

How james joyce explores religious and moral connotations in dubliners

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James Joyce and the Epiphany: An Exploration of Religious and Moral Connotations

James Joyce revolutionized literature and ushered in the era of modern fiction. Joyce became famous for his revolutionary use of stream of consciousness narrative along with his abstract snippets he used to represent his different characters. His stories usually take place in Dublin and are centered on moral, theological, and political issues of the time. As Joyce himself struggled with his own religious beliefs, he searched to find a way to find the divine in the ordinary. This is most apparent in *Dubliners*, where Joyce uses “epiphanies” in order to help his characters realize different “truths” about society through seemingly unimportant moments in their lives. Joyce stated, “For myself, I always write about Dublin, if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal” (Ellman 505). By having his characters experience an epiphany, Joyce was able to expose truths in Dublin, and connect this back to the larger picture of all big cities in the world. This, along with Joyce’s unique narrative style, is why his writing is still relevant today, although his stories do not always come to a satisfying conclusion. Not to be confused with the normative liturgical epiphany, Joyce uses these revelations to create a deeper connection between the character, reader, and society. An epiphany, in literature written by Joyce, is intended to “inform the protagonist, the readers, or both, much in the manner of Plato’s forms, which epitomized a purer truth than his world of appearances” (Bowen 103). Although Joyce’s works may seem like simplified narratives that portray a snippet of a characters life, they actually represent a much

deeper meaning. He uses these characters to showcase the moral paralysis rampant throughout Dublin. Throughout *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce use the epiphany to showcase theological, social, and moral issues within Dublin in order to highlight tribulations within society as a whole. By doing so he also highlights his own struggles with religion in his process to reveal what an epiphany truly is. Is it only within the realm of the divine? In answer to this, Joyce counters that as the force of religion begins to wane, society must find the “divine” in everyday life.

Epiphanies in Joyce’s writing have strong religious connotations. This is a result of Joyce’s own conflicting experiences with religion. Some may say that he had forsaken his catholic roots and that his manifestation of the divine within his characters was only a mockery of religion. It is a valid argument that Joyce was trying to make the statement that Catholicism was no longer relevant to society and was a gimmick, just as the lives of his characters. Although a sound argument, a stronger argument can be made that he wished to find the divine in the ordinary, in a society where religion had lost much of his power. As a catholic growing up, it can be inferred that Joyce never truly lost sight of the divine; instead he tried to redefine the connotations of the Godly in a modern society. Joyce highlights his struggles with religion through his semi-autobiographical work, *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*.

Joyce often deviated away from the typical liturgical epiphany in his writing; however there are still echoes of Christian epiphany in his works. “Christian period epiphaneia developed a religious denotation as a visible manifestation

of a hidden divinity either in the form of a personal appearance, or by some deed of power by which its presence is made known. It also refers specifically to the feast of the Epiphany, 6 January" (Walzl 436). In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen experiences a religious epiphany after a mass where he is taught about the suffering he will endure if he goes to hell. As a result, Stephen " never consciously changed his position in bed, sat in the most uncomfortable positions, suffered patiently every itch and pain, kept away from the fire, remained on his knees all through mass except at the gospels, left parts of his neck and face undried so that air might sting them and, whenever he was not saying his beads, carries his arms stiffly at his sides like a runner and never in his pockets or clasped behind him" (Joyce 410). Shortly after this spell of Godly Piousness, Stephen begins to recognize himself as an artist and experiences his most moving epiphany of the work. " Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable" (Joyce 432). In this way Stephen moves away from God; something his mother feared he would as a result of attending University. Joyce struggled with faith throughout his own life, something that is exhibited in his character's epiphanies, which oftentimes have religious connotations.

