

EXTENDED ESSAY

ENGLISH B

To what extent does the aesthetic theory of Stephen Dedalus in

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

follow that of Saint Thomas Aquinas?

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*From the playfield the boys raised a shout. A whirring whistle: goal.
What if that nightmare gave you a back kick?
-The ways of the Creator are not our ways, Mr Deasy said. All
human history moves toward one goal, the manifestation of God.
Stephen jerked his thumb towards the window, saying:
-That is God.
Hooray! Ay! Whrrwhee!
-What? Mr Deasy asked.
-A shout in the street, Stephen answered, shrugging his shoulders.¹*

from Ulysses

¹ Ulysses Ebook by James Joyce pg. 39

ABSTRACT

In A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man, by James Joyce, Stephen Dedalus asserts his own aesthetic theory and defines it as “applied Aquinas”, but there are contradicting views on how he is affected by Saint Thomas. This essay investigates the similarities and discrepancies between the aesthetic theories of James Joyce and Saint Thomas, and thus attempts to answer the following research question:

To what extent does the aesthetic theory of Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce follow that of Saint Thomas Aquinas?

In this investigation, a point-by-point comparison of the theories will be made, under three principles Stephen asserts by two quotations by Aquinas. Throughout the investigation, it will be revealed that, Joyce asserts three propositions on aesthete: firstly, he states that arts is a stasis brought by the rhythm of beauty; secondly, he claims that the beautiful is more akin to truth than it is to the good; thirdly, he defines the three qualities of beauty as *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas*. After investigating each proposition profoundly and taking the context that the propositions are made by Joyce and Aquinas into consideration, it will be argued that understanding of artistic stasis of Joyce is different from that of Aquinas and he sanction Aquinas for the definitions of the good, the beautiful and the true, in order to free himself from the acquisitions of being a dilettante. Besides, it will be notices that he interprets Aquinas in accordance his own thoughts.

In the conclusion, it will be proved that Joyce creates a “Godless Thomism of his own” by separating Aquinas’s ideas from the context in which they are written and by attributing the artist the notions of the God as stated in Aquinas’s theory.

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INTRODUCTION

While many critics of James Joyce agree that the theory of art represented by Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is a key for both the novel itself and Joyce's other readings, they disagree on the extent of Saint Thomas Aquinas's influence on Joyce's theory. Stephen expounds his own aesthetic theory and he defines it as "applied Aquinas", during a walk in the rain with his friend, Lynch. But for some, Stephen refers to Aquinas just because he is able to analyze his ideas only in terms of the philosophy of the Catholic Church. Besides, for some others, Stephen studied Aquinas and Aristotle so much so that he starts to see the world through their eyes. Thus the following research question arises:

To what extent does the aesthetic theory of Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce follow that of Saint Thomas Aquinas?

The history of realistic novel reveals that the demands for social and psychological detail in works of literature are usually satisfied by the artist's own personal experiences. The fiction hence tends towards autobiography. The forces that exclude the novelist from the society, makes the artist focus all his observations upon himself. Thus, he becomes the hero and begins to view other characters as a "crowd" of the background. This background takes on importance for its influences on the hero – "the self". The theme of his novel is the formation of the character, and the process of his growth which involves his apprenticeship, education and maturity, and it falls into the genre of "bildungsroman"; and when it confines itself to the professional world of the novelist, it becomes a "künstlerroman" , the novel of artist (Levin 47). In the Portrait, Stephen, an Irish boy in late 19th century, gradually decides to cast off his familial, social and religious affiliations for the sake of a life devoted to art: writing.

Throughout the Portrait, Joyce traces the evolution of Stephen Dedalus from infancy, to the point where he finally chooses his career. Thematically, the evolution of the artist is represented as a three-way struggle to fulfill sexual, religious and aesthetic desires. The aesthetic desires emerge right after the first two are fulfilled and found to be incapable of satisfying the soul. As a child, Stephen is surrounded by the nexus of sexual and religious desires. Then, the conflict among these forces becomes a practical application of his borrowed theory of the good and the beautiful, of the kinetic and the static effects.

