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"Our shouts echoed in the silent street": Paralysis, Symbol, and Implication in James Joyce's
"Araby"

by

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Approved_____

Date_____

In the opening story of James Joyce's *Dubliners*, "The Sisters," the young boy narrating the story fixates upon a word: "paralysis." Although two other words, "gnomon" and "simony," also filter across his consciousness, the boy notices that the word paralysis sounds different, like "the name of some maleficent and sinful being." He is frightened by this word, but he also feels drawn to it. At the close of the first paragraph, the boy "long[s] to be nearer to" the word, "to look upon its deadly work."

The deadly work to which he is referring is the body of a recently deceased priest. In the context of "The Sisters," the boy equates the stillness of physical paralysis with the rigor-mortis of the priest's body. However, the concept of paralysis extends beyond this story and becomes a means of interpreting the *Dubliners* collection.

We first find paralysis in letters Joyce wrote during the early publication period of the collection. Joyce described Dublin through a paralytic lens as early as 1904, when he writes in a letter to Constantin Curran that *Dubliners* is meant "to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city" (Joyce 55). Joyce reiterates this idea in his correspondence with Grant Richards, a publisher. In these letters, written from February to June 1906, Joyce's tone is insistent – he is continually attempting to persuade Richards to refrain from censoring certain stories – and he seems caught between appeasing Richards while maintaining the integrity of his project. However, while a young Joyce makes certain demands only to abandon them in the next letter, his general vision for *Dubliners* remains consistent throughout the letters: "to write a chapter of the moral history of my country" (Gorman 150).¹ Writing this moral history means confronting Dublin as "the centre of paralysis" in order to take what Joyce

¹ This letter is published in Herbert Gorman's *James Joyce*; others are published in *Letters of James Joyce*, edited by Stuart Gilbert.

envisions as “the first step towards the spiritual liberation of my country (Gorman 150, Joyce 63). Consequently, scholars, including Florence Walzl, Gerhard Friedrich, Marilyn French, and countless others, justifiably assume this paralysis as a foundational theme in their work on *Dubliners*.

However, despite Joyce’s letter and the parallel interpretive approaches taken by Joycean scholars, the concept of paralysis remains difficult to define. Notably, there is a contrast between how Joyce may have used the word in his era versus how we apply the term paralysis today. The *OED*’s definition for “general paralysis” offers one possible means of how Joyce would have understood the term. More fully known as “general paralysis of the insane,” this definition is medical: it refers to “a late manifestation of syphilis” that caused “dementia, psychosis, seizures, and generalized muscle weakness.” As Walzl notices in “Patterns of Paralysis,” Joyce, a former medical student, wrote *Dubliners* with an eye for diagnosis. In this sense, Joyce suggests that certain actions cause paralysis. Specifically, the actions of certain morally reprehensible or cowardly characters in *Dubliners* brings about their own paralysis. We see this in “The Sisters,” with the paralysis of a priest who has just committed the sin of simony. We also recognize this moral or consequential paralysis in characters like Farrington in “Counterparts,” who release their frustrations by abusing others. Such paralysis may also be present in “The Dead,” in which Gabriel Conroy’s jealousy of his wife’s former lover becomes a paralyzing realization that he has never fully possessed her how he may have thought.

However, we cannot successfully apply this framework of paralysis to all of the stories in *Dubliners*. In particular, the narrator of “Araby” does not fit with this consequential paralysis. While the boy may have the flaw of having too much imagination or pension for romance, it

seems too harsh to judge this as a fault comparable to jealousy or abuse. Only some characters cause their own paralysis, but all characters, innocent or guilty, feel its affects.

Paralysis adopts a different definition in its modern application. The general definition, which is the definition we are more familiar with contemporarily, comes from the *OED* and operates on both literal and figurative levels, relating paralysis to a “state of being powerless; a condition of helplessness or inactivity; inability to act or function properly.” In studies of *Dubliners*, scholars apply this definition to varying degrees. Like the boy who feels an immediate sense of stillness from the “maleficent” word, scholars of *Dubliners* equate the word with varying senses of motionlessness, stagnation, and death.

Scholars seem to have a common sense of paralysis; however, given enough room, their understandings begin to differ substantially.

For example, in her article “Patterns of Paralysis in *Dubliners*,” Marilyn French describes paralysis solely as “the inability to act” (445). In comparison, Gerhard Friedrich blames this inaction on a kind of fear, describing paralysis as “cowardly incompetence” (424). Both of these scholars use a similar sense of paralysis as being debilitating, but the nature of this debilitation differs between their uses of the term. To understand paralysis as inaction focuses on plot; understanding paralysis as incompetence focuses on character. Judgements on these characters are pushed further by scholars like Sydney Bolt, who describe the characters of *Dubliners* as “cowardly, hypocritical citizens” (34). Walzl also employs this tone in describing the characters in *Dubliners* as being paralyzed because they are “morally and intellectually dead” (227). Inevitably, each scholar will employ their own sense of paralysis in their interpretation of the stories, but a swath of understandings ranging from plot to character to setting mar paralysis as

an interpretive technique. Instead of providing clarity, shifting definitions of paralysis obscure the text.²

For instance, as mentioned above, differing definitions of paralysis do not seem to fit into the collection's third story, "Araby." Understandings of paralysis as motionlessness or inaction do not apply because the story's unnamed narrator is both mentally and physically active. Curiously, the boy experiences paralysis through movement: he is frozen speechless while pursuing a girl; later in the story, the boy experiences climactic disillusionment after leaving his home and moving towards the titular bazaar in the story. The boy's movement towards Araby also suggests that, in contrast to paralysis as "cowardly incompetence," the boy is brave and takes risks, or as Bernard Benstock puts it in his article "Tellers in the 'Dubliners' Tales," the boy is "a seeker and visionary" (Benstock 549). Instead of paralysis being helpful in interpreting "Araby," shifting definitions of the term render the text unclear and unpredictable. We feel that the boy has been changed in some manner by the conclusion of "Araby," and we assume that this change is a paralyzing disillusionment. However, understandings of paralysis as inaction or cowardice do not seem to explain this conclusion.

This essay will explore a new definition of paralysis and evaluate its applicability to "Araby." In the conclusion, we will then consider the flexibility of this definition and how it appears in the whole of *Dubliners*. This attempt is for the dual purpose of providing new insight into the collection and evaluating the implications of Joyce's claim that *Dubliners* depicts the "centre" of Ireland's paralysis.

In my reading of the *Dubliners* stories, I find that paralysis is a failed attempt at filling absence with presence. When characters detect a spiritual vacancy in their life, they attempt to

² This is far from an exhaustive account of paralysis's history in scholarship of *Dubliners*. For a more thorough history, see the third chapter of James Fairhall's *James Joyce and the Question of History*.

fill it by pursuing spiritual fulfillment; adventure, religion, national identity, family. Throughout *Dubliners*, Joyce shows how each of these attempts at fulfillment is ultimately illusory.

