

Exploration of Epiphany in Joyce's Novels

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Abstract: Epiphany is originally a religious term. James Joyce introduced the term into the field of literature for the first time to explain the aesthetic process in artistic creation. Joyce's truly creative theoretical viewpoint should be his theory of spiritual epiphany. Epiphany is not only a sudden revelation of the underlying meaning of an individual's experience or a situation, but also the revelation of the true meaning of life as a whole, and it is a pure reflection of the truth, the good and the beautiful. In Joyce's novels, he pursued the reform and innovation of art form, and boldly adjusted and rebuilt the inherent literary order of the West. Actually Joyce's artistic innovation reflects the conflict and integration of literary tradition and revolution in the early 20th century.

1. Introduction

1.1. Brief Life Story

James Joyce (1882-1941) has a global reputation as an Irish novelist, and is regarded in the West as the most influential novelist in the early 20th century.

He was born in Dublin, Ireland. As a teenager, he attended Jesuit schools. His great enthusiasm for literature, music and Catholic piety became evident in his youth. He later entered the Catholic National University which is today's University College Dublin to study modern language. It was during that time that Joyce took a great interest in literature. After graduation he left Dublin for Paris, hoping to study medicine. But he could not finish the medical study and returned home. Then he got associated with a lot of French literates and read a lot of works of French literature such as *Lady Gregory* and *George Moore*. His partiality for literature had been clear. For his later life, he spent most of his time in Switzerland, Italy and France. For more than half a century, his works exerted a great influence on the Western literary field. He was considered to be not only a thorough reformer, but also an outstanding novelist in the Western modern literature.

1.2. Literary Innovation

According to Joyce's view of literature, he intended to make all the components that made up the form of a novel into a new unified whole, independent of these components. The expression of the subtle mental activities can be a necessary way to describe people's deep consciousness. Novelists should emphasize the substitution of morphing, abstraction, simplification and rhythm for photographic simulations of life. His view was somewhat similar to Bell, "novelists should create the

forms they have in mind and the forms they find in their surroundings” [1].

Joyce deliberately expressed the creation intention that the moment is eternal, strived to explore the psychological changes generated by the task at the critical moment and captured the character’s instant consciousness to reflect the essence of life and revealed the eternal truth. These contribute to the emergence and development of epiphany.

2. Joyce’s Aesthetic Principles

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce defined epiphany in terms of three aesthetic principles for beauty. They are “integrity”, “symmetry” and “radiance”. These principles have a respectable philosophic origin in the “integritas, consonantias and claritas” of Aquinas, an Italian philosopher in the 13th century.

2.1. Integrity

Stephen, the main character in the novel, explains the first quality of beauty “integritas” as “wholeness”, which is the perception of an aesthetic image as one thing “self-bounded and self-contained upon the immeasurable background of space or time” [2].

2.2. Symmetry

Consonantias similarly is “symmetry” and rhythm of the structure. It is the aesthetic image conceived as “complex, multiple, divisible, separable, made up of its parts and their sum, harmonious” [2] (Joyce, 1996). To be more exact, the mind considers the object in whole and part, in relation to itself and to other objects, examines the balance of every part and the form of the object, traverses every cranny of the structure, and then the readers may have the impression of symmetry.

2.3. Epiphany in *Dubliners*

Radiance is approximately equated to another term “quidditas” or “whatness” of a thing. Quidditas is the link with the theory of epiphanies. In fact, the definition in *Stephen Hero* is more revealing: “... When the parts are adjusted to the special point, when we recognize that it is the thing which it is, its soul, whatness, leaps from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves epiphany” [3].

3. Epiphany

3.1. Origin of Epiphany

Epiphany is a religious term borrowed from Greek “Epiphaeneia”, which means “a showing-forth” or “a manifestation”. In Christianity epiphany is a festival celebrated on the sixth of June, which commemorates the first manifestation of newborn Jesus Christ before the three Magi. “Epiphany” can also refer to the sudden appearance of the holy image in the mind of Christians when they pray as well as their sudden consciousness activities. James Joyce was the first person to apply the theological term to literary works.

3.2. Joyce’s Concept of Epiphany

James Joyce used the term “epiphany” to describe the artistic revelation of the inner radiance of an object or event. He thought that art did not primarily provide a grotesque and complex

representation of the external world, but rather made people feel its essence, aiming to reveal the deep emotional life of the unconscious. Joyce believed that the subject of literary creation did not grasp the essence of the object by careful observation and rational thinking, but captured the beauty of the object through intuitive epiphany. In Joyce's view, epiphany is not only the most creative moment in creative thinking, but also the direct object of artistic expression. He believes that the act of epiphany itself involves a process of creating a new image [4]. As a man of letters, he wants to express or represent the image of beauty that people are trying to understand in the form of sound and colour [5].

