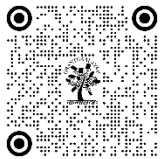


A LACANIAN EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY, NEUROSIS, AND THE ARTIST IN JAMES JOYCE'S A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, focusing on identity development, neurosis, and the artist's connection with society. Using Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, the researcher investigates Stephen Dedalus as a subject navigating the complex dynamics of selfhood, desire, and social alienation. This paper explores Stephen's changing identity, shattered sense of self, and internal conflict between societal standards and the desire for artistic independence. The paper also talks about Stephen's rejection of the Symbolic Order and his eventual acceptance of the artist's function as a means of addressing the Lacanian Real, a domain beyond language and societal restrictions. Through this Lacanian lens, Joyce's novel emerges as a profound narrative about the challenges of self-realization, the destructive power of desire, and the alienating effects of societal expectations on the artist.

Keywords: Identity, Selfhood, Desire, Alienation, The Symbolic, The Imaginary, The Real

1. INTRODUCTION

James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) is regarded as one of the most important works of modernist literature, offering a ground-breaking examination of the intricacies of identity, artistic expression, and intellectual revolt. This semi-autobiographical novel follows the psychological and emotional development of Stephen Dedalus, a young Irishman dealing with the opposing influences of religion, family, and national identity. Stephen's journey from childhood to early adulthood is a sequence of transformative experiences that serve as a reflection on consciousness evolution and the building of an artist's sensibility. Joyce's original narrative tactics, particularly his use of stream of consciousness, language experimentation, and fractured temporal structure, mark a dramatic break from standard narrative forms, establishing the novel as a classic example of modernist aesthetics.

A Portrait is around Stephen's search for self-definition and rejection of societal norms. His struggle for artistic individuality is both a personal and broader indictment of the authoritarian church and governmental institutions that dominated early twentieth-century Ireland. Joyce's novel, with its exploration of the inner workings of the individual's mind and the tension between personal freedom and collective expectations, becomes an essential text for

understanding the modernist movement's preoccupation with the fragmented self, alienation, and the search for meaning in an increasingly disorienting world.

This research paper will make a humble attempt to interpret Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* through a Lacanian lens.

2. LACANIAN REALMS

A through study of Freud and Lacan's theory of infant development suggests that a child's bond with his mother is disrupted when he distinguishes himself from others, leading to a shift from undifferentiated needs to desires shaped by cultural expectations. This transition fosters identity and cultural entry, highlighting a deep longing for recognition and love. This stage introduces the ego ideal and imaginary identifications. Lacan's developmental process is categorized into three mental disposition orders: Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. The Imaginary order creates unity and coherence, while the Symbolic order introduces children to cultural norms and rules. The Real dimension represents pure being beyond representation. The Imaginary order is a pre-oedipal phase. Habib states:

The imaginary phase is one of unity (between the child and its), as well as of immediate possession (of mother and objects), a condition of reassuring of plenitude, a world consisting wholly of images (hence "imaginary") that is not fragmented or mediated by difference, by categories, in a word, by language and signs (Habib 2008:91).

During this critical period, the child's acquisition of language marks its initiation into the symbolic order — a system of signification that structures human experience. Lacan's psychoanalytic theory posits that the child's separation from his mother in the imaginary order, a sense of loss, forms the foundation of his identity. The symbolic order, governed by language and societal norms, introduces the child to the realm of desire, reflecting the perpetual striving of lack. This interplay between language and desire shapes human existence, defining the human condition.

3. THE SYMBOLIC

Tyson very rightly points out that "in entering the Symbolic Order — the world of language — we're entering a world of loss and lack" (Tyson 2006:30). It is not therefore surprising that according to Lacan the Symbolic Order marks the replacement of the mother with the Name-of-the-Father. For it is through language that we are socially programmed, that we learn the rules and prohibitions of our society, and those rules and prohibitions were and still are authored by the Father, that is, by men in authority past and present" (Tyson 2006:31). Tyson adds further:

Our desires, beliefs, biases, and so forth are constructed for us as a result of our immersion in the Symbolic Order, especially as that immersion is carried out by our parents and influenced by their own responses to the Symbolic Order. This is what Lacan means by his claim that "desire is always the desire of the other" (See, *Seminar Bk. XI: 235*).

Lacan's theory suggests that human desire is influenced by societal ideologies in the Symbolic Order, which creates subjectivity and identity. This order, influenced by external forces, drives the unconscious and perpetuates desire. Language, central to the Symbolic Order, is necessary to address the absence of desired objects and form identity. Lacan critiques psychoanalytic practices that reduce analysis to Imaginary identifications, advocating for the transformative power of the Symbolic. He also challenges Saussure's linguistic model, arguing that the relationship between signifiers and signifieds is fluid and unstable.