Joyce uses epiphanies to show spiritual moments for his characters that reveal how the characters are paralyzed and therefore are unable to change their living situation in Dublin. Joyce stated to his brother in a letter, " I am writing a series of epicteti- ten-for a paper.... I call the series *Dubliners* to

betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city” (Walzl 437). In this way Joyce’s epiphanies are a double-edged sword. In *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce’s pseudo biography, Joyce’s “alter ego” Stephen Dedalus undergoes many spiritual epiphanies. Stephen’s epiphanies are much more uplifting in juxtaposition to the epiphanies suffered by his characters in *Dubliners*. This is a result of *Dubliners* representing the moral paralysis within Ireland, whilst *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* represents Stephen’s journey to becoming an artist and in effect—leaving Dublin. In Joyce’s literature, “liturgical epiphany in its meaning of a manifestation of divine power offered Joyce a term which, placed in a literary setting, could signify both revelation in its usual technical sense and spiritual illumination in psychological and symbolic senses” (Walzl 450). Joyce’s epiphanies generally offer both of these conclusions to an epiphany; however, his spiritual enlightenments do not always reveal satisfactory conclusions to the lives of his characters.

Joyce’s epiphanies all display similarities. It can be concluded that the selections from *Dubliners* as well as *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, are all taken from Joyce’s personal experiences within Dublin. Most of the heroes are “lonely, sensitive boys dissatisfied with their home and cultural environments and vaguely aspiring to something ideal” (Walzl 444). All of the boys within his story seek meaningful relationships and are disappointed. They also usually seek theological virtue only to be presented with a distorted or “delusional” view in faith, hope, and love (Walzl 444). This is because Joyce himself lived through the moral, religious, and political

paralysis within Dublin. As a result, Joyce had to depart from Ireland in order to extricate himself from the “moral paralysis” and become “the artist” he aspired to be. In “Eveline”, Joyce embodies the inability for most people to escape their paltry lives in Dublin and aspire to be more. In her story, Eveline is repressed and treated poorly by those close to her. She has a chance to escape. However, upon the dock, she is consumed by an epiphany: “No! No! No! It was impossible. Her hands clutched the iron in frenzy. Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish!” (Joyce 51). This is symbolic of the paralysis in Dublin: people were unable to extricate themselves from the poor life situations they were consumed with. Joyce, on the other hand, was able to accomplish this.

In “Eveline” the character Jack, has his own epiphany as well when he sees Eveline standing on the dock. He describes her as “passive, like a helpless animal” (Joyce 51). Readers who accept this last epiphany must do so at the risk of ignoring or discounting Eveline’s epiphany. However, there is little evidence other than the reader’s predisposition to suggest the truth or falsity of either. (Bowen 107). Thus, Joyce writes in *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* that Stephen’s final epiphany he is consumed with is that he must escape Dublin in order to become the artist he aspires to be. Without doing so he can never break from his various disappointments: his family’s poor financial situation, his loss of faith, his lack of fervor for the political climate in Ireland, and the letdown of university life. He would have ultimately suffered the same fate as Eveline. Only by departing Dublin are Stephen Dedalus and Joyce himself able to live the life “they” desire as exposed in *A*

Portrait of An Artist as a Young Man, however numerous characters in Dubliners are less fortunate in that regard.

In regards to his writing, Joyce was concerned with “reproducing both the reality of an event and its symbolic or spiritual meaning” (Wazl 436). He achieves this in “Araby” where he writes a seemingly miniscule event, which implodes into a serious religious and moral epiphany within the young narrator’s life. The story paints a frightening picture of the descent from childhood to adulthood and reveals “A boy who must begin to free himself from the nets and trammels of society. That beginning involves painful farewells and disturbing dislocations. “The boy must dream no more of enchanted days. He must forego the shimmering mirage of childhood and begin to see things as they really are” (Stone 376). When Araby does realize the “trammels” of society, his epiphany is a terrible revelation that exposes the darkest parts of both his self and human nature. The narrator declares “Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (Joyce 46). On the character level, this represents a terrible manifestation for the narrator as he grapples with the manifestation of materiality and the self as opposed to faith and God. On a larger level, it represents the fallen world of Dublin as a whole. The whole adventure serves to only disappoint the narrator and reveals the “fallen world” of Dublin society. Furthermore “the images suggest Ireland, as a country traditionally personified in Irish literature as a beautiful girl who is worshipped with mystical fervor “(Stone 388). This passage explains the images constantly replayed of the girl that the narrator

worships. In a way she is a foil to Ireland, the narrator worships her, however once the veil behind her “mystical fervor”, is lifted the narrator is left with nothing but a frightening revelation as to the truth behind both his crush and on a larger scale—Ireland. In some ways “Araby” is “A Portrait of the artist as a young boy” because he experiences similar struggles, at an earlier stage, to Stephen. Both experience personal experiences that change their opinion on the world and alert them to the darker side of Dublin, and both experience religious epiphanies.

