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**A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN:
A STUDY IN MYSTERY**

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Introduction

Arts in general and literature in particular have, from the first, examined life from the imagined to the creatively modified reality; from the plausible to the highly improbable and from fantasy to mystery. The imagined, the creatively modified reality, the plausible and the improbable are all recurrent features of literary pieces, whether at the level of fiction or criticism. Although mystery and fantasy have featured in so many works, not much attention has been paid to them by critics. Yet, mystery especially has been so masterfully treated by James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to demand serious attention.

The concepts of mystery and fantasy are so closely related that a blink of the eye could lead one astray into fantasy instead of mystery. Both are different, but there is a thin film of demarcation between them.

Foster (1979:103) describes as fantastic "something that could not occur". This has to do with those elements we observe in a novel which in the normal sense would naturally not happen. Although the novel (for most of the time and part) is fictitious there is the probability of the action/ events in the novel happening in real life. But this is not the case with the fantastic. The fantastic book usually asks us to accept the supernatural. This naturally leads novels of this type to have "an improvised air". It is this that leads to the charm and force which such novels exude; and it is this that produces the special effect which Foster (1979:104) refers to where he says "...when the fantastic is introduced it produces a special effect; some are thrilled, others are choked off..." The fantastic is overwhelming. Thus, he further says, "the power of fantasy penetrates into every corner of the universe".

In an all-embracing manner, he draws up a list of items that could constitute the fantastic in a novel:

...all beings who inhabit the lower air, the shallow water
and the smaller hills, fauns and dryads and slips of the
memory, all verbal coincidences, puns and puns, all that
is medieval this side of the grave. (104)

Mystery, according to Thompson, has to do with "secret, hidden or

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN: A STUDY IN MYSTERY

inexplicable matter... a religious truth divinely revealed, especially one beyond human reason." Of the mystery story, he says it is "a fictional work dealing with a puzzling event....". Therefore for a work of art to be considered a mystery, it must harbour within it the inexplicable, especially as it affects human reason. There must be some sense of puzzle within it that needs to be resolved but which may never be, especially from human perception; and/or there must be a sense of divine revelation. However, it will be proper to point out here that the mysterious could and do have elements of reality in them, but the reality and truth of which could often be explained as divine / supernatural revelation.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the fantastic and the mysterious are very closely related in the sense that they centre on the inexplicable and the supernatural. They can only be said to be different in degrees.

A Study in Mystery

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is a novel built for the most part on mystery. The most striking are religious mystery, mystery of the self and the mystery of the presence of a being out of the ordinary.

So much of what we find in the novel centre on religion; Christianity, and the Catholic faith to be specific. We are presented with situations where we find the religious events organs and concepts inexplicable. For example, Hell is presented as a vast and abysmal place of torment for sinners the escape from which is impossible. It is bottomless and fortified beyond human reason: the walls were over twelve thousand feet thick; and the torment is unbearable: the fire burns with such intensity that it could melt everything; yet the content of hell are never combustible: they are eternal. (91-94)

Leading to the state of hell is the condition of sin: that act which, when committed or omitted, creates a gulf between us and God, and most often leads us on to greater and more sins. Stephen has carnal knowledge of Josephine and he is described as being in mortal sin. (75) We discover that this first mortal sin leads him on to more sins: "He wanted to sin with another of his kind, to force another being to sin with him and to exalt with her in sin." (75) In the last paragraph of page 77 we find this desire realized.

Completing the link in the chain of Hell, Death (that unknown and unseen portals through which every soul must pass to eternity), and sin are the fall of our first parents (Adam and Eve) and Satan (the Fallen Angel).

Adam and Eve were deceived into eating the forbidden fruit by Satan who earlier had disobeyed God Almighty and consequently had been

thrown down from heaven into hell, Adam and Eve committed a sin and the whole mankind from then till eternity is damned. This is quite a mystery

In the same vein, Heaven and Hell (the dwelling place for Satan and his followers) sound quite mysterious. These are really very much inexplicable and beat human reason.