Joyce transplanted the term to the realm of fiction and first defined it in the first draft of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which was his novel published in 1916. Joyce defined epiphany as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" [6]. This definition emphasizes sudden spiritual enlightenment. A man of letters should be extremely careful to record these epiphanies and realize that they are subtle but fleeting. In addition, the definition shows that even ordinary things can glow with eternal brilliance. According to Joyce, a man of letters should not only recognize the object in question as a whole, but also recognize it as an organized and structured complex. At last, when the relationship between the parts reaches a level of subtlety and each part is connected to a particular place, he can realize its essence. Actually, after the structure is so adjusted, the soul of the most ordinary object seems to light up in front of the readers, and the object brings us an epiphany [7]. Therefore, Joyce's epiphanies can be considered as part of the novel's action and rhetoric. They include both the artist's creation and the reader's perception of the metaphors that reveal or signify something of importance.

3.3. Epiphany in *a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Joyce maintained that the soul of the objects leapt to us from its hidden appearance. However, Joyce's epiphany is not derived from gods, but among common people in "casual, unostentatious, even unpleasant moments" [2]. These moments seem trivial to us, but truthfully show the true and important reality.

The process of Epiphany can be fully illustrated in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The novel portrays Stephen, a young artist who is determined to escape from the shackles of the society, church and family in order to pursue a noble artistic career. Stephen has experienced many moments of epiphany in his life. For much of his early life, he has seen the dirty, narrow and dingy streets in Dublin and heard the hoarse noise of the drunkards. With the gradual awakening of the protagonist's consciousness, what often appears in his mind is the "sea" or "birds". For example, the free flight of birds is constantly projected into his soul, which has gained great spiritual power. He compares the souls of all Ireland to bats, "... a bat-like soul began to realize that it was in a darkness and loneliness that no one knows" [2].

As for the epiphany about the artist's mission, it is based on the images such as seabirds, doves and eagles. In Chapter Fourteen, Stephen is inspired by the image of a wading girl and decided to devote himself to the career of art. In his eye, the girl "seemed to have been magically transformed into a beautiful seabird" [2].

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the trivial things such as the bell and basket can create epiphanies. Stephen once told his schoolmate, Lynch about the whole process of how he thought of the basket, "First you separate the basket from the rest of the outer entity which is not the basket. To apprehend it that it is one integral thing..., you recognize its wholeness. Then, the mind considers the object in whole and in part, in relation to itself and to other objects, examines the balance of its parts..., then we recognize that it is an organized composite structure. So the mind receives the impression of the symmetry of the object. Then the mind makes the only logically possible synthesis. This is the

moment which I call epiphany” [2].

3.4. Epiphany in *Dubliners*

Dubliners is Joyce’s first collection of short stories. In *Dubliners*, in order to describe the spiritual side of the main characters, Joyce began to employ epiphany, which could function as the climaxes of his stories. This technique has a profound symbolic meaning, that is, in each story, after the characters have suffered a lot, they are made enlightened or epiphanized. The reversal of hopes, dreams, aspirations and ideals of the main characters is presented in several instances of such sudden awakening and disenchantment.

Set in the Irish capital, the novel depicts the lives of diverse groups of the middle and lower class citizens in Dublin in the 20th century. What unites the fifteen short stories is their common theme, which is the paralysis that pervades the social life and it is reflected in all spheres of moral, spiritual, social and political aspects. The citizens who have suffered setbacks finally see clearly their own situation at a critical moment of light. This is what Joyce called epiphany.

The first short story *The Sisters* is about a child’s reaction to the death of a priest. The child’s consciousness gradually unravels the mystery of the priest’s unusual behaviors during his last year. It turns out that behind the priest’s death lies a kind of spiritual and religious paralysis. This is the revelation that the child has got after seeing the priest’s body. The child’s consciousness seems to mature in the second story *An Encounter*. He skips school with another classmate and roams a Dublin harbor in search of a “green-eyed foreign sailor”. Actually “green eyes” symbolize a fresh experience with an exotic color and a spirit of adventure. On the road, they meet a ragged wanderer, and the boy is surprised to find that the man’s eyes are green like wine glass. It is at this moment he experiences a spiritual epiphany, and he realizes what he has found is perversion and depravity. “Green eyes” have become a sign of their disillusionment. In the short story *Eveline* there is the most direct and vivid expression of psychopathy and paralysis of Dublin. Eveline’s spiritual realization is that she is not really deprived of her freedom, but she does not have the courage or strength to grasp it. The paralysis of her mind aborted her ideals and pursuits.

