

Thematic Study of Portrait of Artist as a Young Man

Soul and Body

The gap between soul and body means a great deal to **Stephen** during childhood and adolescence. As a child, Stephen notes countless particular sights, sounds, and smells, and interprets them with great tenderness and seriousness: they seem to lead him deep into his memories and his understanding of the world. In this way, body and soul are naturally connected for Stephen as a child. But Stephen also shies away from many social activities, preferring to keep to himself and attend to his thoughts and daydreams: he distinguishes between extroverted activity, in which his body interacts with others, and introverted activity, in which his soul communes with itself.

Stephen's religious education reinforces the soul-body split. He has been taught since early childhood that premarital sex is a grave and shameful sin, so he perceives his adolescent sexual longing as a sort of insubordination of body against soul – an appalling perversion he must keep hidden at any cost. His secret lust, vague ambition, and keen poetic vision create a strange and weighty inner world that does not often correspond to the shrill, dirty, practical world of city, school, and family. Though he often feels burdened by this ghostly inner life, he seeks to protect it from dogmatic external influences: when he tries to control his body and elevate his soul through meticulous religious practice, the formulaic religious teaching ultimately fails to leave any permanent mark on his inner life.

The culmination of his religious crisis seems to mark the reunion of soul and body: the *senses*, “the call of life to his soul,” turn Stephen away from the priesthood, fuel his artistic ambitions, and restore his inner world – the senses of the body, the same senses that fuel his lust. But when Stephen arrives to university, he carries the split into his rather antiquated aesthetic theories. He brags that he will “try to fly by [the] nets” of nationality, language, religion; but before he can become truly free, before he can repair the antagonism between soul and body, Stephen must create an aesthetics of his own. This new aesthetics, embodied by *Portrait* itself, will be one that does not privilege unity over dispersion, thought over feeling, or purity over reality.

Innocence and Experience

Ideas of innocence and experience, of change and maturation, are central to every *Künstlerroman* (a novel that narrates an artist's growth and development), of which *Portrait* is one. In Joyce's novel, the theme of innocence and experience structures the remaining four themes, because in each case the novel traces the child-to-adult arc of **Stephen's** shifting perspective. That is to say, when we talk about *Portrait* we are always talking about the evolution from innocence to experience.

Stephen's own idea of innocence is deeply influenced by Christian notions of purity and sin. Throughout the book, he identifies innocence as a sexless, lustless existence – the life of a child or a celibate; experience, on the other hand, is a fallen condition, filled with doubt and shame. For example, he imagines that Emma was innocent as a young girl, but after her sexual awakening she is “humbled and saddened by the dark shame of womanhood.” Innocence, for Stephen, also denotes a kind of simple, hearty, direct relationship to the surrounding world. Stephen's adolescence is marked by growing isolation, a spiritual alienation from friends and family. When he recalls the sensory vividness and immediacy of his childhood, and when he listens to stories of easy companionship from his father's youth, he feels that his innocence has disappeared – that the child Stephen has died.

The two notions of innocence are closely connected, because to a large extent it is Stephen's sexual shame that drives him away from others: to hide his shame, he retreats into a secretive inner world. Shame of the body also complicates and disturbs Stephen's relationship to sensory experience. By the end of the novel, though, Stephen's religious anxieties start to diminish, and his sensory life seems to grow brighter once again. Innocence usually gives way to experience; in Stephen's case, experience also gives way to innocence: “his soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood.”

Literature and Life

Since earliest childhood, novels and poems help **Stephen** make sense of the world around him. From the very first scene of the novel, in which infant Stephen creates a little rhyme from Dante's threat that "eagles will come and pull out his eyes," words shape and brighten Stephen's experience. The sounds of words puzzle and enlighten him, and novels like *The Count of Monte Christo* help him shape his adolescent identity. At times, beautiful phrases from poems thrill him as much as real romantic experiences.

Yet, though Stephen's inner experience melds art and life, Stephen the young poet and aesthete believes there must exist a great distance between them: he imagines art as the vapory spirit soaring high over the city of the real. Drawing on the philosophy of Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas, Stephen decides that art must inspire only philosophical abstractions about emotions, "ideal pity or terror," but not real emotions themselves – he thinks passions like love and anger are too lowly for art. In his own poetry, he omits random or unsavory detail in favor of high romantic abstraction. "Excrement or a child or a louse" finds no place in his art. Joyce's novel itself, of course, includes everything Stephen omits: passion, crudeness, dirt, randomness, contradiction. The novel itself gently mocks and refutes Stephen's youthful theories – theories that once belonged, perhaps, to the young Joyce himself.