Epiphany

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The standard *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of ‘epiphany’ refers to ‘an appearance or manifestation, especially of a deity’—and in particular the divine ‘manifestation of Christ to the gentiles in the persons of the Magi.’ James Joyce, however, popularized the term to describe not just religious manifestations, but secular, everyday, and even banal revelations. As Richard Ellmann explains, the artist finds epiphanies not among the gods but among men in ‘casual, unostentatious, even unpleasant moments’ (87). In his own words, Joyce located epiphanies in the sudden moment where ‘a *thing* […] its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance’ (Joyce 188). This Joycean epiphany serves a particular narrative function in fiction and usually occurs when a character gains a deeper insight, often at the climax or conclusion of a story or scene. As such, epiphanies are often individual and subjective, occurring from the interior perspective of a single character. Some of Joyce’s most exemplary epiphanies appear at the conclusion of his short stories collected in *Dubliners* (1914), in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), or at the end of Molly Bloom’s soliloquy in *Ulysses* (1922). The Joycean epiphany has an important legacy in modernism, and can be related to Virginia Woolf’s concept of ‘moments of being,’ which are also found in the everyday. While Woolf’s ‘moments’ are more frequently associated with the physical than the spiritual, critics also debate over Joyce’s ‘epiphany’—some seeing it as more symbolic, and others as more realistic.

Joyce, James. *Stephen Hero*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1944.

Ellmann, Richard. *James Joyce*. New York: Oxford UP, 1965.