

Joycean Epiphany: A Subjective Experience**Deblagno Basu**Independent Research Scholar
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Balibela, Arambagh, Hooghly**Abstract**

The aesthetic art of transforming the mundane and tediousness of everyday life which characterises the works of James Joyce would not have achieved its desired impact without the incorporation of his very own take on Christian 'epiphany'. This paper intends to examine the subjective nature of epiphany through its analysis of some of Joyce's seminal texts such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and three story from his *Dubliners*- *Araby*, *Eveline*, and *The Dead*. It also assesses how the intentional open-endedness of the epiphanies reinforce its subjective nature by leaving the audience free to derive their own meanings.

Keywords: Epiphany, James Joyce, Revelation, Experience, Life.

Introduction

With the rise in number of Roman Catholic churches and the decline of Church of Ireland or Presbyterian and Methodist Churches whose congregation decreased from eight percent in the second half of the nineteenth century to less than three percent in 1981, much of Irish society and politics came to be infused with starkly Catholic tones.

Because of his Christian upbringing, as enforced by his conservative Roman Catholic parents, Joyce was steeped in Catholic religious ideas and his use of religious doctrines in his works demonstrates the importance of the Catholic faith in Ireland. However, unlike his fellow Irishmen William Butler Yeats, C.S. Lewis, George Moore and others, in whose works

can be found a perfect symbiosis of art and religion, for Joyce, it was always constant opposition.

Dedalus, closely corresponding to Joyce's fictional self as discovered in *Ulysses*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* along with Stephen Hero, the premature draft of *Portrait*, traces the intellectual, moral and spiritual dilemma of Joyce with regard to his muddled faith. The young Catholic Irishman, Stephan Dedalus, in *Portrait*, initially strives to strike a balance between the understanding of his faith and that of the Church but finally announces his departure from his cultural traditions and the constraints that his family imposed to ascend to the world of arts and the material pleasures that emerge as a part of it. This perplexity continues to root itself in comprehending the character of Stephen in both *Portrait* and *Ulysses*. However, this never-ending endeavour of Joyce that veiled his life, is a struggle through which the artist emerged victorious.

For instance, Joyce adopted the concept of the epiphany from Catholic doctrines but amended its meaning for artistic purposes.

Epiphany

Derived from Greek, the word 'epiphany' means a sudden manifestation of deity. In Christian theology it also symbolises the manifestation of a hidden message for the benefit of others, a message for their salvation. In the context of the Roman Catholic Church, the epiphany refers to the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6, which commemorates the revelation of Jesus's divinity to the Magi. He found a certain resemblance between the mystery of transubstantiation in the Catholic mass and in his endeavour as an artist to change the bread of everyday life into something with permanent artistic life. It is no surprise then, that he adapted the idea of epiphany to suit his own artistic ends.

Joyce himself never defined what he meant by epiphany but some idea of what it means may be derived from how Stephen Daedalus defines it in *Stephen Hero*, an early version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Stephen says that epiphanies are a sudden and momentary showing forth or disclosure of one's authentic inner self. This disclosure might manifest itself in vulgarities of speech, or gestures, or memorable phrases of the mind (Stephen Hero). Joyce's brother Stanislaus saw epiphanies as something like the records of Freudian slips. He claimed that epiphanies were ironical observations of slips, errors and gestures by which people betrayed the very things they were most careful to conceal- 'little

errors and gestures – mere straws in the wind – by which people betrayed the very things they were most careful to conceal’ (Lavin). Terry Eagleton explains that epiphany, James Joyce coins it as sudden moments of revelation, is “a religious term which he hijacked for secular purposes” (Eagleton). In *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Morris Beja limits the definition of the epiphany to a “sudden spiritual manifestation,” stating that this manifestation is “out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it” (Beja).

