

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2017.2.3.51>

Stephen and the ‘Uncreated Conscience’ of His Race: Exploring the Native Concerns in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Dr. Tanmay Chatterjee

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Bakshirhat Mahavidyalaya

Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India

Abstract

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man explores what it means to be an artist in late nineteenth century Ireland, fraught with religious and political strife. The novel is an account of the formative days of Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist, who comes to realize that before he can become a true artist, he must rid himself of the stultifying effects of the religion, politics and essential bigotry of his background in late nineteenth century Ireland. During the course of the narrative he breathes in something of every wind that blows in Ireland. He believes that beyond the coasts of erstwhile Ireland, poor and culturally deprived, is the culture of the world. His eclectic perception makes him determined to use his art to reclaim emancipation for the soul of his native land. The homeless Irishman in Ireland, the homeless genius in the world, Stephen resolves to fly off like Icarus, onward and upward, and ‘forge’ in the smithy of his soul the ‘uncreated conscience’ of his race. The present paper intends to study *A Portrait* in light of its historical, social and cultural context as well as to discuss Stephen’s encounters with and reactions to the notions of nation and nationalism, society and culture, religion and liberty.

Keywords- Subjugation, Ambivalence, Phantoms, Artist, Religion, Politics, Culture

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man represents the transitional stage between the realism of Joyce’s *Dubliners* and the symbolism of *Ulysses*, and is essential to the understanding of his later endeavours. The novel is a nuanced depiction of a budding artist, Stephen Dedalus, who comes to realize that before he can become a true artist, he must rid himself of the stultifying effects of the religion, politics and essential bigotry of his background in late nineteenth century Ireland. *A Portrait* is a novel steeped in its historical, social and cultural context. The present paper intends to study this novel in light of its context as well as to

Stephen and the ‘Uncreated Conscience’ of His Race: Exploring the Native Concerns in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

BY

Dr. Tanmay Chatterjee

discuss Stephen's encounters with and reactions to the notions of nation and nationalism, society and culture, religion and liberty.

While it might be tempting to read Stephen's repudiation of the Catholic Church and Ireland as mirroring Joyce's own rejection of any real involvement with Irish political and religious issues, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a novel that is profoundly engaged with the cultural, social, and political events of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ireland. Declan Kiberd argues that "In Joyce's hands, the *Bildungsroman* was an instrument with which to investigate the Irish experience, and the ensuing self-understanding was a discovery of the real Ireland of the present" (336). Thus, the development of Stephen's personal identity is inextricably linked to the desire to 'forge' in his own soul 'the uncreated conscience of [his] race' (Joyce, *A Portrait* 196), making the individual conscience – and consciousness – inseparable from that of the Irish nation. In recasting questions of Ireland's search for national identity in terms of Stephen's own painful road to maturity, Joyce rejects definitions of Irishness that are formulated by looking to the past, and instead embrace an Irish identity based on the realities of contemporary Ireland and its relation to Britain and the rest of Europe.

The Ireland Joyce left in 1904 was a country that had experienced, since the ninth century, successive waves of invasion –by the Danes, Normans and English. The Norman Conquest that took place under Henry II (reigned 1154-89) was at times fitful and uneven, with many of the Norman settler intermarrying with the native Irish population and assimilating into this native culture by adopting the Gaelic language and customs. Those who did assimilate into the Gaelic culture came to be known as the 'Old English', to distinguish them from the new English arrivals who settled in Ireland during the Tudor period. While the Normans, and later the Tudors, attempted to use a mixture of diplomacy and military force to quell discontent amongst the native Irish population, it was under the reign of Elizabeth I that a policy of military subjugation of Ireland was fully enforced and a new effort was made to establish plantation settlements of 'loyal' English subjects. This policy was pursued because both the Irish and many Old English settlers remained loyal to the Catholic Church after the Reformation and were therefore seen as potentially disloyal to the English crown – for much of post-Reformation Irish history, Roman Catholicism would be a rallying point for those resistant to English colonialism in Ireland.

