Liminality and the Epiphanic Spectrum in Joyce’s *Dubliners* and Mistry’s *Tales from Firozsha Baag*

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1 The short story cycle is inclined, by its very form, to an exploration of liminality. Its structure reminds readers at each break in the text that they are passing a threshold from one self-completing narrative to another. While the short stories in the cycle gain additional resonance from their position within a sequence, and the text as a whole may build towards thematic cohesion, at a formal level the short story cycle is punctuated by its gaps. The reader's movement through the white space between stories is a corollary to the various physical and metaphoric thresholds encountered by characters within the text. A central liminal experience in much short fiction is the Joycean epiphany, the revelatory instant in which characters’ perception of themselves or their position in the world is transformed. However, when the epiphany is understood not as an instantaneous transitional moment but rather as a gradual accumulation of awareness, and thus process-driven, it has additional correlations with the structure of the short story cycle. In texts marked by narrative re-beginnings and the provisionality of endings, one character's partial epiphany has the potential to be completed by another character later in the cycle. An analysis of epiphany as a process that occurs upon a spectrum has specific implications for the short story cycle as a genre.

2 James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), and Rohinton Mistry’s *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) share a number of similarities: both are short story cycles in which the individual narratives are linked by a common setting, informed by the impact of British colonialism; both examine motifs of maturation, aging and loss; and both end by depicting the intersections between literal deaths and symbolic rebirths, as Gabriel Conroy senses that the time has arrived for “his journey westward” (Joyce 176) and Kersi Boyce reflects, from his immigration to the West, on the home he has left behind in India. Joyce’s and Mistry’s short story cycles present narratives of initiation and
transformation, culminating in a final introspective turn in the last story that links the preceding narratives into a processual and successive stream. Neither novelistic nor anthologic, the two short story cycles stage cumulative narratives in which meaning accrues both through the stories’ contiguity and through the necessary disruption that occurs as readers pass from one complete narrative unit to the next. Joyce’s and Mistry’s treatment of the epiphany, then, can be considered not simply in terms of its anticipated role within narrative resolution and closure of the individual story, but in terms of the closing of the cycle as a whole.

Margot Norris’s introduction to Suspicious Readings of Joyce’s Dubliners begins with a survey of the shifting critical landscape constructed around Joyce’s landmark short story cycle. Norris refers to James Fairhall’s reception history of Dubliners in his 1995 study, James Joyce and the Question of History, noting that “Dubliners was largely ignored until 1956, when American critics rediscovered the collection, which had never sold well and received little early distinguished attention” (Norris 1). The succeeding decades witnessed an energized critical inquiry into Joyce’s previously “marginalized” early work that shifted the thinking about Dubliners away from what Warren Beck describes as its “relega[tion] . . . almost to the status of juvenilia” (qtd. in Norris 1) to a sense of the text’s maturity and artistic significance. Mistry’s early short story cycle, itself overshadowed by later novel-length works like his panoramic realist novels, Such a Long Journey (1991), A Fine Balance (1995), and Family Matters (2002), is, like Dubliners before it, ripe for renewed critical inquiry. One of the hazards of treating the short stories of future novelists as simple apprentice-work—perhaps a necessary way-station on the road to artistic maturity but certainly no place to linger—is the risk that a momentum accumulates in that consensus, leaving early work in alternate forms to languish at the critical road-side. In addition to the privileging of Mistry’s novels, most of the scholarship on Tales from Firozsha Baag has concentrated on postcolonial and diasporic readings of the text, situating the work of the Parsi-Canadian writer within the context of a Parsi or Indian global diaspora. A comparative reading of Mistry’s and Joyce’s texts focusing on the short story cycle form reveals the writers’ exploration of the fissures and fault lines that characterize the genre. At the same time, in two short story cycles structured, at least in part, around a succession of narratives of maturation, the textual gaps can be navigated by considering what Hugh Kenner calls, in his analysis of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, “the trace of a moving metamorphosing subject” (Kenner qtd. in Johnson xv). Applied to Dubliners and Tales from Firozsha Baag, this idea of the “trace” of the “metamorphosing subject” (xv) links the stories along a horizontal axis, bridging the discrete narratives into a “moving” picture.

The Short Story Cycle and the Epiphanic Spectrum

Short story theorists, while debating the most apt terminology for the linked sequence or cycle of short stories, agree about some of the definitive formal features of the genre, including the “tension between separateness and unity” (Lundén 17). Forrest L. Ingram’s definition, by virtue of its epigrammatic simplicity and precision, retains its staying power. In his Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century (1971), Ingram describes the short story cycle as “a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the
pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of its component parts” (19). However, Susan Garland Mann cautions against "over-emphasiz[ing] the importance of any single unifying pattern” (30). Leaving aside the “pattern,” with its emphasis on narrative coherence, Ingram’s language of “modif[ication]” emphasizes readerly agency rather than writerly intention, and identifies some quality of plasticity in the reception of the short story cycle. Building on Roland Barthes’ division between readerly (lisible) and writerly (scriptible) texts, a shift in emphasis from the short story cycle as a site of completeness and pre-determined narrative patterning to one of incompletion, elision, and ambiguity allows for a productive opening up of the expectations of the genre and of readers’ work as narrative interlocutors.

