
UNIT 2 GENRE, OVERALL STRUCTURE AND POINT OF VIEW

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we shall look at the generic status of *A Portrait* and at its overall structure. The question of 'Point of View' is to be taken up too. This unit will introduce you to terms like 'Bildungsroman' or the novel of growth. An important matter to be considered here would be how much of 'distance' and what kind of 'distance' Joyce maintains from his hero Stephen Dedalus.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Your reading of *A Portrait* is going to make it quite obvious to you that narration in the first four chapters of the novel is more indulgent toward Stephen and in the fifth chapter there is greater detachment between the narration and the hero. In the first four chapters irony, even when deployed, is quite sympathetic (by and large) to Stephen. Stephen's 'errors', in this portion of the novel, are treated merely as the exuberance of youth. Chapter five makes the narration more distant.

A Portrait is marked by the use of a consciousness that is at least dual. First, there is Stephen's consciousness that helps in capturing the intimacy that a first-person narrator normally enjoys. Then there is a maturer consciousness that runs parallel to Stephen's point of view. It works to qualify Stephen's consciousness mainly through humour and irony.

A Portrait, in terms of genre can be seen as 'aesthetic autobiography' in the tradition of the 'Bildungsroman' (it has something in it of the 'Kunsterroman' – 'artist novel' – as well). You will realize that determining the novel's generic status help us to tackle some other aspects of the novel with a greater sense of a awareness.

2.2 GENRE

Patrick Parrinder in his 1984 book *James Joyce* calls *A Portrait* an 'ironic autobiography' and Suzanne Nalbatian in her 1994 book *Aesthetic Autobiography* calls it "aesthetic autobiography". The qualifiers used by Parrinder and Nalbatian underline the fact that though autobiographical elements are strongly present in *A Portrait*, it is not straight autobiography. As such Stanislaus Joyce, the writer's brother has stated:

My brother was not the weak infant who figures in *A Portrait of the Artist*. He has drawn it is true very largely upon his own life and his own experience....But *A Portrait of the Artist* is not an autobiography, it is an artistic creation. As I had something to say to its reshaping, I can affirm this without hesitation.

(Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper*, p.17)

As *A Portrait* has in it elements of both Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman let us look a little at some examples of these. Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (a novel, that you must already have looked at), Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* are all examples of the broad category Bildungsroman whereas Marcel Proust's monumental novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*) can be seen as an example of Künstlerroman.

The original version of *A Portrait* was *Stephen Hero*. In the ten years separating the two projects, Joyce's endeavour was to move the subject matter of his life largely from the "lyrical" to the "dramatic" mode. The progression from *Stephen Hero* to *A Portrait* is from 'the novel of the overt and partisan manager' to that of the "invisible and impersonal director" (Joseph Prescott "Stephen Hero" in William M. Scutte (ed.) *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p.25) The technique of *Stephen Hero* is indeed explicit and ploddingly documentary. What happens in *A Portrait* is that the autobiographical element which is otherwise its very significant ingredient is consciously and painstakingly recast into a mode of depersonalisation, objectification and mythification. Joyce is able to heighten naturalistic detail onto a dramatic plane of symbolic art.

2.3 OVERALL STRUCTURE

The **first chapter** of *A Portrait* shows Stephen's development from infant awareness to the first assertion of his identity in an act of protest against injustice. The **second chapter** shows the growing isolation that comes with his adolescence. It culminates in the encounter with the prostitute. The **third chapter** represents the crisis of adolescence and a temporary toying with the idea of taking up priesthood as a vocation. The **fourth chapter** represents the climax of the development in his recognition of his true vocation. The **fifth chapter** shows the completion of his development and the declaration of his creed of freedom. If we take the first two chapters as a structural unit then we find that these two chapters together trace the awakening of religious doubts and sexual instincts culminating in the physical experience with the prostitute. The next two chapters together (as another structural unit) continue the cycle of sin and repentance. The fifth chapter as a structural unit stands a little apart, in terms of ironic 'distance'. This chapter brings Stephen to the verge of exile and brings to the fore his aesthetic theory and his life's goals. Here the spotlight is on his University days. University life in general is also taken up admirably well.

