

**AP English Notes**  
**December 1, 2004**

**Classic Notes from GradeSaver on Portrait of the Artist.**

**Chapter 1:**

**Summary:**

We begin with Stephen Dedalus' earliest childhood, described to us in the terms a child would use: there are touches of baby talk, along with visceral imagery of his parents, his governess Dante, and his Uncle Charles. One of his neighbors is a little girl named Eileen, and Stephen announces that when he is grown, he will marry her. His announcement infuriates Dante. We learn later that Eileen is Protestant.

We then move to Stephen's first days at the boarding school of Conglowses, and the language changes to reflect Stephen's aging: he is now a young boy, and he is terribly homesick. He comforts himself with thoughts of how it will feel to return home. He is also very devout, and his nightly prayers are a cross between a child's compulsive superstitions and the Catholic faith in which he has been raised. One day, a larger boy named Wells picks on Stephen and pushes him into a cesspool. Stephen gets a fever from the filthy water, and he fantasizes about how sorry everyone will be when he dies. In the school clinic, Brother Michael takes care of him and another boy named Athy. Brother Michael reads the paper to them. Stephen and Athy hear about the death of Charles Parnell, an Irish nationalist politician. Stephen has earned some respect from the boys for not ratting on Wells.

That Christmas holiday, Stephen eats at the table with the adults for the first time. The happiness of the occasion is shattered by a bitter argument between Dante on one side and Stephen's father, Simon Dedalus, and John Casey, friend of the family, on the other. The fight is over Charles Parnell. Dante is fanatically Catholic, and she approves of the decision of the Church to condemn Parnell for his marital infidelity. That action destroyed Parnell's career, and hounded him to his death from exhaustion. Casey and Simon were both great admirers of Parnell; he was a hero to Irish nationalists. They point out the many times that the Church has betrayed Ireland. The fight is emotional and vicious, and ends with Dante storming out of the room. Casey is in tears; Stephen is horrified when he sees his father begin to cry as well.

Back at Conglowses, Stephen hears about an incident in which several boys stole and drank the altar wine. He listens to the other boys talking it over. He remembers Eileen's fair hands and blonde hair; because he understood those hands and hair, he feels he can understand the meaning of "Tower of Ivory" and "House of Gold," two phrases Catholics use to describe the Virgin Mary.

Some of the boys involved in the altar theft have been given the choice of expulsion or flogging.

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Only Corrigan has chosen flogging. The other boys approve of his choice; a boy named Fleming adds that Mr. Gleeson will not flog Corrigan hard, because it would look bad if he did. Later, Stephen thinks about Mr. Gleeson. He agrees that Gleeson will not flog Corrigan hard, but he silently disagrees with Fleming's judgment. Mr. Gleeson will be merciful, but not for the sake of appearances; he will be merciful because he is a kind man.

We see Stephen and the boys in Latin class, which is headed by the intimidating Father Arnall. The frightening Father Dolan enters, seeking out boys to punish as examples for the rest of the class. Stephen is not doing any work, because his glasses have been broken; when Father Dolan sees him, Stephen explains that his glasses are broken, but Father Dolan accuses him of having broken them on purpose. He paddles Stephen's hands.

Stephen is humiliated by the punishment and angry about its injustice. After class, his friends encourage him to go complain to the rector. Stephen thinks he might. But as he stays in during recess and heads towards the rector's office, he is seized by terror. He passes through the intimidating corridors, with their paintings of saints, and finally musters the courage to knock on Father Conmee's door. Nervously, he explains to the Father what happened. Father Conmee promises to talk to Father Dolan about it, and sends Stephen on his way. When Stephen goes out to the playground, his friends surround him, eager for news. He tells them what happened and they hoist him up in the air, yelling out with joy. They throw their caps in the air and celebrate Stephen as if he were a hero.

**Analysis:**

We are following Stephen through the course of his first year at Conglowes, climaxing in his small victory at Father Conmee's office. The opening condenses the journey Stephen takes in the novel, as he moves toward his decision to become an artist; we also are introduced to the major forces that shape Stephen: Irish nationalism, Catholicism, and his incredible sensitivity.

We watch as Stephen gradually becomes more accepted by his classmates. Although he will always remain something of an outsider, certain events of this passage predict his future position as a reluctant leader. Although initially he is an easy target for bullies because of his sensitive nature, small size, and social awkwardness, we see several traits in Stephen that are the seeds of a formidable personality. He is not a whiner, despite his sensitivity: when pushed into the cesspool by Wells, he remembers his father's warning never to tattle on anyone. And he is tough enough to go to the rector and complain of Father Dolan's unfairness. Still, these moments of strength are not easy for Stephen. He is an extremely sensitive child, and his athletic incompetence makes him nervous and fearful. In all his interactions with the other boys, he is practically silent. If he disagrees with their judgments, he keeps his thoughts to himself.

Two major themes are Catholicism and Irish Nationalism. We see that Stephen is a very devout child, fearful of hell and enraptured by the Virgin Mary. But his relationship with religion will soon grow troubled, and the difficulties are foreshadowed here. The argument at Christmas reminds us that Ireland is a conflicted land, and here we see here as she has lost one of her great

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heroes. Catholicism is part of Ireland's national identity, but the argument shows that the Church is not always compatible with the Irish longing for liberty.

Nor is rabid Catholicism compatible with Stephen's basic character. Dante's fury over his friendship with Eileen is against the very core of Stephen's sensitive nature: later, he makes sense of the Virgin Mary by remembering Eileen's hands and hair. Ironically, he relates to an icon of his faith by remembering the pretty features of a young Protestant girl.

We see Stephen's sensitivity again and again. He observes his world with the eyes of a poet; even in the naïve and child-like way he explains the things around him, he shows intellectual grace and imagination. He also is already an observer of men. Note that he alone is generous and sensitive enough to see the real reason why Mr. Gleeson will not flog Corrigan hard. There are many moments like this one throughout Chapter 1, as we see how different Stephen is from the other boys in the way he sees the world.