5 The title of Mistry’s text foregrounds the telling and receiving of “tales” and anticipates a number of embedded storyteller characters, including Nariman Hansotia in “Squatters,” Jacqueline (called Jakaylee), the Goan ayah in “The Ghost of Firozsha Baag,” and the unnamed writer-narrator in the concluding short story, “Swimming Lessons.” The term “tale” emphasizes orality and creates a narrative space for the tall tale, as presented in the story of Sarosh’s failed immigration in “Squatters” and Jakaylee’s encounter with the seductive spectre in “The Ghost of Firozsha Baag.” The title also gestures towards famous cycles of tales like The Arabian Nights and The Canterbury Tales. Most significantly, “tales” remind us of the role of the implied listener as the one whose act of listening constitutes the storytelling scenario, and who can be seen, thus, as a collaborator in the telling of the tale.

6 Taking a paradigmatic short story plot point—the Joycean moment of epiphany—and reconfiguring it as a formal rather than exclusively thematic feature offers opportunities to unpack the texts’ self-referential treatment of reading and interpretation, seeing in the work of embedded “readers” and “writers” a mirror for the external reader’s negotiation of textual indeterminacies. The emphasis on reader agency rather than writer intention further allows for the possibility that a text built, like the short story cycle, out of occasionally incongruous collisions and competing narrative sightlines, may produce no single or definitive interpretation. This exegetical scenario is staged in the self-reflexive final short story in Mistry’s collection, “Swimming Lessons” (a story which could be alternatively titled “Reading Lessons”). Here, the mother and father of the story’s protagonist, a man belatedly revealed to be the “author” of the preceding cycle of stories, debate the meaning of their son’s work, ultimately arriving at no consensus about the work of the writer or the meaning of the stories. As Wolfgang Iser notes, the reader’s experience of a text is “dynamic” (275); the “unwritten part ... stimulates the reader’s creative participation” (276). Here, the “unwritten part” can refer both to the gaps within and between the individual stories in the cycle. While each text in the short story cycle is a self-contained narrative—a story that can be read and interpreted independent of the cycle of which it is a part—Robert M. Luscher proposes that, “Within the context of the sequence, each short story is ... not a completely closed formal experience” (148). However, the “cumulative thematic impact” (Luscher 149) can be measured against what Rolf Lundén describes as the short story cycle’s “structure of disjointure with its gaps, voids, contradictions, and silences” (21). Iser’s interpretation of the reader’s “dynamic” experience with textual gaps, while framed in broadly narrative terms, has particular implications in the context of the short story cycle, which is formally predicated upon the reader’s movement through the gaps that punctuate the sequence. Connections can be made
between Ingram’s description of the short story cycle’s capacity to produce a “modifying” (that is, active) reader experience, and the language of narrative negotiation. *Dubliners*’ structure of “fragmentation and discontinuity” (Kennedy 11) offers readers opportunities to navigate the gaps and reckon with the text’s interpretive cruxes. Similarly, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* challenges the imagined reader’s desire for narrative resolution through a cycle of stories that emphasizes incompleteness, interruption, and misinterpretation.

The starting point for discussions of the epiphany is often the use of the term in Joyce’s *Stephen Hero*, the embryonic and fragmentary autobiographical novel that would take final shape in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In this early work, Joyce identifies the epiphany as the moment of illuminating recognition: “we recognize that it is that thing which it is ... The object achieves its epiphany” (*Stephen Hero* 213). Florence L. Walzl describes this early articulation of the epiphany as an “instantaneous apprehension of the essential being or nature of the object,” that simultaneously “acts as illumination for the beholder” ("Liturgy” 442). Walzl charts the shifting significance of epiphany in the aesthetic theory advanced by Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; here, epiphany is reformulated not as the recognition of the object’s quiddity but as the artist’s creation of something—“a character or situation or setting that will in turn give a revelation of life” (Walzl “Liturgy” 442). For some critics, the reader’s quest to locate the epiphany results in under-developed readings. Susan Bazargan proposes that the search for the epiphany transforms the “highly mutable stories” in *Dubliners* into “‘idle’ predictable narratives for many readers,” and she notes that “save for the epiphanic flare-up, other interpretative lights are skimmed” (qtd. in McSweeney 19). Rather than “the loose, generalized sense that [epiphany] has come to acquire in literary-critical discourse—a sudden moment of illumination for a character or the reader” (McSweeney 17), reconceptualizing the epiphany in spatial terms, occurring upon a spectrum rather than within a single “moment,” allows a horizontal axis of developing understanding to replace a vertical axis of instantaneous insight. This reorientation of the epiphany as a threshold experience—an active, process-oriented and dynamic event occurring within time, and achieving various degrees of completeness—emphasizes that the Joycean epiphany functions as a parallel to the structural and thematic thresholds that are central to the short story cycle as a genre.

