

Multiple Themes in James Joyce's *Araby*

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Abstract: *Araby*, composed by the famous Irish writer James Joyce, comes the third in his collection *Dubliners*, which contains fifteen short stories in total. This novel tells a story of a young boy who pursued eagerly for his love and who was encountered with disillusionment at last. The epoch of James Joyce witnessed the great transformation from realism to modernism, which resulted in an increasing rise in attention paid to the description of mental state of the residents. Joyce expressed his concerns about the society through his meticulous depictions of daily chores. By analyzing details in the story, the spiritual emptiness of people at that time can be clearly seen. Based on researches in the past and the structuralism theory of Tzvetan Todorov, this essay aims to clarify the narrative structure of the story and its themes of mental paralysis.

Key words: themes, *Araby*, James Joyce, classes, spiritual emptiness

1. Introduction

1. 1 Introduction of James Joyce

James Joyce (1882-1941) was born in Dublin, the capital of Ireland, and was one of the pioneers of the Western modernist literature. His birth took place in a Catholic family, and he died in Zurich, Switzerland. He left Ireland when he was young and lived on teaching and writing for the rest of his life.

He showed his talents in music, religious, philosophy, language and literature and began to practice the composition of poetry and prose. His father had a strong belief in nationalism, while his mother was a devout Catholic.

When he was born, Ireland, once a beautiful island country, was colonized by British army and was haunted by constant wars. He had a large family of younger brothers and sisters, but he, the most talented son, was his dad's favorite. His desire for books was always satisfied by his dad, who supported him with money squeezed every day. He was familiar with the works of continental writers, and he was

especially influenced by Ibsen. Gradually, he exhibited his special understanding of the spiritual world and he began to rebel against the religion of his family. After his graduation from university, he participated in the Irish Renaissance at that time. But he soon got out as he opposed its ideas. In the same year, under the economic pressure and the constraints of his family, he left Ireland and headed towards Europe, where he led a separated life.

Joyce was one of the greatest writers in Europe whose works and the application of "stream of consciousness" had a remarkable impact upon the world.

1.2 Introduction of *Dubliners*

Joyce's *Dubliners*, published in 1914, contains 15 short stories about the lives of the lower and middle class citizens. They are arranged in chronological order: "Childhood", "Adulthood" and "Old age". Many readers do not understand the essence of the *Dubliners* nowadays. As Joyce's only novel collection, it is a little premature for the simple reason that the writing style has rarely been used. That is, through the descriptions of the chores and small fractions, he analyzed human nature and revealed the mental state of residents.

He commenced this book in 1904. In a letter to the publisher Richards, he clearly stated his intention: "My purpose is to write my own chapter for the moral and spiritual history of my country Ireland." (Joyce, 1914) In fact, this later turned into the goal of his literary pursuit and he committed himself fully to it all his life. In his eyes, Ireland, under the double oppression and repression of the British Empire and the Catholic Church, was stagnant, and Dublin was the center of paralysis. Its residents were numb, depressed and degenerate.

Joyce once lamented: "When did I leave Dublin? You will find that my feelings for Dublin were unforgettable." (Joyce, 1914) This novel revealed the "emotional paralysis" in Dublin, and showed the emotional state of people. It also reflected Joyce's expectations and sympathy for the people in his hometown who were living in darkness.

Araby is the third chapter of the book. It tells the story about a little boy. After a long and anxious wait, the boy lost in the illusion of the girl's charm. But his love finally ended in his epiphany. In the story, the ubiquitous images were not fictionalized by Joyce, but were real, ordinary things that people were familiar with. With his keen eyes, Joyce was able to capture the rich implications and associations of these commonplace objects on the streets of Dublin. These objects became images through his brain, and were promptly applied to his works, rendering and revealing the basic themes of the story. They presented a vivid picture of Dubliners' life at that time, while offering readers a deeper sense of repression. It seemed as if readers, too, had gone through this spiritual journey of epiphany with the boy.