It may be that Joyce got some of his ideas of epiphanies from his reading of the Italian author Gabriel D' Annunzio's *L'Epifania del Fuoco* (The Epiphany of Fire). The epiphanies reflect aspects of Joyce's life at the time they were written, a formative period of Joyce's life. They are like snapshots, recording specific and minute fragments of life and they are presented without commentary. Often these fragments appear without a given context making it difficult to determine Joyce's intention and meaning. Some of the epiphanies are rendered as dramatic dialogue while others are simple prose descriptions or prose poems.

Out of seventy-one epiphanies Joyce wrote, only forty survive in print (Bowen and Carens). After January 1904, Joyce did not write any further epiphanies. However individual epiphanies were incorporated in Joyce's later works, including *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, *Stephen Hero* and *Finnegans Wake*, with fewer references in *Exiles* and *Dubliners*.

Major and Minor Epiphanies in *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*

Joyce's *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man* clearly demonstrates such epiphanies to signify the moment when all of a sudden, the personae probes into the heart of things and experiences a sudden spiritual manifestation. In the artistry of literary device Stephen's rejection of priesthood, his peeling of nationality, his self-search in an artist in exile are presented through certain revelation meticulously and forcefully.

Minor epiphanies mark all the stages of Stephen's understanding, as when the feel of Eileen's hand shows him what Tower of Ivory means, or as when the word 'Foetus' carved on a school desk, suddenly focuses for him in brute clarity his 'monstrous' way of life' (Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*). Major epiphanies occurring at the end of each chapter, mark the chief revelations of the nature of his environment and of his destiny in it.

The epiphanies may contain a revelation of a person's character, brief and fleeting, occurring by virtue of some physical trait in the person, as the way big Corrigan looked in the bath:

He had skin the same colour as the turf-coloured bog water in the shallow end of the bath and when he walked along the side his feet slapped loudly on the wet tiles and at every step his thighs shook a little because he was fat (Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*).

In this kind of use, as revelation though one or two physical traits of the whole mass-formation of a personality, the epiphany is almost precisely duplicable in (Charles) Dickens, as in the spectacle of Miss Havisham leaning on her crutch beside the rotten bridecake, or of Jaggers flourishing his white handkerchief and biting his great forefinger.

The minor personalities in the Portrait are reduced to something very like a Dickensian 'signature' – as Heron with his bird-beaked face and bird-name, Davin with his peasant turns of speech, Lynch whose 'long slender flattened skull beneath the long-pointed cap brought before Stephen's mind the image of a hooded reptile (Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*).'

The epiphany may also be a kind of 'still life' with which are associated deep and complex layers of experience and emotion. In the following passage for instance the sordor of Stephen's home, the apprehensive and guilty image of the bath at Clongowes, and the bestiality he associates with the bogholes of Ireland, are illuminated simultaneously by a jar of drippings on the table.

He drained his third cup of watery tea to the dregs and set to chewing the crusts of fried bread that were scattered near him, staring into the dark pool of the jar. The yellow dripping had been scooped out like a boghole, and the pool under it brought back to his memory the dark turf coloured water of the bath at Clongowes (Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*).

Here the whole complex of home, school, and nation is epitomized in one object and shot through with the emotion of rejection.

The epiphany can be the result of a gradual development of the emotional content of associations, as they accrete with others. Among Stephen's childish impressions is that of 'a

woman standing at the half door of a cottage with a child in her arms' and "it would be lovely to sleep for one night in that cottage before the fire of smoking turf, in the dark lit by the fire, in the warm dark, breathing the smell of the peasants, air and rain and turf and corduroy... (Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man)"

The early impression enters into emotional context, later, with the story Davin tells him about stopping at night at the cottage of a peasant woman, and Stephen's image of the woman is for him an epiphany of the soul of Ireland: 'a bat like soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness.'

The epiphany is dynamic, activated by the form-seeking urgency in experience, and itself feeding later revelations. At the point of exile, Stephen feels, 'under the deepened dusk':

the thoughts and desires of the race to which he belonged flitting like bats, across the dark country lanes, under trees by the edges of streams and near the pool mottled bogs (Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man).

