

Epiphany in D. H. Lawrence’s “Odour of Chrysanthemums” and James Joyce’s “Eveline”

Noshin Nisa

Undergraduate Researcher, Department of English & Humanities
University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), Dhaka, Bangladesh

Ahmad Mahbub-ul-Alam

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Manarat International University (MIU) &
PhD Research Fellow, Center for Higher Studies & Research (CHSR),
Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), Dhaka, Bangladesh

Citation: Nisa, N., & Mahbub-ul-Alam, A. (2021). Epiphany in D. H. Lawrence’s “Odour of Chrysanthemums” and James Joyce’s “Eveline”. *Journal of Sustainable Learning and Development*, 1(1), 28-32.

*Corresponding Email: pialbd@yahoo.com

Abstract: D. H. Lawrence’s “The Odour of Chrysanthemums”, tells the story of Elizabeth who also craved to break free from an unwanted life, but never could, and had an epiphany of the futility of a long relationship that she could not mend anymore. James Joyce’s “Eveline” from the 1914 short story collection *Dubliners* tells the story of Eveline who almost broke free from her usual terrible life but gave up the attempt to escape with a realization of the danger of a new life in a new place. This paper is going to analyse how Elizabeth and Eveline, in their respective stories, got entangled in the usualness of their painful life but also had to accept it despite the epiphanies.

Keywords: Epiphany, Feminism, Odour of Chrysanthemums, Eveline

INTRODUCTION

An epiphany is a sudden moment of realization. This term originally meant the arrival of Christ. In Modernism, epiphany refers to a sudden realization of a conflict or a feeling, that deeply affects the person’s perspective about something. An epiphany is not a resolution or solution to a conflict. Rather, it is the force that makes a person aware of the conflict, even though the person cannot come out of the conflict.

In D. H. Lawrence’s “The Odour of Chrysanthemums”, the setting of the story builds up to Elizabeth’s frustration about her life. The small details in the narrative are more significant, holding more importance than any superficial detail. The details set up the ominous tone of the story, indicating discomfort and unease. The setting of the story indicates the negative impacts of growing urbanization in people’s life, how it harms nature and the people who are having trouble adapting to the change of industrialization. The train and the mine are represented as some threatening aspects that do not generate positive feelings. The train is said to have startled the people and the animals, interrupting natural life. The trees are dried, which indicates that nature is being harmed. And the mine is represented as something ominous. The mineworkers are like inhumane shadows. They seem to have lost the humane aspects of themselves working underground every day. The mine is not a sign of progress, instead, it is a symbol of dysfunction in people’s lives. Lawrence opposes the idea of progress and betterment of industrialization and urbanization, by showing that they are ruining the lives. The unpleasant picturization leads the readers to Elizabeth’s growing dissatisfaction. On the other hand, in the stories of *Dubliners*, James Joyce used epiphany to end the stories, rather than a resolution where

the problems are solved, amplifying the significance of the complexities that the stories try to tell. The stories of *Dubliners* show the situation of the people where their lives are stagnant, initially being unaware of it, and having the moment of epiphany by the end, understanding the delusion. This understanding is not supposed to make the stagnant state any better. It only makes them aware of their paralytic condition.,

OBJECTIVES

The general objective of the study is to examine epiphany entangled in relationships referring to the selected texts, while the specific objective aims at comprehending the respective roles that the two characters, Elizabeth and Eveline, are tied in that have been stopping them from living the life that they want, as they also accepted being tied.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Aycan Gokcek (2020) aims to point out the significance of Elizabeth's epiphany in "The Odour of Chrysanthemums". Gokcek's paper also aims to reflect on the conflicting and isolating inner-life of the women of the working-class society that D. H. Lawrence tried to depict in his story. Xin Jing's (2016) paper also comprehends Elizabeth's epiphany of the eternal distance between her and her husband right when her husband was no more there with her; how her sudden realization that she spent her life with a stranger who still was not a stranger could not help her in changing anything from the past but could help her move forward in future. Veazey (2003) analyses Eveline's situation of drowning in the impossibilities in "Eveline", and how she was ultimately left with nowhere to escape. Joanna Lyons (2000) contemplates why Eveline could not leave at the end of "Eveline". The paper concludes that Eveline could not leave not only because the new life after her leaving would be uncertain and dangerous, but also because she willingly kept herself trapped in the comfort of the misery of her usual life, instead of choosing uncertainty. With the guidance of the observations taken from the reviewed papers, this paper observes how the characters' surroundings' expectations from them keep them away from their desired life, and why the characters also ultimately cease to keep fighting.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Presented in "The Odour of Chrysanthemums", life in colliery is not nurturing and healthy. The workers spend most of their time of the day underground, working in the mine. Underground is mostly associated with death. So, the workers are living in a representation of death itself, as their livelihood. The mineworkers are like dead shadows. They are not like their human selves anymore. After the suffocating work condition in the underground, the workers drink to stable themselves, causing them to come home late and creating distance from the family. So, the colliery is harming family intimacy too. Life in the colliery is also life-threatening. Elizabeth has compared the mine to a rat hole and a mousetrap, where her husband Walter works, indicating how unhealthy and risky the work condition is, that the workers can even lose life as a mouse stuck in a trap. Finally, we learn that Walter dies in the mine being asphyxiated. Elizabeth's words unintentionally come true, proving the life-threatening condition in the colliery. The colliery's comparison to a rat hole is symbolizing the constant threat of life of the workers, who are working for the progress of civilization, ironically, getting into the trap of death.