Characters wonder whether their dreams and pursuits carry any substance, whether their own lives are meaningful. Conversely, they realize that the spiritual absences are not mere vacancies, but positive signs of Dublin's insufficiency – religiosity, propriety, drunkenness, and pretense – that cannot be filled, but must instead be replaced. The failure to replace these absences results in interminable modes of living, a spiritual paralysis that permeates the lives of *Dubliners*. As mentioned previously, I will demonstrate the multiple paralytic layers this definition reveals in the collection's third story, "Araby" before considering the definition's broader implications in the conclusion.

The boy in "Araby" attempts to fill absence of his home with forms of presence like his image of romance or adventure. Specifically, the story's use of symbol signifies the boy's attempts to fill absence. For the boy, romantic ideologies and icons – such as chalices, adventure in the east, and romantic love – offer a presence that counteracts the dark, silent absence the boy finds in his home.

However, the boy is affronted by two contradictions, first being that the symbols he pursues are hollow and illusory. This realization, that his imagination and fantasies are mere illusions, paralyzes the boy. The second contradiction is that absence is not mere emptiness or illusion but an active, detrimental force in Ireland; instead of being filled, it must be replaced. Another way of phrasing this is that absence is not felt by the characters of *Dubliners* so much as it acts upon them. In the case of the boy, his realization of absence inspires and motivates his quest, and his search for symbol and meaning; by failing to find substance, the boy realizes how entrapped he and the rest of Dublin are in this quagmire of absence. This idea, that absence is a

kind of presence, is intuitively contradictory. However, traces of this idea exist both in the study of Joyce's fiction and in the texts themselves, which we will explore briefly below before our examination of "Araby."

Maud Ellmann examines this paradoxical idea in her essay *Ghosts of Ulysses*, where she critiques our Western "ghost-free civilization[‘s]" tendency to treat absence as a vacuum or a void (83). This vision is based upon a "myth that presence is superior to absence, and that absence is a lack of presence rather than an independent power" (83). Instead, Ellmann insists on a respect for the presence of absence, a vacancy that makes itself felt.

Traces of this elusive contradiction also appear in Hélène Cixous's commentary on Joyce, specifically in her essay "Joyce and the (r)use of writing." Like Ellmann, Cixous notices a willing bias of vision towards absence in Joyce's texts. As readers, we insist on the sense of wholeness that comes with presence. In her essay, Cixous defines paralysis in "The Sisters" as a constant negation of both hope and language. This negation is felt in the story; Cixous writes that paralysis "sucks up the text, invests it, immobilizes it in space and time" (23). Instead of being mere emptiness, absence in *Dubliners* actively paralyzes its characters. Cixous then writes that these characters search for "claims. . . of a coherent whole," but end up embarking upon "a journey. . . with never a definitive way out" (Cixous 19, 16). Absence is not a mere feature of Joyce's Dublin, but an active part in it; instead of being a shortcoming of the text, it is an arresting, immobilizing presence within the text.

Hugh Kenner also ponders this felt absence at the beginning of his book *Dublin's Joyce*. Kenner first calls Dublin a "city of the dead" before calling it a "once living city." Joyce, Kenner argues, felt the "paralysed form of the historic city" in "the stones beneath his feet" (Kenner 3). Kenner describes the plight of Dublin as continually living in this absent environment without

realizing it. Each Dubliner walks the stones which trouble Joyce; all of their speech, thoughts, and mannerisms are inherited relics of this ancient city. Because these rhythms are inherited and imposed, Kenner argues that “no Dubliner acts from his nature because no Dubliner knows what his nature is” Instead, each Dubliner goes through repetitive, stagnant cultural rhythms without pondering a different way of life.

These cultural rhythms could include the ailments mentioned in the first *OED* definition, which stated that paralysis was “a manifestation of syphilis,” and was a diagnosable medical condition. Given that Joyce was a medical student, then Kenner’s work could suggest a connection between paralysis in *Dubliners* and patterns of life in Dublin – in other words, a recognition by Joyce that the repeated behaviors of his fellow citizens are causal for their own paralysis.

However, *Dubliners* is not moralistic, but freeing, as Joyce suggests when he describes the work as “the first step in the spiritual liberation of my country” in a later letter. Liberation can be more abstract than condemnation or straightforward diagnosis. A moralistic reading of *Dubliners* would reprimand characters for certain failures; however, liberation implies an escape from paralysis and suggests that paralysis’s cause lies outside of the characters in *Dubliners*, perhaps being an element of their environment. I am arguing that this external element is a sense of felt absence and the realization that attempts to fill this absence are insufficient or illusory. In this sense, while Kenner’s understanding of paralysis in Dublin deals with the city’s history, paralysis in *Dubliners* also translates outside of this history and into any particular moment where absence is a positive force as opposed to mere vacancy. Attempts to fill this vacancy ultimately fail; instead, Joyce implores that Dublin replace their modes of life instead of fill them.

Absence continually plagues the characters of *Dubliners* as characters continually feel the absent as a form of presence: in “Eveline,” Eveline cannot escape the memory of her absent mother, who even while deceased affects Eveline’s consciousness and decisions; Gabriel is shaken by the absent presence of one of his wife’s former lovers in “The Dead”; the absent politician Charles Parnell affects how each character in the politically tense “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” presents themselves, and the deceased priest in the “The Sisters” reappears to the boy as an elusive, sinister presence.

In “Araby,” the boy first notices absence in his surroundings. At home, the boy recognizes layers of paralytic absence, seeing it in the dead environment of his home, the emptiness of adults, and in his own adolescence. The boy attempts to fill these absences with a variety of symbolic presences: the adventure of Araby, a quest, the idealized symbol of the feminine, and the imagined symbol of a chalice. These symbols appear sporadically in the boy’s consciousness and have a similar sense to the word paralysis in “The Sisters”: while the narrator of “Araby” is familiar with the existence of these symbols, his interest is more of a child’s fascination with the implications of such symbols and less an understanding of what such symbols actually mean. However, different pieces of scholarship are helpful for both identifying and interpreting romantic symbolism in the text. In particular, both Jerome Mandel’s article “The Structure of ‘Araby’” and Jessie Weston’s book *From Ritual to Romance* provide depth and insight into the narrator’s understanding of his quest in “Araby.”

Mandel’s article outlines the story as a courtly love narrative and tracks Joyce’s use of medieval symbolism throughout the story. We should note that there are several places where Mandel insists on connections that I do not find in the text. Specifically, I do not see evidence in the text that “there is promise of reward” in the girl’s twirling of her bracelet, or that the boy’s

watching the girl from a distance necessarily connects with the courtly idea that the boy “can’t take her name in jest” (51, 50). Mandel’s findings are always plausible, but I would question whether all of his findings are supported by the text. However, Mandel’s argument that “Joyce [was] working with the well-defined structure of a traditional literary genre. . . the medieval romance” is generally strong, and the few questionable connections are far outweighed by carefully observed moments in the text (48). In our examination of paralysis, Mandel’s article is helpful for identifying the moments where symbols in the text correspond with romantic narratives.

