

The coming to age of the Artist

A look on Joyce's artist as seen in

A portrait of the artist as a young man

And Bellow's artists as seen in

Humboldt's gift

The identity of the artist does not change with the changing times. It remains easy to identify an artist when one comes across a painter, a writer or a poet in a literary text. The distinct appearance of the artist is that of an intellectual living in a world of elevated thoughts. This distinction is easy to note in the above mentioned two novels too.

In *A portrait* the character of Stephan is contrasted with other characters, though the comparison is not very overt. He is shown to us distinct from Cranly, arguably his best friend in the novel. Cranly is clearly not considered a genius and he, thus, is unable to completely empathise with Stephen. He is spared the sacrifices (alienation, difficult choice, etc.) that Stephen has to make because he has an artistic attitude. Also, the artistic character of Stephen is put in contrast against violent Heron's character too, which helps us to see what a person who is crude and not an artist would be like. In Bellow's *Humboldt's gift*, however, the distinction, though as much present, is far more subtle.

It is no doubt that both Humboldt and Citrine are both artists and artists of no mean calibre in the novel. However, their traits are quite unlike those of Stephen, at least outwardly. It is easy to see that the artist in Saul Bellow's period *looks* very different from the artist of Joyce's imagination, Stephen. These changing artists and the change in literature that brought them around are somethings that are worth a second look as they are likely to give to us an insight into the Modernist artists themselves.

Edward Bloom has said that Modernist artists were different from other artists of other periods

because Modernist artists *knew* that they were Modernist artists and that their treatment would not be the same as that of the other older artists, like the Victorian artists. There are clear acknowledgements of this fact in many Modernist texts, including Fitzgerald's *Tender is the night* where Fitzgerald mentions that artists like Joyce are on the rise. Also, both the novels are seen as semi-autobiographical works. *Charlie Citrine* is based on Saul Bellow himself, *Humboldt Fleisher* on Delmore Schwartz, a contemporary of Saul Bellow, and *Stephen Dedalus* is said to be based by Joyce on himself. Hence, the artists in the Modernist works very closely resemble the actual artists. Also, it is interesting to see the artists from these two works juxtaposed against each other because both these novels are almost from the fringes from the Modernist era. Published in 1975, *Humboldt's gift*, is clearly a very late novel, considering that the Modernist era started as early as 1900. Hence, it would also benefit us to see how the artists have 'grown' in the period. The signs of growth are visible as the artists in Bellow's time are not afraid of acquiescing that they are artists while Stephen, still in the nascency of Modernism, takes some time to come around to the same fact.

The primary difference in the artists is not at the superficial level. The artists are clearly different in their demeanor. Humboldt is aggressive, Charlie passive and Stephen pensive. However, the differences in the artists are more visible by what is the attitude they assume about various things. We see Stephen at a crossroad of his life as he ventures into uncharted waters at the end of *A portrait* and it is somewhat possible to see either Citrine or Humboldt as a grown Stephen. The possibility of such a metamorphosis is investigated.

First and fore mostly it is obvious that the artists in Saul Bellow's novels are adult characters. They have been already been through the intricacies of life and are now at a different stage of life. They have already been the '*catcher in the rye*'. However, Stephen's tale is told to us as he is growing up. This might be the explanation behind the nature of '*miracles*' or '*epiphanies*' that both the writers talk of. The Joycian epiphanies are profound and life changing. Just after he sees that religion is not meant for him, he thinks in these grand terms:

“He (Stephen) started up nervously from the stone-block for he could no longer quench the flame in his blood. He felt his cheeks aflame and his throat throbbing with song. There was a lust of wandering in his feet that burned to set out for the ends of the earth. On! On! His heart seemed to cry.”

He has a desire to reform and change his life based on singular moments of clarity. However, for Humboldt and Citrine, these periods are over. Now, the epiphanies for them are moments of realisation. The most significant epiphanies of Citrine come to him as events possible in the past:

“If I were allowed to sleep with this woman (Naomi Lutz) for forty years, my life no doubt would be different, but I would have felt that it had been successful.”

Apart from these, there are realisations (I fail to call them epiphanies as childlike Stephen would have seen them) regarding various people, Thaxter, George Swiebel, Humboldt, and Cantabile, Citrine likes to keep these ideas to himself, not even as muse, and carry on with his life as it would have without those ideas. As another clue, Citrine is now discussing anthroposophy and, hence, is much beyond the grasp of the epiphanies that change Stephen's life.

