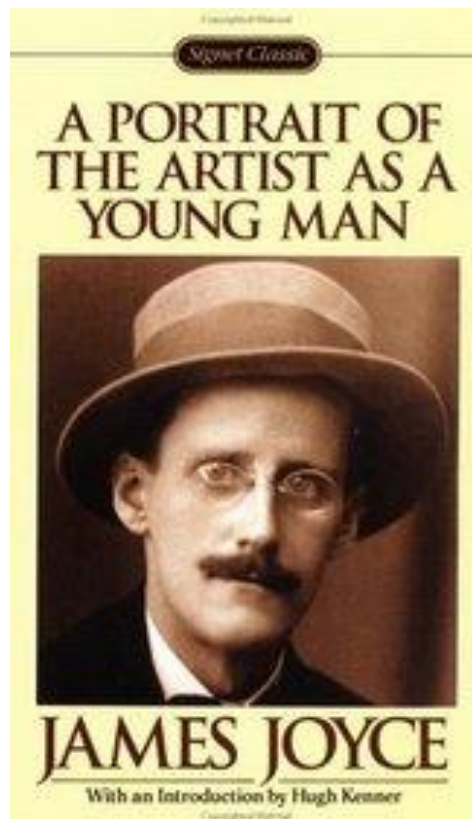


**Out of the Labyrinth:
Optimism in *A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man***

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Abstract

Optimism is a mental attitude or world view that interprets situation and events as being best optimized. The concept is typically extended to include the attitude of hope for future conditions unfolding optimum as well. Philosophers often link the concept of optimism with the name of Wilhelm Leibniz who held that we live in the best of all possible worlds or that God created a physical universe that applies the laws of Physics. This paper analyses the concept of Optimism in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The novel with its protagonist Stephen Dedalus striving to get out of the limitations of Labyrinths is an example of optimistic attitude to life and its progress. James Joyce's artist, Stephen is not a symbol of

Everyman representative, but of man apart, defined by his differences from the generality of humankind, at odds with his society.

Key words: Optimism, Labyrinth, Freedom

Optimism for Survival

Optimism can be defined as a tendency to expect the best possible outcome or an interest to dwell on the most hopeful aspects of a situation. The broader concept of optimism is the understanding of nature, past, present and future which operates by laws of optimization. This understanding although criticized by counterviews such as pessimism, idealism and realism, leads to a state of mind that believes everything as it should be and that future will be as well.

The word optimism is originally derived from the Latin ‘optimum’ meaning ‘best’. Being optimistic, in the typical sense of word, ultimately means one expects the best possible from any given situation. In the philosophical sense optimism is the doctrine asserted by Wilhelm Leibniz, the German philosopher that this world is the best of all possible worlds. It is a belief that the universe is improving and that good will ultimately triumph over evil. Ethically optimism is best represented by Philosophers like Rousseau, who believed that man is inherently good by nature.

Optimism is a belief system with three major components: first, the belief in our own power to make our life and future better; second, the belief that negative events in life are not permanent, personal or pervasive ; and third, the belief that positive events in life are permanent personal or pervasive. Personal refers to our interpretation of who is responsible for the event and why it happened. Pervasive pertains to one’s belief about how other parts of life will be affected by the event. Permanent refers to the lasting effects of an event. In the popular sense of the word optimism means “the belief that there is a soul of goodness in things evil, and that whatever exists is right in some inscrutable fashion, or can be made the means of good (“Optimism,” *Everyman’s Encyclopedia*).

The Structure of This Novel Resembles the Structure of a Poem

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The structure of this novel with its interweaving of themes, symbols and motifs more closely resembles the structure of a poem than of a traditional novel. 'Plot' is internalized, not Dublin or Ireland, but Stephen's consciousness is 'the stage on which the dramatic action unfolds'. The novel opens amid elaborate counterpoint. The first two pages enact the entire action in microcosm. They are a prelude. And if they do not enact the entire action, at least in them one finds hints of the significant problems that preoccupy Stephen Dedalus as he reaches toward maturity, sin and retribution, paternity and maternity, the tyranny of the social order, the artist's relation to the material. With each the young artist must come to terms before the *Portrait* is concluded. Joyce uses a variety of methods to suggest that optimism undoubtedly prevails in the character of Stephen Dedalus and these ultimately control the reader's reaction to his material. Hugh Kenner states: "Each chapter in the *Portrait* gathers up the thematic material of the preceding ones and entwines them with a dominant theme of its own" ("The Portrait in Perspective" 31).

The concept of optimism has captured the attention of many writers other than Joyce because it answered a profound philosophical question, if God is omnipotent and benevolent, then why is there so much evil in the world? Optimism provides an easy way out of this philosophical dilemma, God has made everything for the best, and even though one might experience personal misfortune, God through that misfortune is still promoting the higher good. Optimism thus assures freedom, courage and happiness to the individual to face the mundane realities of existence. It releases the life-force of perseverance and hope, and stands as the best among the varied philosophies that solidify human faith in the truthfulness of realities of existence with definite spiritual overtones.

