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Research Question: Analysis of Stephen Dedalus's search for an identity in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce.

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Abstract

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, by James Joyce, is considered to be one of the principal examples of the genre Künstlerroman (the novel of the artist). This study analyzes the search of the protagonist Stephen Dedalus for an identity, which encompasses a time period from his infancy to his late adolescence.

Brought up by a pious Catholic governess, Stephen Dedalus is exposed to the term 'morality' at a very young age. Due to Ireland's turbulent political atmosphere, in which the church plays an important role, young Stephen becomes aware of the conflict between the secular front and the Irish Church. As he gradually gets disinterested in Irish politics as a result of its aggressive complexity and the death of a national hero, he begins to develop a sense of 'difference', in relation to his realisation of his odd surname. Later on, the economic decline of the Dedalus family and his father's reckless attitude prompt him to isolate himself from the family firstly through sex, and then through religious uprightness. However, when he finally realises that his surname alludes to a Greek myth of liberation, he spurns the idea of joining a religious order and officially recognises his inherent qualities that fit in with the definition of an artist.

(213 words)

Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis.
(The times change and we are changed with them.)
(Joyce, 106)

I. Introduction

Most acclaimed for his mastery of words in *Ulysses* and *Dubliners*, James Joyce has created a world of silent paralytic wonders, accessible to very few people that have rigorously persisted in examining these masterpieces layer by layer. A starting point, for those who would like to have a better understanding of Joyce and his world –or even a glimpse at how the conscience of Joyce functions-, would often be reading Joyce's semi-autobiographical novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

The traces of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*-in-the-make date back to an essay Joyce wrote for the Irish periodical *Dana* in 1904. This essay, which Joyce had named "A Portrait of the Artist" following his brother Stanislaus's suggestion, is believed to have provided the author with the essential questions and notions to write *A Portrait.* Like the rest of autobiographical works in literature, *A Portrait* would require a retrospective journey with the close inspection of Joyce's intellectual evolution and the circumstances in which his identity was shaped. Thus, it is no wonder that he chose to discuss the properties of identity in A Portrait of the Artist as well: "For Joyce, this ironic autobiographical essay was an early attempt to synthesize his ideas about aesthetics, Ireland, religion, and the role of the artist. It was also his way of engaging with an age-old philosophical question: Is our identity fixed or in flux?" (Bulson 48)

Acknowledged along with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Stendhal's *Vie d'Henri*, and Butler's *Way of All Flesh*, *A Portrait* is considered as an epitome of the *Künstlerroman*, a novel of the artist: Its main subject of interest is the protagonist's formation of character and how he stands up against the corrupt contemporary social and political institutions in his quest for freedom and beauty. In this context, *A Portrait* provides the reader with ample resources on influences

shaping the identity of the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, such as a Jesuit education and fin-de-siècle Irish politics. While reading *A Portrait*, it is also possible for readers to keep track of Stephen's inherent qualities that manifest themselves during the novel, covering a period from his infancy to his expatriation in his early twenties.

The scope of this study, therefore, will be the analysis of Stephen Dedalus's search for an identity and the extent to which his character has changed during the process. Indeed, Joyce's keen observations and wise use of words will lead the way to the understanding of why Joyce and Dedalus rejected the mediocre lifestyle the society had to offer: "His youth in Dublin, subject to the limitations of poor eyesight, the perceptions of acute hearing, the exaggerations of immaturity, the natural bonds of emotion and unnatural tensions of resistance furnished his only matter. He forgot nothing and forgave nothing." (Levin 25)

II. Childhood Heroes and Villains: Introduction to Morality and Betrayal

Childhood perceptions of the surroundings, family and events usually lay the initial foundations of the future personality of a human being. Undoubtedly, a child often comes face to face with some conflicts and contradictions early in his/her life, and consequently, tries to draw his/her own conclusions from these. This happening marks the first instances of self-identification as the child inadvertently aligns himself/herself with a specific idea or a person: The case of Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of *A Portrait,* is no exception.

