

# "the irish cow: a motif essay"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Ireland: for centuries, dreamers and tourists have associated it with rolling green hills, misty, cool fog, smiling, barefoot peasants, moss-covered castles built of stone, and haunting Celtic songs. This romantic picture may suit the foreigner, but for Stephen Daedalus, the hero of James Joyce's autobiographical masterpiece "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man", it is a vision that could not be further from the truth. Stephen's Ireland is a land of restriction and hypocrisy, of dirt and poverty, of monotony and foreboding – in short, a place he longs to escape. Throughout the novel, the image of a cow recurs as a motif and becomes an important factor in the development of Stephen Daedalus's view of his country and the Church that is such an integral aspect of it (and, consequently, of life in general). The motif follows Stephen from his relatively happy and innocent childhood, through the growing hardships of his early adolescence, to the final disillusionment of his youth. Each instance is paired with Stephen's emotional response to Ireland and to the Church, his relationship with each institution, and his feelings on life at large. The cow is first encountered on the very first page of the novel: "Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road" (7). This scene occurs early in Stephen's life, and describes his first memories of his parents and the stories his father told him. It illustrates a time when the hero was a careless and happy child and knew very little about the nature of his country or his religion; the "moocow" is, therefore, a symbol of his small, peaceful place in Ireland, in a house with a story-telling father, a piano-playing mother, and Uncle Charles and Dante. However, while Stephen has not yet uncovered the negative aspects of his homeland, the first sentence foreshadows his later discovery. The moocow is "coming down the road"; it may be assumed that this road is Stephen's life,

<https://assignbuster.com/the-irish-cow-a-motif-essay/>

and he is " baby tuckoo", the boy that the cow is approaching. While the cow seems to be a peaceful and gentle creature, as evidenced by the childish name " moocow", and Stephen is " a nicens little boy", this will no longer be true when the two meet. The cow will turn out to be a stifling and dangerous force in the boy's life, and the boy will become a brooding cynic who must abandon the cow to avoid being destroyed by it. Joyce sets up this event by not finishing the story, but merely setting it up and letting it trail off, suggesting that the reader himself will discover its conclusion by reading the novel. The next encounter with the cow motif occurs in Book 2, when Stephen is back at his family's house in the country. This is a time in his life when he is beginning to understand more of the world around him: he begins to accompany Uncle Charles on his errands, and to listen when Charles and his father discuss worldly issues such as Irish politics. However, he is not yet fully mature, and does not understand his life or his country completely. He meets a boy of his age named Aubrey Mills and they begin to play adventure games together, a boyish pursuit that emphasizes the fact that Stephen is still a child; accordingly, the cows he comes into contact with are still seen in a positive light. The boys love driving in the milkcar, and the cows look beautiful to Stephen in the summer sunlight. When September comes, however, Aubrey goes to school and Stephen stays home because his family can no longer afford Clongowes. While Stephen is relieved not to have to return to his hated school, he begins to understand that all is not well: " In a vague way he understood that his father was in trouble and that this was the reason why he himself had not been sent back to Clongowes" (64). Stephen has an idea that something is wrong, but he has not attained a full grasp of the problem, and so his feelings about cows are mixed. At one point, cows

and their milk revolt him, but at another he is indifferent to them and even thinks that the life of a milkman might be pleasant – and then, again, he is filled with dread as a feeling of unsettlement comes over him. Something is wrong, but he doesn't know what. His world is expanding, but he does not know where it is going and where it will take him. In the meantime, the cow seems to lurk in the background, good and bad, beautiful and revolting. Stephen does not know what it – or his life – will bring. The following mentions of the cow arise when Stephen is being lured back into Catholicism after his "fall" with the Dublin prostitute. He goes on a religious retreat, where he hears fiery sermons from Father Arnall – sermons that scare him into devotion for a short time. The first night, however, after the priest makes only a short speech and Stephen goes home, he has not yet been seized by fear, and feels only lethargically depressed. He stands "listless and dishonored, gazing out of darkened eyes, helpless, perturbed and human for a bovine god to stare upon" (111). While this may very well be the first stage of Stephen's plunge into self-disgust and passion for repentance, it may also be one of his first honest moments of doubt. The god that stares upon him is not yet described as powerful, or almighty, as he is later, but rather as "bovine", a term that recalls the Biblical tale of the worship of the Golden Calf. At this point, Stephen's depression may be from his first inkling that the omnipotent religion that has such a strong hold on every aspect of his life, from his family to his country to his school, may in fact be false, a Golden Calf that is nothing but an idol for the foolish to bow down to. And even an inkling of such an idea may be enough to depress Stephen as much as an all-consuming threat of Eternal Damnation. The following day, Stephen is plunged headfirst into consternation with the threatening sermon of the

