

## **The Portrait of Stephen as an Existentialist**

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### **Abstract**

*Looking carefully at the protagonist of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* one can see that there are certain actions and choices which Stephen does, as he progresses in life, that reflect a certain direction which Stephen is willingly steering his life towards; and that is of course to be an artist. This direction, however, may not be influenced by some outside force that pushes Stephen without him being conscious of it. Rather, it is a free choice, on Stephen's behalf, to define his own existence and what he wants to be in life. When there is a talk about existence, the philosophy of existentialism comes to mind. Sartre has talked about the freedom and the responsibility of the individual to make his/her own choices to define his/her life. And by applying these particular concepts from Sartre, the development of the protagonist, Stephen, and his aspiration to be an artist can be seen in a different light.*

**Key words:** *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, existentialism, freedom of choice, responsibility, Jean-Paul Sartre, Stephen Dedalus, James Joyce.

### **1. Introduction**

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is not the most celebrated works of James Joyce as a novelist. But along with the collection of short stories *Dubliners*, the two are considered as the better accessible of his works compared to *Ulysses* and *Finnegan Wake* (Grose, 1976. p. 25). They are less complex and certainly shorter. What make critics interested in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is that it depicts some sides of Joyce's life himself. The protagonist Stephen goes through similar stages in life to Joyce and he even attends the same school. The novel is considered as a semi biographical bildungsroman because Joyce mixes facts and fiction and a lot of myth and symbolism.

Biography is only one of the elements that interest critics in this novel, other interests include the need for Stephen to distance himself from the religious and political forces in Dublin to become an artist (Daiches, 1940), Joyce's (and Stephen's) aesthetic theory (Block, 1950), the biblical references in the strange woman's episode in Davin's story (Aschkenasy, 1985), art, modernism, the city and consumer culture (Leonard, 1995), the gender studies approach (Teal, 1995), and the postcolonial approach (Mezey, 1998-1999).

All those critics mention at some point or another that Stephen is alienating himself, acting differently from his peers, not doing what his society expects him to do or that he is making his own mind subjectively about what he wants to be. And the approach that suits this subjective individualism is existentialism. The philosophy of existentialism spread in Europe in the years between the two World Wars. According to Kaufmann, Jean-Paul Sartre's name "become synonymous with existentialism" (Kaufmann et al, 1994. p. 452). ). He was not only a philosopher, but a novelist, a playwright, an essayist and an editor. It is only appropriate to choose Sartre's ideas of existentialism here since he was "the influential leader of the French Existentialists" (Sahakian, 1968. p. 353). Taking the concept of (freedom of choice/responsibility) to analyze the novel, we can see Stephen's actions in a unique light.

## 2. Analysis

Symbolically, Joyce weighs the choices that are available to Stephen in terms of the color of roses, "White roses and red roses: those were beautiful colours to think of ... But you could not have a green rose. But perhaps somewhere in the world you could" (Joyce, 1994. p. 12). Stephen can choose one of two things, nationalism or religion. These are what the two colors symbolize, the two ways by which his countrymen live, as shown during the Christmas dinner when these two choices are also represented by his father and Dante. But Stephen is thinking of a third choice symbolized by the "green rose". He doesn't want to choose either this or that. He wants to look for other choices in life because he wants to be an individual person. Even though the "green rose" does not exist in Ireland, Stephen is determined to find it somewhere else in the world. The matter of which of the available choices is brought up again when his friend asks Stephen whether he kisses his mother or not before going to bed, Stephen wonders what choice he should make (Joyce, 1994. p. 14). It seems both of the available choices are not satisfactory neither to him nor to his society. Another symbolic reference to choices is made by the colors green and maroon which Dante has on her brushes "He wondered which was right, to be for the green or for the maroon" (Joyce, 1994. p. 16-17). The matter of which way to choose in life seems limited to him because both are the choices presented by society and they are both not his own, therefore they do not satisfy him.

