

Leah Kelson

Dr. Jarica Watts

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“Fall of Coins”: Metaphorical and literal transaction in James Joyce’s “Araby”

The year is 1905 and lampposts of the streets of Ireland are covered with posters announcing the “Araby” bazaar: a promisingly magnificent Oriental show complete with Cairo donkeys, skirt dancing, an orchestra, an Arab Encampment, and fireworks (Ehrlich 265). This historical event drew crowds with its international fascinations and was a “major public event” raising a gross revenue between £13,000 and £18,000 (Ehrlich 266). While the grandeur of “Araby” is written into history, author James Joyce, a native Irishman, strips the event of its grandeur. James Joyce’s piece entitled “Araby” resides in his collection of short stories entitled *Dubliners* published in 1914. Joyce tells the story of a young boy that discovers puppy love with the “girl next door.” The boy obsesses over his best friend’s sister and finally catches her attention when he promises to bring her back something from Araby (Joyce 23). However, the boy arrives at the much-anticipated event only to find “darkness” and “silence” (Joyce 25). Scholars dispute the disparity between the reality of Araby in Ireland and Joyce’s written work: while scholars like Heyward Ehrlich find “Araby” to be a story of a conceited young boy trying to reinvent himself (Ehrlich 283), others like T.S. Eliot find the story to be a “vivid waiting” (Eliot 400-401). However, what these, and other scholars, have failed to recognize is the significance of a transactional reading of Joyce’s “Araby.” Transaction in this context refers to the giving of time, affection, money, attention, etc. with the expectation of something in return. “Araby” is laced with transactional examples including literal market-based transactions and

metaphorical transactions including the transaction of charity for recognition or the exchange of gifts for attention. With this in mind, “Araby” becomes a critique on literal and metaphorical transaction in which Joyce argues that expense always exceeds the return.

Joyce’s first transactional focus is literal. He expresses this when the young narrator explains a shopping trip with his aunt:

On Saturday evening when my aunt went marketing I had to go to carry some of the parcels. We walked through the flaring streets, jostled by drunken men and bargaining women, amid the curses of labourers, the shrill litanies of shop boy who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs’ cheeks . . . These noises converged in a single sensation of life for me: I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes. (Joyce 22)

While the narrator is holding onto the memory of his dearly beloved amidst the hustle and bustle of a marketplace, he identifies the scene as negative; the narrator parallels the scene of exchange with “foes.” Simply put, the boy claims the world of transaction as an enemy. This parallel is a foreshadow for the final transaction (or rather, the lack thereof), alluding to the fact that literal transaction is what becomes his final enemy. The boy expects the entrance fee for the bazaar to be sixpenny and realizes he must pay one shilling (half of his money) in order to enter the bazaar (Joyce 25). Steven Doloff quotes scholar William Burto regarding the situation when he says, “Obviously, the sixpenny gate is for children. Unable to locate it . . . the boy is forced to enter by the shilling (adult) turnstile” (Doloff 154, footnote 2). The boy, worried that he will miss the opportunity to enter the bazaar, pays a greater sum in order to enter. However, much to his chagrin, the bazaar is not what he expected it to be; he explains Araby as dark, silent, and that he “remember[ed] with difficulty why [he] had come” (Joyce 25). The boy’s sacrifice of one shilling (more than he had anticipated spending) leaves his expectations unfulfilled: his expense

exceeds the quality of the overall experience with no return policy. Joyce shows that transaction with the use of literal money always falls short when he ends the paragraph regarding the boy's discovery of Araby with "I listened to the fall of the coins" (Joyce 25). With this phrase, Joyce symbolizes the fall of the boy's grand expectations for Araby, with no hope of return.

However, Joyce does not limit the fall to the literal transaction of monetary means but extends the fall to the use of transaction for acclaim. The boy describes Mrs. Mercer who comes for tea with his aunt. He explains that she "collected used stamps for some pious purpose" (Joyce 24). Margot Norris's footnote explains the common practice of Catholics of the time who sold used stamps in order to sustain foreign missionaries (24, footnote 3). Through the boy's perception of "pious purpose," Mrs. Mercer used stamps as her form of transaction with the intent to be seen as a devout and charitable Catholic. The adjective "pious," while expressing the devoutness of religion, also gives the hypocritical connotation. This hypocritical light shows currency as a means for egotistical gain despite the arduous work to collect used stamps. Joyce furthers this recognition in the bazaar itself. Scholars report that hundreds of people attended the bazaar for various reasons. The bazaar was a charitable event as explained by Ehrlich: "the actual Araby bazaar was more a 'gala fundraising event' than the modest charity bazaar in the story" (Ehrlich 264). Ehrlich later goes on to say that "the historical Araby bazaar was a major public event, a huge international commercial enterprise with attractions from as far away as Galway, London, Stockholm, and Chicago" (266). While some attended the bazaar (currency of attendance) to give off an air of charity, others simply attended to show their participation in a "major public event" (266) and prove how "cultured" they were. Joyce shows that exchanges can occur to pump an ego rather than simply to obtain physical objects. However, by describing Araby in such a pathetic and disappointing light, Joyce shows that often the hype of an event

makes it “popular” rather than the actual quality of the product. The person then attending Araby may receive the title of a “cultured” individual but lack an actual cultural experience, thus creating a counterfeit appearance. The transaction, while seemingly fruitful, is counterfeit at its core.

