

*A Tale of Two Quests*

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At the very mention of the word "quest," most people think of a hero on a tumultuous and taxing journey. The hero is journeying with the goal of acquiring something external and something well worth all the trouble he encounters on the way. When the hero's quest ends he has typically acquired what he sought out to get and emerges from the experience as a legendary figure. A fruitless quest is thought to be a failure, as the object being quested after has not been obtained. However, few people consider the internal quest that accompanies such a physical mission. Irish author James Joyce in his short story, *Araby* introduces us to a young boy, living in early 20th century Dublin, who sets off on an physical quest to buy his love interest a gift. The battles fought on this quest take place in the boy's heart and mind and while he fails to accomplish his external goal, he achieves an internal, although unwanted, transformation.

Much like a knight-errant, the boy in James Joyce's modern story, *Araby* is on a quest to acquire something deemed to be precious. On a physical level, he is on a mission to attain the affection of his neighbor's sister. In order to win her over he takes up a secondary quest, and travels to the annual Araby bazaar in order to buy her something (260). Unbeknownst to him, his internal quest begins when he develops an intense interest in the girl. He never communicates his adoration to her, but he hopes that in

buying her something his feelings will be made apparent (259-260). Because the girl is unaware of his intentions and because he heavily romanticizes both the girl and the bazaar, it could be said that, in questing, he is partially playing make believe.

The boy easily loses himself in fantastic thoughts and romantic ideals and upon committing himself to the physical quest, "imagines himself dispatched on a romantic quest by his beloved" (Patton 2). From the reader's point of view the external quest is a mere trip to pick up a small gift, but to the boy it's a holy "knight's quest" (Patton 2), and he fancies himself a knight in shining armor. While the physical mission is not half as arduous or meandering as a legendary quest, it leads the boy to a setting in which he experiences a shattering epiphany. This epiphany is the culmination of the tension marring his internal quest and it ultimately devours a piece of his innocence, via a sudden shift in perspective. This shift in perspective allows the boy to witness the deceptive power of his imagination and the frailty of his romantic worldview. In this way, both the physical and the internal quests bring about an ending to the boy's childhood experience, and therefore can be considered dangerous.

At stake in both quests, ultimately, is something internal. Though the boy must traverse through the deepening night, via a "deserted train" (262), his mission is not fraught with hazards that threaten his life but rather mental perils that seek to undermine his romantic idealism. It is these unseen forces that ultimately transform the boy into "a creature" (262) and account for much of the turmoil raging inside of his mind and spirit. The issues that litter the physical quest appear to be mere deterrents and annoyances compared to the tension created by the internal mission. However, there is something to be said of these external pressures.

Author Jerome Mandel asserts that, like questing knights of old, the boy's crusade is challenged and doubted by those around him and even opposed by nature (51-52). The opposition of nature is attributed to the "pitilessly raw" air that greets the boy on his walk to school on Saturday (261). While such opposition can be viewed as physical in nature, it functions as more of a bad omen than a threat to the boy's well being. The physical obstructions typically faced by legendary questing knights are, as Mandel states, "transmuted by Joyce into 'time,' 'an old garrulous woman,' 'a drunken and forgetful uncle, mindless cliches ('All work and no play'), unrealistic and romantic songs, money, and the like" (52). The boy in *Araby* manages to bypass these obstacles, save for money (262), and emerges from his mission physically intact, albeit very much alone.

