

STEPHEN'S REVOLTS IN THE JOURNEY OF BECOMING AN ARTIST

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Abstract

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is an autobiographical novel which describes the growth of James Joyce from early to the stage in his manhood when he was ready to take up his selected vocation of an artist. The hero is named Stephen Dedalus and the article describes his struggles from childhood to early adolescence. The article presents Stephen's constant revolt against a hostile environment at home, in school and at the University, in church and in the country and he finally goes into voluntary exile to work as a dedicated artist who owes loyalty to nothing but his art.

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It is true that this novel is the story of Stephen's rebellion against the atmosphere of his home, his society, his school and his church and his search for harmony, order, symmetry, peace and freedom. His rebellion against the prevailing environment and his search for a better order continue throughout his early youth and at the end he decides that he can pursue his chosen vocation of an artist only if he leaves home and goes into an altogether different atmosphere.

Stephen was by nature a sensitive boy. He was an artist by temperament. He loved peace and harmony, sweetness and light. These were lacking in the atmosphere in which he was brought up. He was disgusted with the 'sordid tide of life' around him. This lack of harmony is noticed pointedly in the heated discussions which go on in one Christmas dinner which they have in their house. The discussion is about the way in which the church treated the great patriot Parnell. Aunt Dante gets so angry that she walks out of the dinner.

Stephen also saw the conflicts between neighbours on religious grounds. He used to play with a small girl Eileen. He imagined that he would marry her when he grew up. But he was sharply rebuked for this because Eileen was a Protestant. He was asked to apologize and he was told that if he did not apologize the eagles will come and pluck out his eyes. Stephen's heart rebelled against this atmosphere.

The 'conscience of his race' as it appears in the world of his own childhood and adolescence and youth is uniformly corrupt and brutal. Even in the little prelude giving impressionistic glimpses of his earliest memories, fear of authority is one element in the atmosphere— a "He hid under the table" — and the only way to escape cruel punishment is to submit : "Pull out his eyes/Apologise." The little boy is surrounded by adults with rigid readymade standards of all conduct and values, and he must conform. At Clongowes external reality shapes itself into a world of unintelligible and confusing codes, of secret guilt and vague sins, of a mob of shouting, pushing fellow creatures, 'the whirl of the scrimmage', of snobbish values—your father must be a magistrate—and of gross injustice whereby you are shouldered into a slimy

ditch if you won't consent to swap a little snuffbox for a chestnut. Stephen, however, triumphs over all this in the final sequence, where he is unjustly beaten by the sadistic Father Dolan. His shame and rage drive him to report the cruelty to the rector. He is exonerated; his schoolmates applaud his rebellion and he feels 'happy and free'. (Drew.24)

A child feels secure if he has a strong and responsible father on whom he can rely completely. In this respect Stephen was very unlucky. His father was an irresponsible person who did not know how to earn money or manage the house. When he accompanied his father to Cork he saw that his father knew only how to drink and to boast about himself and his friends.

Stephen searched for a father figure among the teachers in Clongowes School but he was disappointed. They were all unsympathetic and unfair. Father Dolan gave him a beating when he was not at fault at all. Father Conmee appeared to be sympathetic but he treated the whole thing as a joke. One teacher accused him of heresy. He was disgusted.

He also searched for a father figure among his school fellows but there also he was disappointed. Wells threw him in a ditch of dirty water. In Belvedere College the students beat him up with a stick and a cabbage stump just because he said that Byron was a great poet. Even Lynch and Cranly, in whom Stephen placed absolute confidence, finally disappointed him. He felt that he was different from all others and was destined to live without a single friend.

He found nothing in his country to be proud of. Dublin was dirty physically and metaphorically. The Irish were condemning their great writers like W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge and their great patriots like Parnell. Ireland seemed to him like the old sow that eats her farrow. Ireland seemed to be suffering from paralysis. No creative writer could work freely in the sordid atmosphere of Dublin.

Stephen was searching for a way to end the turmoil in his soul. This search led him when he was only sixteen years old into the arms of a prostitute. In her arms he felt free and strong. He started going to prostitutes regularly. But then he realized that he was committing a great sin and God would punish him for that. This feeling made him very unhappy. Father Arnall's sermons made him realize the depth of the sin into which he had fallen. Then he became almost a saint. The church wanted to take him into its arms. But he realized that the fathers led an ordered and passionless life. That would have been fatal to a true artist. That is why he rejected the offer of priesthood. He refused to take part in any of the rites of the church. His mother wanted that he should at least do his Easter duty but he refused to do this because he said that he would never do a thing in which he did not believe.

His final decision regarding the course of action that he had to take was taken in a rather strange manner. As he was going towards the beach the students started making fun of him by calling him 'Daedalus'. This appeared to him to be prophetic. As he entered the water he saw a wading girl looking towards the sea. She seemed to be like a beautiful sea bird. Her image passed into his soul. He was filled with profane joy. He had heard the call of life and he had decided to go. He realized that he must be an artist and his salvation lay in flying away from the labyrinth of his family, his country and his church and going to a region where he will have no attachment to anything but his art.



From the very beginning he was in search of a suitable language which should exactly convey his thoughts. He worked very hard to perfect his medium. He wanted that every word should be appropriate and should convey his exact shade of meaning. He has described that on a particular day he wrote only two sentences. First he could not get the exact words and when he got them he spent long hours deciding the order in which the words were to be used. His search for the right word continued right up to the end of his writing career.

The long last chapter repeats again all the elements in his environment which inspire his rebellion--the feckless, poverty-stricken family, where he is still treated like a child by his mother, while mentally and spiritually he is a complete stranger. As he passes from his home to the waterlogged streets, stumbling through wet rubbish and mouldering offal, he is conscious only of 'the sloth of body and soul' which paralyzes Dublin and 'the corruption arising from its earth'. His blanket condemnations exclude any political or literary hope for his country, and his descriptions of his students at the university are uniformly unfavourable. They are of a different breed from himself. They have unpleasant looks and unpleasant voices; they use the coarsest and most limited vocabulary; they have no intellectual capacity or curiosity, and are utterly without sensibility or dignity. The teachers are no better. As Stephen sits in the classroom "an odour assailed him of cheerless cellar damp and decay," and a 'dull torpor of the soul' looks out from 'the pale loveless eyes' of the dean of studies. The religion which dominates everything is now dead to him; he gibes at the Irish church as 'the scullery-maid of Christendom'. (Drew.38)

His rebellion against the prevailing conditions and his search for peace, harmony and freedom finally led to his exile. He decided to go to a place where he would have no loyalty to anything except to his art, where he would have no fixed routine and would have perfect leisure to give all his time and attention to art. He hoped that his exile would end the turmoil of his soul. He was in search of truth and beauty--beauty such as had not yet been born in this world. For attaining his ideal of beauty he needed wholeness, harmony and radiance. This search took him away from home and remained his passion throughout his life.

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