The choices of the two situations mentioned above give Stephen the freedom to choose. Without having a choice, a person's freedom is limited or there is no freedom at all. And these choices make Stephen realizes his freedom. Among the existentialists, Sartre emphasizes on freedom the most "I am indeed an existent who *learns* his freedom through his acts, but I am also an existent whose individual and unique existence temporalises itself as freedom, ... I am condemned to be free" (qtd. in Blenkinsop, 2004. p. 162). For Sartre, whatever we do is an act that demonstrates our freedom, a freedom that we cannot evade, that is why he reaches the paradoxical conclusion that we are "condemned to be free".

So Stephen also decides to practice his freedom and chooses not to hide behind the objective values of his peers and the way they regard their teachers and he decides to stand for himself. When Stephen goes to the rector's room to correct the injustice he suffered on the hand of one of his teachers, he finds his friends waiting for him and they gather around him to cheer him for standing up for himself, in one of what Joyce calls "epiphanies", which are a sudden realization or revelations at the end of each chapter, "The cheers died away in the soft grey air. He was alone. He was happy and free" (Joyce. 1994. p. 60). Stephen has his moment and he asserts himself in his school society as a unique character. But aside from all that, he realizes that he alone can do anything to assert his individuality. He also feels alone and alienated from the rest of his fellows because he has chosen to do what no one else has done. As he realizes his loneliness, he also feels happy because he has the choice of changing and making the suitable choices in his life. Stephen also feels free because by practicing his will, he no longer feels involved in his society or its customs, he realizes that he can break free from what tries to shape him and moulds him.

When talking about existentialism, Sartre says that "*existence* comes before *essence*" (Sartre2001. p. 27), by which he means "that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surge up in the world—and defines himself afterwards" (Sartre, 2001. p. 28). It is not the physical existence which Sartre and other existentialists are worried about. Nor is it the person's gender, colour, or social class that are of interest to the existentialists. It is how a person "defines" him/herself to assert his/her individuality. According to Sartre "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (Sartre, 2001. p. 29).

This idea of existence is what occupies Stephen's mind. He is not worried about his physical existence, nor is he worried about his physical death, "He had not died but he had faded out like a film in the sun. He had been lost or had wandered out of existence for he no longer existed. How strange to think of him passing out of existence in such a way, not by death but by fading out in the sun or by being lost and forgotten somewhere in the universe!" (Joyce, 1994. p. 96). He thinks of his existence in terms of making something out of his own life. He doesn't want to be a nobody that will "fade" away and no one remembers, but he wants to exist always in the memory of the universe. The play at the school gives Stephen his first hand experience with the taste of art. The moment he has a taste of it, he can never stop and the only thing he would do is look for more, "Now that the play was over his nerves cried for some further adventure. He hurried onward as if to overtake it" (Joyce, 1994. p. 88), the play showed him what he really liked and that he is on the right way.

But since Stephen at this stage is still not ready to leave his prison island, all that he can do is go through the labyrinth studying it until he is ready: "He returned to his wanderings. The veiled autumnal evenings led him from street to street as they had led him years before along the quiet avenues of Blackrock" (Joyce, 1994. p. 102).

In the fourth chapter, Stephen is offered to take the order and become a priest. He has reached the point where he has to make his decision. Stephen feels a kind of "chill" and repulsion when he thinks of accepting the order, "The chill and order of the life repelled him...What had come of the pride of his spirit which had always made him conceive himself as a being apart in every order?" (Joyce, 1994. p. 164). Stephen also wonders what has happened to his pride and his rebellious spirit that has been guiding him. By choosing his own path, Stephen chooses also to gain knowledge of the world through his own experience of it. He is not afraid of sinning or making mistakes because that is the way he wants to experience the world:

He was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world.

