

**Rebellion and Individualism in Modernist Fiction:
Perspectives from Camus's
The Stranger and Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man**
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Abstract

It is possible to argue successfully that the modern period, that is, the period alternatively denominated as the twentieth century, together with its literature, is rebellious in an unprecedented way. Even a cursory look at the various habits of thought and criticism that became prominent during the period would reveal this underlying mesh of iconoclasm. Is it the subversive criticism of structuralism and deconstruction which proclaimed "the author" dead? Or should we mention surrealism and Dadaism which revolted against standard morality, logical reason, conventions and so on? What about absurdism and the individualistic philosophy of existentialism? There is something perceptibly rebellious about all these modern schools of thought, particularly when we pit them against traditional thoughts. Often embedded in this rebelliousness is an individualism which challenges totalizations and conventional assumptions. In fact, one may say that modernism, amongst other things, is concerned with the individuality of the self. This paper then seeks to explore the manifestations of these rebellious and individualistic influences on two works of modernist fiction – James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Albert Camus's *The Stranger*. It shall be seen at the end that such characters as Stephen and M. Meursault who we see in the selected novels are literary consummations of the dominant philosophies and temperaments of the period.

Introduction: Rebellion, Individualism and Modernism

The twentieth century is very important in literary criticism and history, and in fact the history of other fields of study. The reason is perhaps because of the impact it made on culture and science, the evidence of which is still seen today. Beginning from the end of the nineteenth century and blossoming greatly in early twentieth century, the modern period marked a significant change in western culture and civilization. It attacked traditional institutions and questioned suppositions of centuries old. In fact, the word "subversion" could be used to describe its mode of being. Frederick Turner in his "Crisis in Modern Aesthetics" uses the image of combustion to describe what modernism did to traditional institutions. He writes that "the artistic economy of the modernist period ran on fossil fuel: it burned traditional artistic genres and structures to power its engines and its fundamental ethos was thus one of combustion" (8).

In the literary field, there was the questioning of not only what literature is traditionally thought to do but also how it should be approached. Lawrence Rainey actually refers to this modernist attitude of repudiation when he remarks that "whatever literary modernism was, it was impatient with or overtly hostile to received conventions of fiction" (xxv). Structuralism for instance jettisoned the traditional critical approach that often anchored criticism on the author, what he meant to say, what influenced him or the incidents in his life

that helped to shape his work or oeuvre. In the approach to the literary text, structuralism stressed the linguistic structure, instead of author, moral precepts or social realism; its focus was on how the text means, instead of what the text means. There was Dadaism which reacted against the destruction and human carnage that resulted from World War I by rejecting 'reason' and 'logic.' In psychology, Sigmund Freud revolutionized the field by introducing fresh perspectives in the study of behavior and mentality, in the process undermining previous views in those areas. In philosophy, Nietzsche declared God dead, a thing that scandalized the religious sensibility of many that time, and influenced Albert Camus in his development of his theory of rebellion. In fact, one can correctly say that the twentieth century was a period of rebellion; that rebellion was characteristic of the modern period. Where there was previously totalization, modernism insisted on individuality; where there had been reason and logic, modernism saw irrationality and illogicality, and so on. However, this paper is going to treat rebellion in relation to individualism. The reason is of course that individualism seems a recurrent way of expressing the modern rebellious bent; consequently, a good number of scholars have even used it as a defining hallmark of modernism. For instance, paraphrasing T. W. Laqueur, H. G. Cocks writes that, "what was modern about these writings...was that they reflected a post-Enlightenment culture in which the individual was presumed to be autonomous, and in which order and goodness could only be found within the self and not in some externally determined moral or religious hierarchy" (1215).

The Victorian age was a very restricting one, so that, the need for the individual to really assert himself by pursuing whatever passions he might deem profitable was inhibited by certain moral shackles sponsored by society or social institutions. But this was to change in the modern period because modern discourses undermined such prescriptive determinants as religious obligations, social-oriented ethics, socio-political obligations and so on, and retreated attentions from these general categories to the self, the individual. Freudian psychoanalysis, for example, is to a large extent an approach of psychology from an individual perspective. Notions and practices which were previously labeled aberrations or anathema became audaciously endorsed. For instance, the pre-modern notions about masturbation are subverted and masturbation is given a celebratory reading as a harmless exercise in self love in Betty Dodson's *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Self Love* (see Cocks' "Modernity and the Self in the History of Sexuality" 1216).

