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"her figure defined by light": An Analysis of Light and Music in James Joyce's "Araby" and Dennis Courtney's *Araby*[*]

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I. Introduction

Although Joyce's deep interest and even actual investment in early cinema have been noted by his biographers from early on, the actual research done on this subject is surprisingly limited considering its obvious relevancy to Joyce studies. Thomas L. Burkdall's book, entitled *Joycean Frames: Film and the Fiction of James Joyce* (2001), was published in a book-length monograph, followed by an eclectic collection of essays, entitled *Roll Away the Reel World: James Joyce and Cinema* (2010). Meanwhile, the film adaptations of Joyce's works are scantier, with only a handful being available: Joseph

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Strick's *Ulysses* (1967), John Huston's *The Dead* (1987), Dennis Courtney's *Araby* (1999), and Sean Walsh's *Bloom* (2003). Hardly surprising in this circumstance is that critical attention has been focused on the analysis of Joyce's works instead of their film adaptations. These adaptations, however, can provide some new insights to understanding the original texts. One example would be Courtney's short, independent film with its faithful but nonetheless interpretive reworking on Joyce's story. Paying attention to such directorial interpretation, this essay attempts to synthetically analyze Courtney's film *Araby* along with Joyce's original. Though eliciting critics' favorable comments, this film has yielded no serious criticism except Joseph Kestner's "James Joyce's 'Araby' on Film" (2010). Based on his interview with the director, Kestner evaluates and expounds on the film's adherence to and alterations from the story. However, putting Courtney's film together with the source text can clarify and produce its further meanings. In fact, such meanings are revealed and highlighted in the richness of sensory perceptions in both works. As a way of enriching such perceptions, both Joyce and Courtney utilize light and music in their works. Focusing on light and music, this essay argues that they, through their sensory deception and amplification of the boy's romantic illusion for Mangan's sister as well as its discord with reality, play an essential role in understanding Joyce's short story.[1] Such function is further substantiated by Courtney's use of lighting, music, and other sound effects. Therefore, this essay will also explore the ways in which the director makes the utmost use of them as cinematic techniques for his adaptation of "Araby."

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1) Zack Bowen, in *Musical Allusions in the Works of James Joyce: Early Poetry through* Ulysses, notes that this "theme of illusions coming to nothing in the boy's epiphany" is suggested in the popular song, "I'll Sing Thee Songs of Araby" (14).

II. Light

Joyce's stories are intensely visual; from the boy's vision of the dead priest in "The Sisters" to Gabriel Conroy's visually heightened sensitivity in "The Dead," the stories from *Dubliners* are filled with visual perceptions without which the stories would fall flat. Among them, however, "Araby" takes a special position as it plays with the motif of "blindness" outright. Its presentation is obvious from the opening passage, where the cul-de-sac of North Richmond Street is expressed through "being blind" (*D* 20).[2] Such condition foretells the boy's blindness in his romantic surge toward Mangan's sister, whom he hardly knows but as an image. Such meaning is enhanced by the actual blind between them, through which he watches her every morning (*D* 21). As Margot Norris puts it, "The narration describes the boy's voyeurism of Mangan's sister by slipping further meaning off the protective screen that is called a 'blind,' onto its meaning as an ocular shelter used by hunters to conceal or camouflage them from their prey" (48). What is striking in her analysis, though, is the identification of the boy with the house as a voyeur:

> The nearly closed blind, with its slit for peeping, functions like an eyelid closed but for a slit—transforming the front parlor into an eye that harbors the peeping boy. The boy's own ocular gesture—"I kept her brown figure always in my eye"—is thus doubled, as the 'seeing' house keeps the boy in its eye. This strange figuration has complex ontological implications since an eye cannot see itself (except as mirrored or reflected, that is, as some other eye would see it). The boy in his hunter's "blind" thus looks out from a blind spot, what Jacques Lacan has termed a "scotoma." The

2) Many critics agree with the idea that the motif of blindness is key to "Araby." For detailed discussion, for example, see David Pierce's *Reading Joyce*.

> implication of the boy doing his seeing from the site of his blind spot is that he cannot see himself as a voyeur or a stalker, for example, since he sees himself only as a worshipper or a lover. (49)

The boy's blind condition, according to Norris, is inbuilt in the topography of North Richmond Street, implying that this is an inescapable condition for him. While he engages in the act of seeing all the time, his vision is critically impaired until he sees his own blindness at Araby. In the darkened hall of the bazaar, the boy perceives himself as a "creature driven and derided by vanity" and it is "[his] eyes" that suffer as a consequence, as they are "burned with anguish and anger" (*D* 26). With his own epiphany, the reader also feels the necessity to reevaluate his earlier perception of Mangan's sister, himself, and the world that depended upon his vision. In short, the motif of blindness is key to understanding the theme of the story.