The snares of the world were its ways of sin. He would fall. He had not yet fallen but he would fall silently, in an instant. Not to fall was too hard, too hard: and he felt the silent lapse of his soul, as it would be at some instant to come, falling, falling but not yet fallen, still unfallen but about to fall. (Joyce, 1994. p. 165)

Of course for the religious minded society of Ireland at that time, if Stephen rejects taking the order he would be considered as falling, but for him it is this fall that would take him higher, though he hasn't fall yet, he will experience life as he sees it and fall in its "snares". We see Stephen's mind-making as he contemplates whether to take the order and become a priest, or leave the life of religious commitment and every involvement that comes with it behind. He goes back and forth from the chapel, as representative of religion, and Byron's publichouse, as the name of Byron represents rebellious and secular, artistic life:

He could wait no longer...from the gate of Clontarf Chapel to the doors of Byron's publichouse and then back again to the chapel and the back again to the publichouse he had paced slowly at first, planting his steps scrupulously in the spaces of the patchwork of the footpath, then timing their fall to the fall of verses...but he could wait no longer. (Joyce, 1994. p. 168)

He reaches a decision as he finally times his steps with the fall of verses, signifying that he has made up his mind to choose the secular artistic life over religion. At this moment Stephen has decided his own destiny. "...the office he had refused...he had so often thought to be his destiny and when the moment had come for him to obey he had turned aside, obeying a wayward instinct...He had refused. Why?" (Joyce, 1994. p. 169-170). Stephen has chosen to change the path of his life, from that which was expected and laid in front of him, by depending on his own "wayward instinct" because he realizes that there is no other guidance that he can follow except his own. Sartre says "Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse" (Sartre, 2001. p. 32). Therefore man is "...forlorn. For he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself" (Sartre, 2001.p. 32). Likewise feels Stephen, who would not be someone who would obey a value from outside his existence, he turns for himself and his own "wayward instinct" for providing values, though he still does not have a clear idea about his path or why is he going that way.

Stephen has decided which way he would like to take in life with confidence, "He passed from the trembling bridge on to firm land again ... he raised his eyes towards the slowdrifting clouds, dappled and seaborne. They were voyaging across the desert of the sky, a host of nomads on the march, voyaging high over Ireland..." (Joyce, 1994. p. 171). Stephen also raises his hopes high as he raises his eyes towards the sky and imagines himself like the clouds, flying over Ireland and away from its labyrinth.

Now that he sees his chosen path clearly, he feels that he has come alive again, and more important, he feels proud of his freedom and his choice. He is also happy that he is alone and tasting the essence of life. It is his realization of his existence that makes him so close to the heart of life, as the epiphany scene shows:

and a new life was singing in his veins...He was alone. He was unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life ... A girl stood before him in midstream ... She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird ... But her long hair was girlish: and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face. (Joyce, 1994.p. 175)

The girl makes him realize that there is nothing wrong in admiring mortal beauty, as opposed to divine inhuman beauty of ivory and gold of the church. Stephen realizes that, as mortals, mortal beauty is all that we have in this world, and we must make the best of it. Since Stephen aspires for his existence, he is not afraid to face life and to make mistakes as he goes on through it, he knows that to experience life he must go through defeats as well as victories:

To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory. On and on and on and on!  
(Joyce, 1994.p. 176)

Celebrating mortal beauty and living and accepting life with all its uncertainties, is the only way to satisfy him, as humans can't achieve any glory in life without tasting defeat. Stephen sees himself getting nearer and nearer to escaping the island of his imprisonment, and getting away from the others who have no will to follow their inner feelings, those who feel weary of life "...and the tide was flowing in fast to the land with a low whisper of her waves, islanding a few last figures in distant pools" (Joyce, 1994. p. 176).

