

Evolution of the perception of women



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In “ A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man”, Stephen Dedalus’s evolving image of the female derives from his shifting and inconsistent perspective on religion and spirituality. Whichever religious belief he holds during each adolescent phase is projected onto the female of the text and she serves as a tangible object of his abstract convictions. Sex, salvation and purity are three of Stephen’s most frequent ascriptions to women. In discovering these attributes in prostitutes, the Virgin Mary and the bird-like girl Stephen exploits women as sources of spiritual elevation, religious redemption and freedom. Stephen’s altering idolization of each female figure chronologically documents his progression from a conservative religious devotee to an independent and spiritually resourceful artist. Throughout Stephen’s childhood the significance of Catholicism is impressed upon him in a manner comparable to teaching a child table manners. They were fundamental edifications practiced by every Irishman devoted to the ‘ true’ Ireland; those dedicated to the rebellion of Protestantism. Raised with religion as and an additional appendage to his body, Stephen never questioned the validity of the existence or motivations of God. He attends academically Catholic institutions, studies educational instructions of priests and prays at mass without query. While Stephen’s childhood is saturated with the influences of Catholicism his sensitive and intellectual mind are fully aware of the national and political tension revolving around Irish politics and religion. The Christmas dinner scene disturbs young Stephen, and as he enters puberty he begins to understand how socially controlling religion was. Religion was the reason why he was sent to these Catholic schools where he experienced abuse by priests while Mr. Dedalus’s while political support for Parnell was the source of the devout Dante’s meltdown at the Christmas dinner.

Distraught and suffocated by a religion that was “reshaping the world about him into a vision of squalor and insincerity” (“A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man” ...pg 46), Stephen finds himself simultaneously hungering for intellectual and physical answers for his confusion—his young 16 year old hormones harbored a craving for sensual satisfaction of the body. In Chapter 2, subsequent to experiencing familial humility and shame, Stephen discovers himself wandering down dark and damp Dubliner streets searching for the answers that his befuddled and randy body demanded. Stephen’s wanderings led him to stand before the rawest symbol of sex—a young feminine prostitute. Prostitutes are considered the epitome of female sexuality since they sell their bodies in order to provide their means of living, essentially saturating every economic aspect of their lives with sin. They were the ultimate symbol of Catholic rebellion and Stephen considers the prostitute’s blatant defiance of her Christian community intoxicating. Stephen views the young prostitute as the release to the “cry that he had strangled for so long in his throat” and her sex as a method for the “vehicle of a vague speech” (Portrait...pg. 70), a vague speech that liberate Stephen free from the restrictive sermons of religious life. Stephen’s keenly sensitive mind does not allow him to consider the sexual act with the prostitute as purely physical. An orgasm to Stephen is a spiritual experience that transports him from the harsh reality of poverty and hormonal confusion into a world of pleasurable fireworks. Stephen still cannot part with the Catholic notion of the adored and heavenly Virgin Mary, even though the prostitute is an obvious contradiction of the Virgin Mary. His description of the prostitute and her room is heavenly—the prostitute wears a long flowing gown and her room is lit softly by candles (candles were often found to be the source of

soft light in churches). The prostitute also has a doll in the bedroom, a symbol of innocence and child-like purity. Similar to how one would surrender to the power of God, Stephan allows her to bow his head in the position prayer, and he finds himself “ surrendering himself to her, body and mind, conscious of nothing in the world” (Portrait. . . pg. 71), as if he is being spiritually transported to another spiritual realm. Stephen continues his sordid affairs with prostitutes and does not cease until he hears Father Arnell’s sermon regarding hellish damnation of those who participate in unwholesome pleasures of the flesh and mind. Scared witless by the notion that his “ human spirit will be sobbing and sighing, gurgling and rattling,” due to his body “ feeding the mass of its creeping worms and to be devoured by scuttling plump-bellied rats” (Portrait...pg. 79), Stephen vows to seek a life of Christian redemption. In efforts to reverse the effects of his sins, Stephen practices extreme mortification of his senses, and subsequently seeks advice from a priest in confession. The priest advises Stephen to “ pray to our mother Mary to help you. Pray to Our Blessed Lady when that (meaning sordid sex) comes into your mind” (Portrait. . . pg. 103). Coupled with his new practice of mortification and the priest’s counsel, Stephen discovers himself devoutly praying to the Virgin Mary obsessively, revering her as the idyllic image of virginal purity and beauty. Previously Stephen found the prostitute’s disparate image of the Virgin Mary intoxicating; he now worships the purity of the Virgin Mary with the intention of eradicating the prostitute’s fleshy scent from his skin. Stephen’s fascination with the virginal female includes Emma— a living, breathing reincarnation of Mary. The fact that Stephen has never spoken to her increases her purity level. By never having touched or spoken to Emma Stephen is unable to have ‘ soiled’

her therefore he never compromises her heavenly representative of Mary on Earth. Additionally Stephen couples Emma and the Virgin Mary in his thoughts of female wholesomeness. He imagines himself standing, “ near Emma in a wide land, humbly in tears, bent and kissed the elbow of her sleeve” (Portrait... pg. 82) in attempts of gaining her forgiveness for previously harboring brutishly lusty thoughts of her. In this imagined scene the Virgin Mary unites the two by the hand, in essence granting Emma’s forgiveness as well as her own onto Stephan. Stephen’s passionate commitment and idolatry to the Virgin Mary exemplifies his ability to reconfigure the image and role of the female form depending on the phase of his life. Stephen’s projection of women will change yet again as he unearths his desire to express his artistic and intellectual independence. As a reward for his unfettered devoutness to the church Stephan is offered a position in the priesthood. However initially attracted to the prestige associated with the position, Stephen increasingly discovers himself offended by the notion of being constrained by another’s rules—after all, although previously bounded to the notions of mortification, they were his very own standards, imposed rules determined by him and no other. He comes to realize that the “ chill and order of the life repelled him” (Portrait. . . pg. 115), and with a sound resolution he claims, “ He was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering the snares of the world” (Portrait... pg. 116). Subsequent to his newfound and exuberant proclamations of following in the steps of the great Greek artist Daedalus, Stephen stumbles upon a young female wading in the beach water. Stephan’s powerful imagination, freshly filled with images of the flying Daedalus, imagines the girl as a bird. The bird-like girl symbolizes

the notion of an unfettered natural beauty, unregulated by religion. Stephan stands frozen and amazed by her naturalness and independence. It is interesting to note that Stephan chose a woman to project his newfound independence— why not merely project his current exuberance onto an actual bird? It is important for Stephan to ascribe his emotional and intellectual ideals onto women because they serve as the medium in which religious and spiritual symbolism takes place on earth. They are easily accessible in terms of touch and visualization, and Stephen is able to convert them to another form (whereas a bird is already a bird and therefore is less desirous in terms of transformation). It is Stephen's imagination at this time that creates and adapts the sighting of the bird-like girl into a monumentally spiritual affair. In this moment he reveals the inspiration as a sign to, " To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty..." (Portrait... pg. 123). By the end of the text the boy who was once ruled by religion and social pressure has embarked on a deeply spiritual and sensual journey of introspection. In this journey across the sea the women in *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man* serve as landmarks in Stephen's adolescence. Each female symbol is a projection of the varying phase in Stephen's search for himself. All three women, the prostitutes, the Virgin Mary and the bird-like girl are maps of Stephen's desired destination—each one mapping deriving their directions from his mind. Stephen's phase, like his projection of women changed radically depending on the external influences of religion, and ultimately the influences of his artistic mind and soul.