The major epiphanies in the novel occur as the symbolic climaxes of the larger dialectical movements constituting each of the 5 chapters. According to Hugh Kenner, each of the chapters begins with a multitude of warring impressions, and each develops toward an emotionally apprehended unity.

At the end of each chapter in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man epiphany is skilfully used. This epiphany is noticeable in the resolution of the conflicts and the harmonisation of the several elements that build up the chapter. For example, the first chapter deals with the baffling impressions of a child which enable us to perceive the child's conflict, unconscious in the beginning but conscious as the child grows up. The conflict is between his implicit faith in the authority of his elders and his actual feeling of insecurity. His elders—Mr. Casey, Dante, the Jesuit teachers, senior students at the school, are assumed to represent absolute justice and moral and intellectual congruity. But the child finds bitter quarrels at home over Parnell and the functions of the church. At school he faces the cruel flippancy of the boys, the moral deterioration suggested by the 'smuggling' in the square and the theft of the altar wine, the callousness of Father Dolan with his pandybat (Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man). Thus, there is a marked difference between what the child expects

and what he really meets in life. This internal conflict is almost ended when Stephen meets the rector and tells him about his plight and miserable experiences. Justice wins and Stephen is hailed by his schoolfellows as a hero when he comes out from the office of rector. Thus, Stephen's harmony with human environment is splendidly established. Thus, the first remarkable epiphany in the novel is here in the resolution of conflict and victory of justice.

Second chapter describes other complications in Stephens' life. His family is shifted to Dublin and his life at home becomes fatal and he feels very uneasy and isolated. He is internally shaken when he hears his father's account of his talk with Father Conmee, the rector of Clongowes about the pandybat incident. What he regarded as the triumph of justice has taken the form of a joke. Then comes the scene where Stephen is accused of heresy because of the manner in which he has expressed an idea in one of his essays. Some notorious schoolboys take advantage of this and thrash him with a cane and cabbage stump, but more distressing is the increasing hatred for father on the part of Stephen.

On the journey to Cork, Simon Dedalus emerges as a dull, confused and irresponsible kind of person. On the other hand, Stephen's idealistic desire for beauty and purity translate into a vague erotic fantasy of the girl Mercedes who often comes into his dreams. All these incongruous ingredients constitute a conflict that is resolved towards the end of this chapter. It approaches in the shape of a new vision of the relationships between the elements of experience. Stephen's dream of Mercedes is united with the embrace of a whore. It is sin here but is sublimated into something gentle and beautiful and emotionally securing: "Tears of joy and relief shone in his delighted eyes. In her arms he felt, that he had suddenly become strong and fearless and sure of himself. He closed his eyes, surrendering himself to her, body and mind, conscious of nothing in the world but the dark pressure of her softly parting lips" (Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*).

In chapter three, the conflict emerges out of the sense of sin and demands of religion. Stephen frequently goes to satisfy his sexual urge among the prostitutes but his conscience always pricks him for this moral deterioration: "He had sinned mortally not once but many times and he knew that, while he stood in danger of eternal damnation for the first sin alone, by every succeeding sin multiplied his guilt and his punishment" (Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*). In other words, he feels agony at the thought of distancing God, yet he keeps on committing sin. When he tries to pay, his soul tells him that his misdeed is too

serious to be forgiven by a false tribute to God. The summit of this internal conflict approaches when he hears the soul-shaking sermons of Father Arnall in which he has very horribly depicted the world of hell. He feels as if overcome by terror. This conflict ends when after a long walk, he goes to a chapel and confesses his sin in front of a priest and thus purifies his soul. It brings to him immense relief. This is another example of epiphany: "He had confessed, and God had pardoned him. His soul was made for and holy once more, holy and happy. The past was past. The ciborium had come to him" (Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*).