Stephen now feels confident about his chosen path. He no longer worries about losing his way because he walks on his own. When the dean tells him that he should be careful not to lose his way, "Many go down into the depth and never come up. Only the trained diver can go down into those depths and explore them and come to the surface again", Stephen answers with confidence that "I need them only for my own use and guidance until I have done something for myself by their light" (Joyce, 1994. p. 191). He has considered the other's guidance but only until he can be ready enough to go by his own guidance. Stephen now can't stand the city of Dublin, he feels that its weight is pulling him downwards and preventing him from flying, "...the city's ignorance like a great dull stone set in a cumbrous ring, pulled his mind downward..." (Joyce, 1994. p. 183). By this stage, we see Stephen is eager to leave Dublin. He also recognizes that every one is free to choose his path in life, just as he has chosen his, and no one should interfere with that freedom, "You are right to go your way. Leave me to go mine" (Joyce, 1994. p. 203) he tells his friends.

Sartre says that "one will never be able to explain one's action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words ... man is free, man is freedom" (Sartre, 2001. p. 32). And since Stephen feels that his freedom would allow no room for any specific or imposed "human nature", he chooses to make his own nature and to be defined as an artist. He chooses the path of art instead of the path of religion. And as an artist, Stephen appreciates the great writers since ancient times, because they all contributed to humanity, "The pages of his timeworn Horace never felt cold to the touch even when his own fingers were cold: they were human pages ... but yet it wounded him to think that he would never be but a shy guest at the feast of the world's culture" (Joyce, 1994. p. 183), and he aspires to make his own share of contribution towards the heritage of humanity. He is now starting to get recognition from others as an artist, for the first time in his life, as the dean asks him, "You are an artist, are you, not, Mr. Dedalus?" (Joyce, 1994. p. 190). While he was silent and only listening to what the others say in the first chapter, we see Stephen expressing his ideas about art in this chapter and says confidently that he is right and the others are wrong:

-We are right, he said, and the others are wrong. To speak of these things and to try to understand their nature and, having understood it, to try slowly and humbly and constantly to express ... from sound and shape and colour which are the prison gates of our soul, an image of the beauty we have come to understand - that is art. (Joyce, 1994. p. 211)

He is committed to his choices in life and not afraid to voice them out whether in art or otherwise. Stephen's description of the development of the artist's personality resembles his own development:

The personality of the artist passes into the narrative itself, flowing round and round the person and the action like a vital sea ... The personality of the artist, at first a cry or cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails. (Joyce, 1994. p. 219)

Just as Stephen had experienced both sin (when he went to the prostitute) and religion before he found his own way, the artist must experience different aspects of life before his personality is fully developed and detaches himself from others.

Stephen tells the dean that he will use the light of others to find his own way. So is the artist's personality, it must drink from the sea of life and the experiences of other artists before it can refine itself and fly. Sartre says "Man is nothing else but that which he makes himself. That is the first principle of existentialism" (Sartre, 2001. p. 29). Instead of being a real priest, Stephen has chosen to be a priest of art, "... a priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life" (Joyce, 1994 p. 225). With his art, Stephen will transform the daily experience of everyday life into a memorable, everlasting experience.

Contrary to what most people think about freedom, for Sartre "freedom" means also responsibility. Sartre says that "In any case, and whichever he may choose, it is impossible for him [man]...not to take complete responsibility" (Sartre, 2001. p. 41). So here is an essential point to understanding Sartre's concept of freedom; "freedom is not the ability to obtain the ends chosen but autonomy of choices" (qtd. in Blenkinsop, 2004. p. 174). Freedom is not the reckless will to do whatever one wishes without any responsibility. On the contrary, freedom for Sartre is to be committed for one's actions. Sartre goes to say that "...man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre, 2001. p. 32). Man is responsible of creating his own values, and therefore he has to be committed to what he chooses. Sartre says "In any case, and whichever he may choose, it is impossible for him...not to take complete responsibility" (Sartre, 2001. p. 41). Sartre emphasizes that there is no freedom without responsibility and that the two are to be considered as two faces of the same coin.

