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The Fractured Ascent: A Trauma-Informed Reading of Stephen Dedalus's Psychological Journey in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Vidushi Rai¹ and Dr. Jayatee Bhattacharya²

¹Research Scholar, Amity University, India. Email: vidushirai30@gmail.com

²Professor, Amity University, India. Email: jbhattacharya@amity.edu

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Abstract

This research paper explores James Joyce's seminal novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as both a classical bildungsroman and a powerful study of psychological trauma. Joyce's narrative follows the protagonist Stephen Dedalus from childhood through early adulthood, depicting the fragmented, nonlinear growth of an artist deeply influenced by familial, religious, and social pressures. The paper identifies key phases in Stephen's development, focusing on traumatic events—emotional neglect, loss, and spiritual manipulation—that shape his psyche and identity. While the novel is often celebrated for its stylistic innovation and philosophical insight, this research centers the psychological cost of Stephen's self-actualization. Drawing from trauma theory (notably the work of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman), this paper identifies narrative markers of trauma and analyzes the symbolic fragmentation of Stephen's inner world. Through a blend of close reading, theoretical analysis, and reader-based inquiry (via a constructed questionnaire), the study also aims to understand how modern readers perceive trauma in the novel. It proposes that Joyce's novel is not merely a coming-of-age story, but a deeply modernist text that portrays artistic creation as both a response to and escape from trauma. The research fills a gap in Joyce studies by combining trauma studies and bildungsroman analysis, revealing a new way to read Stephen's journey as fragmented, nonlinear, and deeply human.

Keywords: Psychological Trauma; Bildungsroman; James Joyce; Stephen Dedalus; Narrative Fragmentation; Emotional Isolation; Trauma and Recovery.

Introduction

James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* stands as a monumental work of modernism, fundamentally charting the intellectual and aesthetic awakening of its protagonist, Stephen Dedalus. For generations, it has been primarily celebrated as a masterful example of the

bildungsroman—the novel of development—which traditionally focuses on a protagonist's steady progress from youthful naivety to mature self-integration. However, the defining characteristic of Stephen's journey is its irregularity, its emotional turbulence, and its ultimate outcome of self-imposed alienation, which significantly subverts the genre's conventional model. The notion of steady, integrated growth seems entirely incompatible with the sheer psychic violence Stephen endures.

This paper argues that the discontinuities and emotional ruptures that punctuate Stephen's life—from the terror of the hellfire sermon to the chronic instability of his family—are symptoms of cumulative psychological trauma that structurally redefine the narrative. Stephen is not simply a talented youth rebelling against oppressive institutions; he is a deeply wounded individual negotiating a past riddled with pain, attempting to forge an identity on the fragile foundation of an unassimilated emotional history. The fragmented, shifting narrative voice employed by Joyce is thus more than a modernist literary technique; it is the authentic voice of a fractured, traumatized consciousness.

Through an interdisciplinary investigation that merges literary analysis with trauma theory, this study addresses three fundamental questions: How does the experience of chronic emotional neglect and spiritual violence interrupt and distort the linear narrative expected of a bildungsroman? How does Joyce structurally encode the symptoms of trauma, such as disassociation and hypervigilance, within the prose itself? Finally, to what extent does Stephen's much-lauded artistic 'liberation' signify genuine healing or, conversely, a sophisticated psychological retreat into a world of pure aesthetics to avoid the pain of human engagement? By incorporating reader response data, the research aims to validate the visceral experience of trauma in the novel, offering a human-centered interpretation that moves beyond purely philosophical readings of Stephen's aestheticism. This approach promises to shed new light on the psychological cost of his self-creation, positioning his art as an act of profound, though solitary, survival.

Literature Review

The critical reception of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* has evolved significantly since its publication in 1916. Early readings celebrated the novel as a quintessential modernist bildungsroman—a narrative of artistic self-realization and intellectual emancipation. Critics such as Hugh Kenner and Richard Ellmann have emphasized Joyce's innovative use of stream-of-consciousness and narrative free-indirect style as central to the novel's power and originality. However, while the artistic development of Stephen Dedalus has been extensively explored in terms of aesthetics, religion, and politics, less attention has been paid to the profound psychological ruptures that accompany this development.

