The Deconstruction of Maturity in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
Abstract

This thesis examines the use of irony in Joyce’s *Portrait*, claiming that it has the effect of deconstructing common notions of maturity that are engrained within the *Bildungsroman* tradition, and that this was Joyce’s intention. In *Portrait*, irony plays the role of psychological reality, undercutting Stephen’s unrealistic expectation to see his life follow a traditional path of teleological progression. This essay proceeds by looking at the novel’s symbolic, thematic and literary cues, as well as through an analysis of its structure, and Stephen’s psychological and behavioral tendencies throughout the novel. This interpretation of the irony as bearing deconstructive meaning comes from the essay adopting a static, as opposed to a kinetic, apprehension of Stephen in *Portrait*.

**Key words:** Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus, irony, psychological realism, *Bildungsroman*, maturity, teleology, deconstruction, static apprehension.
To James Joyce, the aesthete had a specific role in society, and it was that of ‘objective curator’. The artist was tasked with distancing him or herself from society enough to gain a clear understanding of it through the insight of personal, individual experience. This clearer understanding would in turn reveal solutions to society’s greater afflictions. Ireland, and particularly Dublin was the society Joyce sought to remedy. Ireland’s malaise was a sort of spiritual inertia that kept it from attaining liberation, and according to him the solution was as simple as presenting Ireland to itself realistically, without the “swaddling cotton wool of euphemism and linguistic indirection through which he felt Ireland […] represented itself to itself” (Johnson x).

In defense of *Dubliners*, Joyce writes: “I believe that in composing my chapter of moral history in exactly the way I have composed it I have taken the first step towards the spiritual liberation of my country” (*Letters of James Joyce* 62-63) and it is in the phrasing “moral history” that we see how greatly he emphasized realism and accuracy; he considered his writings to be historical accounts. By merely presenting the truth of the situation to Dubliners, Joyce believed he would start the process that would break them free of their malaise. But in order to change Irish society and affect human psychology, he knew his art had to reveal the internal cognitive dissonance of the individual that had led to the collective paralysis of his nation. Whether it was challenging contemporary views of the female mind in the final chapter of *Ulysses*, or any pick of the stories from *Dubliners*, Joyce sought a realistic portrayal of the
individual and collective psyche. In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* for instance, we see the early experimenting in stream of consciousness narrative that later comes together masterfully in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Throughout *Portrait* we are often awkwardly and intimately exposed to the moment-by-moment thoughts of the main protagonist Stephen Dedalus. It was this pioneering in psycho-realism that defined Joyce’s unique branch of modernism and it is ubiquitous throughout his literary works, albeit in various forms. *Portrait* invites a wide range of interpretative possibilities through strict authorial absence and a subjective point of view that shifts in its degree of subjectivity (Sharpless 321), and scholars have debated fiercely over the intensity and tone of a perceived veil of irony that seems to permeate everything surrounding Stephen.

Seen through an appropriate interpretative principle,¹ this veil of irony seems to shape the novel into a powerful but subtle tool of psychological and social deconstruction aimed at disrupting and problematizing previous conceptions of maturity, revealing them as unrealistic. Through *Portrait*, Joyce displays how 19th century ideals of maturity are unrealistic and, as this essay will show, Stephen’s stunted development suggests that maturity cannot be fully achieved.

To illustrate this point, let us first engage in a speculative scenario based upon what we know of the tumultuous decade it took Joyce to write *Portrait*. In 1904, Joyce announced his commitment to writing a great work of literary art within ten years. *Portrait* met this deadline almost exactly, but the road there seemed to have been more difficult than he anticipated. Wanting to write about his own coming of age and artistic vocation, his first manuscript *Stephen Hero* fits snugly into the 19th century “Bildungsroman” genre, a literary genre (also known as a “novel of formation”) that portrays the process by which a main protagonist matures and

¹ According to Sharpless, *Portrait* denies us the ability to make “subjective, involved, and active” judgments of Stephen by, for instance, excluding authorial “presence” and absence of means of controlling the reader’s response. Although many have seen Joyce’s inability to provide means by which the reader may judge Stephen as authorial flaw, Sharpless argues rather that they are techniques utilized by Joyce to deny the reader the ability to make what Stephen would call “kinetic” apprehensions, which Stephen rules out as inappropriate in Chapter Five. Instead, Sharpless argues we should adopt “a special kind of static apprehension [when approaching the novel] in which the clarity, radiance and harmony of the object, its particular *quidditas*, become the essential constituents of the aesthetic experience” (Sharpless 321). This aesthetic approach rules out “authorial flaw” and demands we shift our understanding of the aesthetic goal or purpose of the novel, from beautifying/vilifying its subject to the sheer realistic, psychological portrayal of the subject.
develops up to a point of “coming of age”. It would have been a bold, triumphant story complete with all the teleological progression and the victorious hero that this genre demands. However, somewhere along the line Joyce grew increasingly frustrated and disillusioned with his first attempt. There is a myth that he at one point threw the manuscript into the fire and his wife Nora had to fish it out at the last moment before it burned. It would not be entirely improbable that what frustrated him was not the difficulty getting the book published (Joyce had gone ten years trying to get *Dubliners* published, without giving up) but rather the perceived sacrifices to realism that had to be made in order to “forge” a hero like Stephen. *Portrait* eventually emerged as a heavily re-written successor of the abandoned *Stephen Hero*. It is an altogether more complex and discordant novel, especially in its treatment of its main protagonist. But the discord is not mainly explicit; it emerges in *Portrait* through irony. Instead of scrapping *Stephen Hero* and writing an entirely new novel that explicitly attacks preconceptions of maturity, Joyce has written a novel where irony plays the role of reality, constantly trumping Stephen’s attempts to live up to the role of a traditional hero of *Bildung* as if suggesting this traditional ideal (particularly its emphasis on teleological progression, as we shall see) is not realistically achievable. Thus irony is the novel’s deconstructive *geist*, whose energies are directed at problematizing traditional answers to the question “what is maturity?”. While Stephen struck heroic poses unproblematically in *Stephen Hero*, he still attempts to do so in *Portrait*, but the reality around him, conveyed through Joyce’s subtle textual, symbolic and thematic emphases, creates a dissonance that conveys deconstructive meaning.