It was with the defeat of Catholic James II by William of Orange in 1690 at the Battle of the Boyne that English power in Ireland was fully cemented. From this period, through military force and the enactment of penal laws against Catholics, the hegemony of 'new' Protestant English settlers (the Anglo-Irish, or, as they came to be called in the eighteenth century, the Protestant Ascendancy) was established. Catholics were prevented from owning large tracts of land, were denied access to education and were disenfranchised and prevented from participating in government unless they took an oath of loyalty to the British crown. The

Catholic clergy were banned, and it became illegal to celebrate mass. Largely as a result of such measures, the Protestant Ascendancy controlled most of the land and wealth of Ireland up until the second half of the nineteenth century, despite the fact that they were a minority in Ireland.

Some of these penal laws began to be relaxed in the latter half of the eighteenth century, and Ireland also achieved some measure of parliamentary independence from Britain in 1782 with the establishment of the so-called 'patriot parliament' of Henry Grattan and Henry Flood mentioned by Simon Dedalus in Chapter 2, when he and Stephen are standing in the former Irish House of Commons. However, the period that many identify as the height of Protestant power in Ireland came to an end in the Aftermath of the United Irishmen uprising in 1798. Led by the Ulster Protestant Wolfe Tone, the United Irishmen sought a relaxation of the penal laws against Catholics and Irish independence from Britain. The rebellion was unsuccessful and led to the passing of the Act of Union of 1800, in which the Irish parliament was dissolved and the 'United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland' was formed. After 1800, the focus of much political activity was directed towards achieving Catholic Emancipation, under the leadership of Daniel O'Connell (the 'Liberator'), emancipation was achieved in 1829, and the focus of political activity then shifted to agitation for the repeal of the union. However, political agitation for independence was temporarily put on hold with the splintering of the Repeal Movement in the 1840s and, more importantly, the Great Famine of 1845 to 1849. With the dramatic decline in population that resulted from mass emigration and deaths through starvation and disease, the famine irrevocably altered Irish society. After the famine, the focus of Irish politics shifted to land reform and the issue of Home Rule for Ireland. While agitation for land reform was carried out by the Land League (established by Michael Davitt in 1879), the Irish Parliamentary Party, led by Charles Stuart Parnell, used its considerable influence at Westminster to negotiate for Irish Home Rule.

Charles Stuart Parnell was for Joyce – as well as for Stephen Dedalus – the single most important political figure in Ireland in the late nineteenth century. The son of Protestant landed gentry, Parnell became the most popular leader of his time in the struggle for Irish independence from Britain. Parnell, in alliance with William Gladstone's Liberal Party, was on the verge of achieving Irish Home Rule when he was implicated in a scandal involving his long-time mistress Katherine O'Shea. Parnell was named as co-respondent in the O'Shea divorce case and was consequently seen by the British Liberal Party as a political liability. He initially retained the support of his party, but was later asked to step down as leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party and was violently condemned by a number of prominent Irish Catholic clergymen. The parliamentary campaign for Home Rule collapsed, and Parnell died a broken man shortly after in 1891. For Joyce (and, again, for Stephen), this 'betrayal' of Parnell by the Irish people was but one more example of the continued pattern of Ireland's

betrayal of its own leaders. As Stephen says to his nationalist friend Davin in Chapter 5, Ireland is “the old sow that eats her farrow” (Joyce, *A Portrait* 157).

The divisiveness of the Parnell case is literally brought home to Stephen in the vividly realized scene in which Christmas dinner is ruined by the argument between Dante Riordan, Simon Dedalus and Mr. Casey. In many ways the divisions in the Dedalus house at Christmas represent in microcosm the split the Parnell incident brought about in Irish society as a whole – a split between those who, like Dante, felt that Irish identity should be intertwined with Catholicism and that the Irish people should follow the lead of the Catholic clergy in denouncing Parnell, and those who, like Simon Dedalus and Mr. Casey, believe that the Catholic Church had no place in Irish political Life. The all-pervasiveness of this issue is signalled in Stephen's strange dream of Parnell and Dante while recovering from illness in the school infirmary. This dream, in which Stephen confuses a vision of his own funeral with that of Parnell, foreshadows the associations made later between the betrayed outcast Parnell and the artist Stephen.

