

# Politics in joyce's "a portrait of the artist as a young man"



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"A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" is a "Künstlerroman", and the story of a young artistic aspirant in a particular social setting. That is why the political background of the novel is so important, for it provides the environment for the artist to grow up in. This political and social background therefore remains as an ever-present force in the narrative, introduced in great detail in the first chapter, and providing one of the most potent reasons for Stephen Dedalus's voluntary exile in the fifth. The background of the novel is the anti-colonial movement against the British in nineteenth century Ireland, which had begun with the Act of Union in 1800, making Ireland a part of the United Kingdom, and abolishing a separate Irish Parliament in Dublin. All through the century various political and social movements arose in Ireland, giving expression to the demands of the Irish for greater control of their own affairs. The Home Rule movement, headed by Charles Stewart Parnell (probably the greatest individual force at that time), is especially relevant to this novel; the Land Reform movement headed by Michael Davitt also comes into play. The first line of the novel catapults the reader into the heated political arena of this period. The baby Stephen is listening to a story told by his father about a "moocow coming down along the road", which met "a nice little boy named Baby Tuckoo" 1. Here, the cow, being the symbol of Ireland, is brought into direct confrontation with Baby Tuckoo, or Stephen. This confrontation becomes one of the principal themes of the novel, and is brought up whenever the nation is mentioned. For example, even when Stephen is writing his name in the fly-leaf of his Geography book, he cannot limit his address to "Clongowes Wood College, County Kildare, Ireland", but has to continue as - "Ireland, Europe, The World, The Universe" 2 - which implies that even at this age Stephen does

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not see himself as merely an Irishman, but as a citizen of the Universe. This is backed up later on by the fact that narrow Irish nationalism is rejected by him, and he chooses to leave Ireland for Europe in a self-induced exile. The novel, as stated earlier, is set in the Revolutionary Ireland of 1880—1900, and the history of this period is filtered to us through Stephen's consciousness. Stephen's father, a staunch supporter of Parnell, is set against Dante (Stephen's governess), who is a fanatic supporter of the Catholic Church. The two brushes always kept in Dante's press – one green, and the other maroon – become politically symbolic, denoting Parnell and Michael Davitt respectively. The colours maroon and green recur constantly throughout the novel, from the green earth and maroon clouds which Fleming had coloured in Stephen's geography book, to the red and green holly in the Christmas decorations at Stephen's house. We also later find that Dante rips the green velvet off the back of the green brush to indicate her changed feelings towards Parnell in accordance with his rift with the Catholic Church. The famous Christmas dinner party in the first chapter rudely makes Stephen aware of the viciousness and meanness of politics. But even before this section we have several instances in which we are made aware of the fact that Stephen's life is never free from politics. One important example of this is the day-dream which Stephen has in the infirmary of Clongowes, of Parnell's death. It is curious that whenever Stephen thinks of Parnell and his immense popularity, Dante is always involved in one way or another, expressing energetic opposition to the leader. So great is this enmity between the two sides, that Stephen is sometimes confused, expressing pain that he did not know what politics meant. The Christmas dinner brings this to a head, and for the first time he sees the sedate, dignified adults quarrelling

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bitterly and viciously over matters, the importance of which he, at the age of six, is in no position to understand. He sees Dante screaming with a total lack of control, at those who commit heresy by defying the Church, and witnesses his father and Mr. Casey shouting blasphemies against the priests, and weeping uncontrollably for their dead leader. The seeds of revolt against both Church and State are sown in Stephen's mind on this very day. He cannot listen to the grievous faults of the Church as a child, and then accept priesthood later in Chapter IV, as a youth, and therefore, in spite of himself, rejects the offer given to him by the Director of Belvedere College. Parnell, however, is far more than just a historical figure, and takes on a powerful symbolical presence in Stephen's consciousness. His heroic stature takes on tragic dimensions, and this is used by Joyce to unite the religious and political themes in the novel. Though a great political figure, Parnell's downfall is brought about by religious institutions, and this fact plays a big part in the making of Stephen's mind from childhood to adulthood. In Chapter V, during his conversation with his friend Davin, Stephen makes a very important statement about those aspects of man's life which tie him down to certain worldly ideals which he would rather avoid - "The soul is born ..... first in those moments I told you of. It has a slow and dark birth, more mysterious than the birth of the body. When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets" 3. In this novel politics, like religion, family, language, and religion, is seen as another of the "nets" flung at the soul "to keep it back from flight". It is like an obstacle to the artistic spirit, and Stephen resolves to fly by it, as by all the other "nets". The fifth chapter analyses in detail Stephen's reasons for

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rejecting nationalism and nationalistic politics. In accordance with his role as a rebel against authority, he is the lone student who refuses to sign in on McCann's drive for universal peace. Another instance of swimming against the tide is his refusal to participate in nationalistic politics at the instance of his friend Davin, who is a strong nationalist himself. At that time in Ireland, nationalistic fervour was discovering an outlet in all aspects of traditional Celtic life and culture, one of which was traditional sporting events, through the Gaelic Athletic Association founded by Michael Cusack. Stephen not only detests physical activity, but directly rejects Davin's appeal to join the mainstream. Stephen also clearly gives us his reasons for this rejection. He likens Ireland to "a sow that eats her own farrow", for, according to him, his country is a record of betraying precisely those people who have given up their lives and comfort for its cause. He refuses to pay the penalty for the mistakes and conscious acts of betrayal that his ancestors have committed, and resolves to leave his country for the mainland, in order to express himself better as an artist. He remembers with painful bitterness one particular instance which proved to him beyond doubt that Ireland is no place for good art and artists to flourish in – the first performance of Yeats's play "The Countess Cathleen" at the opening of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899. The performance had to be stopped midway because of the boos and brickbats flung at it from a bigoted audience which could not separate their religious opinions from true art. Stephen's implication is that his expression as an artist would be hampered by these same Irishmen if he did not break away from narrow nationalistic bonds. The Irish culture which Stephen rejects is, however, not merely decadent as he interprets it to be. It has an energetic and popular side which he fails to notice, and as such, ignores

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completely. This popular side had been recognized by Yeats, who had aimed to express this very culture from a distance till his countrymen were progressive enough to accept his ideas and opinions. Stephen does have a vague idea of this role in artistic life through a dream which he records in his diary in the final section of the novel. The dream runs as follows – “ A long curving gallery. From the floor ascend pillars of dark vapours. It is peopled by the images of fabulous kings, set in stone. Their hands are folded upon their knees in token of weariness and their eyes are darkened for the errors of men go up before them for ever as dark vapours. Strange figures advance as from a cave. They are not as tall as men. One does not seem to stand quite apart from one another. Their faces are phosphorescent, with darker streaks. They peer at me and their eyes seem to ask me something. They do not speak” 4. This dream is suggestive of the dead Irish past which he wants to shake off, symbolized by the busts of Irish kings who can do no more than watch the vapours rising by them, and the procession of deformed creatures walking past them. But these creatures are mutely appealing to Stephen the artist, as if asking him to pull Irish art up from its decadent state. This idea, however, remains submerged in Stephen’s consciousness while he decides to fly across the seas like the mythical Dedalus, to artistic freedom. It will later be dealt with in greater detail in the world-famous sequel to “ A Portrait of the Artist” – Joyce’s masterpiece, “ Ulysses”. References : 1)James Joyce : “ A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man” (Penguin Books, 1992, London), p. 3. 2)Ibid, p. 12. 3)Ibid, p. 220. 4)Ibid, p. 272.