

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man - James Joyce

The title

The indefinite article 'A' is no less important than the word "Portrait" : this means that this novel, like a painter's work, is only one of the possible interpretations of a subject, which is the mind of the protagonist and the development of his personality in his early life. It has been stated that Joyce never tried to write outside the framework of his early environment. This statement applies particularly to "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man", where autobiographical, political, religious and mythical elements are mingled.

Plot

This novel is the semi-autobiographical story of Stephen Dedalus, a young Irish man and Joyce's fictional double. Divided into five chapters, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is set in Dublin and follows Stephen's life from childhood through adolescence to manhood. Like Joyce, Stephen is the son of a poor father and a highly devout Catholic mother, and like Joyce, Stephen attends Jesuit schools, Clongowes Wood, Belvedere, and University College. As he grows through various family conflicts, he begins to rebel against his family, his religion, and his nation. Finally, in order to establish himself as an individual and to find his identity as an artist, he seeks voluntary exile in Paris.

The hero: Stephen Dedalus

The writer calls his hero Stephen Dedalus, who stands for Joyce himself or for the artist in general, since, like Stephen, the first Christian martyr, he is a martyr to art, and like the mythological character Dedalus, he must escape from the social, political labyrinth of Dublin's life in order to reach the neutrality of art.

Stephen undergoes several crucial transformations over the course of the novel. The first, which occurs during his first years at Clongowes, is from a shy little boy to a bright student who understands social interactions and can begin to make sense of the world around him. The second, which happens when Stephen sleeps with the Dublin prostitute, is from innocence to corruption. The third, when Stephen hears Father Arnall's speech on death and hell, is from an unrepentant sinner to a devout Catholic.

Finally, Stephen's greatest transformation is from a fanatical religiousness to a new devotion to art and beauty. This transition takes place in Chapter 4, when he is offered to join the Jesuit order but refuses in order to attend university. Stephen's refusal and his subsequent epiphany on the beach mark his transition from belief in God to belief in aesthetic beauty. This transformation continues through his college years. By the end of his time in college, Stephen has become a fully formed artist.

The stream of consciousness technique

In A Portrait Joyce begins the process of removing himself from his work: he first makes use of the 'stream of consciousness' technique, according to which the narrative banishes the authorial personality and proceeds along the flux of the character's thoughts instead of being told by an external voice. In this way Joyce expresses Stephen's consciousness at each stage of his existence, and the language develops from

what is appropriate to the very small child of the first chapter, to the articulate comments on art made by a university student.

The reader is given no clues how to feel or react and he has direct access to the character's interior world.

Stephen Dedalus's epiphany

He was alone. He was unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life. He was alone and young and wilful and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters and the sea-harvest of shells and tangle and veiled grey sunlight and gayclad lightclad figures of children and girls and voices childish and girlish in the air.

A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory, were bared almost to the hips, where the white fringes of her drawers were like feathering of soft white down. Her slate-blue skirts were kilted boldly about her waist and dovetailed behind her. Her bosom was as a bird's, soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some dark-plumaged dove. But her long fair hair was girlish: and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face.

She was alone and still, gazing out to sea; and when she felt his presence and the worship of his eyes her eyes turned to him in quiet sufferance of his gaze, without shame or wantonness. Long, long she suffered his gaze and then quietly withdrew her eyes from his and bent them towards the stream, gently stirring the water with her foot hither and thither. The first faint noise of gently moving water broke the silence, low and faint and whispering, faint as the bells of sleep; hither and thither, hither and thither; and a faint flame trembled on her cheek.

—Heavenly God! cried Stephen's soul, in an outburst of profane joy.

He turned away from her suddenly and set off across the strand. His cheeks were aflame; his body was aglow; his limbs were trembling. On and on and on and on he strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the advent of the life that had cried to him.

Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory. On and on and on and on!

He halted suddenly and heard his heart in the silence.