The boy was innocent and immature at the very beginning. He lived in the dead lane called North Richmond Street. As he was in his years of adolescence, he had a hazy feeling about love and admired his

neighbor's sister but he didn't know how to express his ecstasy.

One day the girl told him that the Araby was a good place to go, but she said that she can't go because her church had a retreat. The boy was eager to buy her a gift. When the day finally came, his uncle forgot about it and came home late. Then his trip was delayed by the train. Finally, when he arrived there, the hall was dark and most of the stalls were closed. Soon the market would turn off the lights, and the upper half of the hall was completely dark. He felt himself was a poor creature driven and mocked by vanity, and he felt helpless.

The use of symbols is worthy of the readers' speculation and exploration. One could not help marveling at the author's consummate use of symbolism when he grasped the ingenious meanings of various images.

1.3 Introduction of this paper

This dissertation is aimed to make clear what the novel *Araby* is about and what the themes are, for theme is the most important of all when reading a novel. It will also make clear what the deeper meaning the author tried to convey.

This essay divides the main theme into different parts, and a part will be further divided into branches, making it easy to understand.

In general, it has three main parts containing the aimlessness of the citizens, the secularization of religion, the growth and the epiphany of the boy. The aimlessness is supported by evidences from the novel itself and the historical facts learnt from the references and online passages. Secularization of religion, however, is identified through details in the novel and clues betrayed by the three books found in the room of the dead priest. The last part is the epiphany. It was the result of the boy's mental growth. So in this part, things about his growth are sure to be given and analyzed.

Also, there are some delightful comments about the time the boy arrived at Araby. It can be understood if one can imagine the condition of the clock. His growth led also to isolation and a sense of loneliness, which existed pervasively in the novel.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Domestic paper overview

In 2002, Zhang Lian pointed out that the three different moods of the "I" in *Araby* are based on a textual analysis, and he explored Joyce's narrative strategies and the tones applied in the story.

According to Meng Jiangling (2016), the description of city life has become significant when shape a figure and reveal people's mental crisis in Joyce's time. In his days, British novels were changing from traditional realism to modernism. In this story, through the boy's observation, Joyce presented the loneliness of the boy. And he aimed to understand the mental space and the imaginative space in *Araby*,

thinking that the spatial description can reveal Dubliners' hopelessness. Meanwhile, it reflects observation about modern life of Joyce.

Wang Xuechun (2007) found that Joyce devoted himself to the spiritually liberation of Irish people all through his life, whose early works showed his talents. This could also be seen from the application of writing methods, the special symbolizations, contrasts and comparisons. Wang also analyzed this story from three perspectives: the social status in Dublin, the living conditions of the residents, and the life of human beings. Li Lu (2013) found that in this short story, the process of disillusionment of dreams was showed clearly to readers. She discussed the settings, characters in the novel and analyzed its symbols. Through the analysis, her study revealed different themes and demonstrated the ways of how these elements were applied.

Deng Rui (2009) pointed out that in *Araby*, several slight gothic elements could be found in terms of its literary styles, techniques and theme. Although some parts of *Araby* appeared bright, grotesque imagery, and irrationality also existed, which could be viewed as gothic elements.

Wu Haiping (2006) thought that *Araby* was told from the third person point of view. It was a man, rather than a young boy, who recounted the experience. Through analyzing the story, he was attempted to explore the ironic view of the institutions and persons surrounding the boy.

2.2 Foreign research overview

Ms. Rokeya and A.K. Zunayet Ahammed (2017) found that the boy underwent a shattering epiphany, which ended with realization and maturation. They suggested that Joyce evinced how a young boy gains sharp insights into his life.

But in 1994, A. R. Coulthard found that the anomalous word "vanity" was identified with a religious meaning at that time, which, he thought, was the key to understand the story's themes. What's more, anguish and anger were merely emotional reactions, while the admission of vanity, reflecting the oppressive Catholicism, could be more severely judged.