In Chapter 4 one of the very famous epiphanies used by Joyce is presented. Elizabeth Drew has appropriately commented: "More complex than any other is the description of the figure of the girl on the beach after the vision of "the hawklike man flying sunward above the sea," and the suggestion of all the emotional associations which radiate from the glimpse of her".

A girl stood before him in midstream: alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flash.... Her state blue skirts were kilted boldly about her waist and dovetailed behind her. Her bosom was as a bird's, soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some dark-plumage dove. But her long fair hair was girlish; and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face. (Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*)

Stephen has just experienced the certitude of his vocation as artist and this strange and beautiful figure is a symbol of this. She is Stephen's Muse, as it were. She is mysterious, for all such spiritual revelations rest on mystery. She is birdlike, for the message has come to him from the sky in the symbol of flight. She is a seabird, standing in the flowing waters of life; she is also associated with the dove, bringing to mind the Christian stories of the Annunciation, and the descent of the Holy Ghost—the gift of tongues. Her blue skirts are Mary's colour: she is the mother of the Word. But Venus, goddess of beauty, had her doves too, and the pagan symbolism of Venus rising from the sea and being welcomed from the air is there too. The seaweed, though, making its sign on her flesh, is emerald: she is also Ireland, the emerald isle. She is Stephen's own race, whose uncreated conscience he will forge. She is

also Woman, “mortal beauty,” for it is from the mortal matter of the earth that the artist creates the immortal word which shall not die.

Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life !... On and on and on and on! (Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*)

This radiant image of his inspiration as it appeared to young Stephen as a romantic adolescent, is written in the language of romantic ecstasy but basically it remains the same, though he creates a bitter parody of this scene in *Ulysses*. The whole atmosphere of Joyce's later books is very different, but all that this figure evokes is in everything he ever wrote: the mingling of Christian and pagan tradition; Ireland; Woman; the flow of river and sea as symbols of the waters of time and life. These are always the primal matters to which he gives a “new and radiant body” in language. A flight of Daedalian fantasy can be perceived in her, which is a metaphor for Stephen’s own liberating flight (Bowen, *Epiphanies*, *Stephen’s Diary* and the *Narrative Perspective of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*).

In Chapter 5, Stephen reconsiders and examines all those factors that have exercised emotional claims upon him —his family, his friends, church, nation and so on. All these claims crumble in front of his commitment to art. He has now evolved his doctrine of aesthetics. The final epiphany of the novel comes when Stephen declares his determination to go to ‘encounter the reality of experience’ (Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*) and invokes the old artificer Daedalus to help him.

Nak Hun makes a critical point stating that it is essentially the response of the mind to an exterior object which gives rise to an epiphany. He further states, “The memorable phase of the mind in which an epiphany is achieved does not last long for a mind is always moving, changing, and flowing in ‘a stream of consciousness’” (Song) .

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is a testimony of this vacillation of Stephen’s mind. Each chapter shatters the synthesis achieved at the end of the previous one, to move on to a new one. “Evanescent” is the term Hun uses to describe the essence of Stephen’s epiphanies, hence necessitating their recording to retain their value (Song). The conception is

achieved when the recording is done by the amalgamation of epiphany and art. The epiphany is, therefore, essentially an artistic stimulation, and is indispensable in the creation of art.

While Beja's chapter in *A Companion to Joyce Studies* provides a comprehensive chart which maps out the instances in his works which real-life epiphanies appear in the novels, there is a marked scarcity of actual epiphanies in *Dubliners*. In letters, Joyce expressed his intention to present his epiphanies as a manuscript, but they eventually were woven into the novels and not collected until long after Joyce's death. So, for the stories of *Dubliners*, Joyce had to draw from other sources to create the epiphany—primarily from synthetic sources, such as the one used in *Stephen Hero* for the cause of the epiphanic collection.