**What maturity?**

The claim is that rather than just commenting on and deconstructing his idea of himself through a semi-autobiographical style, Joyce is deconstructing a broader,

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2 As we shall see, there are two main traditions in defining *Bildungsroman*, but the German tradition emphasizes the need for a teleological progression. This will be explained further in the ensuing section.
contemporary view of maturity. Therefore, since Stephen is the subject of Joyce’s deconstructive, ironic portrayal, he must be easily recognizable as a representation of the contemporary view of maturity for this claim to be true. This “contemporary view of maturity” was at the time primarily represented in literature through the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Thus it must be established that Stephen was an easily recognizable protagonist in the *Bildungsroman* genre in order to make the claim that Joyce’s ironic portrayal of him indeed functions as a deconstruction of a broader, contemporary view of maturity. This section shows that this is true, and establishes the exact aspect of the *Bildungsroman* tradition, (and thereby, the aspect of conventional maturity) that Joyce reveals as unrealistic: namely, its emphasis on teleological progression.

There are two main approaches to defining the *Bildungsroman*: a “British” approach and a “German” approach (Boes 231). The British approach is generally associated with Jerome Hamilton Buckley’s seminal work, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*. It attempts to define the genre through combining the common traits of typical, representative novels by an inductive, taxonomic aggregate. At the end of the chapter that regards Joyce’s novel, Buckley concludes that *Portrait* can indeed be subsumed under the genre *Bildungsroman*, considering Stephen a more or less typical hero of *Bildung*. Among other things brought up are Joyce’s strong familiarity with and influence by contemporary *Bildungsroman* novels, and his fascination with and emulation of the writers’ styles, prose and even specific scenes and events. Though the circumstances of Stephen’s life more than adequately fulfill Buckley’s “principal elements”, some of the circumstances surrounding his goals and ambitions seem to differ substantially from the 19th-century tradition, in ways that are central to this study. But Buckley does not identify these as irreconcilable deviations, saying that “[w]hatever its derivations from particular books or authors, the *Portrait* is developed within the recognizable general framework of the Bildungsroman” (Buckley 230). Buckley’s somewhat paradoxical statement that Joyce “sums up, even as he transforms, the traditions of the 19th century Bildungsroman” acknowledges *Portrait’s* unorthodox characteristics, but
considers them insufficient to bar the novel from the genre (226). While Buckley opted to include *Portrait* under the *Bildungsroman* genre, he was doing it on the basis of his broad taxonomic approach.

A more important and convincing aspect of Stephen’s likeness to a *Bildungsroman* protagonist is his constant anticipation of and striving towards teleological progression in his life. This means he wants to see his life follow a gradual progression towards a fixed goal or purpose, and is something that the “German approach”, derived mainly from the work of German philosopher and sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey, strongly insists upon (Boes 232). It is a characteristic of Stephen’s that is just as strong in *Portrait* as it was in *Stephen Hero*. His life before the epiphany in Chapter Four is characterized by anxieties and suffering that seem to stem from not having a viable basis upon which to base his own value and self-esteem: a thoroughly immature characteristic. He seems to be running a marathon without having established a clear finish line, or where the finish line keeps shifting from being in front of him one moment and then far off in another direction, or even behind him, the next. During the hellfire sermon in Chapter Three for instance, Stephen’s frame of reality is shattered and he is convinced he has been heading in the completely wrong direction. He pursues a new direction with immense zeal only to gradually lose faith in its authenticity and appeal. This groundlessness acts as the main antagonist of the early part of the novel, but is ostensibly defeated in Chapter Four where his artistic vocation is revealed to him in a vision of

a hawklike man flying sunward above the sea, a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood and boyhood, a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being. (*Portrait* 183)

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3 It is important to note that Joyce was writing during the transitional period when the *Bildungsroman* genre was already on the verge of becoming old-fashioned. It can certainly not be assumed that his ideas alone shifted the zeitgeist, and in hindsight his ideas are recognizable as conforming to the general style of ‘modernism’ that emerged at this time. These “derivations” from and “transforming” of the genre that Buckley finds in *Portrait* clearly indicate the strain upon conventions and traditions during this transitional period that Joyce was simultaneously inspired by and working to shape and advance.
This prophecy becomes a lodestar upon which to measure progress, in true teleological fashion, with new ideals and principles such as an Aquinastic aestheticism and the cold silence of intellectual revolt.