<https://assignbuster.com/the-irish-cow-a-motif-essay/>

priest. It is a speech that has the power to make Stephen a highly devout Catholic, albeit for only a short time. Even in the midst of such a speech, however, a hint of what is to come in Stephen's life is slipped in through the obscure use of the cow motif. When the birth of Jesus Christ is being described, the priest states that Jesus was born " in a poor cowhouse in Judea" (118). Although the priest is literally referring to the barn in which Jesus was born, in the symbolic scheme of the novel the cowhouse may very well be Ireland. As the cow is used to represent the country of Stephen's birth and adolescence as well as the Church, the use of the term " cowhouse" for the place of Jesus' birth can be seen as a reference to Joyce's – and, of course, Stephen's – belief that the hypocritical and tyrannical entity that is the Church belongs only in the filthy and confining Ireland, represented by the cowhouse. This is a fact that Stephen will eventually realize, thereby throwing off all effects of the terrifying sermon. The next time that the cow motif comes up is when Stephen has become thoroughly disillusioned with his religion and his country. He is now a student at the University at Dublin, and is regarded as a sort of maverick because he refuses to take pride in Ireland and become a nationalist. His friend Davin, a simple and moral young man who is devoted to the nationalist cause encourages " Stevie" to conform and think of Ireland before everything else that he values. Stephen makes a direct parallel between Ireland and cows when he says, " Ireland is an old sow that eats her farrow" (203). Literally, Stephen is referring to a mother cow who eats her disabled calf, but figuratively Stephen is referring to the country of Ireland and the tendency of its leaders to destroy the people it produces if they err. Specifically, Stephen may be citing the Church's rejection of Charles Parnell. As the Church was a

<https://assignbuster.com/the-irish-cow-a-motif-essay/>

powerful force in Irish life and politics in Stephen's time, its officials had tremendous power to build up or destroy national figures. As Stephen grows up, the people close to him laud Parnell for his leadership of nationalism, and Dante keeps a brush in her press for him. But when Parnell is found to have an affair with Kitty O'Shea, a married woman, he is denounced by the Church and, accordingly, by the majority of the religious Irish. While Stephen lies in the infirmary at Clongowes, he hears the news of Parnell's death. At his first adult meal, Stephen witnesses a fiery debate between his father and his friend, who still support Parnell, and Dante, who agrees with the Church's condemnation. After Parnell dies from exhaustion and his career is destroyed by the oppressive forces of the Irish Church, Stephen retains this image of Ireland as a land that may very well destroy the thing it creates. Stephen understands that he himself, like Parnell and many others, is very much a creation of Ireland, and he admits as much to Davin: " This race and this country and this life produced me" (203). He understands as well that the fanatical religion that caught hold of him and made him feel miserable and guilty for every action has the power to destroy him as a person, that the encouragement he received to become a priest of the Irish Church would have made his life drab and unbearable, and that the nationalism for the homeland has the power to destroy his dreams for the future if he joins the cause. He does not wish to be farrow to the sow of Ireland, and thus he rejects " the cow". The cow motif arises again while Stephen's aesthetic theory is being developed. As he speaks with Lynch, he asks, " If a man hacking in fury at a block of wood make there an image of a cow, is that image a work of art?" (214). While this is not a direct reference to the parallel between the cow and Ireland, it can be argued that the cow image is

slipped in here to contrast Stephen's vision of his future as an artist with Ireland's lack of conductivity to that purpose. When Stephen has his epiphany on the beach upon seeing the bird-like girl, he realizes that his purpose in life is to create art – the type of art that glorifies the beauty of humanity and earthly matters, not of lofty and divine concepts like country and religion. Since Stephen reaches this epiphany after deciding that he can never be a Catholic priest, the epiphany is his first step in realizing that he cannot be an artist if he remains in Ireland. When he mentions a cow in his discussion of beauty, he is again referring to an oppressive Ireland that will never allow him to blossom as an artist – an idea that Lynch reinforces when he states, "What do you mean by prating about beauty and the imagination in this miserable G-dforsaken island? No wonder the artist retired within or behind his handiwork after having perpetrated this country" (215). One of the last encounters with the cow motif comes when Stephen meets his friend Cranly, who is reading a book entitled "Diseases of the Ox". This title is fitting because it embodies Stephen's final conclusion about Ireland: it is a diseased, dirty, and hypocritical land that he can no longer feel at home in, namely because he is not devoted to its religion and has no sympathy for the cause of its nationalism. For him, Ireland is not responsive to any kind of progress and weak because its men were not strong enough to resist English rule; the country holds no future for Stephen. Thus, the ox or cow that is Ireland is as figuratively diseased as the literal cattle in Cranly's book. Far from the romantic fantasy imagined by the foreigner, Joyce's Ireland is a land infested with filth, fear, hypocrisy, and monotony, factors that are strengthened by the forceful hold of the Irish Catholic Church. Besides being a renegade work in its use of a stream-of-consciousness style and its mighty

themes, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" employs a number of motifs that add symbolic power to the overall message. The motif of the cow is one that comes up numerous times throughout the story, symbolizing Ireland, the Church, and Stephen's relationship to these two entities. It appears as a happy but foreboding moocow in Stephen's childhood, as an element inspiring mixed emotions in his early adolescence, as a shadow of doubt during his return to religion, and as a symbol of hypocrisy, destruction, and the limitation of artistic purpose during his University days. Finally, Stephen realizes that Ireland is rotten through and through, like the diseased cattle in his friend's book, and he abandons the land in his search for creative freedom.