

# EPIPHANIES IN A *PORTRAIT OF ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN*

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**Abstract:** The aesthetic tradition, a typical affiliate of which being James Joyce, envisages the conversion of the everyday into aesthetic art, and it is here where the roots of Joyce's epiphanies can be traced to. This paper examines the understanding of the word "epiphany" and scrutinises the same in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, typically analysing the everyday experiences of the protagonist which lead to such 'revelations'. It discusses the characteristic of the epiphany to universalize predicament by converting it to timeless art, and yet remain essentially subjective. The paper therefore, attempts to uncover that it is in this dialectical process that the essence of the epiphany truly lies.

**Index Terms-** epiphany, revelation, imagery, Joyce

*A Glossary of Literary Terms* by M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham defines 'epiphany' as "a manifestation" or 'showing forth' and by Christian thinkers was used to signify a manifestation of God's presence within the created world". It further talks about James Joyce's use of the term for a more secular function, signifying the discernment of a revelation in the perception of an ordinary object. Having written about seventy of them, Epiphany was for Joyce a prose genre, and he used some of these in *Stephen Hero*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. Joyce's epiphanies transform the inconsequential and the banal into something significant leading to an essential self-recognition; their portrayal is realistic, replete with external particulars. It is the identification of the spiritual inside the mundane. In the words of Robert Scholes, "It may refer to an early prose type, to a spiritual and intellectual illumination of the nature of a thing, and also, by extension, to the artistic insights and means by which such a revelation is achieved" (153).

James Joyce, being a principal affiliate of the Aesthetic tradition, trails its course by converting everyday experience into works of art. A depiction of this process "becomes at the same time both the art object and the subject of its own being" (484), as expressed by Zack Bowen. The moment of revelation, thus, constitutes the conversion of experience into truth. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* deals with the effort of a young boy, growing into adulthood, to make sense of the world around him by placing it in a familiar framework, thus providing him the rationalisation that he needs to cope with his sense of inferiority and the strain of existence. According to Bowen, "to combat these claims, he constructs a network of literary allusion, aesthetics and history...which he reforms again and again into moments of truth connected with literary art and his evolving artistic-priestly role as a creator, saviour, sacrificer, sacrificed...(this) shapes the narrative point of view into a continual series of meaning laden epiphany-like moments" (486). The artistic form into which he universalizes his predicament, epiphanizes the details of his existence into timeless art. According to S.L. Goldberg, "The epiphany has a moral quality because it links art to life" (66).

The experience that Stephen has with the bird-woman whom he sees wading in the sea with her skirt hiked up, is the principal epiphanic moment of the text, which brings about the artistic awakening in the protagonist who had prior to this been indecisive about his future. He experiences a sudden moment of clarity when he glimpses at her, and in this way she acts as his muse, empowering him to become an artist. He sees her as an image of pure beauty and experiences an "outburst of profane joy" on looking at her. His response to the beauty of the girl is in conflict with his Catholic upbringing, therefore the joy is still "profane" for him, but he soon outgrows that and is ecstatic rather than ashamed of his feelings. James Balakier points out that "her natural beauty stirs Stephen's finer feelings and not his grosser passions" (487).

It is interesting to note how Joyce draws attention to the silence characterising the sea and the sky just before Stephen sees the "wild angel". Joyce even comments, "Her image had passed into his soul forever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy". Balakier terms this an "internalised silence" (487) which functions as a platform, giving rise to the outburst of joy. He sees this silence as "a gap in cognition, which is not an experiential void but the source of profound 'aesthetic pleasure'" (Balakier, 492). It also serves as an important changeover from a constricted view of the self and its relation to the world, to an enlightened new sense of the power of the artistic self. "The all encompassing whispering silence of the sea has become the natural correlative of Stephen's newfound self" (Balakier, 492).

The bird-woman becomes a merger of all the female images that have occupied Stephen's life and mind so far, bringing together the different images of the bird, the virgin and that of courtly love. Further, Bowen sees it as a "mental assertion of the direction of Stephen's life in which his past experiences are subconsciously reviewed and translated" (110). She is a metaphor for his artistic creation. A flight of Daedalean fantasy (Bowen, 110) can be perceived in her, which is a metaphor for Stephen's own liberating flight.

Critics also refer to Stephen's epiphany as a scientific epiphany because it is characterised by a sudden realisation of scientific truth. However, his epiphany cannot be explained in an objective form, but can be only recorded in an artistic figure, thus, establishing its subjectivity in the process.

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’”( 106) . *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a testimony of this vacillation of Stephen’s mind. Dorothy Van Gent sees it as a “dialectical process” (106), as each chapter shatters the synthesis achieved at the end of the previous one, to move on to a new one. “Evanescence” (104) is the term Hun uses to describe the essence of Stephen’s epiphanies, hence necessitating their recording to retain their value. 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. It is important to draw attention to the fact that when Stephen witnesses the girl in the water, he sees her as an object of art, something he can worship.

Having pointed out that it is fundamentally the response of the mind which leads to an epiphany, it would not be wrong to ascertain that ultimate reality is situated in the mind. The design of literature being to represent reality, it must consequently aim to reflect the reality in the mind of characters, which comprises of the subconscious as well as the conscious. Joyce accomplishes this through the employment of the stream of consciousness technique. According to Hun, “If it should be admitted that the recording of the stream of consciousness in the *Portrait* sensibly reflects the boy’s isolation, then the epiphanies scattered throughout the book are the records of the moments of Stephen’s subjective realization of what appears to him as the truth” (109). Therefore, one can deduce that the “sudden manifestation” by which an epiphany is defined is only the personal judgement and belief of a character, and not realisation of a universal absolute. It is the result of the mind’s constant need for groping for the truth, which is majorly directed by the subconscious. This subconscious can only be revealed to the conscious through “sensation and images, the objects of the mind” (Hun, 109). This explains how epiphany is typically achieved via imagery.

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” (111).

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