Coming to Elizabeth Bates, no information about her past and background is presented in the story. Her ideas, expectations, and feelings are not directly described. But through some details about her, and her behaviors and actions, her reactions and words, readers can figure out that she is possibly from a higher-class background who is stuck in the society of mine-workers, who does not feel like belonging to the life she lives, who used to have expectations but now is disappointed. She is different from the women of the families in the neighborhood. Her hair, her clothes are neat. She favors cleanliness and neatness. Anything dirty makes her paranoid because she associates anything dirty with her husband, her husband's job, and his life.

The chrysanthemums mentioned in the title of the story also hold significance. The chrysanthemums play different roles in different times of Elizabeth's life, and the stages of the times decrease to disappointment, hence the word odor is used instead of fragrance. Initially, chrysanthemums represented hope for Elizabeth, when she got married and when her first child was born. Then the scent of the flower turned into an odor when the disappointment of her present life stroke. In her description at the beginning of the story, her face was mentioned to have a stern disillusionment. It can be connotated that the expectations of a life she wanted have been disillusioned as time passed by, leaving her out of place in a life that is not worthy of her status. She loathes her husband's job and believes that his work and his lifestyle are the reasons for her deplorable life. This again shows the immensely negative impact of the growing industries on the families' peace. The workers do not come home in time busy drinking to unwind the stress after a long day's exhaustion in the mines. Elizabeth murmurs her repetitive behaviors of Walter, of coming home late, drunk and dirty. The nasty dirty untidy things, even the dirt on her son's shirt remind her of her husband when he lies on the house drunk and dirty. This life is not what she deserved and hoped for, but she is stuck in it, stuck in her social role of a married woman in the miners' society.

In the story, the traditional ideas of marital productivity and the authenticity of social roles are challenged, or, at least, questioned. When Walter's mother, Elizabeth's mother-in-law, comes with the news of Walter's accident, she is already breaking down into tears. Whereas, Elizabeth is still thinking logically. She is contemplating the difficulties she will have to face because of her injured or possibly dead husband. She reasonably tries to calm her mother-in-law down not to wake up the children. Her calm strong mind in the state of crisis, while others are in noisy chaotic panic and outburst, further proves her more sophisticated background. While her mother-in-law is even unable to utter about the news of the accident, Elizabeth blatantly asks if Walter is dead, and regrets saying that, which shows her straightforwardness along with her consciousness. The imposition of social roles comes in the sight when the mother-in-law wonders, mourning, and pitying, how helpless Elizabeth will be if her husband dies. When it is revealed that Walter has died, Elizabeth still keeps herself calm and collected, trying to prevent her mother-in-law from making more noise, in such a time, when Elizabeth herself is expected to become weak and to break down in sorrow. Her vulnerable emotional reaction is expected more because of the social norm of a wife being shattered after her husband's death, not because of her true emotions themselves.

With Elizabeth's epiphany, the conflict of social roles and true marital productivity gets clearer. Walter's body is unharmed of any injury, as he has died due to asphyxiation. When Elizabeth sees her husband's body for washing, she notices how beautiful he is, or was. She realizes that she has noticed him for the first time as himself, as a human, apart from all his faults of dirt. It strikes her that only now she is attracted to him as a grown woman attracted to a grown man, despite him being her husband all along, despite her being with him all along. She tries to make a connection to him after realizing that she has never tried to connect to him. As she understands that his soul is not there anymore, she feels a mixture of shame and fear of having lived with a stranger. The dead body radiates more strange emotions to her than the living person ever did. She feels more for this dead body than she could ever feel for the living person. With her epiphany, the productivity of marriage is questioned. Both Elizabeth and Walter have been performing their social roles of living together, being physically intimate, and producing children, thus making the relationship seem like a perfect marriage as a marriage should be according to society. However, their marriage was void. They never tried to know each other, they never made efforts to connect emotionally; Elizabeth herself admitted that they were like strangers. It proves that just by stretching through marriage because society has assigned the particular roles of a married couple on two people, is futile without mutual connection irrespective of physical intimacy or children or longevity of staying together.