It is Camus who develops the idea of rebellion into a discursive formation characterizing the modern period, and our definition of rebellion should thus be anchored on his

vision, articulated in a book appropriately entitled *The Rebel* (an essay on man in revolt). Besides, this non-fictional work, *The Rebel*, seems an exemplum after which many of Camus's fictional writings are modeled, including the one we have chosen for this study, *The Stranger*. But who is a rebel? Camus answers:

A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion... Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that,

somewhere and somehow, one is right. It is this way that the rebel slave says yes and no simultaneously (The Rebel 3).

Rebellion thus becomes the defining aesthetics for his artistic creations, a truth which James M. Sharkey admits in his "Camus' Aesthetic of Rebellion." For Sharkey, the focal point is refusal. He writes that: "grounded in the philosophy of revolt, Camus's aesthetics emerges from the depths of negativity through an act of refusal. It is this moment of refusal which must be the focal point in a description of Camus's aesthetic of rebellion" (79). This in fact shows us the way our discussion should go in accounting for the rebellion in the two texts of study. In examining the rebellious careers of M. Meursault in *The Stranger* and Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, we should be able to point out those areas in which the characters said no, those areas where they refused.

Perhaps, no word need be said about the appropriateness of the texts we have selected for this study. At any rate, it should be noted that the texts are no doubt fine representations of the dominant spirit and temper of the age. Camus, a Nobel Prize winner, occupies a hallowed place in the pantheon of twentieth century thought and literature. Joyce himself is another formidable figure of twentieth century literature, his *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* occupying first and third places respectively in the list of the hundred best English-language novels of the twentieth century. In fact, Morton P. Levitt is right when he says "the modernist age might more tellingly be labeled as the Age of James Joyce" (387).

Individualism itself seems tenaciously tied to rebellion. The concept of "the self" is important in the understanding of individualism. Individualism usually involves the affirmation of the self above other social categories, so that rebellion is more or less the struggle to assert the self; in fact, for B. G. Garnhan, "self-assertion is possible only in revolt" (254); and it is against "whatever oppresses his mind and body" that man rebels (Willhoite 401). It is for a selfish purpose that the individual rebels, and the word "selfish" is being used here without the negative implication usually ascribed to it. The individual rebels in order to preserve the self; his refusal is grounded in the need to affirm the right of the self to be different. He is thus "one who, in the final analysis, adheres to no judgment but his own. He is a self-authenticating individual" and if he is selfish, he is so because, "after all, only he is responsible for his own acts" (Caraway 136). Because he finds himself in a world that is insensitive to his passions, because he finds himself in a society that appears to be hedging

him on all sides with constraining obligations, he must rebel and in that way wrest his selfhood from the world. The first thing that matters to him is not God, family, or country, but the self, and this attitude seems to validate the charge of solipsism that has been brought against the modernist (see Frattarola 146). The idea of individualism being realized in rebellion is captured in Irene Taviss Thomson's essay, "Individualism and Conformity in the 1950s vs. the 1980s," where we read that "individualism as depicted in the 1920s was primarily a rebellion against a restrictive society, a drive for self-expression" (499). There is another way we can understand individualism: it might be understood as the affirmation of the individual's right to choose among the options contesting for his loyalty, be it familial, religious or political loyalty.

Camus's *The Stranger*: Asserting Selfhood and Difference

The career of M. Meursault in *The Stranger* usually shocks the reader who is encountering the text for the first time. The portraiture of the character really upsets our sense of the ideal as regards human relation and conduct in society. If the novel form is regarded as thriving in realism, such a notion is called into question in Camus's novel because Meursault is not someone like ourselves; he is a stranger in the world, alienated by his shocking, unconventional behavior.