Epiphany leading to coming-of-age in Araby

James Joyce's *Araby* for instance show an adolescent boy's continuing process of self-realisation through his disillusionment with the bleak reality of Dublin in the early twentieth century. Brought up in the dreary and deadening surroundings in conservative Catholic cultures with his uncle and aunt, the lonely sensitive boy finds no outlets to express his feelings. Torn between harsh reality and imagination, the boy searches light and a relish of romance. the protagonist's infatuation has him fantasising about his friend Mangan's sister, the only light amidst the darkness, in his romantic vision- "The light from a street lamp illuminates the girl's figure, highlighting the white curve of her neck and the white border of her petticoat, and it touches upon her hair and her hand so that she appears to the boy as a Renaissance painting of the Madonna" (Joyce, *Araby*).

To win her over, he willingly takes on the obstacle of going to *Araby* and bringing her a gift- "If I go I will bring you something." His uncle's late arrival and the slowness of the train diminishes the protagonist's chances of reaching the bazaar and on arrival, the emptiness of the setting makes him timid and even disillusioned- "In that dark silence the boundaries of his small, private world of the imagination dissolve" (Joyce, *Araby*).

The boy is distraught seeing two men counting money on a 'salver'- a symbol of the moneylenders in the temple. He is betrayed by the corrupt commercialism which suffocates romantic feelings. Also, beside the *Café Chantant*, he hears the falling of the coin which is a clear indication of a society which has lost its romantic dream or spiritual innocence. In

Roman Catholic context, the fall of coins further connotes the decadent transactional nature that the world has succumbed to and brings to mind Judas' betrayal of Jesus in exchange for thirty silver coins. "Remembering with difficulty why I had come", he makes an effort to overcome his last obstacle, buying something to win his love. The degradation of spiritual values by venal materialism is again illumined in the form of a dramatic epiphany in the following scene of bargaining:

- O, I never said such a thing!
- O, but you did!
- O, but I didn't!
- Didn't she say that?
- Yes, I heard her.
- O, there's a...fib! (Joyce, Araby)

The seductive conversation between the salesgirl and her two companions makes him realise that Mangan's sister, who to him was a 'chalice' to bear 'safely through a throng of foes' is a girl like any other. She would not care if he fulfilled his promise.

The boy's repetitive use of 'the young lady' implies a parallel between his love for the girl and the two gentlemen's 'love' for this 'lady'. Like theirs, his love for her is also for physical attraction. In a sense the boy is being hypocritical and vain like the adults, although at this point, he cannot understand it. However, just 'out of a sense of duty', the shop woman asks the boy if he wants to buy something.

Feeling unwanted by the woman, he says, "No, thank you" and he gets disappointed as nothing works out as expected. The boy perceives that his idealised vision of Araby is baffled along with his idealised vision of Mangan's sister and of love. He feels foolish about everything he has done supposedly for love for the girl (Joyce, Araby).

As he leaves the bazaar, the description of his internal desolation heightened with the external bleakness of the lights going off, all builds to the ending's epiphany, "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity: and my eyes burned with anguish and anger" (Joyce, Araby).

Epiphany leading to recognition for need of emancipation in Eveline

Joyce manifests his short story, *Eveline*, as one that depicts a clash between personal aspirations and social prejudices. Eveline's story depicts the pitfalls of holding to the past, i.e., she is obsessed with a dilemma either to continue her domestic life rooted in the past, taking care of her abusive and tyrannic father as per promises made to her mother or to possess a new married life with Frank, her lover at Buenos Aires.

The eponymous character feels happy to leave her hard life, yet at the next moment she worries about fulfilling promises to her dead mother. She grasps the letters she's written to her father and brother, revealing her inability to let go of those family relationships, despite her father's cruelty and her brother's absence. She clings to the older and more pleasant memories and imagines what other people want her to do or will do for her.

