

## **The Epiphanic Consciousness in Joyce's "The Dead"**

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### **Abstract**

Joyce's story "The Dead" reflects the significance of epiphanic consciousness that underlies the epiphanic mode of education. It is argued that the story challenges the ethos of the institutional mode of education and exposes the gap between 'substantial knowledge' and 'abstract knowledge.' Despite being well-educated, Gabriel, the central character, undergoes a process of transformation when the epiphanic moment reveals the futility of his actions. This research paper investigates how far and above his education is with regard to the actual experience of life. The new knowledge unlocks a new level of growth in him. He achieves a new vision of reality and a sense of transcendental unity with existence whether dead (past) or alive (present).

**Keywords:** Education, Knowledge, Epiphanic

### **Introduction**

What my study attempts to show is that the institutional mode of education is limited, and there is a possibility to bring the institutional mode of education closer to the Epiphanic model of growth. Education does not mean skills-based learning, handling tools and operating machines in a skilful manner. The purpose of education is to cultivate individuality, the autonomy of the self and to recognize humans as 'various'; appreciation of the 'richness and subtlety' of this world; cultivation of the heart, 'feeling', and 'emotion'; and 'mental clarity'. Thus, it involves the whole of human personality that grows with the expansion of the human faculties by the 'interchange' of 'general and humane' ideas. The most significant aspect of this process of development is the release of creative imagination from what Wordsworth terms the 'servile yoke'. It is possible to earn the benefits of living in a technological-rationalistic age by endorsing the Epiphanic model of growth. It is argued that the lopsided emphasis of modernity on the outer life ironically represses an individual's inner capacity for growth and development. The Epiphanic model of growth is an answer to the void created by modernity's lack of emphasis on inner development. Nature – associated with inner potentialities – and nurture – associated with academic culture – should correspond in an interchange of intellectual give and take. Therefore, Joyce questions the process of selective growth which illumines only the targeted aspects of an individual, and represses the rest of the personality.

In *Dubliners*, Joyce appendages 'moral' – stripped off its historical religious meaning – to his aesthetic theory developed in *Stephen Hero*. He expands his notion of the epiphany – an exact focus of vision – in the context of Dublin which is the intense centre of – moral and spiritual – 'paralysis'. The conflict between the external world of moral and spiritual 'paralysis' and the internal mental and emotional states of the protagonists are juxtaposed; the mounting tension of this conflict is released in the epiphanic moments that bring about a new state of awareness.

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The conflict is intensified to the pitch of a crescendo where the lightning flash of an epiphanic moment points toward a new level of growth in the protagonists.

The last story of *Dubliners* – a collection of fifteen short stories – “The Dead” exemplifies more fully the epiphanic mode of education. The story was written in 1907. Most of the critics regard the story as an expression of Joyce’s high point of creativity of the period which marks the beginning of his later much accomplished art of fiction. Beck (1969) affirms that in this story Joyce achieves “a texture of denotativeness that approaches the poetic mode” (p. 325). Daiches (1968) argues that the story is actually a symbolic expression of Joyce’s “aesthetic attitude” that he finally accepted; it also reveals his artistic concern of the difficulty of “defining the aesthetic point of view at this period” (p. 37). Some critics consider it separate from the rest of the stories but most critics treat it as a befitting end to the volume of short stories. Also, the titles of the first and the last stories are interchangeable. The time of action of the story is an appropriate choice on Joyce’s part – less than a week before the Feast of the Epiphany – in order to reflect the significance of epiphanic consciousness that underlies the epiphanic mode of education. Since it is the longest story in the entire collection, Joyce provides ample information about the protagonist. The protagonist of the story, Gabriel Conroy, is described as “a stout tallish young man” (Joyce, 2006, p. 154). He is reasonably well-off. He is a well-educated person. He is a graduate from the Royal University. He is a teacher of literature at a college. He writes a literary column every Wednesday for *The Daily Express* – a conservative, unionist newspaper. He also writes book-reviews. Nevertheless, he is a typical product of the institutions of education he has attended. The story explores how far and above his education is with regard to the actual experience of life. The story challenges the ethos of the institutional mode of education and exposes the gap between “substantial knowledge” and “abstract knowledge” (Williams, 1990, p. 69).

#### **Research Methodology**

This study has been conducted on the basis of close textual analysis. In order to substantiate the central arguments of this study, specific words or phrases have been selected from the text of the story. These specific words or phrases are analyzed and interpreted by means of secondary sources.

