Intertextual Layers of Portrait Construction: Woolf and Joyce in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract: This article investigates the role of intertextuality in the construction of literary portraits in twentieth-century modernist fiction, with a particular focus on Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway (1925) and James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916). Intertextuality, understood through Julia Kristeva's definition of text as a "mosaic of quotations" and Roland Barthes's claim of the "death of the author," positions the individual portrait not as an isolated description but as a node in a web of cultural and literary references. The study demonstrates how Joyce's portraits of Stephen Dedalus are shaped by scholastic and mythic allusions, Dante, Shakespeare, Aquinas, while Woolf's portraits of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith resonate with Miltonic diction, Romantic poetics and Biblical undertones. Through close analysis, the article argues that intertextuality transforms portraiture into a cultural performance that embodies both individuality and collective memory. By situating characters within broader traditions, Joyce and Woolf reveal that modernist portraits are not static images of appearance but dynamic texts of cultural dialogue.

Introduction:

1.1 Portraits as Cultural Constructs

The portrait in literature has never been a purely mimetic device. Even in realist fiction, where the aim was to render characters vividly, portraits were embedded in cultural codes. A villain's deformity signaled moral corruption; a heroine's beauty connoted purity or fragility. Portraits were thus always more than descriptive: they were cultural constructs, shaped by inherited conventions and shared expectations.

Modernist literature foregrounded this principle by explicitly transforming portraits into intertextual mosaics. Characters were not only depicted as

individuals but also as echoes of earlier texts, myths, and traditions. To describe Stephen Dedalus or Clarissa Dalloway was simultaneously to invoke Dante and Milton, Shakespeare and Keats. Portraits became layered, dialogic, and polyphonic.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The concept of intertextuality was most famously articulated by Julia Kristeva, who described every text as "the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva, 1980). Portraits, therefore, cannot be read in isolation: they are formed through the interplay of earlier literary, religious, and cultural texts. Roland Barthes reinforced this insight with his declaration of the "death of the author" (1977), shifting focus from authorial intention to the network of texts that constitute meaning.

Equally significant is Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism: every utterance exists in dialogue with others, and characters are never monologic but are shaped by multiple voices and discourses. A portrait, in this light, is not a single description but a dialogue between the character, the narrator, and the cultural voices that resonate within the text.

1.3 From Realism to Modernism

In the nineteenth-century realist novel, portraits were largely mimetic. Dickens's grotesques, Eliot's moral heroines, and Tolstoy's tragic Anna Karenina illustrate how external description anchored characters in recognizable social and moral worlds. Intertextuality was present but implicit, woven into archetypes and genre conventions.

Modernism, however, marked a radical reorientation. Rather than reproducing external surfaces, modernist writers sought to capture inner life, consciousness, and cultural memory. Portraits no longer functioned as windows onto reality but as textual events where individual identity intersected with cultural tradition.

For Joyce, Stephen Dedalus's portrait is built through references to Dante's Divine Comedy, Shakespeare's Hamlet, and Thomistic aesthetics. These intertexts frame Stephen's struggles with religion, art, and nationhood.

For Woolf, Clarissa Dalloway's portrait resonates with Miltonic diction and Romantic poetics, while Septimus Smith's trauma is articulated through echoes of war poetry and Biblical motifs of sacrifice.

2. Intertextuality in Joyce's Portraits

James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) is not merely a Bildungsroman tracing the development of Stephen Dedalus from childhood to artistic awakening. It is also an intertextual text, deeply embedded in cultural and literary traditions. The novel's title itself signals the dual dimension of portraiture: it is at once an individual representation and an artistic statement on how identity is constructed through language and culture. Joyce's method is to weave Stephen's personal experiences with the voices of religion, philosophy, and literature, thereby producing a portrait that resonates far beyond the individual.

