

LITERARY REFLECTION

Araby and the Shape of Desire

A reflection on James Joyce, Jerome Stern, and the literary architecture of longing

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Fiction often reveals what ordinary perception leaves hidden: the private threshold where desire, loneliness, and self-knowledge begin to meet.

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In Jerome Stern's *Making Shapely Fiction*, the craft of fiction is treated not as ornament, but as architecture. A story becomes meaningful through form: its movement, pressure, imagery, silence, and the moments in which a character discovers what had been hidden from him. James Joyce's *Araby* demonstrates this with unusual force. On the surface, the story follows a young boy's infatuation with Mangan's sister and his attempt to bring her something from the bazaar. Beneath that simple plot, Joyce builds a meditation on longing, illusion, loneliness, and epiphany.

What makes *Araby* enduring is not only what happens, but how it happens. Joyce allows the reader to feel the boy's inner world before fully understanding it. The story is told in the first person, which draws us directly into the narrator's private consciousness. Through that intimacy, desire becomes less like an event and more like an atmosphere. The reader does not merely observe the boy's longing; the reader inhabits the narrow, shadowed world in which longing grows.

Joyce's sentences often move slowly and visually, creating a rhythm that mirrors the boy's perception. When he writes that the air is "musty from having been enclosed," and that a room is filled with "wild old useless papers," the physical environment becomes more than setting. It becomes emotional weather. Words such as "blind," "cold," and "gloomy" deepen the atmosphere of restriction. The world feels dim, enclosed, and waiting for some kind of illumination.

That illumination appears, at least for the boy, in Mangan's sister. Her presence changes the tone of the story. She is not described with exhaustive detail, yet she becomes the center of his imagination. Joyce gives her the force of symbol rather than the fullness of character, which matters. The boy is not truly in love with a person he knows; he is enthralled by an image he has created. His desire gives her meaning, and that meaning gives his world temporary light.

The power of Joyce's style appears in his use of figurative language. When the narrator says, "My body was like a harp, and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires," desire is transformed into music. The simile suggests that the boy is no longer fully self-governing. He is being played upon by feeling. His body responds before his judgment can interpret what is happening. This is where Joyce's fiction becomes psychologically exact: adolescence is shown not as clear understanding, but as enchantment before understanding.

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by an image he has created.*

Stern's ideas help clarify why these details matter. Fiction comes alive when its observations feel genuine. Joyce does not need to explain the boy's longing abstractly; he places that longing in rooms, streets, windows, shadows, and gestures. The result is a world that feels emotionally real because the external details carry the internal condition of the character.

The window is especially important. When the boy watches from behind the blind, he is physically near the world yet emotionally removed from it. He sees companions outside, watches Mangan's sister from a distance, and remains hidden. The window becomes a threshold between participation and isolation. He wants connection, but he experiences desire from concealment. He is drawn toward love, yet trapped within spectatorship.

This tension gives Araby its central shape. The boy believes he is moving toward romance, but Joyce reveals that he is moving toward self-knowledge. The bazaar becomes the place where fantasy collapses. Its darkness and emptiness expose the distance between the imagined world and the actual one. The boy arrives too late, finds little of the exotic wonder he expected, and recognizes the vanity of his own desire. The epiphany is painful because it does not merely disappoint him; it awakens him.

In this way, Araby is not only a story about young love. It is a story about the first serious fracture between imagination and reality. The boy discovers that desire can make the world appear enchanted, but enchantment can also deceive. What he seeks in Mangan's sister is not simply affection; he seeks a form of transcendence, a way out of the dimness surrounding him. When the bazaar fails to fulfill that vision, he confronts the limits of his own projection.

This is why Joyce's use of darkness matters so deeply. Darkness is not only a visual motif; it is the pressure of ignorance, confinement, and emotional immaturity. Light appears when the boy imagines love, but the light does not last. By the end, he stands in a darkened space with clearer sight. The paradox is central to the story: he sees more precisely only after the fantasy loses its glow.

Stern's principles of fiction help illuminate this movement from image to realization. A character's posture, silence, physical placement, and surroundings can say as much as dialogue. In Araby, the boy's waiting, watching, wandering, and stillness all reveal the condition of his soul. Joyce makes the outer world bear the weight of the inner one.

The result is a story shaped by desire, but completed by disillusionment. The boy's longing is genuine, yet incomplete. His imagination is powerful, yet immature. His disappointment is painful, yet necessary. Joyce does not mock the boy for feeling deeply; instead, he shows how feeling must eventually encounter reality. That encounter is what gives the story its lasting force.

Ultimately, Araby endures because it captures a human moment that is both private and universal: the awakening from projection into perception. Joyce uses imagery, symbolism, figurative language, and first-person narration to bring the reader inside that awakening. Stern's understanding of fiction as shaped, embodied, and detail-driven helps reveal why the story works so well. Beneath its simple plot, Araby shows how literature can transform longing into knowledge, and disappointment into the beginning of vision.

Works Referenced

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Editorial note: This version has been lightly revised from an earlier academic essay into a publication-style literary reflection for a personal writing site or Medium.