ISSN 1753-2396 (Print)
ISSN 2753-328X (Online)

Journal of
Irish and Scottish Studies

Articles

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Volume 10, Issue 2
Pp: 49-55
2020
Published on: 1st Jan 2020

1 4 9 5

ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Quest through the Real

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Centring on the first emotional experience of an adolescent boy in twentieth-century Dublin, Joyce's 'Araby' masterfully amalgamates physical and psychological quests. The external quest of the protagonist is an actual journey, so to speak, to the Araby bazaar in search of a gift for his beloved. The action in the story might strike the reader as nothing more than a go-and-fetch task for a teenager. It is clear from the very start, however, that the boy sees his actions as much more than that. He sees himself as a holy knight searching for the Grail. 'I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes' he says, strongly encouraging the idea that to him, his sweetheart is much more than a mere subject of infatuation.[1] She has no name and is constantly referred to as Mangan's sister. She is, in this particular context, his *objet petit a*.[2] *Objet petit a*, for Jacques Lacan, is 'not part of the signifying chain; it is a 'hole' in that chain. It is a hole in the field of representation, but it does not simply ruin representation'; 'it both produces a hole and is what comes to the place of lack to cover it over.'[3] It is with the search for this object, represented in Magnan's sister, that the boy's second, and internal, quest begins.

While the boy's physical journey toward his chalice fails to bring to fruition his initial desire, his internal quest is fulfilled, and he is transformed into something else; he becomes a 'creature'.[4] He loses a part of his innocence and transforms from a boy into a man. But he is not really sad, rather, he 'is reacting to sudden and deeply disturbing insights'.[5] He comes to the understanding that having failed to obtain the object, much like the Holy Grail that knights of the roundtable fail to obtain, he is all but certain to

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[1] James Joyce, 'Araby' in idem, *Dubliners (Webster's Thesaurus Edition)* (San Diego, 2005), 24.

[2] Eugene O'Brien, 'The Return and Redefinition of the Repressed' in Leonard Orr (ed.), *Joyce, Imperialism, & Colonialism* (New York, 2008), 54.

[3] Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London, 2005), 88.

[4] Joyce, 'Araby', 29.

[5] Harry Stone, '"Araby" and the Writings of James Joyce' in Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz (eds), *Dubliners: Text, Criticism, and Notes* (New York, 1976), 349.

have lost his chance with the girl, thus realising the childishness and 'vanity' of his love. This realisation is the epiphany of this short story.[6]

An epiphany for Joyce is a 'sudden spiritual manifestation'.[7] Epiphanies are often climactic and momentary, transforming the person experiencing them into someone, or something, else. They bring out an object's 'soul, its whatness', the very core that underlies all but is never truly achievable, except in those rare moments of epiphany.[8] This article argues that the moment of epiphany can be read as a clash with the Real in Lacanian terminology; it is that which is beyond reality. In the moment of epiphany, trauma of the real occurs and the subject starts 'traversing the fantasy' to take 'the traumatic event upon him/herself and assumes responsibility for that *jouissance*'.[9] Jouissance is a 'pleasure *in* pain' achieved through the loss of fantasy, it is in fact opposed to fantasy and related to death drive.[10] In 'Araby', then, the unforeseen 'chalice' obtained by the boy at the end of his internal quest connects to the Lacanian idea of *jouissance* and shows how an epiphany leads to *jouissance*.

Discussion

To discuss the quests within 'Araby' a thorough examination of its structure is vital. The story is skilfully crafted in the structure of a medieval romance.[11] The boy, as the knight in shining armor, is in search of an object, much like the grail, to prove his everlasting and courtly love to the girl. The main concern here, however, is what happens from the moment this knight's arduous journey proves to have been in vain.

The story opens with the *entrance* of the hero, which in this case is located in the boy's neighbourhood in Dublin.[12] As expected from Joyce, a very dark picture is drawn at the very beginning: 'North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street'.[13] The first part of the story is steeped with strong images of Christian belief and their hold on the neighbourhood, from the 'Christian

[6] Joyce, 'Araby', 29.
[7] M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (7th edition; Boston, 1999), 80.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 89.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Jerome Mandel, 'The Structure of "Araby"', *Modern Language Studies*, 15 (1985), 48.
[12] Ibid., 49.
[13] Joyce, 'Araby', 24.

Brothers' School' to the identity of the 'former tenant' of the protagonist's house, who was a priest.[14] These pictures in turn strengthen the romance of the story, giving it a religious edge.

