

"a portrait of the artist
as a young man" —
significance of the
title



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The title of "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" has been the subject of as much speculation as the novel itself, and like all modernist writing, this title has been able to maintain its open-ended nature. Indeed, this open-endedness has posed problems for many critics. The theme of this novel concerns the development of the artist from that point in his life when he becomes conscious of the world around him, to the time when he reaches manhood, and sets off in pursuit of the goal which he has identified for himself in the course of the book. The problem is that we are not given a portrait of AN artist, but of THE artist. The choice of the general article "a" before the word "portrait" suggests the open-ended nature of the text - that it is only one of many portraits that can be painted, and that the author is only attempting to show one side of the picture, from one point of view. The reader may interpret as he wishes. The definite article "the" before "artist", however, cannot be understood so easily. It may refer to the autobiographical element in the novel, or it may refer to the type of the artist, the form of art which he chooses to make his own. The phrase "portrait of the artist" is traditionally used in connection with self-portraits, and this is suggested by a comment which Joyce had made to Frank Budgen, who has quoted thus in his book "James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses" - "I have not let this young man off very lightly, have I? Many writers have written about themselves. I wonder if any of them has been as candid as I have". Yet, in spite of all the evidence pointing to Stephen Dedalus being a portrait of Joyce himself, it is difficult to accept this completely. The novel remains autobiographical in all the incidents recorded in it, and also in most of the peripheral characters around Stephen. But the character of the hero himself is very far from that of the author, as far as we know about his

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biography. As such, James Joyce both is and is not the subject of the portrait of the artist as a young man. James was certainly not the humourless, self-centred young boy who takes himself too seriously, that is portrayed in the novel. The incidents, moreover, are a combination of what happened to Stanislaus, James's brother, and those experienced by the author himself as a young man. The refusal to do his Easter duty, for example, was actually his brother's revolt against what he did not believe, than Joyce's own. Stephen's dark personality, too, parallels Stanislaus more than James. As such, the phrase, " portrait of THE artist" is misleading. It would rather be rewarding to consider the second argument in this connexion - that the phrase " the artist" refers to a particular kind of artist. In the novel, we find, the word " artist" specifically refers to a literary artist, and not an artist of any other form. In fact, other forms of art, like painting or sculpture, are regarded with a certain amount of disrespect by Stephen in the fifth chapter of the novel, while talking to Lynch. The vocation which Stephen chooses for himself after rejecting all others, is that of a writer, and he mentally begins to recognize the mythical Dedalus as his spiritual father, while explicitly describing his relationship to his biological father Simon Dedalus as that of fosterage. There is also, in this regard, an open-endedness about the word " artist", as well. There is no doubt that Stephen aspires to becoming an artist; there is also no doubt that he has in him almost all the qualities that an artist should have. For example, he is in love with words from infancy, and often turns to words - their sounds and associations - for comfort and enjoyment when his spirits are down (such as the meaningless words in Doctor Cornwell's Spelling Book). He has a vivid imagination, and is always attempting to create something which is otherwise unattainable - a green rose, for

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instance. He is also an avid reader, and is proficient enough in word-usage, as is illustrated by the fact that he wins cash prizes in essay competitions, and that his best subject in school is essay-writing. Yet, when the word "artist" is mentioned in the title, we cannot but regard it with a touch of cynicism, because Stephen never does become the artist he wants to be – mostly because of his extreme self-centredness and rejection of everything that human society regards with emotion, such as nation, language, religion, family, and friends. In the entire novel the only creative work that he manages to complete, after long lectures on art and poetry, in a villanelle which he professes to have written in a moment of wild inspiration – a stiff, stilted, artificial, unpleasing work. By the time he is ready to leave his country, we have genuine reservations about this young man, for it is a mystery how a person as "wrapped up in himself" (according to his rival Mc Cann) as he can ever aspire to great art. This young man loves nobody and nothing but himself, and rejects anyone who comes anywhere closer than arm's length – his parents, his friends Cranly and Davin, and even Emma at the end. Stephen, moreover, is extremely confident about his ideas and views, disdainfully shaking off the good advice of the Dean of Studies, and expounding his theory of art to the most unlikely and unappreciative person, Lynch. About the latter part of the title, it was Joyce himself who took the trouble to advise his readers not to forget the four last words, "as a Young Man", as many of his early critics had tended to do. That is why we are shown Stephen as a potential artist, striving towards maturity and fulfilment, where this maturity is only hinted at, not shown in the time-period of the novel. It is because Stephen is a young man here, that the interest of this novel goes beyond its plot, for speculation remains even after the novel is

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over, whether, in spite of all his potentiality, he does become the artist he aspires to be. It also paves the way for the mature Stephen Dedalus in the loose sequel to this novel - Joyce's masterpiece, "Ulysses".