

Myth, Martyrdom, and Modernist Selfhood: The Symbolic Significance of the Name “Stephen Dedalus” in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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Abstract: James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* foregrounds the significance of naming as a crucial narrative and symbolic strategy. This article examines the mytho-symbolic implications of the protagonist’s name, “Stephen Dedalus,” and argues that Joyce deliberately fuses Christian martyrdom and classical artistry to construct Stephen’s modernist identity. The name “Stephen” evokes St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, signifying resistance, sacrifice, and defiance of religious authority, while “Dedalus” alludes to Daedalus, the mythical Greek artificer whose ingenuity enables escape from confinement. Through stream-of-consciousness narration, Joyce aligns Stephen’s psychological, aesthetic, and vocational development with these dual mythic trajectories. The article contends that the symbolic resonance of the name functions as a structural principle guiding Stephen’s evolution from institutional imprisonment—family, religion, and nation—towards artistic self-liberation. By embedding myth within modernist subjectivity, Joyce redefines the artist as both rebel and creator, forging a new aesthetic conscience beyond inherited traditions.

Keywords: James Joyce, Stephen Dedalus, Myth, Modernism, Identity, Aesthetic Vocation.

1. INTRODUCTION:

In modernist literature, the act of naming often exceeds its referential function and becomes a symbolic marker of identity, ideology, and destiny. James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) exemplifies this modernist strategy by investing the name of its protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, with dense mythological and ideological significance. Joyce repeatedly foregrounds Stephen’s name in the opening chapter, emphasizing its strangeness and inviting readers to read it allegorically rather than merely realistically. The novel retrospectively narrates Stephen’s formative years, presenting his intellectual, emotional, and artistic development against the backdrop of late nineteenth-century Irish society.

Stephen’s struggle is not merely personal but cultural and epistemological. He seeks to define himself outside the hierarchical institutions of family, religion, and nation that attempt to discipline and confine him. Joyce positions Stephen as a modernist subject whose identity is shaped through conflict, memory, and imagination. The symbolic structure of the name “Stephen Dedalus” becomes central to this process, encoding the novel’s concerns with rebellion, exile, sacrifice, and artistic creation.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research methodology grounded in close textual analysis and myth-critical theory. The primary method involves a close reading of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with particular attention to Joyce’s deliberate foregrounding of the protagonist’s name in the opening chapter and its recurrence across the novel. This textual analysis is supplemented by comparative mythological interpretation, drawing upon Christian and Greek mythic frameworks to elucidate the symbolic resonance of “Stephen” and “Dedalus.”

The study further engages modernist literary theory to situate Stephen Dedalus within broader debates on subjectivity, exile, and aesthetic autonomy. Concepts from Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque are employed to analyze Stephen’s resistance to hierarchical institutions, while biographical and historical contexts of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland inform the reading of social and ideological constraints depicted in the novel. Rather than treating myth

as a static allegory, this methodology views myth as a dynamic structural principle through which Joyce articulates the modern artist's struggle for identity. This interdisciplinary approach enables a nuanced understanding of naming as a narrative strategy that shapes Stephen's psychological and artistic development training according to social and cultural norms. As he himself defines education in a letter to his friend Hugh James Rose, though loosely, 'Education, I needn't remark to you, is everything that draws out human being, of which tuition, the teaching of schools, especially however important, is comparatively an insignificant part. This suggests that he doesn't support the school system's emphasis on advancing intellectual prowess, which can harm a child's natural sensibility.

3. DISCUSSION

Dedalus: Artistry, Craft, and Escape

The surname "Dedalus" invokes Daedalus, the master craftsman of Greek mythology renowned for his ingenuity and artistic skill. Daedalus constructs the labyrinth for King Minos and later devises wings of wax and feathers to escape from it. This mythic narrative of invention and escape provides a powerful analogue for Stephen's aesthetic vocation.

Joyce repeatedly situates Stephen within metaphorical labyrinths—educational institutions, familial expectations, nationalist politics, and religious doctrine—that stifle his creative growth. Like Daedalus, Stephen recognizes that escape is possible only through art. His growing sensitivity to language, rhythm, and narrative form reflects the development of a craftsman's consciousness. Joyce's emphasis on Stephen's manipulation of words, stories, and sounds parallels Daedalus's mastery over material and form.

The Labyrinth of Irish Society

Irish society in *A Portrait* functions as a complex labyrinth that entraps the individual within competing ideological demands. Family loyalty, nationalist sentiment, and Catholic morality converge to regulate Stephen's behaviour and aspirations. Joyce presents these institutions not as inherently evil but as historically sedimented structures resistant to individual creativity.

Stephen's navigation of this labyrinth is marked by intense introspection and psychological conflict. His artistic awakening emerges through moments of alienation rather than belonging. As critics note, Stephen "roams the labyrinth searching his mind for answers," attempting to reconcile personal desire with collective expectation. The labyrinth metaphor thus operates both socially and psychologically, reinforcing the Daedalian dimension of Stephen's identity.

Carnival, Rebellion, and the Modernist Artist

Stephen's rebellion aligns him with what Mikhail Bakhtin terms the "carnavalesque"—a mode of resistance that subverts hierarchical authority through inversion and critique. Rather than blindly accepting inherited values, Stephen interrogates and destabilizes them. His scepticism towards nationalism and religion reflects a broader modernist distrust of grand narratives and fixed truths.

This carnivalesque resistance also connects Stephen to Icarus, the son of Daedalus, whose reckless flight symbolizes youthful defiance. However, unlike Icarus, Stephen seeks a measured flight—one grounded in aesthetic discipline rather than hubris. Joyce thus revises the myth to accommodate modernist self-consciousness, balancing rebellion with artistic responsibility.

Flight and Aesthetic Vocation

Stephen's departure for Paris marks the culmination of his Daedalian trajectory. The recurring bird imagery underscores his symbolic flight from social confinement into artistic autonomy. This escape is not a rejection of reality but a reorientation towards it through aesthetic perception. Stephen envisions the artist as occupying a "priestly role," mediating experience through form rather than doctrine.

Joyce presents art as the means by which Stephen can "forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his race." This formulation encapsulates the novel's modernist ethos: art becomes an ethical and imaginative practice

capable of reshaping collective consciousness. The symbolic weight of Stephen's name thus finds its fullest expression in his commitment to artistic exile and creation.

4. CONCLUSION

James Joyce assigns profound symbolic significance to the name "Stephen Dedalus," transforming it into a structural and thematic core of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. By synthesizing Christian martyrdom and classical artistry, Joyce constructs a modernist protagonist whose identity is forged through resistance, exile, and creative self-fashioning. Stephen's alignment with St. Stephen foregrounds spiritual rebellion, while his connection to Daedalus emphasizes artistic ingenuity as a means of escape from ideological confinement. The name thus encapsulates Joyce's vision of the artist as both rebel and creator, capable of transcending inherited structures without denying their formative influence. Ultimately, the mythic resonance of Stephen Dedalus enables Joyce to articulate a modernist redefinition of freedom, identity, and aesthetic vocation, situating art as a transformative response to historical and cultural constraint.

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