The entrance phase ends with the introduction of the beloved, Mangan's sister, as she comes 'out on the doorstep to call her brother in to tea'.[15] The romance structure is supported by the position the boy assumes. His manner of love is gentle, a silent adulation conducted from afar, which helps to shape the image of the boy as a hero akin to 'Lancelot, Tristan, Cliges who must maintain public distance from the one they most adore'.[16] 'Every morning I lay on the floor in the front parlour watching her door. The blind was pulled down to within an inch of the sash so that I could not be seen' he says.[17] This is, certainly, the normal behaviour for an adolescent boy in his situation, but Joyce weaves the story in a way that 'it reflects the conventions of medieval romance'.[18] The theme of courtly love is supported by the boy's desire to 'protect her' and follow her 'morning after morning' without receiving any gratitude or recognition.[19] He lives in a world where the environment is 'most hostile to romance' yet his infatuation is so strong that 'her name' springs to his 'lips at moments in strange prayers and praises' which he himself does not understand.[20]

The story moves to the quest when Magnan's sister speaks to the boy at long last. As the knight that he believes he is, he is more than ready to do his Lady's biddings. He is so astonished when she speaks to him that he cannot even remember how he answered. 'When she addressed the first words to me I was so confused that I did not know what to answer. She asked me was I going to Araby. I forgot whether I answered yes or no'.[21] The quest begins when the girl states that 'She would love to go' to the Araby bazaar but she cannot.[22] The boy, ready to fulfil whatever wish the girl might have, takes the comment as an order to go to the bazaar in her stead and bring her a gift in the hope that she finally acknowledges his love. She in turn grants him her favour through 'bowing her head towards' the boy, a much-cited act in medieval romances. 'I

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Mandel, 'The Structure of "Araby"', 50.
[17] Joyce, 'Araby', 24.
[18] Mandel, 'The Structure of "Araby"', 50.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Joyce, 'Araby', 24.
[21] Ibid., 25.
[22] Ibid.

will bring you something' he promises, as he departs.[23]

Upon accepting the challenge, all else becomes irrelevant to the boy, a hindrance to what he desires to do; he wishes 'to annihilate the tedious intervening days'.[24] He cannot focus on schoolwork, he cannot think about anything other than her be it at home or at school. He keeps fantasizing about the bazaar as 'an Eastern enchantment'.[25] His family is, in a way, against the quest; there is in fact the possibility that his aunt believes his quest to be fictitious as she says she hopes the boy is not 'involved in some Freemason affair'.[26] His uncle, who is supposed to fund his quest, forgets all about it and does not return until late at night. 'At nine o'clock I heard my uncle's latchkey in the halldoor'.[27] He then tries to convince the boy not to go by saying 'The people are in bed and after their first sleep now', showing that he does not truly understand the graveness of the situation. Here the boy overcomes his first obstacle and carries on with his quest. He takes 'a third-class carriage of a deserted train' to the bazaar, still bent on fulfilling his quest.[28] Upon entering the bazaar, he notices something amiss, 'there was no sixpenny entrance' he asserts and 'a silence like that which pervades a church after a service'.[29] He is beginning to understand that his quest will fail. He walks 'into the centre of the bazaar timidly', then goes toward one of the few open stores, whose salesperson does not seem to encourage his buying anything.[30] It is here that he realizes the futility of his mission; in his own words: 'the light was out. The upper part of the hall was now completely dark'.[31] He has realized that he will not be able to obtain the gift, therefore the girl will never know of his interest in her. 'Gazing up into the darkness' he realizes that his desire will never be fulfilled and his 'eyes' burn 'with anguish and anger'.[32] His physical quest thus fails, but a transformation occurs. He is no longer a boy, but, in Joyce's words, a 'creature driven and derided by vanity'. The protagonist's tone here shifts from that of an adolescent – timid, bubbly and hopeful – to that of a man – experienced, cynical, dejected – having seen the

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 26.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 27.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 28.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 29.

futility of his own wishes. This moment is the epiphany in 'Araby'. It is this transformation that is the object of the boy's underlying quest, and in this sense, he has not failed: 'The quest is successful since it leads to vision and epiphany'.[33]

As the boy's *objet petit a*, Magnan's sister plays a key role in the transformation that occurs. The quest that the boy sets off on involves the displacement of his libido, meaning he settles for buying his love interest an object instead of telling her how he feels.[34] 'The construction of the subjectivity of the beloved object' is among the key elements in the story. As noted above, the girl has no name of her own, there is just the indication that she *belongs* to a character called Magnan, she is Magnan's sister. She is in fact 'the lost object that initiates the chain of desire within the narrator himself', and for Lacan, desire cannot and will not be fulfilled, it is in its very nature to resist fulfilment.[35] In this way it is clear that the boy's quest was bound to fail from the very first moment. What is important to note here is that she is seen not as an actual person but, as Eugene O'Brien narrates it, as a body, as an other, and often different parts of the body act as metonyms for her totality:

