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Adolescent Character Development in O’Brien and Joyce

by Corie Dias

Author Edna O’Brien was inspired by James Joyce growing up, particularly by his work *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, of which she once said, “Now here was ... a section of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which stunned me not only by the bewitchment of style but because [it was] so true to life, it [was] life” (Roth 108). O’Brien’s novel *The Country Girls* contains many parallels to *Portrait* and has actually been referred to as “a portrait of the artist as a young woman” (Salter 2). Both of these works are examples of bildungsroman, or coming of age stories. However, Edna O’Brien’s story deviates from Joyce’s work in that her main character is a female and therefore goes through a different kind of development in moving towards adulthood.

These stages of development are discussed by Carol Gilligan, in her essay “In A Different Voice: Women’s Conceptions of the Self and of Morality.” In this essay, Gilligan comments on the differing stereotypical views of adulthood in light of gender, which “[favor] the separate-ness of the individual self over its connection to others and [lean] more toward an autonomous life of work than toward the interdependence of love and care” (Gilligan 135).
Gilligan argues for a new perception of self which takes into account both the female and male views of development. Stephen Dedalus and Kate Brady each embody one of these stereotypical views, stages of adolescent growth that they must work through to become well-adjusted adults. Stephen defines himself through the separateness that he has from other people as an individual, while Kate defines herself based on the relationships that she has with other people.

One area in which this can be seen is in the characters’ relationships with their parents. While he is still young, Stephen is fairly attached to his mother, who takes care of him and has a “nicer smell than his father” (Joyce 19). Once he is old enough to attend school, Stephen fails to understand why the other boys at Clongowes laugh at him for saying that he kisses his mother goodnight. He also relies on his father when he is young. Simon Dedalus is actually the source of Stephen’s early literary experiences, as brought out by Suzette Henke in her essay “Stephen Dedalus and Women: A Feminist Reading of Portrait”:

He perceives his father as a primordial storyteller who inaugurates the linguistic apprenticeship that inscribes the boy into the symbolic order of patriarchal authority...The male parent appeals to Stephen’s imagination, awakening him to a sense of individual identity at the moment when language necessarily establishes a gap between subjective desire and self-representation (Henke 307).

Simon’s early interaction with Stephen gives him both a sense of male authority and his first form of self-identification, as a very young Stephen thinks, “He was baby tuckoo...He sang that song. That was his song” (Joyce 19). Here Stephen expresses literary ownership over the stories he hears. He has a definite attachment to his parents and relies on them, but even at this age has a sense of self.

While at school, Stephen often thinks longingly for his parents and for home, as he is bullied by the other boys. However, as he gets older, he begins to realize that his parents, specifically his mother, are not able to protect him from all outside influences anymore. Upon one return to Clongowes after being home for the holidays, “he realizes that his peacemaking mother, a mollifying agent of social arbitration, has failed to offer a viable sanctuary from the male-dominated power structure that controls the outer world” (Henke 310). Stephen now knows that he must learn to protect himself from the aggressors in the male-dominated society that he finds himself in, whether they are other boys or cruel teachers.

He begins to push his parents and their influence over him away, as “he feels increasingly compelled to cast off the shackles of female influence” (Henke 309). Stephen grows away from his mother, distancing himself from her emotionally. He no longer looks to her for protection and comfort; in fact, he does not seem to talk to her anymore if he can help it. Mrs. Dedalus is rarely mentioned in the book again until book IV, where Stephen has her wash his face for him. She makes the comment that it is sad for a college student to have his mother wash for him, to which he sarcastically replies, “But it gives you pleasure” (Joyce 153). Stephen has come a long way from his earlier dreams of coming home to his mother; he now cannot even have a real conversation with her.

As he goes through his adolescent years, Stephen is also taking great steps in his intellectual growth. He is one of the best students in his school and feels that he is a great thinker. This is another way that he begins to separate himself from others. This comes into play in Stephen’s relationship with his father, as seen in one segment of the book where the two take a trip to Cork. Stephen is embarrassed by his father’s behavior, remarking that “one humiliation...
had succeeded another” (90). Mr. Dedalus converses with many old friends in Cork, as he himself is an “old Corkonian” (Joyce 90). As Stephen observes one of these conversations, he thinks to himself:

An abyss of fortune or of temperament sundered him from them. His mind seemed older than theirs: it shone coldly on their strifes and happiness and regrets like a moon upon a younger earth. No life or youth stirred in him as it had stirred in them. He had known neither the pleasure of companionship with others nor the vigor of rude male health nor filial piety (Joyce 91).

