# Epiphanies in *Dubliners**

Takashi Suzuki

Epiphanies appear in *Dubliners* in various ways. Some stories present them directly. These epiphanies are apparent to every reader. One of these is in "After the Race". Jimmy Doyle is a son of the successful father who is called a merchant prince by the Dublin newspapers. Jimmy is a spoiled youth who has money and is popular but of no particular talent. He is very excited, sitting in a car that a wealthy Frenchman drives with his companions through the cheers of spectators. He has joined the Frenchman's company without no reason. Jimmy takes this car race as the opportunity to deepen his relationship with the Frenchman from mere acquaintance to friendship. The Frenchman is reputed to own some of the biggest hotels in France, and is about to start motor business in Paris. Jimmy is going to "stake"(47)[1] the greater part of his money on the Frenchman's venture, and the Frenchman gives him the impression that the investment is made possible by a favour of friendship. The idea of this investment is initiated by his father's suggestion. Therefore Jimmy and his father treat them in a very friendly and hospitable manner. But this design leads Jimmy to a fatal card game, and he loses more than he can afford:

> He knew that he would regret it in the morning, but at present he was glad of the rest, glad of the dark stupor that would cover up his folly. He leaned his elbows on the table and rested his head between his hands, counting the beats of his temples. The cabin door opened and he saw the Hungarian standing in a shaft of grey light:
> —Daybreak, gentlemen! (51)

Villona's most common call, "Daybreak, gentlemen!" crushes Jimmy's ambition which has powerfully dominated his mind, and harshly exposes what he actually is. The representational level of Villona's announcement is clearly distinct from that of the preceding narrative, and this distinction creates a dramatic representation of Jimmy's failure.

The transition of time and space is subtly calculated. From the wide spectacles of Inchicore, to the dinner in Jimmy's spacious house, and finally through the night city to the dark narrow yacht cabin. Time moves leisurely, but the speed of time suddenly increases, the night passes so quickly but, at the end, in Jimmy's "dark stupor," time stagnates, everything is immobile, and the epiphany suddenly breaks in with a shaft of grey light.[2]

The similar transition of time and space is also effective to introduce an epiphany in "Two Gallants". Until Corley leaves Lenehan, time and space change slowly in pace with their rambles. When Lenehan is left alone, he has no other way than to keep on wandering listlessly in the Dublin streets, and, as if reflecting his irritation, time speeds up. His wanderings end in the shadow of a lamppost of Merrion Street and the appointed time comes. The readers do not know why Lenehan has been waiting for the meeting with Corley so anxiously, and share his tension and unrest to this moment. In the darkness, within a small circle under the street lamp, "A small gold coin shone in the palm"(65). Released from the suspense prior to this revelation, the readers are shocked and disgusted to realise what Lenehan has awaited.

On the other hand, "An Encounter" has a more complicated structure. A boy goes out on an adventure with his friend "to break out of the weariness of school life for one day." At the end of their expedition, they have a terrible experience of meeting an old pervert. If what this story shows is an encounter of a healthy adventurous boy with a pervert who incarnates the spiritual deterioration of Dublin, and thus highlights the contrast between the two, then why is the boy ashamed of his paltry stratagem and penitent in the end of the story? What does he really encounter in this story?

His adventure to the Irish "Wild West"(18) is a short journey across Dublin in the opposite direction from the west to the east, and it represents a downward movement of cultural and economic conditions as well. As the boy and his friend Mahony travel from the city centre to the seaside Ringsend, they move from the area of the Catholic middle class to that of the Catholic working class, and then to the "squalid streets where the families of fishermen live"(23). Casual impressions of the streets he passes betray the misery the lower class people suffer. However, this innocent boy feels no sympathy for them. He feels their life is something despicable and has nothing to do with his.