Weston’s book *From Ritual to Romance* is particularly helpful for understanding the depth of symbols in “Araby.” Specifically, Weston’s text³ provides insight into the implication of certain symbols. While the narrator does not elaborate on why he thinks of a “chalice,” for instance, Weston’s scholarship allows us to explore the symbolic weight of the chalice in Grail legends and consider how this symbol, as well as other medieval symbols in the story, are the boy’s attempts to fill absence with presence.

We will elaborate upon these sources throughout the investigation. However, as a brief introduction it should suffice to say that Joyce uses mythic or ancient structures to tell modern stories in several of his works. Of course, the preeminent example is Joyce’s Homeric allusions in his novel *Ulysses*. Furthermore, in Susan Swartzlander’s article “James Joyce’s ‘The Sisters’: Chalices, Umbrellas, Ptolemaic Memphis and Victorian Dublin,” connects Joyce’s interest in

³ We should note that Weston’s text is only on symbols, not specifically on symbols in *Dubliners*. Furthermore, Weston wrote *From Ritual to Romance* after Joyce wrote *Dubliners*, so we are not implying that Joyce used this text at all to organize his stories. However, Joyce was certainly aware of medieval and mythic literature and symbol to an extent where he put them to use in his fiction. It is also possible that Joyce had at least passing familiarity with Weston’s earlier scholarship while working on *Dubliners*; several of Weston’s texts are published before *Dubliners*’s publication in 1914. To say that Joyce was familiar with Weston is plausible; to say that Joyce was knowledgeable of medieval legend to an extent where Weston’s texts will be useful is almost certain.

Ancient Egypt with his concern for the paralyzed modes of living in *Dubliners*. Joyce's use of grail symbols in "Araby" is not to the same extent as his Homeric allusions in *Ulysses*, but the structure of the boy's narrative and various symbols throughout the story suggest that "Araby" is guided by an Arthurian quest pattern. To clarify, this paper's purpose is not to prove the presence of these symbols in the story, a task already undertaken by Mandel. Instead, we will examine how the boy uses such symbols as attempts to fill the pervading absences in his life.

This essay explores the boy's various attempts at filling absence and considers their implications. Different characters in *Dubliners* attempt to fill absence by different means. Below, we will first consider the various presences of absence in the boy's life in "Araby" and how he attempts to fill them. We will then ask if, by our definition, the boy is paralyzed at the story's conclusion or if we recognize any sense of spiritual liberation.

Paralysis in "Araby"

At the beginning of "Araby," the boy's home, "North Richmond Street," is the epitome of absence. We notice this in the layered absence of the story's first three paragraphs. In the opening paragraph, the boy describes his home:

North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two storeys stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbours in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces. (33)

The opening is strange because it is so impersonal. While this story is narrated from the first person, the narrator does not reveal himself in his opening description. This gives the opening of "Araby" an authoritative objective tone, but it also adds to the overlaying sense of vacancy already in the text.

The descriptive language in this opening is heavy with absence – the boy describes his street as “blind,” “quiet,” “uninhabited,” “detached,” and “imperturbable.” The houses are empty and removed. In this sense, the houses are personified as being isolated and separate, filling the street with a sense of quiet and solemnity. Overall, one gets a sense of silence, waiting, longing. This quiet is not peaceful – it is tense. Instead, the houses imply a felt absence in the sense that they are “conscious,” “gazing” at one another in complete silence, imposing a felt absence upon the street. This silence becomes a symbolic presence of absence, a felt vacancy of sound that the boy uses to describe his home.

The only language used to contrast this sense of silence and the imposition of the houses in this scene is the boys being “set. . . free” from school. This establishes children as an early contradiction to absence, a presence that fills the street with life and freedom. One pictures children running into the street, laughing and playing or continuing on their way home. However, they interrupt the quiet for only an hour, before the houses gaze upon one another again.

There is also a continuing sense of uneasiness concerning the boy’s description of the street. In the second sentence, the boy describes “an uninhabited house” that has been “detached from its neighbours.” His description continues past this, but the presence of the empty house gives the street a haunting feeling. The other houses hold “decent lives within them”; their “gaz[ing] at one another” implicates that the empty house is ignored off to the side. This establishes a visual means of seeing absence. One imagines a house that no one acknowledges, but still emits a tangible presence. The boy is certainly aware of it, distinguishing this house from the others in the street because it is empty and contains no life.

This uneasiness extends into the opening of the next paragraph, where the boy tells us that “the former tenant of our house, a priest, had died in the back drawing-room” (33). The association the boy makes between his house and death creates a tangible sense of absence in the story. Like in “The Sisters,” this deceased priest has a presence that lasts beyond his death. The boy finds physical signs of this presence in the objects the priest has left behind, abandoned objects in the waste-room and the backyard. The boy looks through the remains of the former-priest’s possessions, specifically the “old useless papers” in the waste-room, which the boy has examined long enough to determine are mostly “curled and damp” (33). The boy also examines the specific room where he died, at one point going up there on “a dark rainy evening [when] there was no sound in the house” (36). Similar to the uninhabited house, the back drawing room becomes symbolic of the absence in the boy’s home.

Interestingly, the boy presents something of a puzzle concerning the priest and the uninhabited house. The use of the term “our” implicates ownership. However, the boy’s description of the back drawing-room makes the space sound less like a house which people actually live in and more like an abandoned house. He feels the “air, musty from having been long enclosed,” and the boy goes playing in “the waste room behind the kitchen” which has been “littered with old useless paper,” traces of the priest who had died there (33). Amongst these useless papers, the boy looks for odd treasures, finding a book that he likes because “its leaves were yellow,” adding to the litter of the waste room with the fact that this book has been there for a long time (33). The garden behind the house is “wild,” the bushes “straggling” – the boy finds “the late tenant’s rusty bicycle-pump” (33). Later, the boy listens to the sounds of rainfall through the “broken panes” of the window (36). Such details depict a derelict, abandoned house. When the boy ventures into this “drawing-room in which the priest had died,” there is no sound

in the dark house, no signs of life from any of the supposedly “decent lives” within. This sense of emptiness is reinforced later in the story, when he remembers all of the rooms being “cold empty gloomy,” and feels “liberated” in being able to roam them as he pleases (38).

This is a curious sense of liberation. Presumably, the boy feels free because he is alone and can do as he pleases, but it is also worth noting that, in this isolation, the boy is mirroring the environment around him, finding a space that is dark, quiet, and abandoned. In my reading, the freedom the boy feels connects to such details that depict him playing in an abandoned house: he is free because he is alone, and being alone means he does not have to be self-conscious, and is free from the eyes of adults.

