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Journey to Reality: A Character Study

“Araby” by James Joyce is an initiation story in which a young boy comes to question the meaning of life. The story develops around the protagonist’s character, which is romantic, idealistic, and escapist. The narrator is infatuated with his friend’s sister. To him, she represents light, beauty, and hope. His obsession consumes his everyday life. He even embarks on a mythological-like quest to bring her a gift, which ultimately results in crushing realization.

The first scene in which the narrator’s romantic vision is revealed is when the girl comes out to call her brother to come into the house. The narrator describes her as she stands in the light of the doorway. “Her dress swung as she moved her body and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side” (241). In fact, every description involves the play of light on her body. On the occasion when the girl finally speaks to the narrator, he observes her in this way: “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. It fell over one side of her dress and caught the white border of her petticoat as she stood at ease” (242). In another instance, the narrator describes her “brown clad figure” and how the light “touched discreetly at the curved neck, at the hand upon the railings, and at the border below the dress” (242). His romantic vision of the girl is repeatedly expressed in images of light.

The young narrator's idealism is shown in his desire to get a gift for the girl at the bazaar Araby. To him, this gesture is like a quest of a hero in mythology. He sees Araby as an exotic place where he can find a treasure suitable to his lady love. In the days before the bazaar, he finds it hard to focus on anything else but his quest. Even the name of the bazaar is significant to him. "The syllables of the word Araby were called to me through the silence in which my soul luxuriated and cast an Eastern enchantment over me" (244).

The narrator is also an escapist. He leads a dark, isolate life and feels the need to leave this reality. His physical environment is depressing. He describes his street as quiet "except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free." He goes on to mention that "An uninhabited house of two stories stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbors in a square ground" (241) In addition, the narrator has no parents and lives with an aunt and uncle who clearly are not in touch with his feelings. The girl therefore the hope and inspiration of his life. He escapes into the fantasy of winning her heart. Even in the places, "most hostile to romance," (243) he carries the idea of her inside himself. On shopping trips with his aunt he blots out the ugly surroundings and replaces them with thoughts of her. "Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand" (243).

The narrator's romanticism, idealism, and escapism are what propel the story to its dramatic ending. As the lights in the bazaar begin to fade and he has not fulfilled his quest, the light of his romantic ideas is also extinguished. At this moment of epiphany the boy sees that he has created a fantasy in his mind and he

really knows nothing about this girl, nor can she save him from his reality. "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger" (245). He realizes that he must construct a new life based on reality. He can either become an embittered, hopeless man or move on to a new understanding of life.

Work Cited

Joyce, James. "Araby." *Backpack Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama and Writing*. 4th ed. Eds. Gioia, Dana and X.J. Kennedy. New York: Pearson 2007. 241-247. Print.