

Notes on Araby by James Joyce

Summary

The narrator, an unnamed boy, describes the North Dublin street on which his house is located. He thinks about the priest who died in the house before his family moved in and the games that he and his friends played in the street. He recalls how they would run through the back lanes of the houses and hide in the shadows when they reached the street again, hoping to avoid people in the neighborhood, particularly the boy's uncle or the sister of his friend Mangan. The sister often comes to the front of their house to call the brother, a moment that the narrator savors.

Every day begins for this narrator with such glimpses of Mangan's sister. He places himself in the front room of his house so he can see her leave her house, and then he rushes out to walk behind her quietly until finally passing her. The narrator and Mangan's sister talk little, but she is always in his thoughts. He thinks about her when he accompanies his aunt to do food shopping on Saturday evening in the busy marketplace and when he sits in the back room of his house alone. The narrator's infatuation is so intense that he fears he will never gather the courage to speak with the girl and express his feelings.

One morning, Mangan's sister asks the narrator if he plans to go to Araby, a Dublin bazaar. She notes that she cannot attend, as she has already committed to attend a retreat with her school. Having recovered from the shock of the conversation, the narrator offers to bring her something from the bazaar. This brief meeting launches the narrator into a period of eager, restless waiting and fidgety tension in anticipation of the bazaar. He cannot focus in school. He finds the lessons tedious, and they distract him from thinking about Mangan's sister.

On the morning of the bazaar the narrator reminds his uncle that he plans to attend the event so that the uncle will return home early and provide train fare. Yet dinner passes and a guest visits, but the uncle does not return. The narrator impatiently endures the time passing, until at 9 p.m. the uncle finally returns, unbothered that he has forgotten about the narrator's plans. Reciting the epigram "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," the uncle gives the narrator the money and asks him if he knows the poem "The Arab's Farewell to his Steed." The narrator leaves just as his uncle begins to recite the lines, and, thanks to eternally slow trains, arrives at the bazaar just before 10 p.m., when it is starting to close down. He approaches one stall that is still open, but buys nothing, feeling unwanted by the woman watching over the goods. With no purchase for Mangan's sister, the narrator stands angrily in the deserted bazaar as the lights go out.

Analysis

In "Araby," the allure of new love and distant places mingles with the familiarity of everyday drudgery, with frustrating consequences. Mangan's sister embodies this mingling, since she is part of the familiar surroundings of the narrator's street as well as the exotic promise of the bazaar. She is a "brown figure" who both reflects the brown façades of the buildings that line the street and evokes the skin color of romanticized

images of Arabia that flood the narrator's head. Like the bazaar that offers experiences that differ from everyday Dublin, Mangan's sister intoxicates the narrator with new feelings of joy and elation. His love for her, however, must compete with the dullness of schoolwork, his uncle's lateness, and the Dublin trains. Though he promises Mangan's sister that he will go to Araby and purchase a gift for her, these mundane realities undermine his plans and ultimately thwart his desires. The narrator arrives at the bazaar only to encounter flowered teacups and English accents, not the freedom of the enchanting East. As the bazaar closes down, he realizes that Mangan's sister will fail his expectations as well, and that his desire for her is actually only a vain wish for change.

The narrator's change of heart concludes the story on a moment of epiphany, but not a positive one. Instead of reaffirming his love or realizing that he does not need gifts to express his feelings for Mangan's sister, the narrator simply gives up. He seems to interpret his arrival at the bazaar as it fades into darkness as a sign that his relationship with Mangan's sister will also remain just a wishful idea and that his infatuation was as misguided as his fantasies about the bazaar. What might have been a story of happy, youthful love becomes a tragic story of defeat. Much like the disturbing, unfulfilling adventure in "An Encounter," the narrator's failure at the bazaar suggests that fulfillment and contentedness remain foreign to Dubliners, even in the most unusual events of the city like an annual bazaar.

The tedious events that delay the narrator's trip indicate that no room exists for love in the daily lives of Dubliners, and the absence of love renders the characters in the story almost anonymous. Though the narrator might imagine himself to be carrying thoughts of Mangan's sister through his day as a priest would carry a Eucharistic chalice to an altar, the minutes tick away through school, dinner, and his uncle's boring poetic recitation. Time does not adhere to the narrator's visions of his relationship. The story presents this frustration as universal: the narrator is nameless, the girl is always "Mangan's sister" as though she is any girl next door, and the story closes with the narrator imagining himself as a creature. In "Araby," Joyce suggests that all people experience frustrated desire for love and new experiences.