

Analysis of the Symbolic Meaning of James Joyce's *Araby*

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Araby is a short story by the famous Irish stream-of-consciousness writer James Joyce. Through a series of images, the novel expresses the theme of the story: the “mental paralysis” of Dubliners and the “spiritual Epiphany” of the little boy, which reflects the spiritual barren of Dubliners at that time. Through the analysis of the symbolic meaning of many images in the work, this paper reveals the social background and religious significance hidden behind the images.

Keywords: symbolic meaning, James Joyce, *Araby*

Introduction

James Joyce's “*Araby*” is the work of British writer James Joyce, excerpted from his collection, “Dubliners.” Joyce's novel is extremely delicate and rich in symbolism. But in *Araby*, few people have paid attention to the symbolic meaning in this work.

In this novel, James Joyce describes the story of a little boy falling in love with his sister next door. The little boy finally decided to go to the Araby bazaar to buy gifts for Mangan's sister, but when he finally arrived at Araby bazaar after going through hardships, he found that the market had already closed, and he finally returned empty-handed, disillusioned. Although the article is short, there are many special images in the article, and these images contain a lot of symbolic meanings, they are worth for us to explore. Therefore, this paper is developed around these special images in *Araby*, mainly discussed the symbolic meaning of each image in the article, the connection with religion, and so on. In the author's time, religious problems were prominent, the society was chaotic, and people's thoughts and lives were severely controlled by the British authorities (Chen, 2012, pp. 71-72). The author wanted to awaken dumb Dublin through his own article. Through the analysis of the symbolic meaning in the article, we can learn more information about the darkness of the society and the suppression of human nature.

The Symbolic Meanings of the Characters in *Araby*

The main characters in this novel include the boy and Mangan's sister. The boy in this novel symbolizes Joyce himself. Through the details described in the article, we can find that he is lonely, innocent and sensitive. At the beginning of the article, the boy lived in a place called North Richmond Street. It was cold and lonely, and the boy had few playmates. The boy has a unique feeling for the sister of his neighbor Mangan. In his usual daily life, the image of Mangan's sister appears in his mind from time to time. Every weekend in the evening, the little

boy always company with his aunt to go to the street to buy things. When crossing the noisy street, the little boy was not distracted by the noise around him, but walked forward more firmly, focusing all his attention on one point. As described in the article, the little boy crossed the street, as if he was holding the sacrament cup and passing safely among a group of enemies (Ju, 2010, pp. 29-31). From here, we can find that the little boy is lonely and has his own unique insights. He does not go with the world, but retains his own nature which is just like the author James Joyce in the real life.

The disillusionment of this boy symbolizes Joyce's own disappointment to the Dubliners. The little boy tried his best to find a chance to talk to Mangan's sister. When he finally found the opportunity to chat with Mangan's sister, he learned of a market called Araby from her, so he promised Mangan's sister to go to the Araby Bazaar to buy some gifts for her. The boy waited expectantly for the day to go to the Araby bazaar, and in this expectation, the Araby bazaar had a new meaning and became mysterious, but when that day really came, the little boy was obstructed by various factors, the uncle, who had agreed to give the boy money to go to the Bazaar a long time ago, came home very late that day. As a result, the boy could not catch the train to the Bazaar in advance, and when he was on the way to the Bazaar, he found that he did not have enough money for him to enter the Bazaar. He tried his best to make some tricks on the porter, in that way, he finally entered it. He was happy that he finally arrived at the place as promised, but soon he reluctantly found that most of the shops in the bazaar he was yearning for were closed. The little boy went to the only shop with the door opened to try to find what he could buy. But when he walked into the store, he was ignored by the sellers. He didn't buy anything, so he had to return empty-handed. The moment he turned around, the lights in the store went out instantly. The light represented the disillusionment of love in the heart of the little boy (Li, 2012, pp. 22-23). The disappointment of the little boy also represented the disappointment of the writer James Joyce at that time. He was very angry of the insensitive Dubliners and worried about the chaotic status in that time.