Of course, the boy is not really living alone in the abandoned house. The text confirms this when he speaks with his aunt and uncle later in the story, or goes downstairs to find his aunt sitting with a friend; even when his aunt and uncle are absent, the boy notices they are gone and wonders when they will be back. Instead of proving that the boy is literally in the abandoned house, connections between the back-drawing room and the uninhabited house imply a sense of abandonment and absence. The boy is under the care of his aunt and uncle, implying that prior circumstances have removed the boy from his parents. Furthermore, the boy’s aunt and uncle are frequently absent throughout the story. The boy’s descriptions of the house depict it as being dark, silent, and filled with vacancy. It seems that the boy is accustomed to waiting at home by himself and playing alone in the darkness. Therefore, while the boy notes the empty house on North Richmond Street as being an irregularity, this uninhabited house becomes a symbol through which the boy experiences his life at home.

Here, we have come across several significant symbols of absence: the uninhabited house, the absent uncle, and the deceased priest. With respect to symbols used in Grail legends,

the house embodies the land that the boy hopes to restore through his quest. Furthermore, in these legends, Weston finds in *From Ritual to Romance* that the land is connected to the figure of the Fisher King. This sick king is connected to the land; by completing his quest, the knight will heal the king as well as the land. This raises the conundrum of who, if anyone in particular, represents this Fisher King in “Araby.” Both the uncle and priest seem possible figures, but it is uncertain what their healing would look like. The boy does recognize a sickness in his uncle’s drunkenness, thinking that he could “interpret these signs” when his uncle stumbles in the door (39). However, the boy does not seem to feel any sentiment towards his uncle. Instead, in coming home late and then delaying funds for the bazaar, the uncle becomes more of an obstruction to the boy’s quest than the purpose of it. Similarly, the priest could be a symbol of the Fisher King, but the boy’s fascination for the priest outweighs any concern about healing or restoring him. It would seem that, if either of these figures is the Fisher King, than it is a subversion of legend instead of an adherence to it.

The sentence where the boy mentions the deceased priest is also significant because in saying “our house,” the boy is finally implicating himself as the story’s narrator. From here, we know that we are getting a partial perspective on North Richmond Street. The eyes of the narrator are the eyes of someone who lives there, eyes that notice intimate details of the street’s movements but could be blind to others.

By this blindness, I mean that the boy in “Araby” has a limited perspective that affects his delivery of the narrative.⁴ He possesses a childlike sense of naivety, noting that the priest who

⁴ We should note that Joyce employs this limited or realistic perspective whenever his characters participate in first-person narration, and particularly when this narrator is a child. Perhaps Joyce’s most famous use of a child’s perspective is Stephen Dedalus in the opening chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In this particular chapter, Stephen possesses a unique sense of curiosity and wonderment, but his perspective is also limited in that he fears breaking the school rules as a child might, and operates with a youthful view of authority. Additionally, both of the stories preceding “Araby” in *Dubliners*, “The Sisters” and “An Encounter,” are narrated by children, and both have a perspective that presents its own insights and limitations. Specifically in “The Sisters,” the boy knows there

had died “must have been a very generous priest” because he “left all his money to institutions and the furniture of his house to his sister” (33). As readers, we sense a disconnection between the priest’s actions and his supposed generosity. However, the narrator makes this comment without any irony and shows both a youthful optimism and a flexibility in understanding what exactly being generous means.

He also has a childlike fascination with “the syllables of the word *Araby*.” Like the boy in “The Sisters,” the boy in “Araby” fixates upon this word because he is not entirely certain of what it means. He recounts the syllables of the word instead of the word itself; he is drawn by its evocation, even without any substantive understanding of what *Araby* actually is. This uncertainty carries a sense of possibility, an absence of understanding that the boy can fill with imagination and fantasy. The boy elaborates very little on what he imagines *Araby* will be like, but his comments on “Eastern enchantment” suggest a foreign or an exotic fantasy. We imagine the boy’s vision of the bazaar being a romanticized, European mold of “the Orient,” described best by the opening of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*: “The Orient was almost a European invention. . . a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 1). The boy does not have an expansive understanding of this exotic land, but shares in the cultural parlance that casts *Araby* as an alluring land of imagination and possibility. We see the limits of the narrator’s perspective in how he participates in this imagination; instead of understanding that the local bazaar will likely be a cheap imitation, the boy takes the girl at her word that *Araby* will be “splendid,” and imagines that he is moving towards mystic and exotic adventure.

is a mysterious power behind a word like “paralysis,” but he does not know what exactly it means yet. Throughout “The Sisters,” the boy has a similar vision towards the behavior of the adults who surround him. He understands they are acting strange about the priest’s death, but he is not exactly sure why.

A further layer of the narrator's limited perspective arises in how he perceives his home: While North Richmond Street is described as being dead and lifeless, the narrator's courage, imagination, and vitality contrast his environment. This difference between the narrator and his home means he feels constantly uneasy but cannot fully describe why. This uncanny difference between narrator and setting is most apparent when the boy plays alone in the dark of the house, where the boy notes how the darkness "liberated" him, and how his "soul luxuriated" in silence (38, 37). Presumably, this sense of freedom comes from the boy's being alone and able to play in whatever way he wishes; however, the feeling of his "soul luxuriat[ing]" in the darkness suggest something deeper than the pleasure of solitude. The luxuriance of darkness is sensual, and this feeling combined with the boy's being alone in the room suggests temptation; he enjoys the dark because it hides him, perhaps because it is forbidden. We notice more forbidden connotations in the boy's auto-erotic act of pressing his "palms. . . together until they trembled, murmuring: '*O love, O love!*' many times" in a prayer to his love for Mangan's sister (36). In a sense, the boy is in the midst of a twisted confession, going to the empty office of a dead priest in order to unload his private and most bawdy feelings; instead of ridding himself of these feelings, the boy revels in them, allowing the intensity of his love to overcome him and for the darkness of the space to wash over him. However, the liberation of the boy's private confession is too intense, and the boy risks losing himself in the empty space rather than fill it with his romantic love.

He feels his senses' "desire to veil themselves," and worries that he is about to "slip" from them into the surrounding absence (36). This slipping offers a sense of freedom and release from the world, but the boy is also filled with a more overwhelming sense of panic. In this sense, the pressing of the palms is also an attempt to feel something amidst the oncoming sensory deprivation. The boy is caught in a strange tension, enjoying the characteristically paralyzing

darkness one moment and attempting to escape from it in the next moment. Such panic suggests the boy is awakening to the world around him; furthermore, I would posit that the boy experiences this awakening without being able to describe it fully. Instead of understanding the source of his discomfort as the darkness or depression around him, the boy's perspective is limited. He is left to attribute his uncanny feeling to a vague quality of the air, feeling the "musty" air of the back drawing-room or noticing the "house in bad humour" when he feels how the "air was pitilessly raw" (33, 38). This contrast between the boy and the air of North Richmond Street is most noticeable in the following passage:

When we met in the street the houses had grown somber. The space of sky above us was the colour of ever-changing violet and towards it the lamps of the street lifted their feeble lanterns. The cold air stung us and we played till our bodies glowed. Our shouts echoed in the silent street. (33, 34)

The story's opening suggested the freedom of the schoolchildren contrasting North Richmond Street's customary darkness, and we see that here, as the boy recounts the echoing shouts of play ringing against the looming presence of the "somber" houses. We also notice a contrast between the light and the pervading darkness of the street. The lamps on the street are "feeble," unable to produce any lasting illumination. Instead, the most vibrant light in the boy's description comes from the glowing bodies of the children, playing amidst the falling twilight. Like the shouts, the light is a brief disruption to North Richmond Street's customary emptiness. The children are "stung" by the cold air because of the warmth of their own bodies; like the boy's earlier panic at losing himself in the darkness, he notes a contrast between his own vitality and the comparative lifelessness of his home. Absence and lifelessness layer the opening of "Araby," and the boy's descriptions of his play appear to be attempts at filling this emptiness. The boy searches the waste room presumably in an attempt at finding something besides waste; his play, and the shouts of his friends, are attempts to fill the street with sound and presence.

