

The depiction of the stephen dedalus' story in a portrait of the artist as a youn...

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James Joyce's novel, "A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man," chronicles the adventures of Stephen Daedalus as he navigated adolescence in and around the Irish city of Dublin during the late 19th century. He uses his experiences with religion, family, and sexuality to try and figure out his place in the world.

Stephen starts the novel in a prestigious boarding school where he learns of God and the raging political turmoil around him. What frightens him is how little he care about either subject, instead finding interest in his thoughts and studies. As Stephen moves from home to home and from school to school, he tries repeatedly to find an organizational body to belong to, but continuously leaves. After a particularly long period of debauchery, Stephen finds the church and almost becomes a priest, before once again leaving the group he had sought to recede into his own thoughts. After dropping out of university, the young Stephen realizes that he may never fully understand himself or find his place in society, but decides to make a concerted effort to do so for the sake of his art.

When first published, both the public and the literary scholars of the day saw the novel as radical. Joyce's use of stream-of conscious and cotemporary language was something entirely new to the literary world, and the depictions of faith contrasted with debauchery angered the predominately Catholic Ireland. With time however, the novel has become a benchmark of the modernist literary movement and is more revered than feared. It can also be seen as one of the earliest examples of the autobiography, as many of Stephen's adventures paralleled Joyce's own adolescence. Joyce would

later refine his style with “Ulysses,” which is considered his magnum opus and possibly the greatest novel of all time. While “Portrait” may seem like just a series of random events experienced by a protagonist, James Joyce uses symbolism and theme to simply yet elegantly dissect a future artist to prove that it is the small and mundane events in life that shape us into the people we are.

Style Analysis

One thing that makes “Portrait of An Artist as a Young Man” such a dense and tedious read is the fact that it is grounded very much in the time that it was written in. Every single page is covered in footnotes elaborating on references made in the text. Often, the novel is accompanied by a section of further readings that compliment the time. Often that section is almost as long as the novel itself. What all this is getting at is that due to the novel being so grounded in its time, Joyce never uses heightened language or fancy syntax. His literary language is that of his characters, which is in turn is that of the current time and place; never fanciful, and never needing to be. For example, the following is an example of a fight had between Stephen’s father and his scullery maid, Dante, over the death of a recent labor party leader. “‘He’s a devil to all of us!’ Dante cried, her face red with blood. Calm, and with a composure unlike that of the scullery maid, the father replied ‘Then take him to Dublin and burn him! Burn him!’ ‘You dirty bastard. You don’t know the right of the world!’ Dante shot” (Joyce 24).

In many novels from this time, fights involved extremely flamboyant gestures of prose, and a flurry of figurative language. Here, the fight is very

intense, intimate, and very grounded in the time it is trying to represent. Because of this, it has much more of an impact, and it is easier to how it impacted a young Stephen. The fight was just like any other quarrel, and the mundane nature of it all draws back to the novel's main argument that art is influenced by the small and intimate, not the tenacious and bombastic.

While the syntax and diction used by Joyce is informal, he still manages to add another level of literary depth to the novel through his use of symbolism. Throughout Stephen's life, he encounters many reoccurring images. Women, music, water, and surprisingly cows. In the very first page of the novel, the reader is introduced to these symbols. "Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo... His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face" (Joyce 1).

Already in the first page, hair, women, cows, and water in a glass influence Stephen, symbols that will repeat throughout his life. Joyce never flat out yells out "there's a symbol!" They fade into the background, connecting the mundane and personal moments that influence Stephen's maturation into the artist he is to become.

While James Joyce may not use the romantic language popular in the works of his contemporary's, Joyce used colloquial and informal diction of the time to his advantage which, coupled with his subtle use of symbolism, help

reinforce his argument that the little things in life are what truly shape us into who we become.

Theme Analysis

While “Portrait of an Artist As A Young Man” has many themes, such as the need for Irish Independence and the role of artists in modern society, Joyce’s most prevalent theme is the development of one’s individual consciousness. The character of Stephen Daedalus is portrayed throughout the novel from the ages of around 12 to his early twenties. During this time, his consciousness is influenced mostly by two things, Stephen’s interactions with his family, and his search for his niche in society.

