

The Five-Stage Model of the Epiphanic Plot: Structure, Functions and Typology of Sudden Revelation in Modern Prose

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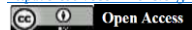
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ABSTRACT

Epiphany a sudden, quasi-revelatory moment in which a character perceives the hidden essence of a person, an object, a situation or his or her own life – is one of the key structural phenomena of modern prose. Although the term has been widely discussed since James Joyce's *Stephen Hero*, literary scholarship has most often treated epiphany as an isolated moment of perception or as a stylistic device rather than as a principle that organises the whole plot. This article proposes and substantiates a five-stage model of the epiphanic plot comprising stasis, accumulation, catalyst, revelation and reconfiguration. The material of the study consists of four canonical works of short prose: J. Joyce's "Araby" (1914), A.P. Chekhov's "The Student" (1894), L.N. Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" (1886) and K. Mansfield's "Bliss" (1918). Structural-semantic, narratological, comparative-typological and motif analysis were applied, supported by Aristotle's concept of anagnorisis, M. Beja's criteria of incongruity and insularity, R. Langbaum's notion of the epiphanic mode, Yu.M. Lotman's theory of the event, G. Genette's narratology and Uzbek theoretical approaches to plot and conflict. The analysis demonstrates that in the epiphanic plot the decisive event is shifted from the plane of external action to the plane of perception: the culmination coincides not with a change of circumstances but with a change in the character's way of seeing. Each stage performs a distinct poetic function and is marked by recurrent textual signals – iterative narration, accumulating motifs, a disproportionately trivial trigger, temporal deceleration and imagery of light, and a reorganised final perception. On the basis of the fifth stage, four types of epiphanic outcome are distinguished: euphoric, disillusioning, redemptive and suspended. The model can serve as an analytical instrument for describing the plot structure of the modern short story and the psychological novel, including works of Uzbek literature.

Introduction

Modern prose, beginning with the late nineteenth century, displays a noticeable shift in the understanding of what constitutes a literary event. In the classical plot, the event is primarily an external change: a crime is committed, a marriage takes place, a fortune is lost or won, a hero dies. In a considerable part of modernist and post-classical prose, however, the decisive change occurs in the consciousness of the character, while the external circumstances may remain almost untouched. A boy arrives at a bazaar too late, a student tells two peasant women a Gospel story, a dying official feels his son's lips on his hand, a young wife glimpses a whispered word in a hallway – and these minimal external occurrences become the turning points of entire works.

The phenomenon that underlies such turning points has received the name *epiphany*. Originally a theological term denoting the manifestation of the divine, it was transferred into literary aesthetics by James Joyce, whose young hero in *Stephen Hero* defines it as a sudden spiritual manifestation that may

arise from a vulgar speech or gesture as well as from a memorable phase of the mind itself [Joyce, 1963: 211]. Since then, epiphany has become one of the central categories in the study of modernism, the short story and the psychological novel.

Nevertheless, a persistent methodological problem remains. Epiphany is usually described as a *moment* – a point of insight – whereas its plot-forming role, that is, the way the whole narrative is organised to prepare, produce and absorb this moment, has received less systematic attention. Yet the moment of revelation is never self-sufficient: it presupposes a preceding state of limited perception, a gradual accumulation of meaning, a concrete trigger and a subsequent reorganisation of the character's world. The present article argues that these elements form a recurrent structural sequence which can be described as a five-stage model of the epiphanic plot.

Theoretical background and literature review

The genealogy of the problem goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, where *anagnorisis* (recognition) is defined as a change from ignorance to knowledge, ideally coinciding with *peripeteia*, the reversal of fortune [Aristotle, 1996: ch. 11]. Aristotelian recognition, however, concerns primarily facts and identities – who a person really is, what has really happened – and its value lies in the reversal of the hero's external situation. T. Cave's comprehensive study demonstrates that recognition has remained a problematic and even "scandalous" device throughout the history of poetics precisely because it compresses knowledge into a single moment and exposes the artificiality of plot [Cave, 1988]. Epiphany may be regarded as a modern transformation of *anagnorisis* in which the object of recognition is not a fact but a meaning, and the reversal takes place in perception rather than in fortune.