4. THE REAL

In *Seminar XI*, Lacan defines the Real as "the impossible" — it cannot be imagined, represented, or fully integrated into the Symbolic. It is beyond or above language. Its unattainability underscores its fundamental nature as the irreducible and ungraspable aspect of existence, perpetually resisting human attempts to render it comprehensible or accessible.

For Jacques Lacan, the 'Real' is one of the three fundamental orders, alongside the 'Imaginary' and the 'Symbolic.' It resists symbolization and lies beyond the ideologies that shape understanding, emphasizing its radical otherness. Central to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Real often manifests as trauma, confronting subjects with experiences irreconcilable within the Symbolic framework. Though omnipresent and foundational to existence, the Real remains elusive, existing in constant tension with the Symbolic and the Imaginary. According to Tyson:

One way to think of the Real is as that which is beyond all meaning — making systems that which lie outside the world created by the ideologies society uses to explain existence (Tyson 2006:32).

The Lacanian 'Real' represents the uninterpretable dimension of existence, unmediated by the meaning-making systems of language, religion, or ideology. It is the stark realization that ideologies are not timeless truths but mere constructs, concealing a purposeless and chaotic existence. This raw, unfiltered experience of existence, often fleeting and overwhelming, reveals the traumatic nature of the Real, which remains beyond the full comprehension of any individual. According to him, it gives us only the realization that the reality, hidden beneath the ideologies society has created, is beyond our capacity to control:

The trauma of the Real gives us only the realization that the reality hidden beneath the ideologies society has created is a reality beyond our capacity to know and explain and therefore certainly beyond our capacity to control (Tyson 2006:32).

For Lacan, the Real is beyond the scope of signification, existing outside the Symbolic and the Imaginary. It is the absence of meaning, a signifier of its own lack, and is not subject to the opposition of presence / absence that defines the Symbolic. The Real is always in its place, unchanging, while the Symbolic allows for the possibility of absence. Lacan's theory of the Mirror Stage and the Imaginary illustrates the ego as a construct, built through misrecognition of external images, leading to a false sense of unity and identity. The ego is shaped by narcissistic identification with external objects, while the real self remains inaccessible. Lacan argues that meaning is always shifting within language, and human beings are perpetually aware of their inability to fully express or attain the Real, resulting in a persistent sense of lack and failure in communication.

According to Lois Tyson (Tyson 2006:33) the most reliable way to interpret a literary work through a Lacanian lens is to explore the ways in which the text might be structured by some of the Lacanian concepts and see what this exploration can reveal. Such an exploration shall focus on the following:

(i.) Do any characters, events, or episodes in the narrative seem to embody the Imaginary Order, in which case they would involve some kind of private and either fantasy or delusional world? (ii.) What parts of the text seem formed by the Symbolic Order? That is, where do we see ideology and social norms in control of characters' behaviour and narrative events? &

(iii.) Does any part of the text seem to operate as a representative of the Real, of that dimension of existence that remains so terrifyingly beyond our ability to comprehend it that our impulse is to flee it, to repress and deny it?

5. LACANIAN INTERPRETATION

Building on Lois Tyson's approach, one can analyze and interpret *A Portrait of an Artist as a Youngman* from a Lacanian perspective to uncover new meanings or explore modern dimensions that have previously remained unexplored or unnoticed in this text. It is pertinent to mention here that Lacanian theory of identity formation and neurotic behavior is key to literary analysis. The Mirror Stage, The Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real explain identity formation, with the Mirror Stage marking the infant's misrecognition of its image, leading to a fragmented ego. This process is reflected in characters struggling with their identities. Neurotic behavior arises from the tension between unconscious desires and language's limitations, often manifesting as a search for fulfillment. This research paper will attempt to answer the following research questions:

- How does Stephen Dedalus' journey through the Imaginary Order influence his development of selfhood and identity? Are there specific episodes in the novel where Stephen's fantasy or delusions about his place in the world take center stage?
- In what ways does the Symbolic Order shape Stephen's interactions with family, religion, and society? How do societal ideologies, including religious and political influences, dictate his behavior and his evolving sense of self?
- How does Stephen's rejection of societal norms and his struggle to create an independent artistic identity reflect Lacan's theory of the Mirror Stage and the formation of the ego? What moments in the text mark Stephen's confrontation with the limits of his ego and identity?