Here is where details from both Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and Jermonie Mandel's "The Structure of 'Araby'" become relevant in our investigation. In Mandel's piece, he looks at the first three paragraphs of "Araby," identifying them as part of the heroes "*enfance*," or a definition "of the hero's youth before his coming to manhood" (48). In a symbolic or romantic quest narrative, the hero is defined in relation to his home, which Mandel notes in writing that in the story "the *enfance* is a matter of location as well as upbringing" (49). In "Araby," the boy's upbringing seems primarily a matter of location, mainly because his aunt and uncle are not present often enough to raise him.

However, more than a simple definition of who a hero is, Jessie Weston detects that the purpose of the quest can sometimes be discerned by the hero's location. While writing on the romantic hero Parcival, Weston observes how a "distinctive feature" of the story is its "insistence upon the sickness and disability of the ruler of the land," and how completing the quest will result in a "restoration of the land" (13, 14). In the ancient and recurring grail legends, finding the grail was a personal success for the knight, but more importantly, it was a redemption for his homeland.

When we consider these critical observations with respect to "Araby," we can see their traces in how the story establishes its central character as being a contrast from his setting. In this contrast, we see the purpose of the boy's quest as the counteraction of his North Richmond Street's absence and the restoration of its sense of presence or life.⁵

The boy is called upon this quest by an interruption to the text, when the boy and his friends return from play to find "Mangan's sister came out on the doorstep" (34). They see her

⁵ Also, in describing *Dubliners* as a step towards liberation, we could insist on a connection between the boy's quest in the story and Joyce's purpose with his collection.

waiting for us, her figure defined by the light from the half-opened door. Her brother always teased her before he obeyed and I stood by the railings looking at her. Her dress swung as she moved her body and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side.

(D 34)

We call this passage an interruption because it shifts the text from descriptions of play to descriptions of fascination. In particular, this passage uses light and shadow to cast a curious illustration of the girl. Her “figure” is “defined by the light” – to some degree, this casts her as a sense of presence, contrasting the characteristic dark of North Richmond Street. Similarly, the movement of “her body” and “dress” at the end of the passage contradict any sense of dead, motionless paralysis. Like the boy, this girl is a sense of life and vitality in an otherwise stagnant landscape.

However, this idea of the girl’s “figure” being “defined by the light” has curious implications. The scene directs our focus towards the girl’s “figure.” Here, the word figure certainly invokes a romanticized and objectified depiction of the female body. Furthermore, “figure” also begs for a consideration of the ambiguity of the word “defined.” This definition the boy describes could be an illumination, but it could also be an outline of the girl’s figure, portraying her as a silhouette of darkness amidst a background of light. In this sense, the boy is not actually seeing the girl. Like the syllables of the word Araby, the boy is looking in upon an alluring, unknown shape, a darkness that he can fill with whatever features or qualities that he chooses.

Later in the text, the boy’s vision of the girl as a “brown” figure “cast by my imagination” reinforces this idea that the girl is clearer in the boy’s mind than in the reality of the story (34, 35). The word brown conveys a similar absence to the earlier suggestion of silhouette; it is an absence of more vibrant color, however it could also act as a base that the boy can fill further from his own imagination. In doing so, Joyce shows a curious distance between the girl

and the narrator, a physical distance that the narrator enforces out of nervousness, but a spiritual proximity between the boy's spirit and his image of her.

The boy enforces variations of this distance throughout "Araby." He stands by the railings, gazing at her silently as she calls her brother inside; he then recounts how "every morning I lay on the floor in the front parlour watching her door," his "heart leap[ing]" when she emerges (34, 35). He follows in close pursuit, keeping her "always in [his] eye" as he follows dutifully, but never speaking, presumably maintaining a physical separation from her in order to avoid detection (35). Instead, he remembers how "her image accompanied me even in places the most hostile to romance," and how "her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers" (35). He does not understand his feelings, but he pursues them without question and is entirely captivated by them.

Mandel connects this moment with "the introduction of the lady who becomes central to the hero's life" (48). Mandel continues to write how, in quest narratives, the quest emanates from this lady; in a sense, she gives the literary knight his sense of purpose.

In line with these symbolic elements, the boy symbolizes the girl by equating "her image" with a "chalice" in the text (35). In Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, the "Grail itself, whether cup or dish. . . was invested with a certain atmosphere of awe, credited with strange virtues, with sanctity itself" (Weston 66). The boy certainly imbues the girl with this sense of awe, marveling in her presence and fixating upon her image when she is away. Furthermore, the symbol and shape of the chalice reflects how the boy views the girl. Her depiction as the grail equates her with idealistic values – chivalry, holiness, chastity, purity. However, what fills a chalice also defines it to some degree. In this case, the boy is filling the girl with his own fascinations and idealizations, defining her as an image to his liking.

In other scholarship, the girl is regarded as a symbol of Irish art. Harry Stone notices this in his article “‘Araby’ and the Writings of James Joyce,” where he connects the name of the girl’s brother, Mangan, with one of Joyce’s favorite Irish poets. In particular, Stone suggests that the girl in “Araby” with an image in Mangan’s poetry called “‘Dark Rosaleen,’ a love paean to a girl who represents Ireland. . . physical love, and romantic adoration” (Stone 379). When we consider these observations in connection to the girl’s role in the text as presence, then we find the plausible suggestion that, in pursuing her, the boy is pursuing a symbol of art as a means of counteracting the surrounding paralysis of his home. This is similar to Stephen Dedalus’s quest in *Portrait* and *Ulysses*, where he longs to fill the artistic vacancy of his country with his own aesthetic achievement; it is also consistent with the symbolic details of various grail-quests mentioned thus far.

To some extent, the girl provides an implied liberation from paralysis. To him, she is a wholesome presence that he can pursue in an attempt to heal his surrounding absence.

