

# An Analysis of the Influence of Religion in James Joyce's "Araby"

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## Abstract

James Joyce's "Araby" is a short story deeply embedded in the religious context of early 20th-century Ireland. Based on close textual analysis, this paper aims to analyse how Catholic imagery and language shape the narrator's perception of love and reality. Using the full text as raw data, a qualitative approach is adopted to interpret religious symbols and allusions in the story. The results show that the narrator internalizes religious vocabulary and combines his romantic feelings with the veneration of the Virgin Mary, finally considering his quest as a failed pilgrimage. Religious imagery does not merely decorate the text. It confines the boy psychologically. His disillusionment at the bazaar thus becomes Joyce's critique of Catholicism as a primary cause of Ireland's spiritual paralysis, revealing how religion distorts adolescent emotion and deepens Dublin's social paralysis.

## Keywords

Religious language, love, loss of faith, disillusionment.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Plot Summary of "Araby"

James Joyce's short story "Araby" follows a young boy who lives with his aunt and uncle and becomes deeply obsessed with his neighbor, Mangan's sister. When she asks him whether he plans to visit a bazaar named Araby, he promises to bring her a gift from the fair. However, the boy is delayed in departing for the fair and arrives just as it is closing. He is ultimately disillusioned by the gap between what he finds there and what he had imagined.

### 1.2. Historical and Religious Context: Catholic Ireland in the Early 20th Century

In the historical context of "Araby", Ireland was still under British colonial rule. The country's incomplete political independence, economic stagnation, and the emotional detachment between individuals contributed to an atmosphere of oppression in which people struggled in frustration and despair (Guo, 2004). By the mid-nineteenth century, Catholics accounted for more than seventy percent of Ireland's population, and society had sunk into a state of spiritual paralysis. As the dominant religion, Catholicism exerted a profound influence on Irish culture, particularly in the field of education. Many children were sent to Jesuit-run schools such as the one the narrator attended in the story, or to convents such as the one Mangan's sister attended. While such religious education reinforced Catholic ideology, it also intensified people's inner anxiety and contributed to the disorder of daily life in the context of a collapsing spiritual order. In this environment, the spiritual emptiness fostered by religion deeply shaped people's ways of living and directly influenced the behavior of characters in *Dubliners* (Jafari, Soqandi, & Birgani, 2019).

## 2. Literature Review

Previous research on James Joyce's "Araby" has focused on its use of symbols, its portrayal of Dublin's social paralysis, and its treatment of faith and disillusionment themes.

## 2.1. Studies on Symbolism and Imagery in “Araby”

Some research has focused on Joyce’s use of symbolism and sensory imagery. Scholars have consistently identified the interplay of light and darkness as central to the story’s meaning. Kho (2020) offered a detailed analysis of how lighting from the half-opened door illuminating Mangan’s sister to the extinguishing of the lamps at the bazaar reveals the narrator’s perception, effectively conveying his psychological blindness. This attention to visual detail is echoed in Chinese scholars. Tang and Qi (2022) argued that Joyce’s repeated use of the word “dark” constructed a spiritually impoverished Dublin. These studies convincingly demonstrate that symbolism in “Araby” is not merely decorative but essential to the story’s thematic concerns.

## 2.2. Studies on the Portrayal of Paralysis in “Araby”

Other scholars read “Araby” as a portrayal of Irish social and spiritual paralysis. Farquhar (2018) closely examined paralysis as the central condition of Dubliners. He argued that the boy’s disillusionment came from his failed attempt to fill the emptiness around him with romantic and spiritual dreams. Similarly, Kong (2024) considered the story’s aimlessness and weakened religious atmosphere as signs of a colonized and stagnant Dublin. Maniee and Mansouri (2017) took a post-colonial view. They have pointed out that the English accents at the bazaar and the boy’s fascination with exotic Oriental fantasies reflected British cultural and linguistic control over Ireland, which was a main cause of Irish paralysis.