Stephen can no longer relate to his own father. His life is not the same kind of life that his father has lived. He now feels that not only has he never known normal companionship, he has never known “filial piety” either. It is not just that Stephen feels a distance now, he feels that he has always been distanced from his father. Despite his father’s advanced years, Stephen perceives himself as having an older mind and more maturity, without the normal amounts of youth in his thinking. This kind of thinking drives the two further apart as the story goes on. This distance from his parents is a defining factor for Stephen, as he feels that he no longer needs them to protect him and that he is on a higher plane intellectually.

In The Country Girls, Kate Brady has a much different type of perception of herself and of her parents. While Stephen had grown apart from his mother by the time he was in his early teens, fourteen year old Kate has a very close relationship with her mother: “She was the best mama in the world. I told her so, and she held me very close for a minute as if she would never let me go. I was everything in the world to her, everything” (O’Brien 6). Every day as she leaves for school, Kate is afraid that her mother will not be alive when she comes home. This is mainly because of the fears that she has in regard to her drunken father, who gets abusive after he’s been out on a drinking bout.

Kate’s world revolves around both of these parents, and she identifies herself in terms of them. She has less of a sense of herself than of who her parents are and how they affect her. She is proud of her mother, thinking that she is the most beautiful woman in the village. And Kate is well aware of the reputation that her father has around the town. She is worried when he is not home, and she worries yet more when he is. Her father is always there in mind at least, and the resulting fear and distress is something that Kate always has to carry inside herself.

This internal distress is worsened, as her mother drowns one night when Kate is away from home. Kate’s response to her death is a wish to be with her mother; she wants this not to prove that she is indeed dead, but to get away from the other people, to “get out and find her dead body” (O’Brien 42). Kate’s world had revolved around her mother, and now that world is gone. As Kate remarks at the time, “It was the last day of childhood” (O’Brien 45). Kate knows, on some level, that her childhood life is over without the protection and guidance of her mother.

With the strongest force from her childhood now gone, Kate has to come to terms with her relationship with her father. Unlike Stephen, Kate does not actively try to distance herself intellectually. Rather, she distances herself physically when necessary, but this separation is never permanent. Even when living with her friend Baba’s family, Kate must deal with the occasional visit from her father and has to make requests from him for money. Once she is ready to leave home to go to a convent school, her father tries to display affection for her, but Kate only wants to get away: “‘Don’t forget your poor father,’ he said. He put out his arm and tried to draw me over onto his knee, but I pretended not to know what he was
doing and ran off to the yard to call Hickey for his tea" (O'Brien 48). Kate draws away from her father’s attempts at being affectionate and tries to create a life separate from him, but is ultimately unable to do so. He is always lurking in the background, and is there ready and waiting when she and Baba are kicked out of the convent.

At this point, Mr. Brady is no longer even living in Kate’s childhood home as he was unable to keep up with the payments. Kate goes to the gatehouse where he is now living, hoping not to meet him there. Unfortunately she wakes him up, and has to face him yet again before leaving for Dublin:

‘Go on back to bed,’ I said. I was praying that he would...
‘They have the house lovely,’ I said, hoping that it would make him feel guilty.
‘The grandest house in the country,’ he said.
‘I don’t miss it at all,’ he said then. And I thought of my mother at the bottom of the lake, and how enraged she’d be if she could only hear him (O’Brien 115).

Kate’s attempts at making her father feel guilty are futile, as are her attempts at escape. Mr. Brady is always going to be there, a part of her, just as Mrs. Brady is part of her identity. Even after her death, Kate thinks of what her mother would say, what her mother would think. Kate’s perception of herself is not of herself at all, but of her relationship with her parents, a dead mother and a father that she is afraid of. She does not have the same sense of independent self that Stephen Dedalus does, one that tries to be wholly separate from his parents emotionally and intellectually.