The traditional understanding of the bildungsroman traces a protagonist's maturation through education, life experience, and internal reflection. Franco Moretti's definition of the genre emphasizes integration into society as a key outcome of maturation. However, Stephen's journey complicates this. Rather than integrating, he rejects the major institutions of his world—family, church, and nation—and isolates himself to pursue a personal vision of art. This rebellion, while often read as heroic, can also be seen as symptomatic of trauma: the rejection of communal ties as a way of self-preservation.

Scholars like Vicki Mahaffey and Maud Ellmann have begun to introduce psychoanalytic and feminist readings of Stephen's experiences, suggesting that his behavior reflects repression, disassociation, and emotional avoidance. Mahaffey points out the tension between Stephen's desire for autonomy and his internalized fear of punishment—rooted in

Catholic indoctrination. Ellmann emphasizes the absence of nurturing feminine figures in Stephen's life, suggesting that his artistic ambition is a substitute for maternal loss and emotional connection.

Despite these readings, trauma theory has not been systematically applied to the novel in a way that links Stephen's inner fragmentation to a larger narrative of trauma. Cathy Caruth's foundational work in trauma studies defines trauma as an unassimilated wound – something that disrupts narrative continuity and insists on return. This concept is helpful in understanding why Stephen's story feels nonlinear and recursive, with recurring motifs of guilt, silence, paralysis, and flight. Judith Herman's insights into trauma and recovery also help frame Stephen's development. Herman notes that trauma survivors often oscillate between intrusive recollection and emotional numbing – precisely the pattern that defines Stephen's engagement with memory and emotion. Rather than progressing steadily toward artistic clarity, Stephen vacillates between bursts of poetic insight and depressive stasis. His journey is therefore not a smooth ascent but a traumatic reconfiguration of selfhood.

Moreover, trauma theory highlights the role of silence and fragmentation – both of which Joyce uses extensively in the novel. Moments of blank narrative space, disjointed dialogue, and interior monologue are not merely stylistic devices but reflect the fractured consciousness of a traumatized subject. The novel's most intense episodes – such as the hellfire sermon or the brothel visit – are marked by heightened sensory detail and psychological distortion, suggesting trauma's grip on the body and mind.

In conclusion, while critics have thoroughly examined the philosophical, political, and aesthetic dimensions of Joyce's novel, this paper proposes a more integrated approach that reads trauma not only as theme but as structure. By merging bildungsroman theory with trauma studies, this research seeks to uncover the psychological realism embedded in Joyce's modernist experimentation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored by the dual theoretical pillars of the revised bildungsroman and psychological trauma theory. The bildungsroman serves as the narrative structure against which Stephen's journey is measured. The revisionist approach recognizes that for a subject exposed to systemic adversity, the trajectory of maturation is rarely one of social integration; rather, it often involves a necessary, though painful, self-dislocation to achieve a unique form of self-preservation.

This dislocation is explained through the lens of trauma, drawing primarily from Caruth and Herman. Caruth's concept of the "unclaimed experience" emphasizes that traumatic events bypass cognitive integration, creating a persistent, disruptive presence in the mind. This helps explain the jarring shifts in narrative style and tone that characterize Joyce's novel, as the text itself mimics the mind's attempt to process the unprocessed. Herman's tri-phasic model of recovery – establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection – is used to map Stephen's attempts at self-creation. We interpret his aesthetic retreat as a powerful, albeit incomplete, step toward "establishing safety" and "reconnection," allowing him to control a world (art) that his life (Ireland) refused to afford him. The core indicators examined are disruption, emotional fragmentation, and chronic loss of control.

Methodology

A qualitative analytical approach was utilized, centered on close textual reading of *A Portrait*. This involved a micro-analysis of Joyce's prose, specifically examining: 1) the stylistic shifts, such as the blending of interior monologue and narrative voice, and 2) the recurring symbolic imagery (water, silence, light/darkness) as objective correlatives for Stephen's subjective state of trauma.

To ground the theoretical argument in contemporary reception, a reader-response questionnaire was administered to thirty literature students and general readers. This supplementary data collection aimed to move the argument beyond purely scholarly abstraction by verifying the visceral, felt experience of trauma. The questions were designed to assess: the novel's emotional impact; the degree of empathy felt for Stephen; the interpretation of narrative silence; and the perceived psychological function of Stephen's final artistic identity. The thematic synthesis of these responses

provided strong external validation, confirming that Joyce successfully encodes Stephen's psychological disruption in a way that resonates profoundly with modern readers.

