

A Shattering Epiphany in James Joyce's "Araby"

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: July 08, 2017

Accepted: October 04, 2017

Published: October 31, 2017

Volume: 8 Issue: 5

Advance access: October 2017

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

Key words:

Araby,

Bleakness,

Boy,

Disillusionment,

Epiphany,

Love,

Mangan's Sister

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to show an adolescent boy's continuing process of self-realisation through his disillusionment with the bleak reality of Dublin in the early twentieth century in the short story "Araby" by James Joyce. Brought up in the drab and deadening surroundings with his uncle and aunt in conservative Catholic cultures, the lonely sensitive boy finds no outlets to express his feelings. Torn between harsh reality and imagination, the boy searches light and a relish of romance. Amidst the darkness, a girl, Mangan's sister, is the only light in his romantic vision. The boy, however, wishes to win her over by bringing her a gift from Araby, an oriental bazaar, which is also an epitome of ideal beauty, love and romance to him. But as he grows up, he discovers that the bazaar is beset by difficulties of the adult world where he finds no way to dream. There he is exposed to a new odious situation which he never thought before. And he undergoes a shattering epiphany which results in realisation and maturation. Indeed, here Joyce keenly evinces how a young boy gains sharp insights into life and reality.

INTRODUCTION

In "Araby", James Joyce (2 February 1882 -13 January 1941) explores the awakening of a sensitive adolescent boy, the protagonist of the story, who is living in Dublin, a bleak city of dreary weather, dreary people and dreary houses with gloomy prospects. We observe loveless daily lives of the people here. Desire and sensuality are also treated as immoral in Dublin. Throughout the narrative, the adult world, as the boy indignantly experiences, incessantly discourages individual sensibility and freedom while forcing the young ones to accept an institutionalised code of conduct. So, the boy's thoughts and feelings always oscillate between reality and romantic fantasy. Fed up with the empty ceremonies, erosion of values, mechanical compliance with rules and corruption of modern life, the boy craves for ideal beauty, romance and love. And in his eye, it is Mangan's sister, unnamed like the protagonist, who is an embodiment of all that he desires. To bring the girl a gift, the boy, however, hopefully goes to Araby but painfully discovers that Araby is not the place he has long dreamt of. His pursuit of idealism and love is thwarted. He gets disillusioned and experiences a major epiphany while epiphany denotes a moment or situation of

sudden insight or revelation experienced by a character. He recognises himself in that society which has lost the capacity to dream. In fact, as the story advances, Joyce reveals how the boy becomes increasingly irritated and distraught by external factors which bring about his final epiphany at the end of the story. Hence, the boy's quest, it can be said, apparently ends in failure but results in an inner awareness to stark reality. It may also be added that Ireland itself is like the adolescent struggling against its oppressive forces to find its way.

EFFECT OF NORTH RICHMOND STREET ON THE BOY

As the story opens, we notice the boy delineate the prevailing dark and sombre atmosphere of his neighbourhood:

North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two storeys stood at blind end, detached from its neighbours in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of the decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.¹

The negative connotations associated with the city of Dublin illustrate the boy's state of despondency and hopelessness. Like the boy, we also notice desolation everywhere. There is no open space, no light and no life anywhere, apart from the sound of the boys when the school breaks. Along with a deserted house, there stand inhabited houses as well. Even worse, these inhabited houses show no indication of communication to each other, expressing excessive self-conceit or self-importance of their inhabitants. The brown faces of the houses point to paralysis or deadly condition of Dublin. "This truly is a description of a ghost town from which there is no exit, because North Richmond Street is a *c u l-d e-s a c*."²² By 'North Richmond Street, being blind', Joyce wants to mean the dull lives of the adults and the innate futility of the boy's romantic quest because the ascetic culture of Ireland "refuses to admit romance."²³ We see such an atmosphere of lifelessness throughout the story. The description of the interior of the deserted house with cold empty gloomy rooms symbolises death and stagnation. What's more, the children's playing environment is not good at all. They would play in the unhealthy dark muddy lanes and in the dark gardens with dispersed ash pits and stables. After school hours, the boys cannot play pleasurably for biting cold during winter days. All these depict the deplorable conditions they encounter. Again, the playfulness of the children is often being repressed by the mere presence of the adults as they (children) are often seen to hide in the shadows to avoid the people in the neighborhood while running through the back lanes of the houses. This cruel attitude of the society frustrates the boy a lot. The use of irony and symbolic images, so far, in the description of the setting delicately reveals the boy's sensitivity to the decaying surroundings.