However, in symbolizing the girl, the boy is simplifying her, turning her into an image that he can control and using her as a point upon which he can attach his desires. Feminist scholars studying Joyce notice this pattern and write about it as a means of challenging Joyce’s writing of female characters. In her essay “Joyce and Feminism,” Karen Lawrence notices how women in Joyce’s texts are always depicted as mirages or illusions to which male characters attach fantasies of desire.⁶ Ewa Ziarek offers a different interpretation of this idea in her essay

⁶ This happens frequently with Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*, a character who rarely appears in the narrative but is frequently objectified by the novel’s male characters. This phenomenon also occurs several times in *Portrait*, where Stephen equates women he sees with his dreams of aesthetic achievement. Specifically in *Dubliners*, Lawrence discusses Gabriel Conroy’s “realization that his relationship with his wife Gretta has been anchored in his fantasy of what he would have her be, rather than in a full knowledge of what she is” (Lawrence 207).

“The Female Body, Technology, and Memory in ‘Penelope,’” noting how women oftentimes stand for “nature” in Joyce’s work, and provide “an imaginary means of escape” from modern life (Ziarek 110).

In my own interpretation of Joyce’s female characters, it seems that Joyce’s male characters frequently hold up women as artificial means of guidance. This is suggested by Molly Bloom’s representation of Homer’s Penelope at the conclusion of *Ulysses*. Through this symbolization, she guides her husband home through a sense of constancy. Similarly, Stephen’s attachment of desire to various women in *Portrait* can be understood as an attachment of guidance as he uses them as navigational points towards artistic inspiration.

In “Araby,” we see this idealization of women as a guiding force in several senses. As suggested by Mandel, the girl provides guidance in her symbolic provision of a quest. In this examination, the boy finds in his image of the girl what he does not find at home: a sense of presence that awakens feeling inside of him and fills him with awe and intrigue. The text defines this femininity when the boy gazes up at the girl as she “bows her head towards” him (37). He gazes up at her in awe, noticing how

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 a petticoat, just visible as she stood at ease.
(D 37)

The boy is looking up at the girl, implying a sense of reverence. Also, her definition from “the light” depicts her as a symbolic, transcendent figure.

However, youthful uncertainty mars the boy’s feelings. He confesses a sense of “confused adoration” towards the girl, indicating that he does not understand the origins or implications of his feelings. In his description of her from the passage above, the boy seems to fixate upon the features of the girl that fascinate him most; consequently, we can infer that he

also describes the elements of her. The “curve of her neck,” the light on “one side of her dress,” “the white border of a petticoat” – these features fascinate the boy because of their elegance but also presumably because of their mysteriousness. The boy **is** gaining an awareness of his attraction to this girl, and he cannot articulate why she attracts him because he does not fully understand it himself. He fixates upon the details that are the most symbolically or culturally feminine because they are also the most unapproachable, unknowable, and alluring.

In this sense, the boy manufactures the presence he feels from the girl. He fills her with his own presumptions and fascinations; however, his youth bars him from fully understanding his feelings. We notice this in comparison to a similar scene in “The Dead,” where Gabriel Conroy, while gazing up at his wife, admires the

Grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. (*D* 270)

Both the boy and Gabriel stand beneath the woman whom they are beholding, and both find something desirable and unknowable. Like the boy, Conroy objectifies his wife as a “symbol of something,” and alters her sense of distance so that it becomes one of elusiveness, of desirability.

However, what differentiates the passages is that, unlike the boy, Conroy understands the origins and implications of his feelings. While he asks “what is a woman,” we get the sense that Conroy is confident in how to answer his own question, especially later in his story when he thinks of seizing his wife, enclosing her in his feelings of desire and romance.

Conroy wants to draw closer; the boy keeps his distance. He is content to follow in silent devotion, and is in a sense paralyzed in **by** his own feelings. One of the paralytic qualities of his home is its silence, a silence the boy reflects in his behavior towards the girl, admitting that “I did not know whether I would ever speak to her or not” (35). While the boy’s descriptions in the

text depict him as being the opposite of his paralyzed home, his romantic uncertainty leads to a sense of confusion. He worships her as a form of presence, a liberation from the vacancies that surround him, but he does not know how to pursue her. Instead, the boy is stuck.

The text represents this frozenness through the absence of the girl's name in the story. The boy knows the name personally, but never reveals it in his account of the narrative because the girl is unfamiliar to him. All he has of her is "her image"; it appears her name is not his to use, almost too sacred to profane. The boy finds he "did not understand" why her name comes to his mind in "prayers and praises," nor why it fills his eyes with tears or causes "a flood from my heart" (35).

We notice a connection between the boy's use of this seemingly sacred name and the word "paralysis" in the sisters. Like the boy in that story, the narrator of "Araby" finds himself continually drawn towards both the name of the girl and the girl herself. However, he is also somewhat fearful to look upon her, hesitant to bridge the vacant space between them.

This is a space that the girl has no trouble in bridging herself. Just as the girl interrupts the boy's narration when he first sees her, the text is interrupted again with his memory of when "at last she spoke to me" (41). This speaking is the introduction of the quest. She asks the boy if he is going to Araby, what the girl promises is a "splendid bazaar" (36). In doing so, the girl interrupts several layers of absence in the story. Before this moment, no other character engages in dialogue; instead, it is delivered by a narrator who is too love-struck to speak.

Interestingly, the girl's speaking is a subversion of quest-patterns recorded in Weston's text. Concerning the grail, Weston finds that in repeated tales of the ritual legend that quest-object "is so secret a thing that no woman, be she a wife or maid, may venture to speak of it" (137). Of course, one could argue that the narrator has equated the girl, not Araby, with the

symbol of the chalice. However, this still confuses the use of ritualistic symbols in the story, creating a notable contrast: In legends, the knight or hero would gain knowledge of the quest through his worthiness; in “Araby,” the boy thinks of the girl as his chalice before she speaks with him. Prolonged consideration of this textual conundrum will likely be hair-splitting, but here, we will reiterate the issue of the boy’s youthful narrative perspective. Regardless of Joyce’s knowledge of ancient legend, the boy in “Araby” seems to operate with a simple, straightforward knowledge of any Arthurian symbols. The girl is the chalice because to the boy she is the ultimate good, and he treats her with awe and sacred emotion. Therefore, while the reader may recognize her gestures – her “turn[ing] a silver bracelet round and round her wrist,” the “bowing [of] her head” towards the boy, or her casual mentioning how she “would love to go” to Araby – as overt signs of flirtatious manipulation, the boy only sees them as evidence of her worthiness. Because he treats her as an empty vessel that he fills with his own expectations, he has no reason to doubt her intentions. He interprets her actions as fundamentally good, so to him, the girl always fulfills his expectations.

While the boy is unable to invoke the girl’s name due to his sense of awe, her speaking to the boy fills another textual absence, the boy’s removal of her name in the text. In a sense, the boy substitutes the word Araby for the name he cannot bring himself to say. Like the girl’s name, the boy thinks of “the syllables of the word *Araby*” as a sign of presence, but unlike her name, the boy can bring himself to recount it in the text.

The boy uses the “Eastern enchantment” of Araby as a means of understanding his confused, muddled feelings towards the girl. His fascination with her, her granting him the quest of Araby, and his sense of intrigue toward the foreign bazaar all become “a single sensation of life” for the boy (35).

