



## Stephen Dedalus as a Mythical Hero: Retelling Myths in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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### Abstract

This paper explores the reappearance of Stephen Dedalus as a mythical hero in modern form as reflected in James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* using the critical insights of myth critics. This exploration aims to reveal the universality of myth. It claims that in the novel the mythical hero, Daedalus, is revealed as Stephan Dedalus. Stephen's journey from childhood to maturity with epiphany and transformation resembles the journey of the mythical hero. His struggles to escape from the trap of religion, family, and nationality to be an artist are similar to the struggles of the mythical hero, Daedalus. More specifically, Stephan's psychological development towards a critical understanding of his own society echoes Daedalus' skill development of making wings of feathers and wax. Similarly, Stephen's motive for escaping to Paris reflects Daedalus's realization of the urgency of moving to Sicily. This study uses qualitative research design and method of textual analysis to locate the resurfacing of mythical ideas in modern context. Textual data taken from the primary text are analyzed using the theoretical insights of Joseph Campbell and other myth critics, in relation to the ideas of the universality of myth and the role of hero, to explore the issue.

**Keywords:** Mythical hero, mythology, rebellion, epiphany

### Introduction

The revelation of the mythical hero Daedalus as Stephan Dedalus in James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* marks the relevance of the mythical ideas in the modern world to understand and solve modern problems. This revelation asserts the transformative quality of myth and its significance in the modern fragmented world. As a structuring element, the myth of Daedalus in the novel links the central theme of individual rebellion, discovery, and transformation. This task of Joyce of borrowing a certain tale and character, which are timelessly valuable, from ancient mythology as well as molding them into a new narrative. It appeals to modern readers, not only heightens the popularity of mythology but also contributes to popularizing the novel.

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Joyce's presentation of the journey of Stephan Dedalus from childhood to maturity with the epiphany and transformation resembles the journey of Daedalus, a mythical hero. It is a journey not of attainment but of re-attainment, not just discovery but rediscovery. His journey outward into the world of action and events eventually requires journey inward. His psychological development toward a critical understanding of his society and realization of the need of escaping from there to move to Paris for being an artist is crucial. This journey takes the hero from known territory to unknown territory where he will be tested for his quest of excellency. It can be associated with Daedalus' development of skill and his realization of the need of moving to Sicily for the free practice of his skill. Stephan's transformative realization of the need to emerge from his Irish heritage and trap of religion and family as a person matches with Daedalus's struggle for coming out of the labyrinth and domination of king Minos and escaping from the trapped island of Crete to live freely in Sicily. Thus, by observing and graphically depicting what confines a man, how a man overcomes this confinement, and how a man lives once he is free, Joyce projects the motivations and the outlets for human expression. Like mythical Daedalus, Stephen assumes the role of a persecuted hero, who must overcome his personal weaknesses and the oppression of his environment to gain spiritual enlightenment.

### Literature Review

Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is one of the most analyzed fictional works of English language. Different critics have shed light on different aspects of the novel and have unfolded the creative potentiality of Joyce.

Waldon Thornton in his book *The Antimodernism of Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* analyses the novel as an antimodernist text. He states, "I set my view about Joyce's antimodernist aims in portrait within the context of certain deep running current of western thought, within the context of certain of Joyce's underlying ideas, and within the implication of the genre of the Bildungromance" (3). It is antimodernist in the sense that it deals with the running current of western thought. The hero of the novel revolves around the issues like traditional system of family, society, and state. In contrast to this idea, Ali Gunes portraits Stephen as a modernist character who seeks his identity in a new way, defying the traditional way of assigning identity. He states, "Stephen Dedalus is a modernist character: he seeks his own identity and meaning in the complexity of modern experience through art, rather than accepting the identity given to him by traditional society and culture" (37). Gunes highlights the presentation of Stephan as a modernist character as he rejects the identity given to him by the traditional society, but he attempts to create his own identity by his own effort. He takes art as a medium to defy the traditional boundaries and create his own identity and meaning.

Yutong Xie analyses the metaphoric representation of color in the novel. He points, "Black and green are found to be endowed with both positive and negative metaphorical meanings producing an ironic effect, which in some way, reveals Joyce's complicated feelings about his motherhood" (61). Xie explores how the symbolic presentation of colors reveals the author's complicated feelings about motherhood. Whether fictional or real, Joyce's dealing of motherhood is complex. This complexity is revealed through the use of colors' complexity. Dante Fresse depicts intertextuality in the novel. It is explained as, "an intimate study of the ways in which one reads, interprets and identifies with the symbolic language of texts. Joyce uses the adolescent subjectivity of Stephan Dedalus to demonstrate how one's strict adherence to, or excessive identification with textual meaning can stagnate development in human identity" (56). Through the character Stephan, Joyce shows the need of associating with intertextuality,

as a strong adherence to the textual meaning is an obstacle for a broader understanding. As Stephan moves away from his family and society to create his own identity and meaning of his life, a reader needs to move away from the boundary of the text and follow intertextuality for a broader meaning.

