
UNIT 5 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES : A BRIEF SELECTIVE OVERVIEW

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we shall look at the criticism related to a *A Portrait* first in terms of its immediate critical reception and then in terms of criticism from the forties onward. We shall also see how one recent approach – the Psychoanalytic approach – is likely to prove more fruitful with this novel.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In terms of its critical reception *A Portrait* has had its share of detractors and its admirers. Foremost among those attacking the novel are those who see it as an artistic failure on account of Joyce's inability to properly handle 'point of view'. These believe that Joyce has failed to consistently manage his 'distance' from Stephen. Those who see the novel as an artistic success believe that the problem of 'distance' has been handled quite well by Joyce in *A Portrait*. More recent approaches have by and large, stopped seeing the 'distance' problem as all that important.

5.2 EARLY CRITICAL RECEPTION

A number of its early reviewers saw *A Portrait* as a seriously flawed book. They saw in it 'lack of organisation.' Some had problems with what they saw as its prurient realism and its frankness about physicality. Some saw the discussion of aesthetics and the sermons as not fully integrated into the organic structure of the novel. Some saw Joyce as a realist but thought that his method was too chaotic to produce the effect of realism.

Quite a few people saw positive merit in *A Portrait*. The poet Hart Crane found it 'spiritually inspiring.' H.G. Wells saw it as 'by far the most living and convincing picture that exists of an Irish Catholic upbringing' (*Nation*, XX (24 February 1917)). Francis Hackett in a review in *New Februry*, X, No 122 (3 March 1917) saw *A Portrait* as not entirely pleasant but thought it 'has beauty, such love of beauty, such intensity of feeling, such pathos, such candor it goes beyond anything in English that reveals the inevitable malaise of serious youth'. John Macy in a review in *Dial* IX ii, No 744 (14 June 1917) thought *A Portrait* was outspoken, vigorous, original, beautiful.'

5.3 SUBSEQUENT CRITICISM

The broad division in subsequent criticism of *A Portrait* has been between those like Hugh Kenner and Wayne Booth on the one hand who attack the novel on some counts and those on the other hand who are quite enamoured of it. Both Booth and Kenner fail to appreciate fully the novelty of Joyce's effort. Kenner believes that the vagueness we come across in *A Portrait* regarding Joyce's precise attitude to Stephen is calculated and that this vagueness answers the imperatives of a nearly solipsistic novel. Booth thinks that Joyce fails in properly managing the problem of 'distance'.

Both these criticisms all simplistic in that they fail take into account Joyce's modernism, his handling of and mastery of a multiple perspective and his subtle modulation of tone and attitude. As an answer to the Booth Kenner approach, those sympathetic to Joyce's method take the position that *A Portrait* uses at least a 'dual consciousness'. One part of the duality is that which, from Stephen's point of view, enables Joyce to capture the intimacy of a first-person narrator, recording and observing, experiencing at different levels, ages and sensitivities. The other part of the duality from the point of view of the mature narrator, allows Joyce to retain legitimate control of the form and to comment indirectly on the subject matter.

Harry Levin's 1941 book *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction* is in the forefront of sympathetic treatments of *A Portrait*. Some of the major points Levin makes are:

- a. The Stephen we finally meet is more sharply differentiated from his surroundings than the figure Joyce set out to describe;
- b. Joyce's notable contribution to English prose is to provide a more fluid medium for refracting sensations and impressions through the author's mind – to facilitate the transition from photographic realism to aesthetic impressions.
- c. Joyce's use of conversation is one of the most vital elements of Joyce's writing.

James Atherton's "Introduction" to his edition of *A Portrait* for the Heinemann Modern Novel Series in 1964 is another good example of criticism that is sympathetic to Joyce's overall achievement. The most remarkable thing Atherton's "Introduction" does is to draw attention to cinematic elements in Joyce's narrative technique in *A Portrait*.

Seeing *A Portrait* in the light of technical and stylistic innovations initiated by Modernism is a big help in arriving at a sympathetic view of the novel. Most books on Joyce that appeared before poststructuralism came on the scene (around 1966) are informed by this modernism-sympathetic attitude. Colin MacCabe's 1979 book *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* was the first full-length attempt to see Joyce's writings from a poststructuralist perspective. John Paul Riquelme and Maud Ellman are other notable critics who have brought a broadly poststructuralist perspective to bear on Joyce's works. The broad shift brought about by poststructuralist perspectives collectively is to orient Joyce criticism towards

questions related to identity, naming and patriarchy largely in the light of theories brought into currency by the work of the French psychoanalytic thinker Jacques Lacan.

But then literary theory (in relative terms) has paid much more attention to *Ulysses* and to *Finnegan's Wake* than to *A Portrait*. Those two novels provide much more fertile ground for many of the more recent critical trends. In the wake of the relative falling out-of-favour of the New Critics in particular and of Formalism of various kinds in general, a text like *A Portrait* has suffered some relative neglect but for anybody seriously interested in the formative stages of early English-language Modernism and for those interested in fiction-writing as a craft, it remains a virtual goldmine. Only when a reader approaches this novel in a spirit of appreciating Modernism in general is he/she able to fully realise the reach and full impact of the remarkable things Joyce did with language in his novel and the extraordinary economy and compression and radiance with which he was able to do that. If, on the other hand, ideology and gender-related issues make a reader hostile to everything 'Modernistic', then part of that hostility gets transferred to the reading act itself but that is seen by many as an affordable loss in this period of reader-empowerment. At the same time, we should not forget that some of the ideological and feminist readings are quite likely to go against the grain of this novel.

