
UNIT 4 TECHNIQUE

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

Our objective in this unit is to look at Joyce's technique in *A Portrait*. As you know all modernists attached a lot of value to technique, the 'how' of a work as distinguished from its 'what'. The slogan 'Make It New' had a special significance for every modernist writer. Joyce is no exception. In this unit you will see how the 'stream-of-consciousness' technique which was touched upon in the unit on 'Contexts' actually operates in *A Portrait*. You will also see the variety of styles used by Joyce and become aware of the exploitation of repetition as a stylistic device. This section will cover repetition of image, symbol and motif.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In terms of influence exercised on future practitioners of his craft and in terms of range and audacity of experimentation, Joyce has been perhaps the tallest figure in modernist literature written in English. The whole range of his stylistic daring becomes clear to one only after one has encountered *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* as well but *A Portrait* by itself is enough to stamp him as a dexterous user of English and as one aware of the possibilities as well as limitations of the language. The subject of the novel is conveyed to us both by the surface narration of events and by dialogue as also by a deliberate carefully woven network of verbal associations incorporated into the text. The language strives towards a kind of radiance and textural richness and density throughout and there is an exactitude, tautness and economy about it which is really striking. The best lessons of Realism, Naturalism and Symbolism are evidently internalised quite well by Joyce and he adds a lot of his own special technique to the cumulative and composite legacy represented by these influencing trends.

4.2 VARIETY OF STYLES

One of Joyce's major stylistic achievements in *A Portrait* is the modulation of styles throughout. As you read the novel, you are going to realize that Joyce uses a different style in each section to underline each stage of Stephen's development. Each style is meant to represent a different stage in Stephen's progress towards the final realization of his true vocation. The changes in style are deliberately foregrounded (highlighted).

The novel is set in motion by the formula one would use for starting a fairytale. By a selection and patterning of language, Joyce is able to mimic the growth of the child's mind:

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo....

His father told him that story : his father looked at him through a glass : he had a hairy face.

He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived : she sold lemon platt.

O, the wild rose blossoms
On the little green place.

He sang that song. That was his song.

O, the green wothe botheth.

When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell.

His mother had a nicer smell than his father. She played on the piano the sailor's hornpipe for him to dance. He danced:

Tralala lala
Tralala tralaladdy
Tralala lala
Tralala lala

(p.3)

The usual narrative links are replaced to a large extent by verbal echoes and associations. There is a direct representation of sensations, feelings and impressions. The suggestion of party recitations helps to evoke family life in the parlour. Sensations of wet and dry, the sense of a ministering mother and the contrast in the child's mind between father and mother are all introduced here. As the child grows, the idiom changes and the range of interests becomes wider. Now the language and perceptions are those of a schoolboy. Further we come across a mind becoming aware of itself and of the body:

He kept on the fringe of his line, out of sight of his prefect, out of the reach of the rude feet, feigning to run now and then. He felt his body small and weak amid the throng of players and his eyes were weak and watery. (p.4)

The schoolboy slang now introduced into the novel richly reinforces and enlivens Joyce's rendering of school life. There are words like 'scut', 'feck', 'rump', 'stink', 'dog-in-the-basket', 'smuggling' and these bring about a subtle alteration in the language amidst which Stephen grows.

For the Christmas dinner episode we find Joyce taking recourse to a dramatic, impersonal mode. In a sense, the world of adults takes over here. Later the style returns to Stephen's subjective viewpoint around the pandying incident but the pandying is described by way of an intrusion of external reality. Stephen's thought patterns and the associations of 'cruel and unfair' and the internal monologue that Stephen has is pitched at a high level of tension. It is defused after the interview with the rector. The mood now changes to the dramatic and the form reflects that.

A detailed cataloguing and sampling of the great variety of styles is not possible here so let me give you an indication only of some of the broad stylistic shifts mostly coinciding with transitions from chapter to chapter.

