

The failures of fatherhood: simon daedalus and joyce's ireland



Father-son relationships are a part of the fabric of everyday life, and because of this, father-son relationships are a recurring theme of great literature.

While a father can certainly be a role model and source of strength for a son, a father who fails in his role can create a very negative relationship. In *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus has a troublesome relationship with his father, Simon Dedalus. Stephen also has problematic relationships with other fathers: Catholic priests. Joyce uses the shortcomings of these fathers to symbolize the problems facing Ireland and show Joyce's complex relationship with his homeland.

One major way in which Simon Dedalus symbolizes the problems facing Ireland is through Simon's fall into poverty. In Chapter 2, Simon faces increasing financial hardship, and Stephen notices his father's failures. Despite still being quite young, Stephen understands that "his father was in trouble" financially (67). Forced to move to a "cheerless house" in Dublin, Stephen begins to resent his father (68). Stephen's resentment of his father's poverty shows how Joyce resents the poverty of Ireland. Subject to harsh British rule, Ireland was one of the poorer countries in Europe during the late 1800's and early 1900's. Dilapidated urban areas, such as those described in the novel, covered most of Dublin during this time period ("Poverty and Health"). Therefore, the move to Dublin is especially significant because Dublin is poorer than some of the areas around it, just as Ireland is poorer than the Western European countries near it (Britain, France, etc.). Just as the poverty of his father deprives Stephen of "comfort and revery of Blackrock," the poverty of Ireland deprives Joyce of the luxuries that he could have in wealthier countries. The financial decline of Simon continues to get

worse throughout the novel. As Stephen ages, he continues to notice the “disorder, the misrule and confusion of his father’s house”(176). Stephen refers to the house as “his father’s house,” showing how Stephen blames his father for his family’s financial situation.

Joyce uses Stephen’s resentment of his father’s poverty to display his displeasure with the poverty of Ireland. Another instance in Chapter 2 where the shortcomings of Dedalus symbolizes problems facing Ireland is Stephen’s trip with his father to Cork. Stephen has to accompany his father to “his own dispossession” as he has to sell off his estate (92). Stephen’s unhappiness on this trip is another example of how Joyce despises the poverty of Ireland. Also, from the onset of the trip Stephen is aware of his father’s “draughts from his pocket flask”(92). As the trip continues, Simon drinks as he journey’s “from bar to bar” around the city (99). His drinking becomes so disruptive that Stephen finds that he must “cover that shameful sign of his father’s drinking bout”(99). Simon’s drinking is another problem of Ireland that Joyce seeks to criticize. Ireland is known for being a heavy drinking country, and the stereotype of the drunk Irish is common (“Alcohol... Ireland”). Joyce uses the drinking habits of Simon Dedalus to criticize the heavy drinking of Ireland. The effect Simon’s drinking has on Stephen reveals this criticism. Stephen considers his father’s drunkenness “shameful,” and he is disappointed that his father’s drinking allows him to be “duped by the servile manners of the porter”(99, 94). Stephen is “wearied and dejected” by his father’s drinking, showing how Joyce uses Stephen’s relationship with his father to criticize obstacles facing Ireland.

Another shortcoming of Simon Dedalus that Joyce highlights in his Chapter 2 visit to Cork is his tendency to dwell on the past. During the trip, Stephen “[listens] to stories he had heard before... of his father’s youth,” and has to accompany his father as he “drank to the memory of [his] past”(96, 101). Faced with a daunting financial future and a return to his hometown of Cork, Simon Dedalus dwells on past memories. The reminiscing of his father has a negative effect on Stephen: as he “[listens] without sympathy,” he begins to feel “a faint sickness... in his heart”(92, 96). Just as Stephen disapproves of his father being stuck in the past, Joyce despises the ways in which Irish culture and society is stuck in the past. One example of this can be seen in the Christmas dinner discussion about Parnell. Parnell spearheads an Irish independence movement, but the Catholic “public morality” of Ireland “[hounds Parnell] into the grave” after his affair (30, 33). As he grows up, Stephen realizes that “Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow,” destroying a great political figure because of its old-fashioned moral system (220). This connection is another example of how Joyce uses Stephen and Simon’s relationships to show problems he has with Ireland.

While Stephen has a troublesome relationship with his biological father, he also has a strained relationship with Catholic priests that are fathers in name, such as Father Dolan. At Clongowes College, Father Dolan punishes Stephen for not doing his work, when in fact Stephen had broken his glasses. Stephen finds this punishment “cruel and unfair” as he is left “trembling” and “quivering” (54, 51, 52). The strict actions of Father Dolan greatly disturb Stephen, and Joyce uses this strained relationship to symbolize his dislike of the austerity of Irish morality and religion. The sermons given by

Father Arnall on the Belvedere retreat that Stephen attends showcases the strict philosophy that Joyce symbolizes in Stephen's relationship with Father Dolan. The scorching speech is the philosophical equivalent of hitting a child with a pandybat, and the anguish that the punishment causes Stephen shows how Joyce disapproves of the strict moral philosophy practiced in Ireland. Furthermore, Simon Dedalus later hears about Father Dolan's punishment of Stephen, having a "great laugh over it" and calling Stephen "impudent" (76, 75). Simon's joking attitude about an event that greatly disturbed Stephen is another example of how Joyce uses father-son relationships to show his problems with Ireland.

Father-son relationships contribute a great deal to the meaning of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a whole. As the book progresses, Stephen's relationship with his father becomes strained, especially as his father's financial failures cause his family to fall into poverty. Also, Simon's drinking habits and tendency to dwell in the past causes trouble in his relationship with Stephen. Lastly, the harsh actions by Father Dolan is another example of a troublesome father-son relationship in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce uses these problems to symbolize problems in his own relationship with Ireland: his displeasure with the poverty, drinking, and the outdated and strict morals of his home country.