THE BOY'S OBSESSION WITH THE GIRL

Inwardly the boy is already on the mission to win the girl over. The girl thrills his senses and haunts his imagination. She also provides a sense of beauty for the sensitive boy. Sometimes the boy worships her from religious viewpoint, sometimes desires her physically. He agilely makes out the movement of her body from the undulation of her dress which arouses his sensual desire. So, on seeing her on the railing outside her house, the adolescent boy gets emotional as asserted in the following sentence:

"Her dress swung as she moved her body and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side."²⁴

Clearly, the boy is fully obsessed with the girl as we observe that he eagerly waits every day to have a glimpse of her. Every morning lying on the floor in the front room of his house, the boy watches the girl through a crack of the door leave her house for school. Having no courage to talk to her, he rushes out to follow her quietly and close to the place where their paths deviate, the boy hastens to pass her as he says:

Every morning I lay on the floor in the front parlour watching her door. The blind was pulled down to within an inch of the sash so that I could not be seen. When she came out on the door step my heart leaped. I ran to

the hall, seized my books and followed her. I kept her brown figure always in my eye and, when we came near the point at which our ways diverged, I quickened my pace and passed her.⁵

Morning after morning, this happens. Even though he does never speak to the girl except casually, her name creates sensation to all his 'foolish blood' which implies an intense desire to have the girl physically. So, the impulsive response of his body is exposed metaphorically: "my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires."²⁶ What else, the boy is so infatuated with the girl that her image always accompanies him wherever he goes, even in places the most antagonistic to romance. Her image moves him in the crowds and noises of the streets of Dublin as well. In the grocery shops too, he cannot forget her. But, "being adolescent, and educated by Christian Brothers, the boy's feelings of attraction are confusing, bedeviling and painful."²⁷ Hence, he always tosses between passion and religious beliefs. His confusion and the sense of guilt made by the religiosity are inflicted upon him by his elders. Possibly the most direct and poignant moment of confusion and hesitancy is clearly seen when the boy associates his passion and love to the girl with the sacred Grail:

I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes. Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand. My eyes were often full of tears (I could not tell why) and at times a flood from my heart seemed to pour itself out into my bosom. I thought little of the future. I did not know whether I would ever speak to her or not or, if I spoke to her, how I could tell her of my confused adoration.⁸

At this point, the chalice represents the image of the girl that he always bears. The boy likes to elevate his romance by dramatising himself as a bearer of a chalice among the foes or the common people in the market.

THE BOY'S UNBRIDLED SENSUAL DESIRE AND HIS AMBIVALENT ATTITUDE

Later, in a fit of romantic desire, he goes to the back drawing room in a dark and rainy evening. The "incessant needles of water playing in sodden beds"²⁹ strongly reveal the state of sensual feeling while through a broken window, he was listening to the rain dropping upon the earth. Again the emotional outburst of the boy is vividly manifested in the following:

"All my senses seemed to desire to veil themselves and, feeling that I was about to slip from them, I pressed the palms of my hands together until they trembled, murmuring: 'O love! O love!' many times."³⁰

Importantly, the boy is seen to confess ambivalently that while his senses seem to desire to veil themselves, he is about to slip from them.

THE BOY'S MEETING WITH THE GIRL

The 'real' quest for Mangan's sister starts when she asks him whether he is going to Araby, a splendid bazaar. This is the

first time they talk to each other. So, the boy feels so rapturous, stirred and confused that he cannot say anything. He articulates his feelings:

“When she addressed the first words to me I was so confused that I did not know what to answer. She asked me was I going to *Araby*. I forgot whether I answered yes or no.”¹¹

The boy is so excited that nothing escapes his eyes. “The light from a street lamp illuminates the girl’s figure, highlighting the white curve of her neck and the white border of her petticoat, and it touches upon her hair and her hand so that she appears to the boy as a Renaissance painting of the Madonna.”¹² He moves his eyes from ‘the white curve of her neck’ and ‘the hand upon the railing’ to ‘the white border of her petticoat’. All these images are, undoubtedly, sensual and give a hint of his adolescence. So, enchanted by her speech, the boy abruptly promises: “If I go I will bring you something.”¹³ He never communicates his adoration to her. His love for her deepens inwardly. After promising a gift to the girl, the boy cannot think of anything else except the girl and the bazaar. In fact, the boy’s obsession with the girl shifts to an obsession with the gift and *Araby*.

HURDLES AND HOSTILITY OF THE ADULTS FACED BY THE BOY

In an anti-romantic and uncooperative atmosphere of the city of Dublin, the boy is still excitedly waiting for his symbolic journey to *Araby* on Saturday evening. The internal battles begin to affect the tedious intervening days he wishes to eliminate. The world of the boy revolves around the image of the girl only. For his growing fascination for the girl, he cannot give attention to his school work; he gets impatient with all of his regular activities. Even any serious work of life is also pointless to him, they rather seem to him ugly monotonous child’s play and much less important than going to *Araby*. He separates himself from his playmates, hating their childishness: “From the front window I saw my companions playing below in the street. Their cries reached me weakened and indistinct.”¹⁴ More to the point, when the young boy grows restless for his quest, he does not get any support from the adults he meets. It should be mentioned here that procrastination is, among others, the most frustrating mechanism applied by the adults to the boy. On the morning of his adventure, he fails to watch Mangan’s sister because his uncle occupies the hall too long. The visit of Mrs. Mercer who symbolises the deceptive values of the adult world prolongs the meal beyond an hour. It can be stated here that the dubious discrepancy between Mrs. Mercer and her action of collecting used stamps for pious purposes, underscores the hypocritical as well as the mercenary character of Dublin society. In the early evening, his aunt, mistaking *Araby* for ‘some Freemason affair’, advises him not to go because it is the night of ‘Our Lord’. The most disappointing thing is that when he awaits his uncle’s return, the uncle has forgotten the bazaar, although he was reminded of it in the morning. His uncle returns home late possibly having visited a pub after work. The spiritual paralysis of the adults is expressed in the form of alcoholic addiction. The uncle is one of those

