

Eng/ Sem.3/CC-12/ Contemporary Fiction

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

About The Author

James Joyce (1882-1941) is a colossus (a person of exceptional importance and reputation) of modernist fiction. Some of the critics regarded him obscene and immature but praised him as an erudite humanist; some have deemed his prose impenetrable, too concerned with artifice and verbal gamesmanship, while others have described his writing as life-affirming and always attuned to the music of language.

Joyce combined stream-of-consciousness, interior monologue, absurdist drama, mythical parallelism, and other techniques in a formal combination or chemistry that has had a profound impact on other modernists and future generations of novelists.

James Joyce is a Modernist. His style includes experimentation with structure, dialogue and characterization. For instance, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* vignettes of critical life events form the structure thus rendering the narrative void of a conventional beginning, middle and end. Dialogue blends into the narrative text without benefit of quote marks or standard paragraph indentation.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica comes to conclude that James Joyce is considered the most prominent English-speaking literary figure of the first half of the twentieth century. His short-story collection and three novels redefined the form of modern fiction and have inspired countless writers in his wake.

Katherine Mullin asserts that Joyce is commonly perceived to stand at the centre of his aesthetic moment, the 'father of high modernism', the protégé, friend and inspirer of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and other modernists, whose long shadow hangs over later writers. However, Joyce's centrality should not distract us from the many ways in which he spoke from the periphery of the literary culture he would come to dominate.

Joyce's first published book, *Dubliners* (1914), consisting of stories he had written over the previous decade, was a naturalistic look at what Joyce called the spiritual paralysis of Dublin.

Joyce was born in the Dublin suburbs in 1882 to a Roman Catholic family. At the age of 16, Joyce rejected Catholicism; the symbols, rituals, history, and theology of the Church, however, would remain important sources for his later fiction.

About the Book

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is a novel by the Irish modernist writer James Joyce. It follows the intellectual, moral and spiritual development of a young Catholic Irishman, Stephen Dedalus, and his struggle against the restrictions imposed by his culture.

Though the technique used in much of the novel's narration can be described as 'stream-of-consciousness' and **Interior Monologue**, some critics complain that this term tells us little about the effect it achieves. Joyce traces Stephen's various stages of development, by adjusting the style of his language as his protagonist grows up. From the baby-talk of the opening, to the high-minded aesthetic discussion towards the end, Joyce's language plays mimics of Stephen's phonetic, linguistic and intellectual growth. By the end of the novel, Stephen has resolved to follow his calling as an artist and to leave Ireland in order to 'forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race'.

Autobiographical Elements in the Book

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is largely autobiographical. It explores Stephen's life corresponding in most details to Joyce's. Like Stephen, he was born in Dublin to a merry, profligate father and devout Catholic mother, the eldest of ten surviving children; like his fictional counterpart, he attended Clongowes Wood College, Belvedere College, and University College Dublin.

During college, Joyce began to publish literary reviews, poems, and plays. After graduating in 1902 he briefly studied medicine in Paris; he returned to Dublin some months later to attend his mother's funeral. At this time, he tried unsuccessfully to publish shorter, earlier versions of *Portrait* under the names of *Portrait of the Artist* and *Stephen Hero*. In 1904 he met Nora Barnacle, who he married and who served as an inspiration and a model for many aspects of Joyce's fiction. The couple spent many years wandering around Europe in near-poverty, settling eventually in Zurich and Paris.

The psychological realism of the book

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce is evident in the fact that the entire story revolves resolutely on its main character, Stephen Dedalus. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is actually a semi-autobiographical account of the author's life as a young man.

The novel is written as a third-person narrative with less dialogue. The narrator seems attached to the main character. The book's opening lines present popular examples of Stephen's thoughts and conscious experience when he is just a child. Take these lines for instance, "*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. . . .*"

Joyce's style in writing realism is distinctive and unique. It differs from other works that delves on similar topic. What sets this story apart is that most of the action occurs predominantly in the mind of the protagonist, Stephen. In order to make that portrayal believable, Joyce creates and employs a technique called interior monologue, or stream of consciousness wherein the arbitrary thoughts of Stephen are being quoted such as those found in the first pages of the book.

Images and Symbols

Images and symbols are oft-repeated are designed to convey Stephen's innermost feelings. Take for instance, a rose or the colour of rose which represents the young man's quest for romance and beauty; the colour yellow stands for utter dislike from unpleasant experiences or realities; and birds or flight, an allusion to the young man's craving for creative freedom. Sometimes these symbols are used by the author to represent the threat of being punished and loss of independence. These images are drawn from religion, philosophy, and myth which Joyce masterfully intertwined and represented in the tale.