**Thematic Thresholds: Literal and Metaphoric Negotiations**

Mistry’s text beckons across the century to Joyce’s earlier cycle, offering what Linda Hutcheon terms a “postmodern intertextual echoing” (140). The most evident connection that links the two short story cycles is their common focus on place: in Joyce’s text, the city of Dublin and its inhabitants are depicted in a series of fifteen short stories focusing upon the lower and middle class, while in Mistry’s text the denizens of a predominantly Parsi apartment complex in Mumbai, called Firozsha Baag, are represented in a series of eleven short stories linked by a common setting and recurring characters. The focus upon a seemingly closed and self-contained community belies the mobility inherent in liminality, represented symbolically in the image of the “threshold”—the in-between space through which characters move. Joyce’s declared aim in *Dubliners* was to present the city as the centre of the country’s “paralysis” (letter
to publisher Grant Richards, May 1906; qtd. in Johnson xvii), although Richard Robinson quips that paralysis has now been “rendered almost unmentionable in Joyce studies” (46). And while, undoubtedly, the cycle of stories is filled with characters failing to move beyond the limits of custom and creed—for example, Eveline resisting the temptation to run away to Argentina with Frank; Mr. Duffy renouncing his connection with Mrs. Sinico in order to preserve his carefully controlled masculine world; the political stasis in “Ivy Day in the Committee Room”—some characters do seem to achieve a kind of spiritual or psychic mobility via the epiphanic impetus which is itself an exploration of movement: from symbolic darkness to light, from ignorance to self-knowledge, from metaphoric blindness to insight. For all that Joyce’s stories do explore the stasis of his characters’ lives, many of the stories also foreground the possibility of crossing the symbolic threshold via the epiphanic process. As Ben Forkner observes, the very “organization of the stories into a movement from childhood to maturity implies a half-hidden possibility of human development, a faint blueprint of hope despite all evidence to the contrary.” Forkner’s argument that the structure provides a “hope” which otherwise is thematically elided opens intriguing interpretive possibilities: of the possible gap between theme and form, of their contradictory movements, and of a formal impetus that has a strength beyond the thematic interpretation of the cycle. Building upon Forkner’s “blueprint” metaphor, one could suggest that while the rooms themselves are gloomy and closed, within the larger architecture of the short story cycle there are capacious views and open doors.

Similarly, Tales from Firozsha Baag explores the tension between stasis and mobility in the lives of individual characters. As Forkner proposes of the larger narrative pattern in Dubliners, that it implicitly indicates a narrative of “human development,” so too does Mistry structurally emphasize the physical growth and emotional maturation of his recurring characters, Kersi and Jehangir, as elliptical, fragmentary pieces of their coming of age narratives move the short story cycle inexorably from their adolescence to their manhood. The place that traps them—the decaying apartment complex, with its vestiges of English colonialism represented in the inefficient Criterion stove and the romantically remote Enid Blyton books—must be escaped in order to enter fully into manhood. Indeed, in the short story “Squatters,” the local sage and storyteller, Nariman Hansotia, identifies the boys as likely to go abroad and thus in need of specific (and distinctly narrative) instruction. As Peter Morey observes, Mistry’s stories shift between third and first person (31); like Dubliners, which uses similar shifts, the effect is of formal narrative mobility. Even as characters individually or collectively experience entrapment on the basis of age, gender, class, race, or religion, the reader’s vantage point is one that emphasizes mutability and flexibility as there appears to be no single perspective from which the narrative worlds are explored. Arguably, rather than presenting a “novelistic superstructure” (Morey 31), Tales from Firozsha Baag offers a shifting and gap-filled structure that generates meaning through its contingent narrative form. The short story cycle offers a renunciation of what Gerald Lynch describes as the “totalizing impression of the traditional novel of social and psychological realism” (17).

Characters in Joyce’s and Mistry’s short story cycles encounter both literal and symbolic thresholds. At the literal level, recurring architectural motifs, including windows, doors, ante-rooms, hallways and staircases, emphasize spatial liminality. Little Chandler gazing out the window at the beginning of “A Little Cloud,” with
melancholic reflection on the difference between his life and that of his friend, 
Gallagher, who left Dublin eight years earlier and had “got on” (53), recalls Eveline and 
the boy narrators in “The Sisters” and “Araby,” gazing at and through windows, and 
anticipates Gabriel’s longing glance out the window at the pure, snowbound world 
outside as the time for his supper speech draws near in the final story, “The Dead.” The 
threshold or liminal space is complicated by locks, doors, and keys throughout Tales 
from Firozsha Baag, suggesting the challenge to free and unimpeded movement, and a 
corollary challenge to epiphanic insight. The threshold becomes a vexed space, as in 
the battle over a divided apartment in “The Paying Guests” or in the incursion (and 
expulsion) of a thief and former friend in “One Sunday.”

At the symbolic level, adolescence functions as the crucial “threshold space” that 
characters within both cycles must successfully negotiate. Joyce’s focus on this pivotal 
narrative juncture (the “coming of age” narrative) is one he gestures towards in a 1906 
letter to Grant Richards, who in 1914 would finally publish Joyce’s short story cycle. 
Here Joyce described the “four aspects” of Dublin life that he presented in the stories 
that would become Dubliners as “childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life” (qtd. 
in Gabler xvii). Florence Walzl suggests that Joyce employs the “Roman divisions of the 
life span” (“Life” 410), where childhood stretches until the age of seventeen, and 
adolescence follows from seventeen to thirty. The period of Joycean “childhood,” then, 
corresponds more nearly with our sense of the period ordinarily described as 
“adolescence.” The stories of “childhood,” namely “The Sisters,” “An Encounter,” and 
“Araby,” do not present a static moment in childhood but rather a series of moments 
that emphasize the threshold nature of adolescence: the space through which the 
protagonists must pass in order to reach maturity. However, the loosely chronological 
progress of stories that follows this opening movement simultaneously promises and 
undermines the possibility of achieving maturity, self-knowledge and insight, as older 
characters are thwarted by their nature and their circumstances. The final short stories 
in both cycles present their protagonists in a retrospective mode, looking back on the 
lives and choices of their younger selves, and of those who moved within and just 
beyond their own orbit of existence.