The narrator’s epiphany reveals another thematic issue brought up time and time again throughout *Dubliners* and that is the imagery of blindness within Dublin. Eyes play a huge role in many of the stories in *Dubliners* as the characters are often “blinded” and thus unable to see the significant moral issues within their society. Blindness carries religious connotations as well as Jesus was known for curing the plight of a blind man, the story goes: “One Sabbath day when Jesus Christ and His disciples were in Jerusalem, they saw a man who had been blind since birth. “He [Jesus Christ] spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, “And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam. ... He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing.” (John 9: 6–7.). Religion throughout *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* are fully explored in both negative and positive connotations, much of the political issues tracing back to the rift between the catholic and protestant churches. *Araby* exhibits many examples of blindness imagery, “the street is blind this feature is given significant emphasis in the opening phrases of the story, this

suggests that blindness plays a role thematically. It suggests as we later come to understand, that the boy also is figuratively blind, as he has reached a dead end in his life" (Stone 380). This theme plays alongside the premise of paralysis as it often disallows the character from seeing the socio-economic, political, or religious problems within society which are essentially paralyzing them.

In "Eveline", Blindness plays a roll thematically as well; the narrator states "Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition" (Joyce 51). Although it is plain to the reader that Eveline could potentially seek a better life outside of Dublin, she is unable to perceive this fact. As a result, she is ultimately paralyzed and fails to escape her dismal life style. This is similar to An Encounter, where it is apparent to the reader young protagonist is in a poor situation with a dangerous and perverse old man, however at first the narrator is blind to the man's wayward intentions. By the time he realizes this he is unable to make an escape as he is paralyzed with fear. Paralysis is another important thematic issue within Dubliners.

Paralysis plays a role in another Dubliners story "The Dead", the main protagonist Gabriel is blind to his wife's thoughts and mistakes her signals for engaging in an intimate encounter. However, it is revealed to Gabriel that he has been blinded by his own misconceptions, and is sorely wrong about his wife's thoughts and intentions. This leads to Gabriel's epiphany in which he realizes that " he was conscience of, but could not apprehend their wayward flickering of existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world; "(242). In summation " All of the epiphanies of the

previous stories anticipate Gabriel's "vision" of his own ludicrousness prompted by his relationship to Gretta and Michael Furey" (Bowen 108). In *A Portrait of an Artist of a Young Man*, Stephen recognizes the blindness and paralysis rampant throughout Dublin. As a result he must extricate himself from society in order to "envision" the city from an outsider perspective, and shed the "paralysis" of Dublin in order to become an artist. He also must shed his religious piety in search for a new, higher understanding of the divine as an artist. This is relative to Joyce's real life as he had to leave Dublin in order to procure his works and thus reveal the divine within the ordinary of society.

In *An Encounter*, a coming of age story, all of the blindness and paralysis that Joyce believed to plague Dublin is exhibited. The epiphany that the narrator experiences is a result of an outing in the city of Dublin, which the narrator expects to be an exciting adventure. It instead turns out to be a horrifying glimpse of the city, which is far from the narrator's fantasy. Within the first moments of the adventure the boy's desire for escape is exhibited "When we landed we watched the discharging of the graceful three-master which we had observed from the quay" (Joyce 33). The boys continue to watch the vessel for a long period of time, however, the only adventure they are able to pursue is within Dublin—the ships are unattainable to them, such as they were to Eveline. The social and religious problems are made apparent immediately within the story. When the boys are faced with a poorer location of Dublin, they encounter a group of rag tag, boys and girls. The children accost them yelling, "Swaddlers! Swaddlers!" The narrator