The theoretical foundations of the literary epiphany were laid by M. Beja, who proposed two criteria for identifying it: the *criterion of incongruity*, according to which the revelation is disproportionate to the triviality of the object or event that provokes it, and the *criterion of insularity*, according to which the revelation is not directly connected with the object that provokes it [Beja, 1971]. Beja also distinguished between immediate and retrospective epiphanies, the latter arising through memory. R. Langbaum traced the *epiphanic mode* back to W. Wordsworth's "spots of time" and described its characteristic features, including suddenness, momentariness and a psychological rather than causal logic of association [Langbaum, 1983: 335–358]. A. Nichols located the origins of the modern literary moment in nineteenth-century Romantic and Victorian poetics [Nichols, 1987], while S. Kim examined how epiphanies are distributed across the extended structure of the novel and grouped into constellations [Kim, 2012].

For the purposes of plot analysis, Yu.M. Lotman's theory of the event is especially productive. Lotman defines the event as the shifting of a character across the boundary of a semantic field; texts with events ("plot texts") are distinguished from texts that merely reproduce an established order [Lotman, 1977]. In the epiphanic plot, the boundary crossed is internal: the character passes from one way of understanding the world into another. G. Genette's analysis of narrative duration provides tools for describing how the epiphanic moment is rendered – typically through a sharp deceleration of narrative tempo in which a few seconds of story time occupy disproportionate textual space [Genette, 1980]. G. Freytag's well-known five-part scheme of dramatic action (introduction, rise, climax, return or fall, catastrophe) offers a useful point of comparison, since it likewise segments the plot into five phases but orients them towards external action [Freytag, 1895].

Uzbek literary scholarship conceptualises the literary work as an integral system in which plot, composition, character and discourse are mutually determined [Quronov, 2018]. B. To'rayeva and U. Ko'chimov regard conflict as one of the principal forces generating plot development [To'rayeva, Ko'chimov, 2022: 67] and formulate theoretical approaches to the analysis of plot organisation [To'rayeva, Ko'chimov, 2022: 63–65]. These positions allow the epiphanic plot to be interpreted as a

specific form of conflict – a conflict between illusion and truth unfolding within the consciousness of a single character.

Despite the considerable body of research on epiphany, the existing approaches remain predominantly descriptive and focus either on the criteria of the epiphanic moment or on its historical origins. A stage-based model that would describe the epiphanic plot as a whole – from the initial state of perception to the final reconfiguration – and that could be applied consistently to texts of different national literatures has not yet been sufficiently elaborated.

The aim of the study is to construct and test a five-stage model of the epiphanic plot. The objectives are: (1) to define the stages of the epiphanic plot and their poetic functions; (2) to identify the textual markers of each stage; (3) to test the model on texts belonging to different national literatures; (4) to establish a typology of epiphanic outcomes; and (5) to determine the relationship of the model to traditional schemes of plot structure.

Materials and methods

The material of the study comprises four canonical works of short prose: J. Joyce's "Araby" from the collection *Dubliners* [Joyce, 1914], A.P. Chekhov's "The Student" [Chekhov, 1998], L.N. Tolstoy's novella "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" [Tolstoy, 1981] and K. Mansfield's "Bliss" [Mansfield, 1920]. The texts were selected according to three criteria: (1) each is widely recognised in criticism as containing a decisive moment of revelation; (2) together they represent three national traditions (Irish, Russian and New Zealand–English) and both the realist and modernist poetics; and (3) the outcomes of the revelation differ substantially, which makes it possible to test whether the model is sufficiently general.

The research is based on a complex of complementary methods. The *structural-semantic method* was used to segment the texts into compositional units and to establish the semantic relations between them. The *narratological method* [Genette, 1980] was applied to describe narrative duration, frequency and the mechanisms of deceleration at the moment of revelation. *Motif analysis* made it possible to trace the accumulation of recurrent images (light and darkness, fire, cold, trees) preparing the revelation. The *comparative-typological method* was used to juxtapose the four texts and to derive the typology of outcomes.

The analysis was conducted in five stages: (1) close reading of each text and identification of the epiphanic moment according to Beja's criteria; (2) backward reconstruction of the preparatory segments; (3) identification of the trigger and of the narrative techniques that render the revelation; (4) analysis of the final segment and the character's reorganised perception; and (5) generalisation of the recurrent features into a stage model and a typology.

The study is limited to short prose and a novella; the distribution of multiple epiphanies within the large-scale novel is not considered in detail. The quotations from Chekhov and Tolstoy are analysed on the basis of English translations, which is sufficient for structural analysis but not for stylistic analysis at the level of the original language.