We might argue that M. Meursault's attitude is as a result of the unfriendly condition he finds himself in this world. This reading of course chimes in well with Camus's Sisyphus myth, and by extension the philosophy of absurdism inaugurated by Camus; but our reading is not merely called forth by the fact that we are able to see a similitude between the myth of Sisyphus and the career of M. Meursault; our reading is necessitated by the possibility of a validation within the confines of the fictional text. Carl Viggiani appears to join us in this mythical reading, for he writes that:

The central ironic device in *L'Etranger* [*The Stranger*] is its reconstruction of the Sisyphus myth. The irony arises out of the transformation of the hero-antagonist of the gods into an office clerk who spends his days working on bills of lading and the rest of his time in a variety of dull and sordid adventures. The eternal punishment of Sisyphus is expressed in a contemporary image of absurdity: the deadening routine of the life of an office worker (870).

With this monotonous life, one would imagine that Meursault would jump at the offer his boss makes him, of heading a post in Paris. The boss is "pretty sure" he would love to live in Paris, and thus have a "change of life." But for Meursault, "one never changed his way of life; one life was as good as another." His boss thinks he has no ambition, but Meursault has since given up the kind of ambition that his boss has in mind after he dropped out of school. What has filled out the vacuum where a lot of ambition once resided is pessimism, that attitude of believing that everything eventually leads to frustration, to futility and it is the same thing everywhere. Meursault's refusal to go to Paris is backed by experience for as we learn from him when he tells his girlfriend he had once lived in Paris, and his description of the place presents the same images of dullness and monotony: "A dingy sort of town, to my mind. Masses of pigeons and dark courtyards. And the people have washed-out, white faces" (54). Meursault probably would have loved to continue with his studies but frustration is knit in the fabric of existence. In Garnhan's "Albert Camus: Metaphysical Revolt and Historical Action," this image of a man compelled to revolt by frustration is presented as part of Camus's philosophical enterprise. We read that: "Camus was limited to the feeling that man, a creature demanding happiness, order, and self-fulfillment, was frustrated, and was bound by nature and stature to struggle and protest" (249).

Part of his acts of protest is his refusal to play the role conventionally required of him. Society requires certain conventional attitudes in certain circumstances, like the death of one's mother. For Celeste and for the larger society as well, "there's no one like a mother." In

the societal "role script," he should ask to see his mother's corpse and he should be shaken by the sight of it, he should dissolve into tears and avoid such pleasures and indulgences as might undermine the sadness of the event. He should not drink café au hit during the vigil for his mother. But M. Meursault violates all these expectations. Perez and the woman who was said to be devoted to his mother are his counterfoils; their actions typify the conventional expression of grief. Concerning the woman, for instance, M. Meursault narrates:

A few minutes later one of the women started weeping. She was in the second role and I couldn't see her face because of another woman in front. At regular intervals she emitted a choking sob; one had a feeling she would never stop. The others didn't seem to notice. They sat in silence, slumped in their chairs, staring at the coffin or at their walking sticks or any object just in front of them, and never took their eyes off it. And still the woman sobbed. I was rather surprised as I didn't know who she was. Wanted her to stop crying, but dared not speak to her. After a while the keeper bent toward her and whispered in her ear; but she merely shook her head, mumbled something I couldn't catch, and went on sobbing as steadily as before (11-12).

Perez equally plays the societal role – of how to behave when someone you love dies – very well, for "his eyes were streaming with tears, of exhaustion or distress, or both together." A similar thing is expected of M. Meursault. But he is a deviant. Look at the way he goes about life after burying his mother. He could afford to have intercourse with a woman just a day after his mother's death. If not for the black tie that Marie his girlfriend sees when they are wearing their clothes after swimming, she would not have known he is mourning. The fact that Marie "shrank away a little" is a testimony to her shock over M. Meursault's all-is-well attitude in spite of such a serious thing as losing one's mother. The prosecuting lawyer during his murder trial eventually uses this against him: "Gentlemen of the jury, I would have you note that on the next day after his mother's funeral that man was visiting a swimming pool, starting a liaison with a girl, and going to see a comic film. That's all I wish to say" (118).

