

Transformation of a Young Irishman

ENGLISH LITERATURE B EXTENDED ESSAY

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ABSTRACT

James Joyce's novel "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" tells the story of a young Irish boy in the early 20th century. The protagonist goes through a huge transformation as he faces the issues present in the society of Ireland at the time. James Joyce also experienced a childhood in that time in Ireland and had a relatively similar life. Therefore, I have aimed to answer the following research question in my extended essay: "How do the social and cultural changes in the early 20th century Ireland relate the protagonist's transformation to the author's life in James Joyce's novel "A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man"?"

I will be investigating this question under the topics of religion, education, social statuses, unionism and nationalism. The protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, and James Joyce, despite being born into a country under religious influence and having received religious education, decided to steer clear of religious practices. Even though they were parts of nationalist households and were surrounded by unionists at school, they chose to support neither side. They both had the economic status of lower middle class and felt the discrimination done towards them at school because of it. They both received high class education and were successful at it. These conditions they faced shows that the issues present in Ireland at that time affected their transformations greatly and in almost identical manner.

The conclusion I have reached was that the social and cultural changes in early 20th century affected both Stephen Dedalus and James Joyce's transformations in the same manner, making Stephen's conflicts, in a way, reflections of the transformation of James Joyce in his youth. In the end, these changes in Ireland made them gain unique perspectives towards issues such as religion, economic statuses, education and nationalism.

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INTRODUCTION

“A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man” by James Joyce depicts the transformation of the protagonist who is living in the early 20th century Ireland. The protagonist, Stephen Daedalus, goes through several steps of transformation as he gets exposed to various aspects of the society in Ireland from his friends, his family and his school. The question is “How do the social and cultural changes in the early 20th century Ireland relate the protagonist’s transformation to the author’s life in James Joyce’s novel “A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man”?” Stephen continuously experiences inner conflicts regarding big issues like Nationalism, Religion, Education and Identity. All of which is present and controversial in Ireland at the time. Thus, the transformation of Stephen mirrors the transformation Ireland is going through in the beginning of 20th century Ireland and James Joyce’s personal life.

NATIONALISM

“-This race and this country and this life produced me.”¹ One of the biggest issues that troubled the mind of the young protagonist was nationality as he was expected to be extremely connected to his country and roots by the society he is living in. In the early 20th century, Ireland was under the pressure of the British Empire which was working to suppress the culture and nationality of Irish people and the approaching WWI and the Irish Revolution had created constant conflict between nationalists and unionists. “Tension was high and Ireland seemed on the brink of civil war.”²

Nationalists believed that Ireland should be independent and free from the grip of the British Empire. “Believing that the British Government has no right in Ireland, never had any

¹ John Blades, *James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. (London, England: Penguin, 1991), 220.

² Ian Cawood, *Britain on the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Penguin, 2004).

right in Ireland, and never can have any right in Ireland”³ The reason that caused nationalists to reject the British in a serious manner was the fact that British pushed the idea that they were no longer “Irish” to the point that the people reacted and became nationalists. They believed that the best results for the people of Ireland could only be achieved by making Ireland independent and giving up the national identity of the people was not worth the benefits that some sort of union with the British Empire could provide.

The idea of nationalism was first introduced to Stephen when he was a child. His household, especially because of his father, were mostly made up of nationalists. Stephen’s father is neither from the highly educated and high class nor the low class and uneducated part of Ireland. This makes him a person standing in between both of the realities of the country at that time. “-Poor Parnell! He cried loudly. My dead king! ”⁴ Mr. Dedalus, Stephen’s father, is a supporter of Charles Steward Parnell and the nationalist movement. Charles Steward Parnell was the spearhead of the movements in the early 20th century regarding the nationalism and independence of Ireland. Parnell grew up in an anti-British household but received education in three English boarding schools which also puts him in the middle of the classes just like the Stephen and Joyce. This can be seen as one of the reasons why they both admired Parnell as a nationalist figure. “He went to three English boarding schools.” He became the president of important groups such as the Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain (1877) and the Irish land rule (1879). In “September 1877 the Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain elected Parnell its president.”⁵ The courage with which Parnell acted and the fact that he has managed to accomplish much are also reasons why Joyce and Stephen admired him. Mr. Dedalus’ nationalist and revolutionist beliefs also causes some conflict at the dinner table in Dedalus’

³ Donal Nevin. *James Connolly: "a Full Life"* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 2005).

