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ENG 201 Sec 0501

November 25, 2021

The Meaning Behind Lights and Shadows in “Araby”

“Araby” is a short story written by James Joyce. The narrative is about young boy who falls in love with a girl from his neighborhood. The main scene takes place in a bazaar named Araby, where the boy arrives with full of excitement and leaves with unexpected discouragement. The story illustrates the narrator’s feelings and emotions that transform into the epiphany in the end. Joyce uses lights and shadows as the symbols throughout the story. The alteration between brightness and darkness demonstrates the battle between narrator’s fantasy and the harshness of reality.

The light is associated with joyful experiences. The light can be perceived as hope, excitement, optimism, and enthusiasm which struggle to brighten the shadowed neighborhood. This kind of shine is associated with Mangan’s sister who unintentionally possesses the ability to fulfill the boy’s life with a little bit of joy. Readers see the relationship of the girl’s presence to the brightness the moment she appears in the story: “She was waiting for us, her figure defined by the light from the half-opened door” (Joyce 1). The narrator describes the brilliance is associated with her appearance: “The light from the lamp opposite our door caught the white curve of her neck, lit up her hair that rested there and, falling, lit up the hand upon the railing” (Joyce 2). The boy adapts the romantic role and “in developing this role, Joyce increasingly emphasizes the separation between physical reality and imaginative perception” (Rosowski 276). The boy does not even know the girl’s name. It is not the girl who spreads the joy, rather it is the boy who sees the delight in her. In another

words, the girl in the body of Mangan's sister is born in the boy's imagination, surrounded by his desires.

In her criticism "Joyce's 'Araby' and Imaginative Freedom" Rosowski says that the primary conflict of the story is between psychological and factual realities (275). About the girl, the critic writes, "She exists for him only as an imaginative projection of himself" (Rosowski 276). Readers feel the sweet taste of passion along with the lost sense of reality when boy is murmuring: "O love! O love!" (Joyce 2) while staring at the lighted window on a dark rainy day. In this moment, glimmering fantasy is trying to shed light on the darkness of reality.

The darkness symbolizes the harsh reality that conflicts with the boy's fantasy. From the beginning, readers see how the neighborhood is filled with gloom and silence and how it presents the boy's unhappy, unenthusiastic everyday life. If there is no glimmering joy in the form of Mangan's sister, the surroundings will be completely absorbed by the shadows. Throughout the story, readers see how the darkness gradually dims the light. In another words, reality is winning over the boy's imagination. The first sign of the dimming is presented as the boy prepares to leave for the bazaar Araby, where he wants to buy the girl something, as he has promised. The boy is waiting for his uncle, who is late, and so the darkening evening outside gradually kills the excitement that nourishes boy's fantasy.

Eventually, the narrator arrives at Araby, where "nearly all the stalls were closed and the greater part of the hall was in darkness" (Joyce 4). The bleakness of reality advances, but there is still hope since some of the stalls are open and have not been darkened yet. When the boy is asked if he wants to buy anything, pretended love towards the girl suddenly transforms into epiphany and then it turns into anguish that arises from the comprehension of harsh reality. "Finally, the boy is unable to sustain his imaginative role against the physical reality of the bazaar" (Rosowski 277).

The boy realizes that he is driven by his own illusions. He now knows that the girl only exists in his imagination as an ideal figure that he desires. The darkness finally celebrates the victory: "I heard a voice call from one end of the gallery that the light was out. The upper part of the hall was now completely dark" (Joyce 5).

Interdependence of light and dark symbolizes the conflict between fantasy and reality in the narrative. The boy's shadowed life is brightened by the presence of Mangan's sister who brings a little spark into the darkness. Feelings and emotions that are triggered by the girl are not love. It is an artificial sensation that allows boy to see the enthusiasm in his joyless existence. Eventually, the light is out and the darkness absorbs the surroundings which means that the sense of reality brings boy back into his real world. The story is a good representation of the battle between psychological and actual realities.

I hereby pledge that the information in this essay is my own original work and that all phrases or quotes taken from other sources have been correctly identified via quotation marks/in-text citation. Mariami Pruidze.

Work Cited

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