ENGL 1102
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Joyce's "Araby" and Updike's "A & P": A Culture Hostile to Romance

"Araby" by James Joyce and "A & P" by John Updike are two stories which, in spite of their many differences, have much in common. In both of these initiation stories, the protagonists move from one stage of life to another and encounter disillusionment along the way. Looking back upon his boyhood in Irish Catholic Dublin in the early 1900's, the narrator of "Araby"gives an account of his first failed love. Captivated by Mangan's older sister, the boy promises to bring her a gift from a bazaar that wears the mystical name of Araby. Sammy, a nineteen-year-old cashier at the local A & P in an unnamed coastal town north of Boston, narrates "A & P." Like Joyce's boy, Sammy also attempts to win the attention of a beautiful girl by making a chivalric gesture. In both cases, romance gives way to reality, and conflict occurs when the protagonist finds himself in discord with the values of the society in which he lives. Joyce's "Araby" and Updike's "A & P" are initiation stories in which the adolescent protagonist comes into conflict with his culture.

Both protagonists live in restrictive cultures. The narrator of "Araby" portrays the Dublin that he grew up in as grim and oppressed by Catholicism. He begins his story with a description of North Richmond Street, where the somber houses wear "brown imperturbable faces" and seem "conscious of the decent lives within them" (Joyce 728). In this description, Joyce links decency and a stifled life together. Filled with "cold empty gloomy rooms," the house where the boy resides reminds the reader of a tomb (729). A priest died in the back drawing room, and "air, musty from having been long enclosed," is associated with books of religious devotion (728). When the boys in "Araby" are "set free" from the Christian Brothers' School, they are released into an environment where even play affords little pleasure: "The cold air stung us and we played till our bodies glowed. Our shouts echoed in the silent streets" (729). Dublin is a joyless environment: uncw 98

While the boy's fantasies are holy, they are also chivalrous as he attempts to step into the role of the hero in a tale of knighthood and romance. He seeks to win the attention of Mangan's sister by promising to bring her a gift from a bazaar that she has expressed an interest in visiting. She cannot visit the bazaar herself because she must attend a retreat. Araby, with its mysterious eastern name, becomes as unfamiliar and alluring to the boy as Mangan's sister. It too fulfills his need for romance, and he idealizes it as he idealizes the girl.

Araby, however, is not at all what the boy expected it to be, and his dreams crumble in the face of harsh reality. After a long delay and a lonely ride in a deserted train car, the boy arrives at the bazaar only to find that it is closing. He is again disappointed when he must pay an adult fare, forfeiting half of his spending money for the price of admission. Inside, the darkened hall remains as silent as "a church after a service" except for the sound of falling coins, an allusion to the moneychangers whom Christ drove from the temple (731). Christ reprimands the moneychangers for turning the temple into a market place, and the boy, having mentally transformed a marketplace into a temple, is not reminded of its crass and commercial nature. The boy's vision of Mangan's sister fades into the physical person of the young woman at the bazaar who flirts with her admirers and entertains them with empty chatter. The magical bazaar melts into the harsh reality of cold concrete and emptiness. Realizing that his thoughts of Mangan's sister and Araby have been nothing but dreams, the boy stands alone in the darkness with his shattered hopes.

The boy's shattered hopes, however, are not the tragedy of this story; the tragedy lies in an ascetic culture that refuses to admit romance. The values of this culture have been implanted in the narrator, the adult the boy has become many years after his experience at Araby. The older man criticizes and often reprimands the youth he once was. He confesses to the reader that, even though he has barely spoken to the girl, "her name [is] like a summons to all [his] foolish blood" (729). The speaker clearly disapproves of his passion, for he connects it to the word "foolish." He suggests that reason and temperance are in order and that the boy's passion has been misdirected since the only passion that this culture accepts is religious passion.

Continuing with his self-criticism, the narrator states, "I thought little of the future" (729). "What innumerable follies laid waste my waking and sleeping thoughts. . ." (729). The adult judges and rejects the romantic impulse in his former self. He claims, "I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity . . ." (732). He convinces himself that desires and hopes are not only futile and idle, but also self-indulgent and sinful. His harsh judgments coincide with the values of Catholic Dublin, which rely upon self-denial and the worship of God.

Just as the Catholic Church is the center of life in Dublin, the A & P grocery store stands at the heart of life in Sammy's conservative Massachusetts town. Perhaps this explains why Updike places the A & P "right in the middle of town" where "you can see two banks and the Congregational church and the newspaper store and three real-estate offices . . ." (Updike 733). By observing the order in which Sammy places the buildings within his sentence, the reader can obtain an idea of the values that the boy's community embraces and their order of importance. The banks are mentioned first, indicating the importance of money in a modern consumer society. They are followed by the Congregational church, a standard, middle-class, Protestant religion, which sets the moral standards for the town. Individual freedom follows moral norms since the newspaper office, a literary testament to the first amendment, and the real estate offices that promote the American dream of ownership are listed last. Right along with Norman Rockwell, all of these establishments perpetuate traditional American culture. The location of

Sammy's New England town also offers a clue to its values. It is near Salem, implying strict moral codes and little tolerance for those who break them.