Stephen comes from a broken family. His father is constantly moving his family from city to city due to his debt problems; his mother never confronts the problem, and his brothers and sisters largely ignore him. Even so, his father’s voice does bring him some comfort. This comfort coupled with the neglect from his family leaves Stephen ample time to think. After one particularly mundane morning of ignorance Stephen observes, “The consciousness of the warm sunny city outside his window and the tender tremors with which his father’s voice festooned the strange and happy air drove off all the mists of the night’s ill humor from Stephen’s brain” (Joyce 77). Through this peek into Stephen’s consciousness, the reader can see how he compensates for the lack of familial interaction, instead focusing on nature and sound in its most basic form. These influences are what really drive his conscience to become one of artistic thought and literary merit.

The other large influence on Stephen's conscience is his struggle to find a place where he belongs. Throughout the novel, he tries to find his place in boarding school, city life, prostitution, university, and most importantly, religion. In all of the aforementioned cases, he never finds a fit and is pushed back into the search for a purpose. He comes closest to finding a place in religion. After a year of sexual escapades, Stephen turns to the Catholic Church. He devotes about a year of his life to the church and is eventually asked to join the priesthood. His initial excitement turns to resentment when he has a breakthrough thinking, " He was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snare of the world" (Joyce 142). This is a seminal moment in the development of Stephen's conscience, as this proclamation becomes his defining statement for the rest of the novel. He moves to sacrifice the feeling of belonging to a group for the chance to continue to experience a series of mundane events, day by day, and gleaning from it what he may.

The development of a conscience is the most prevalent theme within " A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man," with Stephen's development of his own conscience being influenced by his relationships with his family, and his constant search for a group to identify himself against (Grendel anyone?). His ultimate decision to reject other's influences in order to form his own opinions from the simple world around him becomes one of the most important decisions in the book, one that embraces the mundane and realized the development of an artist.

Excerpt Journal

“ The fellow laughed; but he (Stephen) felt that they were a little afraid. In the silence of the soft grey air he heard the cricket bats from here and from there: pock. That was a sound to hear but if you were hit then you would feel a pain. The pandybat made a sound too but not like that. The fellows said it was made of whalebone and leather with lead inside: and he wondered what was the pain like. There were different kinds of pains for all the different kinds of sounds. A long thin cane would have a high whistling sound and he wondered what was the pain like. It made him shivery to think of it and cold: and what Athy said too. But what was there to laugh at in it? It made him shivery: but that was because you always felt like a shiver when you let down your trousers. It was the same in the bath when you undressed yourself. He wondered who had to let them down, the master or the boy himself. O how could they laugh about it that way?” (Joyce 39).

This section of narration comes very early on in the novel, and occurs after Stephen hears that a few boys who have committed acts of thievery and homosexual activity will be paddled and possibly expelled. After his group of friends laugh at this, the author enters into Stephen’s mind in one of the best examples of stream-of-consciousness writing in the novel. Stephen’s train of thought wanders of on tangents created by his thoughts, and dwells on some thoughts more than others. This dwelling is represented by the use of the repetition of phrases such as “ he wondered what the pain was like” and “ It made him shivery.” This thoughts and feelings Stephen has start very focused and then bloom into very broad questions about society, before wrapping up neatly with the original question about laughter and

comfortableness, and they each affect his five senses differently. It may seem like a whirlwind sensory experience, but in reality, Joyce has captured what really happen in the human mind as it reacts to its surroundings. This passage illuminates how influential mundane events can be on life, as the questions that spring from this open up door to whole other issues, shaping one into the person they will end up becoming.

“ The tragic emotion, in fact, is a face looking two ways, towards terror and towards pity, both of which are phases of it. You see I use the word arrest. I mean that the tragic emotion is static. Or rather the dramatic emotion is. The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go on to something, loathing urges us to abandon, to go away from something. These are kinetic emotions. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I use the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing” (Joyce 180).