With the collapse of the parliamentary campaign for Home Rule and the fall of Parnell, many turned to a version of nationalism centred on culture rather than on overtly political action. In the 1890s, two movements emerged – the Irish Literary Revival and the Gaelic Revival- that struggled not only to define the parameters of a truly ‘national’ Irish literature, but also what it meant to be Irish at a time in which Irishness had come to be seen by many as synonymous with Catholicism. By the 1880s, the Anglo-Irish Protestant class had largely ceased to dominate Irish political life and was faced with an increasingly militant Irish Catholic nationalism that turned itself against both the British government and those it believed were the representatives of British power in Ireland, the Protestant Ascendancy. Some critics have seen the Literary Revival – a movement predominately led by Protestant writers such as W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory- as an attempt on the part of the Anglo-Irish to form a legitimate link to the Irish past and thus a place for itself in modern Ireland. Those involved with the Literary Revival wished to form a national Irish literature in the English Language, and often in their writings harked back to an ancient, pagan, Celtic pre-colonial past in which Ireland had not yet been marked by the class and sectarian divisions that characterized it in the late nineteenth century.

There were, however, many who felt that Irish identity (and the literature that expressed that identity) should be defined in different terms: “The doctrines of the Irish Ireland movement . . . insisted that Ireland's authentic cultural nationalist identity was unquestionably as a Gaelic and catholic nation, in which the Anglo-Irish English-speaking protestant could have no part” (Brown 517). In the sphere of cultural nationalism, this attitude manifested itself in the formation of the Gaelic League in 1893, which sought to promote the use of the Irish language, and in the arguments of many who believed that a truly national Irish literature could not be written in the English language. The differing agendas of these

two versions of cultural nationalism often clashed, as was the case with the performance of Yeats's play *The Countess Cathleen* in 1899. Many Catholic Nationalists objected to the play's portrayal of an aristocratic Irish woman who sells her soul in order to save her starving tenants –for Stephen, who recalls his attendance at this performance in Chapter 5 of *Portrait*, the furore over the play represents Irish nationalism at its most narrow-mindedness.

Stephen's exchanges with the nationalist Davin in Chapter 5 highlight the language question that had emerged in the 1890. While Stephen cannot fully accept the view that Gaelic should be a central aspect of Irish life identity of the exclusion of English, he is also aware that English is not the 'mother tongue' in Ireland. His discomfort with the English language is expressed in his encounter with the Dean of studies of the university, where a moment of misunderstanding reveals some of the potential difficulties in communication between English and Irish subjects:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language (Joyce, *A Portrait* 146).

Stephen's impulse to create something new (the 'uncreated conscience' of his race) partly emerges from the fact that neither identity, neither language – English nor Irish – fully expresses or explains his own experience of himself and of Ireland.

Despite his desire to speak to and for Ireland, Stephen remains ambivalent about the demands made upon him by family, church, and nation, especially where these demands might impinge on his own path to self-realization:

While his mind had been pursuing its intangible phantoms and turning in irresolution from such pursuits he had heard about him the constant voices of his father and of his masters, urging him to be a gentleman above all things and urging him to be a good catholic above all things. These voices had now come to be hollow sounding in his ears. When the gymnasium had been opened he had heard another voice urging him to be strong and manly and healthy and when the movement towards national revival had begun to be felt in the college yet another voice had bidden him to be true to his country and help to raise up her language and tradition. In the profane world, as he foresaw, a worldly voice would bid him raise up his father's fallen state by his labours and, meanwhile, the voice of his school comrades urged him to be a decent fellow, to shield others from blame or to beg them off and to do his best to get free days for the school. And it was the din of all these hollow-sounding voices that made him halt irresolutely in the pursuit of phantoms. He gave them ear only for a time but he was

happy only when he was far from them, beyond their call, alone or in the company of phantasmal comrades (Joyce, *A Portrait* 63).