Stephen also has this kind of separation of self from those that he forms friendships with throughout A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Even his best friend at school, Heron, is someone that he cannot relate to and has had problems with in the past. Their friendship came about despite the fact that Heron and some of the other boys had bullied Stephen about a paper that he had written. Even after the boys become friends, Stephen does not understand and does not want to understand Heron, but again separates himself. His thoughts are reminiscent of the ones he had when in company with his father in Cork as he thinks about Heron’s behavior:

He mistrusted the turbulence and doubted the sincerity of such comradeship which seemed to him a sorry anticipation of manhood. While his mind had been pursuing its intangible phantoms and turning back in irresoluteness from such pursuit he had heard about him the constant voices of his father and of his masters, urging him to be a gentleman above all things and urging him to be a good catholic above all things (Joyce 82).

Stephen does not understand the kind of comradeship that Heron has to offer, and does not understand Heron’s pursuit of honor and manliness. Heron’s words remind him of his father and all of the masters he has had, urging him to do things that meant nothing to him. Their words were merely an interruption of the “intangible phantoms” of his mind. Again, Stephen is on a different intellectual plane from Heron, as well as his father and teachers, with different thoughts and feelings that he does not wish to share. Stephen reflects on himself, rather than others, and bases his behavior on what his own intelligence dictates, rather than perceiving his sense of self through his friendships.

Kate, on the other hand, defines herself and models her behavior based on her best friend Baba’s wishes and desires, rather than her own. Kate always excels in school, while Baba is “the school dunce” (O’Brien 19). This remains true when the two girls head off to the same convent school. Kate enjoys the positive attention she receives in the academic aspect of school life, while Baba hates classes and rebels against the nuns whenever possible. Baba comes up
with a plan to get the girls expelled, by leaving a dirty note about one of the nuns where someone will find it. Kate is horrified. She does not want to leave school, and is mortified just at the thought of Baba’s plan. Yet she goes through with it, as Baba wishes:

“You write it,” I said.
“Our two names are going on it,” she said as she knelt down. There on the lavatory seat she wrote it in block capitals. I was ashamed of it then, and I am ashamed of it now. I think it’s something you’d rather not hear. Anyhow, we both signed our names to it (O’Brien 104).

Kate is even more ashamed once the girls have been kicked out of the school and she must go home and face both her father and Baba’s parents, the Brennans. Kate tells Mr. Brennan, “We hated it, we hated it; we love home” (O’Brien 109). Kate did not hate school, but she lumped herself and Baba into one identity: “we hated it.” This kind of union continues throughout the novel, as Kate does only whatever it is that Baba wants her to do. There is really no “we” about it in most of what the girls do; it is all Baba. Unlike Stephen with Heron, Kate joins herself to Baba, giving herself an identity through the relationship she has with her manipulative best friend.

Stephen and Kate also define themselves differently in terms of love, or what they see as being in love through the eyes of adolescence. Stephen’s first love is a girl named Emma, who the other boys tease him about. Yet Stephen wishes to distance himself from this girl as well. Unmoved by such popular representations of feminine charm, Stephen seeks refuge from reality in the priesthood of art: he longs to confront the beauty and mystery of creation while tasting the joy of loneliness. Before the tantalizing face of Emma cloaked in nun’s veiling, he forces himself to remain calm and controlled, repressing “the feverish agitation of his blood” (Henke 312). Stephen longs for Emma, but at the same time wants to stay removed from her, “tasting the joy of loneliness.” Stephen represses his feelings, which seem to represent lust more than love, devoting himself entirely to his art rather than relationships with other people. Going back to Gilligan’s words, Stephen is defining himself through “an autonomous life of work” (Gilligan 135). Joyce ends Portrait with a section of diary-like entries, where Stephen makes his last mention of Emma. He says on April fifteenth that he “liked her today. A little or much? Don’t know. I liked her and it seems a new feeling to me” (Joyce 217). Despite this new feeling of “liking” a girl, Stephen seems to have put all thoughts of Emma aside by the twenty-sixth, one of the last entries of the book. Here he discusses his thoughts on his journey to England, where he intends to “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (Joyce 218). And off he goes to a different country, with no regrets as to the girl he left behind. To Stephen, his art, his creation, is far more important than any kind of interpersonal relationships. His sense of self comes from his lonely pursuit of art and an autonomous sense of self, not from anyone else.

