Topic #5

The Use of the Epiphanic Revelation in Joyce's 'Dubliners'

ENG110Y5

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In order to analyze the theme of revelation that pervades James Joyce's *Dubliners*, one should specifically consider the ongoing use of the epiphany throughout this collection of short stories. Joyce defined the epiphany as "a sudden revelation of the whatness of a thing" (Valente ¶1) or when an otherwise insubstantial object, thought, saying, or circumstance suddenly seems quite crucial and usually enlightening. The importance of this literary device can be found within each short story in *Dubliners*, as Joyce commonly used the epiphany on his characters but also sometimes solely on his readers for the purpose of communicating these sudden, revelatory moments in an imaginatively varied and constantly creative way.

To initially focus on Joyce's use of the epiphany solely for the reader, 'Two Gallants' will serve as an appropriate entry point. This seedy and uncompromising story focuses on two wayfaring young men – Lenehan and Corley – who clearly embody Joyce's grim vision of the despondent state of Dublin's youth at the time. Lenehan is the more laconic of the two, yet just as shamelessly amoral as the boisterous Corley. Thanks to the lack of an income, the two vagrants never seem to have anything else to do beyond searching for free alcohol, money, or sex. The reader gradually begins to realize that these men are likely not even friends but simply partners in crime as Corley carries on his tireless monologues with Lenehan and only occasionally replying with an odd, humdrum quip. (Garrett 100) The main epiphany for us, however, comes at the very end after Corley has carried out his latest deplorable deed. We suspect that he is probably seducing a young lady into sex yet when we see him receive a gold coin from her we realize that Joyce is completely uninterested in letting any aspect of this lower-class Dublin society escape from his criticism – the female is revealed as being just as lascivious and depraved

as the two young men in that *she* rewards *him* for sex rather than the other (and certainly more expected) way around. Interesting, but could use more elaboration.

'The Boarding House' revolves around Mrs. Mooney, the supervisor of a boarding house, her nubile daughter Polly, and Mr. Doran, a wine salesman and devout Catholic. Mr. Doran's affair with Polly brings out the businesswoman in Mrs. Mooney, who makes it her foremost concern to arrange a marriage between the two, whether or not love has anything to do with it. The meek Mr. Doran proceeds to let himself succumb to these pressures in fear of tainting his religious reputation as Polly looks on quite happily, daydreaming about her suddenly promising future. (Classic ¶2) Our epiphany comes in the end when we realize that each character is either involuntarily or voluntarily content with placing social conventions above human emotion. A loveless marriage that is based primarily upon fear will soon be initiated – a marriage that is doomed from the beginning, at least from an emotional standpoint. Too much plot summary

In 'Counterparts,' Joyce weaves his story around a man whose confidence and masculinity has been stripped away from him thanks to both social and occupational shortcomings. The disaffected man comes home after a night of heavy drinking to his young son, who is clearly eager to help out his father. It is when the father loses his temper over a trivial matter and begins battering his son – who then helplessly pleads with his father to relent by offering to say a Hail Mary for him – that the epiphany is revealed to us. We see that religion offers no more than an illusion of protection in this society where adversity seems to completely overshadow any possibilities of solace or signs of faith. (Werner 52) Is this a direct quote?

With 'Ivy Day in the Committee Room,' 'A Mother,' and 'Grace,' Joyce respectively makes political, artistic, and religious statements that are all revealed through epiphanies intended solely for his readers to pick up on. As the conversations between the men in the committee room in 'Ivy Day' gradually go on, we realize that these are men whose concerns are so firmly entrenched in the past that they can barely think about the future. The nationalists among them are still so infatuated with their "dead king" Charles Parnell whereas the conservatives seem to have ironically lost their focus after losing their archrival. This epiphany concerns an integral theme of Joyce's throughout *Dubliners* – that of *paralysis* in both spiritual and social terms. (Valente ¶30) Again, a direct quote? The artistic focal point of 'A Mother' is clearly that of Joyce's disappointment with the stubbornness that perhaps caused the Irish arts to flounder in the first place. Mrs. Kearney embodies the doomed mix of poverty and hard-headed nationalism that ultimately gets her daughter nowhere. (Classic ¶18) But what the reader is intended to realize here is something that the characters never seem to acknowledge – it is actually Ireland's morbid preoccupation with their own history that is preventing the country from making a new artistic surge. Finally, Joyce also shows his critical concern with the state of faith and religion in Dublin with 'Grace.' Mr. Kernan is a troubled alcoholic whose wife and friends decide that he needs to experience some sort of religious awakening. Mr. Kernan looks upon Catholicism with so much skepticism that he even equates religion with superstition but eventually decides that he would not have much to lose if he went with his friends on their proposed religious retreat. (Classic ¶14) The integral aspect of this story for us to realize is once again a religious paralysis of sorts where Mr. Kernan is being guided by people who lack any genuine understanding of Catholicism themselves,

what are you getting at here?

so even after listening to their misinformed lectures he is actually no better off than he was before. His friends vehemently argue about Catholic doctrine whilst confusing all of the facts and it is this circumstance that should enlighten us as readers to not only Mr. Kernan's but just about every single character's sad religious misconceptions in this short story. (Classic ¶9)

Although it is now clear that Joyce directed these epiphanic revelations solely toward his readers on numerous occasions, they were more often than not directed toward his characters. In 'The Sisters,' for instance, the boy narrator finds himself developing a fascination with religion - particularly Catholic doctrines - thanks to his friendship with Father Flynn, who appears quite interested in teaching the boy these things. Upon learning of Flynn's mental illness and subsequent death, however, the boy is hit with an epiphany while visiting the Father's coffin. His sudden rejection of Catholicism could be attributed to his realization of the restrictive environment that it seems to impose on people. (Werner 55) The boy identifies the anguish that the religion put Father Flynn through due to its restraint and resolves that he will not put himself through that same degree of mental and emotional paralysis.