2.1 Dante and the Language of Guilt

Stephen's childhood is permeated by Catholic discourse, and much of his early portrait is shaped through allusions to Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy. At Clongowes school, Stephen listens to sermons on sin, hell, and damnation that echo Dante's infernal imagery:

"Hell has six provinces... The first is the province of those who died in mortal sin..." (Joyce, p. 117)

The phrasing directly recalls Dante's taxonomy of the Inferno. Even before Stephen understands theology fully, his imagination is structured by Dantean imagery of fire, torment, and judgment. His portrait as a young boy is thus not only psychological but also intertextual: he is depicted as a child caught in the linguistic and symbolic net of medieval Catholicism.

This intertextual layer accomplishes two things:

It shows how Stephen's identity is constructed not from experience alone but from inherited texts that define his religious and moral world.

It elevates Stephen's childhood fears into archetypal significance, connecting an Irish schoolboy to the broader European tradition of sin and redemption.

2.2 Shakespeare and the Question of Identity

As Stephen grows, the intertextual frame shifts from Dante's theology to Shakespeare's drama, particularly Hamlet. Stephen perceives himself as a Hamlet-like figure—alienated, introspective, torn between action and hesitation.

The connection is explicitly drawn when Stephen engages in debates on Shakespeare's plays with his peers, framing questions of fatherhood, betrayal, and artistic inheritance. For Stephen, Shakespeare becomes a mirror through which he interprets his own family conflicts and his struggle with Irish nationalism.

This Shakespearean dimension is crucial for Stephen's portrait:

Like Hamlet, he is haunted by a sense of obligation and betrayal, particularly regarding his father's failures and his mother's expectations.

Like Hamlet, he turns inward, his language fragmented by self-questioning.

Shakespeare provides Stephen not only with allusions

but also with a dramatic model for selfhood: a portrait as dialogue, soliloquy, and hesitation.

In this sense, Joyce situates Stephen as a modern Hamlet: a young intellectual wrestling with questions of identity, art, and action in a fragmented modern world.

2.3 Aquinas and the Aesthetics of Epiphany

Stephen's artistic awakening is articulated through another intertextual framework: Thomistic philosophy. In his reflections on beauty, he directly cites Thomas Aquinas's three conditions of the beautiful, integritas (wholeness), consonantia (harmony), and claritas (radiance):

"Three things are needed for beauty... wholeness, harmony, and radiance." (Joyce, p. 212)

By appropriating Aquinas's scholastic definitions, Stephen frames his artistic vision in dialogue with medieval philosophy. This intertextual layer transforms his portrait from a mere psychological profile into a philosophical statement. His search for artistic identity is inseparable from centuries of aesthetic debate.

The importance of Aquinas lies in how Stephen uses scholastic language to construct his own epiphanies. For instance, in the famous "bird-girl" scene, the description of the girl in the stream is not only physical but also conceptualized through claritas, the radiant illumination of beauty that strikes Stephen as revelation. The portrait here is doubly intertextual: it is built from the sensory image of the girl and from the Thomistic vocabulary that interprets the moment.

2.4 Mythic Allusions and Archetypal Dimensions

Beyond specific authors, Joyce situates Stephen within a mythic framework. His very surname, Dedalus, invokes the myth of Daedalus, the craftsman of Greek legend who built the labyrinth and fashioned wings to escape imprisonment. The intertextual resonance is unmistakable: Stephen, too, is caught in the labyrinth of religion, family, and colonial Ireland, seeking artistic wings to escape.

This mythic allusion turns Stephen's personal portrait into an archetype: he is not only an Irish boy but also a symbolic artist figure striving for freedom. The myth grants his portrait universal scope.

2.5 Synthesis: Intertextuality as Portraiture in Joyce

Taken together, these intertextual layers, Dante's infernal imagery, Shakespeare's Hamlet, Aquinas's aesthetics, and Daedalian myth, construct Stephen Dedalus's portrait as a cultural palimpsest. His identity is inseparable from the texts that shape his imagination.

Childhood portrait = Dantean hell, Catholic sermons.