After hearing of “Araby,” the boy begins to separate from the absence of his home. He walks through the empty, silent rooms of his home “singing,” filling them with sound – the ticking of the clock, the felt vacancy of time slipping away, begins to “irritate” the boy (38). Similarly, he sets himself apart from his friends, school, and family. After asking his aunt’s permission to go the bazaar, the boy remembers how she was

Surprised and hoped it was not some Freemason affair. I answered few questions in class. I watched my master’s face pass from amiability to sternness; he hoped I was not beginning to idle. I could not call my wandering thoughts together. I had hardly any patience with the serious work of life which, now that it stood between me and my desire, seemed to me child’s play, ugly monotonous child’s play. (37)

The boy separates from school and family. Furthermore, while he seemed content to play in the beginning of the story, his indictment of “child’s play” as “ugly” and “monotonous” is a noticeable shift. The boy watches alone while he sees his “companions playing below in the street,” listening to “their cries. . . weakened and indistinct” (38). His positioning here is interesting because it inverts the position he held while gazing up at Mangan’s sister. Instead, the boy is looking downwards, now feeling himself to be at a height of solemnity and maturity.

Mandel cites these details as environmental obstructions to the boy’s sense of “total devotion” (51). What I would add is that the boy sees obstruction as a signal of his exceptionalism. The girl chose the boy from amongst his friends to go the bazaar, setting him apart for the quest. Like an Arthurian knight, he sees himself as anointed, separate, and special, his quest imbuing him with a unique purpose. This purpose gives the boy a sense of duty, moral imperative, and impatience. While he finds himself too shy to approach Mangan’s sister earlier in the story, with the assuredness of Araby, he confronts his uncle: “I asked him to give me the money to go to the bazaar. . . I did not smile” (39).

Furthermore, the boy's quest fills him with the confidence to venture out into what would be, for a child, the terrifying unknown of night. The boy leaves North Richmond Street after his uncle arrives home at nine o'clock. He rides alone "in a third-class carriage of a deserted train" (39). The train carries him away, "onward amongst ruinous houses and over the twinkling river" (40). Notably, the boy looks upon the houses in a different manner than he did in his opening descriptions of North Richmond Street openly calling them "ruinous," perhaps due to the sense of separation and moral exceptionalism the boy feels because of his undertaking the quest. Similarly, the boy's travelling over the river accentuates the story's other symbolic elements. In crossing the river, the boy is departing from home, the land he must restore as a part of his quest.

Mandel identifies the river as a symbol "that usually separates the living from the dead and suggests that the hero's journey is a journey to the underworld" (52). Mandel's observation of this symbol sets an interesting contrast against the paralyzed city of Dublin mentioned by Kenner as a "city of the dead" (10). The boy's quest appears to be taking him to a surreal land of opportunity, a mythical underworld where he will prove his bravery and complete his quest. Completing this quest will restore the boy's dead home, a place characterized by darkness, vacancy, confusion, silence, and absence. The boy describes North Richmond Street as being "blind," "uninhabited," and "imperturbable"; by contrast, Araby is "magical" (33, 40).

The boy's expectation may have led him to expect for Araby to be the exact opposite of his home. Instead, he finds

myself in a big hall girdled at half its height by a gallery. Nearly all the stalls were closed and the greater part of the hall was in darkness. I recognised a silence like that which pervades a church after a service. (40)

The text reiterates paralyzing details to describe the bazaar: instead of the imagined enchantment, it is dark, quiet, and empty. What few people remain at the bazaar seem impatient

to close, and the boy feels that his “stay was useless” (41). He goes to one of the few open bazaars, and the shopkeeper only speaks to him “out of a sense of duty” (41). The boy makes it appear as if he is considering the shop’s wares; he then leaves in humiliation.

Furthermore, the boy’s equation of the silence to “that which pervades a church” equates this moment to the story’s opening, when the boy played in the presence of the dead priest (41). Instead of escaping that sense of absence through his adventure, the boy finds further absence in Araby; his attempt at filling that absence has failed, as he finds that the vacancy that surrounds him is expansive and totalizing.

The boy’s previous enticement towards Araby has given way to a depressing sense of realization. Notably, the symbols and implications of Eastern enchantment which thrilled the boy earlier are now intimidating and obstructive. In the bazaar stall, he looks upon “great jars that stood like eastern guards at either side of the dark entrance” (41). This line suggests that the boy’s vision of Araby is no longer guiding him on his quest. The stall’s dark entrance reveals another discouraging truth: Instead of uncovering fulfillment and romance, Araby will only lead to further darkness. This leaves the boy frustrated, despondent, and angry:

I knew my stay was useless. . . 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. Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger. (41)

In the story’s conclusion, the boy sees himself as a part of the vacant darkness against which he was contrasted in the story’s beginning. Instead of glowing amidst the darkness, the boy is now enshrouded within it. The text does not mention explicitly whether the boy associates his romantic love as being similarly extinguished, but details suggest that it is highly likely. The shopkeeper who is annoyed with the boy is another older girl, who may be around the same age as Mangan’s sister. Instead of seeing this shopkeeper as a source of light or aspiration, the boy

witnesses her empty acts of flirtation, as she and two young men exchange pieces of frivolous drivel. This may give the boy a depressing realization of how Mangan's sister, instead of being a paragon of moral goodness, likely used his innocence to her benefit.

Beyond the disillusionment of young romance, the boy realizes that his entire quest was empty and meaningless. Just before entering the bazaar, the boy finds himself "remembering with difficulty why I had come" (41). This difficulty in memory implies a certain confusion; then, after leaving the bazaar, this difficulty imbues a sense of humiliation. The boy's quest has been extinguished, and he finds himself paralyzed. We presume that the boy must return home at the end of the story, but at this particular moment, he finds himself displaced and isolated.

This scene corresponds with a haunting image from Weston's text, that of the "Perilous Chapel" (175). Generally, Weston finds that the Chapel "is fraught with extreme peril to life" (175). More specifically, we can connect details from Weston's scholarship⁷ that provide insight into "Araby": the "strange and threatening voices" Weston identifies correspond with the "English accents" of the shopkeeper and her friends, and the "voice" that calls "that the light was out" (Weston 175, *D* 41). The fact that the light has been extinguished in Araby also corresponds to a detail in the Perilous Chapel, where Weston notes "a Hand, black and hideous, comes through the window, and extinguishes the taper, while a voice makes lamentation" (175). Again, Joyce's text was written before Weston's, so we are not suggesting that Joyce at all used these specific passages as models; instead, the correspondence of such symbolic details depicts how the boy sees his quest, and how he realizes that quest has failed. He has not restored his home to any degree – instead, he may return with a new spite for the empty houses of North Richmond

⁷ As mentioned previously, Weston is not writing on "Araby" or on Joyce. However, details from her scholarship inform the patterns medieval or Arthurian patterns noted by Mandel.

Street. Also, he has no Fisher King to heal, but will return to the same absent uncle, living in the same home of the priest.