⁴ Blades, *James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 35.

⁵ Conor O'Brien. “Charles Steward Parnell.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Accessed January 12, 2016. <http://global.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Stewart-Parnell>

home between father Dedalus and a nun, very much like the constant conflict between the unionists and nationalists in the social system of early 20th century Ireland. ”– Sons of bitches! Cried Mr. Dedalus. When he was down they turned on him to betray him and rend him like rats in a sewer. Lowlived dogs! And they look it! By Christ, they look it!”⁶ (Page 31) However, at the end, his father’s strong approach towards nationalism and Irish independence was one of the reasons that made Stephen question his ideals as a whole.

Another medium of conflict regarding Irish nationalism that Stephen was exposed to was his friends and his social environment. Very much like the adults in the society, the children in Ireland were mostly either Nationalists or Unionists affected by their families. In fact the youth played a strong role in before the Irish revolution. So much that, most of the Irish Republican Army was made out of young men. “Pro-treaty commentators routinely described republican fighters as “young hot bloods”, ”hooligans”, ”foolish young men”, ”idle young men”, even mere “schoolboys” and “children”.⁷ Even before the revolution broke out, the youth population had a heavy influence on the political life since they were able to be more active than the older members of the society. This plays a role, and can be easily seen in the book because of the fact that a constant conflict, even though not so obvious, exists in Stephen’s social environment in and out of school between children his age. Davin, one of Stephen’s friends, is a nationalist and an Irish revolutionist. Due to his uneducated family and nature, he possesses an extraordinarily positive and optimistic approach towards the future of Ireland. This is a common trait among the nationalists. “But a man’s country comes first. Ireland first, Stevie. You can be a poet or a mystic after.”⁸ Since Davin is a close friend of Stephen, he does get into arguments regarding nationalism with Stephen. Davin is in strong

⁶ Blades, *James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 31.

⁷ Gavin Maxwell Foster, *The Irish Civil War and Society: Politics, Class and Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

⁸ Blades, *James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 221.

belief that nationality comes before every other ideal and that Stephen should think about his country first before committing himself into artistic activities and ideas. Stephen, however, has a skeptical view of the nationalist ideas and defends that nationalism is just another barrier blocking his artistic nature. He chooses to believe in the redemptive force of art rather than nationalism.

UNIONISM

Unionists, on the other hand, wanted to prevent and attempts to implement a home rule. They supported the political ideology that British Empire and Ireland remain united and wanted the status of Ireland in the British Empire to be preserved. “Raise your hands. Repeat after me: Never under any circumstances will we have Home Rule.”⁹ This caused escalating conflict between the nationalists and unionists in both the cities of Ireland and the Irish Parliamentary Party which later lead to the Home Rule crisis. Unionists were mostly made up of the higher class section of Ireland. They were well educated and lived in good conditions. They believed that the idea of nationality did not matter as long as they could provide, in their idea of, better living conditions and education to the people living in Ireland. They believed that fighting was not necessary when there wasn’t anything at the end of the line. In other words, they did not believe that making Ireland independent would be beneficial for the people of Ireland.