The boy is very much a solo journeyer, with the "image" of his lady to keep him company (259). The adults that the boy encounters do not identify with him or his romantic outlook. His aunt thinks the bazaar to be a "Freemason affair" (260), his schoolteacher worries that he is "beginning to idle" (260) and his uncle completely forgets about his promise to supply the boy with money for his quest (261). It seems that none of the adults connect with or share the boy's romantic worldview, as they are all too jaded. This alludes to the fact that the boy's dreams and ideals are childish and futile, as realized upon his epiphany. The boy's childhood friends, whom he plays with during the story's opening (259), are not included in his quest, as the boy keeps his infatuation a secret. It makes sense that he relishes time spent alone, away from the physical world, as he can no longer interact with it as he once did (260) for, "as a lover totally possessed by love, he moves out of time, and all worldly, public, and temporal affairs" (Mandel 50). While waiting for his uncle to return home to give him money for the bazaar, the boy

goes upstairs, escaping a clock whose ticking no doubt intrudes into his fantasy world, and sings whilst walking from room to room (261). His imaginary grail quest, while fraught with building internal tensions, is, by this point an escape colored with promises of an assumedly exotic bazaar and grandiose daydreams of his flame. Therefore, as literary critic Harry Stone tells us, “Off by himself he feels liberated” (356).

The fantasy that the boy loses himself in, and the mission which he undertakes, are driven by feverish infatuation and religious-like adoration. These two factors propel his physical quest and account for the wars that mar his internal journey. The girl with whom the boy is infatuated is referred to as "Mangan's sister." She is idolized, likened to a "chalice" (260), watched and followed by the boy regardless of the fact that have barely ever spoken to one another (259). The boy sees Mangan's sister as a holy object, thus his crusade is not only romanticized but also contains religious connotations. It can be likened to a grail quest, with Mangan's sister representing the elusive and sacred relic. Mangan's sister is, as Harry Stone remarks, "a shadowy Madonna" (360) and she can also be likened to Mary Magdalene, “who, in Catholic liturgy, is specifically associated with exotic Near Eastern imagery, bracelets, and crossing the city in search of her love- all strong elements in *Araby*”(Stone 354). Nearly all of the religious connotations attached to Mangan's sister find their roots in the boy's mind. Her fanciful holiness works to urgently propel the boy on both his external and internal quests and his love for her, “intensifies the illusion that the world has romantic and religious content” (Collins 1). At the same time, the religious adoration that the boy feels for Mangan's sister works as commentary on the role of religion in Irish culture.

Catholicism, as Joyce illustrates throughout *Araby*, was, at the time, engrained deep in the hearts and minds of the people inhabiting Ireland. *Araby* opens with a nod to the Christian Brothers School, introduces a dead priest and religious books shortly thereafter (258), and continuously references Catholicism and Catholic dogma until the story's conclusion. However, the religious idolization of Mangan's sister, which heavily complicates the young boy's coming of age experience and contributes to his loss of innocence by the story's close, illustrates the degree to which a suffocating climate of religiosity can confound the mind of the individual. His mind, affixed with Catholic dogma and more or less programmed from an early age to revere the Virgin Mary, begins to revere his neighbor's sister in a somewhat similar fashion. He cannot be faulted for making this connection, and neither can he be faulted for confusing natural feelings of sexual desire with make-believe religious adoration. Considering the environment in which he was raised, "his conflation of dogma and romanticism foregrounds the impulse for escape that anyone with imaginative powers living on North Richmond Street would feel" (Fagnoli and Gillespie 1). This climate is not of his making, but rather Joyce's. Joyce uses the boy's hopeless position to highlight the irresponsibility of the nation's leadership, holding them accountable for the poor state of Ireland's indoctrinated children.

Leaders, as represented by the dead priest, the boy's schoolteacher, and aunt and uncle have imposed this religious indoctrination upon the boy in *Araby*, as well as all the children of Ireland. The "confused adoration" (260) and the guilt that it generates are both products of the religiosity inflicted upon the boy by his elders. The boy so easily worships Mangan's sister because he has been indoctrinated to equate worship with a

divine feminine form. Due to the same indoctrination, he struggles with guilt on account of feelings of natural sexual arousal for her. While these conditioning practices are responsible for much of the boy's "confused adoration," Mangan's sister is perfectly designed to captivate and titillate him.