In summary the circumstances of Stephen’s life can be correctly described as pertaining to the Bildungsroman tradition, and his goals and aspirations clearly adhere to the linear, teleological worldview required by the German definition of Bildungsroman. Since Stephen’s delusion and irrationality are exposed through the novel as the contrast between his aspirations and the reality imposed upon him, we can now begin to assess how Joyce imposes a reality that clashes with these goals and aspirations.

Repetition, inaction and self-defeat

In his influential essay Stephen’s Diary in Joyce’s Portrait - The Shape of Life, Michael Levenson asks “what is the shape of a life?”, and offers that “the upward curve of Bildung suggests one answer, the unswerving line of repetitions another. A first approach to the question of character in A Portrait of the Artist must acknowledge both formal principles and acknowledge, too, that they compete” (Levenson 1021). So Levenson identifies two competing narrative trajectories, a circular and a linear one, and specifies that Portrait’s circular “pattern of serial repetition” cannot be assimilated to the conventions of Bildungsroman. Levenson focuses mainly on the diary, which begins on page 270 in Chapter Five of Portrait, in finding these patterns of serial repetition. For instance, in the diary he points out that the amount of time that passes in distanced journal entries between Stephen announcing he is leaving Dublin and him actually leaving demonstrates this reluctance to take action and undercuts the Bildungsroman convention of teleology. Stephen’s constant restating of his intention to break with the past risks “turning the promised culmination into an ongoing sequence of culminations with each trumping the one before until the spirit of revolt begins to languish”, and is one of several examples he uses to demonstrate Stephen’s refusal of closure (Levenson 1020).
However, there are indications of this pattern of serial repetition all throughout the novel.

The main action in *Portrait* is walking, in conversation or in reverie (Levin 11). Besides being a rhetorical device in the book “allowing for conversation, flashbacks, meditations, and aligning these in a variety of ways to the geography of the city” (Deane xiv), the constant walking means that a large portion of the novel takes place between decisive events, events like booking a ticket to Paris, fighting with his mother, interacting with Emma, etc. It is true that his story after Clongowes does take a turn into psychological soliloquy, and so his thoughts in a sense act as the novel’s actions, but the way events in the story are told through Stephen’s recollections or retelling gives a distinct feeling that Stephen is a man of words, not of actions. Some walks are just promenades, without a set destination, and often take place in the company of a fellow, such as Cranly, and end with a retracing back towards where they started from. Additionally, the walks provide a time when Stephen can enjoy simply being Stephen, without working actively towards a goal or applying himself to some task or function. It raises the question of which led to which: his artistic and intellectual nature leading to a life of thinking, or his fondness for inactivity (“[i]t would be “nice to lie on the hearthrug before the fire, leaning his head upon his hands and *think* on those sentences” (*Portrait* 6, my italics)) leading to artistic and intellectual pursuits. If he wishes to actualize his grandiose and oft stated plan of liberating Ireland from its spiritual and linguistic indirection, he must become a hero not just in his own mind, but in the real world as well. However, when the novel is looked at and the tally is made, there is a troubling tendency towards the former, not the latter.

The novel’s narrative style’s strong focus on human psychology offers a constant wealth of insight into Stephen’s thoughts. This makes a psychological analysis especially pertinent as it reveals that Stephen’s shyness to act is so deep and pervasive it undermines the core of what makes a *Bildungsroman* possible: its teleological progression. A clear example of psychological realism undercutting teleological progression can be found in Chapter One. After being shoved into a ditch by an older fellow and contracting a fever, we see Stephen writhing in self-pity,
imagining his own death and the sorrow and respect it would evoke both in those he
despises and those whose authority he respects (Portrait 22). This is the early
emergence of an identity whose relation to its environment is both hyperbolic,
ineffective and ultimately self-defeating. Nonetheless, this victim mentality is a
notoriously common form of escapism and Joyce’s depiction of it is quite realistic.
The essential question here is whether Stephen lives for the goal or the journey of his
life. Teleology requires that life be a means to an end. It demands a vocation and then
a gradual progression towards the final, successful realization of its goal. But the
identity we see emerging early on, just like the repetitive, circular promenades
mentioned earlier, suggests he is off on the wrong foot.

