



The Role of the Feminine in the Making of the Artist in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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Abstract:

Though Stephen Dedalus grows up in a male dominated world, his consciousness and destiny are shaped largely by some memorable female characters from the real, fictional, spiritual and sensual worlds. Depicted solely from Stephen's subjective point of view, they appear more like projections of his egotistical imagination. In the novel, the image of the matriarch extends to three mother figures – Stephen's biological mother Mary Dedalus, his ecclesiastical mother the Catholic Church and his political mother Ireland. As the story begins to unfold through the consciousness of Stephen, one realizes that the matriarchal censure and threat that Stephen experiences very early in his life metamorphoses into his fascination for the image of female beauty in his adolescence. He perceives this ideal image first in the platonic image of Mercedes. As he grows up, this image of Mercedes eventually transforms itself into the image of Emma, who enkindles his awakening sexuality. Emma combines in her person the images of the Madonna and the temptress. Indeed, it is his failure to consummate his nascent sexual desires for Emma that leads him to the erotic embrace of the prostitute. Though his encounter with the harlot marks the end of his search that began with the image of Mercedes, a sense of sin overpowers him and he loses faith in all women. He wants to break through their 'grip' in order to realize his vocation to pursue art. His vocation to art is finally affirmed by his vision of the bird-like girl who at once stands for the image of the matriarch, the Madonna and the temptress wading in the midstream. This paper intends to illustrate in detail how all these women characters played important roles in shaping Stephen's artistic destiny in the footsteps of his adopted artificer-father Daedalus.

Key Words: Matriarch, Madonna, Temptress, Artist-hero, Political Mother, Muse, Spiritual, Soul, Sexuality, Aesthetic, Eternal Feminine, Prostitute.

Stephen Dedalus grows up in a male dominated world, yet his consciousness and destiny are shaped largely by some memorable female characters from the real, fictional, spiritual and sensual worlds. They pervade the novel throughout, yet remain elusive. Depicted solely from Stephen's subjective point of view, they appear more like projections of his egotistical imagination. Demonized by Stephen's childhood sense of abjection, all the women figures of the text, be it the matriarch, or the Madonna or the temptress, 'emerge as powerful emblems of flesh' (Henke 2000, 87). Their sensuous figures haunt the developing consciousness of Stephen Dedalus and provide a foil against which he defines himself as both man and artist. This paper seeks to study in detail how these women figures helped in shaping the artistic destiny of Stephen Dedalus in the footsteps of his adopted artificer-father Daedalus.

At the psychological juncture between his childhood days and adolescent days, Stephen sees his mother as a powerful and beneficial source of pleasure. In the opening section of the novel, she ministers to her son's corporal needs: baby Stephen recalls his 'nice smelling' mother attending to his comforts of body and mind by changing 'oilsheet' when he wets his bed and playing 'the piano... for him to dance' (Joyce 2008, 5). Soon the same mother introduces him to the menacing external world and its authoritarian morality and together with another matriarchal figure, aunt Dante, demands an apology from Stephen and threatens him to punishment for his supposed offence in which this Catholic boy had wished to marry a Protestant girl Eileen Vance. Interestingly Stephen deals with this threat 'by turning it into poetry, focusing on the formal qualities of language: the common rhythm of "pull out his eyes" and "apologise"' (Brivic 1993, 252). Henke comments "The first of the many imperatives that thwart his ego, "apologise" is associated in his mind and vivid imagination with matriarchal threats' (2000, 88). Thus these immediate

matriarchal figures together, through their negative influence, bring out the artist in him at an early age.

In the novel, the image of the matriarch extends to three mother figures – Stephen's biological mother: Mary Dedalus, his ecclesiastical mother: the Catholic Church and his political mother: Ireland. As the story begins to unfold through the consciousness of Stephen, one realizes that the matriarchal censure and threat that Stephen experiences very early in his life, stifle his personal freedom by casting their 'nets' on him. 'Mother Ireland, Mother Church, Our Blessed Mother, Eve, Virgin, prostitute, temptress – all of these roles lead to the erasure of women from Stephen's project of self-origination' (Dean 1992, xxiv). Consequently, as he comes of age, he loses faith in all of them and wants to break loose of their grip: 'You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets' (Joyce 2008, 171). However, in chapter five of the novel when Cranly asks him whether he would deflower a virgin, Stephen asks him another question in reply: 'Excuse me... is that not the ambition if most young gentlemen?' (Joyce 2008, 208). Henke comments 'Figuratively, it is Stephen's ambition throughout the novel to deflower the Blessed Virgin of Catholicism and supplant the Italian Madonna with a profane surrogate – a voluptuous Irish muse rooted in sensuous reality...' (2000, 91) in the process of becoming an artist.

