

James Joyce and Aesthetic Experiences of Epiphany-A study of Dubliners

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Abstract

James Joyce endeavored to join what most other Irish writers of his time had held separate and like Balzac by having a scrupulous view of life he kept his comedy human. In his attempt to make language polyphonic rather than melodic in quality and out of his mastery over psychoanalytic field James Joyce created a verbal vision of life which in wholesome leads us to his aesthetic theory in general and to the theory of 'epiphany' in particular. Theory of Epiphany as expressed by Joyce in *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is central to complete understanding of James Joyce as a novelist. All his successive novels are illustrations or a study of a practical application of this aesthetic theory. In his process of writing and revising the same again he surveyed the human landscape so meticulously from infancy to senility, from birth to death that he can be termed, as one of his biographer Richard Ellmann states ' a gay, morose, trusting, suspicious, uxorious and misogynous'.

KEYWORDS: Polyphonic, Melodic, Psychoanalytic, Morose, Uxorious and Misogynous.

Unlike most traditional writers James Joyce's writing, as deemed by many critics, is enigma and his text as formidable challenge. He is known more for his exile and deviation from literary traditions and for his influence that he has been upon other writers than upon his critics. To the English he is still an eccentric and very Irish whereas American regards him as great experimentalist. Joyce's aesthetic theory of Epiphany with its techniques of turning inward which penetrates to the innermost recesses of the mental process and experience of man provides a profitable way of approaching his works. Like Yeasts, Pound and Eliot, Joyce also exalted Dante at the expense of Milton. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine had far reaching effect on James Joyce's outlook of art where he came to conclude that those things are beautiful which when seen please us. Like Shelley, Joyce also spoke of the true and beautiful and left of the good however he was later scandalized as condoning immortal art however, in reality he was opposing only a narrow didacticism. The present paper attempts to explore James Joyce's Vision of art as expressed by *Stephen Hero* and some of his experiences of Epiphany as explained in his famous book of short stories *Dubliners*.

In his attempt to make language polyphonic rather than melodic in quality and out of his mastery over psychoanalytic field Joyce created a verbal vision of life which in wholesome leads us to his aesthetic theory in general and to the theory of 'epiphany' in particular. Harry Levin considers that "the Epiphany is a new literary technique. It is Joyce's contribution to that series of development which converts narrative into short story, supplant plot with style and turn the raconteur into candid-camera expert" (Harry 29). Theory of Epiphany as expressed by Joyce in *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is central to complete understanding of James Joyce as a novelist.

All his successive novels are illustrations or enlargements of a practical application of this aesthetic theory. M. H. Abrams depicts epiphany as, “a manifestation or showing forth and by Christian thinkers was used to signify manifestations of God’s presence within the created world. Epiphany has become the standard term for the description, frequent in modern poetry and prose fiction, of the sudden flare into revelation of an ordinary object or scene” (80). William Tindall states “the feast of the Epiphany, which occurs on January 6, celebrates the arrival of the three kings at a manger”, according to a myth, “at the manger, they saw nothing more than baby, saw something more. This baby, now apprehended and showing forth, is the radiant body” (Tindall 11). James Joyce explains his own conception of art as an Epiphany. Joyce adopted this term to more or less to secular experience to signify a sudden sense of radiance or a sudden revelation of whatness of a thing that one may feel while perceiving a commonplace object. To Joyce it is a sudden spiritual manifestation that enables the artist to have a deep insight into the lives of others and capturing some of the most delicate and evanescent of moment the artist can and does find a clue to the meaning of human life as a whole. An illustrative description of the theory of Epiphany is given in Stephen Hero where in chapter XXV, Stephen explains his aesthetic theory to an apathetic Cranly. Stephen says:

By an Epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to records these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate evanescent of moments. He told Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany. (Stephen Hero 188-99)

In fact an epiphany is more than one thing for Joyce. It is the process by which we may suddenly apprehend the hidden truth of even some ordinary events. It is a process by which the common everyday incident is transmuted into a profound experience, an evanescent moment whose significance is sometimes not clear into moment in time. In addition, it is the essential and elusive quality in art. Stephen refers to Plato in order to give an additional support, “Plato, I believe, said that beauty is the splendour of truth. I don’t think that it has a meaning but the true and beautiful are akin.” (243-44) Art and beauty is akin to truth and to Joyce an Epiphany is a sudden insight into truth or beauty. Beauty is inwardly related to truth because both are static. Here, to Joyce mere a thing is not as important as that of its being a thing and Epiphany refers to a change in the perception of the observer which is having profound significance. Stephen explains all this with a reference to Thomas Aquinas. He says:

You know what Aquinas says: the three things requisite for beauty are integrity, a wholeness, symmetry and radiance. Some day I will expand that sentence into a treatise. Consider the performance of your own mind when confronted with any object, hypothetically beautiful. Your mind to apprehend that object divides the entire universe into two parts, the object, and the void which is not the object, to apprehend it you must lift it is away from everything else: and then you perceive that it is one integral thing, thing that is a thing. You recognize its integrity. Isn’t that so?” (189)