The second chapter traces Stephen's adolescence from the first awakening of sexuality and his growing isolation from family. In the first section of this chapter we find Stephen nauseated with the reality of his life as well as with avenues of escape that are available to him. He now thinks of a meeting with an idealized woman. This hope is presented to us in a parody of sentimental romantic fiction. The style matches Stephen's cultivated posturing and his romantic reading: '... in secret he began to make ready for the great part which he felt awaited him...' (p.64)

Later when Stephen roams the backstreets of Dublin's brothel district, there is a subtle change in style as the coarse insistent external reality makes its presence felt. In the third chapter the external reality and its grossness take over for a while:

He hoped there would be stew for dinner, turnips and carrots ... stuff it into you, his belly counselled him. (p.109)

When we come to the sermons, a different kind of rhetoric takes over. One example would suffice:

I pray to God that my poor words may have availed today to confirm in holiness those who are in a state of grace, to strengthen the wavering, to lead back to the state of grace the poor soul that has strayed if any such be among you. (p.145)

The rhetoric here relies as much on sound as on meaning for its effect. Once Stephen has confessed, the mood changes and the prose reflects the change:

The muddy streets were gay. He strode homeward, conscious of an invisible grace pervading and making light his limbs. In spite of all he had done it. (p.157)

One of the climactic epiphanies in the novel is represented by the sight of the wading girl and its effect on Stephen. The prose with its buoyancy lives up to the demands of the occasion quite well:

Heavenly God! cried Stephen's soul, in an outburst of profane joy.

He turned away from her suddenly and set off across the strand. His cheeks were aflame; his body was aglow; his limbs were trembling. On and on and on he strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the advent of the life that had cried to him.

Her image had passed into his soul forever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to

throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory. (p.186)

The buoyancy of style is reminiscent of the simile used earlier by Joyce to indicate Stephen's state of mind when he and Emma take a tram-ride home after the children's party at Harold's Cross:

His heart danced upon her movements like a cork upon a tide. (p.72)

In the final section of the fourth chapter the style that takes over is (most of the time) exultant, almost riotous. A boisterous energy seems to be driving the language. The cumulative rhetorical effect of the resonances of words come to be of great importance in such a linguistic situation.

In the opening paragraph of the fifth chapter we get a taste of Joyce's great ability handle uncomfortable detail through cataloguing and through tight structures of modification:

He drained his third cup of watery tea to the dregs and set to chewing the crusts of fried bread that were scattered near him, staring into the dark pool of the jar. The yellow dripping had been scooped out like a boghole and the pool under it brought back to his memory the dark turfcoloured water of the bath in Clongowes. (p.188)

Later in the fifth chapter Joyce's mastery of dialogue and of dramatic form is strikingly at work in his evocation of life at University College, Dublin. Bantering between students is handled with great dexterity and there is, at the same time, remarkable warmth and humanity beneath the surface ribaldry and word-play. Innuendos that the students direct at each other are an example of the vital sources of native humour which sustained the liveliness of Joyce's prose throughout his career. One example will suffice. When Lynch has a hearty laugh on something Cranly says, Cranly comes up with:

Lynch is awake. (p.218)

'The most notable thing about linguistic play in the fifth chapter is that Stephen (tacitly or otherwise) is now very much a part of it all:

His fellow student's rude humour ran like a gust through the cloister of Stephen's mind, shaking into gay life limp priestly vestments that hung upon the walls setting them to sway and caper in a sabbath of misrule. (p.208)

In response to Cranly's words, 'Lynch is awake', Lynch straightens himself and thrusts forward his chest. Stephen's comment on this is:

Lynch puts out his chest....
As a criticism of life. (p.218)

So, we can conclude that the variety of styles that we come across in *A Portrait* is quite functional and tailored to the different stages of Stephen's growth. The broad progression of the style is from a kind of 'interior monologue' of the infant, through growing objectivity, to the adolescent lyricism of the vision of the wading girl. Then there is broad humour and finally there are the diary jottings that amount to some kind of shorthand for the 'interior monologue' form associated with 'stream-of-consciousness' and used more extensively in *Ulysses*.

Repetition as a stylistic and structural device is used by most modernist writers. *A Portrait* also uses it quite effectively. It offers endless difference in sameness and reminds us of the ways in which variety can be organised around some governing preoccupations. At the same time, you should keep this in mind that the function of the repetition of image, symbol and motif in *A Portrait* is most of the time only suggestive, not definitive. The use of some of the key motifs in the very first section of the novel thus has in it as much of fluidity as fixity of connotation. This fluidity then embraces the whole novel.