As he reaches adolescence, another woman begins to rule his imagination; he becomes extremely fascinated by Mercedes, the heroine of Alexander Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He imagines that one day he would meet Mercedes, the epitome of all virtues and during the meeting 'He would fade into something impalpable under her eyes and then in a moment, he would be transfigured... in that magic moment' (Joyce 2008, 54). Mercedes, the woman of his fantasy, lives in a house surrounded by rose bushes. She is the angel that guides him through the labyrinth of his uneasy adolescent life. Her association with the roses reminds one of Dante's Beatrice who leads Dante to the mystical rose of heaven, the Virgin Mary. The rose is the traditional symbol of the Virgin Mary in particular, and womankind in general. It is significant; therefore, that Stephen's vision of the bird-like girl that confirms his artistic destiny is immediately followed by his

rapturous vision of a rose in the evening sky, an experience that is both mysterious and mystical:

A world, a glimmer, or of a flower? Glimmering and trembling, trembling and unfolding, a breaking in full crimson and unfolding and fading to palest rose, leaf and wave of light, flooding all heavens with its soft flushes, every flush deeper than the other. (Joyce 2008, 145)

Alluding to Dante's vision of Paradise, Stephen's vision of this mysterious rose in the evening sky emphasizes the sacredness of his artistic destiny. However, in this symbol of rose, Henke sees the creative sensual aspects of art, whose priest Stephen is said to have become: 'The boy's fantasy re-creates a repressed vision of female genitalia spreading in luxuriant, rose pink petals before his aroused phallic consciousness' (Henke 2000, 91). With the progress of the narrative, the boundary between the sensual and the spiritual will begin to blur gradually.

By means of the evocative symbolism of the rose, Joyce invests the character and destiny of Stephen with highly imaginative, associative, mystical and sensual dimensions. He achieves this through the powerful evocation of the 'feminine' constituted of the prevalent notions of the Madonna and the proverbial temptress, or of the virgin and the whore. After the confirmation of his artistic vocation, Stephen's first creation of art is a villanelle dedicated to his fantasized temptress Emma. As the young artist is inspired to compose this villanelle in the womb of his imagination, a numinous rose radiating ardent light (associated with Virgin Mary) is present. Stephen's villanelle can be likened only to the Word becoming the flesh in the womb of Virgin Mary at the Annunciation by Angel Gabriel.

The moment of mental conception stimulates a sexual process culminating in erotic ecstasy. In a strange instance of mental trans-sexuality, Stephen envisions his own aesthetic impregnation by the Holy Spirit, an experience modelled on Virgin Mary's biblical gestation of the word of God. As the artist falls into a vision of rapturous enchantment, he conflates the ingenious Emma with Mercedes and the bird-girl, then re-creates this female figure in the awesome, uncanny form of eternal temptress... (Henke 2000, 89).

Stephen aesthetically transforms the eternal feminine into a disembodied muse which will now fail to stimulate any sensuous feeling or animal desire. This villanelle which he composes but does not send to Emma embodies 'the link between virginity and harlotry and poses a threat that confuses and frightens Stephen throughout' (Dean 1992, xxiii). From the early schooldays he is made fun of because he said he kissed his mother before going to bed with reference to St. Aloysius Gonzaga and Pascal, both of whom refused to even touch their mothers; as Stephen points out to Cranly that women are consigned to this dual role. This duality is famously confirmed by Stephen's interpretation of Davin's story about the peasant girl whom he met while walking alone a lonely dark road at midnight. Nehema Achkenasy remarks

the peasant woman represents for Stephen eternal womanhood in her dual role as the provider of food and comforts, as well as remote, mysterious and dangerous 'other'. The young woman's breasts and shoulders are bare, her hair is hanging, and she is pregnant; in other words, she stands for erotic promise and procreative fulfillment... As a peasant, 'a type of her race and his own', she is close to the land, and in her pregnant state she is 'Mother Earth' herself. Yet she is also a seductress, trying to lure the young man to her bed, where he might find not only sexual satisfaction but also danger and probably death... the peasant woman stands for everything that is eternally fascinating and terrifying in womanhood. She can give life, nourishment, pleasure, and warmth, yet she is treacherous ('her husband has gone...'), secretive, dangerous, and frighteningly inhuman ('batlike soul'). (1985, 29)