There is a parallel thematic structure in Mistry’s story sequence, which also attends to 
the discrete eras of the human life. In a sequence of narrative iterations that echoes 
Hemingway’s Nick Adams suite of stories in In Our Time, Mistry returns several times to 
the interrelated narratives of two similarly thoughtful and introspective boys whose 
fates ultimately diverge: Jehangir and Kersi. Like the boy narrator in “Araby,” both of 
Mistry’s adolescent protagonists experience processual epiphanies: accumulated 
moments of self-awareness that bring them trembling to the precipice of maturity and, 
in Kersi’s case, beyond, to the life Joyce’s Little Chandler (in “A Little Cloud”) dreams of: 
the life of a writer. The final story, “Swimming Lessons,” stages a revision of the text 
that preceded it, encouraging a reading of the short story cycle as the book that Kersi 
has written and which his parents read and comment upon. As Richard Robinson 
proposes of “the epiphanic structure of the parts” of Dubliners (48), the structure of 
Mistry’s story sequence reaches gloriously revised significance when the reader is 
offered a final moment of revelatory insight into the text they have just read. Mistry’s 
final story, through its embedded readers, frames the external reader’s own act of 
reading; this is reminiscent of Joyce’s reading lessons as, for example, when the boy 
narrator in “The Sisters” seeks to “read” the window at Father Flynn’s residence. As 
Garry Leonard notes, “the boy struggles to form a coherent narrative out of apparently
unrelated details” (89) in a process that directly corresponds to the reader’s struggle to produce meaning. This sense of affinity between embedded and external readers places significant shared emphasis upon the critical work of exegesis, and links to the adolescent character’s struggle to cross the threshold into adult understanding.

Arguably, in these texts, the transition from childhood to maturity embodies the liminal or threshold position more than any other stage in life. One further link is that adolescence brings with it—at least in its literary incarnation in these short story cycles—the possibility of an understanding of the fragility of human life and of the vanity of material ambition. All things made, characters realize, are subject to decline. At the end of “The Collectors,” Jehangir passively accepts that the once treasured stamps of the dead Dr. Mody are devoured by cockroaches under his bed, and the “Araby” narrator, who fails to buy a present for Mangan’s sister, perceives the vanity of his endeavour, and feels his “eyes burn[ing] with anguish and anger” at his own folly (24). Mistry uses the Joycean image of the burning eyes not once but twice. Building on the “Araby” plot structure—the high note of anticipation followed by deflation—the middle-aged Rustomji’s careful preparation to attend temple in “Auspicious Occasion” is frustrated, and he stands defeated with “tears of shame and rage well[ing] in his eyes” (26). Mistry makes more literal use of the motif of burning eyes (and the connection to the epiphanic moment) in “Lend Me Your Light,” when Kersi prepares for his emigration to Canada while contending with a case of conjunctivitis that causes “a searing pain” in his eyes (186). He imagines himself, “half-jokingly” (186), as Tiresias, the blind seer, “guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of my birth, and paying the price in burnt-out eyes” (186). While the reader does not learn until the final story that Kersi has become “the writer” of the Tales, this moment appears as humorously self-reflexive and self-aware, the young man seeking to find symbols in life as in art, and parodying his own medical misfortune. Kersi’s awareness of his hubris further links him to the boy narrator in “Araby.” The recurring structure of the Dubliners stories is echoed in the Firozsha Baag stories; as Kennedy notes of Joyce’s characters, their opportunities for “a more fulfilling life” are met instead by the “collapse” of their dreams (24).

Joyce and Mistry’s focus on threshold spaces emphasizes the peripheral positioning of many of the short stories’ protagonists: those who are alienated or marginalized because of their age (this includes both the young and the elderly); their socio-economic or class position; their gender, race, or religion; or some essential aspect of the self. When brought to centre stage, like the young singer Kathleen in “A Mother” or the ambivalent pater familias Gabriel, in “The Dead,” characters confirm their sense of their own alienation. Moments before Gabriel delivers his supper speech, readers are invited to recall an earlier scene in which Gabriel gazed out the window and longed to be in the cold and anonymous dark, that “pleasant” (151) alternative to the stifling supper-table. Gabriel thinks again of the “pure” (159) air that lies beyond the lighted window and he hesitates on the brink of opening his speech, as he “leaned his ten trembling fingers on the tablecloth and smiled nervously at the company” (159). The silent pause before beginning is, too, a kind of rhetorical threshold across which Gabriel must move.
Formal Thresholds: Epiphanies, Gaps, Codas

15 The physical spaces that separate inside from outside (windows, doors), and that connect spaces (hallways, staircases) reflect the inherent separateness of the stories and also the tissues of connection between them. The architectural liminal spaces—spaces which are moved through but which are not, in themselves, destinations—corroborate a sense of narrative imperative that leads the reader through the linked stories. Rather than encountering the short stories as stand-alone texts, ultimately independent from their neighbouring narratives, the sequential nature of the short story cycle insists that proximity and order create additional meaning. The stories possess simultaneously independent and contingent relationships with their neighbouring texts. The reader who encounters the liminal experience of moving through and across the threshold that divides one story from the next is formally positioned in a way that echoes the stories’ protagonists, hovering at their own symbolic thresholds of understanding.

