



## The Convergence of Mythology and Consciousness in Joyce's *A Portrait*

**\*Dr. Sukanya Saha**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Vidhyasagar Women's College Chengalpattu

Kancheepuram Dist. Tamil Nadu

drgulnaz@icloud.com

---

### Abstract

James Joyce's portrayal of human psyche, combined with his mastery of language and mythology made him one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. Joyce is best known for his experimental use of language and his exploration of new literary techniques to reveal or represent the conscience in an altogether ground-breaking manner. His use of the literary technique called 'Stream of Consciousness' delineates the flow of expressions, thoughts, associations, hesitations, impulses as well as the rational thoughts of his characters.

Joyce's writing generates numerous studies owing to his ceaseless experimentation with language(s), mythological/ historical allusions or parallels, and most importantly his delineation of the pre speech level of the consciousness. He has been acknowledged as one of the most prominent literary figures of the twentieth century. It is truly said that in Joyce's fiction, the twentieth century passion for experimentation in literary form reached its climax.

The present article attempts to establish a connection between Joyce's stream of consciousness and use of mythological framework in the construction of the plot of his first novel, *A Portrait*. The paper highlights the thematic and structural strings drawn from Daedalus myth in writing *A Portrait* by Joyce. Joyce's other two novels, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* too blend mythology and stream of consciousness and emerge as pioneering works in the field of modern psychological fiction.

### Key Words:

James Joyce, *A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man*, Mythology, Stream of Consciousness, Theme, Technique

## Introduction

Joyce's First novel, *A Portrait*, is also his first experiment with the stream of consciousness technique which he developed further in his two successive novels, namely, *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*. His experiments with the stream of consciousness technique and his penchant for innovation in style has been the subject of perennial research till date. Joyce's inclination towards mythology is evident in his novels, as all his three novels draw strong parallels from mythology. Joyce's novels are essentially based upon mythology thematically as well as structurally. An attempt has been made to establish a connection between Joyce's first experiment with the stream of consciousness technique and the theme which has been inspired by mythological character of Daedalus. During each stage of this novel, Joyce's portrayal of his protagonist's consciousness and a reverberating plight of mythical Daedalus is an interesting read.

Before we commence, it should be made clear what do we mean by 'myth'. Myths and stories prevalent in a particular culture become the part of human consciousness. From Gods and Goddesses to various supernatural beings, myths deal with larger than life figures and the tales are passed down through literature or elders to generations.

A myth is a story that has significance to a culture (or species), a story that addresses fundamental and difficult questions that human beings ask: who and what am I, where did I come from, why am I here, how should I live, what is the right thing to do, what is the universe, how did it all begin? Myths are stories that are peopled by great men and women; by forces of good and evil; by animals, large and small; by trees, the sea and the wind; and by giants, gods and other supernatural beings.<sup>1</sup>

Mythical creatures and their deeds have always found fond readers over the centuries owing to their enchanting narratives. A host of authors, ancient and modern, have chosen mythology either as the base for their narrative or have retold the old tale in accordance with their individual talents or based upon the tastes of contemporary readers. Stories based upon mythology always enjoy a prime status amidst other fiction, as readers find in them a familiar tale from childhood given a novel twist, hence an interesting blend of knowledge and suspense is served to them. Modern literature is replete with the instances of fiction based upon Greek,

Indian and other mythologies around the world. Needless to say they have found readers across all ages around the globe and mythological fiction will never cease to enthrall its readers.

As stated earlier, Joyce was a pioneer in the field of psychological fiction and linguistic experimentation. His stream of consciousness (hereafter referred to as SOC) technique made him discover novel ways of delineating the levels of consciousness. SOC is “a literary style in which a character's thoughts, feelings, and reactions are depicted in a continuous flow uninterrupted by objective description or conventional dialogue.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, in order to capture the flow of consciousness within a framework of syntax and lexis, Joyce toyed with language in a very interesting manner previously unthought-of. Similarly he pondered over finding a base for his narratives which would provide an outline to them and hold his thoughts stream in place to become understandable. *A Portrait*, being his first experiment with SOC technique, does not intrigue the reader much and the traditional norms of fiction writing are much in place. His successive novels, namely, *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* involve much complexities in language and framework, as much as one wonders whether these can be considered fiction or not.