Reading deeper into the text, it is easy to see that Citrine plans to make an essay on '*The intellectual bores of the world*' his *magnum opus*. This is a sort of picture of resignation, an acceptance of the *wasteland* of T. S. Elliot. Charlie himself explains to Naomi later that actually the lazy sloths are the people who try the hardest and put in the most effort. This fails to convince Naomi, but it is a dismal nod of acceptance given to the absence of objects that can provide the sort of epiphanies that Stephen had. The new artists have the aura of having been *there*, and having done *that*. Perhaps this aging world view is what is reflected in the newer artist's attitude towards other things too.

Regarding family, oddly the positions of the artists seem a little skewed. Stephen remains barely in touch with his family, with his maternal love making him return to them only in secrecy and which he shows no sign of interest in. Later he also plans to venture into foreign lands, with no second thoughts regarding his family. There are signs in his diary that he is now submitting to the leadership of not to his immediate, but rather his old mythical father from the Greek mythology. Hence, for Stephen family became almost a non entity later. However, for Citrine, family remains important to the very end. Even when filial piety is done with, he remains in the place (Chicago) where his parents are buried. Thus, family is actually an anchor for him. Also, when he happens to meet Menasha when he goes to meet Uncle Waldemar, he wishes to sit with him for an evening and listen to him talk about his late mother. Even Humboldt took care of his mother and took Charlie to visit her once. However, Renata looks down upon this attachment to the family too as a form of perversion and wants Charlie to rid himself of it. Finally she is able to convince him (Citrine) to give up Chicago, the place where his parents are buried,

and fly to Europe with her, but the resistance to the idea is very much visible.

When it comes to women, the opinions of the artists of the two periods differ the most. While Stephen was never able to make his opinions of women concrete, jumping between the two extremities of regarding them as either whores or as pristine figures of divinity, like Virgin Mary. The view of women taken by Citrine and Humboldt is completely different. Rather than considering them as whores or as figures of divinity, they consider them as someone in between. Apart from Naomi, Citrine is interested in the other women solely because of what they have to offer him in terms of sensual pleasure. He also judges them without any second thoughts on intellectual basis, although from Stephen's point of view, such an assessment would not be expected. Stephen in his loneliness is under the impression that he is an artist no one compares with, which is not the case with Modern artists in Citrine.

Also, a peculiarity in Stephen is that he is non-plussed regarding monetary matters. He does not refrain from talking about it, rather it never shows up in his repertoire of worries. On the other hand, the new age artist's of Bellow at least care about money. Money, later in the novel *Humboldt's Gift*, is revealed to be a major theme, and a driving force. The art is no longer in the prime seat here, as was the case with Stephen, now money has replaced art, just like in Stephen's life art had replaced religion. It's hard to picture Stephen coming to terms with the fact of being poor at some point in time. This is one of the primary facets of life where we still have to see the Joyce's artists to have their '*epiphanic*' moments. Stephen's view can be seen as being fairly close to Humboldt's view that art is the primary motivator and he wishes to change the world using his art. However, Citrine is far more passive regarding these matters.

These were the most important differences that were there in the lives of the artists of the two periods. Apart from the artists, the differences in the novels in the ambience of the artists can be also felt. How subtly different is the affect of the city in the novels can be understood if we look at Dublin as a politically and religiously charged city and at Chicago as the exact anti-thesis. Chicago is the city where the *wasteland* effect is felt with its maximum vigour. It is very likely that just as Joyce doted on the description of hell, Saul Bellow could have done so describing Chicago. Also, there are characters around the artists that they see in different light. Stephen has Father Dollan and Heron to look at as bullies, while Citrine has Cantabile. Similarly just as Stephen has Cranly to look after him and be there as his best friend, Citrine has George Swiebel and Humboldt had Oliver. However, the effect that they have on Stephen is very different from the effect that the corresponding characters have on Citrine and Humboldt. They appear to Citrine as amusing objects worthy of study while for Stephen they were life changing.

While putting the comparison between the artists forward, it is interesting to note the thematic differences in the locale of the two novels. *A portrait* had been written by Joyce in Europe while *Humboldt's gift* is a novel written by an American writer. Also, they (the artists) had been conceived of on different sides of the World War. This also goes into making them so different. However, it has, in the commercial world of Saul Bellow, intellect that can produce art has been commodified to the extreme. It is a view of art that perhaps Joyce would not like to entertain. This reluctance is clear by the manner that he has adopted to portray his view of the artist.

Also, there are signs of post modernism, like a closely self referential script in the novel, that are creeping up, and the artists that we see here are now slowly turning Post Modernists. Hence, this is the best novel where we can capture and compare the artists to get to know the most about the era. There is yet many things left to be seen and observed regarding the artists in the novel that can yield meaningful insights, but at least we can say that the image of the artist as was initiated by Joyce in *A portrait* did come of age in the present novel, *Humboldt's gift*.

-Utkarsh Upadhyay