However, the connection between the darkened bazaar of Araby and the symbol of the Chapel suggests another implication from the story's conclusion: that instead of being paralyzed, the boy's quest has merely changed forms. Within the text of "Araby," the boy arrives at a depressing piece of self-knowledge, that he is "a creature driven and derided by vanity" (41). This can imply a state of anguish and paralysis that continues past the story's conclusion. In its connection to romantic symbols, however, this self-realization can also imply a renewed sense of purpose. In *From Ritual to Romance*, Weston notes how, in grail legends, the first visit to the Chapel is followed by a second, this one intent on defeating whatever evil has beset the place, whatever hand has extinguished the flame (176-177). At the close of "Araby," it is possible that the boy will look upon darkness as being universal; or he may look upon it, as Joyce seems to, as being unique to Ireland. In this sense, the boy could continue past the pages of "Araby" with an urge to engage with the country's paralysis. This is, of course, speculation, but this implication does seem embodied in later texts like *Portrait*, and perhaps even in the life of Joyce himself, who left Ireland on a self-imposed exile, but whose fiction never leaves the characters and paralyzed streets of Dublin.

The story of "Araby" provides an illustration of paralysis as a failed attempt at filling absence with presence. While the boy embarks on what he feels is a symbolic quest, he realizes that he is surrounded by darkness and illusory symbols. The boy is paralyzed at the story's conclusion, but it is possible that he continues forward from his dejection with a renewed sense of purpose. Instead of healing a Fisher King who is not clearly in the story, the boy may be at the

first stage of healing himself: recognizing the preponderance for illusion in his life, and pursuing instead a life of meaning and substance.

Afterword

The above reading describes a boy who, living in a vacant, empty world, attempts to fill that world with substance. The nature of his world's vacancy is layered and complex – if we continue with the story's romantic parallels, then there are several candidates for the Fisher King, the sick presence that the boy is trying to restore. At the story's conclusion, we are left with two questions: does the boy heal the Fisher King? And does the boy heal himself? I have offered my interpretations to these questions above; however, I am not sure that "Araby" is meant to fully answer either.

Instead, I believe the story presents questions that continue throughout *Dubliners* and the rest of Joyce's work.

The question of the Fisher King relates to the land – and throughout *Dubliners*, the land is continually sick. Almost every story is set in the winter twilight. We find characters wandering empty night-time streets in "Two Gallants"; in "Ivy Day," the characters hide in a room whose darkness is barely abated by dying coals; characters in "The Dead" are constantly reminded of the snowy night that lays outside the comfort of their celebration.

This question of the paralyzed land persists throughout Joyce's later work as well. Stephen's motivation to go forth at the end of *Portrait* is a realization that he cannot heal the land from within, and that he must free himself in order to create the consciousness of Ireland. What is interesting in *Ulysses* is how characters still move through Dublin's paralyzed landscape; however, because we see the city on a summer's day in June (as opposed to the winter nights of *Dubliners*) the paralysis is not as overt. Dublin's sickness appears when Leopold Bloom sees the

occasional poverty on the street or hears the occasional Anti-Semitic comment – this sickness then becomes full-on hysteria by the novel’s ending, in the hallucinatory and drunken “Circe” episode. Finally, we even recognize traces of this relationship to the land in *Finnegans Wake*, when Earwicker’s dreaming body becomes the landscape of the text.

Questions of healing the individual soul run parallel to these questions of the land. In *Dubliners*, Joyce presents a variety of souls who can, perhaps, never be healed: Farrington in “Counterparts” and Little Chandler in “A Little Cloud” both come to mind, as both men end up abusing their children albeit in markedly different ways. In this abuse, the text seems to answer that the souls of the two men will never be healed; instead, we are faced with the question of how their children will fare after the story has ended. Perhaps the most poignant example of an individual, paralyzed soul occurs in “Eveline,” when Eveline’s inability to choose between staying and leaving Ireland results in her remaining, paralyzed, on a dock, watching her escape float away. The story forces us to wonder how Eveline will remember this event, or if she will let it fade into the absence and depression of her life in Dublin.

These questions seem to have followed Joyce throughout his life. Of course, Joyce famously declares war on the Catholic Church and imposes a self-exile from Ireland.

In the wake of this explicit anti-Catholicism, I am intrigued by a phrase in Anthony Burgess’s book *Re-Joyce*, where he writes that, despite his withdrawal from the church, Joyce’s work was more deeply Catholic than Catholic converts Graham Greene and Gerard Manley Hopkins. This is not to say these other writers were lacking in any sense; but their work was consciously Catholic, while Joyce’s was inescapably so. Even after departing the Church, in literature Joyce continued to pursue a meaning that transcended the material.

What most intrigues me about his work is how his literature is rooted in Dublin even while Joyce lived abroad. Joyce wrote of “spiritual liberation” in his letters, and I think he is sincere – he has a genuine desire to restore his homeland, or at least to spur it forward.

I think Joyce, at one time in his life, sensed a similar absence within himself as the boy in “Araby,” and perhaps even saw himself as “derided” by his own vanity. We see more evidence of this spiritual journey in *Portrait*, but we see its origins in “Araby”: a boy pursuing traditional, antiquated symbols before realizing the illusory nature of those symbols. We do not know if the boy in “Araby” continues past this point; however, it seems that Joyce continued to forge his own symbols, works that are complicated and illusory in appearance, but offer substance and liberation.

This is why it’s interesting to me how frequently contemporary readers parade Joyce as an anti-religious figure. Recently, I even saw an article on how *Dubliners* rescued someone from Orthodox Judaism. Joyce’s characters are trapped; oftentimes, readings focus on this entrapment, and the institutions that are doing the entrapping. I believe such readings focus on the illusory nature of Joyce’s work, taking it as a statement of the insubstantial, insufficient presence of religious institutions in Joyce’s time. In “Araby,” these institutions are represented by the boy’s championing of illusory symbols.

However, what I hope to have demonstrated in my reading is that Joyce’s characters are trapped by this land and by insufficient, empty spiritual symbols; but they are more defined by their willingness to seek than by their entrapment. Joyce is against antiquated practices, fake religion; his writing is a call towards genuine, spiritual experience.

In this way, studying Joyce has affected my own faith as I grow increasingly convinced that Joyce’s works are written primarily to encourage spiritual liberation. This liberation can be a

freedom from something, a call away from the paralytic rhythms in one's own life; but this freedom from is only to inspire a movement towards the real, the actual, and the experiential.

For me, Joyce's works have become a call back to faith and a return to the spiritual. Despite their reputation as texts that call readers away from religious practice, Joyce's work is fundamentally about giving up illusion and superficiality in order to pursue the substantial. In our contemporary era, we still see absence; however, this absence occurs as much outside of the church as it does inside of it. Joyce's work often confuses the reader with its complicated, riddled nature – as a reader, I often find myself grasping at the text, or not being sure what I have found – but Joyce does not only create obscurity. Instead, he inspires searching, a longing to be away from the illusory and closer to the liberating.

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