> She was waiting for us, her *figure* defined by the light from the half-opened door ... Her *dress* swung as she moved her *body,* and the *soft rope of her hair* tossed from side to side ... While she spoke she turned a silver bracelet round and round her *wrist* ... 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. At fell over one side of her dress and caught the *white border of a petticoat,* just visible as she stood at ease.[36]

She is thus not a subject, rather she is the object of the boy's scopic drive and her function is to 'designate his developing subjectivity as one who is in love'; she is, in this sense, a 'signifier of the boy's desire and of his societal development from a boy to a young man'.[37] The only use of this character, Magnan's sister, is to define the narrator, to be a metaphorical mirror for the

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[33] Mandel, 'The Structure of "Araby"', 7.

[34] O'Brien, 'The Return and Redefinition', 54.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Joyce, 'Araby', 24-5 quoted in O'Brien, 'The Return and Redefinition', 54-5. Note O'Brien's emphasis.

[37] O'Brien, 'The Return and Redefinition', 55.

narrator to see his own growth and maturation.[38] She provides the means for the protagonist to assert his 'I'. The many possessive adjectives and pronouns in the text that follows serve as examples of this point:

> *I* imagined that *I* bore *my* chalice safely through a throng of foes. Her name sprang to *my* lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which *I* myself did not understand. My eyes were often full of tears (*I* could not tell why) and at times a flood from *my* heart seemed to pour itself out into *my* bosom. *I* thought little of the future. *I* did not know whether *I* would ever speak to her or not or, if *I* spoke to her, how *I* could tell her of *my* confused adoration. But *my* body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires.[39]

The girl thus serves to reflect an image of the boy back to himself; 'through the scopic drive, the power of the gaze'.[40] With this in mind, it can be asserted that his journey to the Araby bazaar is in fact 'undertaken through the eye of the other'.[41] The protagonist, then, is heading, albeit unwittingly, toward a place where his ideals will be shattered and his object of desire lost.

Now to analyse the ending from this perspective, in the moment that the boy realises that his desire is not to be achieved, the walls of his reality are shattered and he enters a state of trauma. This part of the passage is marked with elements of despair; a despair resulting from the loss of desire and necessary for *jouissance*:

> *I lingered* before her stall, though I knew my stay was *useless*, to make my interest in her wares seem the more real. Then I turned away slowly and walked down the middle of the bazaar. *I allowed* the two pennies to *fall* against the sixpence in my pocket. 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*.[42]

As the girl is his desire, through losing any hope of obtaining her, the boy is

[38] Ibid.

[39] Joyce, 'Araby', 24 in O'Brien, 'The Return and Redefinition', 55-6 (O'Brien's emphasis).

[40] O'Brien, 'The Return and Redefinition', 56.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Joyce, 'Araby', 29, my emphasis.

traumatised and *jouissance* occurs. It is, again, in the same moment that epiphany takes place and the boy changes.

This means that for this particular story, the chalice in the quest, the epiphany and the trauma are all one and the same thing. Through having the protagonist lose his object of desire, Joyce gives him something more important: a new insight into the world, a separation from the innocence and boyhood and a maturation into something else. It is this state of becoming 'something else', this transition, that constitutes the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*.

Conclusion

In the short story 'Araby', Joyce introduces to us a character, not to be recognised until the very last paragraph, who is making a mockery of his younger self through telling us a benign, innocent love story about a teenager using the structure of medieval epics. The character being mocked is completely unaware of the situation and fancies himself a knight in shining armour, there to aid the damsel in distress upon being called to action. In the ending of the story, as the young boy's quest for glory seemingly amounts to nothing; yet he gains something even more valuable: experience. Although the story closes with the 'anger' and the 'anguish' of the protagonist, we understand through the Lacanian psychoanalysis of the character that these feelings are in fact what is real; *jouissance*. The paralysis that undergirds this story is in fact a price to be paid for *jouissance*. Through taking away from his characters what they hold most dear, or what they think they do, Joyce gives them something else, an epiphany, the achievement of which necessitates the loss of what the characters think they want.

What Joyce was illustrating is that the protagonist's childish dreams are filled with inaccurate ideologies about the world, he has no choice but to fail, but to be crushed under the mass of the truth. Lacanian psychoanalysis reveals that the boy's quest is destined to fail from the moment he decides to undertake it. The Lacanian concept of *jouissance* is the result of this failure. Indeed, the actual object of the quest is *jouissance*.

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