Stephen's first exposition to the term "morality" can be attributed to his pious Catholic governess Mrs. Riordan, or as Stephen prefers to call her "Dante". Although, "Dante" is possibly a mispronounced version of "Auntie", this appellation immediately evokes the image of Dante Alighieri whose masterpiece *La Divina Commedia* explores a strict Catholic morale in depth. In relation to her namesake, Dante is a woman of fervent religious convictions: When Stephen, as a child, announces his naïve intention of marrying the Protestant girl next door, Dante makes him apologise by terrorising him and by indicating that if he does not apologise "eagles will come and pull out his eyes" (Joyce, 8). In addition to that, Dante also demonstrates the political affiliation which would be expected from a devout Catholic woman during the last decades of 19th century. She fully supports the sense of Irish nationalism, promoted through rallies of the Catholic Church against the English dominance and Irish Unionists, who happened to be mostly Protestants:

> Dante had two brushes in her press. The brush with the maroon velvet back was for Michael Davitt and the brush with the velvet back was for Parnell. (Joyce 7)

Under the influence of Dante, Stephen idolizes these two politicians who are the spearheads of the Irish Revolution. However, when Parnell's secret love affair with the wife of MP

William O'Shea is revealed, Dante ostracizes him like the greater portion of the Catholic community, leaving Stephen puzzled and with ambivalent emotions: "He wondered which was right, to be for the green or the maroon, because Dante had ripped the green velvet back of the brush that was for Parnell one day and had told him that Parnell was a bad man. (...) That was called politics." (Joyce, 18)

This dichotomy he experiences is further reinforced by the conflict he witnesses during a Christmas dinner: This constitutes a significant part of the formation of Stephen Dedalus's political opinions since he becomes exposed to a strong secular Parnellite ideal through the words of his father Simon Dedalus and his friend John Casey. At the dinner table, Mr Dedalus encourages Mr Casey to tell an anecdote that fulminates against the Catholic Church:

> We go to the House of God, Mr Casey said, in all humility to pray to our Maker and not to hear election addresses. (Joyce, 35)

Needless to say, phrases like this flare up Dante and she responds to the accusations by claiming that it is "a question of public morality" and that a priest's main goal should be telling his flock "what is right and what is wrong" (Joyce, 35). As the focus of the argument is later shifted to the betrayal of Parnell by the Catholic Church and his recent demise, Stephen becomes acquainted with the concept of betrayal for the first time. While Dante puts "God and religion before the world" (Joyce, 43) and calls Parnell "*a traitor to his country*" and "*an adulterer*" (Joyce, 43), Mr Casey calls him "*my dead king*" (Joyce, 44) and cries:

> Let him remember too, (...) the language with which the priests and the priests' pawns broke Parnell's heart and hounded him into his grave. (...) No God for Ireland! (...) We have had too much God in Ireland. Away with God!" (Joyce, 38-44)

Since the intensity of the arguments and the hostility of the atmosphere are beyond Stephen's comprehension, his initial response is that of a puzzled and intimidated child: He is consternated at witnessing the passionate warfare of the two major Irish ideals of religion and politics without any competence to understand the conflict, intervene and restore the feeling of family togetherness to the Christmas dinner.

Actually, this lack of understanding is central to the novel because it can be interpreted on two levels that establish a causative context to the changes of Stephen's identity: "Words belong to the shaping of character, to the articulation of morality and to the strengthening of courage (...). Not hearing things, not understanding someone (...) –this, too, constitutes part of our experience of language." (Pierce, "Reading Joyce", 177) On one level, this fact sensitises him to any kind of 'weakness' and encourages him to prioritise 'being strong and having a solid character' over other aspirations. It also engenders an unyielding sense of frustration that appears whenever he feels uncomfortable with his present state of mind or his surroundings and whenever he cannot rationalise some behaviour –like betrayal or unjust treatment- of other people. Hence, it's likely that Joyce prefers to manifest this kind of frustration through Stephen's rebellions and his obsession with the extremes, sex and religion. On another level, him feeling extremely perturbed by his first serious encounter with religion and politics foreshadows his firm indifferent attitude to these two concepts in the last chapter: As an adult, Stephen still perceives them as a whole bunch of harsh words and bitter exchanges that ruin the taste of the Christmas turkey.

