Sociology of Joyce’s Women in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and the Irish Parallel

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In his novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce traces the traditional roles of women as mothers and sexually objectified beings. Particular evaluation of the Christmas dinner party scene and the Ballyhoura Hills woman encounter provides evidence of women continuously fighting their conventional, subordinate positions to men. Yet, there seems to be apparent confusion between the expectations of silence and self-expression, as demonstrated by the dual nature that women take on in the novel. Joyce further exemplifies the estrangement of his female characters from social norms by paralleling their behavior to his own sentiments toward Mother Ireland, which he and his novel’s protagonist Stephen both come to resent and leave. With the subtlety of biblical references and the characters’ duplicitous behaviors, *Portrait* paints a confounded dynamic between the desire for personal liberation and institutional incarceration within both the novel’s women and Joyce himself.

Oscar Wilde once wrote, “A woman’s life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man’s life progresses” (“An Ideal Husband” 4.246). Similarly, the early 20th century Irish novelist James Joyce often depicts the estrangement of men’s and women’s spheres. *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Joyce’s first novel, traces the maturation of a young Stephen Dedalus who gradually rejects social, familial, and religious pressures and instead dedicates himself to a career of writing. Set in the final years of nineteenth century Ireland, the literary work emerged in the midst of the female suffrage movement, during which time infant mortality rates lowered and female citizens increasingly sought paid employment; it should be noted, however, that Catholic women were often more limited in job opportunities than those in the Protestant Ascendancy due to the Catholic church’s strict employment restrictions (Wainwright 654). Heated politics, with nationalist political leader Charles Parnell at the forefront, also had radical effects on the women’s movement in the late 1800s and early 1900s as women fought to claim more rights through groups such as the Ladies’ Land League, headed by Parnell’s sister (657). Though *Portrait* begins around the time of Parnell’s death, his political reign initiated a shift in women’s roles that largely shapes the characterization of females throughout the novel. Joyce portrays the dual roles of women as mothers and temptresses in his illustration of the Ballyhoura Hills woman; likewise, he draws a contrast between the female characters’ naïve subordination and their threatening lack of silence towards men in his depiction of Dante in the dinner party scene. Together, the two characterizations parallel Joyce’s sociological perspective on the duplicity of the feminized Mother Ireland that nurtures but also confines.

The woman of the Ballyhoura Hills is both a maternal figure and a temptress. Davin, Stephen’s friend and fellow peer, describes the duality in her appearance: “She was half undressed as if she was going to bed...and I thought by her figure and by something in the look of her eyes that she must be carrying a child...I thought it strange because her breast and her shoulders were bare” (Joyce 160). The woman’s double appearance reflects her psychosocial position. While her role in society is to serve as a mother, she still holds an innate purpose of seduction that is pointed out by her bare composure. In contrast, Dante’s final, and rather destructive, expression in the dinner scene argument contributes to Joyce’s unstable, feminized view of women. As Stephen remembers of his governess, “Dante shoved her chair violently aside and left the table...At the door Dante turned around violently and shouted down the room, her cheeks flushed and quivering with rage...The door slammed behind her” (Joyce 34). Supplemented by her emotions, Dante takes physical action here. If a man had behaved as Dante, his actions would probably have been viewed as an assertion of power. However, as exemplified by Mr. Dedalus’ “guffaw of coarse scorn,” Dante’s angry movements are perceived as signs of her instability, and even rudeness (44). The other woman in this passage, Mrs. Dedalus, is completely without voice and mindlessly follows the typical hostess protocol. Though contrasting characterizations, the three women in these two scenes adhere to the image of the subdominant Joycean female.