#### **Discussion and Analysis**

The occasion of the story happens to be the Misses Morkan’s annual dance party – most probably a New Year party. The hostesses of the party are Gabriel’s aunts, Miss Kate and Miss Julia and their niece, Mary Jane. He is their sister, Ellen’s son. Julia is the leading soprano in a church called Adam and Eve’s. She could not continue in the choir because the Pope abolished women from singing in the church. Kate gives music lessons at home. Mary is a musical talent educated at The Royal Irish Academy of Music. She is an organist in the Catholic Saint Mary’s Church. They are a middle-class family living off their musical talents. They had settled on Usher’s Island thirty years ago. Mary was only a little girl at that time. It has become quite a tradition in the family to invite all those people whom they know at the annually recurring party.

Gabriel is the most awaited person at the party. He and his wife, Gretta,

arrive at the party later than ten o'clock in the night. The party is already under way. He comes late because of his wife's elaborate preparations for the party. Joyce exposes Gabriel's cultural position in the earliest interaction he has with the housemaid, Lily. He seems to give himself an air of cultural superiority over others. From the manner with which he pays attention in order to put off his overcoat and galoshes, and smartens himself to meet the guests upstairs, he gives the impression that he is very conscious of keeping up the appearance of a gentleman. When he arrives, he exchanges a few words with Lily. He reports to Lily that it is snowing continuously outside as she finds snowflakes on his galoshes and overcoat. It is one of the many references to snow in this story. Later in the story, Mary says to the departing guests: "we haven't had snow like it for thirty years" (Joyce, 2006, p. 184). Joyce's emphasis, in the earlier stories, shifts from "dear dirty Dublin" to Nature as the continuously falling snow appears as a powerful symbol of self-realization in the story (2006, p. 61). He predicts that the snow may continue the whole night. Gabriel does not like her way of pronouncing his family name; she uses three syllables instead of two. He does not see the point that she is not culturally as privileged as he is. He has known her since she was a child. He asks whether she is getting married soon. Lily's answer to Gabriel astonishes him to the point of shaking his self-complacent ideas about man-woman relationship: "The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you" (Joyce, 2006, p. 154). His tacit assumptions of sex meet a sharp blow from Lily. It angers him as the colour on his face changes. He is taken unawares by the remark made by Lily because he was least expecting to have it come from a housemaid who is supposed to be pliant toward him. He tries to tip her off by giving a coin as a token of his superior position with regards to her. She declines to accept the tip but he insists on saying that "Christmas-time! Christmas-time" (Joyce, 2006, p.154)! He leaves Lily and continues going upstairs. Nevertheless, she thanks him cordially. He takes some time to recover from Lily's answer about men. He waits before the drawing-room door where the dancing is going on. In order to neutralise the sad exchange he has had with Lily, he pays attention to his dress and arranges his cuffs and the bows of his tie. Since he has to deliver a short speech after the dinner, he takes out the paper on which he has written the main points of the speech. He is still unclear whether he should include a few lines from Robert Browning because the guests might not understand them as he thinks that "their grade of culture differed from his" (Joyce, 2006, p. 155). He realizes his mistake by being frank with the housemaid; he regards that conversation as "an utter failure" (Joyce, 2006, p. 155). So he thinks likewise that if he quotes Browning, it might be 'an utter failure' as well.

In the brief conversation with his aunts, it is revealed that Gabriel is the decision-maker in his family's affairs. He exercises control over his wife and children about what they should eat or wear. He is shown to be solicitous about his wife's health to the extent of dominating her as a possessed object. He is so health-conscious that he will not go back to his home in Monkstown because Gretta caught cold last year; he instead stays at an expensive hotel this time. Nevertheless, Gretta says that she would not mind walking back home if she were allowed to do so. There are frequent references to walking in *Dubliners*. Most of the stories feature

characters who tend to walk through the streets of Dublin but there is very little walking in this story. Gretta's wish to walk back home is thwarted by Gabriel's concern over her health. Another reference to a character's thwarted wish to take a walk occurs in the story. Just before the dinner, standing near the window, Gabriel longs to go out in the snow and walk there. Gretta appears in the above-mentioned talk as a natural character but her romantic wish stands in sharp contrast to Gabriel's grave concerns over the health of his wife and children. She admits that she did not want to wear the galoshes but it is Gabriel who forced her to wear them. Julia does not know what galoshes are. Gretta tells them where Gabriel has picked the idea from; it is commonly used on the continent. It reflects Gabriel's snobbery.