16 These examples of the literal and metaphoric thresholds that may be crossed reach their epitome in the pivotal moment of epiphany. Indeed, Garry Leonard describes the epiphany as “the primary aesthetic building block of [Joyce’s] stories,” locating the epiphany as “a point where hitherto disparate observations, thoughts, and desires rearrange themselves into an unsuspected pattern that shatters often long held ideas about one's self and one's surroundings” (91). Clare Hanson’s observation that “in many 'plotless' fictions a moment of heightened awareness acts as a focus, a structural equivalent for conventional resolution of plot” (7) offers the potential to read the epiphany as a substitute for conventional narrative closure and resolution. The epiphany can also be framed in a tissular relationship, connecting the pieces of the short story cycle. In its dual role as thematic and formal device, the epiphany is a transitional and liminal marker of the protagonist’s deepening consciousness of some fundamental aspect of self or other. Disparate characters from individual stories are thus linked in a processual stream.

17 When the epiphany is figured in terms of movement, it ceases to be a moment of passive reception and becomes instead an active and self-determining experience. Like passage through the threshold space, it requires initiative and will. Furthermore, while the epiphany in both short story cycles can be read as “momentary,” bearing witness to characters’ rapid movement from one state to another, from innocence to experience or from ignorance to (partial or contingent) understanding, it may be more productive to conceive of the epiphany as a dynamic experience which occurs upon a spectrum. Focusing upon the epiphanic spectrum rather than the epiphanic moment locates characters’ experience within time, seeing the partial or the incomplete epiphany as a realistic representation of character psychology rather than as a marker of failure of awareness or recognition. In addition, the concept of the epiphanic spectrum accommodates the structural singularities of the short story cycle, in which readers’ experience of meaning accumulates via their movement through the stories in sequence, and through the experience of negotiating the gaps and ellipses that punctuate the linked cycle of stories. The spectrum also allows for a cumulative reading of the epiphany, whereby earlier instances of epiphanic failure are redeemed by later instances of perception, even if these insights occur in separate stories and to other protagonists. For example, in the penultimate paragraph of “A Painful Case,” a
constellation of images accumulates during James Duffy’s walk from the shop where he eats his supper to the park, where he stands alone under a tree and, in an epiphanic realization of his soul’s loneliness, condemns himself for his imagined complicity in the death of Mrs. Sinico. The glowing lights of Dublin shine “redly and hospitably in the cold night” (88); he feels himself “outcast from life’s feast”—a phrase repeated twice in the paragraph (88, 89); and he frames himself in a binary relationship to the “furtive” lovers in the park (88). The epiphanic moment disrupts Duffy’s complacency and accustomed truths. It also pre-figures Gabriel’s epiphany in the final short story, “The Dead,” in which the images of hospitality and feasting are literalized, and the image of the lonely man standing “under a tree” (89) is revisited in Gabriel’s vision of Michael Furey as “a young man standing under a dripping tree” (176).

A parallel reading of the final stories in each of the story cycles, “The Dead” and “Swimming Lessons,” offers opportunities to unpack the formal and thematic significance of epiphanies in the summative stories in the sequences. In The Short Story Cycle, Susan Garland Mann proposes, “many cycles end with final stories that dramatically change the direction of the work” (114). While the concept of the epiphanic spectrum relies upon explicit and implicit continuities within the sequence as a whole, Mann’s notion of the final “change in direction” is not so much a renunciation of continuities, as it is a reminder that discontinuity is an essential formal element of the short story cycle. Readings of Joyce’s “The Dead” have been shaped by the critical consensus that has accrued around Walzl’s analysis of it as a “coda” to Dubliners (“Paralysis” 228), which recalls themes and images that appeared earlier in the cycle. However, notwithstanding the reiterative work of the final short story, it too can be seen as moving across a thematic and formal threshold, or along an epiphanic spectrum. As the last story to be written (and not part of the cycle as initially conceived), it moves beyond Joyce’s original schema for diagnosing a nation’s paralysis and, as has been proposed elsewhere, offers a more redemptive depiction of Dublin and its citizens (Lazar), both in its valorization of the virtue of Irish hospitality and in its depiction of Gabriel’s epiphany in the darkness of the hotel room. At the same time, critics like Charles Peake have observed the “sustained irony” (48) in Gabriel’s speech, reading it in relation to a key paratext: Joyce’s letter to his brother Stanislaus, in which he assesses himself as “unnecessarily harsh” in his depiction of Ireland, and suggests he has “not reproduced . . . its hospitality” (qtd. in Peake 45). Peake proposes that Gabriel’s speech about Irish hospitality at the supper table becomes a “parody” (48) of the sentiments Joyce expressed in his letter. If Gabriel’s lauding of Irish hospitality can be read as parodic or performative—designed to humble Miss Ivors in absentia for the perceived injury she offered to Gabriel’s dignity during the dancing—what opportunities remain to read the epiphany in an uncomplicated light, as a redemptive moment that reflects a nascent empathy in the protagonist? It remains to track backward through Gabriel’s evening to locate the thread of his thought along the epiphanic spectrum.