Results

3.1. General architecture of the model

The comparative analysis shows that, despite substantial differences in style, setting and outcome, the plots of all four texts are organised according to a common sequence of five stages. Their poetic functions and typical textual markers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The five-stage model of the epiphanic plot

Stage	Poetic function	Typical textual markers
1. Stasis	Establishes the character's habitual, limited or illusory mode of perceiving the world	Iterative narration ("every morning", "always"); generalising descriptions; stable routine; absence of reflection
2. Accumulation	Gradually concentrates latent meaning that the character does not yet recognise	Recurrent motifs and symbols; growing tension or desire; delays and obstacles; signs perceived by the reader before the character
3. Catalyst	Releases the accumulated meaning through a concrete, often trivial occasion	A word, gesture, sound or object disproportionate to its effect (Beja's incongruity); shift from summary to scene
4. Revelation	Produces the moment of sudden insight into the essence of the self, another person or life	Sharp deceleration of narrative tempo; imagery of light or darkness; verbs of seeing and understanding; free indirect discourse
5. Reconfiguration	Fixes the new mode of perception and determines the meaning of the whole plot	Reorganised vision of the same world; final image or gesture; open or resolved ending; change of emotional key

Source: compiled by the author.

A fundamental feature of the model is that stages 1–3 belong mainly to the plane of external narration, while stages 4–5 belong to the plane of consciousness. The plot thus moves from the world as it is habitually seen to the world as it is newly understood. The culmination of the epiphanic plot is located at stage 4, but its meaning is realised only at stage 5.

3.2. Stage one: stasis

Stasis is not necessarily a state of calm; it is a state of stable perception. In "Araby" it is conveyed through the description of North Richmond Street, a blind street whose houses, "conscious of decent lives within them", gaze at one another with *brown imperturbable faces* [Joyce, 1914]. The iterative narration of the boy's daily routine – watching Mangan's sister from the front parlour every morning – establishes the closed world of his romantic imagination. In "The Death of Ivan Ilyich", stasis occupies the entire account of the hero's career: Tolstoy's narrator summarises a life devoted to propriety, comfort and social approval, a life whose very ordinariness is presented as its deepest defect [Tolstoy, 1981].

In "The Student", stasis takes the form of a gloomy generalisation: walking home on a cold Good Friday evening, Ivan Velikopolsky reflects that the same poverty, hunger and ignorance existed in the times of Rurik and Ivan the Terrible and will exist in a thousand years [Chekhov, 1998]. In "Bliss", by contrast, stasis is euphoric: Bertha Young experiences an inexplicable feeling of bliss and believes her life to be perfect. Mansfield's text shows that the initial state of the epiphanic plot may be pleasant as well as oppressive; what defines it is not its emotional colouring but its limitation – the character does not see something essential.

3.3. Stage two: accumulation

At the second stage, the narrative accumulates meanings that the character does not yet integrate into a single picture. In "Araby", religious imagery (the boy imagines himself bearing a chalice through a throng of foes), the darkness of the rooms and the uncle's late return gradually transform the journey to the bazaar into a quest doomed to failure. In "The Death of Ivan Ilyich", accumulation proceeds through the growing pain, the falsehood of the family and doctors, and the contrasting figure of the servant Gerasim, whose simple compassion exposes the lie of the hero's environment. In "The Student",

the motifs of cold and fire prepare the parallel between the campfire in the widows' garden and the fire at which the apostle Peter warmed himself on the night of his denial.

In "Bliss", accumulation is especially subtle: the image of a grey cat followed by a black one creeping across the lawn makes Bertha shudder, and the silver-clad Pearl Fulton and the flowering pear tree are endowed with an intensity of meaning that Bertha misreads as a mystical bond. The reader frequently perceives these signals earlier than the character does. This discrepancy between the knowledge of the reader and the knowledge of the character creates a specific form of tension which, unlike the suspense of the adventure plot, is directed not towards *what* will happen but towards *what will be understood*.

3.4. Stage three: catalyst

The catalyst is the concrete occasion that releases the accumulated meaning. All four texts confirm Beja's criterion of incongruity: the trigger is strikingly insignificant compared with the magnitude of the revelation [Beja, 1971]. In "Araby", it is a banal flirtatious exchange between a young lady at a stall and two young men, followed by the extinguishing of the lights in the upper part of the hall. In "The Student", it is the tears of the old widow Vasilisa in response to the Gospel story. In "The Death of Ivan Ilyich", it is the son's kiss on his dying father's hand. In "Bliss", it is a glimpse of Harry and Pearl in the hall and a single whispered word arranging a meeting for the next day.