Birds, water and colours are chief among the symbols that Joyce has woven into the structure and texture of *A Portrait*. First let us look at **water**. Associations of wet and dry are there right at the start in the bedwetting episode. The bog water with which the water of the square ditch into which Wells pushes Stephen comes to be associated, has a way of returning to Stephen's consciousness. It does so not only as 'watery tea' but as the squalor of the kitchen at home and as the turf-coloured bath water. And yet the same water comes to have very different and liberating connotations for him in the episode relating to the wading girl. Moving now to '**colours**' we find the first colours of infant awareness, the green of Ireland and Parnell and the red of the family hearth are both joined in the ivy and holly of the Christmas dinner and then go on to be reflected in the colours of the seaweeds through which Stephen wades. The wading girl's colours are also significant; thighs of ivory, dress of blue and white, and hair of gold. Interestingly, ivory and white also tie up with Eileen's hands. Finally there is the symbolism associated with **birds**. It starts with the eagles that will pull out the infant Stephen's eyes. Then there are the 'talons' of the young Jesuit prefect Mr. Gleeson. The bird image later comes to be associated with flight, liberation and transcendence. First there is the figure of Icarus rising above the waters. Still more significant is the wading girl who is envisioned as having been transformed into a sea-bird with the delicate legs of a crane, standing in the water as if poised for flight. Her bosom is like the plumage of a dove.

Along with the chief symbols two more things have symbolic significance. These are **flowers** and **roads**. Both play an important role in Stephen's mental make-up and baggage. The rose symbolism in the novel is complex. The associations of roads are tied up with walks and wandering. These are also a part of the topography of Dublin (in actuality and as part of Stephen's internal landscape).

Samuel Beckett once warned readers against the danger of excessive 'neatness of identification' where Joyce's use of symbols was concerned. You would do well to keep in mind the fact that Joyce mostly keeps his symbolism in a fluid state so that the connotations keep changing most of the time.

4.4 STREAM-OF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND 'EPIPHANY'

Some indication of the implications of the term 'stream-of-consciousness' has already been given to you by equating it (roughly speaking) with a 'train of thought'. The method is in evidence at many places in *A Portrait*, more so in the opening and the closing pages of the novel. The emphasis in the 'stream-of-consciousness' method is on the psychic being of the characters and the associative mode is kept in the forefront of Stephen's consciousness. This is at the heart of the novel as it is both its subject-matter and its major structuring mechanism. In the opening and the closing pages, the inner aspect of this consciousness is on view. At the start, the reader is rushed back and forth through sudden disruptions. The story of the moo-cow

is linked in Stephen's consciousness with Byrne's sweetshop. A memory of his father leads to a memory of his mother. Associations lead us to Eileen. The coldness of the bed and its wetness are all part of associative processes as are the smells exuded by Stephen's parents.

Another good example of the method is when Stephen is on the football field. He is in the midst of a scrimmage and is thinking of going home for the holidays. He longs for the warmth of the room where he has pasted at his desk the number of days still remaining between then and the holidays. His thoughts on the field move in quick succession from his cold hands, to the various meanings of the word 'belt', to nasty expressions used by the boys, to his mother's warning not to speak to the rough boys and so on.

The way associative processes are pressed into the service of the weaving together of recurrent motifs is quite obvious in the episode related to Wells and the discomfiture it causes everytime it comes back to Stephen:

He shivered as if he had cold slimy water next to his skin. That was mean of Wells to shoulder him into the square ditch...How cold and slimy the water had been! (p.7)

The motif of wetness and coldness stays with him:

He felt his forehead warm and damp against the prefect's cold damp hand. That was the way a rat felt slimy and damp and cold. (pp.19-20)

There are many other examples in the text where associative processes are at work. You should locate them and see how they tie up with Joyce's overall technique. You will find that Joyce mostly sticks to a kind of realist-naturalist style with symbolic motifs interwoven into the narrative. In the first and last pages the technique is more or less exclusively 'stream-of-consciousness'. The diary-jottings at the end are syntactically much closer to the style of *Ulysses* due to their being more fragmentary. In the opening pages the 'train of thought' is expressed in complete sentences and regular syntax.