Adolescent portrait = Shakespearean doubt and soliloquy.

Artistic portrait = Aquinas's philosophy and Daedalian myth.

Thus, Stephen's portrait is not an isolated self but an intertextual being. Joyce shows that identity is made of words, references, and traditions: "the artist as a young man" is always already the artist as a reader of texts.

3. Intertextuality in Woolf's Portraits

If Joyce constructs his portraits through scholastic, philosophical, and mythic allusions, Virginia Woolf builds hers through poetic, existential, and cultural echoes. Mrs. Dalloway (1925) exemplifies how portraits in Woolf's fiction are never isolated descriptions but lyrical intertextual mosaics, resonating with earlier literary traditions and cultural voices.

3.1 Clarissa Dalloway: Echoes of Milton and Existential Language

Clarissa's portrait is introduced through her consciousness rather than her appearance:

"Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself." (Woolf, p. 3)

This line, simple at first glance, situates her within the domestic world of London. Yet as the narrative unfolds, her reflections echo Miltonic diction in their meditations on being and non-being. When Clarissa reflects that she feels both "very young" and "unspeakably aged," she echoes the existential tension found in Milton's Paradise Lost, the language of "to be" versus "not to be," existence versus dissolution.

Miltonic resonance is woven subtly into her portrait. Words like soul, eternity, existence, and nothingness infuse Clarissa's reflections, positioning her portrait within a centuries-old tradition of English existential thought. Her personal anxieties about aging and death thus become part of a larger cultural dialogue.

3.2 Romantic Poetry and the Portrait of Sensibility

Clarissa's portrait is also deeply marked by Romantic intertextuality. Woolf, herself influenced by Keats and Wordsworth, infuses Clarissa's consciousness with Romantic echoes:

Keatsian mortality and beauty: Clarissa's preoccupation with flowers, roses, carnations, lilacs, recalls Keats's meditations on beauty as transient. When she notes the "fresh morning air" and the "shimmering freshness of roses," her portrait resonates with Ode on a Grecian Urn, where beauty is inseparable from temporality.

Wordsworthian memory: Clarissa's recollections of Bourton, her youth, her friendship with Sally Seton, her

near-romance with Peter Walsh, mirror Wordsworth's idea of "spots of time," fleeting yet enduring moments of being. These memories construct her portrait not through appearance but through the texture of recalled experience.

In this way, Clarissa's portrait is intertextually Romantic: she is portrayed as a woman whose identity is shaped by memory, beauty, and the inevitability of passing time.

3.3 Septimus Smith: Biblical Undertones and War Poetics

Septimus Smith, a shell-shocked veteran of the First World War, represents the darker counterpart to Clarissa. His portrait is constructed through Biblical echoes and the intertext of war poetry.

Consider his fractured reflections:

"Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. Change the world." (Woolf, p. 71)

The declarative tone, with its moral absolutes (must not, there is a God), recalls the rhythm of Biblical prophecy. Septimus imagines himself as a kind of prophet or martyr, chosen to bear witness to truths others cannot see. His final act of suicide is framed in Biblical terms of sacrifice, an offering that Clarissa later interprets empathetically, even reverently.

At the same time, Septimus's portrait resonates with the intertext of war poetry, particularly the works of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, whose verses articulated trauma, futility, and disillusionment. Though Woolf does not cite them directly, Septimus's fragmented sentences, obsession with death, and hallucinations of his fallen comrade Evans echo the language of trench poetry. His portrait thus embodies the cultural memory of the Great War.

3.4 Intertextuality as Multiplicity in Woolf

Unlike Joyce, whose intertexts often dominate Stephen's self-conception, Woolf's intertextuality is more lyrical and diffuse. Clarissa's portrait resonates with Milton and Romantic poetry, Septimus's with Biblical prophecy and war poetry. These allusions do not impose fixed identities but open their portraits to multiplicity.