Furthermore, when he goes to Celeste's restaurant to eat, Celeste asks him if he is feeling too badly but he says instead that he is feeling "extremely hungry." Rather than feel bad over the loss of his mother, he is burdened with the strong craving for food. On being served, he tells us that, "I ate very quickly and had some coffee to finish up." The thing is that M. Meursault does not know how shocking his actions and statements are to people. For instance, when asked by his lawyer if he felt grief when his mother died, he remarks that "all normal people...had more or less desired the death of those they loved, at some time or another." Commenting on M. Meursault's self-centered apprehension of the world, A. N. Akwanya writes that:

The problem seems that M. Meursault generalizes about other people on the basis of himself.... [The] insistence that he is just like everybody else could be diversionary, to scatter the beam turned upon him. The point, however, is that he is not like anyone else. He is a

stranger. That is why his claims to the contrary cause so much consternation (138).

Another area in which M. Meursault evinces his rebellion is in religion. Religion appears a very important part of the society of the novel. We read, for instance, about the intense shock of the examining magistrate when M. Meursault tells him that he does not believe in God:

That was unthinkable, he said; all men believe in God, even those who reject him. Of this he was absolutely sure; if ever he came to doubt it, his life would lose all meaning. "Do you wish," he asked indignantly, "my life to have no meaning?" Really I couldn't see how my wishes came into it, and I told him as much. While I was talking he thrust the crucifix again under my nose and shouted: "I, anyway, am a Christian. And I pray Him to forgive you for your sins. My poor young man, how can you not believe that he suffered for your sake" (86).

It appears for the magistrate that religion or the belief in God is the only way one can make meaning out of existence; life without God is meaningless. But this is part of what Camus's brand of existentialism repudiates. Camus has always maintained an aversion for a higher authority, which most people term God, and the belief that one can find the mean-

ing of existence in this higher authority, for him, is rather absurd. In the stranger's rejection of God and religion, we identify this existentialist strain that is peculiarly Camus's. In *The Rebel*, Camus identifies two types of rebellion – historical rebellion and metaphysical rebellion. What we see in *The Stranger* is metaphysical rebellion. For instance, M. Meursault's rebellion against the Christian religion reflects Camus's aversion for totalitarianism. Willhoite has, in fact argued that, "it [metaphysical rebellion] is in fact a rebellion against the image in much Christian history of the authoritarian God who metes out rewards and punishments" (405).

Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Growing into Rebellion and Individuality

James Joyce's work differs from Camus's in certain respects. First, it does not use the stranger image, for Joyce's Stephen does not express his rebellion and individuality through the exaggeration of difference that we see in *The Stranger*. Again, Joyce's *A Portrait* belongs to the literary tradition of bildungsroman. This latter fact is very important for our task of accounting for Stephen's rebellion and individualism. The bildungsroman which is the coming of age novel has various variants. But our text seems to belong to the variant known as the kunstlerroman, a novel about an artist's growth to maturity, showing a growth and development of the self.

From the time that the story begins, we begin to observe Stephen's bent of development. We see his Catholic education, his flow of emotions and perceptions, presented in the Joycean stream of consciousness technique. We notice quite early in the novel that Stephen is

a very sensitive boy. When the bell rings, for instance, and the classes begin to file out, we read that: "All the boys seemed to him very strange. They had all fathers and mothers and different clothes and voices" (12). As a young boy, Stephen Dedalus has started to recognize the difference and individuality of others. From this point, he begins to grow into his own individuality, for there appears to be a quest sequence inaugurated quite early in the story, and it moves from the discovery of the individuality of others to the affirmation of the individuality of the self. B. L. Reid has correctly observed that: "the problem is that of identity: who and what is anyone; most pressingly, who and what am I? Sitting feverish at tea Stephen reflects on the phenomenon of individuation" (402).

It is quite possible to argue that Stephen's inclination towards rebellion and individualism is spurred by his total experience of the world and societies he has been exposed to. Expected to be a priest, Stephen is given a strict Catholic education. He himself actually used to fancy himself as a priest:

How often had he seen himself as a priest wielding calmly and humbly the awful power of which angels and saints stood in reverence! His soul had loved to muse in secret on this desire. He had seen himself, a young silentmannered priest, entering a confessional swiftly, ascending the altarsteps, incensing, genuflecting, accomplishing the vague acts of priesthood which pleased him by reason of their semblance of reality and their distance from it (143).