It is established that Elizabeth is a character with really strong emotional firmness. Also, epiphanic moments do not solve problems. Sudden surprising realizations do not provide ideas for solutions. Elizabeth's epiphany will not bring back the years she and her husband have lost in detachment from

each other. Elizabeth has no other way than to continue living with the realization. However, she is not someone to drown herself in sorrow. She is trying to look mourning or crying because her mother-in-law is watching, and she is expected to be sad as a widow by society. But she can deal with her emotions with firmness and clarity. Knowing that the past cannot be changed, she decides to move on in life with her children, for herself.

The epiphany in "Eveline" denies the resolution of an ending. The story has been building up to the moment when Eveline would leave with Frank. Eveline changes her decision of leaving at the very last moment, with the epiphany of her promise to her mother that she would take care of the family, also by the irresistible pull to her old life. In "Eveline", the story progresses just to come back to the previous state. Eveline's epiphany summarizes her state in the story, and it also symbolizes the theme of *Dubliners*. Eveline has been contemplating her present and her future. She knows that her present life is miserable, and the future can hold hope. But she also knows that future is uncertain, and the miserable present is comfortable and familiar despite being miserable. The dilemma between uncertain future possibilities and a familiar miserable present is never-ending for Eveline, and she never comes out of this dilemma. Instead of a close satisfactory ending where Eveline could embrace one thing or the other, the epiphany represents this dilemma and the reality that whatever she chooses between leaving with Frank or staying in her suffocating life, she has to remain unhappy.

From the beginning, we see Eveline captive in her dilemma and contemplation. She is bound by the feeling of familiarity of her present life, even when she knows that she is suffering. She acknowledges that her father is abusive. But she still feels attached to him thinking of the occasions when he behaved better. The smell of dust and the dust of the things in the house represent her confused blurry state, where the dust is troubling, but still is familiar and comforting. The idea of leaving something familiar makes her so hesitant that she finds the deplorable state to be desirable. Thus, she is captive in both her present and the past. At the same time, the uncertainty of the future and the hope of a good future keep her captive too. She is fascinated by Frank. She is fascinated by the possibility of something exciting and hopeful. She expects to be loved and respected by Frank in Argentina. However, she cannot deny the fear of danger in the unknown future too. The fear comes with unfamiliarity, unlike her familiar but painful present. When Eveline is about to take her journey to the unknown, the fear of the unknown and the bonds of familiarity altogether pull her back. Her passive expressionless face does not express any emotion when she leaves Frank behind, because she is not in the state of feeling anything but fear both for the present and the future.

Though both stories end morbidly for Eveline and Elizabeth, Elizabeth still gets a sense of resolution and some strength to continue living with more genuineness than before for the sake of her children. Eveline, however, remains uncertain. Rejecting the fatal unknown, she still does not choose the protection and happiness she desires. She only chooses familiarity because it does not scare her

CONCLUSION

Both Eveline and Elizabeth, being in different circumstances of different stories, go through similar experiences of stagnancies. While Eveline gets scared of the risk of something new and clings to the comfort of the torturing old, Elizabeth firmly abides by her role despite the suffocation. Both of them are the victims of the lack of choice and lack of social security for women. Their circumstantial restrictions force them to choose the option of not opting for the choice of freedom because freedom and personal peace will deny them the social safety and acceptance that they have in their current situation.

REFERENCES

- Gökçek, A. (2020). "The Significance of Epiphany in D.H. Lawrence's Short Story "The Odor of Chrysanthemums". *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 11(5), 32, doi:10.7575/aiac.all.v.11n.5p.32.
- Joanna, L. (2000). The End of Pleasure Is Pain: Why Eveline Could Not Leave. *The Corinthian*, 2.
- Joyce, J. (1914). "Eveline". *Dubliners*. Grant Richards Ltd., London, UK.

- Lawrence, D. H. (1914). "Odour of Chrysanthemums" in *The Prussian Officer and Other Stories*. Available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/22480/22480-h/22480-h.htm>
- Veazey, L. L. (2003). Drowning in 'Eveline'. *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*, 5(1), 25-36.
- Xin, J. (2016). Elizabeth's Epiphany in Odour of Chrysanthemums. *Proceedings of the 2016 International Conference on Humanities and Social Science*, doi:10.2991/hss-26.2016.90.