The approach that is likely to work best with this quintessentially 'Modernistic' novel is one combining close stylistic and formal analysis with Psychoanalytic insights of the kind provided by the theories of Jacques Lacan. One such extremely useful insight is tying up selfhood with the unconscious. The idea of the self as a stable amalgam of consciousness is sought to be replaced in Lacan by seeing novelistic characters as assemblages of signifiers (always mobile) clustering around a proper name.

It is in areas related to growing and the acquiring of identity and to 'otherness' that Lacanian theories are most relevant for our present purposes. One of Lacan's most important texts is 'The Insistence of the letter in the Unconscious.' One question Lacan poses in this essay (anthologised by David Lodge in his 1988 *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*) is;

Then who is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself since at the heart of my own assent to my own identity it is still he who wags me? (Lodge, p. 102).

In the same essay Lacan insists that the Freudian discovery of the unconscious be followed through to its logical conclusion, which is the self's radical ex-centricity to itself. (Lodge p. 101). Stephen too is preoccupied with 'otherness' and the nature of Stephen's existence and of the shape of his character, always depends on the other end of his thinking. Personality, seen from this viewpoint, is not something static but a succession of phases. Because the different modes of Stephen's thought react to his environment, the arrangement of the overall structure is already an arrangement of technique as different situations entail different rhythms and modes of thought. Each chapter in the novel tries to offer a coherent image of Stephen but the real focus is on the 'movement' which involves the shift between the moment of stasis at which perception fixes on epiphanies at the end of each narrative unit. The distant attitude that Joyce has toward Stephen early in each unit corresponds to the naturalist view of the figure trapped by his social system. And yet each chapter ends with a sense of passing through or passing on and Stephen achieves a transcendence (at each such point) that brings him close to Joyce.

The cycles of Stephen's progress in *A Portrait* are rites of sundering and reconciliation. The word 'sundering' is extremely important in *A Portrait* because in the Psychoanalytic approach 'sundering' it tied up with 'lack' and 'desire'. Sin for

Stephen comes to be an activity through which he develops himself by being shaken loose from an established context so that he can gain entry into a realm of semiotic shifting that expands his range of linguistic structuring. Shaped by the self that he is yet to become, Stephen (at fourteen or fifteen) already begins to understand the process by which he is creating that self. The movement toward clarification of his own self in Stephen's case comes about through expanding into language.

A sense of separation and loss expand Stephen's language in the action of each chapter. His mind at the same time, moves back and forth between an attractive maternal image and a threatening paternal one. Whenever he settles into a somewhat stable relationship with his maternally-oriented environment he perceives a male figure as threatening this stability. His usual reaction is to set off in a new direction to find a new world involving a transformed maternity, a shifting of language. The shifting expands his perception into a new world of images. These images not only become a new wing of his mental development, they in fact constitute him as a new person. Seen from this angle, the linguistic flow, imaged as moving liquid or material embrace at the end of each cycle gives Stephen a new enhanced potential for language. Contact with maternal flux has a way of energizing Stephen at crucial points in the text.

The characteristic mode of Stephen's involvement with the world is complex. A very interesting aspect of the vision Stephen has of himself as an artist is that by projecting himself outward as a narrator, he generates a creative power that returns to expand the mind that sent it. Insofar as he creates his object by shaping his story, he creates himself.

This kind of psychoanalytic line on Joyce's works as a whole is spelt out quite well by Sheldon Brivic in his 1991 book *The Veil of Signs*, reference to which has already been made elsewhere in this unit. My summary of Brivic's argument regarding *A Portrait* is a little simplistic but it is sure to go some way in indicating to you how such a broad approach helps considerably, especially in the case of an identity-oriented and language-oriented a novel as *A Portrait* is. Most other current approaches have in them the potential of being either a misreading or an overreading or a reading against the grain of the novel. In any case, a very large part of feminist criticism is informed by Lacanian insights to such a remarkable degree that the Lacanian approach is bound to be a more comprehensive one. As readers you are free to go in for any one kind of reading which would be more in keeping with your own ideological or readerly preferences. The text that you then create will be your text in keeping with the 'reader-response' notion that a text gets created only in the process of reading. This could be quite subjective. That subjectivity also needs to be checked through conventions of reading or through protocols of reading.

To succeed better with Joyce's novel you need to be aware of the technical side of the modernist enterprise as a whole (with some idea of Imagism, Symbolism, Modernism). You also need some minimum awareness of some later development like poststructuralism. Finally, you need to come to *A Portrait* with a relatively open mind. Then it will be easier to understand the full implications of the kind of glowing tribute that Derek Attridge pays to Joyce:

Far more people read Joyce than are aware of it. Such was the impact of his literary revolution that few later novelists of importance in any of the world's languages have escaped its aftershock, even when they attempt to avoid Joycean paradigms and procedures. We are indirectly reading Joyce, therefore, in many of our engagements with the past half century's serious fiction – and the same is true of some not so serious fiction too.... In television and video, film, popular music and advertising, all of which are marked as modern genres by the use of Joycean's techniques of parody and pastiche, self referentiality, fragmentation of word and image, open ended

narrative, and multiple point of view. And the unprecedented explicitness with which Joyce introduced the trivial details of ordinary life into the realm of art opened up a rich new territory for writers, painters and film makers, while at the same time it revealed the fruitful contradictions at the heart of the realist enterprise itself. (Derek Attridge. *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, p1)

5.5 LET US SUM UP

In this final Unit of our study material on *A Portrait* we have briefly looked at some of the critical responses that the novel generated – upon publication and subsequently over the years. Joyce criticism has become something of an industry as generations of readers try to unravel the complexities of the writer's mind and his technical virtuosity. While this Block deals with some of the basics of *A Portrait*, it is meant to lead you on to a more extensive and intensive reading of other available critical material for a more incisive understanding of Joyce's novel.

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