



THE JOURNEY OF STEPHEN DEDALUS: SEEING THROUGH LACAN'S LENS

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ABSTRACT

James Joyce's novel A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man focuses on the journey of its protagonist Stephen Dedalus from childhood to adolescence finally entering adulthood. His journey is a quest for his own identity as an artist in a world torn apart by political, religious and social interpellations. Stephen's identity and existence as an individual and as an artist is continuously reshaped through his journey. The term paper focuses on a psychoanalytic reading of Stephen's journey by implementing the Lacanian psychoanalytic concept of the three orders being the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. Stephen Dedalus enters the imaginary order during the mirror stage when the formation of his ego takes place. Gradually the imaginary order gives way to the symbolic order when the predominance of language and other external forces act as the big Other. The problem arises with the question whether Stephen at all wants to transcend from the symbolic to the real order and if so how does he attain it since the real order is impossible to attain. All the three stages, their individual implications and interrelation will be thoroughly analysed. A detailed discussion of all the three stages of development of Stephen's life through the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of the three orders will determine how far Stephen succeeds or fails to establish his identity as an artist.

Research Methodology

The research paper has been written after a close reading of the novel and seminar IV, IX, and XI of Jacques Lacan. Excerpts from the text has been grouped and studied in context of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The grouping of incidents was crucial to the research and various concepts related to Lacanian psychoanalysis had to be discussed in the context of progression of the incidents. The Imaginary, Symbolic, and the Real order as related to the progression of the novel, from the protagonist childhood to adulthood had to be studied closely. Examples related to the manifestation of the above mentioned psychoanalytic concepts within the sections of the novel had to be located and studied to provide evidence in support of the findings. The conclusion was proposed on the basis of the findings and leaves further scope for research regarding the three order of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the context of the



movement of the protagonist through time and space. The interplay of the three orders and their lack of absolutes has been focused on, studied, and discussed in details.

Introduction:

James Joyce identifies his protagonist with the mythical Daedalus, the father of Icarus, the great craftsman who had made wings of wax to fly away from the labyrinths of the Centaur. Paradoxically, this mythical pagan figure appears with a renowned Christian martyr Saint Stephen. This juxtaposition of the pagan and the Christian in the protagonist's name is symbolic of his quest, as he continuously undergoes a shift from one to the other, where paganism is substituted by his inherent natural artistic desire and religion plays the role of the oppressor. His struggle to achieve artistic excellence amidst changing and challenging circumstances can be understood only if his quest, from his childhood to adulthood is analysed. The Term paper aims at examining the three stages of Stephen's life from childhood through adolescence to the precincts of adulthood through Lacanian psychoanalysis. The three stages of Stephen's quest will be examined as a journey from the Lacanian order of the imaginary to the symbolic order into the real.

Main Content

Stephen Dedalus enters the imaginary order during the mirror stage when the formation of his ego takes place. The signified and signification are part of the imaginary order. An apt example of this is Stephen's addressing his aunt as Dante. Here the word 'aunty' becomes 'Dante'. To Stephen the word Dante does not stand for the legendary literary figure, rather it stands for his aunt, therefore substituting Dante for aunty. Stephen's desire of marrying Ellen, the denunciation of it by his aunt and her serious threat of foreboding consequences embeds in him a dual sense of desire and fear which will re-emerge in the symbolic order. The imaginary order gives way to the symbolic one in Stephen's case when he is sent away to Clongowes. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan argues that the Symbolic order structures the visual field of the Imaginary, which means that it involves a linguistic dimension (Web). In his Seminar IV, "La relation d'objet," Lacan argues that the concepts of "Law" and "Structure" are unthinkable without language—thus the Symbolic is a linguistic dimension (Web). Therefore the symbolic order is essentially the order of language. The Signifier becomes operative in this order. The symbolic order marks the formation of the unconscious. The Lacanian concept of the two others also becomes operative in the symbolic order. Stephen functions as the Small other which according to Dylan Evans "is the other who is not really other, but a reflection and projection of the Ego. He [autre] is simultaneously the counterpart and the specular image." (Web). "The big Other designates radical alterity, an other-ness which transcends the illusory otherness of the imaginary because it cannot be assimilated through identification. Lacan equates this radical alterity with language and the law." (Web). Therefore in the symbolic stage religion and politics plays



the role of the big Other along with the English language, which, gradually seems foreign to Stephen.