In the same manner, the Ballyhoura Hills woman could be seen as an analogy for Ireland, an entity with two sides: the sustenance-providing country and the home of artistic confinement. According to literary scholar Martha Fodaski Blac, Joyce’s departure from Ireland—as also represented by Stephen’s own escape in *Portrait*—represents his attempts to liberate himself from a sickly enslavement to his birth land and its “patriotic institutions,” which include the church and the social restrictions such as gender-based expectations (Blac 86). When Davin presses Stephen to accept the Irish culture, Stephen replies, “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to...
hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (Joyce 179). Stephen condemns the webs of Irish society that handcuff him. These bondages that confine Joyce to the domestic realm also seek to fashion a uniform society by setting a standard within the domains to which each person must adhere in return for acceptance by others in the same penitentiary. It seems that by bidding to “fly by those nets” Joyce yearns to escape conventionality. Eventually, Joyce did leave Ireland, yet he remained enslaved to it in another sense: he continually returned to it in his writing. However, some ambiguity rests in Davin’s analysis of the woman and thus leaves one to question Joyce’s own certainty in the level of Ireland’s social incarceration. As Marian Eide mentions in her critical analysis, Davin addresses the fact that the woman seems to be pregnant, yet he lacks actual proof of his observation. Her pregnancy forms a sort of barrier between Davin and herself—she becomes out of reach. Her actual intentions of partaking in any sexual activity with the young man are also left to speculation, as Davin cannot comment on much except a look in her eyes that can easily, by any human error, be miscalculated. Still, Davin’s perception of the encounter leaves him to see the woman as a provocative figure that is the perfect embodiment of Irish motherhood, and it is with this conviction of the woman’s seemingly suggestive manners and her possible pregnancy that Davin depicts his story (306).

Unlike the seeming eroticism the Ballyhoura Hills woman may suggest, her state of pregnancy and her actions attest to her inherent maternal qualities. Davin recollects, “A voice asked who was there and I answered...that I’d be thankful for a glass of water. After a while a young woman [of the Ballyhoura Hills] opened the door and brought me out a big mug of milk” (Joyce 160). Giving Davin a glass of milk instead of water is emblematic of woman’s motherhood, since milk is often associated with a mother’s nourishment. By forming her own interpretation of the request, the woman demonstrates a maternal-like instinct while confirming her role as a primary provider of life and sustenance. Thus, the strange woman, if duly acting as a temptress, may first use her maternal façade as a welcoming allure for the young man. The milk, too, could be seen as a means of deception. While the milk may signify the beginning (mothers provide milk to their kin at the start of their lives), it may actually be a means to an end, into the temptress’ bed. This analysis is especially relevant in Davin’s situation, who as Nehama Aschkenasy notes, “is [consciously] not afraid for his life. Subconsciously, however, he is reenacting an archetypal male experience, in which the female is conceived of as a threat and a mortal enemy.” Undoubtedly, there lies a clear differentiation between the struggles of Davin’s subconscious and conscious minds; Davin does not knowingly acknowledge his fear of death at the hands of the strange woman, but perhaps looking into the depths of his mind, he undergoes the “archetypal” experience and succumbs to the ominous, antagonistic image of women which arouses his anxiety (Aschkenasy 31). Women are again viewed as conniving, adversary forces. Stephen’s particular, detailed focus on Davin’s experience with the cottage woman reflects his own dismay towards females—though women did not destroy Stephen physically, his sexual encounters with them expedited his spiritual demise. Thus, as natural temptresses, women become the threat and “mortal enemy” referred to by Aschkenasy.

Religion holds as a vital force in the way women are perceived throughout the novel. As Stephen receives the Communion wafer, he ruminates, “Another life! A life of grace and virtue and happiness! It was true...The past was past” (Joyce 127). This scene follows Stephen’s sexual undertakings with women. He looks to the wafer as means of forgiveness from God and as a savior from himself. Stephen’s epiphany-like reflection arises from desperation. To him, the “past was past” and he could begin once more with a clean slate, though that slate too is corrupted soon after. The milk versus water passage serves as a reminder to Stephen of his tainted purity and his ephemeral religious epiphanies in an uncanny resemblance to the way mother Ireland inhibits his artistic self.