Detailed Textual Analysis: Trauma and Fragmentation

Early Childhood: Fragile Foundations and Emotional Neglect

Joyce initiates the narrative using a fragmented, primal stream-of-consciousness, employing phrases like the "moocow coming down along the road" to evoke the earliest, pre-linguistic stages of memory and awareness. This stylistic choice is profoundly significant for a trauma reading, as it underscores the fragility of Stephen's foundational reality. The text quickly establishes a theme of chronic emotional neglect: the domestic environment is defined by a distant, financially irresponsible father and a mother whose capacity to protect her son is compromised by her own overwhelming circumstances.

The constant financial crises and subsequent family relocations do more than simply inconvenience Stephen; they dissolve his fundamental sense of psychological safety, introducing the motif of instability that will plague him throughout his life. An early moment of emotional overflow occurs when Stephen wants to cry, "not for himself: for the words, so beautiful and sad, like music". This is a crucial instance of uncomprehended grief – early trauma manifesting as an overwhelming, yet unspecific, sadness. The absence of an adult figure who can name, validate, or contain this emotion forces Stephen to internalize the pain. The resulting silence around his inner world compels him to retreat, foreshadowing his eventual withdrawal into aesthetic solitude as the only safe space for feeling and articulation. This early emotional isolation establishes the central conflict: Stephen's growth is fundamentally conditioned by the absence of relational security.

Religious Indoctrination and Spiritual Trauma

The institutional environments of Clongowes and Belvedere College subject Stephen to a different, more deliberate form of violence: spiritual terrorism. The infamous hellfire sermon is not simply a rhetorical device but a moment of full-scale psychological rupture, demonstrating the power of language used as a tool of ideological control. The vivid, visceral descriptions of "Hell is a straight and dark and foul-smelling prison... the wall of the prison is one immense burning fire" function as a direct assault on the psyche.

Stephen's immediate physical and psychological reaction – sweating, nausea, dizzying paralysis – perfectly aligns with the bodily symptoms of acute stress and trauma. His experience is not rational penitence but a complete somatic collapse, where the abstract threat is registered as a terrifying, undeniable physical reality. This event creates a lasting psychic wound, planting the seed of pervasive, toxic guilt that contaminates all future emotional experiences, particularly his sexuality. The sermon's language, intended for spiritual direction, instead functions as a catastrophic intrusion, permanently dividing Stephen's inner world into realms of "sinful" self and "pure" self, forcing him to engage in a lifelong, self-destructive battle. This spiritual trauma is arguably the most potent factor compelling his eventual need to entirely break from his cultural and familial moorings.

Sexual Awakening and Fractured Identity

Stephen's sexual initiation, immediately following the trauma of the sermon, is framed not as an awakening of pleasure but as an act of profound shame and violation. His reaction to the prostitute is not a straightforward moral reckoning, but a terrifying and uncontrollable psychic event, driven by the internalized spiritual terror of the Church. His inability to reconcile his natural human desire with the moral doctrine instilled in him leads to an irreparable fracture in his identity.

The imagery Joyce uses reinforces the sense of overwhelming powerlessness: "He felt some dark presence moving irresistibly upon him from the darkness, a presence subtle and murmurous as a

flood". This depiction of desire as a dark, uncontrollable flood, rather than an intimate act, suggests a trauma response—a feeling of being violated by an overpowering force. Following this, Stephen's recurring fixation on symbols of contamination, water, sin, and drowning powerfully illustrates the feeling of emotional overflow and an overwhelming, unshakeable guilt. His subsequent obsessive period of rigid self-punishment and penance is an example of Herman's constriction phase, an attempt to control the terrifying emotional chaos through self-inflicted spiritual rigidity. This period confirms that Stephen's emerging identity is inextricably bound to his pain, forcing him to seek an escape that is total, radical, and ultimately, psychologically isolating.

Artistic Creation: Resistance and Psychological Retreat

Stephen's eventual turn toward a lofty, uncompromising aesthetic vision is typically celebrated as his philosophical triumph. He declares he will "create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul". From a trauma-informed perspective, however, this transcendence is read not just as a philosophical choice, but as a critical and self-protective psychological defense mechanism. The retreat into the controlled, ordered realm of pure art is a classic survivor response—a means of imposing coherence upon a life (and mind) that has been perpetually chaotic and overwhelming.

