towards the language changed profoundly. And James Joyce is one of those pioneers who contributed immensely to these experimentations. To him, language was not a transparent medium, but always a part of the reality it represents, a 'prism, colouring, shaping or even obscuring the world' (Gilroy).

The novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is an account of the growth and development of a young man torn between his religious upbringing and his desire for sensuousness. Though the novel is largely autobiographical as the hero Stephen Dedalus is the very embodiment of Joyce's own self, the novelist has shown his mastery in the use of stream of consciousness method in the art of narration. The style shows Joyce's mastery over the language, his inventiveness, brilliance and power in linguistic experimentations. Stephen's experience of the different words and language marks his artistic destiny from the very beginning of the novel as the novel shows Stephen encounters

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with the reality through different words and expressions. Throughout the novel he is more affected by words rather than by actions. The novel opens with the Latin words ‘*Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes*’ from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, (ch. VIII, 188), meaning ‘And he puts his mind to unknown arts’. It has a direct reference to the myth of Daedalus and Icarus. Though there is a great debate among the critics about the relevance of the epigraph to the rest of the novel, yet the pattern of the upward flight and downward fall recurs throughout the novel and that is hinted in Joyce’s selection of the allusion which rightly asserts his myth-making power. Joyce has deliberately named his hero as ‘Stephen’ after the first Christian martyr St. Stephen to justify that an artist is an outcast from society. St. Stephen was a Jew educated in Greek seems to have a parallel to Joyce’s own linguistic situation, an Irishman educated in English.

Joyce’s choice of each and every word in the title exhibits Joyce’s formal design of the novel. There is a clear hint to the readers that we are going to read a narrative about the growing years of a person who will go on to be an artist. The growth and formation of the ‘young man’ to the persona of an ‘artist’ is very skillfully conveyed by Joyce in the use of the word ‘portrait’ providing a visual impact to the readers. Joyce’s choice of the words in the title conveys his rejection of the realistic and naturalistic conventions of the previous century providing the clue for the emergence of the aesthetic and artistic sensibilities after the decadence, and thereby heralds the era of modernism.

Let me now reflect on the very opening of the novel. Joyce writes, “Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo . . .” (5) Joyce has begun the novel in the age-old tradition of the fictional narrative tradition with the words ‘once upon a time’. He has presented here Stephen’s narratives in accordance with the childish idiom by the words ‘moocow’ comes down along the road and meets a little boy named baby ‘tuckoo’. It brings to us the several important themes that run throughout the novel. It encompasses the legendary figures from the Greek and Irish myth, and the magical cows of the Irish peasant lore very popular among the contemporary people. It is superbly reworked with the epigraph of the novel. Like Daedalus, the legendary Cretan artisan of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* who devoted his mind to the mysterious arts, Stephen’s too is going to be an artist after renouncing the other possibilities. Daedalus’s erotic service to the queen Pasiphae and the reference to the ‘moocow’ is superbly linked by Joyce as the novel later shows Stephen Dedalus’s intricate relationships with several women. However, though the novel begins with the invocation to the myth, Joyce as an artist quickly moves into the reality. Joyce writes, “He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt” (5). The reference to Betty Byrne, a grocer of the town where Joyce lived in his childhood, superbly shows the novelist’s mingling of the myth and reality with the autobiographical note. However, with this

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intermingling of art and life, an artist is going to emerge. In lucid and straightforward prosaic tone, Joyce has beautifully conveyed the whole theme of the novel at the very beginning. With the use of colloquialisms, simplistic grammatical structures, Joyce reflects the consciousness of Stephen from the perspective of the father.

