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Critical Analysis of James Joyce's "Araby"

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"Araby" is a short story authored by James Joyce and part of his 1914 published work titled *Dubliners*. The story of "Araby" mainly revolves around the time when the narrator transitions from childhood to adolescence. The story is an in-depth examination of the lives of the individuals living on North Richmond street that the author describes from the perspective of a child. It is mainly through the considerable mystique and imagination of the children that the author describes the narrators becoming aware of their status' and surroundings. This paper intends to present a literary analysis of Joyce's story by focusing on different elements, including themes, symbolism, and other literary features present in the story.

Marxist theory often serves as an intrinsic approach to literature and plays a critical role in allowing the reader to become aware of the story's historical context. In the story, the girl and the boys are portrayed as characters that seem to focus more on ensuring the maintenance of their power, which was derived from their English descent. At the time, English was a rather oppressive nation to Ireland. Marxist analysis often suggests the presence of class struggles



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within literary texts. Nevertheless, the story features no evidence to indicate the presence of conflict amongst the groups of people from different social classes — except for the case of the characters in the bazaar.

Additionally, it is apparent from the story that the narrator has come to the bazaar with notions of a romantic religious quest. Marx asserts that the ideas and thoughts of culture are often formed by material exchanges of culture. These exchanges, which encompass the social and economic undertakings of individuals, contribute significantly to the formation of one's ideas and one's culture. This is apparent in "Araby", for the narrator especially. The thoughts of the narrator transform his engagement in social and economic exchanges. The narrator becomes cynical about his romantic/religious quest. He further adopts cynicism for the whole notion of buying and selling at the bazaar. Although "Araby" is not often cited as a Marxist story, it is apparent that the narrator becomes rather alienated and undergoes a transformation as a result of his experiences within the marketplace. The narrator undergoes a rude awakening from his previous false perceptions of how he saw the world.

The important themes depicted by Joyce in the story mainly focus on the nature of innocence, and the extent of it breaking — through the inability to assume effective control of the situation as it unfolds. This is evident in the narrator's attempt to find ways of fulfilling his promise to the girl he cares about in the story. The narrator's journey to Araby further plays a critical role in demonstrating his initiation into adolescence as he discovers effective ways of



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making worthwhile efforts for the girl (Elias, 112). The efforts explain the pain the narrator encounters towards the end of reaching his destination — with only a limited amount of time left and nothing else left to bring the girl. The challenges encountered by the narrator in the process contribute significantly to breaking his perceptions of finding satisfaction both in seeing Mangan's sisters' happiness and his own first experience of romance. The bitter reality therefore contributes significantly to the narrator's transcendence from naïve ideals to ideals that are rather realistic, yet sadly cruel.

In describing his environs, the boy depicts a considerably dark and cold atmosphere that lacks light and joy. The exception of the portrayal of darkness depicted by the boy mainly centers around Mangan's sister, as he portrays her as a source of brightness within a rather unwelcoming universe that serves as his home. The boy further describes the street where he resides, North Richmond Street, as "being blind", and the houses within the street being characterized by the presence of "brown imperturbable faces." (Livelybrooks, Zoe, 271). The boy further describes his house's rooms as being "musty from having been enclosed for too long" and "littered with old useless papers" (Kennedy and Dana Gioia, 296). These descriptions allow readers to have an effective disclosure of the repression the boy feels through his environment.

Contrary to the considerably hard and dark portraits of North Richmond Street by the boy, the perception of the street put forth by the girl are characterized by being easy-going and



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full of light. The girl's image also tends to be illuminating. Her brightness is best described by her hair: "Her figure defined by the light from a half-opened door" (Kennedy and Dana Gioia, 298) or "the light from the lamp . . . lighting up her hair" (Kennedy and Dana Gioia, 298), where every movement she makes is elegant, even "the soft rope of her hair tossing from side to side" (Kennedy and Dana Gioia, 299). The story reveals the fact that the boy adopts an effective transformation of the girl's image in his mind into an adorable portrait worthy of religious zeal. The infatuation of the boy further incentivizes his actions — as he clings to the girl's image, even in the places regarded as hostile to romance: "He does stare at her from his window and follow her on the street, however, often thinking of her, even in places the most hostile to romance" (Kennedy and Dana Gioia, 297). The story narrates the boy's blindness to his own being through his consumption of feelings towards the girl. His feelings towards the girl mainly arise through his belief that they are capable of shielding him from the oppression and ordinariness that characterize his daily life.