Unionism is a part of Stephen’s life in the manner that he gets exposed to people with unionist beliefs in his social environment. The most of the other pupils at the schools he attends possess unionist beliefs. Such as Nasty Roche and Wells in the Colongowes Wood College. We guess that their position in the conflict is with the unionists because of the fact that Roche is from a wealthy family and Wells constantly picks on Stephen because of his

⁹ Geoffrey Lewis, *Carson: The Man Who Divided Ireland*. (London and New York: Hambleton Continuum, 2006).

beliefs. Also, many other students at the school come from rich roots and criticize Stephen's undecided and artistic stance towards the issues. The nature of these students show Stephen how the unionist crowd tend to look down upon and bully the people that hold different opinions on the issue. Stephen sees that they possess ugly arrogance brought by the wealthy families and the high education they have. Stephen does not like this approach decides to steer away from the unionist side of the arguments as well. Thus, he ends up looking for another unique position to hold against the conflict of nationalism against unionism.

ECONOMIC STATUS

Stephen also failed to hold an optimistic approach towards the future of Ireland because of the social and economic status of the cities he was living in, especially Dublin. When Stephen's family starts struggling with financial issues, they decide to move to a cheaper house in Dublin. "This was a city of genuine diversity, its many complexities defying easy explanations. Rich and poor, immigrant and native, nationalist and unionist, Catholic, Protestant, Jew and Quaker, and so many more, were all bound together in the life of the city."¹⁰ The city had various types of people from different economic and social statuses. Stephen got to see, firsthand, the horrible poverty the most of the Dublin's population is suffering through. Seeing these dark realities, he became disinterested in optimistic nationalist ideas. He started to question the belief that Ireland could stand on his own feet and even if it would be good for Ireland. Sacrificing the possible improvement of people the of Ireland's lives just for the simple idea of being an independent nation seemed illogical. It is also common for the people outside the Anglo-Irish to reject Catholics since they are mostly nationalists and the Catholic Church supports the unionist society and the people with really low income tended to resort to sinful acts in order to make a living. Stephen saw the people in

¹⁰ "What was Dublin like in the early 20th Century?" National Archives of Ireland. Accessed January 28, 2016. <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/exhibition/dublin/main.html>

the poor part of the city mostly cannot afford to be religious because they ended up doing jobs that required them to sin to earn money. They were obviously not fond of the church and felt abandoned. They were called sinners and demons but they didn't have any other choice. Stephen witnessed the revolt towards the Catholic Church's grip and the poor abandoned people being discriminated against and looked down upon for something they cannot choose.

On the other hand, Stephen was exposed to the higher class environment of early 20th century Ireland quite often since he was receiving education in Jesuit schools and his family was lower middle class. The high class Irish, often referred to as Anglo-Irish, were the privileged minority in the Irish society. They identified themselves as Irish, however they were into the traditions of the British. They spent their time in their big houses with servants and often participated in British sports such as fox hunting and racing. They owned many of the major businesses and had high control over most of Ireland. Their idea of supporting their nation was very different from the nationalists since they wanted Ireland to remain in union with the British Empire¹¹. Even though they are identified as unionists, they mostly considered themselves nationalists. Stephen saw pupils at school that came from Anglo-Irish families and saw their contradictory nature. This made him unable to be a part of the unionists as he rejected the high interest in British tradition and culture which the Anglo-Irish had.

Also, because of the economic income gap between the high and low classes of Ireland, there was anger directed towards the high class by the low class. Lower class envied the high class' living standards and were disturbed by the fact that were living in such horrible standards while the high class was living in huge houses with many servants. This also caused the low class to revoke the ideas presented by the high class such as unionism. They believed that the high class just wanted to preserve their luxurious statuses and were selling their

¹¹ Fidelma Maguire, "The Anglo-Irish." University College Cork. Accessed January 28, 2016. http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/The_Anglo-Irish

country for the British Empire. Which held some kind of truth as a revolutionary war could harm the wealth and the living standards of the high class whereas the low class did not have anything to lose.