The boy is daily made conscious of the discrimination between the social classes in the Catholic community like the boy in "Araby". To the boy, the distance between him and the poor boys is, in fact, wider than between the Catholics and the Protestants. When the ragged boys mistakenly assume the boy and Mahony to be the Protestants, and fling stones at them calling them "*Swaddlers*" (22), the boy seems to contentedly accept the wrong identification.

The dominance of Britain is hated, and at the same time Britain is an object of warped adoration. This pathological paradox of Dublin has its influence on the boy. The old pervert seem to be the only person who has something to satisfy the boy's inflated pride. In spite of his shabby figure, the old man impresses the boy as educated because of his knowledge of literature. When the topic changes from school and books, to the one which has sexual connotations, his good accent weakens the boy's judgement and lessens its obscene content and disguises its menace. The boy reacts in a stereotypically British way. The boy accepts the old man due to his supposedly educated accent. This is in contrast to his contempt to the lower class people.[3]

He proposes false names to hide their identity from the pervert when they notice the old man's deviant behaviour:

> We remained silent when he had gone. After a silence of a few minutes I heard Mahony exclaim:
> —I say! Look what he's doing!
> As I neither answered nor raised my eyes, Mahony exclaimed again:
> —I say... He's a queer old josser!
> —In case he asks us for our names, I said, let you be Murphy and I'll be Smith. (26)

Adopting assumed names to protect themselves is in itself not wrong, but the names the boy proposes to assume contain more than a simple stratagem. Murphy is a typical Irish name, and Smith a typical British one. Choosing these names suggests the way in which the boy differentiates between the two nationalities. As he admits later, he always despised Mahony a little. In giving an Irish name to Mahony and a British one to himself, he discloses his sense of superiority to Mahony in a distorted way.

These short exchanges harshly unveil the boy's hidden snobbishness, but the scene is very natural, nothing dramatic, and its significance is easy to be dismissed.

His journey to Pigeon House shows how his pride is influenced by various biases. The boy is a product of the Catholic Ireland under the British dominance, not simply an innocent adventurous boy. When he finally realises the old man's real nature, he cries 'Murphy' in order to escape from him, and recognises his own vanity at the same time. He encounters his real self, and admits that his stratagem is paltry.[4] The boy is given no name, but a pseudonym. He is Smith even in the end of the story. Although he is nameless, but he is not without hope, for he repents his spiritual poverty.

The characters who appear on the stage of "The Dead" are actually or spiritually dead, or at least inanimate. Only exceptions are Lily and Miss Ivors. They are independent individuals and beyond the influence of Gabriel's social skills or rhetoric. The contrast between the dead and the living is apparent at the beginning of the story:

> —Tell me, Lily, he said in a friendly tone, do you still go to school?
>
> —O no, sir, she answered. I'm done schooling this year and more.
>
> —O, then, said Gabriel gaily, I suppose we'll be going to your wedding one of these fine days with your young man, eh?
>
> The girl glanced back at him over her shoulder and said with great bitterness:
>
> —The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.
>
> Gabriel coloured, as if he felt he had made a mistake, and, without looking at her, kicked off his goloshes and flicked actively with his muffler at his patent-leather shoes. (202)

Why should Gabriel receive such a bitter retort from Lily? What is she blaming for?[5] He is merely being conventionally polite. Lily, however, does not take his almost formulaic enquiry lightly. Instead, she reveals her anger at the men of the educated, privileged classes in general. She is well aware that these men are self content with their well-to-do life and so much unconcerned about the miserable situations of young working class girls. There is very little probability of the rosy future for a girl like Lily in the society where "The percentage of bachelors and spinsters ... was highest in the world."[6] Lily instinctively recognises in Gabriel an inconsiderate and insensitive personality, and is making him face his real self hidden behind his politeness. Gabriel takes out a coin from his pocket and hands it over to Lily to reestablish the social relationship between them, again behaving as one of the superior class.

His attempt, however, falls flat. Her instinctive scorn shows that she has her own social rules and ethics in which she takes pride. The scene betrays the emptiness of his words and behaviour.

