

# Exploring Religious Constraints and a Journey towards Self-Discovery in James Joyce's *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*

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**Abstract:** The object of this paper is to represent a deeply flawed character Stephen Dedalus, whose journey towards self-discovery is hindered by societal and religious constraints in James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a young man*. One of the most prominent issues of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is showing how Stephen casts off the Catholic Religion, his religious identity while he evolves his own freedom and artistic consciousness throughout a procedure that will shape the different phases of his life. From childhood Stephen ascribes to an absolute belief in the morals of the church as his family was a devout Catholic family. As a teenager, this belief directs him to two opposite extremes, both of which are detrimental. At first, he falls into the extreme of sins, repeatedly sleeping with prostitutes, lying, envying, becoming prone to all seven deadly sins and intentionally turning his back on religion. Though Stephen sins consciously, he is always aware that he is breaking the church's rules. Again, when Father Arnall's sermon encourages him to return to Catholicism, he falls to the other extreme, becoming a fanatical model of religious fidelity and dedication. At long last, nonetheless, Stephen understands that both of these lifestyles—the completely immoral and the completely devoted—are constraints and are dangerous for him. Stephen realizes that extreme religious rules and complete sinful attitude both will not permit him to enjoy the full experience of being human. Stephen finally reaches a decision to embrace life and rejoice humanity after seeing a young girl wandering at a beach. At the end of the novel, Stephen replaces his initial Catholicism by a more personal and “evolutionary” religion, the religion of art that will make him a complete and eternal person.

**Keywords:** Religion, Fanatic, Artist, Epiphany, Growth, Identity

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## 1. Introduction

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* recognized its then thirty-two-year-old author, James Joyce, as a leading figure in the international movement known as literary modernism. With *Ulysses*, *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Joyce immaculate his stream-of-consciousness narrative style and became a literary celebrity. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* tells the story of a young Irishman named Stephen Dedalus as he grows up discovers his identity as an artist. The title describes the book's subject quite accurately. On one level, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* can be read as what the Germans call a *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel. On another level, the novel shows how Stephen struggles with an identity crisis throughout the

novel. He grapples with the question of who he is and what he wants to become, as he confronts the conflicting demands of religion, family, society, and his own desires.

Set in Ireland in the late nineteenth century, *Portrait* is a semi-autobiographical novel about the development of a young Irishman, Stephen Dedalus, whose background has much in common with Joyce's. Stephen's education and growth include not only his formal schooling but also his moral, emotional, psychological and intellectual development as he observes and reacts to the world around him. At the center of the story is Stephen's rejection of his Roman Catholic upbringing and his growing confidence as an artist. In the course of *A Portrait*, Stephen seeks to define his own identity. At the beginning of the novel, Stephen is portrayed as a devout Catholic schoolboy who wants to please his

teachers, his family, and his church. However, he soon becomes aware of his own sexual desires and his growing interest in literature and art, which bring him into conflict with the conservative values of his upbringing.

As he grows older and begins to develop his own ideas about aesthetics and the nature of art, Stephen becomes increasingly isolated from the people and institutions around him. He feels trapped by the limitations of his society and his family, and he struggles to find a sense of purpose and identity. He is repeatedly confronted and confounded by the influence of his environment, and in particular his cultural and religious heritage. At the end of the novel, Stephen resolves to escape the constraints of family, narrow nationalism and religious tradition by moving abroad. He declares that he has found his identity as an artist. Stephen's journey towards self-discovery is marked by a series of epiphanies, or moments of sudden insight, that help him to clarify his own beliefs and values. He ultimately decides to reject the religious and political institutions of his country in order to pursue his art, but this decision is not without its own risks and challenges.

Joyce's portrayal of Stephen's identity crisis is both complex and nuanced, reflecting the struggles that many young people face as they try to find their place in the world. This paper aims to show how Joyce's novel offers a critique of the role of religion in Irish society, challenging its authority and its impact on individual freedom and creativity. It reflects the tensions and conflicts that exist between religion and modernity. The novel is a powerful exploration of the human condition, and it continues to resonate with readers today.

