

Symbolism in "a portrait of the artist as a young man"



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The stream-of-consciousness novel is a twentieth-century innovation, which aims to depict the totality of experience through the human consciousness. This necessarily means a retreat from the direct portrayal of social interactions, and a reduction of the outside world to a mere object of the subjective awareness of the hero. Unlike the narration of objective circumstances, this individual awareness is shapeless and un-dramatic, and is unable to contribute its own form and order to the novel. This form and order must necessarily be imposed by the novelist, because the impression of an unconnected stream of thoughts which this kind of novel aims to produce must have an artistic unity, which is an indispensable necessity in any artistic creation. The most important device used by the stream-of-consciousness novelist for attaining such unity is the employment of a system of symbols, which connects the diverse threads into an integrated whole, and imposes a thematic unity to the unconnected strands of thought. James Joyce's "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" is not the classic stream-of-consciousness novel, as is his "Ulysses" or "Finnegan's Wake", but the system of symbols on which it is developed is as important as in the other two novels. Without this system the hero's mind would be a very loose integrator, imposing only structural unity and not a strong thematic unity to the novel. A symbol may be defined as anything which signifies something else, and the significance of which becomes evident through mental association or tradition. Symbols have a range of references which relate to various levels of human society, from religion and culture to emotions and beliefs. M. H. Abrams in "A Glossary of Literary Terms" classifies symbols into "conventional" or "public", and "private" or "personal" 1. The former have developed in the consciousness of an entire culture through several

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generations, and include symbols like the Cross or the Rose or the Lamb. The latter are symbols whose associations and meanings are developed by an individual author, and must be understood in the context of his work alone. Symbols may also be made to stand alone, or be a part of an entire system of related symbols running through the text. Both these types are very common in stream-of-consciousness novels, and often such novels stand on such symbols systems. For example, Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" uses the symbols of the lighthouse throughout the novel as a unifying agent, while individual symbols are strewn intermittently all through. Likewise, Joyce's "Ulysses" uses the myth of Odysseus and his journey as the main symbol. In "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man", too, both types of symbols are used. The primary symbol is best seen in the most important epiphany in the novel - the one where Stephen looks on at a girl wading in the sea at the end of Chapter IV. Here, the chief impression that emerges from the description of this girl is that she is bird-like - "She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful sea-bird" 2. It is this bird-imagery that pervades the novel from the very beginning, and continues till the end, symbolizing whatever is beautiful and free in the consciousness of Stephen. Emma, the epitome of his ideal woman, is also like a bird - near the end of the novel, when he brings himself to feel sympathetically about her, and then he describes her as "simple", "strange" and "wilful". A bird can also evoke connections of aspiration, and a reaching out for the unattainable - as we see in that wonderful account of Stephen standing in the colonnade of the library, looking at the numerous birds wheeling together in the sky, preparing to make their way back to where they had come from. Their flight makes him think of his own plans of

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flying away over the seas, away from his country Ireland, to the continent, to concretize his ambition of becoming an artist. The bird-image is also linked to that other major symbolic figure in the novel, from whom Stephen Dedalus gets his name. The Dedalus of myth is also a winged figure – “ the hawk-like man whose name he bore soaring out of captivity on osier-woven wings” 3. The very name of Dedalus brings to his mind the image of a bird, and also that of art –“ Now, at the name of the fabulous artificer, he seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air..... a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being” 4. Stephen’s alienation from his family, especially his father, results in a search for a father-figure – a person who will be his mentor in his search for a vocation. This search comes to rest on the mythical Dedalus, whom he begins to consider his real father, the father of the spirit, not merely of blood. On the other end is his biological family, to whom he stood “ rather in the mystical kinship of fosterage, foster-child and foster-brother” 5. Dedalus, “ the great artificer”, flying away from captivity, becomes a symbol of his own release from the captivity of his nation, language, and family, and of a life devoted to art, to a total expression of the self. What is implied in this symbol, but not fully understood by Stephen himself, is that he becomes at that moment, Dedalus’s son Icarus, who, in the myth, attempted to fly, but not being as wise as his father, lost the feathers of his wings to the melting heat of the sun, and drowned in the sea. He had tried to fly too high, without following his father’s advice about following the middle path – and the question hangs in the balance about whether Stephen himself is not attempting to do the same. Is Stephen going

