

Epiphany

Epiphany Definition

Derived from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, epiphany means “appearance,” or “manifestation.” In literary terms, an epiphany is that moment in the story where a [character](#) achieves realization, awareness, or a feeling of knowledge, after which events are seen through the prism of this new light in the story.

James Joyce, the great Irish writer, used this term in his writings to indicate a sudden eye-opener regarding the nature of a person or situation. He said that it is the moment in which “the soul of the commonest object ... seems to us radiant, and may be manifested through any chance, word, or gesture.” He means to say that even insignificant things in our lives can suddenly inspire in us an awareness that can change our lives for good.

A Common Example of Epiphany

Let us consider an epiphany of a smoker:

“I used to smoke a lot. Everyone let me know that it was bad for my health however, I didn’t pay any notice. One day I saw my two-year-old baby trying to grab a stubbed-out cigarette from the ashtray. Seeing this, it suddenly dawned on me how terrible smoking was, and I stopped smoking.”

So, this sudden feeling of knowledge that brings to light what was so far hidden, and changes one’s life, is called epiphany.

Examples of Epiphany in Literature

Let us analyze some epiphany examples from different genres of literature.

Example #1: *Animal Farm* (By George Orwell)

Animal Farm, written by George Orwell, is an epiphany that uses animals on a farm to describe the overthrow of the last Russian Tsar, Nicholas II, and the Communist Revolution of Russia before WWI. The actions of the animals on the farm are used to expose the greed and corruption of the revolution. It also describes how powerful people can change the ideology of a society. One of the cardinal rules on the farm is this:

“All animals are equal but a few are more equal than others.”

The animals on the farm represent different sections of Russian society after the revolution.

For instance, the pigs represent those who came to power following the revolution; “Mr. Jones,” the owner of the farm, represents the overthrown Tsar Nicholas II; while “Boxer” the horse, represents the laborer class. The use of Epiphany in the novel allows Orwell to make his position clear about the Russian Revolution and expose its evils.

Example #2: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)

William Shakespeare also makes use of an epiphany in his play *Hamlet*. It is when Hamlet, the hero, is on a ship sailing to England. Till then, he was over-burdened with thinking and planning a flawless revenge on his father’s murderer, Claudius. Suddenly there is a flash of realization and he says:

“[T]here is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.”

He realizes that there is no wisdom for him in trying to inflict the perfect revenge on Claudius – he must take hold of the moment and go with the current.

Example #3: *Miss Brill* (By Katherine Manfield)

We find another example of epiphany in the short story *Miss Brill*, written by Katherine Manfield. Miss Brill, being delighted to be part of the season in the Jardins Publique, particularly on Sundays, prepares herself for the occasion on a chilly day. She wears her fur coat, and walks towards a band playing music in the park. She sees life everywhere around her, and it pleases her to imagine that she is part of all that takes place. In a flash of epiphany, she recognizes that she and everyone else in the park are mere actors, acting out their roles. There was nothing important about that gathering of actors and she was alone despite being with a crowd.

Function of Epiphany

The purpose of epiphany in a novel or a short story is to point out a turning point for a character, or in the plot, in the near future. It may also be used to change the opinion of one character about other characters, events, and places after a sudden awareness of the situation. It may also be a sign of a conclusion in the story.