**Character of Stephen Dedalus**

The only character who is fully developed in ‘A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man’ is its hero Stephen Dedalus. Other characters are introduced in the novel only to throw light on the progress of Stephen. The novel primarily deals with Stephen’s struggles against his environment, like church, family and country, and his liberation as an artist. Stephen has to pass his young age in fear of authority. He is an individualist who cannot mix freely with boys at school. The squalor of his family depresses him. The political controversies of Ireland confuse him. Physical urges take him into the arms of prostitutes. Sermons on sin and hell-fire frighten him and he becomes pious. Then the Director wants to make him a priest. But the artist in him revolts at the thought of his being confined to the passionless life of a Jesuit priest. He rejects the offer of priesthood and secures his freedom to pursue the vocation he has chosen for himself.

Stephen is an introvert. He cannot mix freely with his fellow-men. When he goes to school he feels like an outsider. He is very sensitive and wants to withdraw into his own shell. He is not interested in sports also. At Clongowes School when football was being played he ‘kept on the fringe of his line, out of sight of his prefect, out of the reach of the rude feet, feigning to run now and then’. He was weak of sight and shy of mind. He cannot work in cooperation with others. Nor does he want to serve his fellowmen. He says, ‘I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile and cunning. It was because of his introverted temperament that he remained alone and was alienated from his family, his country and his church and finally decided to leave the country.

One of the chief traits of Stephen is his egocentricity that derives from his introvert nature. He was proud of himself and loved to live in isolation. ‘The noise of the children at play annoyed him and their silly voices made him feel that he was different from others’. From his very childhood he thought highly of himself and was defiant of authority. When he was pushed into a ditch of dirty water and he fell ill, he did not convey his grievance to anyone. Instead, due to his pride and self pity, he started dreaming of his death and funeral and thought that if he died Wells would definitely be sorry for it. When he was unjustly punished by father Dolan his pride was terribly wounded. It was his pride which revolted against this unjust punishment.

Stephen has tremendous self-conceit. He regards himself as very important. When he grew up he considered himself as great as Napoleon. Later he identifies himself with St. Stephens. Then he compares himself to Jesus Christ with Cranly as his John the Baptist. Later Father Arnall described Lucifer’s pride his refusal to serve God. Stephen then stared comparing himself with Lucifer. He said, ‘I will not serve that in which I no longer believe.’ According to his theory of art, an artist is God-like in his creativity and objectivity. True love implies humility and understanding. When Stephen got the stirring of youth it did not take the form of love but of lust. He did not go to a decent girl. He surrendered himself to a prostitute and the experience gave him a new sense of power. Even when he decided to confess, his pride prevented him from going to a chapel in the school or near the school. He went to a chapel in a remote corner of the city.

The offer of priesthood appealed to Stephen’s sense of pride and his desire for secret knowledge and secret power. But it ran counter to his other desires and feelings. He was an artist by nature and he had very sensitive senses and a strong sense of beauty and so how he could like the passionless life of the priests. He loved freedom, and was an individualist. He wanted to be free to do what he liked. So he rejects the offer of the Director.

The friends of Stephen know that he is different from them and can never be like them. He feels that he is superior to all schoolmates and he looks at them with contempt. He was like an anti-social wrapped up in him. Davin says, ‘You are a terrible man, Stevie…always alone…In your heart, you are an Irishman but your pride is too powerful.’ Again Cranly asks him, ‘Have you never loved anyone?’ He cannot work in close cooperation with anyone and so he feels that he can follow his chosen vocation of an artist if he leaves his family, friends and church and goes into voluntary exile.

A boy normally feels that he can lean on his father and seek support and guidance from him. But Stephen was unlucky in this respect. His father was irresponsible and unreliable. The church fathers whom he met in Clongowes were unconcerned with his welfare and gave him no guidance. He is unjustly punished and humiliated by Father Dolan. Father Conmee, to whom he runs for refuge, promises to redress his grievance but he treats it as a laughing matter. The discussions at the time of the Christmas dinner reveal to him the confusion that existed in Irish politics. He could not rely on any father – real or political or ecclesiastical. He finds that Dublin is a place of squalor and corruption. He sought support from friends but all his friends from Heron to Cranly betray him. In sheer disgust he leaves the land of his birth and goes where he can work out his destiny alone.

Stephen has a highly refined sense of language. Throughout the novel, the language he hears around him in Dublin hurts his mind and his ear. The ‘drawing jargon’ of the prostitutes; ‘a heavy lumpish phrase’ used by Cranly that drowns ‘like a stone through a quagmire’ and depresses his heart as he compares its quality with either the ‘rare phrases of Elizabethan England’ or the beautifully turned Irish Peasant idioms. He fees that the decayed language was like a labyrinth he must escape from.

As Stephen grows older, there occurs more open conflict between the worlds of reality and dream. He builds a romantic atmosphere by identifying himself with the hero of ‘The Count of Monte Cristo’, but is knocked out of that dream when he finds himself too shy and bashful to kiss the willing E – C – on the tram. Next day, however, as he attempts to compose a poem to her, he becomes the imaginative artist, ‘by dint of brooding on the incident, he thought himself into confidence’ while ‘all those elements which he deemed common and insignificant fell out of the scene’.

Stephen is far from being an attractive hero of this novel. In fact, he is most unattractive. He probably became arrogant as a reaction to his poverty and insecurity. The only occasion when he showed sympathy for a human being was when he sympathized with the sufferings of his poor brothers and sisters. On all other occasions he is inhuman. He has no humility, no generosity, and no warmth of heart. He has nothing but scorn for his fellowmen. The only person he approves of is himself. Like Narcissus he is in love with himself. But Stephen has one quality that we admire and that is his courage. He has the courage of his convictions and he is not afraid of being alone, without a single friend. He is not afraid of a plunge into the dark.

To sum up, the novel leaves us with equivocal feelings about its hero’s potentialities. Most of the time Stephen embodies an aspect of the nature of Joyce that he frequently subjects to punishment in his novels but which he could never ultimately defeat. Stephen is far from being a god-like hero because he sometimes occurs as pathetic, at times mysterious, sometimes laughable, and sometimes superhumanly courageous enough to face the threats of the world all alone.

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