The aesthetic theory advanced by Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man has been referred to more frequently than any other element in the book. However, different perspectives assert different theses on the Thomistic aspects of this theory, and in this essay, my objective is to argue the similarities and the discrepancies between the theories of Aquinas and Joyce.

In approaching the problem, it is important to point out the outstanding aspects of Joyce's theory that follow the Thomist line. Born in Dublin in 1882, Joyce received a rigorously scholastic education in the hands of Jesuits. Thus, it is not very surprising that the theoretical formulation of Joyce's aesthetics followed Thomistic principles, in view of young Joyce's education and environment. Stephen sets forth the two principles from Aquinas upon which his theory is based. *Pulcra sunt quae visa placent*: those things are beautiful the perception of which pleases. *Bonum est in quod tendit appetitus*: the good is that toward which the appetite tends. It is upon these two principles that Stephen's entire theory rests.

As outlined by Maurice Beebe in his essay on Joyce and Aquinas, Joyce draws three main principles, concerned with the nature of art and beauty, from the two statements by Aquinas. Firstly, "Art is a stasis brought about the formal rhythm of beauty." Secondly, "Art and beauty, divorced from good and evil, is akin to truth; therefore, if truth can best be approached through intellection, beauty or art is best approached through the three stages of apprehension." Thirdly, "The three qualities of beauty which correspond to the three stages of apprehension are, in the terms of Aquinas, *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas*." (Connolly 274)

Throughout my investigation, I will try to follow the line that has been set by Maurice Beebe. Following the bullet points, I will try to widen the scope of my investigation by making a profound analysis of the research question, by making a point-by-point comparison of these theories in three sections.

ART IS A STASIS

In A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Stephen questions the religious and sexual desires of human soul, and defines these as “kinetic”. This progression may be sketched through the female figures: Eileen Vance, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mercedes, Emma Clery, the prostitute, and the girl on the beach. By the end of chapter 2, in the arms of the prostitute, the “movement” reaches its climax; and the second part reaches its climax at the end of chapter 4, with the static joy at the sight of the girl on the beach. The conflict between these two, becomes a practical example of Stephen’s theory of kinetic and static effects.

Ultimately, Stephen sees both sexual and religious desires as kinetic, towards which appetite tends to seek fulfillment outside itself. In contrary, the satisfaction of the aesthetic appetite is static; it is something that satisfies or pleases in itself; it does not move the individual to the acquisition or something or someone outside the self, like a prostitute’s body or eternal salvation.

Stephen bases the first two main principles of his argument on one sentence by Aquinas: *Pulchra sunt quae visa placent*, which means “Those things are beautiful, the perception of which pleases”. (Connolly 267) There are some slight variations in the Latin text in Joyce’s several versions. For example, although both in Stephen Hero and the Portrait “Pulcra” is used; in the original notes it is written as “pulcera”. (Connolly 275) These might very well be typographical errors; however, if they are not, then, these might be the first signs of irreverent attitude towards Saint Thomas.

It is seen that the above mentioned quotation exists in the text of Summa Theologica; however, certain words are spelled differently. A translation of the original shows that Joyce has read the paragraph on beauty and goodness, where this statement is used:

“Beauty and goodness are identical fundamentally; for they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form. Consequently goodness may be rightly praised for beauty. But they differ logically, for goodness properly relates to the appetitive faculty (goodness being what all men desire); and therefore it has the formal aspect of an end (the appetitive faculty being a kind of movement towards a thing). Beauty relates to the cognoscitive faculty; for beautiful things are those which please when seen. Hence beauty consists in due proportions²; for the senses are satisfied in things duly proportioned, as in what is after their own kind- because sense is a sort of reason; and so is every cognitive faculty.³”

This extract elucidates the mystification of Stephen’s explanation of the sentence drawn from it: “He uses the word *visa*... to cover aesthetic apprehensions of all kinds, whether through sight or hearing or through any other avenue of apprehension. This word, though it is vague, is clear enough to keep away good and evil, which excite desire and loathing. It certainly means a stasis not a kinesis.” (Joyce 160)

For him, the art as the soul’s activity is a free intellectual activity and in contrast with other human behavior which are bound by movements of desire, instincts and appetites of his animal and social nature. The proper art should not urge us to “act” to possess something, but rather should be a stasis of intellection. “The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts.” (Joyce, 158)

² “Due proportion” is defined as the harmony of the whole with the part and the part with the whole, in Aquinas’s aesthetic theory. Scholastic interpretations of the term implies that the whole is actually the universe as God’s creation and His own reflection.