Joyce parallels the “milk not water” detail in the Ballyhoura Hills woman scene and the biblical books of Proverbs and Judges, both of which portray a threatening image of women that does not stray much from the image presented at the dinner party. Jael of Judges, like the strange cottage woman Davin encounters, draws a man into her home and answers his request for water and milk; Jael, however, murders her guest and is heralded for her actions against the enemy (Judges 4:17-22). While the Ballyhoura Hills woman does coax her guest and attempt to keep him through the night, as Jael had, Davin refuses to comply with her request. A devout Protestant, he would perhaps recall the story of Jael and take warning against the possible dangers imposed by women. While Davin may take caution from the book of Judges, Stephen heeds the Proverbial image of women, by which females are perceived as whores who essentially turn men—like

Figure 1. A 1915 image of James Joyce in Zurich.
King Solomon—away from God. Stated in Proverbs, as was Solomon's knowledge during his affairs, is a warning against the evasive veneer of women: “For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil” (Proverbs 5:3). This Proverbia depiction of females mirrors Stephen's first encounter with a prostitute. Joyce writes of Stephen, “He closed his eyes, surrendering himself to her, body and mind, conscious of nothing in the world but the dark pressure of her softly parting lips” (Joyce 88-89). By resigning to the temptation of the woman, Stephen frees himself from any moral constraints he previously kept, specifically his religious morals of purity. He abandons not only his body, but his mind. His entire being is surrendered in exchange for the sensual pleasure of “softly parting lips.” It is this “dark pressure” that ultimately corrupts his soul, transitioning him from a life of purity, often associated with brightness, to that of sin and darkness. Hence, like the misleadingly sweet words of Solomon’s harlots, the cottage woman’s invitation to her home is but a means of deceit, a point Joyce attempts to subtly hint at through his allusions.

The hesitation Davin experiences, in light of the biblical recollections, mimics Joyce's precautionary attitude toward both women and Ireland. Joyce decentralizes the focus on the cottage woman as a person and instead focuses on her as a “race.” As Stephen recounts in the novel, he sees the woman “as a type of her race and his own, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness” (Joyce 183). The peasant woman, to Stephen, stands for all the constrictions...
set upon him by his environment. The female figure is not only a fleshly reminder of corruption and decay, but also a symbol of all the forces—home, country, and bodily lust—that have coalesced to paralyze the young artist and imprison his free spirit. He associates femininity with his home and his country, and thus his enemy as he yearns to flee from these mothering aspects of society. As Aschkenasy indicates, Stephen's disdain for the opposite gender represents his perspective that women are an attacking force that aim to keep their kin nearby before destroying them. In Stephen's case, feminine figures—home and country—that keep him where he is now gradually cause his demise by not allowing him to liberate the spirit within him by diverging from his repressing environment (Aschkenasy 37). As Davin turned his head away from the dangers of unholy women, Stephen attempts to flee from his own harlot and Jael, Ireland.

Similarly, the dinner party uses the topic of religion as a backdrop to contrasting women who are pressured into subordination and women who threaten men with their lack of silence. Stephen recollects, “Mrs Dedalus spoke to Dante in a low voice but Dante said loudly: —I will not say nothing. I will defend my church and my religion when it is insulted and spit on” (Joyce 29). Particularly apparent in this scene are the characters mirroring Joyce's governess Charlotte Stoker and his mother Delia Parnell. Dante and Stephen's mother, the two mirrored characters, offer two stark comparisons between the types of women—Stephen's mother is quiet and reserves her own potential opinions as a sort of “politeness” toward the men at the dinner table.