Moreover, the betrayal of Parnell provides a historical background to another critical event of Stephen's childhood and his early education at a renowned Jesuit college, Clongowes: During a visit of the Prefect of Studies to the Class of Elements, even though Stephen tells Father Dolan that he cannot write like the rest of his classmates, as he broke his glasses in the cinder

path, he is accused of being "a lazy little schemer" (Joyce, 56) and 'pandied' gravely with a cane. Edmund L. Epstein connects the historical context with this seemingly insignificant event of school violence in his book 'The Ordeal of Stephen Dedalus' with the following words:

> It might be said that little Stephen was pandied as a result of a national historical event. The Clongowes Jesuits, responding to the rage of Parnellites with guilt and fear, suddenly introduce a spirit of terrorism into their dealings with the insurrectionary populace under their control. (Epstein, 37)

Father Dolan's mean treatment prompts him to question the morality of religious 'role models' and the validity of pain and injustice inflicted in the name of order: "The prefect of studies was a priest but that was cruel and unfair." (Joyce, 59) Later on, his frustration with this case of injustice, along with the animated cheers of his friends bestows him with the sufficient amount of courage to complain to the rector about this matter. Therefore, it can be inferred that Stephen's prolonged vexation with Father Dolan's conduct ("(...) he suffered time after time in memory the same humiliation until he began to wonder whether (...) there was something in his face which made him look like a schemer." (Joyce, 60)) symbolically compels him to stage his own rebellion to recover his marred ideal of fairness, against those who deserted Parnell.

This symbolism is further fortified with the apparitions of the wounded ghost of a noble rebel, Hamilton Rowan, in Clongowes (Joyce, 63) and when the rector, Father Conmee, promises to speak with Father Dolan about Stephen's excuse, which is an evident triumph for Stephen. Likewise, it is noteworthy that his fellow classmates inquire about the nature of his triumph with repeated cries of "Tell us! Tell us!" (Joyce, 66) because this reiteration is suggestive of

the word *telos* and *teleion*, the Greek words for 'end' and 'perfected being' that point out to the actualization of Stephen's potential in society to serve his *telos*. Thus, in Chapter I, Stephen seems to have developed an inclination for independent thinking (that suits an artist) and a strong sense of individuality by courageously facing the fall of his childhood heroes and thwarting his villains : "Stephen certainly has attained his end: he has triumphed over the cold, white father's authoritarian rule, (...) and over his own youth and ignorance." (Epstein, 51)

III. The Legacy of the Name 'Dedalus': Difference and Solitude

Although, in the eyes of an average reader, the title of the novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* may be only relevant to Stephen's artistic endeavours in the last chapter such as writing villanelles; this viewpoint neglects the genre of the novel, *Künstlerroman*, and thus, the process of cultivating characteristics like the sense of 'difference' and the consequent solitude, unique to an artist. In Stephen's case, the development of his sense of 'difference' is of exceptional value to the installation of his immutable solitude because it "forbids him to mingle with his fellows, or let his name or his personality be disregarded or insulted.". (Epstein, 43)

In *A Portrait*, Stephen's family name is a constant topic of discussion all through his childhood at Clongowes and this enables him to acutely distinguish himself from others at an early age. The first comment on Dedalus comes from a bully, Nasty Roche: "What kind of a name is that?" (Joyce, 9) Subsequently, when Stephen gets to stay in the hospital wing due to an ailment, he hears Athy, a student at third grade, saying that "[he had] a queer name." (Joyce, 28) Before pandying Stephen, Father Dolan also asks for the name Dedalus twice as if he is trying to substantiate his lack of respect for him. All of these facts add up to a single reaction in Stephen's mind; he contemptuously advances the formation of his detached identity and sense of 'difference' by alienating himself from the crowds and aligning himself with 'the great men in history': "The great men in history had names like that and nobody made fun of them" (Joyce, 62).

As a result, he begins to live in an aloof world where he rigorously holds onto his imagination, musings, values and beauty. For instance, while his classmates engross themselves with a competition of finding answers to complicated sums, he contemplates on

the names of the competing groups. With regards to white and red roses that stand for two English dynasties, Lancaster and York, he wonders whether or not having green roses -that possibly connote the idealised Irish Free State in his subconscious- was possible (Joyce, 13). Furthermore, when Heron demands him to surrender his fascination with the beauty of Byron's verses, as Byron was "a heretic and immoral", he fervently resists this idea and even the drub of his fellows: Hence, "Stephen is seen more courageous now, he can fiercely defend himself, which shows that he has developed a kind of self confidence (...) shaping his identity." (Turğut, 56) Last but not least, his self-identification with the isolated protagonist of *The Count of Monte Cristo* in his games with Aubrey Mills and his accurate acting out of Edmond Dantès' refusal (to hamper his discipline for revenge) with the line "Madam, I never ear muscatel grapes." (Joyce, 71) are obviously signs of independence: "Stephen's 'sadly proud gesture of refusal' is an attempt to assert his freedom." (Epstein, 52)

Through his adolescence period, such an endearing amount of self-dependence and his delusional world always accompany Stephen; however, due to Mr Dedalus's fall from grace, and the constant moving of Dedalus family, the significance of his world will be overshadowed and replaced by his extreme loneliness and frustration.