Robert S. P. Jones analyses the interrelationship among language, form, and emotion in the novel. He states, "The novel is the perfect vehicle to discuss the relationship between form, language and emotion as Joyce deliberately manipulates the emotional response of the reader through innovation in form and language, departing dramatically from previous literary traditions" (158). Jones observes the originality of the writer in his artistic linkage of the language, form, and emotion. In the novel, Joyce uses the stream of consciousness technique to capture the thoughts and feelings of Stephan as he tries to understand and appreciate his surroundings. For instance, Abu Jweid in "Autobiographical Peculiarities in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*" discusses the autobiographical elements embedded in the novel. He writes, "He portrays Stephan's growth to manhood through key episodes of his youth, Joyce tells Stephan's story in episodes, focusing on the most formative events or moments in Stephan's life" (5). Jweid's discussion reveals the autobiographical note embedded in the novel. Certain events associated with Stephan are the events of Joyce himself. However, Christopher James Wells discusses the issue of bisexuality as represented in the novel. He asserts:

In contrast with a lack of sustained and serious consideration towards bisexual as an adult identity at turn of the twentieth century; as well as in subsequent criticism, this piece reflects on how Joyce's interest in bisexuality as a representational device in *A Portrait* facilitates his critique of the disproportionate attention given to mono sexual identities in sexual science. (113)

For James, the presentation of bisexuality in the novel is Joyce's dissatisfaction towards the discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The above literatures suggest that the novel has been analyzed from multiple perspectives. However, these critics have paid less attention to the issue of the revelation of the mythical hero Daedalus in the modern form like Stephan Dedalus. Thus, this paper attempts to address this issue in the study.

### **Mythological Theory: A Theoretical Perspective**

Modern literature raises the issues of modern times but it repeatedly returns to mythical stories for imparting their ideas in effective ways due to the universality of myths. Myths are the mediums through which the cosmic inexhaustible energies come to human culture. They are the true sources of human energy, inspiration, and motivation. Joseph Campbell puts a great value of myth in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*:

Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever may appear out of the activities of the human body and mind. It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. (3)

Campbell immensely values myths as the guiding principles of human life and the earth. He assures that myths create a connection between human culture and cosmos. At certain occasions, they are regarded as fictional stories related to the origin of the natural world lacking truth but the deeper analysis of myths leads to different conclusions. They are the

stories having universal ingredients of human culture, bringing relief from the tedium of everyday labor and reminding listeners of their values, beliefs, and origins.

For Carl Gustav Jung, archetypes, which he defines as the original patterns on which subsequent things of the same type are modeled, are the most essential elements of mythologies. He forwards the concept of collective unconscious as a part of human psyche and the source of archetypes. The archetypal ideas are expressed in the symbolic form and mythical narratives are the places where these ideas get expressed. Jung argues, "There is no theology without sociology and no mythology without archetypes" (79). The human analysis of myths should not be limited to the ideas of falsity and truth. The falsity and truth of the narratives do not carry the seriousness of myths. They should be analyzed from broader perspectives. In this connection, Susan Mackey Kallis postulates, "Myths, then, neither true nor false, are portals to the unconscious realm of archetypes that are continually produced and reproduced in all cultures in all ages. Manifest in dreams and psychoanalysis as well as in art and films – whether universal or cultural-speak to human experience while providing guides for living the full human life" (21). Kallis takes myths as portals to the archetypes that appear and reappear in cultures of different ages. His broader definition of myth associates it with human experiences and takes it as guidance for human life.

Myths have oral origins, which are found everywhere. They are in different ritualistic performances, performing arts, and day-to-day activities as well. They are not just stories but they are also functional narratives. Bronislaw Malinowski adds, "Our myths are not only in our books but also in the marketplace. Myths thrive because they function" (146). Myths are functional as they cause significant changes in the readers. Those myths that invite changes in the readers rather than crystalizing status quo are taken superior to those that do not do. The myth of Dedalus is an example that inspires the readers to rebel against the unjust authority. For instance, the myth of Sisyphus appeals for endurance and patience.

Among different types of mythical stories, the myths of heroes are the most common. All societies have their heroes and expect heroism in one way or another during the time of crisis. The hero is the answer to their needs and prayers. Bill Buttler praises a hero as an embodiment of possibilities, love, and courage that the normal people lack, "The hero is archetypal, a paradigm who bears the possibilities of life, courage, love- the commonplace, the indefinable which define our human lives" (73). In the same way, Joseph L. Henderson rightly indicates the value of the mythical hero as the psychological one.

