

## An analysis of *Araby* from the angle of binary opposition

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**Abstract:** In the collection of short stories *Dubliners*, James Joyce reveals Dubliners who struggle with the reality of paralysis, of which Epiphany is the common theme. At the same time, through this “Epiphany”, Joyce shows his deep and profound insight into the mental paralysis of various Dublin characters and the harsh society. *Araby* is one of the fifteen stories in *Dubliners*, which narrates a naive boy’s pursuit of love and the falling of his dream. In *Araby*, there exist several distinct sets of binary opposition used in the salience of this theme. This paper will use the structuralism theory under the framework of “binary opposition” to interpretate the novel *Araby* with four groups of opposite mode.

### 1. Introduction

*Araby* is the third novel in *Dubliners*, which is the first collection of short stories of Irish author James Joyce's. In James Joyce's words for *Dubliners*, “I wanted to show it to this strange world from four aspects -- children, teenagers, adults and public life.” [1] As one of the most well-known works in *Dubliners*, *Araby* is set in the dark period of Ireland under the dual oppression of British colonial and Catholic rules. At that time, The Irish society and economy were depressed, triggering Irish people to live in desperate and lost. The protagonist of the story is an unnamed 14-year-old boy, who has fantasy of romantic love to his neighbor Mangan's sister. Whereas, his fantasy to love and adult world has ultimately broken after a trip to the local market *Araby*, where his beloved girl dreams of. The boy was becoming disillusioned and falling into disappointment and despair. In the story, Joyce employs a lot of images to symbolize the boy's alienation when he is growing up. He delicately describes the boy's first love experience in his life, which finally leads to his epiphany. The boy in *Araby* is the epitome of every growing teenager. His fantasy and disappointment are also the gap and contradiction between ideal and reality, which is a fact for every people to encounter with. Through such “Epiphany”, Joyce shows his deep and profound insight into the mental paralysis of various Dublin characters and the harsh society. Therefore, this paper will resort to the theory of binary opposition to further comprehend the theme of *Araby* in four perspectives, naming the binary opposition lies in beautiful ideal and cruel reality, childhood and adulthood, life and death, and waiting and being waited.

### 2. Binary opposition

Structuralism, which originated from structural linguistics, is a popular literary criticism theory in the 1960s. Generally speaking, “structuralism takes an analytical and systematic approach to the analysis of texts, rather than focusing on plots, characters, backgrounds and themes in the traditional sense.” [2] As “the father of modern linguistics”, Saussure pioneered a holistic view of language: “language cannot be seen as the sum of its parts alone, but as a structure in which the meaning of individual concepts depends on their relations within the larger whole.” [3] In his theory of structural linguistics, Saussure put forward many relative terms, such as Signifier and Signified; Diachronic and Synchronic; Langue and Parole; Syntagmatic and Associative, etc. Saussure's theory of difference is the cornerstone of his structuralism. Some years later, the literary critic Roland Barthes further developed Saussure's theory of structural linguistics and put forward the concept of “binary opposition”, which can be illustrated as opposition and difference in works. Roland Barthes believes that a text represents a message, and the content of this message can only be explained through the

binary opposition that constitutes the whole system. It establishes binary opposition from the perspective of difference, and produces the new structure view on this basis. Structuralism can be one alternative way to understand the world: the meaning of one thing is not inside the thing, rather is outside. We can understand the world often by resorting to binary oppositions.

### 3. The binary opposition of beautiful ideal and cruel reality

Throughout the story, which is full of beautiful ideal and cruel reality between antagonism, has revealed such a tremendous gap. As an example, before Mangan's sister spoke to the boy, the boy missed her with heart and soul, sneaking after her at school, and peaking at her through the curtains. Whereas, when Mangan's sister did speak to him, "I was so confused that I did not know what to answer." [4] (P17) Additionally, before arriving at Araby Bazaar, Mangan's sister described splendor and beauty of the fair to the boy. "It would be a splendid bazaar, she said she would love to go." [4] (P17) The author does not depict this place with any beautiful words or exaggerated language, but it is important to note that we just know this market by Mangan's sister's words, which can only be concluded as the single word "good", summed up Araby in the eyes of such little girl. Similarly, the boy's fantasy towards Araby is affected by her words, "the syllable of the word Araby were called to me through the silence which my soul luxuriated and cast an Eastern enhancement over me." [4] (P19). All of these impression and description to Araby makes the boy longing for buy something in it for her beloved girl.