The final story in Mistry’s short story cycle, “Swimming Lessons,” unexpectedly reveals that Kersi is the writer of the tales, a narrative which stands as a loosely autobiographical portrait of the community in which he was raised and from which he has exiled himself through his immigration to Canada. The revelation also belatedly allows for the earlier stories in which he featured to be read as a fragmentary and distinctly postmodern Künstlerroman. The story comments self-reflexively upon the narratives that have preceded it, drawing attention to the joint creative labour of
writing (in the figure of the expatriate son) and interpreting (in the role of the parents who function as the story’s embedded reader-critics). In this way, Mistry’s final story, too, offers a coda to the cycle as a whole.1 “Swimming Lessons” foregrounds the epiphanic spectrum in its depiction of the manifested insights of the expatriate writer-son, and of Kersi’s mother and father as readers in situ of his tales of his old community. Interestingly though, Kersi is never mentioned by name within the story. The reader’s ability to identify the protagonist and his parents hinges upon the clues placed throughout the piece, an experience which emphasizes the reader’s own gradual accumulation of insight. Kersi Boyce is a postmodern, Parsi James Joyce figure, a chronicler and exile from his community, who finds himself turning backwards in his writing, towards the past and the place from which he can never fully escape.

In “The Flash of Fireflies,” Nadine Gordimer suggests “the short story doesn’t deal in cumulatives” (180); what you get, she proposes, is “a discrete moment of truth,” not “the moment of truth” (180). This is true of the short story; however, the short story cycle does formally, if not thematically, gesture towards more than the “discrete moment”; it moves towards a kind of fragmentary vastness, well encapsulated by Joyce’s own claim that he was writing a series of epicleti (what Gabler calls “a suite of ... little epics” [xix]).4 This impression of the cumulative significance built by movement through a sequence relates to the epiphanic spectrum and to the dominant place given to epiphanies at the end of both books. The epiphany stages an “opening out” that takes characters across the threshold of their own necessarily limited first-hand experience to a nascent understanding of the vastness that lies beyond the limitations of individual subjectivity. Connecting theme to form, the endings of the cycles remind readers of the relationship between the parts and the whole, and between the past and the present; just as characters are affected by their past experiences, readers are shaped by their movement through the stories that have come before.

“The Dead” is set at an apt time of year for an analysis of epiphanies, as the Misses Morkan’s annual party takes place on or around January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany. As the party reaches its end, Gabriel waits at the bottom of the stairs, looking from the dim shadows of the hall up the staircase to where his wife, Gretta, stands “listening to distant music” (164). Although Gabriel is here positioned as the symbolic equivalent of the male artist, framing his wife as muse (“If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. . . . Distant Music he would call the picture if he were a painter” [165]), it might be reasonable to also frame him as a symbolic reader—a reader distinctly lacking in interpretive power (“He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of” [165]). The scene gives Gabriel an illusion of interpretive power while simultaneously stripping it away. Comparing the staircase scene in Dubliners to its corollary in Firozsha Baag—an elevator scene—the reader encounters Kersi exercising confident but flawed interpretation in his interactions with the elderly man who functions as a double for Kersi’s own deceased grandfather, and who offers Kersi a second chance to gain a symbolic blessing. Kersi earlier reflected, in a self-reflexive, parodic moment in “Lend Me Your Light,” that “the epiphany would have to wait for another time, another trip” (201). Now, in the final story in the sequence, he has the possibility to attain insight, self-knowledge and, most urgently, a glimpse of the world beyond the self. Gabriel in the dark hotel room, and Kersi in the waters of his bathtub, gaze outwardly, and, in so doing, seem to reach for an insight that extends beyond the prison-house of individual subjectivity. Gabriel’s “generous tears” (176) link with Kersi’s eyes, open and wet under the bathwater. The
epiphany acts as a liminal movement because, in both instances, it allows the protagonist to transcend the limits of the self. While critics debate whether Gabriel’s epiphany is genuine, and while the open ending of “Swimming Lessons,” and the loss of the old man’s blessing, deflate a fully redemptive conclusion, both final stories foreground the power of the epiphany to move the protagonist beyond a narcissistic preoccupation with the self. If an ironic or parodic reading of the conclusions of the two narratives is adopted, readers may identify in Gabriel’s and Kersi’s longing to locate and define their discrete “symbols” (Gretta listening to “distant music” in Joyce’s narrative; a life replete with ambivalent water imagery in Mistry’s text), not genuine epiphany but false or deferred epiphany. As the guests leave, Gabriel standing in the “gloom of the hall” (165) observes, “A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow. He could not see her face but he could see the terracotta and salmonpink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife” (165). Johnson argues that Gabriel’s “lack of recognition” (his perceived failure to identify the woman, immediately, as Gretta) speaks to other failures of perception (xxxix); the potential absence of the final epiphany creates movement, but it may be the complicated movement of the story turning inwards upon itself.

