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Interview on James Joyce's *Araby*

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As a writer, James Joyce is one of the pioneering representatives of modernist English literature in the early decades of the twentieth century. He introduced new techniques and approaches in his novels and short stories, which put him at once into a different category when compared with the writers of the nineteenth-century Victorian English writers. In his writings, Joyce dealt with various issues which still draw attention of the readers worldwide. It is because of this interest that Dr. Leo Mahoney interviews Dr. Ali Gunes about how he was interested in Joyce's writings, as well as about his short stories collected in a book titled *Dubliners*, and then Dr. Mahoney discuss Joyce's short story *Araby* with Dr. Gunes.

Leo Mahoney: I guess my first question is what inspired your interest in Irish fiction and James Joyce in particular?

Dr. Ali Gunes: My interest in James Joyce and Irish fiction grew during my PhD study on Virginia Woolf at Liverpool John Moores University, UK. While reading about the relation of Woolf's world view and that of the other modernist writers, Joyce captured my interest - an interest which has afterward caused me to study his novels, particularly *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, along with some of his short stories published in *Dubliners*. Behind my interest in Joyce, I may say that there are a few reasons. First, what I have noticed in Joyce's writing is that he, once compared to Woolf, gives outspoken and radical messages about life and reality, mostly in his novels, which are mainly related to Irish society and culture. As for these messages in *A Portrait*, the conflict between religion and politics, the religious education system and personal identity formation may be given as examples. But Joyce's messages obviously have wider implications beyond Ireland. Secondly, I have found

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his non-conformist, non-traditional views very interesting, captivating and challenging. Joyce, in fact, shows how an artist should be if s/he hankers for freedom and for being critical in her/his views without being exposed to any constraint. This is what I like most, as it challenges the position of artist in the past and today in that the artist often finds himself/herself in conflict between the restrictive norms of his/her society and his/her own yearning for a different view of life. Finally, the way Joyce represents Irish society and culture may also be useful for cultural and comparative studies, since Joyce's fiction and short stories become proper sources for foreigners, like myself far away, to learn about Irish society and culture, along with the life of Irish people, their views, their way of life, and aspirations, a century ago.

So, then, what are the thematic preoccupations of Joyce's *Dubliners*?

Gunes: First published in 1914, *Dubliners* is a collection of fifteen short stories. As for Joyce's thematic preoccupations in all these stories, various views may be put forward. In a letter to the London publisher Grant Richards, Joyce wrote about his main concern that thematically knits all the stories together in *Dubliners*: "*My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis.*" Irish people, as Joyce continues to state in the same letter, *have obviously been crippled in their views and thus prevented for ages from "having one good look at themselves": that is, Irish people have been unable to improve their lives, along with the standard of living and for ages. To me, the second thematic concern may be the continual artistic growth from the first story to the last one. Since the stories are organized in the order of "childhood", "adolescence", "maturity", and "public life," the reader can not only follow how Joyce's characters artistically develop story after story in *Dubliners*, but also see how life is perceived and represented in Irish society and culture at different stages from childhood to maturity. The third thematic concern is the strong desire of characters in each story to escape from the "odour of corruption" in Irish society as Joyce writes to Grant Richards, corruption ostensibly linked to religion, family, politics, language and nationalism. Hence, characters often seek distance, place, new adventures and relationship, although they frequently seem crippled in their attempts. What's important here is that characters' attempts powerfully suggest a strong for a "new" view of life and relation in a world where their lives will be free, happy and peaceful.*

Very thorough. Have you read *Araby*? If so, in your view, what's its major theme?

Gunes: Yes, I have. Joyce represents a view of identity crisis through his portrait of the unnamed boy in *Araby* when the boy despondently oscillates between the “blind,” “quiet,” “dark muddy lanes” of the street and his strong desire or romanticized yearning for escape from this unhappy situation. His shouts of escape strongly echo in the silent street, yet they remain unanswered and empty for him. At this point, his “romance” or “love for his neighbour Mangan’s sister” appears as a solution to him when it takes him a little bit from the “ugly monotonous” and “dark odorous” aspect of his life. He always chases after and often watches her at a distance. “Her dress”, “her body”, and “the soft rope of her hair” become the source of admiration, healing and inspiration, and thus every morning he “lay[s] on the floor in the front parlour watching her door”, and “When she came out on the doorstep[, his] heart leaped”; he keeps “her brown figure” always in his eye, and “Her image accompanied [him] even in places the most hostile to romance”. On one occasion she speaks to him and asks him if he wants to go to *Araby*, “a splendid bazaar.” On Saturday morning, he tells his uncle that he wishes to go to the bazaar in the evening and asks him for money to purchase a present for Mangan’s sister, a token through which he might aim at improving his emotional relations with and get closer to her.