'An Encounter' also involves a boy narrator who reaches disappointment through an epiphany. The boy attempts to escape the harsh realities of his schooldays by avidly reading fictional novels. He finds these novels entertaining but decides that he wants to actually experience these adventures in real life as well. The boy realizes that it is all just an unattainable illusion, however, when he meets a fellow bookworm in the form of a perverted old man who only reflects a harsh, cold, and generally despicable reality. (Valente ¶19) In 'Araby,' the boy narrator arrives at a similar epiphany by overhearing a

conversation between a young lady and two young men. The vacuity of this conversation in turn leads to his epiphany that his motivations behind being at the bazaar are equally vacuous – he has somehow convinced himself that he will mutualize his supposed 'love' for a girl with vanity in the form of a material gift. (Werner 54) In this respect, he too has to realize that the world of his imagination is nothing more than an illusion in which his romantic expectations simply cannot translate into reality.

Although most of the aforementioned epiphanies were unpleasant ones for the characters who received them, they were not necessarily unbeneficial in that the characters at least received some form of enlightenment. In Eveline Hill's case in 'Eveline,' however, the epiphany that she receives is completely negative as it does nothing more than paralyze her and prevent her life from progressing. (Bloom 3) Eveline coldly backs out of a very promising trip to Buenos Ayres with her lover at literally the last second. This is an epiphany that she receives out of fear most likely incited by a tragic sense of obligation that she feels she has to her nation.

Jimmy Doyle, the young student protagonist of 'After the Race,' becomes quite eager to impress his acquaintances when he finds himself in the company of a number of international personalities including a very rich Frenchman named Ségouin. He proceeds to carry on quite opulently, acting as if he has money to throw away by gambling quite heavily. It is not until he hears the epiphanic call "Daybreak, gentleman!" when he realizes that his efforts were essentially futile – he is quickly snapped back into his Irish reality, where one can try to climb the international ladder of success but will inevitably fall back down into the "channel of poverty and inaction." (Joyce 35)

Abrupt shift...

Little Chandler in 'A Little Cloud' represents the aftermath of what may result from adhering to restraints; that is, staying in Ireland when not really wanting to. These harsh feelings are ignited when an old Irish friend of his shows up, talking about the prosperity that he's achieved whilst being away from Ireland. Chandler's jealousy then gets the best of him when he starts thinking about how much more success he deserved to achieve. At home he begins to feel as if he has been living in a paralytic state and after looking at his wife's photograph and the furniture around him he thinks it all to be inadequate; he feels imprisoned by his own bourgeoisie. (Valente ¶27) The epiphany that arises from all of this is that he, like Eveline, realizes that he cannot break free of this "prison" now – it is his true life and his true existence.

wrong word

The alienated and introverted protagonist of 'A Painful Case,' banker and book enthusiast James Duffy, does not achieve his epiphany until after quite an extreme incident. Although he lacked any friends whatsoever, Duffy had thought himself to be a fairly content man before meeting Mrs. Sinico, a lonely married woman at a concert. But he nonetheless goes along with the friendship as they continue meeting one another; however, when Mrs. Sinico finally decides to show him any obvious affection, Duffy abandons her. When Mrs. Sinico is reported dead soon afterward, Duffy finally achieves his epiphany through a profound feeling of guilt – the loneliness that he has been unnecessarily imposing upon himself for so long now is a source of pain and tragedy that must be reconciled if there will be any hope for his own redemption. (Werner 52)

Maria, the warmhearted but life-weary protagonist of 'Clay' is an exceedingly tragic figure in that she has led a difficult life and is still relegated to meager laboring now in her twilight years. The story's epiphany is communicated through the character

Joe, however – Maria's friend whom she helped raise from childhood. Maria's singing of *I Dreamt that I Dwelt* contains an error but a very relevant one as her mistake is perhaps intentional. She omits a passage concerning love and this in turn could be thought to represent her own loveless existence. (Garrett 107) Joe obtains the realization that Maria is subtly expressing her feelings here in a sudden epiphany that moves him to tears.

In certainly the most famous story in the collection, Joyce's 'The Dead' also contains the most profound epiphanic insights in *Dubliners*. When Gabriel Conroy arrives with his wife, Gretta, at a dance held by his aunts, he becomes wary of delivering a speech that he think may go over the heads of fellow guests. This superior attitude leads to some hostile remarks from Miss Ivors concerning his reluctance to stay in Ireland, as he has spent much of his time in England as of late. This all eventually leads to the major epiphanic event of the story, when at night after the dance Gretta reveals that she has been preoccupied with her memory of Michael Furey, a sickly young boy who risked his life in order to proclaim his love for her before tragically dying many years ago. This leads to Gabriel's epiphany that he never really knew the person whom he thought he knew most intimately due to his ignorance of her past – her 'dead life' – and this in turn leads to his realization that he has also unrightfully ignored his own past with Ireland. (Garrett 110) He concludes that in order to truly unite himself with humanity he must overcome his own egocentrism and adopt a more impersonal view of existence.

Joyce's use of the epiphany as a means of conveying the theme of revelation that is so prevalent throughout *Dubliners* is quite appropriate due to its multiple range of effects – Joyce makes sure that not all of these moments are merely sudden moments of revelation for the story's fictional characters but commonly they are

solely revelatory for the actual readers of these stories, thus transcending literary banality and enabling his fiction to potentially reveal meaning not only for its characters but for its readers as well.

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