

Another look at the "araby": critical perspective



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A deconstructionist has many duties, and among them are deriving multiple meanings from a source as well as a destruction of previous criticisms of said source. This essay on deconstruction will take another look at James Joyce's short story "Araby," one of fifteen stories from *Dubliners*, as well as a previous criticism and analysis of it and will show that no singular interpretation is set in stone. This comparison and double reading will illuminate structural flaws that permeate throughout the New Criticism school of thought, and by shedding light on the backgrounds of the short story as well as James Joyce himself, there can be a greater understanding of the work as a whole.

Before looking at the short story and criticism is it important to know what the story is about. "Araby" is a short story by Irish author James Joyce and is a part of his short story collection *Dubliners*. It follows a young boy living in a heavily Catholic area who develops a crush on his neighbor. He becomes increasingly infatuated with her, getting lost in fantasies of her while being too nervous to approach her. That is, until she speaks to him about wanting to visit a bazaar known as "Araby" to buy something but cannot. The narrator tells her he will go there and buy something for her. He obsesses over this trip, causing him to decline in his studies. He's frustrated that his family does not appear to want to take him to Araby. His uncle forgets he's supposed to take him to Araby and arrives home drunk. The boy eventually makes it to Araby, but everything is closed and he's harassed by a cashier. He leaves bitter and empty-handed.

"Araby" is a story riddled with an opposition between ideals or beings, whether it be through the nature of the settings or the characters that

populate them. The protagonist lives a rather mundane and simple life in his strict small Irish town. The narrator grows disinterested with his surroundings, and while he remarks that the houses on his street appear somber, he reflects on how “ the space of sky above...was the colour of ever-changing violet.” He takes a fancy at the sky above, knowing that it is far out of his reach and separated from the somber and stale reality he faces. Even the lamps, while rooted to the plain ground, “ lifted their feeble lanterns” towards the sky in a futile effort to escape into the great unknown. The beauty of the scene is enough to metaphorically give life into these inanimate objects. This theme of divide comes back in the form of the narrator’s obsession with love. He does not engage in any pleasure or fancy until he comes into contact with Mangan’s sister. Her “ brown figure” makes her stand out from everything else he has encountered, and it is this fascination of the unknown that compels him. His love for her follows him through contrasting situations in which he says take place “ in places the most hostile to romance.” By this, he means his own previous life. He begins to recount a time spent in a market which he would visit with his aunt every Saturday. What he once saw as mundane he now perceives to be so beautiful it moves him to tears, as the everyday noises and conflicts converge into “ a single sensation of life” to him. Due to his infatuation, his unending desire for this person who represented a spice of life in an otherwise somber world, he is now able to see the life in his own surroundings.

As shown with the above reading, there are different lenses to view this story under, creating potentially infinitely varying interpretations with varying

connotations. Now it is time to look at the critical essay written about “Araby”. This essay assumes that the story is meant to be a parable about a rejection of religion in rebellious youth. To support this argument, claims are made such as the fact that the narrator lives in a room where a priest died reflects how religion is dead in his household. Another way to interpret this scene is that the narrator, while isolated, has a sort of spiritual connection to his surroundings, quite the opposite interpretation. While he does not visit a priest, there is the presence of one in his own home, which perhaps gives the young boy guidance and morality expressed throughout the story. This criticism also reads his obsession with Mangan’s sister as an idol and thus deviating from the monolithic doctrine of his home. While he does appear to idolize here, this essay presented above that his swooning for Mangan’s sister could be due to the simple fact that she is different from his surroundings, and her very presence makes him appreciate his mundane surroundings in ways he never imagined prior. The criticism attributes Mangan’s sister’s association with light as making her into a Christ-like figure, while it could also be looked at as her shining a light into the narrator’s otherwise colorless life. Such interpretations are not “wrong” at all, but they are in no way the sole defining interpretation.

These assumptions presented in New Criticism highlight flaws in this form of criticism. The New Critics make broad assumptions of a text and present it as factual. They do this while ignoring sometimes crucial background information regarding the story or the author. For “Araby,” both come into play, and having a basic understanding of these two sources allows one to make interpretations beyond the text while shedding new light upon it. “

"Araby" is one of many short stories from James Joyce's collection of short stories entitled *Dubliners*. *Dubliners* was created to help Ireland achieve a sense of Irish identity and nationalism. Each short story is focalized typically in a middle-class Irish citizen and follows their individual adventures through isolation. The subjects of the story start young and progressively get older and older, showing the Irish identity across multiple generations. Knowing this, a critic could have a field day with "Araby" and how it works in relation to other works in *Dubliners* to form a cohesive whole reflecting the Irish lifestyle and thought. It also would explain why the protagonist of "Araby" has such a strong self-drive and a desire to gain an understanding and appreciation of his world. A New Critic would utterly ignore all of this, and while they may be able to formulate a solid singular interpretation of the solo short story, they would have no way to compare it or connect it to any other part in *Dubliners* and would likely fail to see the significance of the story as a crossroads of Ireland's culture and history.

Speaking of history, it also helps to look at James Joyce's life as a way to achieve a fuller understanding of "Araby." The literary criticism discussed above enforces an interpretation that paints religion, specifically Catholicism, in a seemingly bad light. While he did break away from Ireland's national Catholic Church, to say Joyce simply hated religion may not be all that true. Multiple accounts regarding Joyce state that, while he did not believe he should subjugate himself to a system of thought as large as Catholicism, he still retained the philosophy associated with it, and it would always be a crucial part of his thoughts and writings. World-renowned essayist T. S. Eliot claimed that Joyce's canon was "penetrated with Christian feeling" and

between the lines of his works there is present " a remnant of Catholic belief and attitude." Some of Joyce's friends even accused him of crying " secret tears" during a sermon as well as his frequent going to the church making him a " believer of heart." Perhaps it is more accurate to claim that Joyce was against the institution, but believed that faith was still a vital component to one's moral and intellectual being. The presence of religion in " Araby," as a result, may be more representing of a longing for spirituality than a barrage of criticism and blasphemy that the mentioned criticism may make it out to be.

It is important to look beyond the text in order to gain a fuller and more enriching understanding and analysis of a text. New Criticism, logocentrism, and essentialism are shackles to the flowing of free thought and insightful interpretation. There are many elements of a work of art that would go entirely unnoticed by a strict New Critical study and analysis. A New Critic, like above, may point to statements about religion and make a claim that the story appears to treat the notion with a negative perspective. Having knowledge of author James Joyce, his life, and his controversial and dubious relationship to religion removes a context that would greatly flesh out such a reading.

Works Cited

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