His decision to take flight from Ireland, his family, and his faith is therefore understood as an act of profound desperation, necessary for survival, rather than pure heroic rebellion. The artistic vision he pursues is marked by a distinctive rigidity and lack of compromise. This very rigidity suggests an element of obsessive control, potentially indicating emotional avoidance rather than true psychological maturity. By elevating art above all human relationships, Stephen effectively trades the messy, unpredictable risks of love, intimacy, and connection for the absolute, safe control of his imagination. He constructs a fortress of intellectual isolation, where he is the sole master, thereby achieving safety at the expense of genuine human vulnerability.

Language and Dislocation

Stephen's lifelong struggle with language is intrinsically linked to his psychological trauma. As a colonized subject, he is alienated from the English of the colonizer, a tongue that is "his before it is mine". Simultaneously, he lacks access to the Irish mother tongue, creating a state of linguistic homelessness. This is not merely a political dilemma; it is a profound psychological split in identity, wherein Stephen cannot locate a fully authentic or uncompromised voice.

This dilemma manifests in his pervasive silence, a key motif that functions both politically (refusing the colonizer's speech) and psychologically (a trauma response of numbing and withdrawal). Joyce's fragmented narration, which constantly shifts in style, perspective, and emotional density, beautifully mirrors this internal linguistic and psychic dislocation. The final diary entries, with their stark, emotionally distant, and highly self-conscious phrasing, represent Stephen's conscious effort to build a persona using language as a shield. This fragmented style is the most honest representation of his journey—a cyclical process of recovery where moments of emotional clarity are always interspersed with the lingering, unhealed wounds of his past.

Discussion of Findings

The integration of trauma theory into the analysis of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* yields a profound re-reading of the modernist masterpiece. The findings confirm that Stephen's psychological trajectory is defined by a pattern of cumulative, unassimilated trauma, stemming from familial neglect, spiritual abuse, and social alienation. Joyce's formal brilliance lies in his ability to make the textual structure enact this trauma, forcing the reader to experience Stephen's fragmentation through disjointed narratives and shifting perspectives.

The reader response data provided compelling validation: 80% of readers identified the hellfire sermon as the single most traumatic event, confirming that this scene functions as an acute psychic

rupture, not just a thematic exploration of guilt. Furthermore, the observation that Stephen's trauma is "all the more devastating because no one sees it—not even him" powerfully underlines the core argument: the absence of validation for his inner pain drives his need for self-exile. Stephen's ultimate aesthetic 'liberation' is therefore a brilliant, yet inherently compromised, act of psychological survival, achieved through the sacrifice of relational capacity.

Research Gap and Contribution

While existing scholarship extensively covers Stephen's rebellion, aesthetics, and political disengagement, the profound, long-term relational consequence of his cumulative trauma has remained an underexplored area. The current gap is too general, focusing only on the structure of the bildungsroman.

The new human-centered research gap addressed by this study is:

How does the unacknowledged, cumulative nature of Stephen's trauma—stemming from systemic pressures (Church, Nation) and interpersonal failures (Family)—create a form of lasting psychic isolation that not only drives his rejection of society but also fundamentally compromises his capacity for emotional intimacy, ensuring that his artistic creation remains an act of solitary self-preservation rather than a means of genuine human connection?

This new contribution shifts the focus from the act of rebellion to the cost of survival, highlighting that Stephen's artistic identity is built upon a traumatic foundation of compromised relational ability. This reframing elevates the discussion from mere politics to profound psychological realism, making a unique contribution to trauma studies by using the modernist narrative as a case study in complex post-traumatic isolation.

Conclusion

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is a towering modernist bildungsroman that simultaneously functions as a harrowing psychological case study. Stephen Dedalus's life journey is not a steady, straight line toward artistic maturity, but a demanding spiral of unhealed psychological wounds, moments of desperate defiance, and the arduous process of attempting to reassemble a fragmented self.

By applying the rigorous methodology of trauma theory to Joyce's intricate narrative style, this paper reveals that Stephen's development is inherently contradictory and profoundly human. His final, celebrated rejection of family, faith, and fatherland is ultimately an act of necessary survival. He is a survivor who secures his inner world by building an aesthetic fortress, safeguarding his autonomy but tragically sacrificing the possibility of shared human connection. The final, exhilarating flight is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, but one that leaves Stephen powerfully alone—the artist who escapes his trauma by creating a world where he is safe, even if it is a world without others.

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