The cultural values of this all-American town are rigorously upheld within the A & P. In the grocery store, the softly glowing street lamps that romanticize Joyce's Dublin have been replaced by harsh fluorescent lights. There is no romance here. Instead, impersonality, policy, rules, and routine presides. Describing the maze of aisles through which shoppers bump their metal carts, Sammy says, "The whole store was like a pinball machine . . ." (735). Nothing natural exists in this fast-moving, mechanical, processed world of cash register buttons and automatic doors. With its "pyramid of Diet Delight peaches" and stacked packages, it is the epitome of organization (735). However, what the A & P views as efficiency and progress, Sammy experiences as boring and unimaginative. Within this regulated environment, Sammy sees his suburban middle-class customers as dehumanized. They herd through the checkout lanes like "scared pigs in a chute," dull, stupid, and without individuality (737). Complaining about their lack of spirit, Sammy says, "I bet you could set off dynamite in the A & P and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists and muttering . . ." (734). Dehumanization does not stop with the customers. Sammy himself feels dehumanized by the repetitive, mindless routine of his job, and he creates a short song out of the sound of the cash register in order to keep himself sane. The boy perceives the A & P as a microcosm of his community and an unromantic world filled with dull people and petty restrictions.

A problem arises when three girls, summer vacationers from the beach colony, enter this microcosm wearing only their bathing suits. They traipse barefoot over the green and cream-checkerboard floor, with its even and uniform pattern, and trample on conformity, mediocrity, and rules. Sammy is smitten by the prettiest girl, whom he describes as a consumable commodity: her breasts are "two smooth scoops of vanilla," (735) and he does not mind that her neck is long because "[t]he longer her neck was, the more of her there was" (734). All the while Sammy equates middle-aged housewives with animals, he acts like one. He has a crude and chauvinistic attitude towards women. He compares the female mind to a "little buzz like a bee in a glass jar," yet his own mind has barely buzzed since the girls entered the store, and he rings up the Hi-Ho crackers twice (34). Although disgusted by the butcher's lustful stares, Sammy is not much better. First, he ogles the girls and then idealizes the prettiest one, mentally referring to her as Queenie. Sammy associates Queenie with the exotic "kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream" that she purchases, and he admire her for belonging to the affluent, upper-middle class (735). He is a boy who appreciates quality, and Queenie's social status places her above other girls and makes her a premium, name-brand product. As Sammy insensitively appraises the girls in terms of material goods and financial status, he dehumanizes them and shows himself to be a part of the establishment he finds fault with.

If Sammy's ideas about women are naive, so are his notions on how to win them. When the manager rebukes the girls for their indecent dress, Sammy tries to attract their attention through an act of chivalry. Angry that Lengel has embarrassed the girls, he quits his job in a gesture of protest and a show of loyalty. While the girls are still watching, Sammy wants to disassociate himself with the A & P with its "crummy" management and to differentiate himself from a straight-laced provincial community that enforces a dress code in its stores. Attempting to change Sammy's mind, Lengel protests, "Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad" (737). But Sammy does not buy it. He punches the "No Sale" tab on the cash register and walks to the parking lot to claim "[his] girls" (737). But the girls have already left. In

their place stands "some young married screaming with her children about some candy they didn't get," the result of a romance that did succeed (737).

Sammy tells the reader, "[I]t seems to me that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it" (737). He stands up for his principles and refuses to become one of the "sheep" (734). He does not regret his grand gesture even though he realizes "how hard the world was going to be . . . hereafter" (737). After all, the world is not kind to idealists. When Sammy forewarns the reader, "Now here comes the sad part of the story," he adds "at least my family says it's sad, but I don't think it's so sad myself " (735). Sammy has not merely responded to a gallant impulse in trying to get the girls to notice him, but he has taken a stand against a society that, in his mind, is inflexible. "That's policy for you," Sammy thinks. "Policy is what the kingpins want. What the others [those who are not kingpins] want is juvenile delinquency" (736). Sammy realizes that the establishment can be uncompromising, and that failure to cohere to their standards results in a label of juvenile delinquency. Even so, he asserts himself as an individual. He sets himself apart from his middle-class, conservative culture, and he stands up to Lengel who, as a friend of Sammy's parents, a Sunday school teacher, and the manager of the A & P, represents the establishment and enforces its policy.

When the boy in "Araby" and Sammy in "A & P" each make a chivalrous gesture in their quest for love, they come into conflict with their conservative and inflexible cultures, which have little tolerance for idealism and romance. The boy in "Araby" is defeated by an oppressive, Irish Catholic society. His story is a tragic one, for he resigns himself to a culture that does not tolerate poets and dreamers. He learns to constrict his imagination, to repress his emotions, to apply himself diligently to the humdrum and practical concerns of life, and to resign himself to a life where hopes and dreams are frivolous and self-indulgent. The sensitive boy, with his lively imagination and need for romance, has been replaced by a cynical and bitter adult who berates his former self as "a creature driven and derided by vanity" (Joyce 732). This is a cruel judgment, for he calls the boy a beast, a dumb animal without spiritual attributes or reason. To be driven and mocked by vanity is still graver. The sins that accompany vanity are serious and many: egotism, conceit, pride, arrogance, immodesty, futility, and pretension. What boy deserves to be so harshly reproached for his infatuation and illusions? Chivalry has failed, both for Joyce's boy and for Sammy. Their efforts seem wasted, for their gallant gestures go unseen. However, Sammy's story leaves the reader hopeful. His fate has not yet been decided. Sammy loses his job but gains the title of "unsuspected hero" (737). He claims his right to be an individual in a puritanical, conservative, and uncompromising culture. In Joyce's "Araby" and Updike's "A & P," two boys replace their ideas of chivalry with modern-life realism and inch their way closer to manhood.

Works Cited

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