As an existentialist, Stephen realizes that with the freedom to choose his way of life and the way to identify and make himself comes commitment and responsibility towards his chosen path that must be clear in his actions. He does not want to do something that he does not believe in, even if it would not harm him and means the happiness of his mother for taking the Easter duty, "I fear more than that the chemical action which would be set up in my soul by a false homage to a symbol behind which are massed twenty centuries of authority and veneration" (Joyce, 1994. p. 247). His choices come from within himself and he doesn't yield to the wishes of others or fall under their influence to satisfy anyone even symbolically. Most important is that he must be true to himself before he can be true to others.

Stephen finds freedom in his alienation and he is not afraid of being alone and isolated from others, "I do not fear to be alone or to be spurned for another or to leave whatever I have to leave. And I am not afraid to make a mistake, even a great mistake, a lifelong mistake and perhaps as long as eternity too" (Joyce, 1994. p. 251). He also takes full responsibility of his actions and mistakes, even "lifelong mistake" because that mistake would be the result of his own choice.

We see from the entries in Stephen's diary that he feels free already, "21 *March, night*: Free. Soulfree and fancyfree. Let the dead bury the dead. Ay. And let the dead marry the dead" (Joyce, 1994. p. 252). He feels alive because he is leaving behind the life of the dead in Ireland. He is also preparing to bury the past and leave every thing, even the girl of his romantic dreams, "She could love some clean athlete who washed himself every morning to the waste and had black hair on his chest. Let her" (Joyce, 1994. p. 238). He is willing to leave every thing behind him and start a new life, that is why he leaves the girl that he has idealized for a long time because she is part of the life he has rejected.

Stephen's departure makes him face his loneliness, but he sees others who have chosen the road of loneliness like he did:

The spell of arms and voices: the white arms of roads, their promise of close embrace and the black arms of tall ships that stand against the moon, their tale of distant nations. They are held out to say: We are alone. Come. And the voices say with them: We are your kinsmen. And the air is thick with their company as they call to me, their kinsman, making ready to go, shaking the wings of their exultant and terrible youth (Joyce, 1994. p. 257)

Stephen feels that he is more related to those arms and voices, they are his true "kinsmen", people who chose to 'stand out' instead of to 'stand in', they are the artists he chose to be one of them. The epiphany of the last chapter sums up Stephen's attitude and his choice of the life he wants. He wants to experience life and art to the fullest, "So be it. 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 conscious of my race.

27 April: Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead" (Joyce, 1994. p. 257). Stephen chooses the "race" of artists as the race that he wants to be identified with. The last sentence is addressed to his symbolic father whom he chose for guidance, the mythical Daedalus, to stand by his side.

### 3. Conclusion

Sartre says that an individual is condemned to be free and that he/she can never evade his/her freedom. The moment the individual exist in this life, he/she is faced with different choices and the individual must practice his/her freedom to choose how to identify him/herself. For Sartre, it is the multiplicity of choices that makes the individual free, and with this freedom comes responsibility. Because whatever the individual decides to choose, it would be his/her own choices and therefore he/she must be responsible for them. By practicing his/her freedom, the individual defines his/her existence by choosing what he/she wants to be and to what is the individual is committed to in life.

Stephen may seem as a confused young man at the beginning. However, he grows out of his confusion to emerge as a very determined individual. Stephen realizes at a young age that there are several choices in front of him, therefore, he does not have to follow in the path that has been drawn for him by others. He starts to observe the society and the world around him eliminating the choices that do not suit him and focusing on the ones that he would like to be identified with. Stephen decides to take the path of art instead of the path of religion and he consciously takes the right actions to be identified as an artist. In doing so, Stephen realizes that he has nothing and no one to depend on except his own subjective judgment to lead his way. And this makes him realizes that he is free do choose for himself what he wants to be. By practicing his freedom, Stephen chooses to be identified as an artist, and he makes the suitable choices to make himself what he wants to be. He also realizes that with his freedom comes a commitment towards the choices which he has made because they are his own choices and he is responsible for what he has chosen. At the end, Stephen emerges as an existential character who possesses the awareness of his responsibility and freedom to define his own existence.

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