Joyce did not have a high class household. However, realizing his intelligence from an early age, his parents decided to provide him education.¹² These conditions, the fact that Joyce comes from a lower middle class family but attends high class education, which mirror Stephen's living conditions, are great examples that shows us why Joyce's life parallels Stephen's. Joyce mainly attended Jesuit schools. In fact, he attended the Irish schools of Clongowes Wood College and the Belvedere College which are the exact schools Stephen attends in "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man". This way, Joyce gets exposed to both the low class environment, because of his household, and the educated high class environment, because of him getting education at school, very much like Stephen Dedalus. Also, Joyce's ideals towards the nationalist and unionist conflict is similar to Stephen in the manner that he also does not accept either nationalism or unionism completely but generates his own unique approach to the overall issue.

RELIGION

Like many other issues present at that time, Stephen did not have a strong standing in one of the two sides in the conflict in Ireland regarding religion. Stephen saw the religious society in Ireland very closely as he was attending several Jesuit schools. His mother also was a very religious person and insisted on Stephen getting a religious education. According to an article written by Dr. Myrtle Hill at University College Cork, Ireland, a little over three-quarters (76.9%) of the Irish population belonged to the Catholic Church.¹³ This resulted in

¹² Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1959).

¹³ Myrtle Hill, "Ireland: culture & religion, 1815–1870," University of college Cork. Accessed January 28, 2016. http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/Ireland_culture_amp_religion_1815ndash1870

constant practice of religious traditions such as Catholic festivals, constant public preaching and religious parades. From politics to leisure, religious principals were used to force rules upon people. The Anglo-Irish and/or Catholic parts of the society trusted in the Catholic Church and believed that the church carried the word of God. This parallels the book in many occasions when Stephen encounters highly religious people such as the nun in Stephen's family's dinner table who calls Stephen's father a demon because of his strong opinions towards the pressure of the church. Stephen, at a phase, fell under the influence of the church fearing that he might suffer in hell for an eternity after his death. He was surrounded by religion, religious people and religious public activities so much that he felt under pressure. He devoted himself to religion and confessed all his sins. This was a part of his process of exploring all the ideals present at that time. This way, he was able to witness the motives and beliefs of the Catholic mass and the church as a fellow Catholic. However, after realizing the actual nature of the church he decided to give up religious practices.

A certain group in the society of Ireland at the time were fed up with the constant pressure of the church and wanted the population to be free from the manipulations of the Catholic Church. In "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man", Stephen's father, Simon Dedalus, and his friend, Mr. John Casey, are a part of this group. "John, he said. It is true for them. We are an unfortunate priestridden race and always were and always will be till the end of the chapter."¹⁴ Their frustration towards the high influence of the Catholic Church on the religious masses of Ireland becomes so strong that it pushes them to revoke the idea of religion completely. They believe that the church and religion should not be something that determines the outcome of political issues and that religion is just a personal belief. They are completely disturbed by the fact that most people do not question the directions of the

¹⁴ Blades, *James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 35.

church.” – No God for Ireland! He cried. We have had too much God in Ireland. Away with God!”¹⁵

Religion is a huge area of conflict in both Stephen’s mind and the society of early 20th century Ireland. Stephen was introduced to doubts about religion through the fights happening at the dinner table in Stephen’s home between his non-religious father and other religious family members and family guests. Later, Stephen also sees the non-religious sinning low class of Dublin and loses himself to lust. Soon after, getting scared of the wrath of God, he decides to be a religious man. Finally, he abandons his religious ideals when he reaches his artistic identity.

This is quite similar to the author, James Joyce’s relationship with religion as he, too, rejects religion after being exposed to it by years of religious education. “Six years ago I left the Catholic church, hating it most fervently.”¹⁶ Because of his artistic nature, Joyce could not accept the boundaries the religious and conservative lifestyle pushed by the church possessed. The limitations of religious life made him feel angry and out of character. In the end, Just like Stephen, Joyce refused the positions and the opportunities offered him by the church and ended up despising the religious ideals of the Catholic Church. This clearly shows that Joyce and Stephen are quite similar in their unique opinions about the conflict regarding religion.