Joyce further ensures the effective use of symbolism to help readers comprehend the story's meaning and the protagonist. A closer look into the story insinuates that the idea of visiting Araby tends to be an amusing and exciting experience for the narrator. Araby serves as a representation of a place that is completely different from the rather monotonous and controlling neighborhood of North Richmond Street. Instead of selecting a blind and quiet street, the narrator ensures an effective expansion to his horizons and focuses on the acquisition of new knowledge



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that the new place offers (Joyce 1). Therefore, it is through this process that the boy ensures the development of his expectations of this new place. Nevertheless, unavoidable circumstances result in the boy arriving late to the location. The result of the late arrival is a source of disappointment for the narrator, and a way to break the perceptions of the new place.

The depiction of darkness in the story tends to be symbolic. The end of the story depicts the narrator's realization of no longer being capable of doing anything in Araby. He is thus left in darkness and reexamines his understanding of his lost childhood ideals. The scenario of the boy undergoing his transition towards adolescence and upon letting go of his rather childish ideas are a means for learning to accept the reality that fate brings. Just as described by Maniee, and Shahriyar (201), "just like the narrator of "Araby", a grown man remembering a single night with a mixture of scorn and tenderness, what we come to look back on is a sequence of these significant moments." Often facing such types of experience, the negative experiences these individuals have contribute significantly to the enlightenment of the reality of their worlds.

Although the story is mainly told from the first person perspective of its young protagonist, there is the lack of impression that the boy narrates the story. Instead, it seems that the narrator of the story is a mature man beyond the story's experience. The grown man reminisces of his rather youthful frustrations, desires, and hopes. Contrary to the reconstruction of the events of the story through a boy's mind, Joyce's approach to telling the story plays a critical role in facilitating the perception readers have to the torment youths often experience.



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The experiences relate to youth as ideas concerning both earthly and sacred love are destroyed by the sudden unclouded view of the actual world (Liu, 421). The fact that a man, instead of a boy, recounts his experience ensures the presentation of an ironic view of both the institutions and individuals that surround the boy. The ironic view is rather impossible to attain for the immature and emotionally involved mind of the boy. The views presented in the story thus depict the fact that only adults are capable of reminiscing the high hopes of their youthful selves and its subsequent destruction bears the potential of accounting for the ironic perspective evident in the story. Nevertheless, there is a necessity for noting that throughout the story the narrator ensures consistent maintenance of full sensitivity to his youthful anguish.

In the rather brief but complex story, "Araby," the author focuses on character, rather than the story's plot, by revealing the ironies inherent in self-deception. At one point, the story tends to focus more on initiation, by depicting the boy's expedition for the ideal. However, the quest terminates in disappointment, but its results act as a step towards his new inner consciousness and transition into manhood. Other narration includes the remembered experience of a full-grown man. The story is narrated in retrospect of a man that reminisces a specific moment of deep insight and meaning. The double-focus, evident in the story that features the first experiences of a boy who turns into a man who has not forgotten, plays a critical role towards the provision of a dramatic rendering of the story of a first love — which is narrated by an individual who has a wider view of adulthood.



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In conclusion, it is apparent that the story plays a vital role towards displaying the significant transition of a boy becoming adolescent. The story further serves as a critical flashback for the narrator in his remembrance of significant events that contributed to the shaping of his identity in life. The effective use of transitions and word choices in the story serve as a critical approach to piecing together the boy's aging and loss of innocence.



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