22 If, on the other hand, Gabriel’s failure to identify Gretta at the top of the stairs is a syntactic delay rather than a perceptual one (that is, if it is the reader who is forced to lag behind Gabriel’s identification of the woman at the top of the stairs) then the perceptual short-coming can be more fully redeemed. Through his longing to “read” Gretta, Gabriel demonstrates a desire for understanding, even as his reading functions as an imposition of meaning upon her inscrutable form. However, Gabriel is not only a reader but, like Kersi, a variant on the writer figure; later that night it is his own textual production that is brought back to him across the years in the form of a remembered romantic phrase from an old love letter to Gretta: “Why is it that words like these seem to me so dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name?” (168). Gabriel’s interior act of self-citation is a moment of acute literary self-consciousness. Adding his own words to the text’s larger preoccupation with quotation, Gabriel aligns himself with the expressive power of Robert Browning or Shakespeare and, like the title of his imagined painting of Gretta at the top of the stairs, the words are carried “[l]ike distant music” [169] from their past, linking these two moments, the flawed exegesis of his “reading” of Gretta implicitly discrediting his romantic perception of his tender sentiments in the love letter. Indeed, rather than highlighting Gabriel’s power, his limits as reader and as writer point to his deficiency, to some lack or absence.

23 After leaving the party, Gabriel walks behind his wife and Mr. Bartell D’Arcy through the snowy street, and longs for something that he imagines Gretta possesses, seemingly as a consequence of her “pure” and rural upbringing: a capacity for spontaneity in place of his own acute self-awareness. His memory of Gretta calling out to the glassblower, “Is the fire hot, sir?” (168), is borne to him across the reaches of time, like his own romantic phrases will be a moment later. Almost epigrammatic in her pithy, concise phrasing, Gretta’s words are marked by their “sudden[ness]” (168). Unguarded, incautious, spontaneous, Gretta offers an alternative and model beyond the muse-like figure she seems to embody as her husband observes her from the bottom of the stairs. Gabriel, perhaps unconsciously, hungers for her freshness and spontaneity, unbounded by the punishing self-consciousness that hampers him in his interactions at the party. Gabriel appears to perceive a lack here, recognizing some limitation in his character;
the fact that this precedes the fraught scene in the hotel room (with its revelatory motif of entwining darkness, mirrors, and windows), stages the crisis of self before the hotel room scene where discussions of epiphany tend to focus.

24 As they journey towards the hotel after the conclusion of the party, Gabriel expresses his desire for spontaneous action in his ultimately repressed longing to catch Gretta in his arms from behind. His erotic desire is thwarted; his sense of his own power (as a reader, writer, artist, lover) is undermined. Recognizing Gabriel’s failure to be spontaneous, his overarching capacity for self-restraint and self-control, the reader establishes the framework for Gabriel’s humble acknowledgement of his romantic limitations. Gabriel’s epiphany happens not in an instant in a hotel room but through time and across a spectrum: it can be read not as a momentary flash of transformation but as a gradual accumulation of impressions throughout the evening that culminates in his “generous tears” (176) in the darkened hotel room. The reader’s sense of the incompleteness of Gabriel’s epiphany is modified by a recognition that it occurs upon a spectrum and thus its incompleteness may not undermine the significance of his partial achievement of insight.

25 Similarly, Mistry’s final short story stages a collapse of the protagonist’s interpretive powers, and erotic and romantic self-conceptions. Even as the reader learns that Kersi is “the writer,” and thus a figure charged with interpretive and narrative power, Kersi himself must negotiate with his own limitations of vision and understanding. Looking at two sunbathing women from the window of his apartment in Don Mills, Ontario, Kersi constructs a narrative of seduction and desire that must be revised when he encounters the women in the elevator and recognizes the disparity between his fantasy and the reality freshly presented to him. Similarly, in the gap between his erotic fantasies about the woman in his swimming lesson for non-swimmers, and the reality of his deflating experience in the swimming class, his erotic narrative of his “delectable Asian brown body” (244) collapses. The self-authored fantasy of the desirable body is a recuperative and restorative narrative to challenge the objectification he experiences as a “brown body,” subject to the racism of white boys at the local pool, a wholly interior revisionist narrative strategy whereby the figure of the Other is made the object of desire. Like Gabriel’s thwarted erotic longing for Gretta, Kersi’s failure to achieve erotic conquest challenges the power of the self-created narrative. The epiphany is unmoored from a single insightful moment; instead, the protagonists move through a series of linked experiences that brings them, by degrees, closer to self-awareness.

Conclusions: Negotiating Closure

26 Stories end, but not every story provides the reader with closure. In Coming to Terms with the Short Story, Susan Lohafer examines “anticlosure,” describing the reader’s experience of “an impetus toward closure, blocked by various kinds of interference which are in one way and another removed, surmounted, absorbed” (42).

