

Araby and The Male Gaze

Sam Shortt

Within James Joyce's "Araby", the protagonist becomes possessive of a girl that does not hold any romantic feelings towards him. In the book "Critical Theory Today", Lois Tyson defines 'the male gaze' as "the man looks; the woman is looked at. And it is the one who looks who is in control, who holds the power to name things, the power to explain the world and so to rule the world. The one who is looked at—the woman— is merely an object to be seen" (Tyson 85). This extends into current society, as the belief that a woman needs a man to lead a successful life, disregards the importance behind her free will. Additionally, fantasies that encourage the objectification of women, play into the delusion that women are readily available in real life. The only way to ensure that society's underlying motives remain pure, within relationships, is to be self-aware of our own vanity. I will not only argue that "Araby" is an illustration for 'the male gaze', but I will contend that this seeming empowerment, that 'the male gaze' gives to men, is proved to be impeded within Joyce's text.

Within "Araby", the boy seems to continually attach the girl's identity to a man, as she is first identified as Mangan's sister, and is later perceived as possessed by the protagonist. This connects to Tyson's text as she explains that male supremacy encourages men to treat women as economic 'markers', 'tokens', or 'commodities'. The boy in "Araby" identifies the girl as a 'token' or an object of the men in her life, and correspondingly fails to acknowledge her autonomy. Despite the girl's name being never mentioned in the text, the boy states "I had never spoken to her except for a few casual words, and yet her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood" (Joyce 62). The boy does not mention his love interest's name, because her identity and name are to be tied with a man's. The girl's name rebukes and reminds the protagonist that she has the freedom of choice, and it gives her individualistic identification outside of the boy's perception that women are a 'commodity' of men.

Through the fetishization of the girl, the protagonist in "Araby" ignorantly believes that his love interest holds the same adoration for him. The article, "Male Gaze, Pornography and the Fetishised Female", cites Jon Stratton, who connects Sigmund Freud's theory to the fetishization of the female body (Yahya et al. 27). Stratton understands that the fetishism of women is a replacement for the sense of 'lack' or feeling of 'inadequacy' within men. The article then explains

that this unethical replacement enacts the practice of commodity fetishism; "...the commercial exchange of objects through its association with sexual desire, hence the objectification of the commodity" (Yahya et al. 27). More specifically, the article acknowledges pornography as an extremely popular industry that profits from the fetishization of women. It is platforms like these that play into the fantasy that women are as easily accessible in the physical world as they are online. Men can hide behind their devices, and sexualize women, without any effort or personal connection to the woman they are looking at. Although "Araby's" protagonist has a strong desire for the girl, he suppresses his feelings. From his window, he watches her every morning, but still hides behind blinds. He follows the girl on the way to school but does not make conversation with her. The boy hides in the darkness of a room and calls the girl 'O love!', even though they have barely spoken (Joyce 63). We can additionally identify that the girl's body is described extraordinarily in comparison to her words, values, and soul. When pondering if he will even get the chance to confess his 'adoration' for her, the boy explains "But my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires" (Joyce 62). The boy admits that he dismisses his love interest's words, and that he does not pay close attention to her gestures. Instead, he fetishizes her words and gestures to his liking, and believes that she is available to him. The boy becomes possessive of the girl, even despite his inability to approach her. Within their first discussion, he realizes that the girl is unable to attend the bazaar and promises to bring her back something. It may seem like the protagonist desires to use this item as a segue into his confession of love, but it is more likely that he would have used the 'gift' to attain power. This fantasized power fills his feelings of 'lack' and 'inadequacy'. The boy rationalizes that if he gives his love interest something, he will receive her love and affection in return. The boy commodifies her love to be a simple transaction; that if he gives, then he will get. The boy immerses himself in the fantasy that the girl he desires is easily accessible to him, before they have even had a discussion.

Additionally, the protagonist uses the lack of communication, between him and his love interest, as grounds to conjure up what he identifies her to be, and consequently fails to acknowledge her free will. Instead of desiring to get to know the girl, the protagonist desires to remain ignorant and perceives her as a 'blank slate'. The boy inherently believes that he can mold the girl to fit his idea of the 'perfect woman', because to him she has no autonomy. By becoming desensitized to reality, the protagonist attempts to manifest this girl into being his lover. This

concept is captured in the protagonist's statement while sitting in the darkness of his room: "I was thankful I could see so little. All of my senses seemed to desire to veil themselves and, feeling that I was about to slip from them, I pressed the palms of my hands together until they trembled, murmuring: *O love! O love!* many times." (Joyce 63). After this occurrence, it is the girl that begins the conversation with him and disrupts his fantasy. The boy states "I was so confused that I did not know what to answer" (Joyce 63). To regain control of the falsified relationship, the boy seeks out a gift for the girl from the bazaar. Unbeknownst to him, there was never a relationship in the first place, and he never held any power over the woman of his desire.

Within "Araby", the boy becomes possessive of his love interest, due to his obsessive perception of both the girl's 'helplessness', and by identifying himself as her rescuer. He displays this by visualizing the image of his love interest while walking through 'hostile' environments. The boy exclaims "I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes" (Joyce 62). Within this statement, he inherently perceives himself to be the girl's 'knight in shining armor', and that she is his 'damsel in distress'. The protagonist 'heroically' identifies himself as the protector of his love interest's purity, but in reality, he desires to preserve it for himself. This is again something that he has fantasized over, and not something that is real. This is symbolized within the light, that surrounds the girl, when he describes her appearance. He becomes possessive of this light, and at the end of the story, this light fades away revealing reality.

The protagonist realizes that he had been using the girl to appease his own vanity, and the underlying reasoning for his previous actions becomes clear. Regardless of the girl's desire to receive anything from the boy, it becomes his mission to bring his love interest a gift. It is not until he observes a woman flirting with two men that he understands that the girl of his desire is not who he thinks she is. This display of affection makes him realize that he has never communicated his affections to the girl, and that she has never communicated any romantic desire for him. Additionally, he has created her to be something that she is not, and this deeply bothers him. The boy leaves the bazaar without a gift and says, "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 66). He has control over his own perception and thoughts about the girl, but he has no control over her feelings towards him. It is within this moment that he comes to the realization that he has been possessive of someone who was never his. It is unclear whether the boy turns from his self-conceit, or if he chooses to wallow in it, but he ultimately comes to terms with his pride.

Joyce's "Araby" actively displays the concept of 'the male gaze' but draws additional attention to the fallacy that women are an object to be owned or possessed. The protagonist views the girl to be a 'commodity', rather than an individual, and perceives himself as her champion. Furthermore, he becomes so preoccupied with delusion, that he believes she will eventually desire him in reality. In the end, the boy rectifies his own distorted perspective in understanding that the girl does not desire him back. He seemingly comes to terms with reality and becomes aware of his underlying motives. Currently, our world should become more aware of the ways in which we fetishize, commodify, and objectify people. We cannot inherently possess the people we 'gaze' upon, but, like the boy, our delusion could cloud our interpretation of reality. Perhaps everyone can be compared to the protagonist in "Araby", as we all fight our own creature that is 'driven and derided by vanity'. (Joyce 66).

Works Cited

- Joyce, James. "Araby." *The Broadview Anthology of Short Fiction*. 4th ed. Broadview Press, 2020.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. 4th ed., Routledge, 2023.
- Yahya, Wan R., et al. "International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences." *Male Gaze, Pornography and the Fetishised Female*, 1 Mar. 2010.