³ Project Gutenberg’s *Summa Theologica Part I (Prima Pars)* by Thomas Aquinas.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17611/17611.txt>

Stephen's ultimate purpose is to establish beauty in the objectivity of the artwork rather than in the subjectivity of the artist. If beauty is the quality of something seen, then it is to be found in the rhythm or proportion of the art-object. For Stephen, beauty expressed by the artist should evoke an aesthetic stasis, an ideal feeling, a stasis that can be dissolved by the rhythm of beauty.

Read literally, Saint Thomas supplies sanction for an important part of Joyce's theory. The separation of beauty, the product of cognition, from goodness, the goal of appetite, and the dependence of beauty on form are found in the paragraph from Summa Theologica cited above. On the other hand, when investigated considering the context of the theory, the discrepancies between the theories are revealed. Aquinas's definition of beauty is only referred to briefly in a section on "God, the Divine Unity." According to Thomists, one should find the unity of Being and the presence of God in all beauty. The aesthetic expression is only mystical, if its recipient is self-disciplined in holiness and he is given the extraordinary graces by God.

Joyce agrees with Thomists about what aesthetic stasis reveals; however, what separates him from them is that he attributes the significance of a work of art to its form as a mechanical production, whereas the Thomists attribute the significance of a work of art to its divine quality- "Godliness". Joyce's rhythm does not put emphasis on the Aquinas's Godly proportion. This a very important clue to claim that Joyce has a "Godless" Thomism of his own.

THE BEAUTIFUL, THE GOOD AND THE TRUE

Many points that Stephen explains to Lynch in the Portrait, also appear in the earlier version Stephen Hero as the part of the paper on “Art and Life” which Stephen presents to the audience of the Literary and Historical Society of University College. However, Dr. Dillon, the President of the University, criticizes Stephen for being a follower of the school of “Art for Art’s Sake”. Stephen defends his paper and his ideas saying that the points he make are conclusion drawn from Aquinas’s definition of the beautiful and he prefers to remain silent after he has presented his paper, rather than debating on it. However, in the Portrait, Stephen’s only audience is Lynch, who does not make any moral criticism about Stephen’s ideas.

Stephen uses Aquinas’s testimonial to defend his argument against all moral criticisms he receives. Aquinas’s sanction to his theory is crucial in terms of making him get away from the vision of a dilettante. However, Stephen’s dismissal of the good from the beautiful in terms of Thomist doctrine is somehow jumping on to a conclusion and making a generalization simply by relying on limited evidence. For him, beauty is separated from good and evil because those excite kinetic emotions of desire and loathing. However, Aquinas notes that the difference between the aspects of the good and the beautiful, in the theological view, is less important than the similarity.

Aquinas states that “beauty adds to goodness to a relation to cognitive faculty⁴”. Similarly, Thomists claim that the beautiful is actually seen as a particular class of the good.

Juxtaposing the good and the beautiful, Thomists also argue that art can be subject to moral criticism, although they agree with Joyce that art should not be didactic. The contradiction between this seemingly paradox is dissolved by a clear distinction between the art and the artist. For them, art is the realm of creation so it is related only to the good and perfection of the work produced. Thus, it remains outside the scope of human conduct and its limits, rules and values which are attributed to

⁴ Readings in the History of Aesthetics: An Open-Source Reader; Ver. 0.11, Chapter 4. “Beauty is a kind of knowledge” by Thomas Aquinas <<http://philosophy.lander.edu/intro/artbook.html/x1797.htm>>

“men”. Art always strives towards perfection, therefore it is always good. On the other hand, the artist’s decisions are ethically vulnerable. Art is always right, and if it ever seems to fail, it is because the artist has failed his art. The artist must be moral in creating his art because art is specific to human beings rather than being a mechanical production. Art that is irreverent must be prohibited since it “has no right against God”. As Aquinas states: “In the case of art that produces things which for the most part some people put to an evil use, although such arts are not unlawful in themselves, nevertheless, according to the teaching of Plato, they should be extirpated from the State by the governing authority.”⁵

Another aspect of Stephen’s theory is the claim that the beautiful is more likely to be linked with the true. Thus, his theory forms a counter argument for those who blame him for being a follower of the school of “Art for Art’s Sake”; which to some extent, represents escape and alienation from real life. In fact, Stephen expresses that he does not see art as an escape from life, but rather as an expression of it.