27 Nevertheless, the gratification of closure may be perpetually deferred. Narrative gaps contribute to a reader’s sense of textual incompletion. Garry Leonard observes of Joyce’s “The Sisters” that the short story is characterized by “more gaps than substance” (88). Leonard proposes of Dubliners’ dense texture of allusion, and burden of obscure material objects, that “Upon first reading, there seem to be no obvious clues to
the strategy behind Joyce's selection of a bewildering array of obscure street names, stray thoughts, lost corkscrews, gold coins, lost plumcakes, confiscated adventure books, and forgotten novels of a dead priest. Never before, it seems, has a writer used so much detail to explain so little” (87). Tales from Firozsha Baag, too, strains under the weight of its arcane references. The textual “thickening” produced through the authors’ creation of densely realized (and realist) discrete worlds conceals—but cannot defend the reader against—the stories’ elliptical turns. As Leonard notes of Dubliners, “The stories appear to be taking the reader toward a moral dilemma, or a climax, or a revelation, or at least a conclusion, and then they stop, but without appearing to have ended” (88). Yet Frank O’Connor proposes that Joyce “make[s] tragedy out of a plate of peas and a bottle of ginger beer” (127). The tension, then, appears to be between the seeming meaninglessness of the plotless wandering, and the possibility that within the “under-plotted” story lurks all the complex humanity of its characters’ quotidian existences.

The reader’s quest to locate the epiphany reconfirms the ambivalence of the texts’ endings. Rather than creating sterile narratives, with meanings that exist in advance of the reader’s encounter with the text, Mistry’s and Joyce’s final stories provide only qualified kinds of closure that insists upon the reader’s work of perpetually renegotiating meaning. In formal terms, reading the final short story as a coda implicitly argues for a significance beyond the individual story. It reframes and adjusts the readers’ perspective of the narrative thresholds through which they have already passed. While the interpretive gaps complicate the simple resolution of the singular narrative unit (the individual short story), the presence of the epiphanic spectrum creates new interpretive tissues but does not necessarily resolve the key narrative cruxes.

Austin M. Wright observes the short story’s propensity for “recalcitrance.” Taking “final recalcitrance” as an example, he notes “an effect of incompleteness” (121) in the endings of modernist short stories like “The Dead” that forces the reader to return again to the story to puzzle out its meaning. Here, recalcitrance depends on the accumulation of details whose significance is not immediately evident” (123). Wright’s concept of recalcitrance can be connected to the processual epiphany. Like the characters who move along the epiphanic spectrum, the reader, too, experiences deferred, contingent or partial understanding. This notion of the recalcitrant short story offers some accommodation of the reader’s experience of a text that appears to “withhold” itself, and to deny the reader’s conventional expectations of closure. Taking another approach to the topic of narrative recalcitrance, John Bayley proposes, “A good story exhibits not so much restraint as a lack of curiosity. Its interior is revealed unawares, as if the story itself were not interested in it” (185). This expresses in formal terms what can be observed in thematic terms: the protagonist moving away from solipsistic self-examination into a larger awareness of the role of “the part” in relation to “the whole.” In Joyce’s and Mistry’s short story cycles, as in others, the form affects the interpretation of the themes. Suzanne Ferguson’s observation that “formal concerns influence interpretation” (117) has implications for the significance of the epiphany in the specific context of the short story cycle. The structure of the short story cycle, with its formal emphasis on liminality, foregrounds the reader’s own process of moving through the cycle of stories. The notion of the epiphanic spectrum offers new strategies for approaching the dynamism and mutability of the epiphanic register within the specific genre conditions of the short story cycle. Linking Joyce and
Mistry’s narratives to a modernist hermeneutics that foregrounds the diverse interpretive work and textual negotiation in which embedded and external readers engage, the short story cycle is not reduced to the sum of its patterns but instead opened up by, and to, its indeterminacies.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


NOTES

1. The term “epiphany” disappears in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, which Walzl interprets as evidence of Joyce’s “own dissatisfaction or uncertainty” with it (“Liturgy” 443).
2. Playing with architectural metaphors, Peter Morey argues that Tales from Firozsha Baag “reproduces on the formal level the community that inhabits the compound” (31).
3. Tales From Firozsha Baag was published in the United States as Swimming Lessons and Other Stories From Firozsha Baag, emphasizing the prominence of the final story in the sequence.
4. Walzl defines *epicletic* differently, linking the term to *epiclesis*. In the Eastern Church tradition, Walzl explains, *epiclesis* is the transubstantiation of “bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus” (“Liturgy” 437). She suggests, “Joyce’s adoption of this term indicates that he believes the artist’s creative act was analogous to the Eucharistic change effected by the priest” (437).

### ABSTRACTS

En proposant une lecture parallèle de *Tales From Firozsha Baag* de Rohinton Mistry et de *Dubliners* de James Joyce, cet article soutient que la forme narrative liminale du cycle de nouvelles apporte un corrélatif structurel à la figure joycienne de l’épiphanie. Cet article identifie les croisements entre le « seuil » et l’épiphanie, clarifiant des connections pour les lecteurs, qu’ils soient enchâssés ou extérieurs. Le « seuil » peut être perçu comme une caractéristique formelle du cycle de nouvelles soulignant l’expérience du lecteur lorsqu’il négocie les intervalles entre les nouvelles d’un cycle ; tandis que le spectre épiphanique (en tant qu’alternative au moment épiphanique) nous permet d’aborder le dynamisme propre au registre épiphanique dans le cadre des conditions génériques spécifiques de la série de nouvelles.

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