Stephen's name is another allusion derived from Saint Stephen who was known to have conflicts with religion. **Stephen Dedalus** has the same conflicting desire within him – to be free of Catholic and Irish conventions which he feels to constraint him.

The amalgamation of words, images, and symbols makes *A Portrait of the Artist* quite a complex taste for most readers' palate. One has to dig deeper beyond the surface in order to fully comprehend a complex character such as Stephen Dedalus. It's not easy to peel all the layers of the novel and get to the bottom of things. Stephen's mind seems a mad jumble of places and ideas. Joyce doesn't explain them either. The story does not progress in a usual manner. Scenes overlap; time is unspecified. It's up to the reader to make the necessary associations in order to fully understand the story. This may prove to be a huge challenge to most but the effort would be all worth it.

Significance of the Title

The title of James Joyce's novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, refers to its main protagonist, Stephen Dedalus. The novel follows Stephen throughout his childhood and adolescence, chronicling his life as a toddler, a schoolboy, and, finally, as a young artist setting off into the world to pursue his art. In the title, the words "artist" and "portrait" refer to Stephen's identity as an artist; though Stephen is an aspiring writer, the word "portrait" illustrates his love of art and his ambition to create representations of reality. Furthermore, the final words, "young man," allude to Stephen's youth, inexperience, and growing pains. All in all, the title has come to signify one of the greatest coming of age stories in English literature.

Unlike **The Portrait of a Lady** of Henry James, Joyce's definite article before 'the artist' refers to the author himself. "A portrait" justifies that the narrative is not a memoir or biography but a work of art that deals with the circumstances faced by the author himself.

Major Characters

Stephen Dedalus: The 'artist' of the novel's title, whose life and thoughts are at the centre of the story. The book follows Stephen's life from his nursery, to his upbringing in a home with lots of financial, religious and political tension, to religious school where he decides not to become a priest, and finally to the university, where he is seen by his peers as a poet and is working to develop his own theories of art and beauty. Stephen's trials show us not only the life of a growing boy in late 19th century Dublin, but also the thoughts and decisions a person has to deal with in order to become an artist. Even though he writes only one poem, the implication is that Stephen has made the decisions necessary for a life of art. Stephen's experiences are very similar to Joyce's, making the novel a loose autobiography.

Stephen's father (Simon Dedalus): Described by Stephen near the end of the novel as ' medical student, an oarsman, a tenor, an amateur actor, a shouting politician, a small landlord, a small investor, a drinker, a good fellow, a storyteller, somebody's secretary, something in a distillery, a taxgatherer, a bankrupt and at present a praiser of his own past' (pg. 262), Stephen's father is in turns a model and an embarrassment to his son. His passions about religion and politics make these topics a big part of Stephen, too, and Mr. Dedalus' drinking and financial troubles force Stephen and his family to move around a lot when he's growing up.

Stephen's mother: Mrs. Dedalus has a less direct effect upon Stephen than does his father, although she surely has a hand in forming his expectations of women. Stephen seems to outgrow his mother, especially after he is teased by

his schoolmates at Clongowes for answering that yes, he does kiss his mother before bed. Mrs. Dedalus is not mentioned much in the middle of the book but she reappears at the end. Having borne a lot of children and characterized by her steady faith in God, Stephen is troubled about whether to comply with her wishes that he participate in a religious Easter ceremony.

Uncle Charles: Uncle Charles lives with the Dedalus family at Blackrock and is Stephen's constant companion during that summer. He buys Stephen treats and takes him along to church, though soon grows witless and disappears from the novel.

Dante Riordan: A character modeled on Joyce's aunt, who was his first educator as a young boy. In Portrait, Dante comes to Christmas supper and gets in a huge religious argument with another dinner guest. Like her real-life counterpart, Dante's uncompromising faith in priests and the Catholic faith has a strong effect upon the young boy. Dante does not appear in later parts of the novel.

Parnell: An Irish political figure who was very much on the minds of the people during Stephen's childhood. Parnell was a Protestant and a leader for the common people, but lost many of his fans when he was caught in an adulterous affair with the wife of a political colleague. Mr. Dedalus and Mr. Casey are pro-Parnell; Dante is decidedly against him.

