
From the Writer

“The Epiphany as the Evanescent Moment: Flashes of Unintellectual Light in James Joyce’s *Dubliners*” was my final project for my WR 100 class, a writing seminar that focused on the concept of the avant-garde. Towards the end of the semester, my professor presented the class with a rather open-ended assignment. Our task was to select any piece of work that either we or other historians would consider as falling under the umbrella of the “avant-garde” and construct our own argument from the essay based on what we noticed about the work.

I was frightful of this assignment. I was not used to choosing what I would be writing about, let alone coming up with my very own claim based on no class discussions about the work itself. I decided that the best place to start would be where my interests lie, and that is with books. In my previous essays, I had focused on avant-garde musicians, including John Cage and Yoko Ono. In this upcoming essay, I wanted to focus on a writer. After a quick search on the Internet, I was fortunate enough to discover that one of my favorite writers, James Joyce, occupied the avant-garde era. I have not read much of his work, but grew fascinated with *Dubliners* when I was in high school. After I found something exciting to write about, I was all the more eager to begin my essay.

Nonetheless, the task proved more work than I thought it would be. Devising a claim occupied most of my time. I have gleaned from classes and scholarly essays that *Dubliners* is a piece of work that highlights the notion of epiphanies, the idea that each character arrives at some sort of life-changing revelation at the end of each short story. I have always disagreed with this assertion. Every time I read a story in *Dubliners*, I find that characters never do arrive at a conclusion; they are always at a loss. My claim was still a little loose at this point, but nevertheless, it was a start.

My finished paper was accomplished through many rereads by classmates, writing tutors, and of course, my professor. Though I meant for this essay to be avant-garde in the experimental sense, I am pleased that I have learned more from the experience than I thought I would. My epiphanies are as follows: incorporating sources strengthens claims, circular reasoning is better left neglected, and write where your interests lie . . . always.

— Navraj Narula

THE EPIPHANY AS THE EVANESCENT MOMENT: FLASHES OF UNINTELLECTUAL LIGHT IN JAMES JOYCE'S *DUBLINERS*

James Joyce's *Dubliners*, a collection of 15 short stories, defies literary norms by breaking the original storyline format of Freytag's pyramid, which suggests that a clear beginning consisting of a proper introduction of the setting and the characters, a middle discussing the conflict that would lead to a climax, and an end that ties the story together with a denouement are indispensable to any written work of fiction ("Analyzing a Story's Plot: Freytag's Pyramid"). James Joyce challenges these conventions by abruptly positioning the conflict at the start of his stories and refusing to include a resolution at the end of each one, inviting his readers to consider the cliffhanger at the end of each story in *Dubliners* rather than offering them a realization or, as most critics would say, an epiphany. In fact, as relayed by Zach Bowen, the founding editor of both the James Joyce Literary Supplement and the Florida James Joyce Series, a large number of Joyce's critics "have had something to say about [Joyce's] epiphanies and their use" in *Dubliners* (103). However, these noted critics—such as Henry Levin, Thomas Connolly, and William York Tindall—only acknowledge the everyday, hackneyed definition of epiphany, that of a "revelation" or a "realization." These critics, who solely relate the word epiphany to enlightenment, claim that the characters in *Dubliners* do indeed arrive at a realization at the end of each story. Upon inspecting *Dubliners* and its unconventional endings though, I have come to the conclusion that the figures in Joyce's stories arrive at no revelation at all. Published in 1914, a time when Irish nationalism instilled in people a desire to discover their identities, *Dubliners* offers its characters no sort of realization of their life's purposes. Instead most find themselves lost, accepting failure or unable to

proceed. Through a close reading of “Araby,” “The Boarding House,” and “Eveline,” I will, by recovering the Joycean definition of “epiphany,” demonstrate that an epiphany does not always necessarily adhere to the critical definition (or even worldly meaning) of the word as a “revelation” or a “realization.” In congruency with the Joycean definition of an epiphany as a departure from the critical definition of an epiphany, the Joycean definition does not go so far as to take action in reaching a point of realization; instead, it merely showcases the experiences of the characters in *Dubliners*, not drawing the reader’s attention to any sort of profound revelation.