Throughout the novel Stephen always felt insecure in his use of English. Seamus Deane in his *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce* (1990) writes:

The speaker of Irish-English in the world of increasingly Standard English finds it too difficult to conform to the imperial way. He takes as his script the advice: “when in Rome, do as the Greeks do.” There is a certain scandal in such behavior. It is a linguistic way of subverting a political conquest. (43)

In his conversation with the English Dean in the Physics Theatre of the University College Dublin, Stephen reflects on this linguistic difference. He says:

The language we are speaking is his before it is mine. 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. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (159)

The pronunciation of the above words, especially the vowels, consonants and the endings, in the mouth of the Dean and those to an Irishman, namely to Stephen, clearly hint that Stephen uses the Irish sounds for the English letters. It leads him to the painful recognition that English for him will always be an acquired speech. In the same conversation with the Dean, Stephen used the word ‘tundish’ to refer to “the funnel through which you pour the oil into your lamp” (158). Joyce has used the word no less than five times in the novel, and it is ironic that the dean, being an Englishman too, could not comprehend the word. Throughout the novel Joyce has shown the insufficiency of language and its limitations that strongly affect Stephen’s perception of the world around him. This is evident in Stephen’s musing on the word ‘suck’ and ‘belt’. He says, “suck was a queer word . . . But the sound was ugly” (8), and he concludes that the word signifies the noise made by “the hole in the basin” (9) of a sink. The onomatopoeic effect strongly affects Stephen’s perception here. Wells and the other boys’ bullying on Stephen over his use of the word ‘kissing’ to his mother reflect the novelist’s playful nature on the use of language.

Stephen always experiences the dilemma as a post-colonial denizen. Though he is sometimes a rebel against his Irishness, he could not forsake his Irish identity. Joyce’s experimentation with the English language is one of the means of subverting the language which was imposed upon him. Stephen is troubled by the imposed identity of the English language, but he does not feel completely

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connected to the Irish language either. Without accepting this imposed language wholeheartedly, he manipulates and distorts in some cases to his own end. The English language appears to his Irish identity as the Irish nationality and religion. To quote Stephen again, “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” (171). With the gradual development of Stephen’s character in the bildungsroman tradition, the language of the novel too develops and gradually changes. It began in the style of child-like simplicity and in the manner of narrating the fairy tale. But towards the end of the novel it reached at the complexity with Stephen himself as he was absorbed in his aesthetic theories. Like the author, English language was imposed upon Stephen. But he like Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* commandeers over the language, and finally turns this instrument of repression into one of the ways of subversion. The third person narration of the novel finally got merged into the first person narration through Joyce’s entries in his diaries. Joyce’s linguistic subversion is noticed extensively in the final pages of the book. The concluding part of the novel, more particularly the brief entries on the day of April 11: “Read what I wrote last night. Vague words for a vague emotion” (212), marks a complete reversal of the straightforward style of the opening of the novel.

With the use of the Irish myths, legends, folklores, language and culture as a whole, Joyce along with the pioneers like W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, Lady Gregory and a few others wanted to revive their Gaelic past (known as ‘Irish Literary Revival’). Sometimes Joyce was critical too about this revival. In the final chapter of the novel, Stephen had a discussion with his friend Davin about the Irish linguistic nationalism. When Stephen was asked as to why he dropped out of the Gaelic League’s Irish language class after the first day, he replies: “My ancestors threw off their language and took another . . . they allowed a handful of foreigners to subject them. Do you fancy I am going to pay in my own life and person debts they made? What for?” (170). Davin too rightly asserts, “Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow” (171).

To conclude, Stephen’s curiosity about the words at Clongowes, his manipulation of the several words in different situations, his ability to create and control his own universe with words are the clear indications of Joyce’s linguistic experimentations in the novel. Throughout the novel it is found that Joyce has effectively produced an Irish ambience through the simple and straightforward use of his language. Joyce’s linguistic experimentation in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is here at its best. Apart from this novel, in his later writings Joyce uses the typical Irish dialect to localize his characters into the very soil of Ireland. Like Stephen, the characters frequently felt proud in using and so to say utilizing some features of the Irish language through the medium of the language English. As a polyglot, Joyce exhibits his linguistic efficiency by forming the compound

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words from different languages. The hundred-lettered monstrous word used by Joyce at the opening of the novel *Finnegan's Wake* to describe 'thunder' by adjoining the sounds from the several languages like French, Japanese, Italian and Ancient Greek shows his experiment in language as a typical modernist and thereby heralding an age of study on the study of language.

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