“Araby”: The Death of Romanticism

A young boy, the protagonist in James Joyce’s “Araby,” is greatly influenced by his idealistic and distorted beliefs that are a central theme in the story. Childhood notions foster attributes of romanticism, which life disrupts and exchanges with cynical realism. Joyce’s protagonist clearly exemplifies the romanticized characteristics common of immature adolescents in the beginning of the story. The boy’s fantasy of love and his longing for adventure are perverted and distorted by illusions. Events in the story lead to a pivotal awakening to reality and an end to the false and foolish imaginations. The innocent outlook of youth is replaced with a more realistic life view. The journey in “Araby” from childish naïve thinking to mature sensible reasoning is shown in the story by inspecting the symbolic meaning of Mangan’s sister and Araby, comparing the initial setting with that of the bazaar, and the narrative technique the author employs.

The symbolism behind Mangan’s sister and the bazaar of Araby reveal the defining characteristics and motivations for the main character at the beginning of the story, which result in the climactic point of tension. Joyce relies heavily upon the boy’s strong religious upbringing in the comparison of the girl as divinely attributed. His romanticism is obvious when comparing the bazaar with an imaginary world of wonder. Incentives that lead the protagonists to act are deeply ingrained in his personality, and the symbolic messages in the story bring them to the surface and allow the reader a glimpse. This idea of romanticism and the chivalrous knights quest are typical for a young man driven by foolish and vain desires. His love and devotion is
untested, his courage and persistency is unchallenged. Life has a tendency of dispelling these glorious and foolhardy ideas, and the inspiring symbols will take on a different meaning than before.

Mangan’s sister symbolizes an angelic saint to the protagonist for whom he willingly sets out upon a holy crusade. Gradually through the story we see examples of this image emerging. In recollecting his memories the narrator uses the lines, “Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand” (BL 317), revealing how the boy transferred his limited understanding of religious concepts to this young woman. It is confused and jumbled illusions brought on by foolhardy ambitions. His description of her appearance is strangely reminiscent of an angel or the Virgin Mary, which are common objects of worship and transforms into his idol. This love and devotion are central elements of the romantic spirit, which allows for this deception and ensuing quest to earn his new Goddess’ approval. His foolish notions of affection supersede the rational senses and the resulting holy crusade for love ends with the removal of this veil from the natural eyes. What before inspired love and symbolized holiness, now is revealed as prideful and unchecked impulses. In this moment his ridiculous inspirations are laid bare, and his shame is nearly unbearable.

In the story Araby (the extravagant local fair) represents the characters inner search for adventure and an escape from reality. Araby holds a sense of wonder to the young boy, who is unaccustomed to the foreign and strange. He speaks of its enchanting power as a mesmerizing force, which holds the promise of freedom from his seemingly empty world. One line of the story reads, “In front of me was a large building which displayed the magical name” (320), signaling of the boy’s wonder and amazement. It is the distant shore, the Promised Land, the noble quest of every idealist. He willingly sacrifices his hard earned money to gain entrance into
the bazaar because of this spell that is cast upon him. The irony is that the only magic that exists is in his mind and the in illusion of his imagination. It is his utopian paradise, an escape from his mundane existence, but upon arriving he finds it void of wonder, absent of magic. The spell is broken and so is the boy who sacrificed so much in his quest to reach it.

The comparison of the initial setting and that of the bazaar illustrates the transformation that occurs within the protagonist. Setting plays a key role in this story by allowing the reader to draw important conclusions about the character with very limited information in the text. We can deduce the boy has a religious upbringing from the Christian Brothers’ School he attends and that his decisions and actions are determined by that influence. The effect of the church plays a critical undertone throughout the entire story. We cannot understand the character without understanding where he is coming from. Having Ireland as the location during the early 20th century also allows us to assume that he has experienced a very traditional and simple life. His world is very limited and his scope very narrow. All of these conclusions help us create an image for our character that reveals the implied message of the story.

