

Two Self Portraits: A Comparative Study

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Abstract:

Two self- portraits, James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Dylan Thomas's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog both semi autobiographies of their respective authors, form a key work of twentieth century literature. The development of an artist is the foremost theme of the two novels but the way they are structured is quite different. The closure of each novel is a logical conclusion to two different views of life.

Keywords:- self- portraits, artist, self, bildungsroman, stream of consciousness, style, closure.

James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and Dylan Thomas's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940) have been compared in this study. The points of comparison can be many like style, structure, closure and the aspect of *Bildungsroman* in both.

Joyce's *Portrait* was the product of many years of work. He is one of the great innovators of the twentieth century. This novel, describes the development of Stephen who is shown as passing through a succession of influences which put pressure on his conscience and out-look. It is a novel and so is Thomas's *Young Dog*. Both the novels portray the incidents which relate a stage in the development of the main protagonist towards self knowledge.

At the beginning of the novels both Stephen and Dylan are small boys. But as the novel proceeds they grow up into young artists. Joyce's development of Stephen can be more clearly traced than Thomas's portrayal of Dylan. Joyce begins his novel with an infant Stephen. Joyce's novel depicts, "...embryo artists's struggling development." But even in its first chapter the gradual growth can be seen. Stephen's school days, his relationship with other boys, his behaviour with his family members are all described in detail because they form an important aspect in his growth as an artist. To quote C. H. Peake:

In the *Portrait* a mature artist looks back over his own youth, from a particular viewpoint, perceiving what was significant to his development as an artist, estimating what was vital and what was transitory in that development, and viewing his early self with a purposeful irony.

The middle portion of Joyce's novel is centred around the issues of Christian theology and is completely descriptive. The aesthetic theory of Aquinas described at the end of the novel shows that Stephen has matured enough to discuss such serious philosophy. The novel describes the agony of the artist, his passion, his superciliousness and his struggles to raise himself above his companions. Even the opening page of the novel enacts the entire action in microcosm. Hugh Kenner, in an article written in 1948, pointed out that in this novel of Joyce, "the first two pages terminated by a row of asterisk enact the entire action in microcosm." Stephen from the very beginning is greatly conscious of his identity. At one stage of his life he even supports his family but he is not responsible and sensible enough to handle his scholarship money properly. Stephen's experience with various girls is also depicted like Emina Clery, the wading girl and above all his sinning with the prostitute. Subsequently his confession also shows his progress from an immature youth. Joyce has successfully portrayed the gradual development of Stephen.

Thomas's also shows Dylan as a little boy in the beginning and a young man at the end of the novel, but his growth is not traced clearly. Instead various experiences of Dylan are described which though have some impact on him, it is not shown vividly. Dylan relationship with his family members is not shown. On the other hand, there are number of characters in the novel who undergo various experiences and Dylan is just an onlooker. These differences in *Portrait* and *A Young Dog* are because of the style adopted by the two novelists.

Joyce shows the growth of his protagonist by the change in style in the course of the novel. Stephen's childhood is described in sensuous and imagistic manner but as he grows up, Joyce's style undergoes a continual transformation as Stephen develops from a 'creature' to 'creator'. In *A Portrait*, art in one of the themes and it is illumined by images of varying richness. Joyce closely associated his style of writing with the theory of Aquinas. There are number of symbols, images, epiphanies, metaphors, etc in the novel. Joyce created a dense texture of associations that purported to represent the mind at work. Ideas come one after another in apparently unpremeditated but highly organized juxtaposition, a stream of consciousness technique. One thought leads to another even if they are about two different things. Thomas in *A Young Dog* adopts a very simple style and as the novel proceeds the style does not becomes complex as is the case with Joyce. Thomas adopts a simple style throughout. The language is very simple. Both Joyce and Thomas make use of ironical tone.

Joyce's novel is divided into five chapters linked by the theme of *Bildungsroman*. It has wholeness, a unity and completeness. While discussing the aesthetic theory with Lynch, Stephen says, "I translate it so. These things are needed for beauty wholeness, harmony and radiance" (P. 216) Though, in the novel, the long aesthetic discussions are not logically developed philosophical scheme. But the novel based on this theory gets a harmony of structure. Thomas's novel has a very loose structure. It is composed of a good number of stories with very strained link among them. There are a number of characters drifting in and out. The plot is not closely integrated.

Both the novels have different closure. Joyce ends on a happy note with an optimistic view of life but Thomas portrays Dylan's frustrated attempts at the end of the novel. *A Portrait* contains the story of Joyce's childhood and adolescence and it tells how Joyce came to be the man he was, an artist. Joyce has certainly used the materials of his own life for writing this book, but he has selected, arranged, altered, dramatized and fictionalized those material to support the central theme of the book. According to Parrinder, "The Portrait begins (as we have seen) with his father's words and ends with a cry addressed to an imaginary father." The novel ends on a positive note when Stephen feels his soul emancipated from the intricate web of relationships and affections. Thomas's novel cannot be said to be open ended. He has also described the various events of his life but they have very little bearing in his development as an artist. The experiences are not a very complex. Dylan is not very visionary child as is Stephen. Traces of Wordsworth and Shelleyan romanticism can be seen in Stephen's belief in the priestly role of the artist and his duty "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (P. 253). The actual experience is transformed into artistic myth in Joyce's novel but not in Thomas's *A Young Dog*.

Still, Thomas's novel cannot be said to be a parody of Joyce's *A Portrait*. It a serious work of its own kind. According to Tindall, "For word loving Joyce, God and dog, verbal mirrors, were closely related. . . . Thinking himself god, Stephen fears dog. . . . yet there is a running suggestion that, fearing dogs, he fears himself, and that his portrait, as if reflected in a mirror, is that of the artist as a young dog. (Word loving Dylan Thomas, fond of Joyce seems to have apprehended this). Though many aspects of Thomas's novel are reminiscent of Joyce's work yet the experiences of Dylan are portrayed differently. But both the novels are serious work of their authors and are significant in their own right.

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