## 2. Literature Review

Religion plays a significant role in James Joyce's novel, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," as it presents the protagonist's struggle to reconcile his personal desires with the constraints imposed by his religious beliefs and upbringing. The novel follows the growth and development of Stephen Dedalus, a young man in early 20th-century Ireland, as he confronts the rigid dogmas of the Catholic Church and seeks his own path to self-discovery.

Throughout the novel, Stephen's inner turmoil is depicted through his constant questioning of religious doctrine and his efforts to distance himself from his Catholic upbringing. For example, Stephen expresses his frustration with the limitations imposed by religious dogma when he declares, "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church" [9]. This quote shows how Stephen feels constrained by the Catholic Church and its teachings, which he no longer accepts. Literary critics have commented on the ways in which Stephen's journey towards self-realization is hindered by the religious constraints imposed on him. Karen Lawrence suggests that Stephen's struggle with the Church is a reflection of Joyce's own ambivalent relationship with Catholicism. Lawrence argues that "Stephen's rejection of his

family and religion is a rejection of the past and a move towards a more liberated, individualistic future" [12]. At the same time, critics have also noted that Stephen's rebellion against the Church is not simply a matter of rejecting tradition and authority, but rather a necessary step in his own personal growth and development. As John Paul Riquelme notes, Stephen's rejection of Catholicism is a way of asserting his own autonomy and asserting his own artistic vision.

In his essay on "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," John Paul Riquelme argues that "Stephen Dedalus's self-discovery is the product of his movement from the strictures of his Catholic upbringing toward the realization of his own artistic self" [17]. Similarly, literary critic Morris Beja asserts that "Stephen's spiritual development is a process of self-discovery in which he moves away from the religious constraints of his youth and towards a more individualistic, secular worldview" [1]. In her article on "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," Susan Stanford Friedman argues that "Stephen's aesthetic vision and spiritual awakening require him to break free from the constraints of his family and his church" [7].

Despite his rejection of religious authority, Stephen's struggle with religion remains a central theme in the novel. This is especially evident in his relationship with his family, who are devout Catholics. Stephen's father, for instance, is depicted as a stern and authoritarian figure that imposes his religious beliefs on his son. Stephen's interactions with his father demonstrate how religious constraints can create tension within families and hinder self-discovery. In her analysis of the novel, Elizabeth Bonapfel argues that "Stephen's identity is shaped by his interactions with the world around him, as he moves from passive observer to active participant in his own destiny" [4].

Moreover, Stephen's attempts to break free from his religious upbringing are also reflected in his artistic pursuits. He sees his art as a way to express himself freely and escape the constraints of religion. For instance, he says, "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" [9]. This quote illustrates Stephen's belief that art can be a means of self-discovery and expression, free from the constraints of religion. Literary critic Sam Slote argues that "Stephen's attainment of artistic freedom at the end of the novel is a rejection of the narrowness and conformity of Irish society and an embrace of the radical possibilities of the modern world" [19]. According to critic Hugh Kenner, "Stephen's pursuit of freedom is a rejection of the constraints of his upbringing and an embrace of his own individuality" [11].

In "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," epiphanies play a crucial role in shaping the development of the novel's protagonist, Stephen Dedalus. Through these moments of sudden realization, Stephen gains new insights into his identity, his relationships, and the world around him. In his article "Joyce's Epiphanies and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," Morris Beja explores the relationship between Joyce's concept of the epiphany and the development of

Stephen's artistic sensibility [2]. He argues that Stephen's epiphanies are not simply moments of revelation, but rather a process of growth and transformation that allows him to become a more fully realized artist. Similarly, in his book "The Art of James Joyce: Method and Design in 'Ulysses' and 'Finnegans Wake,'" A. Walton Litz discusses the epiphanies in "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" as part of Joyce's larger project of portraying the development of a modern consciousness [13]. He argues that Joyce's use of stream of consciousness and other narrative techniques allows him to capture the complexity and depth of Stephen's psychological experiences.

"A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" depicts the struggle between religious constraints and self-discovery through the character of Stephen Dedalus. Through Stephen's experiences, the novel raises important questions about the nature of identity, the role of tradition in shaping the individual, and the relationship between art and society. Joyce's novel shows how Stephen's rejection of his Catholic upbringing and the rigid dogmas of the Catholic Church is a critical aspect of his journey towards self-discovery. This struggle illustrates the challenges of reconciling one's personal beliefs and desires with the expectations of family, society, and religious institutions.

