

Epiphany in "a portrait of the artist as a young man"



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The word "epiphany", literally meaning "showing forth", is originally a Biblical term, referring to the festival commemorating the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, often called the "Magi", usually celebrated on 6th January, or Twelfth Night. On this day there is a Church feast celebrating the coming of the "three Kings of the Orient" to worship the baby Jesus. The word, however, is adapted by James Joyce to encompass his artistic vision, first expressed in the Preface to the "Dubliners", and then defined in more detail in "Stephen Hero", his first autobiographical story, almost destroyed by him, and then published as a fragment after his death. In "Stephen Hero", Stephen, planning a book of epiphanies, tells us that "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 record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments". An epiphany, therefore, in Joyce's sense, "shows forth" the full reality of what is seen and observed, but not in logical, analytical form. The reality appears to the mind in a flash of inspiration, triggered by an ordinary conversation or incident. All Joyce's writings, including his early ones like "Chamber Music" or "Dubliners", is thought to consist of a series of epiphanies. What makes "A Portrait of the Artist" different from these is that before "A Portrait" was published, Joyce's works consisted of essentially isolated epiphanies. "A Portrait" is the first work which incorporates in it a sequence of related epiphanies in the form of a coherent narrative, though in this novel he nowhere refers to "epiphany" by name. He only illustrates its use as not only as a significant literary technique, but also as an important philosophical concept, which would later become not only the cornerstone of

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Joyce's own mature works, but also of Modernism in general. In Joyce's practice, the term actually has two meanings – one, that epiphany reveals the truth, the intrinsic essence of a person or something that is observed; and second, that it is a state of mind, a heightened spiritual ecstasy, which he calls “ the memorable phase of the mind itself”. The first puts emphasis on the object, whose reality is revealed by an epiphany; the second puts emphasis on the observer, for whom the epiphany can be a state of heightened consciousness. As such, knowledge becomes something subjective and intuitive, not merely a rational process. In fact, as Stanislaus, Joyce's brother, records, epiphanies can also include dreams, since Joyce, taking his cue from Freud, considered dreams to be a sub-conscious re-shaping of everyday reality. Both meanings can be illustrated in the various episodes of “ A Portrait”. Where the first meaning is concerned, the emphasis being on the object, a good example would be that incident in Chapter II, where Stephen's romantic picture of cows grazing in a sylvan setting receives a jolt when he visits Stradbrook. The vivid details of the “ filthy cowyard”, with its “ foul green puddles and clots of liquid dung and steaming brantroughs” 1, bring home to him the distinction between his idealistic vision of cows (symbolizing his country Ireland), and the foulness of reality. An epiphany with its second meaning also occurs in the second chapter, when Mr. Dedalus, Stephen's father, reveals what is obviously regarded by Stephen as a betrayal of sorts by the rector of Clongowes, Father Conmee. He had wonderful ideas of his own heroism in going to the rector to complain about being wrongfully “ pandied” by the prefect of studies, Father Dolan. This larger-than-life opinion about himself is rudely broken when his father comes home and relates the incident of meeting the

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rector in Dublin, when the rector spoke of the child Stephen in the following terms - " I told them all at dinner about it and Father Dolan and I and all of us had a hearty laugh together over it. Ha! Ha! Ha!" 2. Epiphanies like these are not only used to bring out a sudden realization of the truth in the hero, but also in the reader. Another epiphany is the ecstasy of spirit that Stephen experiences after the retreat, when his soul realizes that it can yet be saved through repentance. An example of " a sudden flash of insight" occurs in the fourth chapter, when Stephen, almost acquiescing to the director's offer of priesthood, suddenly sees a quartet of young men dancing and singing down the road. The very colourfulness of their clothing, their lilting music, their dancing steps, and their simple enjoyment, brings to Stephen's mind in a flash of insight, their contrast with the colourlessness, coldness, and emotionlessness of priesthood, and makes him realize in a moment that priesthood is not going to be his vocation, even though he had been attracted to that profession from his childhood. Often these two meanings coincide in a single moment of intense ecstasy - as in the finest epiphany of the novel in the conclusion to Chapter IV - the picture of the young girl wading in the sea -" 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 sea-bird She was alone and still, gazing out to sea; and when she felt his presence and the worship of his eyes her eyes turned to him in quiet sufferance of his gaze, without shame or wantonness" 3. In one moment the girl becomes for him the embodiment of beauty of art, and in a flash of insight Stephen recognizes his artistic vocation. His " enchantment of the heart" is expressed clearly in his wild delight and ecstatic language. The two aspects of the epiphany coalesce to

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bring the fourth chapter to its rapturous climax. On the other hand, because of its subjective nature, an epiphany can also be unreliable, as we see in Chapter III, when, after the retreat, Father Arnall's lectures manage to convince Stephen that his only correct course is to repent and return to the Church. In Chapter IV this acceptance is rejected, and he realizes his folly through an epiphany. The epiphany also has a deeper, more philosophical significance - the concern with time; and Stephen himself draws attention to this in his diary towards the end of the novel - "The past is consumed in the present, and the present is living only because it brings forth the future" 4. Clearly, Stephen's view is that each moment is the cumulative product of past decisions and actions, and brings about the future by the same process. A prime example of this is the epiphany in the tram, when, while standing with Emma on the tram steps, he remembers his past moments on "the hotel grounds" with Eileen. This moment also anticipates the future, because he will not only remember this moment later, but also because it will subconsciously influence his later life, when Emma will become an archetype of feminine virtue and unattainable sexuality. This is embodied in the present by his inability to kiss her. In "A Portrait of the Artist" Stephen does not refer to the word "epiphany" directly, but he does define a very similar phenomenon in his aesthetic theory, when he discusses the various stages of apprehending a work of art. After referring to the "wholeness" (integritas) of a work of art, he perceives its "rhythm" (consonantia), and finally realizes its radiance (claritas). The notion of "epiphany" does not necessarily imply any moral or aesthetic content, and reveals only truth, but it has a lot in common with the process of "claritas" - something which Stephen has great difficulty in elucidating. After trying to explain it as "radiance" and "whatness", he

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finally uses the phrases “ luminous silent stasis” and “ enchantment of the heart” 5. These connect it with the definition of “ epiphany” in “ Stephen Hero” as a form of highly rarefied spiritual manifestation. There has been plenty of criticism expressing doubts about the effectiveness of the epiphany in novel-writing. One of the main reasons for such doubt is that, in order to deepen their impact, the epiphanies generally have an abrupt, even melodramatic ending. Also, these epiphanies may sometimes appear isolated in the plot line, making the novel seem episodic and ununified. Against these charges, the partial truth of which cannot be denied, we can say that the drawbacks are to a great extent cancelled by their advantages. In “ A Portrait of the Artist”, moreover, the presence and consciousness of Stephen is a potent unifying factor. The epiphanies in this novel also become an important vehicle for binding together themes, motifs, and symbols which run throughout the novel. References : 1)James Joyce : “ A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man” (Penguin Books, 1992, London), p. 66. 2)Ibid, p. 76. 3)Ibid, p. 186. 4)Ibid, p. 273. 5)Ibid, p. 231.