At this point, Joyce invents two strategies to further stress the boy’s crippled identity with a sense of having no way out from the “centre of paralysis.” In one of these strategies, Joyce makes the boy’s uncle forget that his nephew wants go to the bazaar and he comes home very late. The oversight fuels the boy’s anger and frustration. Once the boy gets money, it’s already too late; yet he is insistent on going to *Araby*. Joyce’s second strategy appears when the boy gets to the bazaar, as it on the point of closing; he sees that almost all the stalls, except one, are closed; he examines “porcelain vases and flowered tea-sets”, but he is unable to buy anything of value for Mangan’s sister. Having lingered before the only open stall for a while, he says: “Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger”. In *Araby*, as in his other short stories in *Dubliners*, Joyce represents the boy in a way that, although he longs to run away from the “centre of paralysis”, he obviously seems crippled and thwarted in his sense and vision, so that the boy “thought little of the future” in his life. The crisis of identity looks to be a strong and major theme in *Araby*.

Joyce’s Ireland doesn’t seem to be an inviting country.

Gunes: To me, Ireland in *Araby* is represented in such a way that it does not promise any hope to its inhabitants. It fits Joyce’s view of Ireland as described to Grant Richards in his letter. When the story opens, Joyce presents North Richmond Street as “being blind,” a dead

end with “An uninhabited house of two storeys stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbours in a square ground”. The atmosphere and physical condition of houses are “musty,” gloomy and miserable. The reader follows “through the dark muddy lanes behind the houses...to the back doors of the dark dripping gardens where odours arose from the ash-pits, to the dark odorous stables where a coachman smoothed and combed the horse or shook music from the buckled harness.” Joyce’s North Richmond Street is not a healthful, cheerful and promising picture of Ireland. Moreover, the neighborhood isn’t lively; when “shouts [just] echo in the silent street”, they do not get a response. He suggests an emptiness, loneliness, and lack of warm communication, even though the cities are the centres of social, cultural and artistic activities.

What is even more important for his representation of Ireland is that Joyce creates a close connection between the shabby, derelict condition of urban houses to human identities of his characters. The houses influence the ways people feel and see their lives. In this sense, Ireland, like “musty” houses, fills its citizens with melancholy, with a sense of desolation and frustration. Living with this sad sense of life, therefore, people become disabled, incapable of seeking their voice, freedom and future. In this case, the boy in *Araby* is unable to buy a present for his love due to his lack of money – poverty - and his uncle’s careless neglect of the boy’s deepest want and need. These facts frustrate the young man terribly. The purchase of a gift for the girl would have enabled him to get closer to her and, at the same time, to the center of a full social life. His distress now causes him to fall apart emotionally and, in his senses and his imagination, to be “burned with anguish and anger,” and to fall “into the darkness” as “a creature driven and derided by vanity.”

Critics have said that one of the major themes of *Araby* is loss of innocence. Can you comment?

Gunes: You are right. As I’ve suggested, the loss of innocence in *Araby* derives mainly from the clash of the idealized, dreamy world of the boy and the harsh reality of the adult world around him - a clash that visibly extinguishes beauty, love and warmth in life. *Araby* is, in fact, a love story, and when the image of Mangan’s sister accompanies him “even in places the most hostile to romance,” or when her name springs to his lips “at moments in strange prayers and praises,” the boy-narrator obviously becomes very emotional, happy, excited; he forgets the depressive and “blind” side of North Richmond Street, and he exclaims in “a single sensation of life:” “‘O love! O love!’ many times.” He imagines that he can now bear his “chalice safely through a throng of foes.” Having spoken to Mangan’s sister and decided to go and buy a gift for her, he “wished to annihilate the tedious intervening days” and

“chafed against the work of school,” so that “[a]t night in my bedroom and by day in the classroom her image came between me and the page I strove to read.” His omnipresent image of Mangan’s sister inspires his feeling and removes him from the “tedious” activities of his daily life. The kid’s in love.

