Doubling the Narration: Unearthing Latent Meanings in “Araby”

The human brain is a remarkable evolutionary feat, but the frailty of the human mind perplexes scientific historians. How could a species survive for such a long time without destroying itself? Sigmund Freud sought to answer this and similar questions through his psychoanalytical theory. According to Freud’s theory, retelling stories from the past can reveal unresolved conflicts in a person’s psyche. Such is the case in James Joyce’s short story “Araby.” The story’s point of view is first person as a narrator recounts a boyhood memory. The memory involves Araby, a local bazaar, which the boy attends with the intention of purchasing a gift. This gift is for an ageless female with whom the youngster is infatuated. The minimal plot of the story focuses on detailed descriptions of past events through stream of consciousness narrative. In the retelling of this story, the storyteller(s) unconsciously attempt to deal with their neurosis sourced in a repressed feeling of powerlessness.

Perhaps the best starting point in reading the text using a psychoanalytical lens is to reflect on the author’s relationship with the text’s literal events and latent meanings. “Araby” is a doubly framed text; that is, there are multiple levels of framing in the story. The smallest frame is that of the latent meaning, as evidenced in the literal plot and characters. The main character is a boy, but the story is narrated in the voice of an older version of that boy. The largest frame is then the author himself, James Joyce. Thus, there are two storytellers, the narrator and Joyce. As the author and inventor of the text, Joyce distances himself far from the latent meaning of the text using not one but two literary frames. Any discussion of the boy and the narrator can then be applied to Joyce as the highest creator of the text. Extending the meanings to the author prove a challenge to a psychoanalyst because of the temptation to attribute the discovered meanings to Joyce’s narrator, an obstacle for dissociating the author from the latent meanings.

The story’s introduction hints at the underlying reason for the narrator’s childhood actions. After a paragraph describing the setting, the narrator includes a paragraph on a recently deceased priest (531-2). The priest was a former tenant of a home on North Richmond Street, which is now occupied by the boy and the boy’s aunt and uncle. This brief deviation from the plot serves as a clue for analyzing the storyteller’s neurosis. In analyzing neurosis, Freud focused on the role of parents. It is possible to assert that the protagonist of the story, a nameless boy, is the orphaned son of that deceased priest. The priest left his furniture to his sister, the boy lives with his aunt and uncle, they all live in the house recently occupied by the priest, and the narrator never mentions his parents (532). These details converge to indicate that the storyteller is repressing the memory of his father’s death. The death of a parent, enshrined in the refrains of religion, marks a defeating experience for a child. The ramifications of this defeat play out in the story through delusions and helplessness to control lived experiences. The narrator cannot control the past events as they are permanently solidified in time.

A second area of interest involves the context of the boy’s relationship (or lack thereof) with the ageless female who lives across the street. The boy acts as a voyeur and stalks her: “Every morning I lay on the floor …watching her door” (532). In psychoanalysis, these events indicate that the boy suffers from yet another delusion: unrequited love. The delusion itself attributes a feeling of stability through a daily routine. However, sexual love demands more, demands a “future” beyond the present reality (532). Thus, the boy’s desires live in the tension between the fear of losing the fantasy and the fear of never moving past the fantasy. The female initiates the first major plot event with a brief conversation (533). This dialogue marks the destruction of the boy’s routine, the violation of his sanctified delusion.

In addition to these hypotheses, the storyteller implies that the girl is associated with a convent (533). If the female is a part of or will soon enter the convent, then the boy will lose his routine as well as lose hope for a reciprocated love, a future. She will inevitably be lost to him, and he cannot control that fact. Reality does not mesh with the boy’s obsessions. The reality, as told by the storyteller, indicates the futility of the desire. If this angelic figure represents (or is) his mother, then the present unrequited love is a signifier for the love lost by the literal or figurative death of his mother.