There is also the mystery of the redemption of fallen mankind by the son of God (Jesus Christ) on the cross of calvary. He was made to suffer for the sins of men so as to take us back to Almighty God on the last day: Judgment Day. (86 - 87) Here is one man taking up the pains and sufferings of the entire human race of all generations.

Also, the very idea of Judgment Day is mysterious. We only believe because we are taught to do so. There is yet another kind of religious mystery introduced into the novel. This is the idea of Baptism which is said to cleanse the soul with the body. In one of his streams of thought we find Stephen questioning whether Baptism given by a baptized man who is not a priest is valid. He also asks if a layman in giving baptism pours the water before saying the word whether the child is baptized. Further, he asks if baptism with mineral water was valid (81). The very idea of baptism is a mystery.

The last of the religious mysteries to be considered here is that which centers on the Holy Communion. Here again we hear Stephen in our soul reeling out a chain of questions: at what point does wine become the blood and bread become the body of Christ? In the event of the bread becoming bad (corrupt) does it still remain the body of Christ?; and if the bread is already blessed, could it ever become corrupt? if yes, could it still remain the body of Christ?; and if the wine changes to vinegar is it still the blood of Jesus? The final question here is "will it still be holy?" Another question that he asks is "Does a tiny particle of the consecrated bread contain all the body and blood of Jesus Christ or a part of the body and blood? These are puzzles for which no answer has been proffered and may never be.

Another type of mystery in the novel has to do with the person of Stephen Dedalus. He could best be described as an enigma. We find not a human being but a supernatural being living among the people as a human. In fact, from the earliest time we come in contact with him, we find him always wondering at everything. As we grow further with him we observe that there are some forces that lead him on and pervade the atmosphere around him. That is why we find that he is often led to lonely places most times by powers he cannot resist. According to the narrator,

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN: A STUDY IN MYSTERY

he gave them ear only for a time but he was happy only when he was far from them, beyond their call, alone or in the company of phantasmal comrades. (63)

It is easy to mistake "them" as referring to the voices of his father and masters only. The voices that are more an ! the strongest ones are those beyond the physical: those of the "phantasmal comrades". After his performance in the drama, we see him walk away from all other persons apparently in answer to the call of these strongest voices. This is further confirmed by the statement:

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a voice from beyond the world was calling.
- Hello Stephanos
- Come along, Dadalus... (128)

Stephen is not only a mystery to the reader, he is more than that. He is equally a mystery to himself. This makes it much more difficult to understand his person- This enigma (Stephen) stands in dread of himself. We hear the narrator say,

but he [Stephen], apart from them and in silence remembered in what dread he stood of the mystery of his own body. (129)

The climax of mystery in the novel manifests in the presence of the beautiful young girl in the river

A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful sea-bird, (131)

Magic must have brought her and certainly, she is both strange and beautiful. Further concretizing the feeling of strangeness and awe surrounding the girl who could have been a spirit or ghost or any other of the heavenly or of Hades being is her appearance "mid-stream", the feeling of "loneliness" "stillness" and finally the "gazing out to sea. However one thing is certain: she is there physically and in a palpable form. We are not let into the history or personality of this girl; neither did Stephen interact with her. He merely looked at her furtively and walked by feeling aglow from the presence of the girl. This could be one, if not the main voice,

that calls Stephen always away from the company of other humans. Always we find Stephen under the influence of this force that pulls him away from others, to most unthought-of places. Remembered, he walked away from where he was expected to be waiting for his father.

Conclusion

One could easily mistake some or most of the things discussed above as fantasy. The fact that they do not just exist in the mind but also outside of it makes them mysterious. If nothing else, we find that the issues, incidents and situations highlighted above are unexplained and inexplicable. It is these features that push them through and over the threshold of fantasy to mystery.

Just like life itself, the entire novel is mysterious to a large extent, and that the incidents, situations and ideas discussed above are only landmarks in the forest of the mystery: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

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