Although, she sees Frank as a rescuer, saving her from her domestic situation she suspends herself between the call of home and the past and the call of new experiences and the future, unable to make a decision. The epiphany that takes place for the title character in "Eveline" is the realization that she cannot move forward with her life and the fact that she will not be able to find true happiness. When Eveline Hill is at the docks and is about to start a new and promising life in a distant country, she realizes her duty to her family. She fully understands why she has to stay in Dublin even though in the long run she will not benefit from the stay. This becomes apparent as she thinks to herself as she moves through crowd on the docks and hears an organ player: "Down far in the avenue she could hear the organ playing. She knew the air. Strange that it should come that very night to remind her of the promise to her mother, her promise to keep the home together for as long as she could" (Joyce, *Eveline*). Eveline's promise to her mother in her mind acts as an epiphany obliging her to stay in a distressing situation and forfeit her chance of ever being truly happy.

Epiphany leading to recognition of essence of life in The Dead

It is fitting and quite clearly deliberate – that *The Dead*, which is both the finale of *Dubliners* and its coda; and which is the culmination of Joyce's art as a short story writer; should be set at, or just before the feast of the Epiphany.

Gabriel and Gretta are a happy couple in Ireland. They attend an annual Christmas party. The couple has been a shining point in the party. However, this night turns out to be a bad impression which made Gabriel disappointed. Three things take place one by one. At first, Lily uses the wrong words to amuse them. Then, the different ideas on politics result in a disharmony relationship between the dancer and Gabriel. The worst thing is that after listening to a song, Gretta can't control her feeling and indulge in the memory of the young lover Micheal Furey, who died for his love to her when she was 17 years old. This love story not only brings the surprise to Gabriel but also unbalance. Gretta's tears only make Gabriel firmly believe the long distance between them-not from space but from psychology. Gabriel feels "humiliated" and assailed by a "shameful consciousness of his own person", and he understands something from the life (Joyce, *The Dead*).

Gabriel's discovery that his wife was thinking of a former lover and not him in the climactic moment determines the nature of the epiphany that must come at the end. The revelation triggers a surfacing of internal emotions. His wife asleep, Gabriel is forced to face himself alone, the hero at the end of his tragic journey. While his thoughts and realizations bring about sadness, as the narrator states, "The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree" (Joyce, *The Dead*).

His approach to the epiphany is a more intellectual one. He sees his life as passionless and that he has never experienced love in his life. The mounting emotions combine with the rational revelations to bring a spiritual element to the resounding epiphany, "His soul swooned softly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon the living and the dead" (Joyce, *The Dead*).

Conclusion

Richard Ellmann spent time explaining the epiphanies and their symbolism in Joyce's writing and peppered his biography of Joyce with instances in which the epiphanies came into play. His exposition of the epiphany transcends into the deeply personal and commonplace:

The artist, [Joyce] felt, . . . must look for them not among gods but among men, in casual, unostentatious, even unpleasant moments. . . . Sometimes the epiphanies are 'eucharistic,'

another term ...borrowed by Joyce from Christianity and invested with secular meaning. These are moments of fullness or passion. Sometimes the epiphanies are rewarding for another reason, that they convey precisely the flavor of unpalatable experiences (Joyce, Selected Letters of James Joyce).

Joyce never used the word Epiphany in connection with Dubliners, or as a term for a structural device in longer fiction. His own Epiphanies were all recordings of actual experiences or moods. None were invented. In fact, by his own definition, they could not be invented but had to be recorded.

Drawing on the notion of epiphany being a subjective realization and experience, Zack Bowen remarks, "The truth of his epiphany is hardly the singular purpose of the artist. In the sense of being capable of self-recognition we are all artists, and as artists we need not necessarily equate the validity of our epiphanies with unadulterated truth any more than Stephan Dedalus' visions are unblemished truths" (Bowen, Epiphanies, Stephen's Diary and the Narrative Perspective of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man).

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