Jacques Chuto (2016), however, investigated the poet Mangan in real life, and he assumed that this poet must be the resource of Mangan's sister in the story.

"Ten minutes to ten" would portend the moment that adulthood overtook the boy's childhood. Steven Doloff (2011) thought it a simple visual icon for a widely acknowledged theme in the story.

Araby was one of those short stories where traces of the colonization of Ireland by the Great Britain could be found easily. Since the context was set in Dublin, Pedram Maniee (2017) analyzed it under the condition of post-colonial history.

Michael Skau & Donald L. Cassidy (2010) stated that while romantic elements contributed mostly to the development of the story, Joyce was more alluding to an episode in history, when the Catholic Church was in domination.

Kenneth Sandbank (1981) had no attempt to argue with others, as Edward (1981) said in his controversial study that writers in the Middle East were viewed as prisoners of an institutionalized system of discourse. As a result, they were less likely to see Orientals as human beings.

Obviously, the sixpenny gate was for children, William Burto (1967) found, the boy was forced to enter by the shilling (or adult) turnstile. He came as a boy but entered as a man. He made, at least, a further step towards manhood.

3. The Aimlessness of the Residents

Interpreting the living situation of the boy from the mental perspective can provide readers with an evidence of the mind-numbing state of the Irish people living in the paralyzed center of Dublin. Revealing the complicated psychological transformations of the boy from perplexity and despair to spiritual epiphany at the same time can make people gain the insights into Joyce much easier.

The state of mind of this sort can be the result of the colonization. Similar to Scotland, Northern Ireland is now a part of the United Kingdom. Medieval Ireland consisted of kingdoms founded by the Gaels, who spoke Irish and believed in Catholicism. Northern Ireland had been a colony of the UK since the 16th century, with large numbers of immigrants from England and Scotland moving to Northern Ireland. Most of them were wealthy Protestants who pushed Northern Ireland's proto-Catholics to death.

In 1801, a political alliance between the UK and Ireland was formed. As the majority of Irish aborigines were Catholics, Catholicism and Christianity experienced a cruel religious war, which led to severe discriminations against the Irish in the British Empire. The House of Representatives was controlled by royalists, who drove Catholics away and viewed them as second-class citizens. In 1845, Irish agriculture became fragile and people lived on potatoes. In the meantime, however, an outbreak of potato mycosis in Ireland caused a crop failure, causing the Irish population to fall by a quarter within seven years.

Unfortunately, the British government was indifferent to the famine in Ireland. The local residents did strive for equality but usually in the wrong way. They were contained repeatedly by the British government and gave in afterwards.

In the novel, there was a blind North Richmond Street, which, in reality, was indeed blocked. The boys who played in it aimlessly stood for the common Irish who were struggling in the wrong way with nothing to be achieved. When it comes to the situation of Ireland at the juncture of the century, they were unable to get rid of the British rules, the Catholic influence, making them unable to return to the good old days. The Irish, Dubliners in particular, for all their intelligence, seemed to reach a dead end. No one had the courage or the strength to fight back, nor could they save themselves.

Another interpretation of the “Blind alley” in the text was “the shutters”, which also implied that the boy had a vague and hazy impression of the girl. When he looked through the shutters, he could not see clearly. What could only be seen was a rough outline of the girl. What's more, the Bazaar was described as a good place to visit. In spite of it, his uncle was utterly indifferent to his enthusiasm for the Bazaar.

Upon arrival, he was disappointed by the atmosphere and the coldness of the sales girl. The dreariness of the so-called splendid bazaar could be clearly felt. He noticed the British accent through the talks among a woman and two men, which was the symbol for the colonizing power of the Great Briton. It was the colonization that made the “splendid” Ireland a dull place. This made it rational for the numb and aimless residents to appear.

4. The Secularization of Religion

The background of the novel has directed not only the material aspects mentioned above, but can also influence the spiritual perspectives. By rendering and portraying the living background of the characters, Joyce not only aimed to subtly imply the themes and pushed the development of the plot forward, but also intended to reveal the stagnant soul of the city. The boy in the novel conducted a series of acts in the process of pursuing his love, which were closely related to his living environment.