In the article, Mangan's sister also has multiple meanings. First of all, she symbolizes a beautiful ideal. For the little boy, Mangan's sister is his ideal. Everything about her is full of romance for the little boy. The little boy stands behind the blinds and looks at her hazy figure secretly, it's like an unattainable state when people are pursuing their own ideals. Everything about Mangan's sister is full of light, she is the light in the boy's life, guiding the boy's direction. When the little boy talked to her, the light reflected on her elegant neck and her hands was more beautiful when she gently put up on the railing, and even the corners of her skirt became more beautiful because of this kind of environment. Mangan's sister stood under the light, and the light complemented her, making her look like a character from a fairy tale book. The teenagers were obsessed with it, forgetting the hardships in life, the depressing North Richmond Avenue, the gloomy houses that looked at each other, and the damp priest's room. He focused most of his attention on Mangan's sister. As a young man, he hasn't been deeply involved in the world. For him, Mangan's sister is his ideal and his beautiful fantasy.

Mangan's sister also symbolizes family affection. In the article, when the author mentions the little boy's situation, he is often described as the one that is overlooked. As described in the article, when the little boy said to his aunt expectantly that he wanted to go to the Araby bazaar, his aunt thought that it was a place like Freemason, when the little boy asked his uncle to give him some money to go to the Araby bazaar, his uncle didn't pay much attention to it, and his uncle even went home very late on the day when he waited long time to go to the Araby bazaar, when the boy finally had chance to go to the Araby bazaar, it was almost closed. The environment and

experience of the little boy show that he lacks the love of his parents and someone who can really care about him. The appearance of Mangan's sister is undoubtedly a light in the boy's life, bringing hope to the boy. For the little boy, the image of Mangan's sister is hazy and vague, which is different from the image of the uncle and aunt in his home whose image is concrete (Li, 2008, pp. 53-54). He has lived in an insensitive family for a long time, and he wanted to pin his hopes on some obscure things (Wang, 2011, pp. 24-25). Because of this hazy feeling, when he found Mangan's sister, he felt that she was different from others, different from those insensitive people in the family, and because of this difference, he got a kind of satisfaction of family affection. Since his uncle and aunt could not give him warm love, he looked for this love in Mangan's sister. Therefore, the boy's affection for Mangan's sister perhaps more of family affection, the affection he has lacked since he was a child.

The Embodiment of Symbolism in the Environment

The first thing to discuss is North Richmond Street which is the living environment of the protagonist described at the beginning of the article. As described in the article, North Richmond Street is a dead end, except for the time when the children from the Christian Brothers School return home from school. It's usually quiet. At the end of the street there is an uninhabited two-story building that is some distance away from the other houses in this area. The other houses on the street seem to be self-righteous: staring at each other with gloomy faces (James Joyce, 1914).

The words are very simple, but they bring the reader's mood to a freezing point. There are some symbolic meanings in this sentence. From the sentence "North Richmond Street is a dead end", we can see that the life of the little boy is very boring and hopeless. Since this alley is described as a dead end, we can learn from it that the future of the little boy will be just like this alley, there will be no chance for him to find another way to walk when there was no way (Wang, 2013, pp. 35-36). What's more, this alley was also a deliberate symbol of the living environment of Irish people. They are enclosed in a social environment where "In the area of politics, they are unable to escape from the rules written by British, In the religious, they are unable to escape from the influence of Catholicism, and in the area of culture, they are unable to escape from retro autism" (Song, 2021, pp. 24-25). They always had no way to get out. The houses depicted by the author are in fact a symbol of the Irish in real life. The smart, friendly, and hardworking Irish seemed to have reached a dead end, but no one has the courage and strength to rush out. House is a symbol of the identity of a family, and from the sentence "the houses on this street seem to be self-righteous: staring at each other with gloomy faces", we can see that the houses on the street are gloomy and have no energy (Wu, 2010, pp. 84-86). It is not difficult to see the mental state and spiritual qualities of the people living in the house, how depressing the atmosphere makes the whole alley fall into silence, and how paranoid people make the whole house seem self-righteous. And the most chilling thing is that no one have an intention to change all of this kind of state when living in such a repressive environment. Everyone's unwillingness to change the bad status quo also reflects people's mental numbness (Wu, 2010, p. 51).

