

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EPIPHANIES IN JAMES JOYCE'S *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN*

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Abstract

In conventional terms, epiphany is an artistic inspiration that is essential in creation of art. It is an integral part of the writings of James Joyce. His aesthetic beliefs evoke him to use the technique of epiphany in his works like "Dubliners", Stephen Hero, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Ulysses, etc. According to Joyce, techniques like epiphanies, stream of consciousness, free indirect narrative, etc. help an author to record transient instants of metaphysical beauty. Epiphanies are the narrative base of his novels. This paper will differentiate religious and scientific epiphanies from secular epiphanies stating that the former are objective in nature and once the truth is revealed, a symbol or phenomena always exist as a form of proof.

Paper Identification



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All at once, I see it and I know at once what it is: epiphany.

- James Joyce, Stephen Hero

In conventional terms, epiphany is an artistic inspiration that is essential in creation of

art. It is an integral part of the writings of James Joyce. His aesthetic beliefs evoke him to use the technique of epiphany in his works like “Dubliners”, *Stephen Hero*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, etc. According to Joyce, techniques like epiphanies, stream of consciousness, free indirect narrative, etc. help an author to record transient instants of metaphysical beauty. Epiphanies are the narrative base of his novels.

Merriam Webster dictionary defines epiphany as “a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something”. The general epiphanies encountered are religious, scientific, and secular. An instance for religious epiphany could be Coming of Magi and revelation of the divine form of Christ, scientific epiphany could be exemplified by Newton’s epiphany of gravitational force on earth while sitting under a tree or Archimedes eureka moment regarding the law of buoyancy and examples of secular epiphany are abound in writings of James Joyce.

What differentiates religious and scientific epiphanies from secular epiphanies is that the former are objective in nature and once the truth is revealed, a symbol or phenomena always exist as a form of proof(for instance, cross in the case of religious epiphany and in case of scientific epiphanies the phenomenon can be proved time and again).The latter on the other hand are evanescent in nature and need to be recorded, which makes them subjective in nature. In *Stephen Hero* at one point, Stephen claims that ‘one function of writing is to record epiphanies’ (216).

The task of a writer is therefore, to catch the fleeting moments of epiphany that occur in the mind and translate into a language. Joyce’s collected epiphanies in the *Stephen Hero* became raw material of *A Portrait*. They artistically transform to constitute the chief moments in the stream of consciousness of Stephen Dedalus. They can be representative of “ironical observations of slips, little errors and gestures”, says Stanislaus Joyce in *My Brother’s Keeper* (134-5).

Joyce’s stance on epiphanies sometimes seems ironic as they are preceded or succeeded by moments of misery and despair. He does not use epiphanies as subjects of beauty in a text rather deflates the spiritual manifestation through introduction of ordinary and mundane. For instance, Chapter 1 closes with a sense of justice ensuing Stephen as he complains against Father Dolan. Nevertheless, it soon deflates as the priest and the rector laugh over it. The epiphanic act of “surrendering himself” in Chapter 2 to sexual encounters is disillusioned as he realizes the grosser realities of bodily existence in Chapter 3.

The major epiphany at the end of Chapter 4 is preceded by an offer of vocation in priesthood by the Director of studies. “A sudden spiritual manifestation” occurs in the mind and modifies the ordinary and mundane into imaginary figures in *A Portrait with the bird girl* epiphany. Stephen finds a handsome girl standing in the water with her “kilted boldly about her waist and dovetailed behind her.” This is the moment when Stephen realizes the calling of his self as an artist. His mind cries out, “To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, and to recreate life out of life!” (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 132).

The epiphany which occurred at the ending of chapter three was the most intense and difficult epiphany in the novel, but the epiphany which occurs in chapter four is the most important one, both for the narrative and for Stephen’s character. It is the culmination of Stephen’s inner conflicts during his entire childhood and adolescence, a single moment of utter clarity which defines his character from that point on and through all other works of Joyce. Being the last epiphany Stephen experiences in the novel, it is also a statement made by Joyce, which will be addressed later in this section.

As with many elements in the novel, this epiphany is again a result of a conflict Stephen faces after deciding to dedicate his life to the Catholic Church, God and the Blessed Virgin. Stephen’s life of piety and religious restrictiveness do not last for long, as the principles and restrictions he adheres to and decides to blindly follow are in complete conflict with his true nature. He goes as far as to intentionally shut out his own senses as a means of disciplining them, which is a manner of an ultimate sacrifice for Stephen. During the chapter, he starts sensing this conflict eating at him and making him feel at deep unease. Stephen’s disappointment with religion and the church start to emerge again, creating in him further unrest. The carnal desires which he had tried so hard to suppress, start eating at him once again, with the only thing keeping him away from turning back to his old self being his self-discipline and prayer.

He seemed to feel a flood slowly advancing towards his naked feet and to be waiting for the first faint timid noiseless wavelet to touch his fevered skin. Then, almost at the instant of that touch, almost at the verge of sinful consent, he found himself standing far away from the flood upon a dry shore, saved by a sudden act of the will or a sudden ejaculation; and, seeing the silver line of the flood far away and beginning again its slow advance towards his feet, a new thrill of power and satisfaction shook his soul to know that he had not yielded nor undone all (Joyce 188).

Stephen had been following his religious discipline diligently until then, attending masses regularly, keeping his rosary in his pocket, reading Bible, etc. Nevertheless, he realizes that he does not want to devote his life to a cause he does not fully believe in. Thus, there is a fluctuation of affirmations and rejections played on through major and minor epiphanies, which occur at the conclusion of each chapter.

Stephen's definition of "an epiphany" is "a sudden spiritual manifestation" whether in "the vulgarity of speech and or of gesture" appears in *Stephen Hero* but there is no mention of the term in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (212). Wayne Booth believes that in order to keep an impersonal and indifferent relation with Stephen, Joyce expunged the term in *A Portrait*. The critics have always been divided on the issue whether Stephen Dedalus of *A Portrait* is James Joyce or not, but these epiphanies keep the two persona apart.

These epiphanies ensure a sense of awareness and self- development leading to the formation of an artist. They become a very personal experience in the life of Stephen as they reveal many challenges confronted by him. He awakens to his artistic calling and mould his "non serviam credo" (I will not serve belief). Such truth revealing moments build a sense of understanding in him, which in turn, contributes to the genre, bildungsroman. Epiphanies let the unconscious reveal it to the conscious, aiding Stephen in understanding himself better. It also leads to progression of the narrative structure of the novel as well as Stephen's consciousness.

Epiphanies included within them both the desire and fear. They could be triggered by both external as well as internal stimulus and make the self powerful in the external world by setting it free from fears that were inhibiting the desires. In the bird girl epiphany, Stephen is fearful of hell and sin but the epiphany sets him free to act and be the individual he wants to be. Stephen's epiphanies not only give pleasure to him but also the reader as he or she goes through the never-ending journey of discoveries.

In addition, unlike the novel these epiphanies do not end and shall go on and on as long as Stephen is moving ahead in his life. They shall always be part of his life keeping his conscious alive and never letting him fall in the trap of his ego. In conclusion, this paper has shown the importance of epiphanies to Stephen's character development, the narrative aspect of the novel, Joyce's aesthetic theory and philosophy and Joyce's work in general, focusing on different epiphanies as to show the different ways Joyce constructs epiphanies and the world around his characters. This specific novel offers good insight into young Joyce's stance

towards epiphanies and how he perceived them in his own personal life. All of the important epiphanies and crucial moments in the novel were presented and elaborated on, creating a complete and cohesive picture of the importance of epiphanies in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

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