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# Detached and Empty: Subtexts of the Unoccupied House in James Joyce's "Araby"

### Jason Snart

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In my experience teaching James Joyce's "Araby," I've found students will often assume that the central character in the story, the young boy, lives not in one of the houses that face each other, lining North Richmond Street, but rather in the detached house at the dead end of the street. The detached house is specifically described as abandoned, but there seems a natural inclination, particularly for first-time readers, to associate the detached house with the central character, as though both were somehow picked out from the surroundings as potentially different. Of course, the misreading is easily clarified, but I've found it a useful starting place to elucidate an important set of related subtexts in the story, including those of watching and being watched, not to mention themes of occupation and emptiness. In fact, I look to use this misreading for its quite productive metaphorical alignment of the detached, abandoned house with the young boy. Through this metaphorical parallel a potential "mistake" is turned on its head to become an important key to understanding the story.

The houses described by Joyce at the beginning of "Araby" represent part of what A.R. Coulthard has identified as the "repressive Dublin culture" of the story (98). The houses that face each other are "conscious of decent lives within them." They "[gaze] at one another with brown imperturbable faces," introducing the subtext of seeing and being seen (27). However, the abandoned house, "detached from its neighbours," stands in stark contrast to the facing houses that line the street (27). It represents the subtexts of detachment and emptiness. (Quite possibly, readers look to identify this house as the young boy's simply because it is described *first* in the narrative.) The symbolism of the houses suggests that it is through watching that a moral code—suggested by the idea of decency—can be asserted and maintained. No

less imperative is that this code is to be internalized; that is, it must metaphorically occupy the individual to function effectively. The abandoned house, as both detached and empty, thus provides the ideal metaphorical counterpart to the young boy at the beginning of the narrative: he stands apart from the self-scrutinizing gaze of his Catholic surroundings and has yet to internalize the religious moral code of his culture.

Margot Norris argues that in the story's final scene the "boy who finds emptiness in 'Araby' [the bazaar] is in turn found empty, a personification rather than a person" (n. pag.). I argue, however, that the narrator is not empty at the story's close, but rather "occupied" by, or in the process of being furnished with, the religious, moral codes of his Catholic culture. In the early stages of the story, however, he is empty, having yet to internalize the controlling, moral gaze implied by the facing houses. He is thus most like the abandoned house—empty and unattached—as the story begins.

As the narrative unfolds, the boy does begin to participate in the power of gazing when he spies on Mangan's sister, though it is hardly with sober decency in mind. Eloise Knowlton argues that "The boy's position as unseen seer is precisely that of the pornographic viewer" (7). He shelters, or "houses," himself in order to more effectively watch Mangan's sister, the object of his "confused adoration" (29). The narrator's watching may operate contrary to the moralizing gaze implied by the houses at this point, however, as we are told that he watches for Mangan's sister with the blind "pulled down"; significantly, he "could not be seen," suggesting that he has not learned to see himself in the harsh terms that will come at the story's conclusion, the moment of judging oneself (28).

The narrator's language early in the narrative communicates the boy's inability to understand and process his feelings; he admits, "I myself did not understand," or "I could not tell why"; and his heart "seemed to pour itself out" into his bosom (29; italics mine). The boy is unable to understand his attraction to Mangan's sister; we become aware by the story's conclusion that his recourse has been to internalize (or become occupied by) the restrictive, religiously moral gaze, and self-gaze, that is symbolized by the facing houses.

The boy moves further away from the outsider status initially suggested by the unattached house as the narrative progresses. The more he pursues his confused adoration, and the more he attempts to process his feelings, the more he gravitates toward the only "romance" that is

allowed by the Church: adoration of the image and repression of the physical. As Trevor Williams writes, "the adolescent boy reaches naturally for religious language to express romantic love" (92). In the face of this new experience, physical as well as emotional, the boy makes sense of it with the only tools he has been given: a religiosity that abstracts the emotional and that represses the physical.

The scene in which the boy and Mangan's sister first converse marks a moment of deep transformation, a transformation he does not comprehend at the time but that will be completed as he grows into the adult narrator. Joyce preserves this moment as an ambivalent one. The boy, we are told, "was alone at the railings," finally talking with Mangan's sister (30). He is still an isolated and removed figure, as symbolized by the unattached house. However, he is no longer part of his childhood group; Mangan "and two other boys were fighting for their caps" (30). The somewhat awkward visual configuration that follows is telling, for it places the boy somewhere between his childhood (and now seemingly child-ish companions) and the more "adult" (and watchful) world of his attraction to Mangan's sister. Joyce invokes the houses that face one another to remind us that the moral gaze for which they stand is the narrator's inevitable future. We are told that "The light from the lamp opposite our [the boy's] door caught the white curve of her neck, lit up her hair that rested there and, falling, lit up the hand upon the railing. It fell over one side of her dress and caught the white border of a petticoat" (30-31). The houses, Mangan's and the narrator's, face one another, and Mangan's sister is on her own doorstep. Joyce mentions the house across the street (the boy's house) to reassert the subtext of moral gazing. The reference to the boy's own door as opposite hers—a detail seemingly unnecessary since Mangan's sister is on her own doorstep lit by the lamp there—in fact returns us to the theme of watching, being watched, and watching oneself. From this moment on the safety of the boy's "detachment" and emptiness is compromised.

Finally off to the bazaar, the boy "remained alone in the bare carriage" of the train (34); however, his isolation is not the detached safety of the abandoned house. The language changes as the narrative closes. Where the boy was once unsure of how to understand his feelings, the narrative voice imparts a clarifying authority: "I recognized a silence like that which pervades a church after a service," "I knew my stay was useless," and most devastatingly, "I saw myself as a creature driven

and derided by vanity" (34-35). It is this final self-seeing that destroys whatever innocence was implied by the narrator's detachment from the moralizing gazes of the houses that line the street, for the individual that pronounces judgment upon his first crush as the mortal sin of vanity is by no means the empty child, awaiting experience; it is, rather, the adult now occupied by the strict moral system that watches and is watched.

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