Structurally, the catalyst marks the transition from summary to scene: the narrative focuses on a single concrete episode, and the tempo of narration approaches the tempo of the story. The catalyst thus functions as the threshold of the epiphanic moment – the point at which the external plane of narration hands over to the internal one.

3.5. Stage four: revelation

The revelation proper is characterised by suddenness, momentariness and a shift into the plane of consciousness [Langbaum, 1983: 335–358]. Narratologically, it is marked by a sharp deceleration: a few seconds of story time receive extended textual treatment, approaching what Genette describes as the descriptive pause [Genette, 1980]. Imagery of light and darkness is the most frequent marker. Ivan Ilyich, falling through the black sack, discovers light where death had been; the boy in "Araby", gazing into the darkness, sees himself as *a creature driven and derided by vanity* [Joyce, 1914]. In "The Student", the revelation is articulated as an intellectual and emotional insight: the past is connected with the present by an unbroken chain of events, and touching one end makes the other tremble [Chekhov, 1998].

It is significant that the revelation is not a piece of new information. The boy in "Araby" learns nothing factually new; Ivan Ilyich has known for some time that he is dying; the student knew the Gospel story before. What changes is the configuration of meaning. In this respect, epiphany differs fundamentally from Aristotelian anagnorisis, in which recognition concerns a hidden fact. Only "Bliss" combines both forms: Bertha recognises a fact (the affair) and, simultaneously, the illusory nature of her own bliss.

3.6. Stage five: reconfiguration

The final stage fixes the new way of seeing. The world of the character usually remains outwardly the same, but it is perceived differently. The student, crossing the river by ferry, feels youth, health and joy and senses that truth and beauty have always guided human life. The pear tree in "Bliss" remains as lovely and as still as before, yet its beauty now acquires an ironic and painful meaning. It is the fifth stage that determines the semantic direction of the whole plot; therefore, it serves as the basis for the typology of epiphanic plots presented in Section 3.8.

3.7. Application of the model to the material

The distribution of the five stages across the four texts is summarised in Table 2. The model proved applicable to all the texts without forcing; differences concern the proportions of the stages rather than their presence.

Table 2. Realisation of the five stages in the analysed texts

Stage	"Araby" (Joyce)	"The Student" (Chekhov)	"The Death of Ivan Ilyich" (Tolstoy)	"Bliss" (Mansfield)
Stasis	Blind street; romantic devotion to Mangan's sister	Gloomy view of history as eternal poverty	A "proper", comfortable career life	Euphoric belief in a perfect life
Accumulation	Religious imagery; darkness; uncle's delay	Cold, fire; story of Peter's denial	Illness; falsehood of family; Gerasim	Cats; Pearl Fulton; the pear tree
Catalyst	Banal talk at the stall; lights going out	Vasilisa's tears	Son's kiss on the hand	Glimpse of Harry and Pearl in the hall
Revelation	Self-recognition as a creature of vanity	Unbroken chain linking past and present	Light instead of death; life as "not the right thing"	Bliss revealed as illusion
Reconfiguration	Anguish and anger; collapse of the ideal	Joy; sense of life's meaning	Release from fear; death is "finished"	Open question: what will happen now?

Source: compiled by the author on the basis of the analysed texts.

The comparison also reveals differences in the proportions of the stages. In Tolstoy's novella, stasis and accumulation occupy almost the entire text, while revelation and reconfiguration are concentrated in the last chapter; in Chekhov's short story, the revelation and reconfiguration occupy a comparatively large share of a very brief text. Consequently, the epiphanic plot may be either *retarded* (with a long preparatory phase) or *compressed* (with a rapid transition to insight).

3.8. Typology of epiphanic outcomes

Depending on the direction of the change in perception at stage 5, four types of epiphanic plot can be distinguished (Table 3).

Table 3. Types of epiphanic outcome

Type	Direction of perceptual change	Example	Effect on the reader
Euphoric	From a fragmented, gloomy picture to a sense of unity and meaning	"The Student"	Catharsis, affirmation
Disillusioning	From an idealised picture to a sober and painful recognition	"Araby"	Irony, compassion
Redemptive	From a false life to the recognition of truth on the threshold of death	"The Death of Ivan Ilyich"	Moral shock, purification
Suspended	From illusion to recognition without a stable new position	"Bliss"	Uncertainty, open interpretation

Source: compiled by the author.

