

Significance of the Title of Joyce's Story 'Araby': A Note

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James Joyce's short story 'Araby' presents a grown-up man's confessional narrative of his childhood infatuation and futile search for ideal love. The entire story abounds with images of darkness, drabness, confinement and hopelessness – all pointing to and presupposing the protagonist's final epiphanic realization of the absurdity of his quest of what he deemed to be ideal and pure love. With these images that of Araby is set in sharp antithesis, since the very name bears an enigmatic connotation which the boy in his adolescent fantasy interprets to be conducive to escape from the drabness of daily life at Dublin as well as to attainment of his object of love. However, Joyce skilfully undermines the apprehended romantic connotation of Araby by implicitly relating it to Mangan's sister – the girl whom the boy admires. It is she who first mentions Araby expressing her wish to visit the bazaar, and this makes the boy think if he could bring her something from there, he might attain her affection. The story elaborates the contrast between the boy's aspiration before going to Araby and his stark experience of reality at there – which brings about his epiphany.

Symbolically, Araby and Mangan's sister are foils to each other: the boy's fascination for Araby is caused by the fascination of the girl for it. Visiting Araby seems to the boy as adventurous and sanctimonious as meeting his beloved whose affection he fails to attain in reality. While the boy cannot express his emotion to the girl he loves, he hopes Araby would provide him with a viable solution of the problem: it seems to him the only accessible thing pertaining to girl while the girl herself eludes him. Ironically, this alternative too proves to be inefficacious as at the bazaar the boy meets the same dark, drab, mercenary and spiritually bankrupt world that he is spiteful of and seeks to flee from. Whatever negative and unromantic aspects of life the boy has met so far at home, in the streets and markets of Dublin, are reinforced by his experience at Araby, and he comes to acknowledge the painful facts that he cannot escape from this claustrophobic existence and that the sort of love he aspires to attain is illusory and elusive.

Throughout the story there is an array of Christian typological symbolism, and Araby stands as both opposed to and equated with the church. As the name signifies, Araby is associated with the orient – which is simultaneously mysterious and pagan, and as such Araby is both alluring and full of uncertainty. All the same, Araby heightens the note of spiritual bankruptcy of contemporary Dublin life. When the boy comes to Araby, it is ostensibly dark and as silent as "a church after the service". Here the boy finds two men counting coins on a salver – that is supposed to be used for keeping the chalice in a church. This shatters the boy's imagination of bearing his "chalice safely through a throng of foes", since he comes to confront the reality that the metaphoric chalice of pure emotion and idealism has been supplanted by materialistic and mercenary thoughts – symbolized by the coins that are falling on the salver. Finally, the boy finds a woman flirtatiously gossiping with two men – which further undermines his idealistic apprehension of pure love. It is Araby that emblemizes the boy's illusions about love and life, and it is at Araby that his illusions are finally disrupted through an agonizing epiphany of the inescapable stark reality of mundane existence and his own futile vainglory. Such a dialectical treatment of the motif of Araby renders Joyce's realistic approach to psychological aesthetics compatible with his modernist sensibility, and hence, the title of the story is an appropriate one.

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