But Joyce depicts the boy in such a way that his naivety or innocence is quickly displaced by the harsh reality of the world outside his dreams. Crucially, his uncle forgets his promise to the boy and comes home very late; his train unaccountably leaves the station late and, when he finally arrives at the bazaar, there is only one vendor stall open. Eventually, the boy is unable to buy anything for the girl of his dreams, and he comes to the frustrated understanding that he has lost his chance to fulfil his pining desires. Thus, although the word *Araby* at first soothed his soul and “cast an Eastern enchantment over” him, it now becomes for him a symbol of misery and disappointment, a “centre of paralysis” that occupies the harshness of the adult world. He sees the truth at once as he gazes “up into the darkness” above him and indicts his feelings “as a creature driven and derided by vanity.” For the boy, there’s no space for pure innocence, “love” and “sensation of life” in Ireland.

Sounds downright hellish, which leads me to ask religion is portrayed in *Araby*?

Gunes: In *Araby*, as in Joyce’s other stories, religion occupies an important place. It’s clear that the society Joyce describes is full of ascetic culture and thought, though Joyce seems ambivalent in his view and criticism of religion. First, we see that the society constructed by Joyce is strongly religious and religion, to an extent, seems to be a basic construct of the thought and identity of the Irish people. It is “the Christian Brothers’ School” whose students fill the “blind” and “quiet” North Richmond Street of the tale. Indeed, the students give meaning and freshness to and animate the “silent” street. It’s a sign of youthful life and hope. Moreover, Mangan’s sister – the boy’s love interest - cannot go to the bazaar because “there would be a retreat that week in her convent.” The girl seems pious and she prefers to attend the retreat rather than go to the bazaar with the boy. Finally, religion also permeates the language of the boy’s aunt and seems to control her thoughts when she suggests, “I’m afraid you may put off your bazaar for this night of Our Lord.” So, there’s a clash of the secular and religious spirits in this tale.

Secondly, religion in *Araby* also embodies a certain negativity, which, I think, may be linked to Joyce’s personal discontent with religion, in particular, and with the secular atmosphere of the modern era in general. A former tenant in the boy’s house was a priest who “had died in the back drawing-room.” The priest’s room is “musty” and full of “old useless papers.” In this messy room there are not only “a few paper-covered books, the pages of which were curled

and damp” but also the “tenant's rusty bicycle-pump,” giving his life an impression of indifference, weariness and shabbiness. Normally, a priest should live in a tidy and clean place and have holy books with him, as he’s supposed to be an example for his parishioners; yet the place where the priest lived and died in the story is cluttered and nondescript. Besides, Joyce tells us, instead of reading the Holy Scriptures, the priest seems to have enjoyed secular books such as “*The Abbot*, by Walter Scott, *The Devout Communicant*, and *The Memoirs of Vidocq*.” In this manner, Joyce presents religion and priest in such a fashion that they lose their prestige and importance in the street’s life. In my view, though, Joyce’s dissatisfaction with religion in *Araby* is not so strong as in some of his later stories and novels, where he is very critical of religion, its contemporary corruptions and functions in both personal and social life.

The boy mentions the sin of vanity in his depressed mood after losing his chance to buy the girl a gift. He’s blaming himself for his frustrating situation, is he not?

Gunes: In *Araby*, vanity has both positive and negative connotations, both attributed to the boy-narrator. For instance, having spoken to Mangan’s sister, the boy wants urgently to purchase a special gift for her at the bazaar, a thought that also moves him away from his drab and tedious view of his current life and towards the achievement of his aspirations. Secondly, vanity here may also mean a negative sense of hollowness, worthlessness and triviality as his idealism clashes with the reality of the adult world around him. This world is corrupted, relentless and capitalist; it offers him no space for his young love and idealism, so that the boy has to accept his failure in his quest to win the girl’s affection. He comes to understand that the adult world is “hostile to romance” and to the “enchantment” of *Araby*. For now, romance, love and idealism could survive only in his imagination and, so, he feels stupid and disillusioned as a result of his foolish efforts to achieve his dream. His eyes burn with “anguish and anger” and he indicts himself “a creature driven and derided by vanity.” Joyce is saying in this relation that there is no room for romantic illusions, love, beauty and enchantment in Ireland.