3.5. Epiphany in *Ulysses*

As a whole, *Ulysses* fulfils the criteria of integrity, symmetry and radiance. By making the readers describe in their mind regarding the three qualities, the novel creates its own efficacy. In *Ulysses*, Joyce did not explain the term “epiphany”, yet it is really there, and gradually reveals the nature of life and helps the novel to reach its climax naturally. The readers can find the essence by studying the phenomena and the abstract ideas.

Many writers use “revelation” as a technical device in order to achieve their effects; However, Joyce used it more consciously and with greater variation. A transcendental view of experience is involved in Joyce’s application of epiphanies, which furnishes Joyce with a technique of characterization which evolves generally in the lyrical, epical and dramatic progression that can be described as one from the first person to the third, from the personal to the impersonal, from the kinetic to the static.

The readers’ perception of epiphany follows the pattern of the mind’s movement that Joyce has defined. The reader’s epiphanies are the moments when he perceives the symbolic relationships in their complexity and irony. Why should epiphany in more strictly literary meaning of a “sound sense symbol” have any distinctive value as a clue to the meaning of Joyce’s works? In fact, “*Ulysses* and *Finegans Walk* are great epiphanies, which disclose their whatness and the whatness of reality. But this is only a fancier way of calling them significant form” [8].

In Chapter One, Mulligan “got a card from Bannon. Says he found a sweet young thing down there.

Photo girl he calls her” [9]. Bannon, who is a young student, is Mulligan’s brother’s friend. In Chapter Four, Milly, Bloom’s daughter, sends him a letter, which says, “... We did great biz yesterday..., there is a young student comes here some evenings named Bannon...” [8]. From here we know that Milly is a photo girl, and she knows Bannon. In Chapter Fourteen, when Mulligan goes to the Home’s Hospital with Bannon, he asks Bannon to “tell him of a skittish heifer, big of her age and beef to the heel...” [9]. Bannon takes out the photograph of Milly for Mulligan to look at. Only at this time do we know that Milly and Bannon are a couple.

Another important aspect of epiphany is its one-sidedness. The epiphany as Joyce explained is achieved by the object itself, which alludes to the total impersonality and passivity on the part of the beholder who can only record these epiphanies with extreme care. Goldberg says in his study, “This attempt to theorize is hardly satisfactory. It is so completely void if any personality in its impersonality that art according to these principles would be very cold and aloof” [10].

Thus, it is interesting to see how Joyce’s attitude towards the epiphany changed gradually. In *Ulysses* we can also find that the notion is dealt with in a mildly ironic way: “Remember your epiphany on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria. Someone was to read them there after a few thousand years, a mahwnanvanlara” [9].

The moment of revelation without its narrative base is the most conventional of Joyce’s epiphany, and the readers can find it elsewhere in the novel which does not make use of revelation as a specific technique in a realistic manner.

Therefore, epiphany is another version of symbolism because it substitutes a perception of significance for the fragmentation. In terms of the inquiry into how *Ulysses* implies, what the process of discovering epiphanies signify, and if epiphany represents a quest for objectivity and for the spiritual unity that transcends intellectual understanding, there are a lot questions to answer. Given the novel’s cyclical nature of history and its denial of a universe ordered by God, perhaps we should say that “epiphany is a quest to alleviate by positioning a way of seeing and knowing in literature, that is the spiritual condition dramatized in the novel” [6]. Perhaps we should say that the experience of epiphany becomes a symbol for the wholeness of soul that spiritual enlightenment once affords. It becomes a representation of the integrity, symmetry, and radiance which Joyce is seeking.

4. Conclusions

Though only a fragment of life, the moment of epiphany contains the meaning of all life. Joyce’s epiphany reveals the spiritual paralysis of the present society and the spiritual trauma of the present people, and triggers the protagonists’ true understanding of themselves and the great enlightenment on life. Joyce enables the readers to approach the order and meaning, and the illumination and intensity of epiphany. Therefore, epiphany is not only a moment of enlightenment within the narrative, it is also the promise of revelation if the readers are to acquire the global perspective that reading *Ulysses* requires. With the help of the experimental way of observing human existence and the brand new narrative mode, it opens up a new vision for modern novels.

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