While many critics claim that what Joyce meant by an epiphany is a realization, I will argue that what Joyce meant by an epiphany is simply an unrevealing experience. In *Stephen Hero*, Joyce’s posthumously published autobiographical novel, he relates that an epiphany is a “sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (*Stephen Hero* 211), believing that these epiphanies must be recorded “with extreme care, seeing that they [epiphanies] themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments” (211). Florence L. Walzi, an English professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee who is an expert on the early works of Joyce, examines the etymology of the word “epiphany,” indicating that the basic meaning of epiphany in Greek is an “appearance” or “manifestation” related to a verb meaning “to display or show forth” (436). Then, Walzi goes even further to say that this basic meaning of an epiphany “reflects the later sense of the word as a revelation,” deeming it “a flash of intellectual light” (436). While Walzi, like most critics, extends the definition of “epiphany” beyond its basic meaning, I am hesitant to leap from “appearance” or “manifestation” all the way to “revelation.” Joyce explicitly defines an epiphany as a “manifestation,” suggesting that an epiphany has the tendency to make a person *aware* of something, but not actually *realize* the significance of it, not struck by any “flash of intellectual light.” Joyce also asserts that an epiphany is defined by “moments.” In doing so, Joyce suggests that an epiphany could simply be an experience, or an occurrence in a particular moment of time that holds importance but not necessarily a revelation. The Joycean definition of an epiphany differs from the critical definition of an epiphany in that Joyce’s epiphany is more than what Joyce himself presents it to be: a simple manifestation, an evanescent moment, a significant experience. The

characters in “Araby,” “The Boarding House,” and “Eveline” are aware of the action in their setting but never fully realize the implications of it; they are standing examples of Joycean characters who never reach the critical definition of an epiphany.

While I concur with Tindall’s statement that each of the stories in *Dubliners* “may be thought of as a great epiphany...an epiphany of epiphanies” (qtd. in Scholes 65), I refute his critical definition of the word “epiphany” as meaning a realization rather than an experience. For instance, the young boy in the story of “Araby” is left unsatisfied, hallowed, and questioning his movements because no light bulb of realization has popped up beside his head (*Dubliners* 29). He had promised a girl he fancied that he would go to Araby, a night market, and bring her back a souvenir (32). Arriving at the bazaar near closing time, the young boy lingers for a while at a stall and then leaves, not buying anything (35). At the end of the story, he sees himself as a “creature driven and derided by vanity,” his eyes “[burning] with anguish and anger” (35). The young boy does not come to any sort of realization; he simply goes through an experience of confusion, not knowing how to respond to his first love. Though he gains awareness of the gap between himself and his schoolboy crush, he remains in the dark about how to respond to the girl he loves. Taking no control of his situation, he angrily leaves the market—lifeless (35). He does not realize what to do next or how to go about handling the lovesickness of his situation; as a matter of fact, the reader must go about ending the story of “Araby” for this young boy since Joyce provides no resolution for him, but only delivers a taste of his “evanescent...[moment]” (*Stephen Hero* 211), rather than yielding to Tindall’s definition of an epiphany, which would imply that the young boy arrived at a concrete turning point rather than simply a halfway point.

In agreement with Scholes’ view, the role of the epiphany is to “function dramatically in an artistic context, revealing character, attitude, and emotion” (76). The “epiphanies” that Joyce employs at the end of each story in *Dubliners* may leave the reader blank without a resolution in mind, but the very emptiness of a proper ending also injects readers with a greater understanding of the figures in the story as well as how they respond to their own experiences. Much like the reader, Polly in “The Boarding House” is uninformed about the happenings in her life (61). She

does not realize that her mother is pushing for Mr. Doran to take her hand in marriage so as to save the family reputation Polly has stained by becoming involved with him, or that Mr. Doran is hesitant to wed Polly because he trusts that he could never truly grow to love her (66). At the end of the story, Polly does not come to any firm realization. “The Boarding House” ends with her as she is shedding tears of confusion, still wary about what the future might hold for her (69). Much like Polly, the reader is also unable to reach a conclusion. However, by vicariously living through Polly’s Joycean epiphany, the reader can sympathize with her experience and better understand Polly as a character while at the same time struggling to remove the cliffhanger at the end of her story; for like many of Joyce’s characters, she arrives at no revelation.