Looked at another way, the novel can be seen to divide itself into nineteen smaller units marked off through typographical marks. These reveal to Stephen the character of the world that he lives in, the demands this world makes on him and the corresponding movements within himself that push him towards either succumbing to these demands or rejecting them. Each broad stage of his growth – awakening of the body, literary vocation, farewell to Ireland – leaves him lonelier than before. Some of the other metaphors used to describe the novel's alternations between varying moods are the metaphor of 'troughs' (depressions) and 'crests' thus underlining the wave-like pattern of depression and triumph. The fifth chapter can thus be seen as coming up with a relatively static calm of (relatively) smooth sailing (as compared to the kinetic frenzies of the preceding four chapters) on which the emergent artist rationalises his position and assumes his new role.

A major structuring device is memory. Each smaller unit (a phase in what Joyce himself called a 'fluid succession of presents') is a tightly constructed narrative unit. The linking of the episodes is achieved through a series of evolutionary chains of images and themes. This evolutionary process is tied up with phases in the development of Stephen's identity and with his accumulated memory. The instances of structural repetition that we find in the novel are mostly cases of incremental repetition—a favourite device of modernists – where the motif repeated gets a sort of snowballing in symbolic significance as the work proceeds. This, however, is more of a technique-related matter and the section on 'Repetition' in Unit 4 will give you details of how repetition helps the structure and texture of the novel.

To those not familiar with the 'modernist' approach to literary structure some part of *A Portrait*, (especially the early pages and the last pages of the novel) may give the impression of disjointedness (T.S. Eliot's poetry also gives the same impression to a reader) but this 'disjointedness' is actually quite carefully structured. You may have already read poems like Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'Preludes' If you haven't, then please read them as a way of familiarizing yourself with modernist structure.

2.4 POINT OF VIEW

The problem of 'point of view' in *A Portrait* is a function of Joyce's attempt at objectivity. The question of where an author 'stations' himself/herself in relation to his/her main character is quite a crucial one in fiction. A look at Jane Austen's *Emma* is helpful here. Austen treats Emma with irony and her attempt at objectivity is quite obvious and yet a kind of identification is inescapable. In Joyce's case, the identification is even more inescapable because his stake in the proceedings is greater. Then there is the additional dimension provided by Joyce's attempt at universality. In a sense one can say that in offering us the growth and development of Stephen Dedalus, Joyce was not exclusively concerned with getting to the heart of his own young self or an imaginary equivalent of that, but in getting to the heart of the young artist as such. The destiny we are brought face to face with, could be any young man's destiny in Catholic Ireland. Especially, if the young man was sensitive and had artistic ambitions or pretensions!

The viewpoint in the book is often Stephen's and Joyce does employ a rhetoric which indicates direction to the reader. And yet quite often, an ironic discrepancy between Stephen's naïve view of his predicament and the sophisticated readers' view of it is allowed to slip in. Sometimes inflated images are brought in to make us aware of a discrepancy. Quite often the reader is in deep sympathy with Stephen's thoughts and feelings. At other times, he is amused by Stephen. Sometimes Stephen's immaturity and wrong-headedness is annoying too. His vanity, his way of taking himself too seriously, and his fanciful romantic dreams are a constant source of amusement and

yet Joyce's own irony is held back quite often. But this irony is at work too at a number of places. Joyce later was so conscious of the way in which his novel's protagonist comes under judgement that he said, "I may have been too hard on that young man."

The novel is under no obligation to imply that Stephen will be a successful artist. Also, one must be on one's guard against judging *A Portrait* on the strength of what happens to Stephen in *Ulysses*. It is enough that Joyce has laid down the conditions for the artist and that Stephen had found salvation in deciding on the aesthetic rather than the social, nationalistic, or religious orientations in life. Stephen's character does not so much change as it develops and that too from a firm basis in a temperament. Reserve becomes independence, pride grows into the self-assertion of individuality and sensitivity develops into the artistic personality which, in the closing stages of the novel (University days), is sufficiently tolerant of others. This development is traced by me in Unit 3 at some length.

