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The Role of Setting in "Araby"

T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" concludes with the lines "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper". This stark pessimism is echoed in James Joyce's short story "Araby", the tale of a boy's transformation from wide-eyed idealist to cynic. The setting, Joyce's own hometown of Dublin, Ireland during the dark, cold winter, serves as a constant reminder to the protagonist that his fantasies of "Eastern enchantment" (Joyce 114) are a world away. In contrast with the extravagant imagination of the narrator, the dark, dispiriting reality in which he finds himself is personified by a setting that ultimately contributes to a mood of overwhelming despair.

Early in the story, the narrator's perception of the world is an interesting dichotomy between his physical environment and the reality he imagines for himself. About the object of his affections, Mangan's sister, he writes, "Her image accompanied me even in places the most hostile to romance"(Joyce 113). Through his life, the protagonist has been able to use his imagination and the sheer power of hope to provide him with optimism even in settings that would typically evoke fear or sadness. For example, on a walk through town with his aunt he hears, "the shrill litanies of shop boys" and "the nasal chanting of street singers", but because of the joy the idea of Mangan's sister brought him, "these noises converged into a single sensation of life for [him]" (Joyce 113). In one case, the speaker is alone on a dark rainy evening and becomes fearful of the ominous setting. To deal with this, he pressed his hands together "until they trembled, murmuring: 'O love! O love!' many times"(Joyce 114). Here, he seems almost as

if he is having a powerful religious experience, having completely withdrawn into himself, clearly wanting to escape from the suffocating reality.

As the climax of the story nears, and the protagonist sets out alone for the bazaar to fulfill his aim, Joyce's depiction of the setting loses its gilded tone in lieu of a more harshly realistic one. The narrator's response to his setting, too, changes. Walking through the great, dark hall of the Araby, he notices, "a silence like that which pervades a church after a service"(Joyce 116); in this unsettling and unfamiliar setting, he does not have the luxury of safety allowing him to reflect on his emotions; on the contrary, he is clearly rattled by what he sees. As he continues timidly through the hall, he notes the English accents of the vendors as they laugh over trivialities and is seemingly paralyzed by the realization that the reality of the fair is an inauthentic husk of what he had imagined it to be. Away from the safety and familiarity of his own home, he is forced to abandon his romantic fantasies and view his present situation objectively: as a small child in an apparently uncaring universe. He "[looks] humbly at the great jars that stood like eastern guards" (Joyce 117); humble because he knows that he, as a poor Irish boy, is not worthy of their mystique.

The motif of darkness, earlier in the story representing introspection and the mystery of life, in the end becomes a symbol of emptiness and despair. In the final, climatic moment of the story, the lights of the bazaar are shut off and the narrator, overcome with shame, writes, "gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger" (Joyce 117). Joyce paints a poignant picture in this final sentence of the protagonist alone and hopeless, the ceiling of the bazaar hall blocking his view of the heavens. As is inevitably the case in a story about a coming of age brought on by a monumental disappointment, his disheartening epiphany comes to him in the least picturesque place and the most unexpected time; and not with a bang, but a whimper.