The Myths of the hero is the most common and the best known myths in the world. We find it in the classical mythology of Greece and Rome, in the Middle Ages, in the Far East, and among contemporary primitive tribes. It also appears in our dreams. It has an obvious dramatic appeal, and a less obvious, but nonetheless profound, psychological importance. (110)

Different mythical narrative structures are in practice. Among them, the myth of hero is the most used structure of all times. It encompasses different elements that dramatically appeal to our emotion and have the psychological value. As such, Joyce has used the same structure in his novel.

### ***Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Critical Analysis Transformative Life of Stephan***

The transformative journey of Stephan, the hero of the novel, begins at his home in his childhood. Although parents provide love and care to him, inside their love and care, lurks the hidden form of domination and imposition of their expectations to the

child. Their behaviors are contradictory. On the one hand, they want him to be faithful to religion and God, and on the other hand, they quarrel and argue in such a way that leads him to hatred: “Oh he’ll remember all this when he grows up, said Dante hotly- the language he heard against God and religion and priest in his own home” (Joyce 30). The gap between parents' saying and doing creates negative impact on him. Even at school, he finds strict rules and many religious practices monotonous. They all are against his true nature, who loves freedom of action and expression. All of them prepare him for his future rebellion.

At school, Stephen shows his rebellious nature by complaining to authority, when he is unjustly punished. He proves to be different from others at school by initiating a task of raising voice against unjust work of the teacher, which is raising voice against evils of a system. Remaining silent to injustice proves very painful to him and rebellion is the only way out. In relation to this situation, the narrative articulates, “It was wrong, it was unfair and cruel, and as he sat in the refectory he suffered much from the memory. . . .” (47). He never takes domination and restrictions in a positive way but his responsibilities to parents, school, friends, religion, and nation always stop him from embracing his true rebellious self. He actually lives for others rather than for himself, hiding his true self. As a model youth, “he does not smoke and does not go to bazaar” (67). He does not have faith in the traditional concept of model youth and never enjoys the public praise of being so. The rule bounded life is not the life that he desires: “He saw clearly in his futile isolation. He had not gone one step nearer the lives he had sought to approach” (85). There is a big gap between reality and appearance.

The multiple pressures from the side of family, friends, religion, and financial crisis of his family lead Stephen to commit sins such as sleeping with prostitutes, doing masturbation, and others. For a temporary escape from the problems, he surrenders to prostitution. Going for prostitution is also a form of rebellion against religion, family, and society that always tries to entrap him: “It was too much for him. He closed his eyes surrendering himself to her, body and mind, conscious of nothing in the world but the dark pressure of her softly parting lips” (88). As his escape is not in a positive line, it leads him to remorse and pain. He feels that by involving in the activities like that of prostitution, he did great sin: “His sin, which had covered him from the sight of God, had led him nearer to the refuge of sinners” (91). After his realization of committing sin and a wrong way of dealing with immediate problems, he goes for confession as he says, “He has confessed and God has pardoned him. His soul was made fair and holy once more, holy and happy” (126). After confession, he psychologically feels well and begins to live a religiously devoted life. It is also Stephen’s acceptance of his own sinfulness that sets him free. Guilt and fear of punishment keep him in a sterile, pale world of virtue where he is always hounded by the pressure to confess, admit, or apologize.

Once Stephen thinks of being a priest and living a fully devoted life, it is also not the life which matches his inner voice. Actually, he wants to live the life of a creative artist without the interference of anyone else. His love of art and beauty that matches with his mythical predecessor remains subdued inside him, until his encounter with a beautiful girl in the sea beach. The event proves to be an epiphany and brings a dramatic change in his life. He internally becomes ready for defying the outwardly imposed restrictions in his life that proves to be a true source of his rebellion. In relation to the issue of the true source of hero's rebellion, Marshall W. Fishwick rightly indicates, “The source of true heroic power is internal. When he tackles the outer world, the hero faces the inertia of his fellow, upsetting the social equilibrium brings conflict” (63). Hero's inner power is the source of his rebellion. In the case of Stephen until his inner motivation triggers him, he remains passive. But the moment the inner motivation

appears, nothing can stop him from the rebellion. This transformative journey of Stephan strongly resembles with mythical Dedalus.

***Stephen's Rebellion for Discovery and Rediscovery***

Artistic talent is the true genius that is in Stephan. As a genius artist, artistry is his true self and praising beauty spontaneously is his inner desire. As he encounters a beautiful girl in the sea beach in her full bloom and without the touch of any hesitation, his inner self is triggered. The moment he looks at her, he feels that the state of freedom and spontaneity that he longs for is incarnated in her:

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 sign up on the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and softened as ivory, were bared almost to the hips, where the white fringes of her drawers were like feathering of soft white down. (Joyce 147)

Her beauty and her freedom untouched by any restriction inspire Stephan to live a life that he desires for. She touches his inner voice and prepares him to break all the traps that have bounded him up to the time. As his care for family wishes, religious devotion and nationality are beyond his true self.