In "The Dead", narrative functions in two ways: one is to cover Gabriel's emptiness, the other to uncover it. The former is similar to that of "The Sisters." It is a manifold, dramatic description which sometimes gives a false impression of an epiphany. Consider the scene where Greta is poetically depicted:

> Gabriel...was in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase. A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terracotta and salmon-pink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife. She was leaning on the banisters, listening to something...

> He stood still in the gloom...gazing up at his wife. 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. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. Distant Music he would call the picture if he were a painter. (239-40)

This memorable scene might be easily accepted as an epiphany. The picturesque figure of his wife as an image of Madonna induces the readers to accept it as a moment of eternal beauty. However it is nothing but his misconception of his wife that creates this Madonna-like image of Gretta. It is an illusion that is founded in his self-complacent desires. Paradoxically, it is an epiphany which exposes the fatal lack of their spiritual relationship, for while Gabriel sentimentally romaticises Gretta, her mind is occupied by the memory of Michael Furey, who, she believes, died for her. Therefore, the scene is a farce, and it functions as a ridicule of his futile, quasi-erotic excitement, but, nevertheless, its poetic power greatly lessens his absurdity.

The moment of epiphany is introduced by the other animate figure, Miss Ivors, while Gabriel danced the lancers with her. She abruptly tears off his mask and makes him see his own face:

> —Well, I'm ashamed of you, said Miss Ivors frankly. To say you'd write for a paper like that. I didn't think you were a West Briton. (214)

Her accusation has a strong impact on Gabriel, but he does not admit what is implied in it. He tries to justify himself by thinking that writing a literary column in *The Daily Express* does not make him a West Briton. He writes the column for his love of books rather than for money. There is nothing political in writing reviews of books in it, for the literature is above politics. He bewilders, but manages to sustain his composure and tries to smile and mumbles in an attempt to refute her accusation. But the second shock comes when he, in an unguarded moment, reveals his genuine feelings that he is sick of his own country, sick of Ireland:

> Gabriel tried to cover his agitation by taking part in the dance with great energy. He avoided her eyes, for he had seen a sour expression on her face. But when they met in the long chain he was surprised to feel his hand firmly pressed. She looked at him from under her brows for a moment quizzically until he smiled. Then, just as the chain was about to start again, she stood on tiptoe and

whispered into his ear:

—West Briton! (216)

This time, the shock of her accusation is too powerful and he retires to a remote corner of the room. He fiercely blames Miss Ivors for her discourtesy. "[S]he [has] no right to call him a West Briton before people, even in joke. She [has] tried to make him ridiculous in front of everyone"(217). He cannot, however, deny her words themselves. His exaggerated response indicates how her jibe precisely targets his weakness. Certainly she calls him a West Briton, but she does not ridicule him publicly, only whispers into his ear. What traps him is his confusion caused by her acute observation of his weakness and vanity.[7]

Gabriel is an adult version of the boy in "An Encounter". The difference between them is that the boy is naive but he notices his vanity by himself and becomes penitent. Gabriel is forced to recognise his vanity by others but vainly attempts to deny it however. As the boy moves from the west to the east, Gabriel's spiritual development moves eastward, too. His mind is filled with the adoration of the other worlds including Britain, and this yearning is only partly satisfied by his education, his social status or his imitation of the continental culture. His mind longs for enrichment and he hides his frustration under an Irish mask as if he was not Irish. Here is his self-contradiction. He has rejected his Irish identity and replaced it by an Irish mask. His mask, however, is unexpectedly torn off and his void is laid bare by the two living women. He escapes into "the Irish hospitality"(219) he is sick of or relies on his sentimental illusion of "Distant Music," but he never regains his mental stability again. He is haunted by Miss Ivors during the whole evening.

