

Portrait Essay

The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce shows the development of the soul and coming of age of Stephen Dedalus in Ireland through religion, politics and the emerging artist. Three scenes that show this development through modernist techniques are the early memories of the family at Christmas (Chapter 1), Stephen's first experience with a prostitute (Chapter 2), and Stephen's revelation at the sight of an unknown girl (Chapter 4).

The early memories of Stephen with his family at Christmas show how his soul has been influenced by the conflict of politics and religion in Ireland. While everyone on the table has a strong sense of Irish pride – “He was for Ireland...and so was his father: and so was Dante too” – yet their views on politics were distorted by the religion. Dante supported the common catholic view where the priests were always right – “they must be obeyed”. This view is that “God and religion before everything” shows that every aspect of life should be governed by the church, showing a restricted society to some extent. This restriction hampers Stephen's development and conflicts with his emerging artist.

The view of Mr Dedalus and Mr Casey is an Ireland, where politics are not restricted by politics. They believe that religion hampers Ireland's development as an independent nation as seen in references such as “Priest ridden Godforsaken race”. Mr Casey even takes his detest for the churches intervention to the extreme saying “no God for Ireland”. This is important as Stephen has never seen someone question God's power, and this memory will affect his future choices especially when he learns to rebel against the restraints of society.

Stephen's soul has started to develop. These memories that will affect him have been shown to him without any lies – “let him remember too”. The language has excited him, bringing up emotions – “the spoken words thrilled him”. Stephen has been given too different aspects of Ireland and his soul is being shaped by these experiences. These continuing experiences shape his soul until he leaves Ireland “to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” This shows how politics and religion has formed an Irish patriotism in Stephen's soul.

Stephen's first experience with a prostitute shows Stephen's emerging artist conflict with his religious upbringing. Stephen comes to realise that “he was different from others” showing the emerging artistic qualities. He is experiencing new feelings and his “blood was in revolt” – his rebellious nature becoming more apparent. He becomes aware that he is alone – “futile isolation” – and he becomes too experienced an “alien” world through his senses – he notices things such as “the oozing wall of a urinal”; hearing the “drawling of drunken singers”; feeling the “dark pressure of her softly parting lips”; and smelling the “odour”. These sensual experiences with the abstract descriptions such as “yellow gasflames arose before his troubled vision against a vapoury sky” show the emerging artist, seeing a world different from others, emphasising his individuality.

Conflicting against Stephen's emerging artist is religious morals. Stephen seems to be rejecting many of these religious morals allowing his emerging artist to shape his developing soul – “cared little for mortal sin” and “he wanted to sin with another of his kind, to force another being to sin with him and to exult with her in sin.” Yet for his rejection from the church, the repetition of the word “sin” shows that Stephen is unable to escape from religion and it is still very much a part of his soul. He starts to feel beginning of his guilty and lustful soul that makes his soul “dark”. The repetition of the line “but his lips would not bend to kiss her” further shows the conflict of the rebellious and religious values in Stephen's developing soul. It shows that his soul is still incomplete – he is still coming of age – and he does not found his true morals. It can be seen how Stephen's first encounter with a prostitute has effected the development of his soul.

Stephen's revelation at the sight of the unknown girl shows the final reawakening of the artist. Stephen has been cleansed of the guilt of the prostitute, and leads strict catholic life where he has disciplined the senses that make him an artist – “Each of his senses was brought under a rigorous discipline.” It is when the headmaster proposes a life of priesthood to Stephen that he realises that his soul feels barren and empty – “it was a grave and ordered and passionless life.” Once again the artist is reawakening in Stephen. This is seen through the stream-of-consciousness non-linear plot where Stephen reflects on his past – “the troubling odour of the long corridors of Clongowes came back to him and he heard the discreet murmur of the burning gasflames.”

As Stephen walks along the beach he reflects upon his life, and he memories come together developing his soul and showing his coming of age. It seems that in this reflection upon his life that he moves from boyhood and becomes a man – “His soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood”. This shows his coming of age and that he is approaching the end of his development.

As Stephen wades through the water he sees an unknown girl that rekindles a spark in his soul. He takes in her appearance through an artist's abstract sight – “Her thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory” – yet this does not rekindle his boyhood emotions of sex – even when he thinks of her “bosom was as a bird's song and slight” – instead he sees her as a different beauty – “wonder of mortal beauty, her face.” This shows that a new artist has awoken, seeking a beauty in life without the guilt that had come from pleasing his sexual desires. The fact that her name remains unknown to us adds a further mystic quality to her allowing her to be an image of perfect beauty. It is this encounter that adds to Stephen's coming of age and development of his soul as can be seen in the quote: “his soul was swooning into some new world.”

In concluding, through Stephen's revelation at the sight of the unknown girl, Stephen's first sexual encounter with the prostitute, and Stephen's early memories of the family at Christmas, we see how the emerging artist, politics and religion have led to the development of his soul and his coming of age in Ireland. This has been shown using the modernist techniques of James Joyce in Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man.