In this article, the priest who has died, the "three books" the boy found in the priest's relic, and the "desolate garden", the withered "apple tree", all of these images symbolized religious images at that time. The priest was a former tenant of the little boy's house. In this article we can see that his room is closed, and there is no life inside, it is very desolate. In addition, the author calls the pastor the "original tenant", all of these descriptions reflect the fact that the church business at that time was already in recession. Combining the life and death of the pastor, it is

not difficult to find that the church has gone from prosperity to decline, and people's beliefs have also begun to break. The next image to analyze is the "three books" the boy found in the priest's relic. As stated in the article, the little boy found three books in the priest's abandoned room. Logically speaking, the pastor's books should be books on preaching and religion, but the little boy found two books that had nothing to do with religious beliefs. One of the two books was "The Devout Communicant", and the other is "The Memoirs of Vidocq", and these two books are about adventure and love respectively. From here, we can see that the pastor who has died is extremely eager to live a worldly life and get rid of religious constraints. The "garden" described in the article symbolizes the Garden of Eden in the Bible. Before Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, the Garden of Eden was their paradise, where they lived carefree and did not know what suffering was, but after they ate the forbidden fruit, they were driven out of the place that was once full of laughter and happiness. The paradise no longer had their presence. The same is the garden in the article, which was originally as full of vitality as the Garden of Eden. The garden was already deserted and left unattended, which meant that in the society at that time, people's spiritual homes had collapsed and became barren. In the history, it's said that there is a tree of wisdom in the Garden of Eden, and the forbidden fruit that Adam and Eve stolen grows on the tree of wisdom. This tree can teach people how to recognize good and evil, and the fruit allows people to have the ability to choose freely. And the apple tree in the article is a symbol of the wisdom tree in the Garden of Eden. But as described in the article, the apple tree did not flourish, but withered and withered. This also reflects that people at the time could not see their own situation clearly, the spiritual world was extremely barren. People were lost in their own fate, and abandoned the original religious beliefs, which lead to a serious crisis of faith, people's spiritual world is no longer rich but increasingly barren (Xia, 2011, p. 20).

All of these images above reflect the crisis of religious beliefs in the society at that time, and this crisis is also expressed in another part of the article. When describing the situation of the Brotherhood of Christ after school, the author did not use ordinary language to describe it, but used the phrase "set the boys free", the word "free" not only contains the meaning that children finally get rid of the heavy schoolwork, but also contains a strong religious color, that is, only in a limited time, people can break themselves away from religion and get temporary self-release. The author alludes to the Brotherhood of Christ as the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church is like a prison (Yang, 2009, pp. 78-80). People who believe in the Catholic Church have lost their mental freedom and blindly obey the words of the Catholic Church. Like prisoners, they couldn't resist and even didn't want to resist their bitter and boring life. As an Irishman, James Joyce lived under the shadow of being ruled by the British. He tried to get rid of the status quo, but was powerless.

Conclusion

This story contains a wealth of symbolic imagery, such as the Araby Bazaar where the boy disillusioned, the apple tree and the abandoned bicycle tube in the priest's garden, the three books in the priest's room, North Richmond Avenue, Mangan's sister, and so on, all these images show readers the state of spiritual nihilism in society at the time, criticizing the Dubliners at that time becoming insensitive and losing themselves under British rule, even innocent children are inevitable to get hurt. A simple love story becomes heavy because of these tragic symbolic images. This article and the symbolism in it not only had an important impact on society at the time, but also affected writers in later generations. It is worth for us to explore it in a deeper way.

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