- How does Lacan's concept of the Real manifest in the novel, especially in Stephen's moments of internal conflict, alienation, and his artistic rebellion? Can the 'Real' be understood as the traumatic experiences or existential realizations Stephen faces throughout the narrative?
- What role does desire play in Stephen's quest for artistic independence? How do his desires interact with the expectations and demands of the Symbolic Order, particularly in relation to his family and the church?
- Does Stephen's eventual acceptance of his role as an artist suggest a reconciliation with the Lacanian Real, or is it a retreat into the Imaginary or Symbolic Orders? How does Joyce's portrayal of the artist reflect a negotiation between these orders?
- How does Lacanian theory provide new insights into Stephen's psychological development and his struggle with neurotic tendencies throughout the novel? Are there moments in the narrative where Stephen's neurosis can be analyzed as a reaction to his inability to integrate the Symbolic and the Real?
- What does Stephen's rejection of the Symbolic Order and his emphasis on individual artistic freedom say about the modernist preoccupation with fragmentation and the search for meaning? How does this relate to the Lacanian concept of 'lack' and the impossibility of achieving a complete self-identity?
- In what ways can Lacanian psychoanalysis offer a deeper understanding of Joyce's portrayal of self-realization, alienation, and artistic creation in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*?

6. THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY

Lacanian theory provides a profound framework for analyzing James Joyce's portrayal of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, particularly concerning the formation of identity. By engaging with Lacan's triadic model of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and Real, this paper explores Stephen's journey toward selfhood and artistic expression. His trajectory reveals the fragmented and dynamic nature of identity within the constraints of societal and cultural structures.

7. THE IMAGINARY: THE MIRROR STAGE AND EARLY IDENTITY

Stephen's early experiences align with Lacan's mirror stage, a critical point where the ego begins to form through identification with an idealized image. As a child, Stephen perceives himself through the eyes of authority figures — parents, teachers, and religious institutions. Stephen's identification with external authority figures is evident early in the novel. For example, his relationship with his parents and the priests at Clongowes shapes his sense of self. In chapter 1 of the novel, we come across this statement: "He was caught in the whirl of a scrimmage and fearful lest he should cry out, he closed his eyes tightly and clung to the long slender foot of the fellow in front of him." (Joyce 2003:12) This moment reflects Stephen's reliance on external figures to provide structure and protection, akin to how the mirror stage involves forming identity through external images.

Stephen's self-image is shaped by his interactions with authority figures like priests and teachers. These figures act as "mirrors," reflecting back an idealized version of what he is supposed to be. "The rector would be there in the hall, there would be the lights in the church and the dark wood of the benches and the smell of the altar flowers." (Joyce 2003:82) Here, Stephen imagines himself within the structured and idealized framework of religious life, though he increasingly feels the strain of living up to these expectations.

These external influences function as "mirrors," shaping his nascent sense of self. However, this stage is marked by alienation. The idealized image Stephen identifies with is external, leaving him dependent on validation from societal forces rather than fostering an intrinsic understanding of his identity. The gap between his perceived image and his internal sense of self creates a persistent tension, laying the groundwork for his later struggles.

8. LANGUAGE, AUTHORITY, AND CONSTRAINTS

As Stephen matures, he transitions into the Symbolic order, dominated by language, cultural codes, and authority structures. Central to this phase is the Name-of-the-Father which Lacan identifies as a symbolic anchor for identity.

Stephen's experience of the Symbolic is fragmented:

- 1) **Religion:** The Catholic Church enforces strict doctrines that limit Stephen's creative and sexual autonomy.
- 2) **Family:** Simon Dedalus, his father, fails to provide the stability or authority expected in the paternal role, leaving Stephen to navigate a space of uncertainty.
- 3) **Nation:** Irish nationalism, with its demands for loyalty to cultural traditions, becomes another restrictive force Stephen resists.

Stephen's rebellion against these structures represents his attempt to assert autonomy. He says in chapter 5: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church." (Joyce 2003: 246) Yet, in Lacanian terms, the Symbolic imposes inherent limitations, and Stephen's efforts to transcend its constraints underscore the impossibility of fully escaping its influence.

9. ART AS A SPACE OF JOUISSANCE

Stephen's ultimate aspiration to forge an artistic identity represents an encounter with the Real —the unrepresentable and ineffable dimension of existence. Art becomes a means of engaging with the Real, offering fleeting moments of *Jouissance*, a paradoxical blend of ecstasy and discomfort that disrupts the symbolic structures governing his life.