### 3. Materials and Method

Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* has been gone through as primary source of the research. Joyce's other writings, biography, different renowned national and international journal, online sources, 20<sup>th</sup> century novels, prose work, literary works on social class consciousness have contributed greatly to the formulation of this secondary qualitative analysis.

### 4. Result and Discussion

"A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" is a novel written by James Joyce and published in 1916. It tells the story of a young Irishman named Stephen Dedalus as he grows up and discovers his identity as an artist. The novel is divided into five chapters, each depicting a different stage in Stephen's life. The first chapter begins with Stephen as a young boy attending a strict Catholic school, where he struggles with the conflicting demands of religion and his own personal desires. The second chapter follows Stephen as a teenager, exploring his burgeoning sexuality and his growing interest in literature and art. The third chapter finds Stephen as a university student, where he becomes more politically aware and begins to develop his own theories about aesthetics and the nature of art. In the fourth chapter, Stephen decides to leave Ireland and travel to Europe, hoping to find inspiration and a new sense of self. The final chapter sees Stephen returning to Ireland, but he has become disillusioned with his former Catholic beliefs and feels alienated from the society around him. He ultimately decides to reject both his country and his religion in order to pursue

his art, thus marking his emergence as an independent artist.

Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," struggles with an identity crisis throughout the novel. He grapples with the question of who he is and what he wants to become, as he confronts the conflicting demands of religion, family, society, and his own desires. "Stephen's identity is a complex amalgam of his family background" [8]. At the beginning of the novel, Stephen is portrayed as a devout Catholic schoolboy who wants to please his teachers, his family, and his church. However, he soon becomes aware of his own sexual desires and his growing interest in literature and art, which bring him into conflict with the conservative values of his upbringing.

Religion plays a significant role in Stephen's life, and his struggles with Catholicism are a recurring theme throughout the novel. The novel is set in Ireland at the turn of the 20th century, a time when the country was deeply influenced by the Catholic Church. Stephen grows up in a devout Catholic family, attends a Catholic school, and is expected to follow the teachings of the Church. However, Stephen's questioning mind and artistic sensibilities often clash with the strict doctrines and rules of Catholicism. One of the earliest examples of religious constraints in the novel is Stephen's experience of confession. Confession is a sacrament in the Catholic Church where a person confesses their sins to a priest and receives absolution. Stephen struggles with the concept of confession and finds it difficult to confess his sins to a priest who he perceives as being less knowledgeable than him. This struggle highlights the conflict between Stephen's own intellectual development and the limitations of Catholic doctrine. Another example of religious constraints in the novel is Stephen's encounter with the Jesuit priest, Father Arnall. Father Arnall delivers a sermon on the horrors of hell, which deeply affects Stephen. The sermon reinforces the strict doctrine of Catholicism and highlights the fear and guilt that religion can instill in individuals. Stephen's reaction to the sermon reveals his growing disillusionment with the Church and his desire to break free from its constraints. The character of Stephen's mother also represents religious constraints in the novel. She is portrayed as a devout Catholic who values religious doctrine above all else. Her strict adherence to Catholicism conflicts with Stephen's artistic sensibilities and intellectual curiosity, and her influence on him is a significant factor in his struggle with religion.

In "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," extreme religious behavior is portrayed as a significant constraint on the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus. The novel depicts the intense piety of the Irish Catholic Church and the strict moral code that it imposes on its adherents, particularly on young people like Stephen. One of the key ways in which extreme religious behavior is shown to constrain Stephen is through the church's teachings on sin and morality. Stephen is taught that many of his natural desires, such as sexual desire and artistic ambition, are sinful and must be suppressed or controlled. This leads to feelings of guilt and shame, as well as a sense of conflict between his natural inclinations and the expectations of the church. Furthermore, the novel also

depicts the ways in which extreme religious behavior can limit intellectual and artistic development. The Irish Catholic Church in the novel is shown to be deeply suspicious of intellectual inquiry and critical thinking, emphasizing instead blind faith and obedience to authority. This leads to conflicts between Stephen and his teachers, who seek to impose their own narrow understanding of history and culture on their students, stifling their intellectual curiosity and creativity. Overall, the novel portrays extreme religious behavior as a powerful force in Stephen's life, one that often acts as a constraint on his natural impulses and his development as an artist and a human being.