explains, “ Thinking that we were Protestants because Mahony, who was dark-complexioned, wore the silver badge of a cricket club on his cap.”(Joyce 32). This situation presents the rift between rich and poor as well as protestant and catholic. The boys with money torment the less fortunate girls, chasing them. The poor also are guilty of discrimination against the main protagonist, as they turn against him and his friend as a result of the mistaken notion that they are Protestants. This portrays the prejudice on both side of the spectrum and highlights the socio-economic rifts in Dublin society, which serves to paralyze and divide the city. The story takes an even more sinister turn that highlights the boy’s blindness and paralysis. The boys come upon an old man who exhibits sexually charged fantasies of “ whipping” (35) the young boys. His treacherous nature is out of the young narrator’s frame of reference at first; however the reader can ascertain that the boys are in imminent danger. The boys never do complete their journey, but it is clear that the adventure that they had imagined—carefree and wild, transformed into something much darker. The boys dream of a care free escape, however there attempt at temporary escape only puts them in a dangerous situation, and highlights the socio-economic problems present in Dublin at the time. Thus Joyce is able to twist a seemingly ordinary situation into one that reveals a deeper truth—the “ divine” within the seemingly unimportant.

“ The Dead” concludes Dubliners and touches on theological, moral, and social issues within Dublin within the time period. The name of the main protagonist, Gabriel automatically brings to mind in the form of the angel

Gabriel—patron saint of revelations. Joyce's character, Gabriel undergoes an epiphany after he misinterprets his wife's actions for desire. Gabriel's "epiphany" reveals that he is basically one of the dead as a result of his lack of emotional fortitude and social anxiety. On the surface, as stated, Gabriel's epiphany could appear to simply serve the purpose of dovetailing his life with that of the dead as the emotional quality of his life was unsatisfactory. However on another level "Dubliners ends as it began with darkness, paralysis, and death. Nonetheless, in Gabriel Conroy's final epiphany Joyce seems to affirm the conditions for rebirth for all the Dubliners, conditions that recall the three great liturgical epiphanies celebrated on 6 January, the light of mature self-understanding, the baptismal death of ego that brings new life, and that charismatic love which is the essence of spiritual union"(Walzl 449). This presents an optimistic parable to Dubliners and brings Joyce's intentions to light—to manifest the "Godly" in ordinary, everyday life. This revelation sheds a religious light on the entire Dubliner's collection in his suggestion of rebirth for his characters and relates his epiphanies back to the great liturgical epiphanies. In A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man Stephen Dedalus, struggles with his religious identity. However, ultimately he uses his outsider status as an artist to portray the positive and negative connotations of religion in society. Although religion may not hold power over Joyce anymore, he still recognizes the need for the divine in society—for him, as an artist, this comes in the form of the ordinary. Although the conditions are undesirable in Dublin society, through the Dead, Joyce concludes Dubliners with a picture of rebirth, and hope for those stricken by blindness and paralysis in society.

Joyce's epiphanies effectively portray the amalgamation of religion and moral realizations to both reveal the ills within society and most importantly—the Godly in the ordinary. His characters within *Dubliners*'s all experience some form of spiritual awakening which either alerts them of their paralysis within society or reveals a hidden truth of life within society to the reader. Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* delves deeper into the religious connotations of Dublin society, and only by removing himself from Ireland is Stephen able to become “the artist” he aspires to be. In *The Dead* Joyce concludes *Dubliners* with the rebirth of Gabriel this represent that although his characters have fallen, there hope that they have the power to transcend there moral paralysis in order to mend society. Through *Dubliners*, Joyce explores his own moral and religious values whilst showcasing the paralysis and blindness within Dublin. He uses epiphanies to explore the disillusionment in the Dublin community and also as a commentary on religion. Joyce's overarching opinion being that although Catholicism may not play a large role in his “Modern” society, the divine still had an important role to play—in the lives of the everyday, the ordinary.