

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

Sample Analytical Paper Topics

TOPIC #1

Examine Stephen's relationship to Catholicism as it develops throughout the novel. Use this as a way to comment on his attitude to authority more generally.

Outline

- I. **Thesis Statement:** *Stephen's developing ethic of individualism requires him to reject the authority of the Catholic church. We can measure the progress of his artistic and individual development in part by an examination of the changes in his attitude to the priests in the novel.*
- II. **When he was a child, the Jesuit priests at Clongowes represented absolute authority for Stephen.**
 - A. His general attitude toward the priests.
 - B. The pandying incident with Father Dolan, and the "resolution" of this conflict by Father Conmee.
- III. **His religious awakening at the retreat.**
 - A. The priest's voice speaks "directly to his soul," evidence of the authority Stephen grants him.
- IV. **His changing attitude toward the Jesuits as he gets older.**
 - A. Chapter Four: the director's offer; Stephen's attraction to and rejection of the priesthood.
- V. **Stephen's attitude toward Catholicism as the novel ends.**
 - A. His conversation with the dean of studies.
 - B. His conversation with Cranly.

TOPIC #2

Examine the novel's various "climaxes." In what ways does the narrator tend to treat Stephen's triumphs ironically, suggesting that he is perhaps deluded?

Outline

- I. **Thesis Statement:** *The narrative works according to a pattern whereby the climactic ending of each chapter is significantly deflated by the down-to-earth, routine and habitual tone of the next chapter's opening section.*
- II. **Stephen's triumph at the end of Chapter One.**
 - A. The plain tone of the first paragraphs of Chapter Two.
 - B. His father telling Father Conmee's version of the story at dinner.
- III. **The excitement of Stephen's transgression with the prostitute at the end of Chapter Two.**
 - A. How this becomes a seemingly empty and dull routine in Chapter Three.
- IV. **The fervor of Stephen's confession and religious conversion at the end of Chapter Three.**
 - A. How this seems passionless and routine in Chapter Four.

V. The “climax” of the novel—Stephen’s artistic conversion at the end of Chapter Four.

- A. The narrative at the start of Chapter Five seems to suggest routine and drudgery.
- B. This time, Stephen recognizes this, and understands that his surroundings are to blame for stifling his artistic potential (the “climax” itself is not deflated—its “puncture” has thematic significance).

VI. The eagerness and optimism of Stephen’s language in the journals at the end.

- A. Is this positive tone compromised at all by this pattern of deflation in the rest of the narrative?

TOPIC #3

Trace the themes of exile and detachment as they develop throughout the novel.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *Stephen is portrayed as lonely and aloof throughout the novel, but as the novel progresses, he begins gradually to accept and embrace the role of exile until, by the end, he decides that he must leave the country and live alone in order to be happy.*

II. Stephen’s “uncomfortable” loneliness at Clongowes.

- A. He feels apart from the other students, and is intimidated and uncomfortable about this.

III. In Chapter Two, his imagination (fueled by literature) causes him to detach himself from ordinary life.

- A. How this “detachment” is somewhat necessary, since the family has moved, he is no longer at school, and has no friends.
- B. How Stephen’s literary imaginings suggest that he is beginning to romanticize the role of exile.

IV. After Stephen’s religious conversion, his religious zeal serves to remove him from normal life.

- A. He imagines himself as a priest, separate and aloof.

V. When he has his artistic awakening at the end of Chapter Four, he decides that his pose of detachment and exile is essential toward being an artist.

- A. This pose will characterize him throughout Chapter Five.
- B. He expresses this explicitly as a personal credo of art in his conversations with Cranly and Davin.
- C. His journal characterizes this, showing Stephen’s voice alone, with him looking toward Europe and his self-imposed exile.