The setting of the boy’s neighborhood is characteristic of him early on in “Araby.” North Richmond Street is described as “a quiet street” (316), which reflects the personality of the protagonist. The neighborhood is a dead end, or blind, street similar to the blindness and innocence with which the boy views the world. His world is sheltered and secluded from outside influences, comparable to the houses on the block. Resemblance between the setting and the protagonist is intentional by the author. The environment where he is raised directly determines his early beliefs. Everything is as a traditional Irish neighborhood should be, and the boy resembles this backdrop. However, he secretly harbors disdain for his simple life and he dreams of escaping to a glorious freedom.
The bazaar is initially described as a splendid, wonderful place that embodies the young boy’s youthful desires. Upon arriving at his destination the bleak world he finds is devastating to his perceived beliefs of the bright future. The description of Araby is one of darkness and quiet that reveals the despairing gloom that is slowly engulfing the protagonist. His envisioned hope of the beautiful new world is shattered when he sees the harsh reality that exists at the end of his journey. The emptiness of the stalls is paralleled by the emptiness inside him, the extinguishing lights correspond to the light which goes off in his own soul. Like a chapel devoid of worshipers, so exists our character. A silent and abandoned bazaar is now the new reality for Joyce’s protagonist.

A closer examination of the type of narration the author employs is enlightening and therefore illuminates the reader to the change that takes place in the protagonist life. The inner monologue used by the author shows the true characteristic of the boy in “Araby.” His attitude in the beginning is evidently full of romanticized concepts of life. The language when speaking of Mangan’s sister is poetic and conjures up beautiful imagery. At one point he states, “But my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires” (317), his words are reminiscent of the romanticist poems. His imagination is often confused for reality and creates a grand illusion of a different world. This language is almost comical in its ridiculous description of love and reveals the naïve nature of his character.

Later in the story the inner monologue of the protagonist opens a window for the reader to glimpse the change that comes over him. No line better illustrates this fact than the final exclamation of the boy, “Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (321). The difference is dramatic and a stark contrast to the earlier idealistic optimism. This new language is dark, void of hope
and lacking the poetry that before saturated the text. His world has lost the novelty that inspired
the beautiful imagery in his words. The realization of the lie that he has been living makes him
bitter without a light at the end of the tunnel. His mind is displayed and we see and hear the
despair as his world is shaken to the very core.

“Araby” presents the reader with some interesting insight into the contrast that exists
between childish idealistic beliefs and maturing realistic concepts. Digging down in the story
reveals the death of innocence and imagination the boy experienced. The author presents a
universal occurrence that people experience all over the world. His character experiences all of
the typical adolescent fantasies and perceptions, but eventually must face his own foolishness
and a coming of age rite of passage. The journey is an unpleasant one, that requires sacrifice and
pain, and even though the boy feels betrayed his world is real now. His experience ultimately
leaves him with a very different outlook and erases all romantic notions of life. The fantasies and
illusions are gone and he is free from the distorted sense of reality. Perhaps we regret the fading
idealism, but at least our vision is clear.
Critical Analysis Rubric (Hand this in with your Draft and Final Copy). Where does your Critical Analysis essay fit on the following scale? After reading the criteria for each part of the essay, mark where you think your essay fits on the arrow line below the section—and explain why you believe this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>Needs a lot more effort to meet the “Excellent” criteria</th>
<th>Excellent—at meeting these criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Paragraph</td>
<td>Thesis is too vague and over-generalized</td>
<td>Deals with a real argument, that can be reasonably contested by others—and not just a self-obvious statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thesis is too self-obvious to be considered an argument</td>
<td>Presents a thesis that is interesting, provocative, and which could not be found by others without a lot of careful reading and analysis</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Thesis is too broad to be covered in the page limit</td>
<td>Thesis is very specific—so that it can be thoroughly expounded in the brief page limit.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thesis does not clearly state WHAT the argument is and HOW it will be demonstrated</td>
<td>Thesis tells both WHAT your argument will be and also HOW you will demonstrate that argument in your essay</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thesis is NOT stated 3 times in increasing specifics as outlined in the guidelines</td>
<td>Thesis is stated THREE TIMES as outlined in the guidelines on Blackboard (see “Form of Papers”)</td>
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</table>

1 Unsatisfactory Needs more thought and work Excellent: 20 pts.

Explanation:

Opening Sentence of all other Paragraphs

Is essentially “plot summary” in that it answers this question: “what happened next in the story”

Clear states some specific assertion you will demonstrate in the remainder of the paragraph—and that assertion connects clearly and pointedly back to your thesis statement in Paragraph 1.

