**Summary and Analysis of Araby , by James Joyce**

Summary

**A young boy** who is similar in age and temperament to those in "The Sisters" and "An Encounter" develops a crush on **Mangan's sister,** a girl who lives across the street. One evening she asks him if he plans to go to a bazaar (a fair organized, probably by a church, to raise money for charity) called Araby. The girl will be away on a retreat when the bazaar is held and therefore unable to attend. The boy promises that if he goes he will bring her something from Araby.

The boy requests and receives permission to attend the bazaar on Saturday night. When Saturday night comes, however, his **uncle** returns home late, possibly having visited a pub after work. After much anguished waiting, the boy receives money for the bazaar, but by the time he arrives at Araby, it is too late. The event is shutting down for the night, and he does not have enough money to buy something nice for Mangan's sister anyway. The boy cries in frustration.

Analysis

Like the two previous stories, "The Sisters" and "An Encounter," "Araby" is about a somewhat introverted boy fumbling toward adulthood with little in the way of guidance from family or community. The truants in "An Encounter" managed to play hooky from school without any major consequences; no one prevented them from journeying across town on a weekday or even asked the boys where they were going. Similarly, the young protagonist of this story leaves his house after nine o'clock at night, when "people are in bed and after their first sleep," and travels through the city in darkness with the assent of his guardians. Like the main character in "The Sisters," this boy lives not with his parents but with an aunt and uncle, the latter of whom is certainly good-natured but seems to have a drinking problem. When the man returns home, he is talking to himself and he almost knocks over the coat rack. He has forgotten about his promise to the boy, and when reminded of it — twice — he becomes distracted by the connection between the name of the bazaar and the title of a poem he knows. The boy's aunt is so passive that her presence proves inconsequential.

Like "An Encounter," "Araby" takes the form of a quest — a journey in search of something precious or even sacred. Once again, the quest is ultimately in vain. In "An Encounter," the Pigeon House was the object of the search; here, it is Araby. Note the sense of something passionately sought, against the odds: "We walked through the flaring streets, jostled by drunken men and bargaining women, amid the curses of labourers, the shrill litanies of shop-boys who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs' cheeks, the nasal chanting of street-singers . . . . These noises converged in a single sensation of life for me: I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes."

Although the boy ultimately reaches the bazaar, he arrives too late to buy Mangan's sister a decent gift there, and thus he may as well have stayed home: paralysis. Like the narrator of "An Encounter," this protagonist knows that "real adventures . . . must be sought abroad." And yet, having set his sights on something exotic or at least exotic sounding ("Araby" means Arabia, and the bazaar features a French-style café), the boy cannot get there in time for his experience to be worth anything. Why? Because his uncle, who holds the money that will make the excursion possible, has been out drinking.

Some critics have suggested that Mangan's sister represents Ireland itself, and that therefore the boy's quest is made on behalf of his native country. Certainly, the bazaar seems to combine elements of the Catholic Church and England (the two entities that Joyce blamed most for his country's paralysis), just as Father Flynn's death did in "The Sisters." As the church has hypnotized its adherents, Araby has "cast an Eastern enchantment" over the boy. Moreover, it is "not some Freemason [Protestant] affair." Church parishes often organized bazaars to raise money for charity. When the boy reaches the object of his quest, however, Araby (the church) is empty — except for a woman and two men who speak with English accents. The woman speaks to the story's main character in a manner that is "not encouraging" and is clearly doing so "out of a sense of duty."

Thus, a mission on behalf of an idealized homeland (the boy does not actually *know* Mangan's sister — she is more or less a fantasy to him) is thwarted in turn by the Irish themselves (the charming uncle and his propensity to drink), the church, and England.

In addition to being an artist of the highest order, Joyce was also a consummate craftsman. He guides his readers through the story itself, thereby seducing them into considering his themes. First, he offers a main character who elicits sympathy because of his sensitivity and loneliness. Joyce then provides that protagonist with a specific, dramatic conflict (the need to impress Mangan's sister with a gift from Araby). Though apparently minor, this desire is compelling because it is so intensely felt by him. He cares, so the reader cares.

Then the writer puts roadblocks in the way of the boy and the reader: the wait for Saturday itself, and then for the uncle's return from work. Joyce expands time, stretches it out, by piling on the trivial details that torture the boy as he waits: the ticking of the clock, the cries of the protagonist's playmates outside, the gossiping of Mrs. Mercer, the scratching of the uncle's key in the lock, and the rocking of the hallstand. Then the uncle must eat dinner and be reminded twice of Araby, after which begins the agonizingly slow journey itself, which seems to take place in slow motion, like a nightmare. When the protagonist finally arrives at the bazaar, too late, the reader wants so badly for the boy to buy something, anything, for Mangan's sister that when he says "No, thank you" to the Englishwoman who speaks to him, it is heartbreaking. "Gazing up into the darkness," the narrator says, "I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger." The eyes of Joyce's readers burn, too, as they read this.

One final point: Though all are written from the first-person *point-of-view,* or perspective, in none of the first three stories in *Dubliners* is the young protagonist himself telling the story, exactly. It is instead the grown-up version of each boy who recounts "The Sisters," "An Encounter," and "Araby." This is shown by the language used and the insights included in these stories. A young boy would never have the wisdom or the vocabulary to say "I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity." The man that the boy grew into, however, is fully capable of recognizing and expressing such a sentiment. Joyce's point-of-view strategy thereby allows the reader to examine the feelings of his young protagonists while experiencing those feelings in all their immediate, overwhelming pain.

Glossary

**blind** a dead-end; A dead-end features prominently in "Two Gallants," as well.

**areas** spaces providing light and air to the basements of houses.

**O'Donovan** **Rossa** Jeremiah O'Donovan (1831–1915), nicknamed Dynamite Rossa; an Irish revolutionary.

**the troubles** a euphemism for Irish civil unrest.

**Freemason** an international secret society having as its principles brotherliness, charity, and mutual aid. Many Dublin Roman Catholics were hostile to Freemasons, who were generally Protestants.

**collected used stamps for some pious purpose** selling used postage stamps to collectors to raise money for charity.

**The Arab's Farewell to His Steed** a poem by Irish poet Caroline Norton (1808–77).