Quiet early in his life, Stephen develops a penchant for poetry, prominent from Joyce's frequent use of short poems and songs to express Stephen's mental vacillations. His carefree thinking is often disturbed and disrupted by several forces of interpellation, causing him to reflect on things otherwise. It is in the symbolic order that he understands that Eileen's background as a protestant went against his possibilities of uniting with her. Religion comes into the forefront along with his underlying sexual desire and the conflict between the two tears him apart. Mercedes, the romantic heroine of the novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*, operates as an Eileen like figure in his unconscious. Stephen equates his artistic pursuits with this mystical female romantic figure. All he wants is to gratify his desire for her therefore actually wanting to create her in the material world, which is essentially the work of an artist. Joyce writes that Stephen "...did not want to play. He wanted to meet in the real world the insubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld." (Joyce 67). Stephen is tormented by his adolescent sexual desire to kiss Ellen when she accompanies him to the tram station in chapter II. He is tormented by desires of gratifying his adolescent sexual desires against the stringent religious prejudices which keeps "...urging him to be a good catholic above all". (88). The result of this turmoil causes a kind of alienation in him. Fragments of childhood become mere words to him. Dante, Parnell, Clane, Clongowes remain as hollow signifiers, "useless" Stephen exclaims to himself. Joyce states that Stephen "...burned to appease the fierce longings of his heart before which everything else was idle and alien" (105). Stephen conceives that gratifying his sexual desire is the end to his internal turmoil but on the contrary this problematises things for him as now his religious prejudices such as the concept of "mortal sin" (105) functions as the big Other therefore constantly interpellating him to confession and forgiveness. But on the other hand, Stephen, though once enamoured by priesthood, rejects the offer of entering the clergy because of his unconscious desire of fulfilling his artistic pursuit. The only solution to Stephen's torment was to transgress beyond the border of the big Other and offer himself a world without words, a perfect synthesis of the holy and the profane. This happens to him when his eye conceives the bird girl image in chapter IV. "----Heavenly God!" Stephen exclaims "...in an outburst of profane joy" (186). He had found the purpose of his quest that is "To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life!" (186). Therefore the girl functioned as a signifier and automated the return of Stephen's repressed desire from his unconscious where sexuality, womanhood and artistic desire had been united. Joyce writes that "Her" (that is the bird girl's) "...image had passed into" Stephen's "...soul and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Therefore it may be understood that this instance of mitigating the opposite forces and attaining artistic fulfilment can only take place under a condition where the big Other of language and law (that is religion and other external forces) would cease to operate. Therefore it is only possible in a state beyond language which is the Lacanian order of the Real. It can be



concluded that hereby Stephen tries entering the Real order. But Lacan has also confirmed in his Seminar IX, "Le desir et son interpretation" that the Real order is impossible to attain (Web). Therefore Stephen arrives in a limbic state between the Symbolic and the Real where he wants to transcend to the latter but fails to materialise this transformation due to the impossibility of it.

While conversing with the Dean in chapter V, the pair comes across the word "tundish" which fascinates the Dean. Here Stephen realises that the Dean, by virtue of being an Englishman, enjoys greater comfort with the language than himself. To Stephen, the English language appears foreign and distant. Stephen reflects that the Dean's language "...so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted his words. My voice holds them at bay." This conscious attempt to forgo his language and enter a realm of speechlessness can be understood as his desire to transcend to the Real order. In his aesthetic theory too, Stephen claims that art should not invoke any form of kinetic energy within people else there remains no difference between art and pornography. Post structurally analysing, any form of artistic expression through the use of language is bound to invoke some sort of kinetic energy in a reader since the interplay of signifiers can only create a state of chaos, one wielding another and as a result nothing definite can be concluded. Therefore language exists in a continuous state of flux. So if art has to be static in its effect, then it has to be something beyond the realms of language. So Stephen's artistic quest can only be fulfilled in the Real order. But since the Real order cannot exist because of the ultimate disintegration of things into the symbolic, it can be logically concluded that Stephen's artistic pursuit can never be fulfilled. Yet Stephen composes poetry. Through language he returns to the Symbolic order. Stephen experience continuous shift from the symbolic to the Real and vice versa. In rejecting Davin's proposal of joining the Irish National Movement, Stephen rejects the dominion of the big Other (which essentially belongs to the symbolic state) on the pretext of his disillusionment with the movement itself. But in doing so he falls prey to the Symbolic itself. To Stephen, Parnell acts as a symbol for the Irish deceit of their own national hero, as he tells Davin: "No honourable and sincere man, said Stephen, has given up to you his life and his youth and his affections from the days of Tone to Parnell but you sold him to the enemy or failed him in need or reviled him and left him for another. And you (Davin) invite me to be one of you." (220). But at the same time his desire of attaining the Real order does not forsake him as he says "My ancestors threw off their language and took another...do you fancy I am going to pay in my own life and person debts they made?" (220).

Stephen's continuous movement from the Symbolic to the Real and vice versa can be observed in the poem Stephen finally creates, beginning with the lines "Are you not weary of ardent ways". A thorough reading of the poem makes it clear that Stephen has attempted to synthesize the opposing forces of religion (the big Other) and sexuality (embedded in his unconscious) through his poem and in doing so has attained a momentary fulfilment of his



artistic desire. His creation of the poem accompanies “A glow of Desire” (242) for his lady love, the “temptress of his villanelle” (242). The body of the Eucharist mingles with that of his beloved in the lines “Your eyes have set man’s heart ablaze/ And you have had your will of him.” Therefore the poem is an attempt to transgress from the Symbolic order and since now the big Other has united with the unconscious and attained a synthesis through artistic fulfilment, Stephen seems to enter the Real order, where the Symbolic domination of language as an encroaching and resistive force cease to operate. But at the same time the poem makes a tragic plea: “Speak no more of enchanted days”. It is as if Stephen has realised the futility of this entire attempted transgression from the Symbolic to the Real order and has returned to the former one. He is definitely weary of the “ardent ways” of his quest for artistic fulfilment and is trying to overcome the memories of his attempted transgression to achieve the unachievable non existential Real order of absolute artistic fulfilment.

Conclusion:

Stephen’s quest remains incomplete, neither does he succeed nor does he fail to attain the purpose of his quest. The journey and transgression from one order to the other is what remains with him marking the development of his persona. What Stephen achieves is his own portrait, his own self, that of an artist and of a young man, trying to cope with the verisimilitudes of life, while moving from the Imaginary to the Symbolic and then lurking in a limbic state between the Symbolic and the Real order, moving from one to another. Hence he prays to the two benefactors of his name, to Stephen and to Dedalus, “Old father, Old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead” (276).

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