The intertextuality in Woolf's portraits has several functions:

Existential depth: Miltonic and Romantic echoes situate Clarissa's mortality within larger traditions of English poetry.

Cultural resonance: Biblical and war-poetic allusions situate Septimus's trauma within collective memory.

Dialogic interplay: By juxtaposing Clarissa and Septimus, Woolf stages a dialogue between vitality and death, memory and trauma, two intertextual portraits that mirror and illuminate each other.

3.5 Synthesis: Woolf's Portraits as Lyrical Palimpsests

In Woolf's hands, portraiture becomes a palimpsest of cultural memory. Clarissa is not simply a London hostess but a figure whose consciousness echoes Milton's existential language and the Romantics' obsession with memory and beauty. Septimus is not simply a traumatized veteran but a prophetic, Biblical figure who embodies the voice of cultural trauma after the Great War.

Through intertextual layering, Woolf transforms personal portraits into collective cultural texts. Her characters embody not only themselves but also the poetic, Biblical, and historical traditions that resonate within them.

4. Comparative Analysis

The portraits of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith in Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway illustrate two distinct modernist approaches to intertextuality. Both writers reject realist physiognomic portraiture, instead embedding their characters in cultural memory. Yet the kinds of intertexts they invoke, and the purposes these serve, differ significantly.

4.1 Types of Intertexts: Scholastic vs. Poetic

Joyce's intertexts are primarily scholastic, mythic, and dramatic. He draws on Dante's Divine Comedy, Shakespeare's Hamlet, Aquinas's aesthetics, and Greek myth. These allusions construct Stephen Dedalus as a figure in dialogue with intellectual, theological, and mythological traditions. His portrait becomes an archetype: the young artist as seeker of truth and freedom, bound and liberated by inherited texts.

Woolf's intertexts, by contrast, are poetic, existential, and cultural. Clarissa Dalloway's consciousness resonates with Milton's diction and Romantic poetics (Keats, Wordsworth), while Septimus Smith's trauma echoes Biblical prophecy and the cultural memory of war poetry. These allusions situate Woolf's characters not in mythic archetypes but in lyrical continuities: the existential language of English poetry and the cultural voice of post-war disillusionment.

4.2 Function of Intertextual Portraits

The difference in intertextual choices reflects different conceptions of portraiture:

For Joyce, intertextuality universalizes Stephen. Through Dante, Shakespeare, Aquinas, and Daedalus, Stephen is both an Irish boy and an archetypal figure of artistic striving. His portrait is thus intellectual and mythic, oriented toward the creation of a symbolic

"artist."

For Woolf, intertextuality particularizes her characters within cultural and historical memory. Clarissa's Romantic and Miltonic echoes ground her portrait in the lyrical tradition of English poetry, while Septimus's Biblical tone and war-poetic resonance make him a voice of collective trauma. Their portraits are thus experiential and cultural, oriented toward representing lived existence in a specific moment of history.

4.3 Identity and Selfhood

The intertextual strategies also reveal contrasting philosophies of selfhood:

Joyce: The self is a quest for autonomy. Stephen's portrait is constructed through confrontation with inherited texts (Catholicism, nationalism, myth). He seeks to "fly by those nets" (Joyce, p. 231). Intertextuality in Joyce dramatizes the tension between tradition and independence.

Woolf: The self is relational and permeable. Clarissa's portrait emerges through her relations with others and with cultural memory. Septimus's portrait dissolves the boundaries between self and society, individual and collective. Intertextuality in Woolf dramatizes the dialogue between private consciousness and collective history.

4.4 Gender and Intertextual Portraiture

Gender also shapes their intertextual strategies. Joyce's male protagonist aligns with traditionally masculine intellectual authorities (Dante, Aquinas, Shakespeare). Woolf, writing a female-centered novel, invokes Romantic poetry and Milton partly to question their authority. Clarissa's portrait, framed by Miltonic diction, implicitly critiques a patriarchal tradition that defined women as objects of beauty or temptation. By re-appropriating these intertexts, Woolf re-inscribes female subjectivity into cultural discourse.