EDUCATION

Education in early 20th century is one of the key factors that divided the society between unionists and nationalists. The educated high class people, Anglo-Irish, were mostly unionists. Firstly the schools and education at that time in Ireland, like many other aspects, were controlled by the Catholic Church. The education received by the pupils were mostly

¹⁵ Blades, *James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 37.

¹⁶ Richard Ellmann, *Selected Letters of James Joyce*. (N.p.: Viking, 1966).

religion rather than science. The highly religious education resulted in pupils being brainwashed into fearing the wrath of God and the Church. They were teaching the students to make them the masses that believe and trust the church with every word and decision. Since the church was at the side of the unionists at the time, the pupils were guided towards the unionist ideas rather than nationalism. Another reason highly educated were mostly unionists is that education was also highly manipulated by the British and wealthy people also often went to England to receive education. This way, they were exposed and made familiar to the British culture, traditions and ideals. They, now being culturally half English, took the side of the British and wanted to remain in union with the British. Stephen received Catholic education from the Jesuit schools and did have many friends that came from high class families and supported unionists.

On the other hand, the uneducated people of the country were mostly nationalists. There are several reasons as to why this was the case at that time. Firstly, the uneducated people had limited knowledge of cultures and countries outside of Ireland. Thus, they were connected more deeply to their national identities. They refused to be called anything else than “Irish” when English said Ireland was part of the British Empire. Thus, when British pushed the idea that they were now in the “British Empire” and tried to suppress the nationalist feelings of the Irish people, the nationalist people felt the need to stand up to this pressure. Stephen did have uneducated people in his environment. He had friends that were not as rich as he was. His friend Davin was a nationalist that came from the countryside. Davin supported the nationalist ideas and was not fond of literature and deep talk, related to education. Stephen visited the lower income areas of the city and saw the conditions that uneducated and poor had to endure. He saw that they needed something to fight and hope for and how they wanted to preserve their nationalities. This did not push Stephen to become a nationalist though, since he often saw the unionist side of the conflict.

James Joyce also received education very similar to Stephen Dedalus's education. Just like Stephen, James Joyce's first experiences with school was isolated and tormented. However, after the painful period, Joyce was an extraordinary student and was especially successful in his school life, like Stephen. However, both Stephen and Joyce, had their first sexual intercourse with a prostitute in Dublin and became sinner even though they were praised in Catholic school as a successful servant of god. Even though Joyce and Stephen received high education and were successful at school, they did not fall into the unionist side and preserved their own opinions towards the issue. They also refused to be under the influence of the church despite their education.

CONCLUSION

The novel "A portrait of the artist as a young man" depicts the life of an Irish young man and his struggles understanding his identity and the conflicts present in Ireland in the beginning of 20th century related to issues such as Nationalism, Economic Statuses, Religion and Education." 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 these nets."¹⁷ Stephen starts out as a child and he slowly explores each idea present in these conflicts. He at first despises school because he is tormented by other boys and the teachers, then he excels at his studies and is offered great positions in the Catholic school. He adapts a lustful nature and makes sexually sinning a habit, then he turns to religion confessing his sins and devoting himself to religious studies. He is surrounded by the high class at the Jesuit school but sees all the dark realities of the poor and uneducated part of Dublin in his search for prostitutes. He has a nationalist father and revolutionary friends like Davin but he also is surrounded by unionist ideas in the church and the Jesuit schools. James Joyce, experiences

¹⁷ Blades, *James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 220.

all these struggles in a much similar fashion and just like Stephen, in the end, he never ends up on a side in these conflicts but rather forges his own path backed up by the ideas he made and information he gained by his own experiences. "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."¹⁸ The transformation Stephen experiences throughout the novel mirrors the transformations the social system of Ireland and the author, James Joyce, is going through since every shape of identity Stephen takes along his journey is present in the society of Ireland at that time and is an issue that Joyce had to overcome in his youth.

¹⁸ Blades, *James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 276.

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