Joyce constructs Mangan's sister in such a way that she is easily comparable to a religious painting or statue; "the patient hand on the cruel spike, the gentle head bowed submissively, the mild neck arched in grief" (Stone 354), and at the same time her moving body, swinging dress, and "soft rope of hair" (259) sexually excite the blossoming young boy. He worships her on two fronts: as a religious icon and as a sexually desirable female. His prayers to her are, as Harry Stone notes, "sexual desires" which have morphed "into worshipful Catholic devotions" (359). The mingling of sex, with religion, serves to create an atmosphere of tension. Joyce colors the text with references to both religion and sex, sometimes linking the two. The "rusty bicycle-pump" belonging to the priest (259), and the "big hall girdled at half its height by a gallery" which the boy compares to a church upon entering, (262) serve as telling examples. This uncomfortable sexual tension foments guilt, thanks to the smothering religious dogma that binds the boy's spirit. It also ignites the internal battles that plague the boy's mission.

Before realization of his sexual interest in Mangan's sister, and prior to his crusade, the young boy dwelt in a state of sexual innocence and naiveté. Being a child, he played in the streets with his friends (259). The act of worship was confined to the realms of Catholicism. Upon merely taking interest in Mangan's sister, the boy's internal quest begins to unfold. This inner quest begins to lead him away from a state of innocence. He studies Mangan's sister every time he catches a glimpse of her. His eyes note flashes of

skin and subtle movements (259-260). Authors Nicholas Fagnoli and Michael Gillespie, in their critical analysis of the story, tell us how the boy, “With no apparent concern for the implications of voyeurism,” looks carefully “through a lowered blind in a front parlor window to watch Mangan's sister—herself unnamed—leave her house” (1). He does this “every morning” (259), despite the fact that he knows such behavior to be shameful. His sexual desire and devoted adoration for Mangan’s sister becomes quite strong and frequently toys with his emotions: “My eyes were often full of tears”... “and at times a flood from my heart seemed to pour itself out into my bosom” (260). His spirits are confused and his flesh is conflicted. In glorifying Mangan’s sister, in comparing her to a chalice, in praying to her, and worshipping her being (260), the boy is breaking the first of the Ten Commandments. In his heart and mind he has essentially “dethroned” the Father God, replacing Him with a girl, an object of infatuation and lustful desire.

In this sense, Mangan’s sister is a threat to the boy’s faith and likewise a threat to his innocence. She is not a physical enemy, challenging him, or forcibly preventing him from carrying out his physical quest, but the fantasy that she has become in the boy’s mind works to undermine his religious faith and simultaneously creates confusing feelings of sexual desire. Furthermore, Mangan’s sister, or what she represents to the boy, can be considered the catalyst that enables the boy’s unwanted maturation experience at the end of the story. Viewing her in this light, Mangan’s sister is a temptress and a betrayer, an Eve (Stone 353). This position is similarly attributed to all Joyce’s women, both “fictional and real” (“Gretta, Mary Sheehy, Emma, Nora, Molly,” etc) (Stone 353). Mangan’s sister, as an Eve and an exaggerated fantasy, lures the boy away from his state

of sexual purity and tangles herself in his religious programming, leading to much confusion and turmoil.

The mixture of confusion, titillation, anxiety, and guilt generated by the mere thought of her makes the boy restless. The internal battles begin to affect the days and nights leading up to the physical quest. The narrator recounts how, he, being the boy, was distracted from “the serious work of life,” could not organize his “wandering thoughts” and “chafed against the work of school” (260). He overcomes these struggles, being wholeheartedly determined to acquire a gift for his “lady,” in order to attain her physically. He desires her as an object, a fleshly thing, even though nearly all of her attributes are born of his mind and may very well not apply to her outside of his fantasy world. Rather than give herself to him physically, as he would desire, it could be said that she unknowingly gives him something he doesn’t want.