The final type of transaction is the hinge of Araby: giving of something in return for love and attention, an emotional transaction. Joyce shows the boy’s need for affection through the boy’s fascination with pornographic magazines (Joyce 20), the boy’s determination to pass Mangan’s sister as they walk to school so that she can see him (Joyce 21), and the lack of priority from the boy’s uncle (Joyce 23-24). The pornographic magazines, meant to stimulate the sexual feelings and desires, are well-worn (“leaves were yellow” (Joyce 20)); the boy’s gravity toward such magazines show the boy’s natural desire and interest in superficial sexual pleasure. Joyce furthers the need for love and attention with the boy’s determination to pass Mangan’s sister. He says, “when we came near the point at which our ways diverged, I quickened my pace and passed her” (Joyce 21). The boy watches this girl closely every morning so that he can follow her and yet always makes it a point to pass her – so that she, too, may see him. Furthermore, the boy needs attention from his uncle as well. The boy asks for permission to go to Araby but his uncle forgets (Joyce 24). His uncle is slow to adhere to his desire to attend the fair and his wife must compel him to do so, showing the lack of priority the uncle exhibits for the boy. Joyce chooses to emulate the boy’s need of affection and love through transaction.

The two transactions that ultimately drive the entire story are the transaction between the boy and his uncle and the transaction between the boy and Mangan’s sister. The boy does not have a trusting relationship with his uncle as seen when he says, “if my uncle was seen turning the corner we hid in the shadow until we had seen him safely housed” (Joyce 21). This statement

shows that his uncle is unapproachable and provides a role of authority rather than affection. And yet, the boy goes to his aunt and uncle to ask for permission to attend Araby (Joyce 23). Whether out of a sense of respect or duty, the boy chooses to enlist the permission of his parental figures even though he could have easily gone without their blessing. However, while the boy seeks the approval of his uncle, his uncle simply says that he “ha[s] forgotten” (Joyce 24). The boy expects permission and monetary support in exchange for his willingness to seek permission. However, his uncle is unwilling to comply until finally coerced by the boy’s aunt (Joyce 24). While the boy receives the monetary support he is seeking, his uncle gives his blessing reluctantly and not of his own accord, a rather unfulfilling substitute to the hopeful outcome the boy has anticipated. This brings us to the other symbolic transaction. The boy is seeking the affection and attention of his admired: Mangan’s sister. He wins a conversation with her and discovers her desire to go to Araby and says that he will “bring her something” (Joyce 23). The boy expects attention and affection from Mangan’s sister in return for a gift. His side of the “bargain” comes at a higher price when he must pay more than he anticipates for entry, goes with the reluctant permission of his uncle, and then is disappointed by the experience of Araby. As Harry Stone in his article, “‘Araby’ and the Writings of James Joyce” explains, “he has come to buy, but he has not bought” (Stone 28). In the end, the boy doesn’t even have enough money to buy a trinket for his beloved because he has spent more than he should have between travel and entrance fees. He does not even have enough money to return home (Joyce 25, footnote 9). Despite the boy’s efforts to uphold his part of the bargain, he realizes he cannot give all that is required and thus receives nothing in return. The boy’s coins (both metaphorical and literal) have fallen (Joyce 25).

While some may still argue the legitimacy of the theme of transactions in Joyce’s “Araby,” there is one overriding detail that solidifies the idea. When the boy is asking his uncle

for permission and money to go to Araby, his uncle says he has forgotten and then begins to recite the words of an old poem entitled “The Arab’s Farewell to his Steed” (Joyce 24). The poem by Caroline Norton tells of a man who sells his horse: “Fleet limb’d and beautiful, fare thee well!” (Norton 8). The steed’s owner happily is rid of the steed, explaining what lies in the future for the beast. But gradually the owner realizes that he should not have given up the steed. He exclaims, “Can the hand that casts thee from it now command thee to return?” (Norton 31). The owner yearns for the return of the steed and recognizes his mistake in trying to give up something he loved for nothing in return (Norton 32-36). Joyce chooses to allude to this poem right before the boy goes to Araby, as if to foreshadow what will occur. While the boy has longed to impress the girl and seek his uncle’s approval, every transaction he makes fails him and he is left with a “lonely heart [that] yearn[s]” (Norton 30).

The coins, though literal in the boy’s transaction at Araby and in the marketplace, also take on the metaphorical meaning of the need for acclaim, affection, and attention. Joyce teaches that transaction, no matter the form, falls (Joyce 25): dependence upon others for return will always come up short. The boy has his epiphany at the end that his “stay was useless” and that his “interest” (a double entendre) in the fair was feigned (Joyce 26). The boy decides to allow his “two pennies to fall against the sixpence” (Joyce 26) in his pocket – a symbol of his realization that money and transaction have mirrored the ultimate Fall, something that can never fully be fulfilled with his own merit. The reading of “Araby” through a transactional lens puts in perspective the disappointment of literal transactions as well as the fall of transactions of charitable deeds for acclaim and action or gifts for love and affection. This reading gives meaning to the song shared by the uncle and brings to light foreshadowing and symbolism otherwise unidentifiable. “Araby” no longer is simply a “coming of age” story but rather a

commentary on the transactions that often occur in a societal parallel. The disparity between the boy's perception of Araby and the reality of what Araby-goers reported can hardly be counted as disparity considering the purpose behind the event. If Araby-goers only went with the intention of being seen by others, the reality of Araby is as Joyce explains it through the narrator's eyes.

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