

English 4241
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Assignment 2

Topic 3: "The religious crises that play such a central role in the novel lead Stephen toward his conception of himself as a priest or redeemer of the secular world and the race" (455). Discuss this proposition with specific references to crisis episodes in the novel.

Transubstantiation of Circumstance

Stephen Dedalus seeks to redeem his "Godforsaken race" (Joyce 37) by reviving his soul to discover a racial consciousness that will transform the Irish people. His experiences transport him through creation, destruction, and redemption of his identity. Several crises lead him to desire release from his restrictive environment. As a young boy, he witnesses the tension between Irish Nationalism and Catholicism, coupled with his father's dive into poverty. He then relates his illness to the death of Irish Nationalist Charles Parnell and soon after becomes a victim of injustice when a priest wrongly beats him for breaking his glasses. Stephen's most striking crisis occurs during his retreat at Belvedere College, where Father Arnall's convincing sermon turns him from a sinful life of casual sexual encounters to an extreme state of piety. Stephen's experiences take him from youthful innocence to adolescent frivolity, and finally to submersion into a lone quest to refresh Irish national consciousness. He becomes the Christ in his holy trinity, where God is the "uncreated conscience of his race, and the Race is the body of the faithful in need of redemption" (Pericles). Stephen, as a priest of the world with art as his medium, attempts transubstantiation where an oppressed Irish people hopefully rise into a newly redeemed race.

Commented [SS1]: Interesting - keep working on emphasis of the argument and how you will develop it over listing descriptive elements.

Catholic Ireland has constructed the character of young Stephen Dedalus. His first experience with religion and politics is at the family Christmas dinner: "Let him remember all this when he grows up...the language he heard against God and religion and priests in his own home...and let him remember too...the language with which the priests and the priests' pawns broke Parnell's heart and bounded him to his grave" (Joyce 29). The conflict between Irish nationalism and religion creates an "unfortunate priest-ridden race" (Joyce 32) that although Stephen does not understand, he wants to change. The tragedy of Parnell continues to influence Stephen as he lies ill in the Clongowes infirmary. He dreams that he may die, but it was Parnell who dies. Although still a boy, Stephen becomes trapped by the "nightmare of Irish history" (Lewis 453). At this point in his life, he has no means of redeeming himself, much less the Irish race.

Following his illness, pain continues to plague Stephen as Father Dolan unjustly punishes him for losing his glasses. This traumatic experience is another that shapes the young boy's future in wanting to restructure racial consciousness and is representative of the overbearing hold that religion has on his people. He is beginning to understand his social environment. Stephen takes his first step toward freedom of expression when he speaks to the rector about Father Dolan's erroneous punishment: "He was alone. He was happy and free: but he would not be anyway proud with Father Dolan" (Joyce 51). In writing by Pericles Lewis, he explains how Stephen begins to use "his experience and self-expression to embody the fate of the race that created him (Lewis 452). However, the experience of his punishment shows that young Stephen is already seeking free will while continuing to respect God and religious rules.

Commented [SS2]: how? next step is to work a little more on interpretation of specific passages, close reading, to show how and why, rather than only that things are happening or significant.

During his adolescence, Stephen experiences a Fall from Eden when he trades youthful innocence for sexual encounters with prostitutes: “His blood was in revolt...He felt some dark presence moving irresistibly upon him from the darkness...a cry for iniquitous abandonment” (Joyce 87). But despite giving in to lust, religion still rings in his mind: “his lips would not bend to kiss her” (Joyce 88). Stephen suddenly begins to feel sure of himself, unlike the child Stephen, who feels small and insignificant. He wants to think that he is free to make his own moral decisions, but his resistance to kissing the prostitute demonstrate that his morals are still a product of “personal and national history that he did not choose” (Lewis 458). Stephen is developing an individualistic nature and wanting to serve his purpose. His artistic freedom is beginning to develop as sexuality frees him from the confines of his church and the oppressed Irish race. Stephen still feels that "one soul was lost; a tiny soul: his" (Joyce 122). While Stephen repents of his reckless behaviour, he begins to feel the need to do more than justify the ways of Christianity; he is growing up and discovering a new, enlightened view of his world and race. He feels that he is being "called," but as what: Priest? Prophet? Artist?

It is at this pivotal point of Stephen’s life that he realizes his potential to redeem the secular world. He is not trying to change his heritage, only make comprehensible the “age-old racial conscience that created both the artist and his people” (Lewis 454). If Stephen Dedalus is the Christ in his symbolic holy trinity, then God is the constant, the “uncreated conscience of his race” (Lewis), and the Race is the body of the faithful, the Irish race, in need of redemption from oppression and consequence of historical oppression. The Irish represent the Holy Spirit, waiting for the proverbial “gift of tongues” that they may understand how to release themselves from racial bondage. As Stephen releases his soul to artistic freedom, he can transform the "ideal racial conscience through the reality of his life experiences" (Lewis 456). Although Stephen

Commented [SS3]: good use of quotation here

refuses entry into the priesthood, he maintains a connection with his religion. In juxtaposition with his artistic trilemma, Ireland's Parnell symbolizes biblical Adam since he, like Stephen, succumbed to sexual influence. Parnell was a "failed Christ who might have redeemed Ireland (Lewis). We now reach the point where Stephen realizes that to help Ireland, he must sacrifice his soul, like Christ did his Earthly body, and attain equilibrium between religion, life experience, and artistic freedom. In this way, Stephen Dedalus is a priest of the world, redeemer of the Irish race.

As he reaches maturity, Stephen seeks "moral unity with the conscience of his Godforsaken priest-ridden race, to redeem the Godforsaken land" (Lewis). By adding the artistic license to create yet another trinity of art, religion, and race, he seeks to reshape what already exists, perhaps without the tyranny of church domination. Could Ireland become a more tranquil place with a subdued combination of heritage, art, and God? Ironically, Stephen feels unable to answer these questions in Ireland, and he sets off for self-induced exile abroad: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe...I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can, using for my defence – silence, exile and cunning" (Joyce 218). Stephen, the "Christ," has sacrificed himself to redeem his race, to reinvent a way of comprehension that will perhaps revolve previous attitudes and recreate a racial consciousness from the "uncreated" (Lewis) God who created it.

Commented [SS4]: a careful and interesting paper here. keep working on those close reading skills to draw out the complexity of you're arguments. How does the language and structure of the work contribute to enhance or complicate the reader's experience of this meaning in the text?

Grade: 85

List of Works Cited

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. 1916. Ed. John Paul Riquelme. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007.

Lewis, Pericles. "The Conscience of the Race: The Nation as Church of the Modern Age." *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Ed. John Paul Riquelme. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007. 451–470.

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