Before the narrator hints at a conclusion to the idea of parental abandonment, the plot takes the reader through a third supportive event. The outcome of the brief dialogue between the two characters concludes with the boy’s resolve to go to Araby and bring back something for the girl, who cannot go. The boy immediately begins to encounter difficulties with this task. The first problem involves receiving permission; the second, a fragmented perception of the temporal present; and third, acquiring money to purchase the gift. The narrator quickly passes through the first two difficulties and focuses on the third, narrating an extended description of waiting for his uncle to return home from work. The boy must wait for his uncle to give him money, and this frustrates the feeling of helplessness. He is not in control of his uncle’s arrival. He is forced to live in a state of temporary abandonment from this substitute father figure.

The uncle arrives late in the evening, the boy receives the money, and he arrives at Araby. By this time, the boy “fear[ed] that the bazaar would be closed” (534). The boy has one mission before Araby shuts down: purchase a trinket for his love. This gift symbolizes the hope of love, the eventual fruition of his sexual desires. However, the latent meaning of the gift and romance involve the longing for a reunion with the mother. The efforts to achieve this reuniting signify his attempt to control the situation, his belief that he can do something to get his parents back. However, the boy never purchases a gift. While in a stall looking at the wares, he overhears a flirtatious conversation. When he hears this, he abandons his pursuit of the gift. He walks away into the night and is full of uncontrollable emotion: “my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (535).

The emotions expressed imply egocentricity. The sense of guilt lies in that repressed memory of death and in the mistake of chasing after a female. The dreamland of romance helps the boy leave behind the traumatic experience of losing a parent. Observing a flirtatious conversation opens the boy’s eyes to the idea that he is involved in a similar meaningless affair. The obstacles suppressed in the romance rise and overtake fantasy with reality. To some degree, consciously or unconsciously, he realizes the vanity of pursuing a woman as an attempt to cope with the loss of his parents.

From a Freudian perspective, these insights must be taken to the level of the storyteller. Given that the narrative is doubly framed, assumptions can be made about both Joyce and the narrator he creates. From this perspective, it is possible to claim that Joyce has a suppressed feeling of powerlessness. As Joyce doubly removes himself from the text, his narrator offers a closer reading of the boy’s unconscious through the retelling of the memory. These doublings indicate a dissociation and depersonalization from the source of neurosis.

The symbolism used in the story illustrates the figurative doubling that occurs in “Araby.” The narrator attaches isolation and individualism with darkness. Several yonic symbols, like the priest’s back room and the boy’s disappearance into the night, symbolize attempts to reunite with the mother. Religious symbols attach the boy to his father in all of its complexities. Religion both abandons him in a time of need and connects him to his father. The bazaar is drawn in contrast to North Richmond Street; the former representing reality (a place where epiphanies can occur), and the latter representing fantasy (where delusions can occur).

In keeping with the content, the form is elusive, keeping readers from a firm grip on interpretive content. Much like discerning the complexities of the human brain, the meanings of this doubled narrative signify varieties of latent meanings. The ending itself is problematic as the plot ends with a sense of psychic resolve, but is housed in a narration in which the desires of the subconscious are not evident, not called out, not named.

The open-ended nature of “Araby” allows for multiple readings. For example, one might assert that there is not sufficient, concrete textual evidence to claim that the priest orphaned the boy. After all, the boy never mentions a paternal relationship with the priest! Instead, the significance of the priest may simply be a component of Joyce’s infatuation with religious symbolism. Given the relationship drawn between religion and fantasy, a psychoanalyst might identify a focus on religion as further evidence of neurosis based on a delusion. Keeping this in mind, these theories do not yet satisfy Freud’s focus on the role of parents in psychological development. To stay true to Freud’s work requires the questions of the protagonist’s family situation. The depersonalization of the father and the otherness of the mother correspond to normal mental reactions to a childhood trauma. While the boy longs to get closer to these figures by visiting the back drawing room and stalking the female from across the street, the narrator is not reliable enough to know of or communicate the deaths of both parents. In this situation, the added layer of religious symbolism assists in arguing for the symbolic relationship with the mother and father figures the boy lost.

Work Cited

Joyce, James. "Araby.'" *eFictions*, Edited by Joseph F. Trimmer, et al., Heinle, Cengage Learning, Canada, 2002, pp. 531-5.