Stephen decides to go against all the imposed responsibilities for a desired course of life. This desire is his attempt to become an artist. He declares, "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call 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" (212). Disregarding the imposed course of life and revolting against all types of restrictions, he moves to the path of his choice. He was the first to embrace the path of revolt but he does it for living his life in his own way and for creating something that will benefit the whole humanity. For the same purpose, he decides to go away from his family as well as from his own nation. He expresses, "Welcome, O life I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forget in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (218). He defies all types of imposed authorities and welcomes the new type of life filled with freedom and autonomy.

At the end, Stephen decides that the culture in Ireland is too conservative and restrictive for his writing to flourish. Thus, he moves for his final action of leaving home and nation to find a more welcoming climate and supportive people. The novel ends with Stephen's declaration of his intention to leave Ireland. For Campbell "The hero therefore is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid normally human form" (18). It is the struggle of the artistic temperament to overcome the repression of family state and church. The rebellion is not easy; he passes through numerous transformations. His mind becomes a maze of circular reasoning similar to roaming in the mythical maze of Daedalus. His mind roams from here and there among family, nation, religion, sin, confession, priesthood, beauty, poetry, and philosophy, and at last decides to escape from the maze for living the life of his choice.

This struggle of Stephen engages him in a series of choices made by him who accepts some influences and demands and, at the same time, rejects the others. Sometimes he is humiliated or frustrated. But in the other occasions, he tastes success and victory. Still, he is always molded into a character who has to embark boldly and

idealistically on his adult life at the end of the novel. All these series of ups and downs ultimately lead him to rebellion. This rebellion opens up the path for the flourishing of his artistic ingenuity. His rebellion is observed in both cases that of Stephan Dedalus and mythical Daedalus.

In the novel, the role of myth is very crucial. It functions as a structuring element, linking the central theme of transformations, individual rebellion, journey of discovery and rediscovery. The Daedalus myth is not limited to namesake. In deeper analysis, it is revealed that myth is the guiding thread of the entire novel. According to the ancient Greek myth, the Athenian Daedalus was a famous architect, inventor, and artisan. His homeland was Athens. As he murdered his sister's son Perdix in fear that the boy's talent might surpass his own, he had to flee to Crete. He began to work at the court of King Minos and Queen Pasiphae, in the magnificent palace of Knossos. There he constructed a wooden bull for the queen to satisfy her amorous longings for a beautiful white bull and by which she became pregnant. She gives birth to Minotaur, half man half bull. When the Minotaur was born, Daedalus built the Labyrinth to contain the monster. Later, Minos shut Daedalus and his son Icarus in the Labyrinth. To escape, Daedalus built wings for himself and Icarus. They successfully flew from Crete, but Icarus' wings melted when he flew too close to the sun, and he drowned in the sea. While casting critical eye to mythical hero Daedalus, Joseph Campbell appreciates him as a unique and praiseworthy character:

For centuries, Daedalus has represented the type of the artist-scientist: that curiously disinterested, almost diabolic human phenomenon, beyond the normal bounds of social judgment, dedicated to the morals not of himself but of his art. He is the hero of the way of thought—single hearted, courageous, and full of faith that the truth, as he finds it, shall make us free. (18)

Joyce's Dedalus exactly resembles with mythical hero regarding this aspect. Both are the symbols of revolt for transformation and artistic actualization. Similarly, the heroic myth of Daedalus referenced in the novel plays a very significant role for linking different key ideas like transformation, individual freedom, and discovery and rediscovery. Only in reference to the Daedalus myth, the ideas of the novel can be better understood. Therefore, the myth is a very significant structuring element in the novel.

### **Conclusion**

Many people have an illusion of considering myths as false fictional narrative. Myths vary culture to culture but they draw on a surprisingly universal storehouse of archetypal information about what it means to be a human: how to live a meaningful human life, which is a primary set of instructions for living. These are the reasons why they are still relevant in modern times. Myths have great potentiality of recreating the human experiences that have attracted many modern writers. Their value resides in their power to bring a change in the readers. The readers are supposed to examine seriously something about their lives, to see themselves or their actions in a new light and to understand a relationship of a personal, cultural, or spiritual nature. The writer has re-casted mythical Daedalus as Stephan Dedalus. This inclusion of Daedalus myth in the novel has helped to better understand the transformation that the hero undergoes. It has also justified the rebellious action of Stephen, who becomes able to battle his personal, local, and historical limitations, and moves forward for his free life as a modern hero.

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