The typology demonstrates that the epiphanic plot is not tied to a particular emotional key. The same structural sequence can lead to joy, despair, spiritual liberation or uncertainty. Consequently, the model describes a form of plot construction rather than a specific thematic content.

Discussion

The results make it possible to clarify the relationship between the epiphanic plot and traditional schemes of plot structure. Freytag's pyramid also consists of five parts, and a superficial correspondence can be traced between them and the proposed stages [Freytag, 1895]. The difference, however, is fundamental. In Freytag's scheme, every phase is defined by the development of external action, and the climax is the point at which the hero's fortunes turn. In the epiphanic plot, the external action may remain practically unchanged: the climax coincides with a change in the character's way of seeing, while the "falling action" is replaced by the reorganisation of perception. The five-stage model therefore does not duplicate the dramatic pyramid but describes a different, cognitive axis of the plot.

From the standpoint of Lotman's theory, the epiphanic event is a crossing of a semantic boundary [Lotman, 1977], but this boundary lies within the character's consciousness. This explains why epiphanic texts are often perceived by readers as "plotless": the event is not marked by external action. The proposed model makes this hidden event visible and segmentable, thereby showing that the so-called plotless story possesses a strict plot organisation of its own.

The comparison with Aristotelian anagnorisis also requires refinement. Cave interprets recognition as an epistemological device that compresses knowledge into a single moment [Cave, 1988]. The epiphanic plot preserves this compression but alters its object: the character recognises not a hidden identity but the meaning of something already known. Mansfield's "Bliss" occupies an intermediate position, since the factual discovery serves as the catalyst for a deeper, epiphanic recognition. This suggests that anagnorisis and epiphany should be regarded not as opposed but as two poles of a single continuum of literary recognition.

Beja's criteria of incongruity and insularity proved to be operational for stages 3 and 4 respectively: incongruity characterises the relation between catalyst and revelation, while insularity characterises the relative independence of the insight from the occasion that produced it [Beja, 1971]. The model also accommodates Beja's retrospective epiphany: in such cases the catalyst is a memory rather than a present perception, while the remaining stages are preserved.

In the light of Uzbek theoretical approaches, the epiphanic plot can be interpreted as a specific form of conflict in which the opposing forces are not characters but two modes of perception within one consciousness – illusion and truth, habit and insight [To'rayeva, Ko'chimov, 2022: 67]. In accordance with Quronov's understanding of the literary work as an integral system [Quronov, 2018], the five stages are realised not only at the level of events but also at the levels of motif, narrative tempo and imagery. This makes the model compatible with the analytical tradition of Uzbek literary studies and opens the possibility of applying it to Uzbek short stories and psychological novels of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

At the same time, some limitations should be acknowledged. The model has been tested on four works of short prose. In the novel, as Kim's research shows, epiphanies tend to form constellations and series [Kim, 2012]; in this case the five-stage cycle may be repeated several times, and the reconfiguration of one cycle may become the stasis of the next. The verification of this hypothesis, as well as the application of the model to Uzbek prose, constitutes a task for further research.

Conclusion

The study has shown that epiphany in modern prose is not merely an isolated moment of insight but the organising centre of a distinctive type of plot. The epiphanic plot can be described as a sequence of five stages: stasis, accumulation, catalyst, revelation and reconfiguration. Each stage performs its own

poetic function and is marked by recurrent textual signals – iterative narration, accumulating motifs, a disproportionately trivial trigger, temporal deceleration and imagery of light, and a reorganised final perception.

The analysis of works by Joyce, Chekhov, Tolstoy and Mansfield confirmed the applicability of the model to texts of different national traditions and different literary trends. The decisive event of the epiphanic plot is shifted from the plane of external action to the plane of perception: the culmination coincides not with a change of circumstances but with a change in the character's way of seeing. Differences between the texts concern the proportions of the stages, which makes it possible to distinguish retarded and compressed variants of the epiphanic plot.

On the basis of the fifth stage, four types of epiphanic outcome have been identified: euphoric, disillusioning, redemptive and suspended. This typology demonstrates that the epiphanic plot is a structural form rather than a thematic or emotional category. Compared with Freytag's dramatic pyramid and Aristotelian anagnorisis, the proposed model describes the cognitive axis of the plot, which remains invisible in schemes oriented towards external action.

The results can be used in courses on the theory of literature, narratology and world literature, as well as in the analysis of the plot structure of Uzbek short stories and psychological novels. Promising directions for further research include the study of epiphanic series in the novel and the comparative analysis of epiphanic plots in Uzbek and world prose.

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