Gretta's confession is the last straw. He admits his defeat and realises that "The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward." Moving westward is a process of total denial of his self. What is left in him after he denies his eastward-oriented self? He is empty. In fact, he is already dead since he cast his Irish identity. There is no hope for his revival in the westward journey.[8]

The final scene is superbly lyrical, full of poetic images and symbols, tuned by sonorous rhythms and graceful tones. But it is a gradual and repetitive representation of what is already made clear, though it shows Gabriel's void and the world where every being is dead through the most esthetic and forlorn image of snowfall.

* This is a revised version of the paper I read at the seventeenth conference of The James Joyce Society of Japan at Aoyamagakuin University on 18th of June 2005.

## Notes

1 All textual references are to *Dubliners*, 1916; The Corrected Text, with Explanatory Note by Robert Scholes, London: Jonathan Cape, 1967, rpt. 1975.

2 Shawn St. Jean insists that there is no epiphany in 'After the Race': 'Jimmy experiences no epiphany at all, and Villona's cry, "Daybreak, gentlemen" is qualified by "grey light": for Jimmy it is the shadow, or parody, of an epiphany.' ('Readerly Paranoia and Joyce's Adolescence Stories', *JJQ: Special Double Issue*, Vol. 35, No, 4, Summer 1998/ Vol. 36, No. 1, Fall 1998, p. 674) Shawn, however, seems to be entrapped by the epithet 'grey'. His argument does not necessarily lead to the denial of dramatic effect and power of Villona's cry.

3 Donald T Tochiana in his *Backgrounds for Joyce's Dubliners* (Boston/London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), specifically attributes the old man's perversity to English education quoting Stanislaus' letter (pp.43-4), and points out the boy's contempt of mere Irishness hidden behind his choice of the two typical names (pp. 48-9).

4 Warren Beck thinks, 'The stratagem is paltry not in itself but in having arisen from his ambivalently considering whether he 'would go away or not' when the exhibitionist returned.' But it is clear that the stratagem meant here is his adopting of the false names. His conclusion that the boy's penitence arises from the fear that the man would think him 'as stupid as Mahony' is not tenable enough. (*Joyce's* Dubliners: *Substance, Vision, and Art*, Durham N.C.: Duke UP, 1969. p. 90)

5 Usually critics take this harsh retort of Lilly's lightly: Tilly Eggers, for instance, thinks, 'like Gabriel,... Lilly cannot yet accept her changing identity. Except for one of her "back answers," Lilly acts as a submissive hand maid'. ('What is a Woman ... a Symbol Of?', *JJQ* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1981). p. 383); Craig Hansen Werner comments, 'Lilly's bitter comment that "the men that is now is only all palaver and what get out of you" implicates Gabriel with the "common" people he feels are beneath him.' (*Dubliners: A Pluralistic World,* Boston: Twain, 1988. p. 59)

6 Florence L. Walzl, '*Dubliners*: Women in Irish Society', in *Women in Joyce,* ed. Suzette Henke and Elaine Unkeless, University of Illinois Press, 1982. pp. 33-4.

7 This crucial role of Miss Ivors has been almost completely ignored. At most, she is a cause of Gabriel's momentary embarrassment: 'Extending the characteristic rhythm of confidence and deflation established during the scene with Lilly, Joyce presents Gabriel's conversation with Molly Ivors entirely from Gabriel's perspective. Even momentary shift to the neighbors who "had turned to listen to the cross-examination" reflects Gabriel's defensive concern with his public image.' (Werner, p.61)

8 Richard Ellmann rightly comments: 'The tone of the sentence, "The time had come for him to set out on journey westward," is somewhat resigned. It suggests a concession, a relinquishment, and Gabriel is conceding and, relinquishing a good deal—his sense of the importance of civilized thinking, of continental tastes, of all tepid but nice distinction on which he has prided himself. The bubble of his self-possession is pricked; he no longer possesses himself, and not to posses oneself is in a way a kind of death.' (*James Joyce; new and revisited edition,* OUP, 1982. p. 249)