In a scene at Clongowes in Chapter One, Stephen is wrongly punished by
Father Dolan for having purportedly fabricated a story about breaking his glasses in
order to get out of doing classwork. Stephen is brought to tears by this injustice, and
his classmates egg him on to go up to the rector and report Father Dolan. The decision
of whether to go up to the rector or just forget the whole incident is made up in the
novel to be a major crossroads in the early development of Stephen’s identity, and he
is very conflicted about this decision. Should he stand up for himself, or just forget
the whole incident? He recalls great men in history who had stood up to injustice and,
as a result, now all had their pictures in the history books. “A thing like that had been
done before by somebody in history, by some great person whose head was in the
books of history … History was all about those men and what they did” (Portrait
54-55). But at the same time, he is afraid that the rector would side with Father Dolan,
and that Father Dolan would just be more enraged as a result. He thinks that perhaps
“it was best to just hide out of the way because when you were small and young you
could often escape that way” (Portrait 56). He finally makes the split decision, as he
is walking with all the other students out of the refectory, to take the stairs up to the
dark, narrow corridor that leads to the rector and feels that all the boys are watching
him go. As he walks down the corridor, he senses the presence of all the great men
whose portraits hang on the walls of the corridor. Once he has made his complaint, the
rector acknowledges that a mistake had been made and assures Stephen he will speak
with Father Dolan to make sure the mistake will not happen again. Stephen runs down
to the playground where he is embraced by his fellow students as a champion of justice. The chapter ends in the soft, gray and mild air of the evening as Stephen listens to the “pick, pack, pock, puck” sounds of cricket being played.

On the surface, this appears to be a great triumph for Stephen. He seems to have broken the previous negative spiral of inaction, and taken a step towards becoming an individual who does not succumb to negating his rights and freedoms through non-confrontationist escapism. Stephen’s choice to act can be directly contrasted to Joyce’s *Dubliners* character Eveline, who likewise was faced with a hard decision, but absolved herself of the responsibility and is, as a result, displayed as a tragic, piteous character: an embodiment of Dublin’s fatal paralysis (*Dubliners* 28-29). Thus far, this event in Stephen’s early life appears to be a typical *Bildungsroman* development; a young boy finding an inspiring voice for himself by standing up against injustice. But alas, Joyce has woven in subtle imagery that foreshadows a future sundering of this victory. As David Norris points out, the “pick, pack, pock, puck” sounds are not the sounds of any Irish sport. It is not hurling, but cricket; the sound that British imperialism brought to many of its colonized nations (just like soccer, which is also played at Clongowes). For the same reason that the Irish attempts to appeal to British tyranny to protect them from domestic tyranny fails, we should not expect success from Stephen’s appeal to the rector to aid him against the tyranny of Father Dolan. In Chapter Two, Stephen finds out that the rector and Father Dolan had been laughing at him and the whole ordeal together over dinner that evening. “You better mind yourself Father Dolan, said I, or young Dedalus will send you up for twice nine. We had a famous laugh together over it. Ha! Ha! Ha!” (*Portrait* 76). In Stephen’s mind, Father Dolan and the rector are both tyrannical authorities to whom justice for schoolboys is of no significance, and Stephen’s appeal to a schoolboy’s equivalent of judicial authority has only shown him that he cannot rely on authority to instill justice, and what is seen emerging in Stephen from the experience is a pervasive learned helplessness that hinders progress, not an empowered champion of justice and individual freedom. In this light, Stephen’s proclamation to Cranly in

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4 Norris, David Chairman of James Joyce Center, Dublin. David Norris’ comment comes from a documentary that I have been unable to find adequate information on in order to cite.
Chapter Five of only allowing himself to use the arms of “silence, exile and cunning” appears less the tools of a sly, radical libertarian, and more a self-tailored rationalization for not acting forcefully or effectively to invoke changes in his society, especially when remembering that this is coming from a young man who, after announcing his literary vocation and the grand plan to save a nation has yet only produced, as Seamus Deane puts it, “a little mouse of a poem” (Deane xlii).

The driving force behind Stephen’s literary vocation was not, as he often overtly claimed, an urge to see Dublin freed of its malaise. It was rather the romantic image of the intellectual pariah that secretly enticed him. As Levenson puts it, “[t]o the extent that Joyce’s novel depends on these conventions [of development towards an end goal], the image of the exiled artist serves as its end, as the point against which development can be measured” (Levenson 1021). The mission of curing Dublin’s malaise, though real in his own mind, was a guise that allowed him to imagine himself living a linear, teleological existence, as an arrow on a trajectory towards a target, rather than having to face the reality of actually living for the recurrence of momentary enjoyment performing a romantic, contrarian identity. He merely enjoyed basking in intellectual, moral and aesthetic superiority, a superiority made only stronger by the perceived intellectual bankruptcy of his surroundings. Thus the malaise of Dublin became the material of Stephen’s professional existence, the expulsion of which would see him with an obsolete identity. It is clear through the novel that this paradox was not conscious knowledge to Stephen, but it certainly seemed obvious and important to Joyce, as he shows Stephen going through recurring, unrelenting bouts of cognitive dissonance as a result.

This display of cognitive dissonance through subtle irony is the mark of Joycean modernism, and is what makes Stephen an unsuitable Bildungsroman protagonist on the basis that it breaks the teleological progression towards an overt goal, replacing it with the circular performance of an identity standing still.