As an emblem of physical attraction, she stood as a perfect example of a traitor and emphasized Stephen's extreme fear of women as well as of his own physical needs. The adolescent Stephen who was bewildered by his new emerging sexuality, interprets Davin's meeting with that woman into a 'paradigm of the paradoxical nature of male-female relationship' and this episode turns out to be a significant one in the process of the nurturing of the artist in him (Achkenasy 1985, 29).

As the adolescent Stephen is smothered by his intense carnal desires, his recollection of Mercedes helps him to

transcend those instincts at least for some intermittent short periods. His romantic longing for Mercedes, who embodies an indistinct ideal, isolates him from his immediate environment. By the end of the novel, this isolation of Stephen, fostered by his mental image of Mercedes, takes the form of voluntary exile, the pre-requisite for the realization of his artistic destiny. Another catalyst in Stephen's development is Emma, whom he meets in a children's party one day, and who reminds him of both Mercedes and Eileen. As 'his heart danced upon her movements like a cork upon a tide', he realizes that he had heard her tale 'in some dim past, whether in life or in reverie...' (Joyce 2008, 58). In fact he sees the concept of Mercedes metamorphosed in Emma before his eyes. He wants to hold her hands and kiss her; however, in spite of being certain that she too wishes the same, he fails to master the courage to do so. Instead he writes a vague poem addressed to her the following day, where the protagonists kiss before bidding farewell to each other. Thus what he fails to do in real life, he fulfills in art. He realizes that copying with real art is easier than copying with real life. Henke observes that in case of Stephen 'poetry offers aesthetic compensation for frustrated physical desire, and the stirrings of adolescent sexuality are deftly sublimated through an exercise in lyrical fulfillment' (2000, 89).

Stephen's repressed incestuous attraction for his mother in his childhood metamorphoses into his fascination for the image of female beauty. He perceives this ideal image first in the platonic image of Mercedes. As he matures in age, this platonic image of Mercedes eventually transforms itself into the image of Emma, who enkindles his awakening sexuality. Emma combines in her person the images of the mother, the Madonna and the temptress. Indeed, it is his failure to consummate his nascent sexual desires for Emma that leads him to the erotic embrace of the prostitute. Though it is Stephen who goes in search of the prostitute, he wants her to initiate him to the 'forbidden pleasures' while he submits himself to her passionate embrace. Craving for her slow caresses, he is seen 'succumbing to the seductive allure of her body and to the charm of the brothel's colours and fragrance. It is she who embraces him, an embrace ironically more maternal than carnal' (Blades 1991, 41)

As he stood silent in the middle of the room she came over to him and embraced him gaily and gravely. Her round arms held him firmly to her... Tears of joy and relief shone in his delighted eyes and his lips parted though he would not speak... In her arm he felt that he had suddenly become strong and fearless and sure of himself. (Joyce 2008, 84-85)

Interestingly, for Stephen, the harlot is also a mother figure. Commenting on Stephen's experience with the harlot-mother, Henke says:

The perfumed female who takes him in her arms recalls his nice-smelling mother at the same time that she functions as high priestess or Vestal virgin in a contemporary phallic cult. Clothed in long pink gown, she leads the boy into a womb-like chamber, tousles his hair, calls him 'little rascal', and embraces him with a vaguely maternal caress. Soothed like a baby or a foetus by the 'warm rise and fall of her breast', Stephen momentarily retrieves an illusion of infant satiety. (2000, 92)

Stephen's encounter with the harlot marks the end of his search that began with the image of Mercedes, because 'the transformation he once sought through Mercedes is consummated in the embrace of a Dublin whore' (Henke 2000, 92). In her company he realizes 'he was in another world: he had awakened from a slumber of centuries' (Joyce 2008, 84). Thereafter, he pays constant visits to the prostitutes. Consequently his sinful ways of life and his conscience shaped by Christian morality are at conflict.