Joyce began his story with a description of dark, damp houses and smelly gardens, which alluded to the spiritual emptiness, helplessness, strangeness and estrangement of people under the oppression of the Catholic Church and the British government. It also implied that the pursuit of romance and beauty in such an environment would fail inevitably.

In the middle of the story, there was a house which was formerly rented by a priest. The dead priest represented the down fall of the dominance of Roman Catholicism. The images in the late clergyman's apartment were interwoven into a depressing scene: piles of scattered newspapers, old books with yellowish covers, deserted gardens, scattered shrubs, rusty inflators, and a lone apple tree. A sense of desolation and a hazy nostalgia for books that had nurtured the spiritual world of the Irish loomed around the house. In this way, the reader can see clearly the spiritual emptiness of the residents.

The musty, enclosed space of the room offered no sense of the sacred religious atmosphere, and the incongruity of the adventure books suggested the decline of the church and its men. The fall and disintegration of the religion led to the gradual disappearance of spiritual guidance and a decadence of people's state of mind. Even though children still went to Christian Brother School, Joyce used “set the boys free” (Dubliners, 33) to describe the release of the kids, showing his distaste for Roman Catholicism, and offering the implication that the Catholic Church was a prison. People led rigid and unchanging lives as prisoners. This was in accordance with the condition of Northern Ireland in history, which was

depressing and suffocating.

As for the three books in his room, their contents indicated that the priest was indulged in both religious and non-religious topics, which means that he had had enough of the trepidation of the world and tried to seek for happiness in adventure books.

The first book was *The Devout Communicant*, also called *Pious Meditations and Aspirations for the Three Days Before and Three Days After Receiving the Holy Eucharist*. It is a Catholic religious manual written by Pacificus Baker (1695-1774) who was an English Franciscan priest. It is a religious tract noted for its lush, pious language. By mentioning this book, Joyce indicated that the priest had not given up his belief in religion completely.

And the next two books, *The Memoirs of Vidocq*, and *The Abbot*, are all non-religious books. *The Memoirs of Vidocq*, composed by Eugene Vidocq (1775-1857), tells the story of a private detective, soldier, and thief. It is a popular novel with the theme of deception.

The Abbot is a historical novel by Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832). It is a romantic novel exhibiting the life of Mary Queen of Scots in a sexual fashion. Roland Graeme, its main character, was a young man reared by his relatives. And he dreamt of meeting his girl and then had a knightly quest to the splendid mall in order to buy her a gift. Roland Graeme got deeply involved in romance and adventure. This book probably shows that the priest did have some desires as common people do. And by mentioning these books on the desk of priest, Joyce suggested that even the priest had been depressed with the severity of religious life and the drabness of Dublin's life, so he kept reading it in order to excite himself. Since a priest was supposed, at that time, to dedicate himself to God fully, his love with crime and romance novels suggested that he was neither pious nor sincere towards God.

In general, all these elements constitute a piece of wasteland, which is mostly used by modernists in their works to attack the traditional way of living and thinking.

5. The Growth and the Epiphany of the Boy

Epiphany, according to Joyce, is a sudden realization occurred during common periods of life, or at some significant moments of life. They reach conclusions through enlightenment of this sort, rather than by making inferences or reasoning. It is the moment when the brain is at its most vigorous. One may realize suddenly a lack of meaning of his life after a long period of struggle, just like the boy in *Araby*.

The book *Dubliners* was organized according to these epiphanies to reflect the dumbness of the residents. The themes of *Araby* were displayed through this technique. At the end of the novel, the protagonist suddenly realized his vain. This moment of awakening is called "epiphany" by Joyce.

In *Araby*, the epiphany of the boy was gradually formed as a result of his own growth.