Futile epiphanies
In *Portrait*, the chapters are mainly structured around epiphanies. Each chapter ends with some grand epiphany, much in the *Bildungsroman* style, but not only do the triumphs of these epiphanies often flounder in successive chapters as demonstrated in the above example, the epiphanies themselves do not stack on top of each other. Each epiphany negates the last and points Stephen in an opposite direction from the former. The only thing Stephen seems to gain from these epiphanies is experience, but most of the experience is contradictory and does not form the basis of progression by honing him in on a sharper, stronger resolve or direction. As Hugh Kenner points out, there is a recurrence of too much repetition, such as in one too many ‘on’s in “on and on and on and on” (Kenner qtd in Levenson 1020). There is something similarly suspicious about the way Stephen formulates at the end of the novel to “go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience” (Levenson 1020). Will he have a million epiphanies, all fizzling out in the same way? And if that’s the case, what is he learning and how is he growing through this “experience”? Here, Stephen is not succeeding in evoking either of the Daedali - neither the great artificer, nor the hubristic son - as mythological representations of his struggle, but rather the mythology of Sisyphus: the man doomed to an eternity of rolling a boulder up a mountain (Levenson 1020). It is a myth often associated with the futility of human existence, and is in essence the very antithesis of teleology.

On top of that, the “bird-girl epiphany” – the epiphany where his grand artistic vocation is finally revealed to him – is the one Stephen insists is his “true” epiphany. But the certainty of this claim is completely undermined by how absolutely certain he had been in earlier chapters about other epiphanies that successively fizzled out. The hellfire sermon leading to his religious clerical vocation seemed by comparison far stronger than his bird-girl epiphany and it leads even the most naive of readers to ask: will this not also fizzle out? Especially since Joyce has chosen to make the events of the epiphany so horrendously awkward. As Tobias Boes points out (of epiphanies in general, but using this epiphany as an example): “[t]he epiphany is fundamentally disjunctive: by ‘transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life’ (P, 240), it necessarily destroys the flow of mundane reality and therefore also the continuity of sensation… the only way to follow up on an epiphany
is with a chapter or section break” (Boes 767). But what does Stephen do after the epiphany of the girl on the seashore – after he has just had the great vocational epiphany of his life? He runs aimlessly “on and on and on and on” along the beach; loses track of time completely, “[h]ow far had he walked? What hour was it?” (Portrait 187). And then takes a nap. Normally we would expect the chapter to end as he falls asleep, and this would signify a completed epiphany. We would expect him to wake up the next morning, ready to begin acting upon the new discovery of the previous evening. But Stephen’s epiphany does not take place in the evening. When he woke up, “evening had fallen” (Portrait 187). He climbs up a sandhill and the narrator describes the mood and the tide and then the chapter ends. The phrase “evening had fallen” is awkwardly repeated twice, almost with the effect of stalling or drawing out time. Joyce is deliberately playing with the fact that epiphanies have trouble existing in a realistic temporality. We are left wondering what Stephen will do with the gap between enlightenment and bedtime. The reader’s confidence in the trueness of this “true” epiphany is fatally compromised.

**Stunted maturity**

Before Stephen has his artistic vocation all he seems to know is that he disagrees with his surroundings. Even as he is attempting to follow the humble, selfless, catholic existence he finds that “[t]o merge his life in the common tide of other lives was harder for him than any fasting or prayer, and it was his constant failure to do this to his own satisfaction which caused in his soul at last a sensation of spiritual dryness together with a growth of doubts and scruples” (Portrait 164). His early memories at Clongowes, where his sensitive, artistic nature sets him apart from the other fellows playing sports and behaving like ordinary, rough schoolboys speak of a social discord that over the course of the novel develops into an overriding attitude of disregard for others on the basis of his own sense of intellectual superiority. He also develops a pervasive misogyny throughout the novel, as instanced by his recurring description of women as having “bat-like souls”, constantly weighing the balance between virginity
and harlotry, as embodied in the villanelle Stephen wrote for Emma, but did not send (Deane xxiii).

There is ample evidence of improper growth here; the novel presents us with a young man who is developing many negative personality traits that are not by any stretch accordant with maturity. But at the same time it seems to suggest that it may be Stephen’s groundlessness and lack of a viable basis upon which to base his own value and self-esteem that lies at the heart of his emotional discord and tempered inaction. For instance, while contemplating joining the priesthood Stephen admits that “it was partly the absence of an appointed rite which had always contained him to inaction whether he had allowed silence to cover his anger or pride or had suffered only an embrace he longed to give” (Portrait 172). Stephen acknowledges his inaction, and realizes that the priesthood would provide him with a readymade, institutional goal and yardstick against which one is able to, and meant to judge one’s own progression, and this excites him: “[h]ow often had he seen himself as a priest wielding calmly and humbly the awful power of which angels and saints stood in reverence! [sic]” (Portrait 171). This admittance simultaneously potentiates a genuine solution through his discovery of an artistic vocation, and when he turns away from priesthood, this vocation takes centrality. It could equally well provide the moral background against which the teleological progress he so desperately wants can be measured and made. Thus we are left with one pivotal question: does Stephen’s discovery of his artistic vocation - the epiphany of which forms the supposed climax of the novel - provide an authentic solution to just a single one of Stephen’s accumulated problems? If yes, we can fathom a triumphant ending for Stephen at the end of, or at some point after, the novel. If no, then by the above reasoning, triumph would require that Stephen first unlearns all that he has learned throughout this novel, and begins his teleological progression anew. And as we shall see, not only are his problems not solved by his vocation - they are amplified by it.

