

Imagination in a portrait of the artist as a young man



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Imagination is the individual's ability to create mental images through his perception of reality. It is an indispensable artistic tool that allows humans to express themselves creatively; it separates us from other living creatures. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus struggles through adolescent life in order to discover his true vocation. In this novel, imagination is the invisible force that compels Stephen to take initiative in life. As the story progresses, the role of imagination is evident in Stephen's four distinct transformations. "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (Joyce 275). His imagination is the implement that allows Stephen to finally create his own conscience and, via self-understanding, finally become an artist. Stephen's first major transformation occurs when he confronts the rector at Clongowes Wood College. Stephen thinks it unjust that Father Dolan punished him for idleness when he was actually excused from his assignments. His determination to right the injustice against himself is only possible through his imagination. After shrinking from his cause, Stephen is emboldened: "He thought of the baldy head of the prefect of studies with the cruel noncoloured eyes looking at him and he heard the voice of the prefect of studies asking him twice what his name was" (Joyce 56). This diminutive and negative description encourages Stephen to take action. After imagining Father Dolan, he becomes confident and successfully requests the rector to correct the mistake. This initial victory, the first in a series of events that lead to Stephen's freedom from society, takes place largely because of his active imagination. As Stephen continues to grow and understand more about the society around him, he encounters new obstacles that he must overcome to reach his calling. The <https://assignbuster.com/imagination-in-a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-man/>

irony is that Stephen sets himself up for these challenges; both the ups and downs of his life are due in part to his own decisions. One such trial involves the Dublin prostitute, where Stephen loses his innocence but learns of the folly of sinful life. "The equation on the page of his scribbler began to spread out a widening tail... It was his own soul going forth to experience, unfolding itself sin by sin, spreading abroad the balefire of its burning stars and folding back upon itself, fading slowly, quenching its own lights and fires." (Joyce 110) As Stephen imagines his scribbler, he thinks about its relation to his own sinful life. He pictures the various sins he has committed and also discusses lights and fires. This foreshadows his abandonment of this life for the religious one; the recurring symbolism of fire convinces Stephen that this immoral life is not for him. Stephen's imagination of its consequences leads him to this conclusion. When Stephen decides to quench his sexual needs, he is once again allowing himself to progress through a stage in life. However, the imagination plays a crucial role here as he decides to leave behind the sinful life that many people choose and continues to search for his vocation. After indulging in sin, Stephen Dedalus becomes repentant and decides to live his life religiously. The religious retreat with Clongowes terrifies Stephen; he believes that a vengeful God will condemn him for his sins. The main factor here is Father Arnall's speech. He speaks of fire and brimstone, emphasizing that those who sin will not be forgiven unless they instantly atone for their wrongdoings. "Hell is a strait and dark and foulsmelling prison, an abode of demons and lost souls, filled with fire and smoke. The straitness of this prisonhouse is expressly designed by God to punish those who refused to be bound by His laws" (Joyce 128). Although this description is from Father Arnall's imagination, it still compels Stephen

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to act. He is convinced that the sermon is meant specifically for him and decides that he can change. After listening to this dreadful description, Stephen's picture of himself burning in the hellfire scares him into taking action: "There was still time. O Mary, refuge of sinners, intercede for him! O Virgin undefiled, save him from the gulf of death!" (Joyce 135) Stephen acknowledges that he has sinned and decides that he should amend his life. After confessing and living piously for a period of time, Stephen once again abandons an institution and moves on with his life. He decides that the religious vocation is not his either; his rejection of both faith and the pleasures of the world through these imaginative lessons now pave the way to Stephen's awakening. The final metamorphosis that Stephen undergoes shows why the name of the novel is *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. He has finally taken on the Daedalus persona and become a mature artist. "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead" (Joyce 276). Stephen's tribute to his namesake, the great artist who escaped from his own labyrinth by imaginatively crafting a flying device, is a final testament to Stephen's acceptance of his role as an artist in society. He imagines himself soaring away from the entrapments of sin and religious service: "His throat ached with a desire to cry aloud, the cry of a hawk or eagle on high, to cry piercingly of his deliverance to the winds. This was the call of life to his soul not the dull gross voice of the world of duties and despair, not the inhuman voice that had called him to the pale service of the altar" (Joyce 184). Stephen's avoidance of the snares of life is only possible through his imagination, which is evident in his final discovery: "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 seabird... and <https://assignbuster.com/imagination-in-a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-man/>

when she felt his presence and the worship of his eyes her eyes turned to him in quiet sufferance..." (Joyce 186). The female figure represents aesthetic beauty; she is the epitome of what Stephen considers art. After imagining this ideal woman, Stephen finally understands his calling. He has transcended the confines of society and ultimately decides to leave behind his home, family, and religion to pursue art. Through the various stages in Stephen's life as a young man, he becomes more and more informed about the world around him. His imagination propels him through these experiences; it constantly pushes him to make choices, whether good or bad. Stephen learns that indulging himself in sin is not befitting of his character, nor is becoming a strictly religious priest. He finds his place as an artist, a man free of all such constraints. The decisions that he makes correlate with Stephen's destiny and eventually lead to his career as an artist. Without his creative talent, Stephen would not have progressed through life in this fashion, and it is possible that he would not have become an artist either.