Does NOT clearly preview the ideas that follow in the remainder of the paragraph.

Clearly previews the ideas that follow in the remainder of the paragraph.

Looks more like a list (“Elisa Allen is also talented and resourceful”) than a specific part of your thesis argument (“Further evidence of Elisa’s superior strength is shown symbolically through the different animals in the story”).

Is NOT in any way, shape, or form, what could be considered “plot summary.”
1 Unsatisfactory Needs more thought and work Excellent: 20 pts.
Explanation:

**Content of each Paragraph—after the topic sentence**

<table>
<thead>
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| Plot and other textual elements are dumped on the reader without clear pointers, explanations, and guidance as to how that piece of plot or text DEMONSTRATES and SERVES AS EVIDENCE for the assertion in the first sentence of the paragraph (Wrong way: "Elisa can easily accomplish each task of the potmender, while he is clueless as to how 'Planters hands' work)

Evidence for the assertion of the topic sentence is either insufficient in quantity (only one or two "light-weight" “proofs” given) or insufficient in quality (just because you SAY a symbol "proves" something doesn’t mean it does—you have to show your reader how that symbol follows a clear pattern of symbols and evidence throughout the story (Wrong way: “The chrysanthemums symbolically show that Elisa smells bad, since the potmender notes they have a bad odor.”).

The remainder of the paragraph clearly marshals evidence to demonstrate the assertion of the topic sentence for this paragraph

Each piece of evidence from the text is clearly introduced as EVIDENCE ("another symbol that shows Elisa's strength is . . .” or “another example of her strength is shown by . . .”).

A helpful summarizing sentence is given at the end of the paragraph to restate what part of the thesis has just been proven through the evidence in this paragraph (“In all of these ways the animals clearly reveal symbolically Elisa's greater strengths”) The evidence presented in the paragraph is clearly persuasive to the reader of the assertion of the topic sentence—both in quantity (number of “proofs” presented) and quality (a clear pattern of symbolic or other textual evidence is demonstrated—and evidence is not just dropped on the reader without persuasive explanations from the writer).

1 Unsatisfactory Needs more thought and work Excellent: 20 pts.
Explanation:

**Logic, Reasoning, and Mechanics**

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| The writer’s conclusions often seem to be dropped” or forced on the reader—without sufficient explanations, guidance or evidence.

The writing contains various mechanical problems—such as fragments, run-on sentences, punctuation problems, misspellings, etc.—that seemed to display either a lack of interest in the topic or concern for the needs of the reader, or just a lack of adequate time and effort from the writer.

I did not include an outline of my paper in order to guide and organize my thoughts and to reveal any “logical gaps” in my essay

The writer’s conclusions clearly follow from evidence and are not just “dropped” or forced on the reader—but clearly explained and demonstrated.

The writer is careful to use writing mechanics well—and thereby demonstrates interest, concern for needs of audience and personal effort. conclusion.

I include a detailed and clear outline of my paper in order to guide and organize my thoughts and to reveal any “logical gaps” in my essay
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Impression of Essay</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Unsatisfactory</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I did not respond carefully to most of the “prompt” questions in order to gather material for essay. It is obvious the author is NOT particularly interested and excited about the topic of this essay—and seems to have written the paper simply to “get it done.” Doesn’t attempt to meet the needs of audience. The essay didn’t give readers new and exciting insights, and overall was not very clear, well-organized, or especially captivating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Needs more thought and work</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I thoroughly responded to each “prompt” question in order to gather material for this essay. It is obvious the author is interested and excited about the topic of this essay—and is also excited about sharing his or her findings with an audience in a clear, focused, and persuasive manner. The essay gave readers genuinely new and exciting insights and did so in a clear, well-organized, and interesting manner.</td>
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<td><strong>Excellent 20 pts.</strong></td>
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