As with “Araby” and “The Boarding House,” “Eveline” does not conform to the critical definition of an epiphany as a realization, but rather to the Joycean definition of an epiphany as an experience instead. Eveline needs to make a choice: to either remain subjugated at home by staying with her abusive father or to sail away to Buenos Aires with her lover to live a life of freedom (36). Unlike the young boy in “Araby” and Polly in “The Boarding House” who respond to their experiences—whether by abruptly leaving the marketplace or crying for comfort—Eveline finds herself at an impasse, literally unable to move (41). Her lover, Frank, wills her to come by calling out to her three times, but instead “she set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or of recognition” (41). Eveline encounters no sort of *aha* moment, no revelation. She is left confounded, lost without a revelation. The critical definition of an epiphany does not apply to Eveline; she simply stumbles upon a Joycean epiphany, or an experience, much like the characters in both “Araby” and “The Boarding House” that were also left in the unknown.

A close reading of the stories in *Dubliners* reveals Joyce suggesting that in any individual’s life span, the chance of arriving at a realization is nil. Joyce presents the characters in his story in a pattern of age, starting from the youngest—“[The] Sisters” (9)—moving to the oldest, and ending with “The Dead” (175). Even as young children transform into adults, they have yet to find their purposes in life—unable to locate their ciphers. They only experience the Joycean epiphany, arriving at death before being

able to indulge in the critical epiphany. Kevin J.H. Dettmar, an English professor at Pomona College, states, “If we are honest, however, for many of us the story ends not in epiphany but in utter muddle” (80). Much like the readers who are left in confusion at the end of the story, the characters are more so left without answers, still questioning their identities. Joyce provides no ending for them, no resolution, and certainly no realization. As a matter of fact, the pattern of age that Joyce adopts while relating the stories of the characters in *Dubliners* points toward the notion that throughout one’s life, one may never even encounter any sort of realization. As opposed to critics who assert that *Dubliners* is a collection of 15 short stories emphasizing revelations, I propose, in adopting the Joycean definition of an epiphany, that *Dubliners* is a collection of 15 short stories *lacking* in revelations. Both the characters in *Dubliners* and Joyce’s readers arrive at no realizations at the end of any of the stories.

Joyce wrote *Dubliners* between 1905 and 1914: a time when Irish nationalism was at its apex (Vore 3). During this time, people were not only instilled with a desire to fight for Ireland’s independence, but they were also struggling to discover their identities and their purposes in life amidst the revolution (Vore 3). The young boy of “Araby,” Polly, and Eveline, posed in the backdrop of this fueling, nationalistic setting, ironically do not reach any revelations. Instead these characters are merely at a loss for their identities: the young boy unaware of how to respond to his first love, Polly not knowing if her future is with Mr. Doran or not, and Eveline having trouble letting go of her former identity as a domestic-bound woman. The experiences that these characters go through of still being left in the unknown during a time when Irish nationalism and identity-finding was at its apex mirrors the experience of the readers who are also still left in confusion with no resolution to cling on to. Critics—such as Levin, Connolly, and Tindall—assert that epiphanies are prevalent in James Joyce’s *Dubliners*; however, in actuality no character transforms into a dynamic one and proceeds towards change because no character, much like the reader, has reached any sort of revelation. The young boy, Polly, and Eveline have only jumped into the pool of experience that is the Joycean epiphany, not yet having bathed in the “flash of intellectual light” (Walzi, 436), not yet having immersed themselves in realization. They are still left lost in the shallow end: the “evanescent . . . moment[s].”

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