

# *The Illusion in James Joyce's Araby*

Wang Yan

*College of Foreign Languages, Pingdingshan University, Henan, 467000, China*

**Keywords:** Araby, Illusion, Transition

**Abstract:** "Araby" is a story from James Joyce's *Dubliners*. Illusion is an important theme of "Araby" as it concerns the boy's painful insight into reality and his transition from childhood to adulthood.

## 1. Introduction

James Joyce, born in 1882, is an Irish writer and poet. *Araby* is one of the fifteen short novels in his debut book, *Dubliners*, which was published in 1914 and claimed to be one of the best Collected Stories in the twentieth century. Many Chinese writers think very highly of *Araby*. In his article, Ge Fei says that both he and Su Tong agree that *Araby* is the most prized short story for them.

## 2. Analysis of the Short Story

### 2.0.1 A Dismaying Beginning

Why is the story popular among readers? What charm does it have? The plot is quite simple. *Araby* tells us a boy's one-sided love and almost everyone has this kind of experience. What will we think of when we recall our first love? Maybe it's bitter; or sweet; or bittersweet. Joyce felt a strong sense of illusion. Is it unrequited love or some bigger spiritual vacuum? This line of *The Durrells*, a TV series, fits perfectly with the theme of *Araby*.

This short novel starts on a cold and passionless tone with adjectives such as "blind (appeared two times in the first paragraph); quiet; uninhabited; detached; imperturbable." This melancholy image was reinforced in paragraph two, with the description of a musty house in which the former tenant, a priest had died. "I", the narrator, recalled his teenage times with two perspectives: the mature "I" and the naive "I". This double perspectives create a kind of conflict in the story, for example, energy and life are mingled with darkness and soundlessness in paragraph three, as it is vividly depicted in this sentence: "Our shouts echoed in the silent street." Is it possible for a boy to be aware of the overwhelming stillness when he plays hard with his partners? Possibly not; but when a boy grows into a disillusioned adult, a sense of remoteness and alienation will be heightened and emphasized.

### 2.1 The boy's Inner Journey

What had happened to the boy? Why did he become an unenthusiastic adult? The boy, perhaps an orphan, lives with his uncle and aunt, who show little concern about his emotional needs. The

dead priest, representing the dead spiritual world, leaves nothing inspiring behind. Almost everything is depressing and lifeless; but there are still some “feeble lanterns”. Part of the transition from childhood to adulthood involves encountering new feelings. One of the deepest of these feelings is love. As the boy in the story matures, his feelings are not an exception. In the boy’s imagination, “Mangan’s sister” is pure and divine, raising hopes for the brightness of life.

Readers know little of the holy girl; of her faces, we know nothing. The first picture of the girl is blurred and misted: “... her figure defined by the light from the half-opened door.”(par.3) This image reappears throughout the story. Although the boy feels the powerful love, it is actually blind and empty; that is, his love for Mangan’s sister is purely imaginary. Furthermore, because he has never communicated with the girl, the boy’s attraction is fragile and vulnerable.

The boy’s emotional attachment to Mangan’s sister is like an antidote to the triviality, helping him fight against the relentlessness of the daily life. “Drunken men” and “curses of labourers” can be ignored and endured. He admires Mangan’s sister as a spiritual guide against the noisy and ugly crowd around him, giving him a sense of purity and divinity. “I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes.”(par.5) Paradoxically, although the boy seems to be completely fascinated by the girl, he does not wish for her to know. For instance, he watches her out of the window “morning after morning”, but carefully avoids to “be seen”(par.4). To some extent, the boy’s love is just like a game of make-believe. Sometimes he wonders if it was real love or just a dream he makes for himself. “I was thankful that I could see so little.”(par.6)

To the boy, his love for Mangan’s “holy” sister is something private and even has nothing to do with Mangan’s “real” sister. This dilemma between holiness and reality makes him disorientated. He has no real intention to confess his love as it is just some kind of “confused adoration”. This unrealistic boy, living in a romantic dream world, refuses to face facts.” I thought little of the future.”(par.5) But at the same time he can't help hoping that miracles would just show up. The boy struggles between “the desire to veil themselves” and the fear to “slip from them”, so he prays for love repeatedly, in the dead priest’s drawing-room. The boy is too much into this spiritual love that he cries out for its never coming to an end. He lives in an unreal world created by himself. Mangan’s “holy” sister is like flowers in the mirror and moon in the water, which are beautiful but illusory.