In the novel, nevertheless, the reality was the opposite: "Almost all the stalls were closed, and the greater part of the hall was in darkness." [4] (P19) Bazaar dissolved, the boy realized he lose the chance for witnessing its prosperity, as well as the chance for achieving his romantic love without fulfillment of promise for Mangan's sister. Ultimately, the boy achieves his dream for getting to Araby with his romantic vision to this heaven-like bazaar, "a gigantic building bearing the magical name" [4] (P19). Araby's beautiful appearance shocked the boy, but the conditions inside disillusioned him totally.

The boy came to Araby with pure love for Mangan's sister, but in the bazaar, he just saw a flirtatious woman flirting with two young men, which is in the great gap between the romantic fantasy and the harsh reality. Araby is no longer the heaven of love, but a vulgar bazaar. "I allowed the two pennies to fall against the six pence in my pocket." [4] (P22) The boy's movements showed his great depression and loneliness, feeling that he was "a creature driven and derided by vanity." [4] (P22) Surrounded by the ugly and vulgar world, the boy realizes that the love he is pursuing is nothing but wishful thinking. All of such scenes push the little boy being mature psychologically and attains his spiritual Epiphany.

### 4. The binary opposition of childhood and adulthood

Compared to his uncle, aunt and neighbors, the boy is of different generation. There exists a serious generation gap between them, which also embodies the "binary opposition" as childhood and adulthood. Initially, when the boy told his aunt that he will go to *Araby*, his aunt's response was unexpected for the boy: "My aunt was surprised and hoped it was not some freemasons." [4] (P20) it is clear that a bazaar contains different implied meanings for children and adult. For boy, the bazaar is just the symbol of her romantic love, while for his aunt, it may represent some "inside knowledge" of society. The recognition and expression gap has led to such embarrassment. Moreover, the boy owns no money and has to ask his uncle to lead him to the market. The boy reminds his uncle early on Saturday morning, but is responded with uncle's causality that he didn't realize the boy's eagerness. Nevertheless, the boy is not discouraged by his uncle's casual answer, but believe that his uncle will come back soon to take him to Araby and keep on waiting for him patiently for a long time. However, on Saturday night, uncle went out for drinking and completely forgot the boy's ask to Araby, causing the boy to wait until very late to get money to bazaar. In any binary opposition, there exist the opposition that one side exist in center, while the other is marginal. In the binary opposition of adulthood and childhood, the adulthood is in the center position, like uncle, can dominate the

childhood with marginal position, like the boy, at will. The unequal status exist in the binary opposition is what we have to reflect on.

The boy's uncle and aunt never cared about his inner feelings and needs, and could not understand the boy's spiritual pursuit. Such indifference was a portrayal of the social interpersonal relationship in Dublin, and reflected that adult at that time are living blindly with poor spiritual world to singly pursue their financial sufficiency. Boy, as the ideal from Joyce, still keep his innocence and curiosity towards beautiful dream and fantasy of buying gifts for his beloved girl in Araby. The adults of North Richmond Street had no other aspirations than to live by those routines and rules, and in their mental numbness they were not aware of the changes in the boy's mind, let alone his wishes.

Moreover, the boy's obsession with Mangan's sister, which can be regarded as a hallmark of his walk from childhood to adulthood, leaves him perplexed on a daily basis. At the same time, some of the boy's behavior is an indication of his transformation process. He is trying to act like an adult. His mind was so occupied with Araby and his beloved girl that he did not want to go to school, for the trigger that he regards the classroom as "ugly monotonous child's play". But in the process of transformation, he was at a loss of what to do until he went to Araby, and attained a spiritual Epiphany. A trip to Araby bazaar is the single path of boy's growth from childhood to adulthood.