As a novel about a lovelorn boy, most of it was not about his love affairs, but about the world around

him in his own eyes, the streets he lived in, the apartments the late priest rented, and dialogues between aunt and uncle. The novel opens with the word “blind” to describe the street where the teens lived, and the first paragraph contains a series of depressing descriptions. In the vision of all these materials, the author, directly or indirectly, alluded to one thing. That was the growing loneliness of the boy, whether he was in the rectory, playing in the streets, studying in the schools, or living in his uncle’s house. He felt the loneliness could not be separated. Joyce concealed the paralysis and numbness of the people’s mind under the repressed spatial description, and the social environment. He felt that nobody understood him, and his growth separated him from his playmates. His loneliness stems from his spatial experience, for instance, when the uncle was standing in the hall, he was not allowed to go into the front room or lie on the windowsill; at school, the daily life became monotonous, the teacher scolded him for being lazy in class; in the street, he withdrawn from his usual frolic with his friends, which he considered quite childish. At the market, he walked triumphantly through a crowd with an imagined chalice in his hand. After making a request to her pious and ignorant aunt to go to the Araby, he was hoped not to go against the law. Although he thought his aunt and uncle were benevolent, he knew that they did not truly understand him. Also, although he had been satisfied with his friends and school life, he became impatient with it, as he couldn’t find people or things that he felt connected to. In this way, he rejected the world around him, and the world around him also rejected him in return. By this means, he had a different kind of feeling, a mixture of loneliness and love. It was this feeling that he was proud of, despite his isolation. And, it was precisely this feeling that made him set his foot on the journey to the exotic markets to buy gifts for his girl. When his friends were still playing aimlessly outside in the streets, he was watching her from the attic. This indicated his growth, which was necessary for the epiphany to take place.

Mangan’s sister was referred to by the boy as a chalice when he was walking through the noisy lanes, and this object contained in it a great many implications at that time, especially religious ones. As chalice originated from the fairy tales and folklore, it was affected by Christian ideas, and was transformed into a Christian legend. It was that it was used to hold Jesus’s blood during his crucifixion. Under that sort of circumstances, it seemed that only the boy had a kind of religious belief while others were mostly emerged in their own physical lives. What’s more, the boy was a romantic hero to some degree, he found himself in ‘places the most hostile to romance’ (*Dubliners*, 36). In history, Ireland’s poetries were reduced to badly-sung popular poetry for the commons while ‘litanies’, which was originally a form of prayer, were debased in the market-place, used to advertise goods. The boy sang his own authentic form of litanies, which took the form of his loved one’s name: “Her name sprang to my lips in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand” (*Dubliners*, 36). As he was not influenced by the noisy conditions and had his own belief, he began to develop a sense of loneliness and

incongruity.

When he arrived at the destination, the expression of his disillusionment and despair was presented by the metaphor of the heavy space of the hall: "I find myself entering a hall with a Veranda half way up. Almost all the stalls were closed and most of the room was dark. I realized that there was a kind of silence, like the silence that filled the church after the service. I went timidly to the middle of the market. Two men were counting the money on a tray in front of the curtain. I listened to the sound of coins falling." (*Dubliners*, 36)

In his book *Understanding Fiction*, Warren (2004) explained the image: "Of course, this detail is exemplified by the biblical cashiers of the Temple of the Gospel of Mark in Jerusalem (11:15), and here it reminds us that the earthly filth has eroded the temple of love." The connection between the church and the bazaar was instantly established, indicating the sacred place was transformed into a profane business area. He was then bewildered by the sound of coins clashing in his ears and the multitude of shops in front of his eyes. He had to look at porcelain vases and floral tea sets to recall the purpose of the trip, while the conversations of three Englishmen confused him. From this could be seen the numb state of their mind and the degradation of the religion. At the beginning, he had many nice fantasies about the name Araby. Influenced by sexual and material desires, the almost religiously sacred love gradually collapsed. He felt that he was only a fool driven by the illusion, and the so-called "divine love" was simply vulnerable when faced with profane things. The illusory love shattered, his illusions returned to the reality.