He had sinned mortally not once but many times and he knew that, while he stood in danger of eternal damnation for the first sin alone, by every sin, he multiplied his guilt and his punishment... His pride is his own sin, his loveless awe of God, told him that his offence was too grievous to be atoned for in whole or in part by a false homage to the Allseeing and Allknowing. (Joyce 2008, 87).

His sense of guilt over his sins and the fear of eternal damnation reach their peak as he listens to Father Arnall's sermon that 'probed deeply into his diseased conscience' (Joyce 2008, 97). Finally, the sacrament of reconciliation or confession and reception of the Holy Communion resolve his spiritual crisis bringing him pardon and peace of mind, and he desires

for 'Another life! A life of grace and virtue and happiness!' (Joyce 2008, 123). However, the significance of this episode is that Stephen comes to know and learns to accept that human nature is essentially fallible and 'he is bound to fall... [and also that though] in the Church the failure of his impossible ideal means death of his soul, in art it is the life's blood, the stuff of everyday life out of which he can make order' (Blades 1991, 54).

Stephen's realization of his vocation as an artist is aggravated with his vision of a girl standing in the mid-stream looking at the sea, who appears like 'one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful sea bird' (Joyce 2000, 144). As the vision of the girl, his muse, fills him with profane joy and her image passes on to his soul forever, he becomes convinced of his call 'To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to create life out of life' (Joyce 2008, 145). She is the ultimate figure who brings to surface the desire that laid in his subconscious, the desire of becoming an artist. She is the 'physical embodiment of artistic inspiration, but above all she is the annunciation of Stephen's destiny in art, in one of the most enduring of female images in the novel' (Blades 1991, 97). About this epiphanic vision Elizabeth Drew says:

Stephen has just experienced the certitude of vocation as an artist and this strange and beautiful figure is a symbol of this. She is Stephen's muse, as it were. She is mysterious, for all such spiritual revelations rest on mystery. She is bird-like, for the message has to come from the sky in the symbol of flight... The seaweed, though, making its sign on her flesh, is emerald: she is also Ireland, the emerald isle. She is Stephen's own race, whose uncreated conscience he will forge. She is also Woman, 'mortal beauty', for it is from the mortal matter of earth that the artist creates the immortal word which shall not die. (2000, 71)

Stephen realizes that he must incarnate the image of the feminine for he seeks to transform abstract beauty and desire into poetry. At that epiphanic moment Stephen felt that the image of the bird-like girl passed into his soul forever. However he begins to understand that the

image must pass out as well, if he is to be a 'priest of the eternal imagination' and transmute the spirit into material image. The muse is crucial to this incarnation; somehow it is her spirit that must be embodied... the female is more than a

topic here; she is projected as the muse of representation, of embodiment. Her image haunts his days and nights, as he struggles to refine it into poetry. (Lawrence 1990, 78)

The bird-girl has imaginatively served as Stephen's Madonna who enables him to set out 'on an archetypal journey toward the multifoliate rose of Dante's Beatific vision' (Henke 2000, 94). In his early childhood another virgin Eileen, through an epiphany, guided him to the 'Tower of Ivory', the Blessed Virgin Mary. Stephen understood the meaning of the term the moment Eileen put her 'long and white and thin and cold and soft hands over his eyes' while playing (Joyce 2008, 29). Eileen led him to a spiritual experience; the bird-like girl leads him to a spiritual ecstasy that has erotic undertones. As a consequence of the vision, 'His cheeks were aflame; his body was aglow; his limbs were trembling' (Joyce 2008, 144).

His artistic vocation is corroborated in highly spiritual and sensual terms and by means of an image that combines the concepts of the matriarch, the Madonna, Beatrice and the proverbial temptress. However, at this stage, narcissistic Stephen perceives women as symbols of 'unsettling sexual difference, and a perpetual reminder of bodily abjection' (Henke 2000, 95) even though they have been instrumental in his growth; by the end of the novel, he flees from all of them. His journey into exile will release him from what he perceives as cloying feminine authority. Alone and proud, isolated and free, Stephen proclaims joyful allegiance to the masculine fraternity of Daedalus, his priest and patron: 'Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead' (Joyce 2008, 213). Through his prayer, he imagines himself to be Icarus, the son of Daedalus, urging his father to fulfill his wish of not only to fly by the nets of Ireland, but to become a creative artist like him so that he can change the face of his political mother Ireland through art.