The parallelism between women and Ireland is further substantiated through Davin's final reflection with the imagery of the “batlike soul” which contains a double meaning, one for the woman and one for Ireland. Comparing the woman to a temptress, a “batlike soul” emphasizes a sense of Stephen's detachment from the woman—by comparing her to a bat consumed in darkness, secrecy, and loneliness, Stephen justifies his isolation from women by placing the blame on their own estrangement. In fact, only the unattainable women, such as Virgin Mary, seem to attract Stephen, who notes that “the glories of Mary [hold] his soul captive” (Joyce 91). It is no surprise, then, that Stephen chooses to compare the simple and very attainable cottage woman to a bat which, as Laurie Teal indicates, was an animal frequently used in the 1800s as reference to a harlot or whore. Thus, Joyce seems to sexually taint the natural essence of motherhood. Speaking of “her race and his own” forms a comparison not only between the woman and Stephen, but also Stephen and Ireland, which, like the woman, Stephen views as an antagonistic entity. To Joyce, the woman voices herself as Ireland and not as the individual woman who she is (Teal 72). The “batlike soul” therefore may not represent the virginal image of the woman but rather that of Ireland; while Ireland through a physical sense appears to form a chaste society when it in fact creates a home for eroticism and prostitution, a home of sin and moral failure. During his own encounter with a prostitute, Stephen first notes that “her room was warm and lightsome” before acknowledging the sensuality of the woman and her appearance as she unravels her clothing (Joyce 88). The sequence of observations attests to Stephen's naive mentality at that point in the novel as he initially feels welcomed by the hospitable atmosphere. But just as Ireland's fundamental image transgresses into one of impurity, so does the prostitute's disposition. In a matter of seconds, she is able to transform herself into a sexualized “doll,” as Stephen calls her, and reveal her true self by removing her clothing, which hid her facade of maidenhood.

On the other hand, Dante has no fear of being regarded as “impolite” and touches upon conversational topics throughout the argument. Michael Wainwright evaluates, “The young Joyce's formative impression of Irish womanhood must have been particularly divided: the stoical silence of his mother, a woman only rarely driven to assertiveness, in stark contrast to the demonstrative vocality of his governess, a woman often compelled to express her views.” Like Joyce's own governess, Dante is confident of her views and unafraid to voice them to the male parties. This contrast can be paralleled to Joyce's split image of Ireland. While he believes that Ireland serves as an artistic confinement, his country continues to shape him and in many ways—through his works, for instance—he keeps returning to Ireland (Wainwright 657). Or possibly the contrast in the women's behaviors demonstrates something else: while Dante demonstrates her volubility and even courage by defying the common norms of women's behaviors (as depicted by Mrs. Dedalus and her request for Dante to keep silent), her devotion to the church can be seen as a weakness, a sign of naivety that reflects more on her social status than her religion—she cannot form her own opinions on the politics discussed at the table and in turn devoutly adheres to the viewpoints of the church, stating that “the bishops and priests have spoken...and they must be obeyed” (Joyce 27). While Dante on one hand stands up for herself amongst men, she subjects herself to the men of institutions. These clergymen instill a culture of obedience within the vulnerable, specifically women like Dante who devoutly follow the law of the Church. If equating the female characters to Ireland, one can remark on
the potential single-mindedness of a culturally traditional Ireland. Dante’s counteraction with Mr. Casey in the Christmas dinner party scene demonstrates the lack of males’ respect for females and their desire to continuously subordinate women. Joyce writes, “Dante started across the table, her cheeks shaking. Mr. Casey struggled up from his chair and bent across the table towards her, scraping the air before his eyes with one hand as though he were tearing aside a cobweb” (Joyce 34). There appears to be an overwhelming dynamic between the man and woman, Casey and Dante. Whereas Dante reacts emotionally in this line, Mr. Casey’s reaction is much more physical—he makes the effort to get up and “[scrape] the air,” conveying perhaps the man’s necessity to assert his control through behaviors. Comparing Dante to a cobweb denies her to the status of a bug; as men would normally stomp or grab at pests with the intention to get rid of them, Mr. Casey snatches at Dante. Hence, the emotion-centered women are degraded and subdued by men. Even when prompted to hold silence in respect for the men at the table, Dante transcends her “obligations” as a woman and interjects with her own thoughts on the situation at hand—the church v. Parnell—thereby continuing the “finished” conversation. Joyce represents women in a new light, forming one of either two depictions of the female characters: they stand for their own beliefs with courage or they impolitely overstep their duties (Toolan 404).