Gabriel remains preoccupied with himself as he does not mix with the other guests at the party because 'their grade of culture differed from his'. He does not enjoy the music Mary plays; he finds it rather dull as it lacks melody in it. Only a few of the guests take interest in the music. Gabriel occupies himself by looking at the pictures hanging on the wall above the piano; he sees a picture of his mother there. He begins to think about his mother. It reminds him of her opposition to marrying Gretta. In her opinion, he had married a country girl much beneath their family standards. When dancing starts, he is a partner with Miss Ivors – his colleague and friend for many years. She appears to be a proponent of the Revivalist movement with nationalist sympathies. While dancing, she questions his identity why does he write in *The Daily Express*? She asks who he is actually. On the question of his sympathies with the language and the people of Ireland, he replies: "I'm sick of my own country, sick of it" (Joyce, 2006, p. 165). He reflects Joyce's own response toward Ireland before leaving Ireland for France. He disengages himself from Ireland and refuses to take Irish as his language. She calls him a West Briton. Nevertheless, she appreciates his review of Browning's poems. She invites him to visit the Aran Isles in the coming summer. He replies that he goes on a cycling tour every year to the neighbouring countries. Miss Ivors' questions embarrass him. He regrets having answered her questions. His sense of cultural superiority meets a sharp blow from Miss Ivors who undercuts his self-complacent ideals. Later, Gabriel tells Gretta that Miss Ivors has invited him to go on a trip to the west of Ireland; she becomes excited over it because she could see Galway again (originally she is from Galway). As the time is approaching for dinner, he thinks of his speech again. In order to neutralize the blow he has received from Miss Ivors, he thinks of putting out Miss Ivors by talking about the difference between the old generation as having values and the modern educated generation lacking values. It gives him a sigh of relief to know that Miss Ivors does not stay for supper.

In contradistinction to what Gabriel said to Miss Ivors about Ireland, he makes Irish hospitality, the old generation, and past times as a standard of values in his after-dinner speech. Though the modern generation is more educated and more self-conscious, he regrets the absence of humanitarian values in the modern generation. Gabriel has Miss Ivors in his mind when he refers to the modern generation lacking values. In fact, his remark is ironically referred to himself; he is the one from the modern generation. As discussed above, Miss Ivors aligns herself with tradition. Meisel (1987) argues that "the will to modernity is itself the subject of

*Dubliners* rather than its motive force. Joyce has already superseded the anxiety that places him within tradition by virtue of being able, especially so early, to represent its terms rather than to capitulate to mere expressions of them" (p. 122). He goes on to say that "Gabriel is already compromised in a number of ways, and, as a writer, already a reflexive as well as a realistic vehicle for the kinds of Irish anxieties about the hegemony of English language and culture against which Miss Ivors's pedantic Romanticism is (like Yeats's enthusiasm for the Gaelic revival) mounted as an almost comic defense" (1987, p. 123). A major part of his speech is directed toward his aunts as the custodian of values of the old generation. Gabriel declares his aunts and their niece as "the Three Graces of the Dublin musical world" (Joyce, 2006, p. 178). He does not quote from Browning's poetry on the assumption that his audience is not literate enough to understand it. His assumption of cultural superiority is ill-founded as the audience is literate enough to talk about the quality of music. Earlier in the story, one of the guests at the party, Freddy Malins, is feared to be drunk. The hostesses express their grave concern over it. In contrast to Gabriel's apparently polished manners and appearance, Freddy comes in the party in a half-drunk state; his dress is in a disorderly state. He is a foil to Gabriel. Freddy appears to be a simple-minded character. He does not drink at the party and remains sober. He is affectionate toward Julia and Kate. He cannot see them fussing and worrying over arranging the dinner table. He grabs hold of them and makes them sit down. His manner appears so affectionate that the rest of the guests appreciate his kind gesture toward Julia and Kate. He appreciates Julia whole-heartedly when she sings. He does not object to his mother sending him to Mount Melleray among the pious monks. In the last part of the story, Gabriel acknowledges to Gretta that Freddy is a gentleman as he returned to him one pound that he had borrowed from Gabriel. Before his speech, Aunt Julia sings a song, *Arrayed for the Bridal* which directs their conversation toward the quality of the opera singers of the past. Julia, Kate, and Mr Browne – an old person and a Protestant – side with the past singers; Mary and Bartell D'Arcy – a tenor – side with the singers of modern times.