> The noise of children at play annoyed him and their silly voices made him feel, even more keenly than he felt at Clongowes, that he was different from others. He did not want to play. (Joyce, 72)

IV. The Tears of a Fallen God

Just as Parnell represented "a public world that failed" for Joyce (Pierce, "Joyce's Ireland", 12), with the death of Parnell, Stephen is exposed to an unprecedented circumstance that abolishes his father's insuperable status as 'an almost sacrosanct being' in his eyes:

> The situation is heightened for Stephen when, (...) he notices his father's tears. For the second time that day, he sees his father not as a god but merely human and subject, like himself. (Pierce, "Joyce's Ireland", 17)

Together with the deteriorating balance of incomes and expenses of the Dedalus household, this factor will be an instigator for Stephen's rediscovery of his father as a human being, and his attempts at isolating himself from his family through sex and religion.

After a series of thoughts and occurrences, Mr Dedalus becomes the focal source of frustration for the young Dedalus. The first element in this chain is Stephen's realisation of his family's dwindling fortunes: "In a vague way, he understood his father was in trouble and that this was the reason he himself had not been sent back to Clongowes. (...) The ambition which he felt astir (...) sought no outlet." (Joyce 72) Besides, Mr Dedalus also mocks Stephen's victory over Father Dolan's pandying by imitating Father Conmee in a nasal tone which, in turn, figuratively endangers the integrity of Stephen's *telos* and character: "You better mind yourself Father Dolan, said I, or young Dedalus will send you up for twice nine." (Joyce, 82)

Nonetheless, with regards to Stephen's perception of his father, Simon Dedalus's real fall from grace takes place during a father-son trip to Cork to sell some of the Dedalus property. During this trip, Mr Dedalus introduces his son to his friends with the derogatory phrase of "a Dublin jackleen" and in between several pints of beer, incessantly occupies Stephen's mind

with the stories of his past, while flirting with barmaids: “One humiliation had succeeded another – the false smiles of the market sellers, the curvetings and oglings of the barmaid with whom his father flirted (...).” (Joyce, 106) When the focus of this humiliation shifts to Stephen with Mr Dedalus’s “I am a better man than [Stephen] is any day of the week.” (Joyce, 108), Stephen can no longer tolerate his frustration, and he breaks the bonds between him and his past fraught with the presence of his father: “His childhood was dead or lost and with it his soul capable of simple joys (...).” (Joyce, 108) Therefore, at the end of the novel, the last words of Mr Dedalus (“Is your lazy bitch of a brother gone out yet?” (Joyce, 198), which are shouted down from the stairs, signify how he has faded from action.

In addition, during their stay in Cork, Mr Dedalus ironically feels the necessity to continuously remind Stephen of his inexperience and naïveté as an adolescent whom he has “(…) to warn and ward (…) from sexual development” (Epstein, 67) even with his songs. Yet, his oppressive advice induces an antagonistic reaction from Stephen who feels nothing but “a cold and cruel and loveless lust” (Joyce, 108) stirring within him. To create an output of lust created by frustration, a rebellion against his father, he starts to indulge himself in sexual activities with prostitutes: “His blood was in revolt. (...) He wanted to sin with another of his kind, to force another being to sin with him and to exult with her in sin.” (Joyce, 113)

Still, given his leadership position of a society devoted to Virgin Mary and his excellent record as a student at the Jesuit Belvedere College, he will not be able to sustain the discrepancy between his day and night for a long time. When he hears the moving and highly detailed sermon of Father Arnall about the terrible prospects of Hell, he, driven by self-blame, attempts to isolate himself from any earthly pleasure that relates to the five senses, let alone anyone:

> His eyes shunned any encounter with the eyes of women. (...) To mortify his hearing he (...) made no attempt to flee from noises which caused him painful nervous irritation (...) He never consciously changed his position in bed, sat in the most uncomfortable positions, suffered patiently each itch and pain (...). (Joyce, 171-172)

To sum up, it can be said that whether directly or indirectly caused by the fall of young Stephen's god, Mr Dedalus, and the contrasting desire to express his strength of character by any means, his attempts at isolation do cover up for some of his weaknesses, while making him more vulnerable to develop other weaknesses. Indeed, all of his radical decisions and acts point out to a staunch willingness to declare his independence as a robust entity and make amends for the wounds of his inherent frustration.