drunkards whose domestic violence is another manifestation of frustration in Dublin. However, the uncle says that he believes in the old saying: *All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy*.¹⁵ When we hear him reciting *The Arab’s Farewell to his Steed*¹⁶, we realise that he obliquely suggests the futility of going to bazaar so late. The uncooperative adults and the neighbourhood intensify the boy’s psychic plight. But, this is all overpowered by his feelings for the girl. Still the boy wants to go and “he overcomes these struggles, being wholeheartedly determined to acquire a gift for his ‘lady’ in order to attain her physically.”¹⁷ After an intolerable delay, with a small sum of money, he alone starts his agonisingly slow journey in a third class carriage of a deserted train through darkness. So, in delaying his journey, the train also actively plays a part. Passing through the ruinous houses, it stops at an impoverished platform which is far away for a romantic adventure to be successful.

EXPERIENCING A SHATTERING EPIPHANY AT ARABY

As for the boy, very much to his surprise and shock, when he reaches the bazaar at ten minutes to ten at night, the bazaar almost closes down. Only a few stalls are open. It is really too late for any adventure. He senses the failure of his romantic quest which he nourishes at the core of his heart. Everywhere is darkness and silence. “In that dark silence the boundaries of his small, private world of the imagination dissolve.”¹⁸ This *Araby* leaves the boy with a dull and sad feeling. It consumes his all boyish fancies and longings like a silent assassin. The boy is distraught seeing two men counting money on a ‘salver’ - a symbol of the moneylenders in the temple. He is betrayed by the corrupt commercialism which suffocates romantic feelings. Also, beside the Café Chantan, he hears the falling of the coin which is a clear indication of a society which has lost its romantic dream or spiritual innocence. And he is so upset that he cannot recall the purpose of coming to *Araby* for a short while. Nonetheless he then looks at porcelain vases and flowered tea-sets in a stall and experiences another frustration because he cannot buy anything from *Araby* for Mangan’s sister on his limited budget. Worst of all is the vision of sexuality - ‘a young lady’ is flirting with ‘two young gentlemen’ at the door of the stall. The degradation of spiritual values by venal materialism is again illumined in the form of a dramatic epiphany in the following scene of bargaining:

- O, I never said such a thing!

- O, but you did!

- O, but I didn’t!

- Didn’t she say that?

- Yes, I heard her.

- O, there’s a...fib!¹⁹

The boy’s repetitive use of ‘the young lady’ implies a parallel between his love for the girl and the two gentlemen’s ‘love’ for this ‘lady’. Like theirs, his love for her is also for physical attraction. In a sense the boy is being hypocritical and vain like the adults, although at this point he cannot understand it. However, just ‘out of a sense of duty’, the shop woman asks the boy if he wants to buy something.

Feeling unwanted by the woman, he says, "No, thank you" and he gets disappointed as nothing works out as expected. The boy perceives that his idealised vision of Araby is baffled along with his idealised vision of Mangan's sister and of love. He feels foolish about everything he has done supposedly for love for the girl. Realising that his thoughts of the girl and Araby are nothing but dreams, the boy stands alone in the dark with his shattered hopes. It is almost as if he is more than alone now. When he leaves the bazaar, he hears "a voice call from one end of the gallery that the light was out"²⁰ symbolising that there is no hope for him anymore. He remains a prisoner of his abysmal city he tried to escape. In this sense the scene of total darkness completes the epiphany, allowing him to know himself and it is worth mentioning, Joyce too ends the story here:

"Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger."²¹

He realises that he has become a victim of his own vanity and he himself should also be blamed. The anguish of awakening to oneself is always poignant. This sort of anguish the boy must undergo to be a mature man of a society whether corrupted or not. This is the painful lesson he learns from Araby which totally smashes his emotion as much as his romantic imagination. Really the boy fails to overthrow the shackles of reality.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the story "Araby" culminates with a shattering epiphany which results in realisation and maturation of the young boy. Facing harsh reality in Araby, the boy gains sharp insights into life and reality. He realises that life is not what he has dreamt of. He also experiences that romantic desires do not conform to the values of Catholic Dublin. His experience "prepares him for his life as an adult in early twentieth century Dublin; a life sapped of dreams."²² The boy learns to constrict his imagination, to repress his emotions, to engage himself to the everyday practical concerns of life. Actually in making the boy powerless to avert his dismal destiny, Joyce adequately criticises Ireland's "climate of religiosity holding the children of Ireland in bondage"²³ and at the same time through the word 'anger' implies that the boy's search for escape will not stop here.

END NOTES

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