These lines of the novel are worth quoting in Chapter 4:

A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory, were bared almost to the hips where the white fringes of her drawers were like feathering of soft white down. Her slate-blue skirts were kilted boldly about her waist and dappled with the wet and the rustling fringe of the tide. Her bosom was as a bird's, soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some dark-plumaged dove. But her long fair hair was girlish: and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face. (Joyce 2003:171)

Key moments in the narrative — such as this Stephen's epiphany by the sea, where he envisions the girl wading — illustrate these encounters with the Real. These moments transcend language and provoke a profound awareness of self, suggesting art's potential to approach the sublime. However, the Real remains elusive, and Stephen's efforts to capture it through artistic creation reveal the inherent tension between desire and its unattainable object.

10. ART AND THE LACANIAN TRIAD

Stephen's artistic pursuits embody a negotiation between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and Real:

- **The Imaginary:** His vision of himself as a Daedalus - like figure provides the inspiration for his creative endeavours.
- **The Symbolic:** Language and cultural codes shape his art, even as he seeks to subvert their constraints.
- **The Real:** Art offers fleeting access to the sublime and ineffable, serving as a bridge to the Lacanian Real while remaining bound to the limitations of representation.

This interplay underscores the paradox of Stephen's identity as an artist: his creativity arises from his struggle with the very structures he seeks to transcend.

11. NEUROSIS AND DESIRE: THE LACANIAN SELF IN CONFLICT

Stephen's journey is emblematic of the divided Lacanian self, shaped by the interplay of desire and the structures of neurosis. Lacan posits that desire emerges from lack, a gap that defines the human condition. Stephen's longing for artistic freedom and identity arises from his dissatisfaction with the constraints of religion, family, and nation. In the novel, Joyce writes:

He was alone. He was unheeded, happy, and near to the wild heart of life. He was alone and young and willful and wild-hearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters and the sea harvest of shells and tangle and veiled grey sunlight. (Joyce 2003:170)

This passage captures Stephen's desire to escape and find fulfillment, an indication of the gap or lack that propels his journey.

Similarly, Stephen experiences a split between the self he is expected to be and the self he desires to become, reflecting the Lacanian divided self. The novel mentions about Stephen:

I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning. (Joyce 2003:246)

This statement highlights the conflict between external demands and Stephen's internal quest for self-expression, underscoring the tension between desire and the structures that shape neurosis.

Stephen's artistic and existential aspirations, like Lacan's *objet petit a* (the unattainable object of desire), remain perpetually elusive. Joyce remarks:

His heart trembled; his breath came faster and a wild spirit passed over his limbs as though he were soaring sunward. His soul was swooning into some new world, fantastic, dim, uncertain as under sea, traversed by cloudy shapes and beings. (Joyce 2003:170)

Here, Stephen's artistic and existential yearnings point to a desire for something beyond reach, an ideal that drives his creative pursuit but also underscores his alienation.

In fact, Stephen's rejection of societal and religious norms is fueled by his awareness of their failure to satisfy his deeper desires. "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." (Joyce 2003:276). This declaration reflects his embrace of life as a site of perpetual desire and creative struggle, shaped by the neurosis of living within societal structures. For Stephen, this lack manifests in his oscillation between:

- 1) **The Imaginary:** His idealized self-image as a mythic artist provides temporary coherence but is ultimately an illusion.
- 2) **The Symbolic:** The prohibitions of societal norms repress Stephen's desires, intensifying his sense of alienation.
- 3) **The Real:** His encounters with the Real provoke moments of artistic inspiration but also highlight the impossibility of fully escaping the constraints of the Symbolic.

In these dynamic positions Stephen, as a neurotic subject, is perpetually caught between his aspirations and the limitations imposed by his environment.

12. REJECTION OF THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

Stephen's rejection of societal norms, religion, and familial expectations reflects his desire to transcend the constraints of the Symbolic and forge an alternative identity. His declaration — "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe" (Joyce 2003:268) — marks a decisive break from the traditional structures that have shaped his identity.

This rebellion is not a wholesale rejection of the Symbolic but rather an attempt to reconfigure it. By positioning himself as a "fabulous artificer," Stephen seeks to construct a new symbolic system through art, one that critiques and reimagines the cultural norms he opposes.

13. CONCLUSION

James Joyce's portrayal of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* exemplifies the Lacanian process of identity formation. Through the lens of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, Stephen's journey emerges as a profound exploration of the fragmented and ever-evolving nature of selfhood.

His rebellion against societal norms reflects his desire to transcend imposed limitations, yet his identity remains tethered to the very structures he opposes. Art becomes a site of both rebellion and reconstruction, highlighting the endless tension between desire and its unattainable object. Stephen's quest for artistic expression, therefore, is not a resolution but an ongoing negotiation—an eloquent testament to the complexity and fluidity of human identity.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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