Stephen's Labyrinth

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, essentially the story of Joyce's own break with the Catholic Church and discovery of his true vocation, was published in 1916, at the end of a process of gestation covering many years. In *Portrait* we are locked up firmly inside Stephen's world of ideas. As he is aware of other people only as the ones who affect his own inner realities, there is often something rather abstract about the remaining personages in the text. But the picture is always clear and hard in its depiction of Stephen's successive predicaments. The

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imaginative and unathletic small boy, hard-pressed by the narrow orthodoxies and hovering brutalities of a Jesuit-boarding school: and the pride and arrogance which he progressively summons to his aid: the overwhelming sense of sin into which the severity of Catholic doctrine precipitates him upon the occasion of his untimely sexual imitations; the breaking of his nerve and his phase of anxious and elaborate religious observance; the crisis of his break with Church and family, and the exalting moment of revelation and dedication on the strand: all these are vividly realized and rendered experiences. Bolt states, “Seeing himself always in a heroic role, Stephen in the *Portrait* is by way of figuring as a mock-heroic, comic figure, comparable with Don Quixote or Parson Adams” (*Preface to James Joyce* 57).

A Mature Artist Looks Back – Use of Stream of Consciousness

In the novel a mature artist looks back over his own youth, from a particular viewpoint, perceiving what was significant to his development as artist, estimating what was vital in that development, and viewing his early self with a purposeful irony. Joyce’s innovative use of ‘Stream of Consciousness’ technique makes the *Portrait* a story of the development of Stephen’s mind. By the end of the novel, Joyce renders a portrait of a mind that has achieved emotional intellectual and artistic adulthood. In this novel, Stephen’s freedom of thought is manifest from the start. He is inwardly determined to follow his own course, and has to hide away from authorities, (mother, Dante, the Church). Joyce uses his own life as a framework for the novel but feels perfectly free to revise his autobiography for the purposes of art. As Schutte states in his introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “The flawed, impure young Joyce is the raw material from which Stephen Dedalus is created; his experience is the raw material for Stephen Dedalus’ life”(9).

Artist’s Struggle

Regarded as process the five chapters of the *Portrait* depict the embryo artist’s struggle, first to master his environment and then to free himself from. At the end of each chapter he attains the completion of one stage in his growth; he finds a new world and a point of rest, though in every case a temporary one which collapses under the strain of internal pressure. Joyce employs myth in this novel with the story of Stephen Daedalus the Artificer and his son Icarus. This myth appears to be the guiding thread throughout the novel. Like Daedalus the artist,

Stephen removes himself expertly from the labyrinths (Church, the family and the nation) he is confronted with. In the end of the novel, Stephen, like his name sake, creates the instrument of his escape, his aesthetic theory. Stephen's aesthetic theory is his creation, and the tool that he hopes will remove once and for all from the labyrinths that pursue him.

When we take this work, one can note that it ends on a rather optimistic note. Joyce is not presenting Stephen simply as wayward, unstable, and inconsistent. Stephen is giving his own path to choose, either that of Stephen, the martyr or that of Daedalus, the rebel intellectual. He chooses to be Daedalus and pursue his own course.

An optimist beyond everything, Stephen decides to tackle his labyrinth and ultimately triumph over the inner and outer dilemmas. It could bring the best in himself and the present, then, cannot subdue his soaring spirit. It is this optimistic sense of freedom that equips Stephen with the facing reality. Stephen Dedalus' stepping into the world of full optimism actually offers a beginning of progressive march of life in the bleak modern world that will not ever become a labyrinth for the modern Daedalus.

Beyond Icarus

In Stephen, Joyce portrays the zenith of optimism that the present world is the best suitable one for a man to achieve his means despite the harsh realities of life. In one way or the other, the 'labyrinths' act as his force of survival. Life is dynamic, not static. In a universe of the survival of the fittest, each one of us must struggle against the odds of life in one way or the other. Only a person with liberal optimistic sense and firm tenacity could shatter the evil forces and thus withstand as the very epitome of success and victory. Both Stephen, representing the two age extremities of life tackles all the webs of nature and society only from the belief in the ultimate triumph of good. Dedalus fights hopefully out of his Octopussian self. He fights to harden himself on the way to maturity and has to wade through the ocean of his inner reality of doubts, anxieties, limitations, imperfections in order to reach the optimistic land of the survival of the fittest. He opts to become an artist and the struggles have been those of the artist in the brewing. He is determined to become the artist not with the wax and wings, but with natural wings of achieved optimism. Thus Joyce share with the reader the opinion that Stephen will

survive at all costs by flying away into optimism out of his labyrinths and maintain the balance the world essentially needs. Optimism viewed in this manner is goodness and survival itself for the world essentially needs.

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