Ultimately, it’s Joyce’s own point of view or voice that shapes the story's effect or meaning in *Araby*?

Gunes: Actually, there are shifting points of view from the first person to the third person and vice versa throughout the story, yet we get the story mainly through the views of the narrator-boy. Joyce represents the boy as an innocent who views the world through his naïve

perceptions of it. Having found himself sentimentally attracted to his neighbour's daughter, whatever he sees turns into a sensation and excitement of life. This point of view is romantic, and it shows that whatever difficulty life imposes upon us, there is always space for sensation and excitement in life. However, there is also the other side of reality which contributes to the effect and meaning of the story in line with Joyce's aim in writing the stories in *Dubliners* – the view of a specifically Irish social and personal “paralysis.” Once his uncle forgets his promise to give him money and comes home late, the boy arrives in the bazaar very late after it has been closed. Eventually he becomes unable to buy the girl the gift, which frustrates and upsets the boy. Through the view and frustration of the boy, therefore, we see that the real world of adult is full of difficulties, obstacles, and “paralysis.” In sum, the view of life is striking and apparently contributes to two oppositions/clashes/antipathies – fact and desire – which is Joyce's perceptions of Irish life in his times.

Clearly, then, Araby is a metaphor, a symbol of a long-ago Ireland.

Yes, exactly. In *Araby*, symbolism plays an important role. There are a few symbols in the story, which, as in the other fictional works, makes meanings multi-layered: that is, symbols take us beyond the borders of surface meaning and allow us to go deeper beneath what is visible. One of these symbols is Mangan's sister who the boy finds himself emotionally attracted to. She becomes a symbol of love, idealism, and escapism; she cherishes the boy's idealism and enables him to see that there may be a possibility to escape and go beyond the mundane sense of boredom, frustration and “paralysis”. The second important symbol, which is also the title of the story, is Araby. The image of Mangan's sister constantly occupies his thought after she ask him if he is willing to go to Araby. The “syllables of the word *Araby* were called to me through the silence in which my soul luxuriated and cast an Eastern enchantment over me.” Araby is an eastern name and it bewitches the boy's vision and makes him very pleased. Besides being magical, Araby also appears as a symbolic place where he could realize his love, idealism and visionary escapism.

And the symbolic role of the boy's uncle? What values and attitudes does he represent?

Gunes: In *Araby*, the narrator-boy's uncle is important in the sense that his uncle, I think, represents the world of reality, and thus he seems an obstacle to the boy's objectives. For example, we see his uncle at the very beginning of the story when the boy's sensibility is full of Mangan's sister. The boy is afraid of his uncle as if he might catch him watching her; his uncle is the symbol of morality and tradition in which any relationship between a girl and boy

without marriage is not favoured. In addition to this, the narrator's uncle continues to hamper the realization of the boy's liberating spirit. That he is unable to buy the gift is the moment at which the boy falls apart. His idealism and love are damaged and destroyed by his uncle's negligence and indifference. Joyce represents the narrator's uncle as the embodiment of the world of reality and "paralysis," which clashes with the kid's world of idealism and cripples his hopeful desire of escape.

This line intrigues me. What does the following mean? "I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes."

Gunes: Interesting. Here it is. The Line appears against the background of the boy's fascination with Mangan's sister as he treads the flaring streets of the city and hears the curses of labourers - "the shrill litanies of shop-boys," and "the nasal chanting of street-singers, who sang a *come-all-you* about O'Donovan Rossa, or a ballad about the troubles in our native land. *These noises converged in a single sensation of life for me: I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes.*"

The line reveals to us that the boy feels psychologically empowered and encouraged in his imaginative vision of his future with the girl in that he could achieve his "sensation of life" by defeating the world of reality and paralysis around him. The chalice is a Christian religious symbol – it represents the blood of Christ (the spirit of everlasting life) – a supreme value which the boy appropriates to his own life, a precious urgency needing protection and defense against the wiles and snares of the world.

Thanks again for your time and ideas.

Gunes: You are very welcome

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