

Boy takes flight



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A caterpillar must crawl, inch by inch, across the earth before it can mature, grow wings, and soar beautifully above the land in which it was born. So too, in James Joyce's *A Portrait Of The Artist as a Young Man*, must the central character, Stephen Dedalus, live a terrestrial life as that young man before he can take the skyward route of the artist. As the novel is in most respects autobiographical, the story recounts the rising (and successive falling, rising, falling) of James Joyce as a boy growing up in Ireland. Of significant interest, though, are the parallels that exist between the Greek myth of Daedalus (from which Stephen gets his surname), Stephen's own tale, and the political and social states of Ireland. All three face a conflict where being land-locked prevents them from their goal of freedom, and must make a change, or metamorphosis, in order to achieve that goal. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a man named Daedalus, an exile from Athens and a masterful craftsman, is imprisoned in the Labyrinth, a giant maze that he himself designed for Minos, the King of Crete. The Minotaur—a monster with half the body of a man, and half the body of a bull—ruled over this Labyrinth at one time. Understanding how wandering the labyrinth would take him only to dead ends, Daedalus sets to work at escaping. However, because of the Labyrinth's walls, the only way to do this is by air. Thus, the craftsman fashions two sets of waxen wings—one for him, and one for Icarus, his son—transforming the land-locked pair into masters of the sky. Before they make their escape, however, Daedalus warns his son “to keep the middle way,” as flying too low to the ocean might crash him into the waves, and flying too high would cause the wings to melt from the sun's heat. “Fly midway. Gaze not at the boundless sky,” he admonishes. Unfortunately, Icarus foolishly soars too high, and plummets to his watery death. Daedalus, however, succeeds in

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his escape. Joyce takes advantage of how rich the myth of Daedalus is, and masterfully crafts his tale of Stephen Dedalus to fit beautifully in line with the work. In Portrait, Dedalus is a young man, plagued with internal conflict, and living amidst a nation that is all but torn asunder by its own internal disputes. Throughout his life, Stephen intently observes what is going on around him, and struggles to make sense of it. Like the exile, Daedalus, Stephen feels much like an outsider, never really finding his place among his contemporaries. Life in his current situation, in fact, becomes a labyrinth for him. Though he has many paths in life to choose from, like becoming a priest or a politician, he recognized that such careers would inevitably lead him only to a dead end." His destiny was to be elusive of social or religious orders... to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world." Stephen clearly sees that his destiny involves leaving his nation and wandering the world in search of wisdom, both his own and of others. This path, however, is only conceivable by flight, or by leaving behind the land of his birth. He must cease from being a young man bound to the soil, and go through the metamorphosis that will change him into a winged artist. In this way he parallels the flight of Daedalus and Icarus. Also, just as it was important for the winged escapers to " keep midway," it is important for Stephen to keep watchful eye on his own altitude. Stephen knows that his art must be significant and powerful in order to take him high enough to avoid being lost in the crashing waves. Conversely, there exists the possibility of failure if he strives for too much, and, like Icarus, he can suffer a disastrous fall because of it. Stephen's art, like the sky, is potentially " boundless," but it is imperative that he keep control over it. Though it is a risky escape for

Stephen to attempt, he is strongly motivated by the dire need of his nation for a hero, someone to give them the voice: the wings they need to escape their own prison. Ireland was a country in need of a rebirth. Just as the Labyrinth was an endless prison, so too the Irish felt virtually imprisoned in their own home. Under the control of Britain, it could not define itself as a nation, could not create for itself its own world as the artist does. The myth connects further. In the biblical book of Daniel, the prophet sees a vision of a multi-horned beast, whose horns would symbolize different worldly kingdoms. Knowing this, if Ireland was the labyrinth, then the Minotaur that ruled over it, with its two symbolic horns, could justifiably represent the political and religious control bearing over the Irish by both the British government and the Roman Catholic Church. These two entities also separate the Irish, throwing them into a discord that prevents them from establishing their own identity. Other signals that also hint at such conflict line Portrait's pages; for instance, the green and maroon brushes of Dante, and the argument at the Christmas table. Joyce continues this theme in his later work, *Ulysses*, where Stephen clearly states that two masters, one Italian and the other British, rule him. This type of feeling is not only his own, but represents the inner feelings of much of Ireland. Other artists, such as Lady Elizabeth and William Butler Yeats, also spoke of such internal conflict in their works. One of the greatest obstacles for Irish freedom was that it had divided feelings towards the goal. In his poem "September 1913," Yeats accused the Roman Catholic Church, which tended to include the Middle Class Irish, of choosing money and convenience over freedom and independence. The English writer Lady Gregory continued this theme in her play "The Rising of The Moon," which tried to unify the two opposing Irish

sides towards that goal of freedom. Stephen himself characterizes this conflict, as throughout the novel he is constantly rising and falling in the pursuit of his goal. Eventually Stephen, however, sees that neither a life in politics, nor one in religion, will help Ireland attain its freedom. Charles Stewart Parnell, the man who did the most for Ireland, was dead, first effectively and then physically. Many held that the church was indirectly to blame for his death, as it was religious conventions that caused Parnell to lose his support. Ireland could not attain freedom until it stopped kicking out its own legs. To Stephen, only his art could offer hope, as his mission statement mentions: "Welcome, O Life! I go to encounter to for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." Stephen is preparing for a life where he can "soar" away by means of his art, which is where the novel closes.

Whether he is able to succeed in his flight, or instead become like Icarus and suffer a disastrous fall, is not mentioned in Portrait. However, as the story is largely autobiographical, it can be seen in the life of Joyce himself how his art has had a profound effect on the identity of Ireland. Stephen's goal finds fruition in the life of Joyce, who was very much aware of the impact his writing would have on the nation. "I seriously believe you will retard the course of civilization in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking glass." (Norris 56) Joyce was able to be boundless with his writing, reaching new heights with his prose and in so many ways succeeding in flight. Part of his success was the power of his words. He was able to transcend the rules of the printed page, having language mold like wax in his hands. He was the great artificer. His writing also gave wings to Ireland as a nation: his works accurately

described their plight both to European readers and the Irish themselves. In the end, the almost mythical tale of Stephen, the artificer, and his native land, has taken flight, proving a transformation from that earthbound boy, into the eternal and boundless winged artist.- Works Cited -Norris, David and Carl Flint. Introducing Joyce. New York: Totem Books, 1997." Portrait of The Artist as A Young Man" Book Rags. com. 2000. October 3, 2004 " <http://www.bookrags.com/notes/por/BIO.htm>"