## 2.3. Studies on Faith and Disillusionment in “Araby”

A third group of studies focuses more directly on the narrator’s personal faith and its eventual collapse. Jafari et al. (2019) have noted that the boy habitually used Catholic vocabulary such as “chalice,” “prayers,” and “praises” to describe his feelings for Mangan’s sister. This suggests that his emotional world is shaped less by genuine religious belief than by a language inherited from his upbringing. When this language fails to match reality, disillusionment follows. Susanto (2021) pointed out that the boy’s love for the girl was not ordinary first love, but a kind of faith. His frustrated experience at the bazaar is equivalent to the collapse of this religious ritual of faith.

While previous studies have treated religion in “Araby” as cultural context or thematic element, less attention has been paid to how Catholic language actually works within the story to shape the boy’s emotional world. Therefore, this paper aims to explore how the narrator’s inherited Catholic language influences his romantic experience as well as leads inevitably to its collapse and answer the following research questions:

- (1) How does the narrator’s internalized Catholic vocabulary shape his perception of Mangan’s sister and his experience of romantic love?
- (2) In what ways does this religious framework lead to the narrator’s disillusionment both in love and religion?

## 3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research design. According to Punch (1998), qualitative research is empirical research where the data are not in the form of numbers but in the form of words. Since this paper aims to interpret how Catholic language and imagery function within the narrative of “Araby” to shape the narrator’s emotional experience, a qualitative approach is appropriate. It allows for an in-depth examination of textual details rather than statistical measurement.

The primary data is the full text of James Joyce’s short story “Araby” (Joyce, 2008, pp. 19-25). The analysis follows the method of close reading, which involves a careful, line-by-line

examination of the story's language, imagery, and narrative way. Specific attention is paid to the narrator's use of Catholic vocabulary such as "chalice," "prayers," "praises," and references to the Virgin Mary.

The research procedure consists of three main stages, adapted from the planning stages for qualitative research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The first stage involves locating the field of study and formulating research questions, which in this paper means identifying "Araby" as the textual site and developing questions focused on the role of Catholic language. The second stage involves data collection through repeated, attentive reading of the text, during which relevant passages containing religious imagery or vocabulary are identified and cited. The third stage involves data analysis, in which the selected textual evidence is interpreted to reveal how the narrator's inherited Catholic language influences his perception of love and how this framework ultimately collapses at the bazaar.

By employing a qualitative, text-based approach grounded in close reading, this paper tries to offer a detailed account of the relationship between religious language and psychological disillusionment in this story.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. Constructing Love through Religious Language

From the beginning of "Araby", Joyce clearly portrays the deep-rooted presence of the Catholic Church in the daily life of Dublin. The narrator mentions that the street where he lives is near the Christian Brothers' School. His house is once inhabited by a priest who "had died in the back drawing-room" (Joyce, 2008, p. 19). The priest's papers and books are still littered around the back drawing-room, and the air "musty from having been long enclosed, hung in all the rooms" (Joyce, 2008, p. 19). Religion is like the air itself, dominating the lives and movements of the characters in "Araby".

In such a religious environment, the boy internalizes the Catholic ideal of devotion to the Virgin Mary and finds a substitute in the real world. He is particularly captivated by the sister of one of his classmates. In the narrator's first description of Mangan's sister, she is illuminated from behind. From this sentence "Her dress swung as she moved her body, and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side. Every morning I lay on the floor in the front parlour watching her door" (Joyce, 2008, p. 20), the narrator can be seen as a prostrate worshipper. In addition, he remarks that "Her image accompanied me even in places the most hostile to romance" (Joyce, 2008, p. 20), suggesting that her presence haunts him as if she were a sacred icon.