Throughout the Portrait, the artist’s connection with life is mostly expressed in terms of symbolic connotations. When Stephen watches the young girl in the river, he asserts the meaning of life after his religious crisis. He cries: “Welcome, O life!...”(Joyce 196) At that very moment of epiphany, Stephen acknowledges that art, in fact is a real expression of life as opposed to what he has been taught by Jesuit priests. Religion is directly related with the concepts of good and evil; whereas experience is linked with the concept of the true. Therefore it is apparent that Stephen is quite willing to separate beauty from goodness and link it with reality.

⁵ Project Gutenberg’s Ebook of Summa Theologica Part II-III (Secunda Secundae) by Thomas Aquinas
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18755/18755-8.txt>

The significance in of this association of beauty with truth is that, for Joyce, it provided a defense to the charge that his was a dilettante's art. For him, art is neither something found nor something invented. Pure art exists as a balance between the creator and that which he perceives and between the art object and the one who perceives it.

Although Thomist link the good and the beautiful and thus make the art responsible for its moral criticism, Joyce secularizes the Thomist insistence on the moral obligations of the artist by demanding instead intellectual or psychological obligations by asserting definite standards for art which are rooted in human psychology. It is clear that to some extent he follows the Thomist line, but in contrary, it is also seen that his way of linking or separating true, good and beautiful are not strictly identical to that of Aquinas. His way of showing Aquinas as a sanction for his ideas is clearly for the purpose of making himself be accepted by the critics who may argue on his being dilettante.

THE THREE QUALITIES OF BEAUTY

Stephen's theory is bound up with the three cardinal aesthetic principles; *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas* of Aquinas (Joyce 163). *Integritas* is the perception of the aesthetic image as one thing; *consonantia*, is the symmetry and rhythm of structure and *claritas* is given the approximate meaning of radiance. However, when Stephen refers to Aquinas's definition he misquotes Latin. He tells Lynch, "Aquinas says: 'Ad pulcritudinem tria requiruntur integritas, consonantia, claritas.' I translate it so: Three things are needed for beauty, wholeness, harmony and radiance." (Joyce, 163) On the other hand, Thomist sources translate what Aquinas actually wrote "For beauty includes three conditions, integrity or perfection, or those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; and then due proportion or harmony is required; and lastly, brightness or clarity, whence things are called beautiful which have a bright color."⁶

In interpreting the first two aspects, Stephen does not diverge from the orthodox interpretations of Saint Thomas. *Integritas* is explained by Stephen as "wholeness", being self-bounded and self-contained upon the immeasurable background of space and time other than itself. He says to Lynch that the mind separates the basket from the surroundings and thus sees it as one thing. We see that Some Thomists explain it as certain wholeness and perfection; something incomplete is to that extent ugly, putting more emphasis on perfection. Wholeness, actually, is more influential on Joyce's unified art than the more vague perfection.

On the other hand, Stephen's interpretation of *consonantia*, as "complex, multiple, divisible, separable, and made up of parts and their sum"; accords generally with Aquinas's understanding of the concept of "due proportion". Stephen explains to Lynch that after recognizing *integritas*, you feel "its formal lines... you feel the rhythm of its structure... you feel now that it is a thing." (Joyce 164) It should be recalled that there are discrepancies between the ways Aquinas and Joyce explain rhythm,

⁶ Project Gutenberg's Summa Theologica Part I (Prima Pars) by Thomas Aquinas.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17611/17611.txt>

as explained in the previous part. However, we see that there is no significant divergence between the two in explaining the first two qualities of the beautiful.