4.5 Synthesis

In sum, Joyce and Woolf both construct intertextual portraits, but with different emphases:

Aspect	Joyce	Woolf
Type of Intertexts	Scholastic, mythic, dramatic	Poetic, existential, cultural
Function	Universalizes Stephen as archetypal artist	Situates Clarissa/Septimus in cultural memory
Philosophy of Self	Autonomy, escape from tradition	Relational, embedded in history
Gender Dimension	Male artist shaped by male authorities	Female/marginal voices re-inscribed in tradition

Both writers demonstrate that portraits are not isolated depictions but cultural palimpsests. Joyce uses intertextuality to construct the artist as a universal archetype, while Woolf uses it to portray consciousness as relational and historically situated.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of intertextual portraiture in Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway reveals how profoundly modernist fiction transformed the function of character description. If nineteenth-century realism aimed to render characters through external features, physiognomic detail, and social typology, modernism redirected portraiture inward and outward at once: inward into the recesses of consciousness, and outward into the cultural echoes of literary and historical tradition.

5.1 Summary of Findings

Four major conclusions may be drawn from this comparative study:

Joyce's portraits are structured around scholastic, mythic, and dramatic intertexts. Stephen Dedalus's childhood is framed by Dante's Inferno, his adolescence by Shakespearean soliloquy, and his artistic awakening by Aquinas's aesthetics and Daedalian myth. These references universalize Stephen's identity, presenting him not only as an Irish boy but as an archetypal seeker of artistic freedom.

Woolf's portraits resonate with poetic, existential, and cultural echoes. Clarissa Dalloway is shaped by Miltonic diction and Romantic poetics, her mortality framed in Keatsian and Wordsworthian terms. Septimus Smith's trauma is articulated through Biblical prophecy and the intertextual memory of war poetry. These references situate Woolf's characters within collective cultural memory, making their portraits expressions of historical as well as personal identity.

Different functions of intertextuality: Joyce employs intertexts to dramatize the struggle between tradition and artistic autonomy, while Woolf employs them to reveal the permeability of the self, its embeddedness in society, history, and cultural voices.

Gendered implications: Joyce's intertexts align with male intellectual authorities; Woolf reworks patriarchal traditions by inscribing female consciousness and marginalized trauma into the literary tradition.

5.2 Broader Implications

The findings highlight broader implications for the study of literature:

Theoretical: Intertextuality confirms Bakhtin's and Kristeva's insight that texts and voices are always dialogic. Portraits cannot be reduced to individual psychology; they are cultural palimpsests.

Aesthetic: Portraits in modernist fiction function less as description than as linguistic and cultural performance. They remind us that identity in literature is never self-contained but always constructed through language and tradition.

Pedagogical: For teaching modernist texts, recognizing intertextuality clarifies why portraits may appear fragmented or elusive. Students who identify echoes of Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, or Keats better grasp the depth of Joyce's and Woolf's portraits.

Cultural: In the context of the twentieth century, these portraits reflect broader anxieties—artistic autonomy in colonial Ireland (Joyce) and the fragility of life in post-war England (Woolf). Intertextuality thus ties personal identity to collective cultural memory.

5.3 Final Reflection

Ultimately, modernist portraits in Joyce and Woolf demonstrate that character is not a closed image but an open text. Stephen Dedalus, Clarissa Dalloway, and Septimus Smith are not only themselves; they are also Dante, Hamlet, Aquinas, Milton, Keats, Wordsworth, and the echoes of war poets. Their portraits exist at the crossroads of individuality and tradition, immediacy and memory.

Through intertextual layering, Joyce and Woolf reveal that modernist portraiture is less about "how a character looks" than about how a character exists in language and culture. This insight remains one of modernism's most enduring contributions: the recognition that to describe a person in literature is always to enter into dialogue with the voices of the past.

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