Even though he is one of the few in his set who have evinced the kind of piety required for priesthood, he has ceased to be fascinated with the idea. This is quite understandable and justifiable within the tradition of *kunstlerroman*, for change is important in the career of the artist as he grows in experience and perception. Accordingly, Stephen in the course of his Catholic education begins to be disenchanted with the idea of a career as a priest. This leads to a sort of rebellion, for refusing to be what people – even your parents – expected you to be is not only a betrayal but a rebellion. He will not fill out the space society has carved for him. He has to carve his own path and purpose in life. We read:

He would never swing the thurible before the tabernacle as priest. His destiny was to be elusive of social or religious orders. The wisdom of the priest's appeal did not touch him to the quick. He was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world (148).

His rejection of "social or religious orders" is one that is done for the sake of the project of self-realization. He wants to be able to perceive the world from his standpoint as an individual. The priest who is trying to convince him to take up the vocation of priesthood is able to identify his piety as something which distinguishes him from others. What he, however, fails to identify – something very important – is the individualistic direction in which Stephen's thoughts and actions are developing. It is Temple who perceives this: "He's the only man I see in this institution that has an individual mind," he remarks (182).

Stephen not only refuses to play the religious role expected of him, he also refuses to play the political role. At the time many of his friends are concerned with the issue of Irish nationalism, he chooses to stand aloof. "Try to be one of us," Davin urges him, "in your heart

you are an Irishman but your pride is too powerful." Stephen sees the issue of nationalism as an inhibiting net. He says: "when the soul of man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me about nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets" (184). Davin does not understand Stephen's logic. For him, "a man's country comes first. Ireland first, Stevie. You can be a poet or mystic after." But Stephen will not be entrapped in the net of nationality or religion. As Reid has argued in his "Gnomon and Order in Joyce's Portrait," "By an act of will and nerve he has found not only identity but freedom and character, definition. The small charred figure is unconsciously poised for flight; his soul has already begun to rise from the grave of boyhood" (406). Thus at the end of the novel, Stephen summarizes his rebellious resolve:

Look here, Cranly, he said. You have asked me what I would do and what I would not do. I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland or my church; and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning (222).

His decision to abandon his country is by extension an abandonment of family. But he does not care about this. In saying no to family, homeland and church, he is saying yes to art and self-expression. This is what Camus, in his *The Rebel*, means by the rebel saying no and yes simultaneously. He is not afraid to be alone or to be spurned. He is equally not afraid to make mistakes, no matter how great. There is of course an echo of Lucifer's rebellion in the Bible in Stephen's words, "I will not serve." But he does not care, "he is resolved that to be free he must go away, take decisive flight, abjure not only church but family and homeland" (Reid 419).

By way of conclusion, it must be noted that the project of standing alone, or "setting oneself against the whole creation" (Willhoite) is not an easy one. M. Meursault suffers greatly because of his individualism. Nietzsche, in his *The Birth of Tragedy*, sees tragedy as issuing from the "curse of individuation" (71). Even Stephen knows what awaits him as a result of his rebellion and individualism. Even an individualist like Camus himself had to alter his philosophy a little. Camus's early philosophy was hinged significantly on the individual, his need for self-assertion, his opposition of the forces, most times social, which seek to hedge him on all sides and make it difficult for him to attain his self-assertion bid. It rarely was concerned with a commitment to society. But even this individualistic stance and self-imposed solitude had to change with the conflict between the Germans and the French. Camus had to identify himself with the French, his people. It was a significant action, significant because it underscored the impossibility of total individualism in a troubled world. In fact, Camus consequently tried to blend his individualistic philosophy with the struggle for national justice and liberty. This latter philosophical blend seems to be reflected in Garnhan's view concerning Camus's transformation: "If a nation was the total of the individual spirits within it, and at the same time represented justice and liberty, then each individual must acquire an identity within the nation" (250). That is perhaps the reason we can argue that The

Stranger and *The Plague* (another work of Camus's) present two different orientations of Camus's philosophy of rebellion – individual revolt and collective revolt, the latter being inspired by the threat of a common communal foe. Thus, whereas *The Stranger* presents Camus as the Individualist, *The Plague* casts him as the communalist.

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