Father Arnall: A priest and teacher at Clongowes. Father Arnall sits by and does nothing when Stephen is unfairly punished (beaten with a type of paddle). He also leads the religious retreat that so affects Stephen.

the prefect (Father Dolan): Even though the prefect only shows up in one scene, his cruel punishing (beating) of Stephen shakes loose some of the boy's faith in religious authorities. Later in the novel, Stephen's father mentions that he's seen the prefect and they'd had a good laugh about the incident, which further disturbs Stephen's notion of religious authority.

Mr. Casey: A friend of Mr. Dedalus', who gets into a shouting match with Dante at Christmas dinner. This is the only scene in which we see Mr. Casey, although his dramatic shouts 'No God for Ireland!' surely have a lasting effect upon Stephen.

Emma (the girl from the tram): Emma is the girl most on Stephen's mind. As children, Stephen and Emma have a memorable ride home from a party together (on a tram), after which Stephen tries to write a poem to her. Emma appears often later in the novel, although she's not usually mentioned by her name. She continues to be Stephen's primary muse.

the bird girl (the wading girl): Stephen sees this girl standing on the beach right when he's in the process of deciding that he will definitely not join the

priesthood. Her beauty inspires him and he takes her to be a muse, a reason and an inspiration to choose a life of art and beauty rather than religious devotion.

Cranly: A friend of Stephen's at the university who has a long discussion with Stephen about religion and Stephen's artistic ambitions near the end of the novel. Stephen likes Cranley, though it's suggested that a life of art may mean that Stephen will not be able to keep friends like this. Stephen is also a bit suspicious that Cranley may have some sort of relationship with the same girl he's after.

Minor Characters

Jack Lawton: Stephen's intellectual rival at Clongowes.

Wells: A bully at Clongowes who pushes Stephen into a ditch.

Athy: A boy that is in the infirmary with Stephen at Clongowes. Later, Athy has the information that several boys who are in trouble with the school were caught smuggling (having sexual relations with other boys using the hands).

Simon Moonan: One of the boys at Clongowes who was allegedly caught smuggling (having sexual relations with other boys using the hands).

Eileen Vance: A girl Stephen is friends with as a young boy. Stephen is fascinated with her hands.

Fleming: A boy who gets pandied (beaten with a type of paddle) by Father Dolan on the same day as Stephen.

the rector at Clongowes: The head of the school, who Stephen goes to complain about being unfairly hit.

Mike Flynn: A friend of Stephen's father who is a track coach for Stephen while he's at Blackrock. Stephen doesn't trust Mike Flynn.

Aubrey Mills: Stephen's best pal at Blackrock--the two roam the countryside together and pretend to be great adventurers.

Heron: A boy at Belvedere school who is an intellectual rival of Stephen's. Heron is more rebellious than Stephen, but the two do have something like a friendship.

the director of Belvedere: The director is a priest who calls Stephen in one day to discuss the possibility that Stephen has a divine calling to become a priest. Stephen refuses in part because the director has such a weary, saggy look.

Davin: A student at the university and a friend of Stephen's. Davin is very nationalistic, that is, part of the movement to resurrect Ireland's old language and culture.

the dean of the university: Stephen has a long conversation with the dean in one of the classrooms as the dean is building a fire. An Englishman, the dean stirs up some feelings of superiority and alienation in Stephen, who is beginning to feel that the language of the English is not his own.

MacCann: A student at the university who is leading a petition drive for universal peace.

Temple: Another student at the university--Temple is quite a talker.

Lynch: A friend of Stephen's at the university. Lynch and Stephen go for a long walk during which Stephen articulates many of his aesthetic theories.

To Sum Up

Like T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), though a work of youth, seems prematurely aged. Joyce treats his fictional version of his younger self with a mixture of irony and sympathy.

The novel tells the story of Stephen Dedalus, a young Irishman, from earliest childhood until his decision to leave Ireland for Paris and become a writer. Before achieving his destiny as an artist, however, the young man experiences various epiphanies, mostly misleading ones. The distinctive characteristic of Joyce's storytelling is his attempt to represent each stage of the boy's developing consciousness in the language through which the child himself perceives the world.

Thus, the narrative itself demonstrates the artist's exploration of language. On the opening page, the novel relates the child's impressions of hearing a fairy tale and wetting the bed: "When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oil sheet. That had the queer smell."

Courtesy : Dr. Md Ejaz Alam