Another thing that deserves our attention is the time when the boy arrived at the bazaar, which also carries with it implications of the boy's spiritual growth.

Near the end of the story, Joyce fixed the time of the boy's arrival at the bazaar at exactly 9:50 P.M., though other events in the story were only given approximate times. Ehrlich (1998) offered the solution to the puzzle that by having the boy specify "the lighted dial of a clock" showing "ten minutes to ten" (*Dubliners*, 37), Joyce was evoking, as part of an Irish Orientalist motif in the story, a "tradition of Arabic ciphers, which use letters of the alphabet and individual numbers as substitutes for each other" (326). He continued that if one regard 'ten' as a cipher in the Latin alphabet, he can obtain the letter 'J,' and for two tens he will get 'JJ,' James Joyce's initials (326).

But Steven Doloff (1999) was disagreed with Ehrlich's ideas, he thought the solution to this puzzle could be that the time references the main character, rather than the author. He pointed out that the readers are invited to imagine "the position of the hour and minute hands, which are perfectly superimposed" (326). While clock hands regularly meet twenty-four times during the course of a day, their particular occurrence at 9:50 P.M. at the end of story had a special meaning. If one choose to see the longer minute hand of the clock as representing adulthood and, so to speak, the shorter one as

childhood, then “ten minutes to ten” would portend the moment when adulthood overtook the childhood, eclipsed it, and finally left it behind, which was a simple visual icon for an acknowledged theme in the story.

It was proved by the behavior of the boy when he was entering the gate of the bazaar. He “could not find any sixpenny entrance and, fearing that the bazaar would be closed, and passed in quickly through a turnstile, handing a shilling to a weary-looking man” (*Dubliners*, 34). William Burto (1976) noted here the boy’s inability to find a child’s sixpenny entrance, so he forced himself to use the general-admission shilling turnstile into the bazaar and anticipates the similarly imposed “adult” perspective on himself.

Apart from these, a sharp contrast between reality and fantasy also contributed to the epiphany of the boy: the experience of his being with his aunt to the market brought the fantasy of him up to its peak, while his journey to the Araby brought his fantasy back to reality. To understand fully of this, Northrop Frye (1957) offered his theory of myths. It contains 4 parts, but the mythos of winter can be applied to the understanding of *Araby*. The mythos of winter, which can be revealed through the use of irony, describes a world that contains nothing but failures and depression. The main character is frequently defeated by setbacks in his life. He has the inclination of becoming a hero, but he was overwhelmed by tragic events and will never be able to obtain what he wants. In the story, the irony was used many times to show that the author was not satisfied with the stagnant society.

6. Conclusion

This essay makes clear of the themes in *Araby* and analyses each of them respectively. The title *Araby* could be seen as what pushed the whole plot forward. It was the first connection established between them and the end of their affairs. The novel itself was intended to be a description of spiritual world of Ireland. Residents in it became numb after years of struggles against the colonizers and showed no signs at that time of intending to revive.

The boy was the only different one who was eager to seek for what he desired. According to the structuralism theory proposed by Tzvetan Torodov (1969), a passage can be seen as a combination of multiple sentences. And sentences can be analyzed from various perspectives. In this respect, verbs or nouns that appear repeatedly are to be paid greater attention to than other common words. When it comes to *Araby*, one can easily find that the experience of the boy can be simplified into three verbs: search, find, and lose, which repeated several times in the whole story. That means the boy achieved nothing in the end, making the story a tragedy and the boy a tragic hero.

To sum up, *Araby* is about the love of a boy, but it indeed has a deeper meaning. By analyzing various events in the process of his growth, one can find the root of his pain and loneliness. This is what Joyce intended to tell residents in Ireland: the numbness and paralysis of society would eventually lead

to the disillusionment of the ideals of the young generation. The local people and even the whole country, without the vitality and vigor, would be doomed to collapse. This novel consists not only the enlightenment of the boy, but also shows the patriotism of the author, which may be one of the reasons why *Araby* can still remain popular nowadays.

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