This excerpt is from part V of the book. Stephen is now in his early twenties, as evidenced by the fact that he is no longer learning information, but bestowing it. In this particular instance, Stephen is explaining to his classmate, Lynch, the difference between emotions and the art that inspires them. While readin this and the surrounding passages, I found myself disagreeing with Stephen’s disdain for what he calls “ improper arts;” the arts that inspire feelings of loathing and desire. Stephen seems so locked into the idea that arts should not excite, but inform. He can only see the negatives in loathing and desire. Often, desire can be a good thing. Desire is

often what motivates people to do great things. The possession of knowledge and health are two of the greatest drives for desire that have produced the most important revolutions known to man. Loathing is less exonerable, as loathing has produced some of the worst aspect of mankind such as war and genocide. However, to say that it stems exclusively from art that excites seems very narrow-minded to me. Art that informs can often radicalize someone who was neutral, while art that excites can often stop someone from committing heinous acts.

“ The English lesson began with the hearing of the history. Royal persons, favourites, intriguers, bishops passed like mute phantoms behind the veil of names. All had died: all had been judged. What did it profit a man to gain the whole world if he lost his soul? At last he had understood: and human life lay around him, a plain of peace whereon antlike men labored in brotherhood, their dead sleeping under quiet mounds. The elbow of his companion touched him and his heart was touched: his own voice full of quietude of humility and contrition” (Joyce 110).

This excerpt comes from part three of the novel. Stephen is in his teens and is learning about history when he has two major breakthroughs. He decides that the way to happiness is through a sense of community, and that the brotherhood of man will always provide for him. He also decides that one's actions on earth are not worth the while if their soul is damned to hell. Both of these decisions tie back into Stephen's continuous search for a purpose and a sense of belonging in the world. It is these two epiphanies that start Stephen's lengthy period in the church. He spends more time working for the

church than in any school or club he has been in to that point. Late on in the novel, Stephen is offered priesthood and has a mental breakdown, ultimately abandoning the church. If one were to reread this passage after finishing the novel, knowing full well that both of these epiphanies would not serve Stephen long, they would see this passage as a textbook example of how our worldview and priorities change as we grow in age and in knowledge.

“ When you first wet the bed it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell.

His mother had a nicer smell than his father. She played on the piano the sailor's hornpipe for him to dance. He danced.

Uncle Charles and Dante clapped. They were older than his father and mother but Uncle Charles was older than Dante. Dante had two brushes in her press. The brush with the maroon velvet back was for Michael Davitt and the brush with the green velvet back was for Parnell” (Joyce 1).

We end at the story's beginning. The first page of the novel is seen through the eyes of Stephen when he is probably about two or three years old. The observations he makes on the first page seem rudimentary: Dante has two brushes, the oilsheet smells funny, Uncle Charles is older than Dante.

However, if you go back and read the previous three excerpts in this order-I, III, II-then you notice one of Joyce's most important literary choices in the novel. Stephen's observations become more and more advanced and dense as the novel progresses. The novel essentially chronicles the inner processes of Stephen's mind in real time as he grows up. Often narrators have the

same mental capacity no matter their age during the entire novel. The mental progression that parallels the age progression in "Portrait" shows the genius of James Joyce's writing style. This mental progression is a rarity in novels across time and is one of the most convincing reasons for why this novel was so revolutionary and will be studied for centuries to come.

Conclusion

The criticisms that were hurled at "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" for its revolutionary writing style and realistic depictions of both public and home life have now dissipated, and it is clear to see why. The novel's use of implicit symbolism and repeating motifs break the notion that it is the large bombastic events in our lives that shape our actions and our character.

James Joyce takes the shards of glass broken by his radical use of literary devices and uses them to weave a wholly new exploration of theme, and how it is the little events and interactions in life that contribute the most to our personality and worldview. He further emphasizes this with revolutionary literary techniques such as the constant use of stream-of-consciousness writing to explore Stephen Daedalus' most inner thoughts, and the real-time mental progression of Stephen that illuminates how these inner thoughts warp and change as a result of outside influence and internal questioning.

Thought the novel as a whole may seem like a slice-of-life story with no real weight, Joyce wields a literary scalpel to dissect a future artist and prove once and for all that it is the David's of our lives, not the Goliaths, that have the most profound impact during adolescence.