The day will always come when dream is over. “At last she spoke to me.”(par.7) In stead of enjoying the ecstasy of finally communicating with his dream girl, the boy was “so confused” that at first he has no words to say. This confusion seems to suggest that the boy’s illusion is inevitable. Mangan’s “real” sister makes him confused and now it's time to wake up. Here comes another description of the girl; from the dim light, the boy notices “the white curve of her neck” and “the white border of a petticoat”. In this case, white represents things that are holy. Petticoat also has symbolic meaning. The Celtic Twilight by William Butler Yeats, a book that Joyce was quite familiar with, tells us a story of “Our Lady of the Hills”. In the story, a pretty young lady was mistakenly believed to be the Virgin Mary by a crowd of Irish children. She denied her divinity, but the children refused to believe it. At last, a boy said if she wore a petticoat like other girls, he would stop fancying her as an immortal. When the girl pulled up her petticoat, the boy's dream of meeting a saint turned into anger; he “ran away sobbing.”

## 2.2 The Last Straw

“Araby” is the last straw. The girl asks him if he is going to Araby, “a splendid bazaar”. She herself cannot go, for “there would be a retreat that week in her convent.”(par.9) “If I go,” the boy says. “I will bring you something.”(par.11) To the boy, his journey to Araby to buy the girl a gift is like a holy pilgrimage. The knight now has a noble mission to carry out for his goddess. Waiting

time is painful. He is no longer interested in his companions, and their cries become “weakened and indistinct” (par.16). The thoughts that once occupied his mind such as playing and shouting, are replaced with images of a blind obsession; the boy is completely disinterested in daily life and work. He can’t concentrate on the study, and his teacher’s attitude towards him has changed from “amiability to sternness.” He immerses himself within the world of obsessive infatuation, completely not capable of seeing the reality. He becomes blind to everything but the girl and the bazaar. “Araby” is not just an ordinary market for the boy, now it’s a place of “Eastern enchantment”. The girl’s wish to go there hands over to the boy with a greater eagerness. His expectation of the girl is passed on to that of the bazaar.

Road to “Araby” is not easy or the boy. He is financially dependent on his uncaring uncle who tries to put the boy off when coming back home late. Finally, with the help of his aunt, the boy manages to get the money to take the train to Araby. Strangely enough, here comes an obvious psychological change: the boy is no longer excited about the bazaar. Striding down the street, he has to be reminded by the “buyers” to remember the purpose of his journey. At ten minutes to ten, he saw a building with “the magical name”(par.24). As he can not find a cheaper entrance, the boy passes through a shilling entrance to get into the bazaar quickly for fear of its being closed. When the picture of a bigger-half dark hall comes to the boy, he recognizes “a silence like that which pervades a church after a service” (par.25).The enchantment is going away and the illusion is becoming nearer. The boy watches two men “counting money “and listens to “the fall of the coins”(par.25). He is nearly at a loss to make sense of the reason why he is here, yet his shock and his disillusionment are not yet over.

He hears a young saleslady talking and laughing with two young English gentlemen and their uninteresting conversation triggers the boy’s epiphany about the ideal life and the real life.

“O, but you did !”

“O, but I didn't!”

“ Didn't she say that ?”

“Yes I heard her.”

“ O, there's a .... fib!” (par.27-32)

This “bald exchanges of fatuous, almost incoherent conversation” makes the boy realize that Mangan’s holy sister is only an ordinary girl, just like this ordinary saleslady. The triviality of the conversation has big implications for the boy to understand the cruel reality, and then he is shocked, hurt, angered, and empty. He has come to “Araby” to buy a gift for Mangan’s sister, but now he gives up. Clear reasoning is gradually coming back to the boy, he pretends to be interested in the wares on sale to make his staying real and then he leaves slowly.

The boy doesn’t belong here. There is an obvious lack of harmony between his spiritual needs and this closing material world. At last the light was completely out and in this terrified silence, the boy feels the power of illusion: “ Gazing up into the darkness, I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.”(par.37). This feeling symbolizes his complete realization of his self-deceit. The boy’s realization of the conflict between the ideals and realities is not only a painful cure for his blindness, but it is also a large step in the direction of adulthood.

### 3. Conclusion

The boy’s illusion of love conveys the main theme of this story, that is, the transition from childhood to adulthood involves an illusion of the ideal world and an realization of the true world. When the illusion is gone, we can relate to the world in a brave way. A real hero must face the real world. As the boy in “Araby” has begun to overcome his blindness and realize the truth of life, he

also matures in the process.

## References

- [1] James Joyce. *Dubliners* [M]. NewYork: BantamDell, 2005.
- [2] W. B. Yeats. *The Celtic Twilight*[M]. BeiJing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press,2010.
- [3] Zeng Yanbing. *Interpreting the Narrative of “Araby” from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory*[J]. *Contemporary Foreign Languages Studies*,2011,(8),:47-51.
- [4] Wang Zhanjiu. *An Analysis of the Psychological Experiences of the Protagonist in Araby by Joyce*[J]. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*,2009,(2),:42-44.