## Discussion

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is an autobiographical account of the childhood, adolescence and youth of Stephen Dedalus. Joyce deals with his heavily autobiographical protagonist from infancy and childhood to young manhood in five long chapters. Each chapter is reflective of Stephen's age and sensibility at some particular point of time in his development. As observed by the critics, many incidents in this novel are evident in the records of Joyce's personal life too, for instance, like Stephen; Joyce also had early experiences with prostitutes during his teenage years, struggled with questions of faith, had a religious mother and financially inept father, was the eldest of ten children and received education at Jesuit Schools. Like Stephen, Joyce also left Ireland in order to pursue the career of a poet and writer. This is the prime reason of Joyce choosing Dedalus myth for his framework here.

The novel can be studied from the points of view of Joyce's stream of consciousness technique, autobiographical touches to the narrative and the structural framework based upon the myth of Daedalus. All this has been intricately woven in the narrative of *A Portrait*. Joyce's choice of this myth is significant since he also was compelled to choose the creative path in order to break free from the pressing reality.

According to the myth (often referred to as 'Fall of Icarus'), Daedalus being architect, built a labyrinth on the request of King Minos. Later in the story, Daedalus and his son Icarus are both found to be confined in the same labyrinth, which was immensely complex, though it was made by Daedalus himself. Daedalus finds a way to escape and creates wings of wax and feathers so that he and his son could escape. Icarus soars too high and reached too near the sun, despite his father's warnings. As a result, his wings melt, and he fell into the sea and drowned. His more cautious father however flew to safety.

This novel gives a richly detailed description of both Stephen's outer and inner lives, while he passes through religious doubts, sexual awakening, family conflict and several other experiences that contribute to the formation of his character. The various phases of his growth, physical, moral and religious are vital in his discovery of himself as an artist. Ultimately he is determined to follow unswervingly the promptings of his own artistic conscience.

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is one of the earliest examples in English literature of a novel that makes use of the stream of consciousness technique. The language of this novel follows stream of consciousness pattern to some extent and portrays Stephen's infancy, school days and his thought process at different points of time as he grows in all aspects of his being - physical, emotional, social, spiritual and mental. As stated earlier, *A Portrait* takes its cue from the popular myth of "The Fall of Icarus" with regards to its theme and structure. Different sections of the novel are based upon the progress of Daedalus myth, hence the theme too heavily depends upon it.

Throughout the course of the novel, Stephen, as a child, adolescent or a young man, is caught in a labyrinth, just as his namesake Daedalus was and finally flies high with the wings of poetic art. The word, "maze" has been repeated in the following sentences from the text, as it conveys the degree of confusion Stephen experiences in his surroundings:

The schools are a maze of corridors; Dublin is a maze of streets. Stephen's mind itself is a convoluted maze filled with dead ends and circular reasoning (Hackett 203)<sup>2</sup>

Joyce's sentences depict the thoughts of young Stephen, which present him as a person who is unsure of his choices, deeds and situations. The reality deeply affects Stephen's flow of thoughts throughout. His thoughts process reveals the melancholic strain of his physical and mental being and his spirit suffers with the painful burden of reality as he endures the guilt of immoral sin. Stephen finds himself caught in the intricate web of adult life and for him only way left is to break free from all the worldly confines and fly high. This mirrors the plight Dedalus who is desperate to be free from the confines. As we observe Joyce's statements which portray Stephen's conscience, Stephen's seems a troubled psyche. His thoughts are uttered in the form of truncated sentences which are often non-conclusive:

Met her today point blank in Grafton Street. The crowd brought us together. We both stopped. She asked me why I never came, said she had heard all sorts of stories about me. This was only to gain time. Asked me, was I writing poems? About whom? I asked her. This confused her more and I felt sorry and mean. Turned off that valve at once and opened the spiritual-heroic refrigerating apparatus, invented and patented in all countries by Dante Alighieri. (AP, p. 256)

The pattern of the syntax is uniform in Stephen's thoughts, i.e. short and mainly consisting of verb phrases. Their purpose is the depiction of rapid flow of emotions or sensations. The self-questioning and foregrounded verbs in Stephen's sentences and clauses reveal the sense of urgency of articulation and a mind in constant conflict with personality.