The boy expects to acquire something external at the Araby bazaar but instead receives something internal and unseen. Upon arriving at the bazaar, with money, his physical quest is close to completion, but once he enters the building everything quickly falls to pieces. The assumedly exotic bazaar reveals itself to be a tacky affair, staffed by British merchants (262). The boy fails to buy something for Mangan’s sister and thereby fails to acquire Mangan’s sister physically, or so it can be assumed. The failure of the physical quest further likens the boy’s mission to that of the legendary grail quest. Jerome Mandel reminds us that, out of all knightly quests, it is “only the quest for the grail that produces widespread failure, shows the knights their own limitations and lack of purity, leads to general dissatisfaction, and destroys a brilliant civilization” (53). The inability to attain the physical objects results in a feeling of uselessness, or paralysis. Upon



experiencing these feelings the boy encounters stabs of “anguish and anger” (262). He is not wholly upset due to his failed external quest. As Harry Stone tells us, the boy “is reacting to sudden and deeply disturbing insights” (349). The tension inside of his mind and heart is released upon his gazing inward in a transformative epiphany.

Epiphanies are thought to result in sudden self-confidence, brilliant ideas, and realization of solutions to seemingly impassable quagmires. In the context of the quest motif, the epiphany is a moment of victory, occurring at a crucial moment and enabling the hero to overcome whatever obstacles are threatening his quest. However, Joyce’s young protagonist in *Araby* experiences no such moment via his revelation. The boy experiences instead a rush of frustration and feelings of foolishness, both which annihilate a piece of his innocence and crush his romantic fantasies (262). Upon witnessing a saleslady at a stall flirting with two younger boys, the boy’s internal journey comes to a close and he begins to transform (262). Harry Stone postulates that, “the waiting salesgirl is a parody of the boy’s obsessive image of female felicity” (361) Upon looking at her, Stone writes, “his vision of a comely waiting presence, of a heavenly dolorous lady –dissolves and finally evaporates” (362). The eyes that reveal this “truth” are transformed eyes, unwanted, and gained upon completion of the internal quest. These eyes have lost their spark of irretrievable innocence. As they look up towards the dark ceiling of the hall the boy sees himself “as a creature driven and derided by vanity” (262).

The transformation, from noble knight to creature, is likely deemed to be an obvious sign that the boy has failed his crusade. Certainly the boy believes he has failed, as he walks through the darkness, empty-handed, betrayed, and frustrated (262). He feels foolish and bitter because unexpectedly, he “caught a glimpse of himself as he really is-a

huddled, warring, confused paradox of romantic dreams, mistaken adorations, and mute-fleshly cravings” (Stone 366), but this realization results in a maturation. The quest, as Jerome Mandel illustrates, can be viewed as a success “since it leads to vision and epiphany: coming to some understanding of oneself as ‘a creature driven and derided by vanity’” (53). The boy no doubt matures upon completion of his internal quest. He acquires cynicism, trading out the romantic ideal, and thereby losing a portion of the outlook that colored his childhood previous to undertaking the crusade. On a positive note, his maturation has aided him in better understanding the world, as he is not likely to be tricked again so easily by his imagination. Practically speaking, but quite dour, is the fact that this loss prepares him for his life as an adult in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dublin; a life sapped of dreams.

This speaks to Joyce’s motivation behind writing *Araby*. The boy, being raised on romanticism and suffocating Catholic dogma, is destined to have his childish dreams crushed mercilessly and is likewise destined to wrestle with his faith and the natural pleasures of the flesh. His childhood is cut short as his quests culminate. While the final blow was self-inflicted, as it was his naiveté and eagerness that led him to be transformed at the bazaar in particular, the squandering of his childhood was never in his control at all. This is no accident, as Joyce purposefully constructed the young boy as powerless to avert his dismal destiny. In doing this Joyce was able to adequately criticize Ireland’s leadership (as represented by the story’s adults) and the climate of religiosity holding the children of Ireland in bondage. The quests then, both internally and externally, are highly successful in that they work in tandem to intimately portray the inevitable downfall of a young Dubliner’s innocence. In doing so, they cause the reader to not only question the

effects of religious indoctrination but the role of a nation's leadership in regards to raising its children. Furthermore either quest succeeds in challenging the reader to re-interpret the traditional quest motif.

## Works Cited

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