Instead of his priggish misogynistic observations sparking in his mind an occasional thought of healthy self-criticism or mature self-awareness, he rather begins regarding them as valid insights, bearing artistic truths. He defends his rejection of his mother’s wishes for him to receive communion - despite Cranly's insistence he fulfill
them, if only to put her mind at rest - by referencing great philosophers such as Pascal and Aloysius Gonzaga, and their refusal to kiss their mothers because of their fear of contact with the female sex (Portrait 263). He even justifies abusive treatment of mothers in general by referencing Jesus’ own poor treatment of his mother (Portrait 263). His jealousy of Emma, after having found out that she consorted with a priest instead of coming to him, festers in his mind until it becomes an artistically expressed chauvinistic generalization of all Irish women: “a figure of the womanhood of her country, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness, tarrying awhile, loveless and sinless, with her mild lover and leaving him to whisper of innocent transgressions in the latticed ear of a priest” (Portrait 239-40). Emma has hurt Stephen’s feelings, though through no fault or intention of her own; she can speak to whomever she wants about her ‘innocent transgressions’ - and yet he hyperextends his condemnation to include all Irish women, as if they are betraying their nation through their intimate relation with the church.

His vocation encourages him to pursue this aesthetic program of severe emotional distancing in order to gain an objective perspective of his artistic material, making his immature callousness into an artistic ideal. His rejection of his friendship with Cranly, one of the strongest he had had throughout the novel, was done entirely in this vein. He tells Cranly that he is not afraid of being utterly alone, and leaving what he has to leave in order to pursue his vocation:

--Alone, quite alone. You have no fear of that. And you know what that word means? Not only to be separate from all others but to have not even one friend.
--I will take the risk, said Stephen.
--And not to have one person, Cranly said, who would be more than a friend, more even than the noblest and truest friend a man ever had. His words seemed to have struck some deep chord in his own nature. Had he spoken of himself, of himself as he was or wished to be? Stephen watched his face for some moments in silence. A cold sadness was there. He had spoken of himself, of his own loneliness which he feared.
--Of whom are you speaking? Stephen asked at length. Cranly did not answer. (Portrait 269)
Evident in this quote is the sadness and pain he inflicts on his friends in the callous pursuit of an artistic ideal. The vocation thus reinforces the antisocial behavior so detrimental to Stephen’s emotional maturity and makes him wear it like a badge of honor. His callous attitude extends even to his father, who he “glibly” dismisses as, among other things “a drinker … a bankrupt and at present a praiser of his own past” (Portrait 262). Whenever he causes injury to those near to him, whether they be family or friends, it becomes an indication to him that he is walking his chosen path. This antisocial behavior develops to a point where he seems numb to the experience and recognition of love, doubting even the discussion’s intellectual validity. Earlier in the same discussion, Cranly asks him “[d]o you love your mother? Stephen shook his head slowly. --I don’t know what your words mean, he said simply” (Portrait 261). Cranly is obviously trying to offer Stephen something other than mere dry intellectual exchange, but Stephen seems determined that no discussion, save one of an intellectual nature, is ever worth having. Such is the extent of his emotional distancing. His own mother’s prayer to her departing son seems to fall on deaf ears, belonging to a person too callous to ascertain the depth of its personal and emotional implications. It launches Stephen into a grandiose reiteration of his artistic ambitions, and he pays not the slightest notice to his mother’s farewell.

**The ‘self-born’ delusion**

It is in many senses necessary for a contrarian like Stephen to become as different as possible from the national character he attempts to polemicize in order to be able to lead by example. In the novel, it appears as though Stephen wishes to be, in as many ways as possible, self-born.

Stephen is, as he set out to be, self-begotten. He makes himself into a character and he contrasts that act of will on his part with the obedience of his contemporaries, men and women, who have allowed themselves to be constructed by the social, economic and political circumstances of their lives. (Deane xlii)
But for the sake of Bildung, what is important is not whether or not Stephen agrees or disagrees with particular conventions or circumstances of Irish life, but that he has found, or finds through the novel, that better state of life or existence. Otherwise he will only do harm to those who choose to follow his example, as well as to himself. Furthermore, it must be clear that he has not merely fallen into the pattern of performing the contrarian identity as previously described, where he is merely turning against society because it is all he knows how to do, and then post-constructing a pseudo-intellectual, self-indulgent rationalization to befit his habit. Unfortunately, the sheer number of things Stephen disagrees with arouses immediate suspicion. As in the scene from J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye, where Phoebe is pushed by her brother’s constant complaining to ask him to name just one thing he actually likes, and he is stumped to give a response (Salinger 182-85), the same point can be made for Stephen. It becomes obvious that his contrarian attitude is so habitual that it cannot be a means to a greater end.