While Stephen Dedalus is portrayed as a character that rebels against the extreme religious behavior of the Catholic Church, he also demonstrates elements of extreme religious behavior himself in the early part of the novel. For example, as a young boy, Stephen is deeply religious and obsessed with the idea of sin. He fears the consequences of sin and believes that he is constantly in danger of damnation. He engages in acts of self-punishment, such as abstaining from food, in order to atone for his sins. Furthermore, Stephen also shows signs of religious fanaticism when he becomes a member of the Catholic group, the Sodality of Our Lady. According to critic Bonnie Kime Scott, "Stephen's religious imagination in *Portrait* is a representation of what could happen when the individual is swallowed up by the community, when the individual has no place for himself or herself in that community, and when the community fails to acknowledge or understand the individual's experience" [18]. Critic Richard Brown observes that "Stephen's religious fanaticism is a symptom of a greater malaise, the sense of alienation and the search for identity which dominate his young life" [5]. He is enthusiastic about the group's strict religious practices, such as frequent confession and the recitation of prayers. He becomes very involved in the group's activities and is even chosen to lead a procession of the Blessed Sacrament. Critic Harold Bloom suggests that Stephen's extreme religious behavior is a reflection of the broader societal and cultural influences of the time, writing that "Stephen Dedalus embodies the crisis of Irish Catholicism in the early twentieth century, when the church had lost its authority and the search for alternatives to its sacramental theology began" [3]. However, as the novel progresses, Stephen begins to question the strict dogma and rigid moral code of the Catholic Church. He becomes disillusioned with the idea of sin and begins to view it as a limiting and oppressive force. He rejects the church's teachings on morality and sexual behavior, which he sees as a hindrance to his artistic and intellectual development. In this way, Stephen's extreme religious behavior in the early part of the novel serves as a contrast to his later rebellion against the Catholic Church. It highlights the complex nature of his character and the evolution of his beliefs and values over time.

In "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," Stephen Dedalus commits several sins throughout the course of the novel, including sexual transgressions and disobedience to

authority. One of the most prominent examples of Stephen's sinful behavior is his sexual encounter with the prostitute, which occurs during his adolescence. This experience leaves Stephen feeling guilty and ashamed, as he struggles to reconcile his Catholic faith with his natural desires. Stephen's guilt and shame are further compounded by the moral teachings of the church, which emphasize the sinfulness of sexual activity outside of marriage. Stephen's disobedience to authority is also a source of sin in the novel. According to John Nash, "Stephen's sin of renouncing his family and his Catholic faith is the pivotal event in the novel, marking a decisive break in Stephen's development as an artist" [16]. In his review, Timothy Martin argues that "Stephen's sin is not a moral failing but a necessary step in his artistic development" [14]. He challenges the authority of his teachers and the church, rejecting their teachings and seeking to forge his own path. This rebellion leads to conflicts with his family and the school authorities, and Stephen is ultimately expelled from his school for refusing to conform to their expectations. In his analysis, James Fairhall argues that "Stephen's sin is a manifestation of his rebellion against the oppressive authority of the church and his search for personal freedom" [6]. However, it is important to note that Stephen's sinfulness is not portrayed simply as a moral failing, but rather as a natural aspect of his development as an artist and a human being. Joyce portrays Stephen's struggles with sin and morality as part of his larger process of self-discovery and artistic awakening, emphasizing the complexity and nuance of Stephen's character and experiences.