On the other hand, when exploring *claritas*, it is seen that Stephen diverges thoroughly from the Thomist line. Stephen first emphasizes the ambiguous nature of the word; “Aquinas uses a term which seems to be inexact. It baffled me for a long time. It would lead you to believe that he had in mind symbolism or idealism, the supreme quality of beauty being a light from some other world, the idea of which matter was the shadow, the reality of which it was but the symbol. I thought he might mean that *claritas* was the artistic discovery and representation of the divine purpose in anything or a force of generalization which would make the aesthetic image a universal one, make it outshine its proper conditions.”(Joyce 164) Thus, Stephen derives the conclusion that the radiance is actually another scholastic term, “*quidditas*”, and the “whatness” of the thing. For him, when you apprehend the aesthetic object as one thing and understand it according to its rhythm, you make the one and only synthesis that is logically possible, the “*quidditas*”, which in the scholastic philosophy means the specific essence.

Apparently, Joyce substituted *quidditas* for *claritas* in order to avoid the spiritual connotation of the term. By using the term *quidditas*, Joyce wants to claim sanction from Aquinas without accepting the essential meaning carried by his ideas. The “bright color” in Aquinas’s explanation of *claritas* seems to justify Joyce’s mundane interpretation of the term, whereas the context in which it is written does not. The sentence immediately preceding can be translated as, “Species or Beauty has a likeness to the property of the Son”⁷. After Aquinas explains the three qualities of art that are quoted by Joyce, he actually moves on to explain how each of them applies to Christ. For him, *claritas* is in agreement with the Son, as the splendor and light of the intellect.

⁷ Project Gutenberg’s Summa Theologica Part I (Prima Pars) by Thomas Aquinas.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17611/17611.txt>

If we search *claritas* in criticisms, we can see that what Joyce called “epiphany” can give us a clue by which we can observe his alienation from the Thomist aesthetics. In Chayes’s “Joyce’s epiphanies”, it is argued that Stephen’s discussion of *quidditas* as a perfection and formal organization turns to be *consonantia* itself (Connolly 211). It is apparent that Stephen’s formulation of his ideas is through an evolution, developing through time and maturing as he breaks with the church. One may notice that, in Stephen Hero, Stephen shows a greater reliance on the spiritual value of art than in the Portrait. In Stephen Hero, Joyce’s explanation of *claritas* is somehow more orthodox, in terms of epiphanies. The word epiphany, which he defines as “a sudden spiritual manifestation” has religious connotations. The term epiphany somehow is linked to the soul, in contrary to the more mechanical link that is discussed throughout the Portrait. Going through Portrait, Stephen explains *quidditas*, as the supreme quality felt by the artist when the aesthetic image is first conceived. With this explanation, Stephen puts the emphasis on the man-made nature of the art and thus, enables the artist to exist as a God himself. Hence, we understand that the epiphanies of Stephen Hero no longer are in concern, and the Godly characteristic of *claritas* is reduced to a feeling of revelation.

With regards to the *claritas*, it is seen that Joyce tries to coach his theories in the writings of Aquinas, and if there is question of their compliance, he covers the disagreement by offering ambiguous explanations.

CONCLUSION

While investigating the research question: **To what extent does the aesthetic theory of Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce follow that of Saint Thomas Aquinas?**, it has become obvious that James Joyce follows the form of certain scholastic principles, but by denying the premises upon which they are based, distorts the meaning. Aquinas as an important priest of the Roman Catholic Church alludes to the question of the subject matter of art, but his conclusions must be explored according to their religious context. Throughout the research, we have seen that Joyce secularizes Aquinas, clearly uses his arguments, but interprets them to suit his own purposes. In referring to Aquinas, he uses much of his philosophy and does not distort his argument to a great extent, but in the end interprets the same principles in a worldly rather than religious way. He uses the description of the truth in order to save himself from the accusations of being a dilettante and doing art for art's sake.

However, when explaining other doctrines, he misinterprets SummaTheologica, by denying the spiritual meaning. He explains the doctrines in terms of mechanical, mundane, and man-made structures and hence, ignores Saint Thomas's supernatural implications. By neglecting scholastic interpretations of "due proportion" in art, he simplifies Aquinas to support his objective, non-emotional point of view to art. He sees the object of aesthetics as a world itself, rather than an alliance to the Divine Order. Thus, he makes the artist equivalent to God, and denies the premises from which the Thomist theory is derived.

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