These insistent 'voices' of the church, nation, and family become in Chapter 5 the 'nets' that Stephen must evade in order to realize his artistic vocation: "When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets" (*A Portrait* 157). For Stephen, the only way to escape such impeding nets is through an uncompromising artistic and personal freedom, again expressed in terms that evoke the rebellious Satan's declaration of *non serviam*: "I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile and cunning" (191). Instead of joining Davin and the other young men in the nationalist movement, Stephen chooses exile as the only means of eluding these constricting ready-made sources of identity, even if this exile means a life of loneliness and solitude.

In his essay "The Day of the Rabblement" (October 1901), Joyce responds to the establishment of the Irish National Theatre by arguing for a more European-oriented theatre, rather than one that conformed to what he believed were arrow nationalist demands. The opening sentence of Joyce's essay, written when he was only nineteen, is illuminating when read alongside Stephen's declaration of artistic independence in *A Portrait*: "No man, said the Nolan, can be a lover of the true or the good unless he abhors the multitude; and the artist, though he may employ the crowd, is careful to isolate himself" (Joyce, *Critical Writings* 69). The figure of the proud, betrayed heroic figure persecuted by or rejecting the demands of society surfaces continuously throughout *A Portrait*: in the references to Edmund Dantes from *The Count of Monte Cristo*, who Stephen imagines leaves Mercedes with a 'proud gesture of refusal' (Joyce, *A Portrait* 47); in Stephen's praise of the quintessential artist-as-isolated-hero Byron; and, perhaps most importantly, in Parnell. Whether seeing himself as the betrayed Jesus or the Lucifer who declares '*non serviam*,' Stephen's view of the role of the artist is of an individual who is 'careful to isolate himself' from others and from social, religious and political institutions. Stephen (and Joyce) see artistic independence as the only alternative to any art beholden to Irish nationalism.

However, the question of irony also affects how we understand Stephen's attempts to distance himself from the demands of family, church and nation in his bid for complete artistic independence. For all his assertions of the need for such independence, Stephen is ultimately shown to be a product of the very institutions he claims to despise. His vocation is expressed in 'quasi-religious language' (Jeffares 222) in which Stephen presents the artist as "a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life" (Joyce, *A Portrait* 170-1). As his friend Cranly observes, Stephen's

mind is 'supersaturated with the religion' in which he claims not to believe (185). Stephen's artistic pretensions are thus shown to be the result of a Romantic myth of the artist as lonely hero, which makes Stephen believe that he can be independent of the society that has in fact produced him:

Through him [Stephen], Joyce is able both to affirm the romantic myth of artistic genius, and to partially dissociate himself from the arrogance and self-conceit which follows from that myth. (Parrinder 72)

The ambivalence revealed in this attitude – which both affirms that need for independence from nation and church and ultimately shows this independence as an unattainable myth – points not only to the highly complex (and sometimes contradictory) nature of the pressures placed upon the young artist in an Ireland struggling to define its own identity, but also underscores the fact that Stephen's act of rejection and denial is in and of itself no guarantee of the freedom he so desires.

Works Cited

- Brown, Terence. "Cultural Nationalism 1880-1930." *Field day anthology of Irish literature*. Ed. Seamus Deane. Vol. II. Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991. Print.
- Jeffares, A. Norman. *Anglo-Irish Literature*. London: Macmillan, 1982. Print.
- Joyce, James. "The Day of the Rabblement." *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*. Ed. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1989. Print.
- . *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2001. Print.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. London: Vintage, 1996. Print.
- Parrinder, Patrick. *James Joyce*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984. Print.