In regard to Stephen’s yearning to be self-born, Timothy O’Leary has argued that experience is one of the unstated themes of Portrait, and that “one of the problems [Stephen] sets himself in his adolescence is to see to what extent he can create, or at least give shape to, his own experience independently of the social and historical forces which try to mould him” (O'Leary 93). His argument is that Stephen’s social alienation comes from his interest to extract his own experience of life unaffected by social or historical influence. But one of the brilliant features of Portrait is how well later events are tied together with earlier events in the novel; Joyce spares no effort in making Stephen’s later thoughts and actions thoroughly attributable to earlier causal events. When you combine these two things in one novel: that is, a main character who is artistically obsessed with cutting this chain of cause and effect, along with thorough documentation of the causal history of his views and decisions, it is a veritable recipe for comedic discord, meant to be interpreted as irony.

We can for instance - courtesy of the author himself - trace Stephen’s growing callousness towards his mother back to an instance of traumatic bullying he was subjected to at Clongowes which adversely shaped his view of their relationship. An older fellow at school asked Stephen if he kissed his mother before going to bed and
no matter what answer he gave, he would poke fun at him for it. This led Stephen immediately to wonder “[w]as it right to kiss his mother or wrong to kiss his mother? What did that mean, to kiss?” (Portrait 11). In the conversation with Cranly, Stephen intellectually justifies his callousness towards his mother by bringing up other intellectuals who refuse to kiss their mothers. The parallel of the “kissing of mothers” issue strongly insists upon the link between these two separate events. Seamus Deane points out that, in Stephen’s anger towards his mother, “her image is distorted into memories of young women who had embarrassed or angered him by their coarseness” (Deane xxii). The origin of his dismissal of his father - calling him a drinker, bankrupt and praiser of his own past - can likewise be traced back to a previous instance of bullying at Clongowes where a fellow student introduces Stephen to the importance of name, title and father’s occupation by interrogating him about his name, what his father did, and wondering if he was a magistrate (Portrait 5). As Stephen reflects upon being ordained as a Jesuit priest, he is discouraged by sensual memories from Clongowes, including the “troubling odour of the long corridors” and the “discreet murmur of the burning gasflames” (Portrait 174).

One of the best places to look for further sundering of this “self-born” delusion is at the very heart of the book: the bird-girl epiphany. In the scenes leading up to the epiphany, Stephen wanders from Clongowes to his home, then out to the water. He reflects at some length on why he rejected the clerical vocation and then, more generally, on his failure as a Christian. At first the reasons seem justified: he contemplates the hypocrisy of how the priests use their power, mentioning the crime of simony, then describing how his soul reels from the dullness of a “grave, ordered and passionless life … without material cares” (Portrait 174). But Joyce also includes two events later on that tell a different story. First, Stephen looks back at his mother’s unspoken disapproval of his going to university, viewing it as a betrayal. But at the same time, what seems to cause the most upset in Stephen’s mind, what causes the “dim antagonism” against his mother to gather force within him, is remembering how he had “watched the faith which was fading down in his soul aging and strengthening in her eyes” (Portrait 178). Secondly, what sparks his reading of the phrase “a day of dappled seaborne clouds”, initiating the ecstatic musing upon words that climaxes in
the epiphany itself, is not much different. He meets a group of Christian Brothers and, trying to look at them with ease and indifference, feels only shame and commiseration as he reflects upon how “their humble and contrite hearts … paid a far richer tribute of devotion than his had ever been, a gift tenfold more acceptable than his elaborate adoration” (*Portrait* 180). Thus both his refusal of the clerical vocation and the ecstasy of his artistic vocation are traceable to great amounts of unconfessed jealousy.

When the epiphany itself is viewed from this perspective of jealous incentive, the intermingling of taunts from Stephen’s fellows, as well as his reaction to them, take on new meaning. Stephen stands still “in deference to their calls and parried their banter with easy words … It was a pain to see them and a swordlike pain to see the signs of adolescence that made repellent their pitiable nakedness” (*Portrait* 182). The jealousy and discordant cringing shapes itself into a blind feeling of mature superiority, as is expressed further on the next page: “Their banter was not new to him and now it flattered his mild proud sovereignty” (*Portrait* 183). The epiphany, while viewable as an ode to words and their power to mirror perfectly his inner world of individual emotions, is as equally the galvanizing of a superiority complex built upon suppressed jealousy.

Has he truly escaped his childhood demons and found a life-affirming passion, or has he merely replaced the daydream of his enemies standing teary-eyed at his funeral with a career-themed daydream of the grandiose artist, indifferently paring his fingernails, above, or behind, or beyond some envisioned work of art, far superior to any who may at some point have taunted or betrayed him? One scene leading up to the epiphany seems, at first glance, to speak against this view. Between speaking with the director and beginning his seemingly aimless walk that leaves him with the epiphany, there is a scene where Stephen visits his kitchen. Upon seeing the squalor, and detecting weariness and pain in the songs of his younger brothers and sisters, he begins hyperbolizing about the weariness and pain in choirs of “endless generations of children”. It is tempting to view this scene as providing a possible ‘selfless’ incentive for Stephen’s artistic calling as it would offer a substantial inspirational event to explain Stephen’s otherwise unaccountable ambition to be the liberator of his nation. But can we really take his remorse and pity seriously when he introduces them
as merely “[a] group of his brothers and sisters”, and when asked by Cranly how many siblings he has, cannot give a more precise answer than “[n]ine or ten… Some died” (*Portrait* 262)? It is not a genuine, emotionally invested pity, but an abstract, removed pity that denies the siblings’ individual identities, referring to them instead as a timeless, endless choir.

