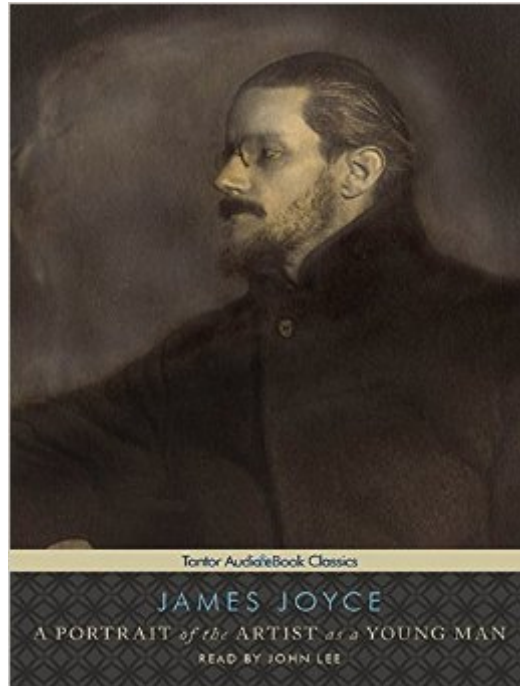


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# A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man



## Synopsis

Perhaps James Joyce's most personal work, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* depicts the intellectual awakening of one of literature's most memorable young heroes, Stephen Dedalus. Through a series of brilliant epiphanies that parallel the development of his own aesthetic consciousness, Joyce evokes Stephen's youth, from his impressionable years as the youngest student at the Clongowood Wood school to the deep religious conflict he experiences at a day school in Dublin, and finally to his college studies, where he challenges the conventions of his upbringing and his understanding of faith and intellectual freedom. Joyce's highly autobiographical novel was first published in the United States in 1916 to immediate acclaim. Ezra Pound accurately predicted that Joyce's book would "remain a permanent part of English literature," while H. G. Wells dubbed it "by far the most important living and convincing picture that exists of an Irish Catholic upbringing." A remarkably rich study of a developing young mind, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* made an indelible mark on literature and confirmed Joyce's reputation as one of the world's greatest and lasting writers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I'm always up for a good challenge, whether it be in books, music or movies, and from what I've heard Joyce is about as challenging as they come in the literary world. However, since it seemed like "Ulysses" or "Finnegan's Wake" would be a bit much to start with, I found myself reading "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" as an introduction to his work. And although I found this book about as easy to get into as Princeton, it was about as rewarding as well. "Portrait" is certainly

anything but a light read. Joyce's meandering narrative and serpentine prose can be confusing to say the least, and on more than one occasion I had to read a sentence about five times in order to figure out what I had just read. For all its verbosity, though, "Portrait" is an essential read because the story of Stephen Dedalus carries so much resonance. I'm about the same age as Stephen was in this story, and I can relate pretty easily to his search for answers. Growing up in Ireland around the turn of the twentieth century, Stephen faces existential questions that should ring true for a young person coming from any culture at any time. He tries to find satisfaction by giving in to his lust, and when that doesn't work he goes all the way to the other end of the spectrum in seeking fulfillment through religious devotion. In the end, however, neither of these extremes provides Stephen with the answers he's looking for. Stephen's story demonstrates one unfortunate fact of life: when you're seeking meaning, there are no easy answers.

I've seen some reviews that criticize the book for being too stream of consciousness and others for not being s.o.c. enough. The fact is, for the most part it's not s.o.c. at all. (See the Chicago Manual of Style, 10.45-10.47 and note the example they give...Joyce knew how to write s.o.c.). A better word for *A Portrait* is impressionistic. Joyce is more concerned with giving the reader an impression of Stephen's experience than with emptying the contents of his head. What's confusing is the style mirrors the way Stephen interprets his experiences at the time, according to the level of his mental development. When Stephen is a baby, you get only what comes in through the five senses. When he is a young boy, you get the experience refracted through a prism of many things: his illness (for those who've read *Ulysses*, here is the beginning of Stephen's hydrophobia - "How cold and slimy the water had been! A fellow had once seen a big rat jump into the scum."), his poor eyesight, the radically mixed signals he's been given about religion and politics (the Christmas meal), his unfair punishment, and maybe most important of all, his father's unusual expressions (growing up with phrases like, "There's more cunning in one of those warts on his bald head than in a pack of jack foxes" how could this kid become anything but a writer?) It is crucial to understand that Stephen's experiences are being given a certain inflection in this way when you come to the middle of the book and the sermon. You have to remember that Stephen has been far from a good Catholic boy. Among other things, he's been visiting the brothels! The sermon hits him with a special intensity, so much so that it changes his life forever. Before it he's completely absorbed in the physical: food, sex, etc.

One of the great changes in literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the

birth of autobiographical literature. Even at the end of the 19th century, it was very unusual for any writer to make one's own life the basis for a purely literary work. To be sure, Dickens had put much of the London he knew in his youth into his novels, but there is no Dickens novel that can be described as purely autobiographical. Mark Twain had written memoirs that employed novelistic techniques and Samuel Butler put much of his own life into *THE WAY OF ALL FLESH* (a novel written in the early 1870s but not published until 1903), but it was only with such works as D. H. Lawrence's *SONS AND LOVERS* (1913) and James Joyce's *PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN* in the English-speaking world and Marcel Proust slightly earlier in Paris that authors began taking their own lives as material for works of fiction. In Lawrence's *SONS AND LOVERS*, a host of real life characters and actual life experiences became characters and scenes in novels. Likewise, most of the events of *PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST* were based on actual events. It isn't quite autobiography, but neither is it pure fiction. Because the genre of fictionalized autobiography has become such a common literary form in the century that has followed Proust, Lawrence, and Joyce's work, the importance of this work can hardly be overestimated. *PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST* is important also for the innovations Joyce made in narrative. While the events in the story occur along a time line, Joyce is not particularly concerned with most of the details in the timeline.

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