

The Creative Launcher

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Construction of Ireland in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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Abstract

Written with Ireland as the setting of the novel, *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, brings forth different aspects of the power dynamics that characterised the twentieth century Ireland. It was the 'age of the empire' and the different European powers were busy colonising more and more territories. The status of Ireland as both the coloniser as well as the colonised, by the British, is what makes the case of Ireland unique whenever it comes to discussing the ideas of nationalism and colonialism. Joyce in his novel puts forward the unique Irish experience through the life of his protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, who finds himself enmeshed in the political conflicts of the day and struggles his way in his quest for artistic autonomy. Stephen's uneasiness about the political controversies and his ambivalent stand regarding Irish political leaders can be seen as Joyce's own rejection of Irish nationalism and his choice for artistic autonomy.

Keywords- Colonialism, Nationalism, Ireland, Politics, Artistic Autonomy, Age of Empire.

James Joyce is an Irish novelist and is considered to be one of the most celebrated authors of the twentieth century. The themes of colonialism and nationalism in Ireland characterise most of his works and his renowned novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* can be seen as a synthesis of his ideas about nation, religion and the role of an artist. The novel offers a distinctly Irish-Catholic experience through its protagonist, Stephen's journey to artistic autonomy. The critics view Stephen as an alter-ego of Joyce himself as he finds himself trapped in the questions of nation and nationality and discovers his artistic temperament in his struggles to free himself of the same. The novel not only

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brings forth the ambivalence surrounding the unique status of Ireland as an agent as well as a victim of colonisation but also unravels the various aspects of internal politics of Ireland at that time.

Colonialism and nationalism were among the most contentious issues during the twentieth century. It was the ‘age of empire’ and the world was witnessing the politics of power struggle. Ireland, which features in almost all works of Joyce, had a very peculiar status as it was both the agent as well as a victim of British imperialism. The complex status of Ireland in the ‘age of empire’ raised many questions about whether Ireland should be considered as a part of the coloniser Britain or should it be considered as its colony. This left Ireland in the grey zone of being both the coloniser as well as the colonised. The conflict between the Protestants and the Catholics of Ireland also played a major role in forming of Joyce’s consciousness. As Harold Bloom notes, both Catholics and Protestants were an agent of British colonialism in other parts of the world as much as they were dominated by Britain themselves.

The peculiar status of Ireland is articulated by Joyce’s ambivalent stand towards the theme of nationalism in his works. In *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the episode of the conversation of protagonist Stephen with the Dean of Studies clearly indicates his ambivalence regarding Irish nationalism. At the University, while talking to the Dean, Stephen thinks, “The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine... His language so familiar and so foreign will always be for me an acquired speech” (Joyce 159). Stephen feels estranged from the English language and realises its inherent ‘foreignness’, but also he uses the same English language to voice out his Irish experience. The sense of disconnectedness he feels towards the English language is characteristic of Irish nationalism, but it is also important to note that the same English language is used by him to articulate his Irishness. As Marjorie Howes says, “The condition has several components: Stephen recognises his identity as Irish, conceives of that Irish identity in opposition to Englishness, and recognises his Irishness as a divided condition” (Howes 4).

Moreover, the episode of Stephen’s confrontation with the Irish nationalists in the novel is of some significance. It not only highlights Stephen’s awareness regarding Irish history and politics, but also showcases his disinterestedness in nationalist revival and his wish to not be a part of any cultural group. Nineteenth century Ireland witnessed the coming up of various nationalist groups that raised their voice against British imperialism and tried to recover long lost Irish tradition and language. In the novel, when a number of nationalist groups try to include Stephen as a volunteer to the cause, they ask him to help revive Irish tradition, but he soon becomes disinterested. He refuses to be a part of Irish nationalism because it demands of him to belong to a group. Later in the novel, his rejection of

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Irish nationalism manifests more lucidly when he tells his friend, Davin that he would not sacrifice his autonomy to pay for the ‘debts’ of Irishmen who led the British oppress them. What he chases is artistic autonomy as he realises that only isolation can make individualism possible. If he aligns himself to any group, then it would threaten the kind of independence he wants, it would demand of him to give up his own voice and become a part of the politics.

Moreover, through the character of Charles Steward Parnell, an Irish nationalist, Joyce brings into light another aspect of Irish politics, the political rivalry between Protestants and Catholics of nineteenth century Ireland. Parnell was an Irish political leader who played a major role in leading the movement for Ireland’s independence from Britain. However, he was condemned by the Catholic Church for maintaining an affair with a married woman. Different people in the novel are shown as having differing views about Church’s act of condemning Parnell. One of them, John Casey, considered the Church as responsible for Parnell death, whereas another character, Dante, favours the Church’s decision. Parnell can be seen as the burden of Irish nationality which according to Stephen, prevents him from leading the independent life of an artist.

Along with the rejection of Irish politics, Stephen also decides to remain aloof from the religious tensions in Ireland. The novel highlights the religious tensions between the Protestants and the Catholics who form an intrinsic part of the Irish experience. Catholics of Ireland were in the favour of Irish independence, whereas the Protestants wanted to remain aligned to the British. When Stephen is asked to consider the life of a priest, he gets tempted at first, but eventually, he rejects the offer for it would hamper his autonomy. He decides to renunciate his home, religion and nationality and lead a life of an artist.

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