Though Ireland has had entered into the political domain of the British and had adopted the language of the conquerors, it not only continued to maintain its distinct identity from that of Britain, but also refused to adopt the British culture. After having exiled her spiritual masters, and lost her true soul and self in the process, she submitted everything that remained to the authority of the Church that

was at once a foreign power as well as a political system that in the guise of a grand spiritual agent. Joyce 'considered the Church an opponent of ambitious youth such as himself' and, therefore, he 'embraced a position of humanism, or more precisely, a humanism-of-one : himself' (Foster 2003, 4). Joyce's attempt was to restore or recreate for his country her true identity. However, his greatest hurdle was Ireland's fidelity to Rome rather than the British Empire. Rome that ruled minds of people, subtly and yet authoritatively encroached the domain that should be ruled by the artist. Therefore, as an artist Stephen's sole objective is to 'forge in the smithy of... [his soul] the uncreated conscience of... [his] race' (Joyce 2008, 213). He would not do so through political means because his call is 'not the dull gross voice of the world of duties and despair, not the inhuman voice that had called him to the pale service of the altar', instead it was 'the call of life to his soul' (Joyce 2008, 143).

Unlike many of his contemporaries who serve their motherland, Ireland through their active participation in the political causes of the country, Stephen remains politically inactive and pursues a cause he holds dearest to his heart, namely the cause of art. It is by undertaking this mission that Stephen ultimately matures from a Young Man to a responsible Artist, instead of only being obsessed with himself: 'I shall express myself as I am', he becomes the modern day Telemachus, son of Ulysses, an artist, who in his own silent rebellion, kept himself away from the things that incited men to action. As a man of science as well as a man of dreams, Telemachus was contented with knowing and expressing. Stephen too was a passive participant in the nationalistic movement because 'the cause of Irish nationhood presents itself to Stephen Dedalus as a trap akin to that of Church' (Scaff 2003, 80). Rejecting this 'trap' he wanted to contribute to the redemption of his country in his own way – by means of art. He embraced voluntary exile and looked upon it as the prerequisites for the fulfillment of his artistic mission. Stephen's mission is not to rejuvenate the cultural life of his country and place his people on the landscape of European art, but 'to appraise the consciousness of his own racial experience and to convert it through art into a permanent vital expression of his soul' (Blades 1991, 115).

Thus it can be inferred that the female figures in the garb of the matriarch, the Madonna and the temptress gradually helped Stephen to become an artist-hero who took the responsibility of changing the face of one of the matriarch figures – his political mother, Ireland. It is under the influence of Ibsen that Joyce discovered his 'heroic figure, the artist-hero, and then eventually through this new figure a method of uniting the themes of the Romantic hero, the biographical novel and the portrait of the artist' (Blades 1991, 108). Incidentally, in accordance with the vision of his artist hero, in his *Ulysses*, Joyce 'constructs a replica of Dublin on the day that time stood still', he does that with 'the cunning of an artificer, the patience of the archeologist, and the missed emotions of the expatriate...' (Levin 1942, 97). Exalting his artifice into an act of creation, Joyce compares this artist to the God of creation who in the words of Stephen 'remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails' (Joyce 2008, 181). At the end when Stephen declares his allegiance to the masculine fraternity, Joyce in a tone of gentle mockery, implied that the inhibitions that chokes his life of creativity are his terror of the women sect and his detestation regarding sexual life. However, Stephen can only gain artistic maturity when he frees himself of these adolescent traits. Henke says that 'towards the end of the novel, Stephen adopts a Wildean pose of triumphant perversity as he proclaims revolutionary freedom and projects a vision of liberating flight' (2000, 94): 'Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience...' (Joyce 2008, 213). But in so far as women are concerned, their function is more symbolic than actual: he goes to encounter the reality of experience not for the millionth time but for the first; and that single encounter changed his vocation of life altogether.

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