> -I have amended my life, have I not? [Stephen] asked himself. (Joyce, 175)

V. Becoming Daedalus: Freedom

In Chapter IV, the director presents Stephen with the opportunity of becoming a priest. At first, he finds this option very appealing since it would provide him with an unlimited amount of isolation: "He longed for the minor sacred offices, to be vested with the tunicle of subdeacon at high mass, to stand aloof from the altar, forgotten by the people" (Joyce, 180) However, when Stephen is taking a stroll by the sea, Greek words, once again, announce a crucial milestone for the development of his identity *as an artist*: As he hears his friends shouting his name in Greek ("Stephanos Dedalos"), he perceives the underlying significance of his name, as if it were a prophecy:

> "Was it a quaint device (…) a hawklike man flying sunward above the sea, a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve, (…) a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop (…) a new impalpable imperishable being?" (Joyce, 192)

How the surname "Dedalus" functioned to set up a sense of 'difference' and an early kind of self-awareness in Stephen's character was previously acknowledged in this essay. However, its uncanny resemblance to the appellation of the mythological figure "Daedalus" is the most fundamental aspect of his name which summarises his life and times: Daedalus is the name of a talented craftsman who constructs the Labyrinth in Crete with the orders of King Minos to imprison his wife's monstrous son, the Minotaur. In spite of his satisfaction with the complexity of this masterpiece, King Minos resolves to confine Daedalus and his son Icarus to a tower to prevent the knowledge of the Labyrinth from reaching the public. Therefore, by using feathers, wax and twine, he fashions a pair of wings for himself and his son… to pave their way to freedom.

Ultimately, he realises that becoming "the Reverend Stephen Dedalus, S.J." would threaten "to end for ever, in time and in eternity, his freedom" (Joyce, 184) to which he is inextricably linked. By alluding to the fall of Lucifer as an archangel and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden via frequent use of the word 'fall', he recites his own *non serviam* (Latin for "I will not serve") that spurns the idea of joining any religious order. Consequently, as he struggles free from what he calls as the "grave of boyhood" (which is replete with intricate political plots, zealous religious conventions and rebellions of frustration), like Daedelus, he moves to make plans for the future to "forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (Joyce, 288) with his mastery of words. Even though there exitst the possibility of melting like Icarus who flew too close to the sun, he mounts the cunning and skills of Daedelus the fabulous artificer, to liberate himself from the fetters of Ireland and his nation from servitude.

VI. Conclusion

Despite the trials and tribulations of Stephen Dedalus's search for an identity, some features of Stephen do resist against time and weariness, like his firm attachment to freedom, individuality and pride in his name. On the other hand, as Stephen gradually becomes cognizant of his *telos*, he transcends the habit of acting according to the conventions of others, which is the original antecedent of his frustration. This striking change is apparent in the following two quotations, one of which is the representation of Stephen as a child through the juvenile but accurate words of naughty Fleming and the other which belongs to a mature Dedalus, fully aware of his capabilities:

"Stephen Dedalus is my name,
Ireland is my nation.
Clongowes is my dwelling place
And heaven my expectation." (Joyce, 17)

"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 and religion. I shall try to fly by those nets." (Joyce, 231)

All in all, it can be said that Joyce does not offer a hackneyed answer to the question whether identity is fixed or in flux. He precisely displays how the perception and viewpoints of an individual are bound to change with time, despite being constantly influenced by the legacy of words and the past. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* Joyce chooses to unwind his imagination, revolving around the uncompromising bond between himself, Stephen Dedalus and freedom, to 'forge', as Pierce suggests, "a novel of liberation" and "a discourse on freedom". (Pierce, "Reading Joyce", 159)

The Sea-impris'ned Daedalus*, meane-while,*
Weary of Creet*, and of his long exile;*
Toucht with his countries loue, and place of birth;
Thus said: Though Minos *bar both sea and earth;*
Yet heauen is free. That course attempt I dare:
Held he the world, he could not hold the ayre.
This said; to arts unknown he bends his wits,
And alters nature.
(Ovidius, 1632, Book 8)

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