Dubliners contains fifteen stories although lacking in coherence each is having a beginning, a middle and an end. Responding to the objections raised by its first publisher Grant Richard James Joyce writes, “I have written my book with considerable care, in spite of a hundred difficulties and in accordance with what I understand to be the classical tradition of my art” (Gilbert 268). In this book Joyce expresses his contempt for the forces which subdue and deform the souls of Dubliners by the Dubliners. These fifteen stories are passive account of their inhabitants and observers which lack action. The city along with its all kinds of odour of ashpits and old weeds becomes the symbol of sick sensitivity. These stories expose man to different human situations and moments of intensity each moving toward a moral, social and spiritual revelation. However, these stories are loosely knitted but one should consider art under its aspects of wholeness and harmony. What makes them a book is its theme or common idea which Joyce himself wrote in a letter to his publisher, Grant Richard: “My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because the city seemed to me the centre of paralysis” (55).

All the stories in Dubliners are the exposition and exploration of paralysis or frustration of the Dubliners and the total epiphany is of the nature of modern city life. Paralysis, in Dubliners, is moral and central. The whole book progressively deals with childhood, adolescence and public life in Dublin. To organize the book as a single whole and in his attempt to present the city of Dublin as an Epiphany of modern life Joyce was thinking in terms of the growth of a single human person with an identifiable character maturing himself into different phases of life. The motif is achieved with oneself coming to awareness and self realization. However written in a long stretch of time beginning from 1905 to 1914, these stories are tied up with an organized plan or by a unifying thread of presenting the entire life of the self. The first three stories (The Sisters, An Encounter, Araby) deal with childhood followed by another three stories of adolescence (the Boarding House, After the Race, Eveline). The stories of childhood are presented with a child’s point of view, first of the family and then of the other people, shown through the eyes of the unnamed boy who narrates them. This world is dominated by adult and the world which is also full of weariness and frustration. But the rays of hope also come with the promise of escaping from this kind of world first in the figure of father Flynn and then in a day’s ‘miching’ from the school with two friends, in An Encounter. The next three stories more or less take up the maturity and issues of struggling young people as their central concern. Ivy Day in the committee Room, The Mother and Grace depict the public life of the Dublin in general. These stories deal with the character of politics, culture and religion in Dublin. Written under the influence of George Moore, these stories follow the naturalistic tradition. Morris Beja also comments on the nature of these stories saying that “this is a little manifesto of naturalism but its most significant phrase is moral history” (202). All the stories of Dubliners however, immoral they may be as many critics state are a quest – a journey with a goal providing the Dubliners a good look in a nicely polished looking glass and like Baudelaire and Flaubert and other symbolists Joyce used the imagery as a tool to his theory of epiphany. The Pigeon House in An Encounter suggests light and power which stands for God where the questioning boys playing truant from the school never get to the Pigeon House. It is a typical quest for all Dubliners resulting into frustration and finally leads to the revelation of the self. In Araby this quest is not made in the direction of God rather church of Ireland is exposed. The

insane talk of a young lady with two gentlemen is another epiphany that reveals emptiness and meaninglessness of the life of the Dubliners with the final realization of the truth. Joyce recounts the moments of realization:

One evening I went into the back drawing-room in which the priest had died. It was a dark rainy evening and there was no sound in the house. Through one of the broken pane I heard the rain impinge upon the earth, the fine incessant needles of water playing in the sodden beds. Some distant lamp or lighted window gleamed below me. I was thankful that I could see so little. All my senses seemed to desire to veil themselves and feeling that I was about to slip from them, I pressed the palms of my hands together until they trembled, murmuring: O love! O love! many times.....and gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger. (Dubliners 31)

Joyce's craving and rage for order is well reflected in the epiphany of the ascetic James Duffy in *A Painful Case*. Mr. Duffy keeps himself aloof from the mundane confusion of the world around him. Mrs. Sinico touches his soul's incurable loneliness whose death has been so painful to him that gradually he is overpowered by guilt and guilt by knowledge. As William Tindall makes it clear that "M Duffy's deadly sin is pride or, as Freud puts it, ego. Mrs. Sinico's virtue is charity or, as Lawrence puts it, love. Mr. Duffy's Epiphany which occurs in Phonix park, however, may bear another significance. Awareness under these circumstances could promise a renewal. Yet this story is the eleventh in the sequence and to Joyce eleven was the number of renewal" (32-33).

So, like objective correlative the technique of epiphany has become a unique method in the hand of James Joyce to serve a distinctive purpose of exposing and explaining a disease like mental condition of all Dubliners leading them into a state of realization of the self. Here Dublin stands for paralysis. Joyce in that term does not fall in the lineage of Yeats, George Moor, Edward Martyn and other advocates of Pseudo- Irishness. To Joyce, the idea of Irishness betrays the soul of a true artist which suffocates the artist freedom and integrity. Like Oscar Wild and G.B. Shaw Ireland has been a negative idea and Joyce's Exile can be viewed as positive escapism where cosmopolitanism could be better idea to avoid provincialism but here Joyce's position seem very distinctive and peculiar where penalty of escape, whether positive, negative or romantic, is loneliness.

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