For Kate, however, the major influence in her life comes from being in love. The source of Kate’s love is an older, refined man who is referred to throughout The Country Girls as “Mr. Gentleman.” As brought out by Mary Jo Salter in her essay “The Country Girls Trilogy”: “Townspeople call him Mr. Gentleman for his riches and refinement, but he is aptly named as Kate’s lover, too; never again will a man treat her so gallantly, nor will she love another man so much” (Salter 2). Kate has deep feelings for Mr. Gentleman, and thoughts of him seem to occupy every minute of her day, expressed by O’Brien in very adolescent clichés: “When he walked into the room I knew that I loved him more than life itself”
(O’Riordan 87). When the two are driving through a snowstorm and Mr. Gentleman has to get out of the car to clear off the windshield wipers, Kate says that “even for the second he was away I was lonesome for him” (O’Riordan 90). Yet Kate’s love is not the kind of lust that Stephen felt for Emma, as seen when Kate reminisces about the two of them going out rowing:

“It was a happy time, and he often kissed my hand and said I was his freckle-faced daughter. “Are you my father?” I asked wistfully, because it was nice playing make-believe with Mr. Gentleman.

“Yes, I’m your father,” he said as he kissed the length of my arm, and he promised that when I went to Dublin later on he would be a very attentive father (O’Riordan 101).

Kate’s feelings for Mr. Gentleman do not have something of a romantic love to them, but this exists alongside a very childish sort of love for a father figure. The combination of these two emotions create a kind of disturbing incestuous fantasy, as Mr. Gentleman calls Kate his “daughter” while attempting to seduce her.

This “very affectionate father” is one of several men who will come into Kate’s life and end up being a disappointment. The great pain that Kate suffers when this happens is in part because Kate focuses so much on the man that she forgets about her own sense of self outside of that context: “All that dreaming of men, and no thinking about her own plans regardless of them, will one day be Kate’s undoing” (Salter 2). Love interests make up the largest part of Kate’s being, much to her devastation when these same men disappear. The Country Girls ends with Mr. Gentleman sending a telegram saying that he must not see Kate anymore, and this is like a small death in her life (Salter 3). Once Kate reads the telegram that puts an end to their romantic/parental relationship, she feels like she can’t go on:

“I cried on the bed for a long time, until I began to feel very cold. Somehow one feels colder after hours of crying...I came out to the kitchen and took two aspirins with my tea. It was almost certain that I wouldn’t sleep that night” (O’Riordan 175). As Gilligan puts it, the life that Kate is looking for and cannot seem to survive without is one of an “interdependence of love and care” (Gilligan 135). Kate does not know how to exist without the defining force of Mr. Gentleman in her life, and, unlike Stephen, she cannot put him out of mind in pursuit of art or fulfillment apart from other people.

Stephen Dedalus wishes to function autonomously, apart from the world with only his work as company. This can be seen in the relationships with parents, friends, and lovers throughout A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. However, this is not the thinking of a fully-formed adult, as brought out by Gilligan: “The concept of the separate self and of the moral principle uncompromised by the constraints of reality is an adolescent ideal, the elaborately wrought philosophy of a Stephen Dedalus, whose flight we know to be in jeopardy” (Gilligan 166). Stephen’s wish for total separation from others in his sense of self is not an intelligent and attainable desire, but an “adolescent ideal,” something that needs to be adjusted in his growth towards real adulthood.

Kate Brady, on the other hand, has no sense of self existing apart from the relationships that she has with others. The dependence that she has on the love interests in her life ultimately lead to her sadness and loneliness, as she does not have a feeling of self apart from these men. Gilligan discusses the kind of childish dependence we observe in Kate: “Childlike in the vulnerability of their dependence and consequent fear of abandonment, they claim to wish only to please but in return for their goodness they expect to be loved and cared for” (Gilligan 135).
Kate is very vulnerable in her relationships, and when she does not receive this love and care, she feels abandoned and does not know how to function.

Stephen’s separation makes him unable to form any permanent or meaningful ties to the people he spends his day to day life with, while Kate’s dependence on others for a sense of identity keeps her from being able to function on her own. While O’Brien deviated from Joyce’s ideas in his bildungsroman in her own portrayal of growth centered around a female character, both of the characters’ developments are somewhat stereotypical of what is expected in men and women in the adolescent stage. As brought out by Carol Gilligan, these stages must be grown out of to develop and mature into well-adjusted adults. Whether or not Stephen and Kate make these necessary adjustments plays a part in the sequential stories, Joyce’s *Ulysses* and O’Brien’s *The Lonely Girl*, respectively.

Works Cited
Gilligan, Carol. “In a Different Voice: Women’s Conceptions of the Self and of Morality.” *West* 134-175.