When the narrator realizes his romantic feelings for Mangan's sister, he begins to worship her, and he uses abundant Catholic symbols to express his affection for her. He imagines himself carrying a "chalice safely through a throng of foes" (Joyce, 2008, p. 20), uttering strange prayers and praises, with her name often rising spontaneously to his lips. He does not understand the meaning of these prayers and praises, but his eyes are often filled with tears. "At times a flood from my heart seemed to pour itself out into my bosom," (Joyce, 2008, p. 20) as if the intensity of his emotion were too much for him to contain. One evening, he enters the room where the priest had died with a devotion as if entering a church, and soon falls into a state of prayer-like fever: "I pressed the palms of my hands together until they trembled, murmuring: 'O love! O love!' many times" (Joyce, 2008, p. 21).

When Mangan's sister finally speaks to the narrator, they stand on the railings on the steps of her house. The railings remind the altar rails at which Catholics kneel to receive Communion during Mass. In this context, Mangan's sister's bowing posture and the narrator's vivid description of her bathed in light are reminiscent of artistic depictions of the Virgin Mary (Kho, 2020). During their subsequent conversation, Mangan's sister says she cannot attend the bazaar because she must go on a convent retreat. When the narrator's eyes fall on the silver bracelet

around her wrist, he resolves to go to the bazaar and bring back something as a present. At this moment, the narrator's obsession almost approaches idolatry.

Based on various details, the narrator's religious associations with Mangan's sister evidently stem from the dominant role of Catholicism in his upbringing. Because the Church at the time suppressed and denied romantic and sexual feelings, especially those outside of marriage, the narrator is left with only religious language to express such intense emotions.

#### **4.2. Losing Faith in Love and Religion**

By religious framework, the writer refers to the inherited Catholic vocabulary and patterns of thought through which the boy makes sense of his feelings. This religious framework does not simply fail at the end of the story. It fails in stages, each step making disillusionment more inevitable.

First, this framework teaches the boy to perceive love in a wrong way. From the beginning, he regards Mangan's sister not as an ordinary girl but as a figure worthy of worship. Under the influence of Catholic language, he has transformed a simple adolescent crush into a sacred quest. The girl becomes the Virgin Mary. The errand becomes a pilgrimage and the gift becomes a holy offering.

Second, this framework gives the boy false expectations of reality. The word Araby seems to cast an Eastern enchantment over him, and he imagines the bazaar as a magical realm where his devotion will be rewarded. Just as prayer is supposed to bring divine response, he believes that his faithful waiting, enduring the delay of his uncle and the slowness of the train will be repaid with something splendid. The religious script promises meaning and fulfillment. He expects the reality to follow it.

Third, this framework leaves the boy utterly defenseless before the real world. When he finally arrives at Araby, he finds not enchantment but a darkening hall with closed stalls and the sound of falling coins. The young woman at the counter speaks to him only out of duty and soon returns to flirting with two young men in English accents. At this moment, the religious framework that once gave shape to his emotions offers no explanation for what he sees. The chalice has no place among tea sets and vases. The prayers have no answer in the flirtatious laughter and jingling coins. The framework that elevated his love into something sacred now leaves him exposed to the banality of the secular world, unable to make sense of it.

In the end, the boy sees himself clearly for the first time, "a creature driven and derided by vanity" (Joyce, 2008, p. 25). The vocabulary that once made him feel like a knight now reveals him as a boy who mistook an ordinary girl for a saint and a shabby bazaar for an enchanted kingdom. His faith in love and his trust in the religious framework collapse together.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In "Araby", James Joyce masterfully uses religious imagery and symbolic language to explore the psychological and emotional influence of Catholicism on the narrator's perception of love, self, and society. Through the narrator's idealization of Mangan's sister and the religious expressions in his language and actions, the story highlights how deeply Catholic ideology shapes his inner world.

However, the boy's ultimate disillusionment at the bazaar reveals the limits of such idealism, exposing the gap between spiritual aspiration and reality. His failure to find meaning in either love or the symbolic pilgrimage to Araby suggests a broader loss of faith, not only in his romantic ideals but also in the religious structures that shape him. In the end, "Araby" is not simply a story of adolescent obsession but a critique of the spiritual paralysis induced by religious and cultural repression in early 20th-century Ireland.

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