Joyce's distance from Stephen is never too great and yet a modulation of attitude through language goes on all the time. A passage like the following is a good example:

He too returned to his old life at school and all his novel enterprises fell to pieces. The commonwealth fell, the loan bank closed its coffers and its books at a sensible loss.(p.104)

There is uncomplicated ironic humour here but the passage is not without sympathy and without an attempt to show Stephen as quite human. There are a number of places (especially in chapter five) where the good-natured and generous side of Stephen's personality is stressed. A good example is the way he takes in his stride the banter directed at him by his fellow students. The unit dealing with 'Technique' (Unit 4) takes up this side of Stephen in some detail.

Despite his preference for a certain classicism in matters of style, Joyce remained a kind of incurable romantic in his life. There are a number of places in the novel where romantic heroism gets underlined without a trace of irony directed against Stephen. One area in which this is quite obvious is in his preoccupation with language and in his faith in language being some kind of vehicle for transcendence. Stephen's yearning for other places is a part of his temperament:

The vastness and strangeness of the life suggested to him by the bales of merchandise stocked along the walls or swung aloft out of steamers wakened again in him the unrest which had sent him wandering in the evening from garden to garden in search of Mercedes.(p.69)

This kind of imaginative transport and his awareness of Europe have a lot to do with Stephen's final exile. The sight of the slow drifting clouds, 'dappled and seaborne' makes him think of Europe:

They were voyaging across the deserts of the sky a host of nomads on the March, voyaging high over Ireland, westward bound. The Europe they had come from lay out there beyond the Irish sea, Europe or strange tongues and valleyed and woodbegirt and citadelled and of entrenched and marshalled races.(p.181)

The call of the unfamiliar is there always and Stephen responds to it most of the time. It is thus quite apt that the epigraph of *A Portrait* is from Ovid and denotes the Dedalus theme. "And he set his mind to work upon unknown arts". Here the boundary between Joyce and Stephen comes to collapse almost.

So we can conclude that Joyce, in *A Portrait* keeps varying his distance from Stephen. Sometimes the two personae almost merge but quite often a distance is kept though it is never too great. This kind of management of distance allows Joyce to bring irony also into play (at places) but even that is never allowed to become too hard-hitting.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

A Portrait can be seen as a Bildungsroman and as 'aesthetic autobiography'. In the matter of 'stationing' himself, Joyce keeps varying his distance from Stephen but never does so drastically. The novel's overall structure has three broad movements. The fifth chapter is a separate movement preceded by two movements constituting two chapters each.

2.6 GLOSSARY

Bildungsroman : The term refers to a novel which describes the youthful development of the central character. Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* are examples of this kind of novel.

Point of view : The term refers to the perspectives from which events in a narrative are seen and narrated. In modern treatments of the art of prose fiction 'point of view' has been a consistent concern. Thanks largely to the theorizing offered by Henry James in the 'Prefaces' he wrote for his novels (these were collected in 1934 as *The Art of the Novel*). Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* (1926) also offered extensive theorizing on this aspect of novel-writing.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. What are the three broad movements going into the overall structure of *A Portrait*?
2. Would you consider 'aesthetic autobiography' a satisfactory description of the genre of *A Portrait*?
3. How does Joyce establish some distance between himself and Stephen? Does this distance stay static or is it varying?

2.8 SUGGESTED READING

Harry Levin's basic book *James Joyce : A Critical Introduction* offers a good starting point for all aspects of the novel including the ones treated in this unit. Specifically, the question of genre is given good treatment in Suzanne Nalpatian's *Aesthetic Autobiography* and Patrick Parrinder's *James Joyce*. Morris Beja's 'Introduction' to the Casebook on *Dubliners* and *A Portrait* offers a sympathetic angle on the question of "point of view". For a treatment of "point of view" which is largely hostile to

A Portrait

Joyce, you can look up Wayne C. Booth's book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and Hugh Kenner's *Dublin's Joyce*. In her book *English Novel : Form and Function*, Dorothy Van Ghent has a chapter on *A Portrait*. This chapter is useful for a consideration of the novel's structure.