By continuously attributing feminine qualities to Ireland throughout Portrait, Joyce parallels the threatening portrayal of women in the novel to Ireland as a force restraining an individual’s, in this case Stephen’s, artistic pursuit. While Davin describes his encounter with the Ballyhoura Hills woman to Stephen, he states, “When I handed her back the mug at last she took my hand to draw me in over the threshold and said: Come in and stay the night here… I thanked her and went on my way again, all in fever. At the first bend of the road I looked back and she was standing in the door” (Joyce 160). Davin’s reaction to the woman’s invitation formulates a threatening image of her. Her forwardness with Davin potentially takes him by alarm. The woman too continues to stand at the door after Davin rejects her invitation, causing Davin to feel as if she is emotionally stalking him.

Much in the same way, Ireland seems to keep a watch over Stephen as he attempts to escape from its confinements. In the last section of the novel, Stephen writes in a letter, “Mother is putting my new second hand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels” (Joyce 224). Stephen’s mother, another feminization of Ireland, attempts to place her son’s life “in order” and to shape his journey away from her through her prayers. Her words can be seen as an insurance to Stephen of her, and thus Ireland’s, spiritual watch over him. As a result, despite Stephen’s physical departure, his mind is fixed upon mother Ireland and her last artistic appeal—she offers Joyce a confined liberation that, with the societal pressures placed on Joyce also comes a nurturer of literature. Ireland, the topic of much of Joyce’s writing as in Portrait, becomes in one sense Joyce’s muse in his works. Thus, Ireland, like the women of the text, possesses a double nature, one which socially imprisons its people based on gender-driven standards and the other which nurtures a passion—though this ardor comes much from the social frustration experienced by Joyce.

If Joyce in the dinner scene was illustrating the female characters’ tendency of subordination, he paints another image through Stephen’s examination of the inescapable “maze,” referring to the various forms of beauty in a woman as perceived by men. In a conversation with his peer, Lynch, Stephen comments on two methods of objectification by which one may lessen the position of women:

One is the hypothesis: that every physical quality admired by men in women is in direct connection with the manifold functions of women for propagation of the species… For my part, I dislike that way out. It leads to eugenics rather than esthetic… There remains another way out… all people who admire a beautiful object find in it certain relations which satisfy and coincide with the stages themselves of all esthetic apprehension (Joyce 208-209).

Stephen first clarifies and dismisses the initial claim that female beauty stems from a woman’s ability to reproduce. In essence, a man yearns to breed selectively by finding the mate that will provide him with the most capable offspring. The second proposal, which Stephen more aligns with, objectifies women as “beautiful object[s]” which provide visually pleasing satisfaction for their male counterparts. Stephen turns the sphere of nature, characterized by his fear and anguish toward women as producers, to a realm of art where females are perceived of as less threatening and mere objects. This fear of women, also present in the encounter between Davin and the “batlike” Ballyhoura Hills woman, speaks to the need for men to constantly subordinate women, such as in the Casey and Dante scene. Sexualization, one form of subordination, possibly stems from the notion of productivity; while women are key to human reproduction, a country is vital to the reproduction and sustenance of a civilization. Thus, the stigma of women as forces of procreation eclipse into the ideals of a feminized nation. When one fails to do its bidding, all else seems to collapse. Joyce further portrays this belief onto Ireland by turning the land into a form of art and focusing on its aesthetics. His feminization of Ireland already translates the illustrations he writes of women to those he feels of his homeland; in other words, his beautification of the female actually serves as a metaphor for his objectification of Ireland.

As Ireland itself, a jail of artistic pursuit, fabricates itself a façade of motherhood, so too do her daughters; the woman of the Ballyhoura Hills and Dante of the dinner scene both exemplify and defy the social duplicities of 20th century Irish women: the tempresses towards sin and the subordinates to man. With passing time, societal implications fortify and persist. Women, still, are continuously objectified and lessened in a man’s search for freedom. If those who, like Joyce, yearn to liberate themselves from social confinements, why must they parallel the faults of their country to the female kind? Perhaps a woman’s curves of emotion yield greater fruit than a man’s mere lines of intellect.

REFERENCES


IMAGE SOURCES


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