Stephen's journey towards freedom and self-discovery is marked by a series of epiphanies, or moments of sudden insight, that help him to clarify his own beliefs and values. In her article "Epiphanies in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*," Marianne McDonald argues that Stephen's epiphanies are a central aspect of the novel's structure and theme [15]. She suggests that Joyce uses these moments of realization to show how Stephen's consciousness develops and evolves over the course of the novel. These epiphanies also serve to reveal the complex nature of Stephen's consciousness and his evolving understanding of himself and his place in society. One of the most notable epiphanies in the novel occurs when Stephen is walking on the beach and sees a girl wading in the water. As he watches her, he experiences a profound sense of beauty and a realization that his perception of the world is shaped by his own subjective experience. This epiphany marks a turning point in Stephen's development, as he begins to reject the rigid dogma of the Catholic Church and embrace a more individualistic and artistic worldview. "He felt his soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region; and there, in that new world of sensations, he felt that he had been liberated from his duty as a priest" [9] - This quote describes the moment when Stephen experiences an epiphany and realizes that he no longer wants to become a priest. "He was alone. He was unheeded, happy, and near to the wild heart of life. He was alone and young and wilful and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters and the sea-harvest of shells and tangle and veiled

grey sunlight" [9]. This quote describes the moment when Stephen experiences an epiphany while walking on the beach and realizing his own subjectivity. Another significant epiphany occurs when Stephen attends a Christmas dinner with his family. As he listens to his father and his uncles discussing politics and religion, he realizes that his own beliefs and values are fundamentally different from those of his family. This epiphany marks the beginning of Stephen's estrangement from his family and his rejection of the traditional Irish Catholic identity. "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" [9] - This quote comes at the end of the novel and describes Stephen's final epiphany, in which he embraces his individuality and sets out to create his own artistic vision. These quotes highlight the importance of epiphany in the novel, and demonstrate how these moments of sudden insight and clarity are integral to Stephen's development as an artist and as an individual. Ultimately Stephen rejects all religious constraints and embraces his artistic pursuit. Stephen Dedalus's rejection of family and religion is a necessary step in his journey towards artistic self-realization.

Throughout the novel, Stephen's epiphanies serve as moments of insight and revelation, helping him to better understand his own thoughts, feelings, and desires. They also serve as catalysts for his artistic development, as he begins to use his own experiences and perceptions as inspiration for his writing. The novel remains a powerful meditation on the complexities of the human experience and the importance of individual choice and self-determination. James Joyce explores the themes of freedom and individual choice through the character of Stephen Dedalus. Throughout the novel, Stephen struggles to find his place in the world and to reconcile his natural desires and impulses with the strict moral code of the Irish Catholic Church. Ultimately, the novel suggests that true freedom comes from embracing one's individuality and making choices based on personal values and beliefs, rather than blindly conforming to societal norms and expectations. "Stephen's journey towards self-discovery is the central idea of the narrative" [10] and artistic expression is a testament to this idea, as he gradually rejects the dogma of the church and finds his own path in life. Stephen's quest for freedom and individuality is a universal one, reflecting the struggle that many people face in trying to find their place in the world and to live a meaningful and fulfilling life.

## 5. Conclusion

Joyce's novel offers a critique of the role of religion in Irish society, challenging its authority and its impact on individual freedom and creativity. It reflects the tensions and conflicts that exist between religion and modernity. In "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," James Joyce explores the theme of the conflict between the individual and the constraints of society, particularly those imposed by religion. Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of the novel, struggles with

his Catholic upbringing and the expectations of his family and society as he tries to develop his own identity and artistic vision. Stephen's eventual rejection of Catholicism and his decision to pursue a life as an artist can be seen as a rejection of the religious constraints that have held him back throughout his life. The novel ultimately suggests that breaking free from religious constraints is necessary for personal growth and artistic expression. "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" explores the religious constraints that affected Irish society at the turn of the 20th century and their impact on the development of the novel's main character, Stephen Dedalus. The novel highlights the conflicts between Catholic doctrine and personal growth, intellectual curiosity, and artistic expression, ultimately suggesting that breaking free from religious constraints is necessary for individual growth and fulfillment. Literary critics have commented on the ways in which Stephen's journey towards self-realization is hindered by the religious constraints imposed on him. Joyce's novel is considered a landmark in modernist literature for its innovative use of language and narrative structure, as well as its exploration of themes such as identity, religion, and artistic expression. Through Stephen's experiences, the novel raises important questions about the nature of identity, the role of tradition in shaping the individual, and the relationship between art and society.

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