

# Review of james joyce's book, a portrait of the artist as a young man

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## **Stephen Dedalus' Quest for Self-Determination**

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce is a semi-autobiographical account of Joyce's childhood and upbringing. The novel is heavily involved in the character study of Stephen Daedalus, a young Irishman whose struggles with growing up are portrayed in the novel. There are many large events that shape Stephen's life, many of which occur in the closing section of each of the novel's five chapters. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is a story of Stephen Dedalus' quest for self-definition, which can be seen through an epiphany scene at the end of every chapter.

Chapter One ends with Stephen learning important lessons about punishment and heroism. Stephen's thoughts about crime and punishment are first introduced when boys in his year begin to talk about some boys who were caught smuggling (committing homosexual behaviour) in the square. At first Stephen doesn't believe the story (" He wanted to ask somebody about it" (2337)) but soon turns his mind to the boy's punishment. Parallels between the smuggling boys punishment and the political situation in Ireland can be drawn in this case, as the boys ask "[are we] to be punished for what other fellows did?" (2338) and, if they are, they " won't come back. ... Let us get up a rebellion." (2338) Stephen is further taught about punishment when he is wrongly punished in class for being a " lazy little schemer" (2342). This scene draws an interesting parallel to later in the novel: now Stephen is punished for something he didn't do, while later he is afraid he will be punished (but never is) by God for sins he does commit. Stephen's unfair punishment leads him to go talk to the head of the school, after which he is

celebrated by his schoolmates: “ They made a cradle of their locked hands and hoisted him up among them and carried him along till he struggled to get free.” (2347) This marks the first time Stephen is portrayed as a heroic character, and specifically a moral hero, which sets him on his path of morality. Despite being seen as a hero, Stephen still feels burdened (“ till he struggled to get free”), and this heroism does not make him less of a social outsider. Overall the ending of Chapter One sets Stephen on the path he will travel the rest of the novel, and emphasizes him beginning to find his moral grounds.

Chapter Two ends with Stephen dancing with worldly pleasure and sin. The final section of Chapter Two has Stephen cashing in his literary prize money (whose value, £33, alludes to Christ's age at crucifixion: 33 years old) and then going on a spending spree: “ He bought presents for everyone, overhauled his room, wrote out resolutions, marshalled his books up and down their shelves, pored upon all kinds of price lists” (2372) Through all of this spending Stephen is trying to purchase a happy and harmonious family, but all this leads to is him mixing up spiritual and worldly matters in his mind, coming close to committing the sin of simony (which, interestingly, is similar to his father's name Simon). Stephen continues this mix up through his incapability to see the incompatibility between his actions and his beliefs. He states that he “ cared little that he was in mortal sin, that his life had grown to be a tissue of subterfuges and falsehood.” (2373) Stephen fantasizes about both the Virgin Mary and prostitutes in the ending of this chapter, showing again the confusion in his mind. Clarity begins to come to

him in the final line of the chapter, as he “[feels] an unknown and timid pressure, darker than the swoon of sin, softer than sound or odour” (2375) when he finally gives in to the physical pleasures of a prostitute. The ending of this chapter continues to define Stephen's moral standing, and the final line indicates to the reader that Stephen may soon begin to realize the sins he has committed and their degree of wrongness.

The ending of Chapter Three is one of the most major turning points for Stephen Dedalus in the novel. He begins to see the sin and error in his ways and begins to try and receive forgiveness for the sins he has committed. The final section of this chapter begins with Stephen beginning to retreat into himself: “ He went up to his room after dinner in order to be alone with his soul” (2396). With this action and those that follow, Stephen changes from a passive listener to the sermon of the last section to an active participator in his spiritual fate. Stephen begins to question his past actions, asking himself “ Could it be that he, Stephen Dedalus, had done those things?” (2397) and he realizes that “ He had sinned. He had sinned so deeply against heaven and before God that he was not worthy to be called God's child.” (2397) At this realization Stephen goes to find a chapel at which to confess, as he feels unable to confess to his own priests. He admits that it has been “ A long time” (2401) since he had last confessed, and the priest tells Stephen to “ Pray to our mother Mary to help [him]” (2401-2402) After confession, Stephen makes a decision that he thinks at the time will affect the rest of his life: he decides to become a priest: “ Another life! A life of grace and virtue and happiness! It was true. It was not a dream from which he would wake.

The past was past. –Corpus Domini nostri. The ciborium had come to him.” (2403) Stephen's decision to fully embrace a religious lifestyle shapes his actions in the rest of the novel, and this epiphany perhaps has the largest effect out of all the transforming experiences shown in *Portrait of the Artist*.

In the final section of Chapter Four, Stephen's life begins to take a different turn as he muses on his past, the present, and his future. Women continue to be a force in Stephen's life, but the Virgin Mary becomes less of a force on his thoughts, as he only looks at her coldly as he passes by a statue of her on his walk. His focus instead switches to that of a girl standing before him in the stream and focuses heavily on her looks: “ Her thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory, were pared almost to the hips where the white fringes of her drawers were like featherings of soft white down.” (2418) Stephen admits that “ He [is] alone. He [is] unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life.” (2418) As Stephen's classmates call out to him with Greek-sounding versions of his name, he changes his thoughts from Christianity toward paganism. This can be symbolized by Stephen's focus shifting from his first name (from St. Stephen) to his last name (Daedalus, a Greek god). Stephen's mission toward self-determination has not been able to be completed through Christianity, which is a possible reason for his faith seeming to wane at this time. During this section Stephen also prophesizes on his own life's past, present, and future, and attempts to fit them all together. Through this Stephen realizes that the art he creates will not only be beautiful, but it will be an entire existence unto itself. Stephen decides

that he will not only create art, he will create himself as he becomes an artist.

The final chapter of *Portrait of the Artist* ends with Stephen becoming the narrator as the reader experiences the final parts of the story through his journal entries. Stephen's quest for an identity and self-definition is emphasized by this change to journal entries. For the first time in the novel, Stephen is not quoting anyone or trying to emulate the voice of another. The writing in this section is also less polished than in previous sections, showing how the reader is finally seeing Stephen's raw voice. The ending of this chapter is marked by Stephen finally meeting with his object of affection, Emma: "Met her today pointblank in Grafton Street." (2469) Through this meeting Stephen begins to see women as actual humans, unlike the idealizations he had previously seen them as. He begins to have emotions other than lust toward women: "I liked her today. A little or much? Don't know. I liked her—and it seems a new feeling to me." (2472) The novel ends with Stephen telling his journal that he will be moving into his new life as an artist: "So be it. Welcome, O life! 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." (2472) His use of the phrase "uncreated conscience of my race" makes it clear that Stephen wishes to be an artist who uses his own individual voice and not the voices of those he mimicked before. Stephen makes another reference to his last name's namesake Daedalus in the final line of the novel, "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead." (2472) The "old artificer" referenced is Daedalus, and

Stephen embraces Daedalus' role as the master craftsman in his new role as an artist. By this final epiphany of Stephen, he has given up his religious lifestyle to fully pursue what he sees as his true calling: to be an artist.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man follows Stephen Dedalus through many years of his life as he searches for his own voice. By the end of the novel it is clear that he can finally speak as himself without quoting other people, so it seems as if the epiphanies Stephen experiences throughout the novel have served their purpose. Now that Stephen has found himself, he may truly begin to live a life of inner peace, and follow his discovered calling of being an artist.