The party continues till the early hours of the morning. Now the guests are leaving; Gabriel is waiting in the dark hall for Gretta to come downstairs. He wonders what is keeping her upstairs. Suddenly he catches sight of her standing on the stairs; she looks changed as he sees her shining eyes and there is colour on her cheeks. She is lost into a reverie listening to a song by Bartell D'Arcy. He misinterprets the meaning of her melancholy figure: "There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude" (Joyce, 2006, p. 182). Though he tends to reduce her to the level of a symbol, she interests Gabriel so much in that posture that she stimulates his sexual appetite for her. He becomes impatient to be alone with her. On their way back to the Gresham Hotel, they take a short walk through the snow to find a cab. He feels sentimentally inflated in anticipation of a romantic union with his wife. He is marshalling all the tides of his lust to sweep her away into the world of sheer physicality of his passion as he sees her walking through the snow. He continues with his daydream constantly adding to it the flavour

of his lust. The couple seems to be “galloping to their honeymoon” if ignorance is still to be the measure of their lives (Joyce, 2006, p. 186). Gabriel brings to his mind an account of the delightful “moments of ecstasy” they have enjoyed together (Joyce, 2006, p. 186). Heated up by his burning desire for her, he anticipates a “wave of yet more tender joy” (Joyce, 2006, p. 186). He wishes in fanciful terms if they could “run away together with wild and radiant hearts to a new adventure” (Joyce, 2006, p. 187). When they are finally left to themselves in the semi-darkness of the hotel room, he holds himself back because he wants her to approach him, to affirm his feelings that she wishes the same. His life to this moment is full: “His heart was brimming over with happiness” (Joyce, 2006, p. 189). On the contrary, Gretta comes back from the party with a heavy heart.

Gabriel’s romantic expectations are frustrated when Gretta collapses before him. Bartell D’Arcy’s song *The Lass of Aughrim* becomes the basis of the epiphany for her; it brings her back to her past life in the Galway when she was very young. From the moment she hears the song and comes downstairs to set off for the Gresham Hotel, she is strangely preoccupied by the memory of her former lover, Michael Furey – a diseased seventeen year old working class country boy. The boy used to sing that particular song which Bartell D’Arcy was singing. She could clearly call up the image of that boy as she tells Gabriel. He died soon after she left her hometown. On the night before her departure, he went down to see her on a rainy night and caught cold which consequently led to his death. Earlier, Gabriel’s conception of her as a symbol implies the fact that he is not accustomed to seeing his wife in true proportions which is one of the reasons why she could never disclose it to her husband all these years. He might have been encouraging her all these years to play up to him in that allotted space which accords with his tacit assumptions of sex. Now it dawns upon him that the basis of their relationship is founded on another secret relationship which has been lying locked up beneath the solid appearance of their self-complacent knowledge of one another. This is the moment that strikes him flat on the ground: “at that hour when he had hoped to triumph, some implacable and vindictive being was coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world” (Joyce, 2006, p. 191). The shock of this unexpected discovery calls into question the victories of his former way of life. As Riquelme (1998) argues, “The experience of reading his own image in antithetical ways contributes to the emptying out and the potential transvaluing of all that he thought he knew” (p. 133). The epiphanic moment reveals the futility of all those actions which, a while ago, encouraged in him the illusion of being a most satisfied person: “A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous wellmeaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror” (Joyce, 2006, p. 191). In that moment of ‘shameful consciousness’ he turns his back on the light coming from the window. He sees himself more clearly with regard to his experience. In Cheng’s view, the epiphany is “an act of emotional expansiveness, self-understanding, and generosity” (2006, p. 361). He foresees the death of his fading and withering aunt, Julia: “One by one they were all becoming shades” (Joyce, 2006, p. 194). Nevertheless, he

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appreciates the death of that young lover who died for love: "Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither with age" (Joyce, 2006, p. 194).

#### **Conclusion**

It is time for Gabriel to make a choice as he contemplates in the closing lines of the text, "The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward" (Joyce, 2006, p. 194). In contrast to the eastward Journeys in the earlier stories, Gabriel pledges to undertake a journey toward the west, which is characteristically Irish. The new knowledge unlocks a new level of growth in him: "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead" (Joyce, 2006, p. 194). In Beck's view, the snow is not simply snow but much more than that; what it "seeks to evoke is actively imaginative response, spontaneous, personally conditioned, and inwardly felt, to include consciousness of Gabriel as a living being as an expansive moment in his enlarging existence" (1969, p. 338). He achieves a new vision of reality and a sense of transcendental unity with existence whether dead (past) or alive (present).

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