## **5. The binary opposition of life and death.**

The intersection of the typical binary opposition life and death runs through the entire collection of *Dubliners* for James Joyce. Begins with *The Sisters*, the first novel of *Dubliners*, Joyce explored the meaning of death and the commemoration of the dead. *The Dead*, which is the last work in *Dubliners*, ends with the pure snow that covers both the dead and the living. Similarly, in *Araby*, there also exist a conflict between life and death. In the first paragraph of the novel, the author depicts North Richmond Street with such words as "dead alley" and "dead silence", which gives us readers a sense of death. But when he says, "except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free", [4] (P16) we feel that there is just a block between the vivacity and the deadly stillness. Additionally, a dead priest is mentioned quite a few times in the novel, which represents the collapse of religious consciousness in Dublin, while the living Dubliners are just regarded as the living dead with no belief and mental paralysis. Death is the beginning of another kind of life. Joyce's description to the dead priest's contribution is that "he had been a very charitable priest; in his will he had left all his money to institutions and the furniture of his house to his sister." At that time, the boy's attitude to the adulthood is still lofty and yearning affected by this charitable priest, which is in a living status. Nevertheless, the priest has dead with his charity, which is also an implied bodement for the death of the boy's innocence and curiosity, but begin to step into the adulthood word.

## **6. The binary opposition of waiting and being waited**

In the novel, waiting and being waited is a special form of binary opposition for mental paralysis in *Araby*. The analysis of this binary opposition in the story is helpful to the understanding of Joyce's skillful exploration of the contemporary people's paralyzed mental world. Multiple occurrences of waiting and being waited lies in the novel: Children are waiting for the Mangan's sister with the hesitation of "continue to wait or go back to home"; the boy is waiting for uncle's return to take him to Araby; Mrs. Mercer is waiting for the boy's uncle came back; the boy is waiting for the train after a suffering day; the boy is waiting for frivolous girl's answer in the market. It is clear to see that from children to adults, from individuals to institutions, everyone is in a cycle of waiting and being waited, which precisely reflects the mental paralysis of these Dubliners. In the binary opposition of waiting and being waited, those who are being waited do things slowly without any sense of psychological urgency, which are in the center position to dominate waiting people. Whereas, it is true of those who are waiting. Even though they are in the marginal position in this stage of circle, they can also be the one being waited with center position. They have time to wait, but makes those who are waiting for them become those who are being waited. In other words, those who are waiting are also being waited for.

For example, when Mrs. Mercer was at home waiting for boy's uncle's return, she had nothing to do, but having dinner for an hour to waste her time and kill the boredom. The boy's uncle didn't come back until nine o'clock at night. However, the reason for his late return isn't for working or some other urgent matters, but for drinking and relaxation, singing the Arab Bimar song. Apparently, it can be seen that uncle was out for drinking to numb his mental paralysis, which has caused Mrs. Mercer's boring waiting and the little boy's late arrival at Araby.

## 7. Conclusion

In a nutshell, *Araby* profoundly describes the themes of Epiphany through these sets of binary opposition. Through the analysis of the structure of opposites in the novel, it can be seen that the "binary opposition" of structuralism constructs the content of the novel and makes the contradiction stand out with the development of the plot. In this novel, the structuralism theory has been fully demonstrated, and the characters' personalities are in sharp contrast with the application of the theory of binary opposition, thus highlighting the idea and theme of the novel to express -- the gap between dream and reality. The little boy finally understands that romantic love is useless and impossible in a paralyzed world. All the efforts that individuals make towards their idealism are driven and fooled by vanity. As a representative of Dubliner's childhood, the boy experiences mental torture, loses faith in romance in the pursuit of his pure love, and finally learns to see the world as it is.

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