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to be the Dedalus he wishes to be, or is doomed to become another Icarus? One other image becomes as well-knit a symbol as that of the bird in the novel - the symbol of the Rose. We actually come across this image in the very first page of the book - " O, the wild rose blossoms / In the little green place"; which the infant Stephen corrupts in his lisp in the very next line - " O, the green wothe botheth" 6. The significance of this line is clarified much later, when Stephen is sitting in the classroom of Clongowes, looking at and musing about the rose-like badges pinned to the shirts of the boys around him. The red rose is the badge of the house of Lancaster, and the white is that of the house of York - the two houses in the school, named after the English Wars of the Roses (1453 - 85). Soon after, unable to do the sum given to the boys, he falls to thinking about all the different colours of roses besides the ones represented in the badges of his school - so many beautiful colours: pink, cream, lavender. However, in spite of the wonderful variety of colours of roses, one cannot find a green rose, like the one in the song he had sung as a child. Perhaps, he also thinks, one can have a green rose if he searches well enough in the world! The Green Rose, therefore, becomes a symbol of the unattainable, something not to be found in reality, but which can be realized in the imagination, through art. Also, being related to the Wars of the Roses, the green rose can also be linked to the political theme that runs so strongly in the novel. Green, being the colour of Parnell's Home Rule Party, can also refer to the much-wronged and also much-admired leader of the Irish people in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In fact, Parnell plays a very important background role in " A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man". Repeated references to certain ordinary things turn them into distinctive elements in the design, and have a symbolic effect.

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These repeated references are called “ motifs”. Good examples of such motifs are the colour symbolism used in the novel – colours such as maroon and green, or white and ivory. Maroon and green are used repeatedly in connection with Ireland politics, beginning with the colours of the brushes in Dante’s press, standing for Michael Davitt and Parnell, or the green and red combination of the Christmas decorations in Stephen’s house. The colour white, departing from its usual connotations of purity or virtue, represents coldness and lack of emotion, particularly in connection with priests and religion. Rather, the colour ivory or cream is represented as a warm colour, being related with emotion and vibrant life. Another important motif is that of the cow, another symbol of Ireland. The novel itself begins with “ Baby Tuckoo” (Stephen) meeting a cow while “ walking down along the road” 7, in the story that his father tells his little son – meeting it headlong, as it were, in a manner of confrontation. Confrontation with national ideals and nationalism is an important part of Stephen’s life as portrayed in the novel. The cow, or Ireland as succour, is also briefly hinted at in the beginning of the second chapter, when Stephen is shown to accompany his friend Aubrey Mills in the milk-cart, delivering milk from house to house. Often, they were taken in the milkcar to see the cows grazing in the fields of Carrickmines – a pleasant sight, which the boys enjoyed. However, when autumn came, the cows were kept in a filthy cowyard at Stradbrook, “ with its foul green puddles and clots of liquid dung and steaming brantroughs”, a sight which “ sickened” Stephen’s heart. His attitude to his country is paralleled with his attitude to the cows –“ The cattle which had seemed so beautiful in the country on sunny days revolted him and he could not even look at the milk they yielded” 8. Quite as significant is the repeated reference to heat and

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cold in the novel. Beginning with the wetting of the baby Stephen's bed in the very beginning of the novel, when he first feels warm and then cold, it continues throughout the first chapter in the uncomfortable coldness of the "square ditch" in which Wells pushed Stephen, leading to the heat of the fever which this incident resulted in. It finally culminates in the third chapter in the heat of Hell, and the fourth chapter in the coldness of priesthood which was offered to him. All these symbols and motifs act as the unifying agents in a novel which would otherwise have consisted as loose images and experiences in the consciousness of the hero. References : 1)M. H. Abrams : " A Glossary of Literary Terms" (Bangalore, Prism Books, 1993), p. 206. 2)James Joyce : " A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" (Penguin Books, 1992, London), p. 185. 3)Ibid, p. 244. 4)Ibid, p. 183. 5)Ibid, p. 105. 6)Ibid, p. 3. 7)Ibid. 8)Ibid, p. 66.