Every one of Stephen’s callous, aesthetic attitudes and his most important decisions, including his grand vocation, are inspired far more by negative experiences than by positive ones. This is not to mention his apparent religious calling, which was ignited by a full-on mental breakdown. In reacting so strongly to these negative forces and impressions, he is letting them shape him far more than an ordinary person would who is ignorant of their surroundings’ effects on them. Thus, instead of being self-born, he unintentionally relinquishes power over the course of his life fully to those he most denounces and despises, such as his bumbling father, his religious mother, the priest with the latticed ear, and Emma, the “figure of her country” who consoled in it. It can be observed to extend even further: to Wells who shouldered him into the ditch (which some scholars have attributed to Stephen’s perceived development of hydrophobia in *Ulysses*); Father Dolan who punished him in the wrong; the list of his greatest influences is the list of his greatest enemies. The artist wielding the arms of “silence, exile and cunning” becomes little more than the progeny of his own tormentors. His very essence is strictly defined and confined to the subject matter of his hollow mockery. Thus his grand claim to want to liberate Ireland from itself is wholly farcical. If he succeeds, he eradicates that which he has defined as his purpose. But there is no danger of this ever happening, because Stephen is plagued by the dilemma that it is far easier to point out flaws than to offer solutions, and at the novel’s ending, despite claiming he will emancipate Dublin on an individual and collective level, he has yet to do much more than point out that a problem exists.

F. Parvin Sharpless argues that by the end of the novel, Stephen has partially achieved his aesthetic mission of moving from a kinetic, emotional involvement to a cold, static apprehension of events that transpire in his life (Sharpless 325). But he also raises concern about what is lost in this process. While Stephen is making his life into art through this process of objective distancing, he is becoming unable to live it:
Pity is an emotion which drains away kinetic passions which, while they may be painful, constitute the vital springs of the average sensual man’s basic motivations, particularly his ability to relate to and love objects and people. Joyce undoubtedly recognized the dangers to the artist of this aesthetic. Being refined out of existence, as Stephen recommends for the artist, is a kind of death, a death in which the sensual reality becomes less and less real, falling contemplatively into a lifeless formality, like Yeats’s Byzantium, where everything is perfect and passionless, where the bird sings only to a drowsy emperor and to bored lords and ladies looking on in objective detached stasis. (Sharpless 328-29)

This is the life his mother witnesses him slipping into, and which she fears, leading her to pray that he may learn “in [his] own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels” (Portrait 275). Rather than helping Stephen mature and develop, his artistic vocation in effect only hinders him by instead excusing and justifying his many immature shortcomings, providing a stage upon which they are reinforced. This is summed up in Buckley’s conclusion of Portrait when he says that “[in Ulysses] Stephen through abasement … may learn that human relationships are no less important than a resolute aesthetic detachment. But no such wisdom is possible at the end of the Portrait, where all is proud alienation … For Stephen as the committed aesthete has no will to change his mind or enlarge his vision, and his renewed search for the ‘reality of experience’ inspires little confidence in us that he will recognize the truth when he finds it” (Buckley 247).

Conclusion

It is possible, on the one hand, to interpret Portrait as contrasting the path of aesthetic detachment with the choice of emotional immersion in life. That would mean the essential difference between Joyce’s Bildungsroman and traditional Bildungsromans is the portrayed degree of sacrifice it takes to be an artist. Following this logic, the message in Portrait would be that the brilliant artist Stephen Dedalus is to sacrifice himself entirely for the nation’s liberation. However, this would be an immense feat of self-flattery on Joyce’s part. It is far more likely, as this essay has shown, that
Joyce’s primary aim was a realistic deconstruction of traditional *Bildungsroman* ideals of maturity, which he remembers himself so ardently striving for. This latter, more likely interpretation requires that we follow Sharpless’ proposal to judge Stephen through a static, instead of a kinetic, apprehension, as it is then we can “see Stephen as wise and foolish, callow and mature; we can see his actions as ‘true’ in the formal sense to his condition” (Sharpless 322). In other words, we can see him and his behavior as psychologically realistic. Joyce’s creation of a novel with such strong authorial absence and a protagonist with so many questionable or ambiguous character traits will inevitably be interpreted as “babbling and incommunicable relativism” (Wayne C. Booth; qtd. in Sharpless 321) from a 19th century *Bildungsroman* mentality. This is because this mentality aims to remove ‘babbling and incommunicable relativism’ from reality, aiming instead for unrealistically objective, meaningful scenarios, people or contexts. The difficult, confusing and sometimes off-putting effect that we get in *Portrait* is the only natural result of a successful work of art intended to accurately reflect this degree of psychological realism.
Works Cited


