

The Childhood Conditioning of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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Abstract—James Augustine Aloysius Joyce was an Irish novelist and poet. He is considered to be one of the most influential writers of the early twentieth century. His major works include *Ulysses* (1922), *Dubliners* (1914), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is the story of Stephen Dedalus, a boy growing up in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century. As a young boy, Stephen's Catholic faith and Irish nationality heavily influence him but finally, he decides to cast off all his social, familial, and religious constraints to live a life devoted to the art of writing. At the end of the novel, Stephen decides to leave Ireland to pursue the life of a writer. In the present research paper, an attempt has been made to analyze the fictional character of Stephen Dedalus from the novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This research paper intends to study the psychological development of Stephen and the consequences of his childhood conditioning, which made him the person he is at the end of the novel.

Keywords: Environment, Stephen, Psychology, Childhood, Development, Conditioning.

Introduction

In the early part of the novel, the readers are given a peek into the toddler environment from the perspective of a little boy, Stephen. He remembers his parents, his uncle Charles, Aunt Dante, wetting the bed, oil sheet and its smell, the stories of his parents, neighbors and especially, a little girl named Eileen Vance, who he fancies and announces that he would marry her when they're grown-ups. This little announcement brings him a good beating from Aunt Dante, who dislikes the girl simply because she is a Protestant. This little scenario infuriates Aunt Dante and she blurts out some words that are rather fearful for the little Stephen: "O, if not, the eagles will come and pull out his eyes" (Joyce 12). In response, Stephen uses these words to create a creepy rhyme:

Pull out his eyes,

Apologise,

Apologise,

Pull out his eyes.

Apologise,

Pull out his eyes,

Pull out his eyes,

Apologise. (Joyce 12)

This weird rhyme sheds a little light over his poetic self. Stephen appears to be a shy, meek, and scared little boy.

Stephen's life is a simple depiction of a complex journey of a boy who evolved from a weak, shy kid to a strong-willed and mature adult, and one who was willing to take necessary steps in uncertain fields to explore and improve as an artist that he seeks to become. Living up to his name, Stephen became the Dedalus of the Greek mythology, leaving his life behind in Ireland.

The childhood of Stephen has been a rocky one. He was a shy and meek child, who lacked love and was sometimes reprimanded by his aunt. Because Stephen's expression of love and joy were met by such cruel acts, he chose to stay quiet and became a shy child. The traits of shyness are often followed by alternative means of expression. For Stephen, those means were poetry. To express, love, and share are the innate desires and motives of a human being. Stephen was not provided with space to be creative and expressive. As a result of this, he became scared and shy as a child. His needs for expression gave rise to an artistic streak in him and he began to find refuge in his poems. Because Stephen lacked confidence due to his surroundings, he sorted ways to fulfill that lack within him. His driving and motivating factor was to get rid of feelings of under-confidence.

Stephen's time at Clongowes was also not a pleasant one. He felt weak, shy, and awkward most of the times. It can be deduced that his shyness stems from his childhood home where he feels unaccepted and unloved. He was often bullied at school and on one occasion, he got admitted to an infirmary

because he had a high fever. Even after being treated so badly, Stephen never ratted out his classmates. This trait is the trait of obedience. He was a lost child, but an obedient one. His father's strict persona always encouraged Stephen to be righteous and religious. As a submissive child, he would always do as told and never question. This is another trait that is accompanied by shyness because of an unloving childhood. The person often becomes weak to stand up for himself and thus, falls prey to others who ill-treat or bully him. Such personalities cannot raise their voice against the ill-treatment and they often fail to take good care of themselves. Stephen quietly accepted being bullied as he was taught to never rat out and was shy because of his environment at home. Stephen grew up to be a weak child in his school, one who was not able to retaliate. This weakness stems out from the cruel acts of beating by his aunt which resulted in him not being able to take a stand for himself. He feels that he needs to give an outlet to his feelings and wanted to express his innate thoughts. He is seen getting lost in thoughts of his own sad funeral which definitely is a way to express his emotions and feelings about the incident at that point in his life.

The next incident in Stephen's life that deserves mention is his attraction towards Emma Clery. He was physically and romantically attracted to her, but could not gather courage to ask her out. This lack of confidence again comes from an ugly experience that he had in his childhood when he was lambasted for being expressive. Even though Stephen has grown confident in himself, he is still combating shyness when it comes to women and especially, when it's about the woman he likes. As always, in order to express, he resorts to writing down his feelings and thus, pens down a poem for Emma. Emma reminds him of his young love towards Eileen. He could never gather courage to go up to Eileen and talk his heart out. This has created a void in Stephen's heart. The emotional need of getting involved with a woman was never fulfilled for Stephen and due to this, needs and desires arise in his heart.

By now, it is clearly understood how Stephen led his life. The environment plays an immense role in his life. Everything that happened in his life affected him immensely. He has grown into a confident man, confident in his craft and writing. He is talented and doing well for himself, but he is still sad about the lack he feels in his life. At this point, he wins laurels for his hard work and earns some money that he gives away to his family to reduce their financial strain. Being an emotional person, Stephen shows a beautiful side of his personality when he innocently tries to help his family. Even though he feels that everything seems to be going great, he somehow feels sad. To reduce his sadness and understand his thought processes, he chooses either to wander off in his thoughts or take long walks alienated from everybody. Being isolated is another way in which introverts are able to find peace within them. For characters like Stephen, who have a difficulty to associate with people around them, isolation and solitude comes as a relief. So, Stephen's reasons for being away from everybody also come from the lack of association and belongingness with others. This sadness and lack in his life leads to another major incident that changes his life.

Stephen's case study is unusual which makes the readers go through the detailed scenarios of his life and how he took the life-changing decision of becoming the artist he desired to be. Stephen, a young meek child, goes through a series of life-altering experiences that make him realize his innate nature. He ultimately pushes his boundaries and blooms as a true artist, creating a pathway to becoming a self-actualized person.

References

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