Joyce names his protagonist as Daedalus which is significant considering how Stephen too is caught in a maze like his mythical counterpart. Stephen's thoughts reveal that he is torn between the pressing needs of reality and spiritual awakening:

Every part of his day, divided by what he regarded now as the duties of his station in life, circled about its own centre of spiritual energy. His life seemed to have drawn near to eternity; every thought, word and deed, every instance of consciousness could be made to revibrate radiantly in heaven... (AP p.151)

The repeated adverb "every" verbalises Stephen's desperation to seek refuge in spirituality. The path of spirituality seems radiant and also appears to provide him with some solace. The consonance in "revibrate" and "radiantly" explains or amplifies the intensity of emotions which he now possesses for spiritual energy. In Stephen's case, worldly obstacles are his family, country and religion which bound his physical and mental self not giving any room for his conscience to be free. *A Portrait* is a narrative of a constant mental struggle in search for identity, an identity which he realises at the end when he chooses the path of creativity:

April 16. Away! Away!

The spell of arms and voices: the white arms of roads, their promise of close embraces and the black arms of tall ships that stand against the moon, their tale of distant nations. They are held out to say: We are alone-come. And the voices say with them: We are your kinsmen. And the air is thick with their company as they call to me, their kinsman, masking ready to go, shaking the wings of their exultant and terrible youth.

...I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. 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.(AP, p.257)

Stephen ultimately finds respite in the pursuit of art. If he wishes to fly away, his wings are poetry. He will become a creative artist. The novel concludes with a series of diary entries which give us a peep into the working and reworking over his final decision to fly 'Away'. Significantly, he realises what his heart calls for: "...*I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels.*" It calls for freedom from social constraints of family and friends. He wishes to scale new highs and long distances which seem welcoming to him. He distrusts the boundaries imposed by nationality, language and religion and tries to free himself from this complex web. Here, Stephen's language becomes metaphorical as meaning is implied rather overtly stated. He refuses to serve in what he does not believe, i.e., home, country and church and decides to express himself freely and use the weapons of "silence, exile and cunning".

Stephen's past shapes his personality and conscience. From the very beginning he wishes to break away from all kinds of bounds like Daedalus. As a child when he wins the social acceptance, he reacts as: "They made a cradle of their locked hands and hoisted him up among them and carried him along till he struggled to get free".

### Conclusion

The narrative of *A Portrait* is firmly based upon the pattern of attempted flights and falls or failures. The stream of Stephen's thoughts correspond various stages of the development of his being as he faces difficult situations to cope with. His confusion and restlessness draws parallels with his mythical counterpart who undergoes similar agonising experiences before finding a way of escape from his existence in labyrinth. Novel ends with Stephen most ambitious flight: "*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.*" Stephen is supposedly caught in an environment which is a complex labyrinth and constrains a free spirit: "He wandered up and down the dark slimy streets peering into the gloom of lanes and doorways, listening eagerly for any sound. He moaned to himself like some baffled prowling beast." (Joyce 103). Stephen's ultimate rebellion is a classic example of a young person's struggle against the conformity demanded of him by society (Grose 242)<sup>3</sup>.

### Citations

#### Primary source:

Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: Jonathan Cape.

#### Secondary Resources:

1. "Mythology" <http://www.davidkabraham.com/OldWeb/Beliefs/Education/mythology.htm>, 3 March, 2016
2. [https://www.google.co.in/?gfe\\_rd=cr&ei=B01WV5veN\\_P98weV\\_bnwDg#q=stream+of+conscience](https://www.google.co.in/?gfe_rd=cr&ei=B01WV5veN_P98weV_bnwDg#q=stream+of+conscience) 6 June 2016

3. *“James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Themes”*  
<http://schoolworkhelper.net/james-joyces-a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-man-themes/>, 3  
*March, 2016*