Let us now look at the role of 'epiphany' in *A Portrait*. The concept of 'epiphany' is basic to the appreciation of Joyce's general approach in *A Portrait*. By an epiphany Joyce meant a sudden spiritual manifestation or 'showing forth'. With some stretching of the connotations of the word, it is possible to see *A Portrait* (as many critics have done) as incorporating a sequence of related epiphanies in the form of a forward-moving narrative. The 'showing forth' that Joyce had in mind was the reality (the 'whatness') of an object, person, an event. The estuary epiphany is the most notable example of the kind of 'showing forth' that Joyce had in mind. What happens here is that Stephen, in a flash of insight, recognizes the call of his artistic vocation, transfigured into the form of the wading girl who becomes for him (then) the embodiment of art and beauty. The second thing to note is that another aspect of epiphany (the joy or the sense of enlightenment it creates) is conveyed to us in the wild transport of delight experienced by Stephen at the sight of the girl. The two aspects have a way of reinforcing each other. They resonate and bring the fourth chapter to its rapturous climax. The interview with the Jesuit director also has in it strong elements of epiphany. That episode needs to be seen in its totality (its before and after included) to realize its epiphanic status.

4.5 LINGUISTIC FEATURES

To the extent Joyce's style in *A Portrait* retains naturalistic tendencies, it tends to be

up with this linguistic thrust is that there is a preponderance of tight structures of modification (adjectives, adverbs, adjective phrases, adverbial phrases and adjective clauses and adverb clauses) occurring both in pre-head and post-head positions. The aim is to give us as exact a description as possible. Three examples of varying length will illustrate this linguistic tendency. The first is:

The sad quiet grey blue of the dying day came through the window and the open door, covering over and allaying quietly a sudden instinct of remorse in Stephen's heart. (p.176)

The second example is:

Near the hoardings on the canal he met the consumptive man with the doll's face and the brimless hat coming towards him down the slope of the bridge with little steps, tightly buttoned into his chocolate overcoat and holding his furled umbrella a span or two from him like a divining rod. (p.191)

The third example is:

He passed unchallenged among the docks and along the quays wondering at the multitude of corks that lay wobbling on the surface of the water in a thick yellow scum, at the crowds of quay porters and the rumbling carts and the ill-dressed bearded policemen. (p.69)

In the first example, the word 'blow' is modified by three adjectives (sad, quiet, grey) and the verb 'came through' is modified by the participial phrase 'covering over and allaying quietly a sudden instinct of remorse'. In the second example, the noun phrase 'consumptive man' is modified by 'with the doll's face and the brimless hat' and the whole phrase taken together is tied up to the participial phrase 'coming towards him down the slope of the bridge with little steps'. This modified structure is further modified by 'tightly buttoned into his chocolate overcoat and holding his furled umbrella a span or two from him like a divining rod'. In the third example, the verb 'passed' is modified first by 'unchallenged among the ducks and along the quays' and further by 'wondering at the multitudes of corks'. The 'corks' themselves are further modified by 'that lay wobbling on the surface of the water in a thick yellow scum'. 'Mean scrupulousness' is the expression which is quite appropriate for this kind of nagging accuracy and this accuracy works very well in the service of the modernist preoccupation with city-life, with concretion and with immediacy and complexity.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

As with other great modernists, technique is an extremely significant part of Joyce's novelistic art and most technical devices are there to add novelty as well as accuracy to the presentation. The variety of styles in the novel is extraordinary and each change of style conforms to some stage in Stephen's growth. 'Stream-of-consciousness' is used less extensively here than in *Ulysses* and epiphany is used to remarkable effect. Tight structures of modification mark the syntax of the novel at most places.

4.7 QUESTIONS

1. What kind of style does Joyce use to convey the workings of Stephen's mind as an infant in the opening pages of *A Portrait*?

2. What do you understand by the term 'stream-of-consciousness'? Which works of Joyce use it more extensively than does *A Portrait*?
3. Write a short note on associative processes in *A Portrait* in terms of the random working of memory leading from one thought/image/impression to another.
4. How does the use of tight structures of modification (adjectives, adverbs, adverbial and adjectival phrases and adverb and adjective clauses) help Joyce in giving textural density to his style in *A Portrait*?
5. Give at least one example of 'epiphany' from *A Portrait*.

4.8 SUGGESTED READING

A good introductory book on matters related to the technique of *A Portrait* is Christopher Hanson's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1969. You will find Patrick Parrinder's book *James Joyce* quite useful in the matter of shifts on and variety of styles. Anthony Burgess's extensive writings on Joyce are useful in the matter of throwing light on Joyce's linguistic virtuosity. His 1980 book *Joyceprick* is quite helpful.