Courtney seems to be aware of the significance of such vision in this story. In addition to faithfully representing the setting in Joyce's story, the director expresses the motif of blindness through the use of a black screen in both the beginning and ending of the film. Against the black screen, following the opening credits, the narrative voice introduces the setting of the story: "North Richmond Street was a quiet street except the hour when the Christian Brother's School set the boys free." In his article written after conducting an interview with the director, Kestner explains, "Courtney used this device to grasp the 'blind' nature of the street and the culture" (243). However, the narrative curiously avoids articulating the word "blind."[3] According to Kestner, "Courtney felt if the word 'blind' were used in the opening voice-over, the audience would assume the boy was physically, rather than

3) The original line from Joyce's text is "North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free" (*D* 20).

psychologically, blind" (243). The director thus employs visual blackness instead of auditory voice-over to get the boy's psychological blindness across to the audience. Meanwhile, the awareness of this condition comes with the slamming of the door at the end of the film.[4] As Kestner notices, "two doors slam shut: at the home of Mangan's sister and at the house where the protagonist lives with his aunt and uncle" (243). Between these slams comes the boy's epiphany in narration, followed by a second black screen. Framing his film with black screens, Courtney communicates the boy's mental blindness to the audience.

It is noteworthy in the end of Joyce's story that the boy's self-realization comes when "the light was out" (*D* 26). Instead of illuminating, the light in "Araby" seems to screen, if not blinding, the boy's perception of reality. Perhaps the most evident example of his limited perception is when he gazes at Mangan's sister, for the lighting condition makes him perceive her as only a contour.

> Or if Mangan's sister came out on the doorstep to call her brother in to his tea we watched her from our shadow peer up and down the street. We waited to see whether she would remain or go in and if she remained we left our shadow and walked up to Mangan's steps resignedly. She was waiting for us, her figure defined by the light from the half-opened door. Her brother always teased her before he obeyed and I stood by the railings looking at her. Her dress swung as she moved her body and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side. (*D* 21)

Hiding in the dark corner of the street, the boy gazes at Mangan's sister under the light. The light coming from "the half-opened door" is at best limited in its angle and intensity (*D* 21). Still, it would be hard to recognize a figure

4) See Kestner's article for more details regarding the door motif.

were it not for extra light from inside the house at dusk of winter days. It is no wonder that he only recognizes her larger movements "defined by the light," such as her waving dress and hair (*D* 21). The critical influence of light on the boy's perception of her continues even when she talks to him later. When she asks whether he goes to Araby, his attention is paid to her lightened body.

> She held one of the spikes, bowing her head towards me. The light from the lamp opposite our door caught the white curve of her neck, lit up the 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, just visible as she stood at ease. (*D* 23)

The body of Mangan's sister is rendered as a sexual object rather than a whole subject while he feels his emotion to be sacred. He imagines that "[he] bore [his] chalice safely through a throng of foes" in the market (*D* 23). He also gives the knight's pledge, answering to her, "I will bring you something" when she asks him if he goes to Araby (*D* 23). The religious overtone in the boy's imagination cannot conceal his physical desire. The light fragments her body into parts such as "the white curve of her neck," "the hair that rested there [her neck]," and "the hand upon the railing" (*D* 23). The lamplight also highlights what has been usually unnoticed during daytime, such as "the white border of a petticoat," adding a sexual tone to the image of Mangan's sister (*D* 23). Her image, combined with the "eastern enchantment" the word "Araby" evokes, remains mysterious and sensual (*D* 23). Thus divulging the boy's veiled desire for her to the reader (a desire he himself may not yet have realized), the lights in those instances highlight—if not evoke—the desire. The lights play a critical role in the boy's blinded perception of her and himself.

Courtney seems to seriously take, if not inspired by, the role of light in

Joyce's short story. The brilliance of his adaptation lies in his, and the film's art director Amie Cooper's adroit use of lighting when they shot the film. The film's setting is darker than at dusk; it is almost after nightfall. Darkness and shadow dominate most of the scenes, except some during the daytime. They also do when Mangan's sister first appears on the step. The little backlight from inside the house discloses only part of her face—her left chin, jaw, ear, and hair. The frontal part of her face is completely hidden in darkness so that the audience hardly sees her facial expressions, except a little bit of her speaking mouth when she calls for her brother. Except for her folded arms, her figure is also covered by darkness. The subsequent shot of the boy's face is in stark contrast to hers. His front face is caught on camera in full, and it is hard not to recognize his intent and even feverous gaze at her. Following his gaze is the close-up shot of Mangan's sister. More details of her hair and dress are revealed, but her face is still in darkness. It is the same when she turns her steps and moves her center of gravity to the left foot. Only when she turns in her body to close the door are her facial features shown; her expressions are disinterested and casual even with the slight smile she gives in the end. Compared to this scene, the scene in which Mangan's sister talks to the boy shows an obvious change in her presentation. The intensity and angle of the lighting do not seem to have changed from the first scene, yet the audience can see her facial features and expressions quite distinctively—her dreamy gaze at a distance and her broad smile—as signs of her desire to go to Araby. When the camera moves in for a close-up of her, the texture of her dress, the details like her pearl buttons, and her small gesture of shaking her body or touching a bracelet are all revealed. Her real person, with her own thoughts and desires, emerges in the scene. But such a sense of reality, although clear to the viewer, evades the boy's perception. For him, her image reinforces his erotic fantasy of her. Due to the effects of the lighting, the boy's

continued blindness is effectively conveyed to the film's audience.

III. Music

If light leads the boy into a kind of psychological blindness, the music in "Araby" reveals how he interacts with the real world in this particular condition. In his discussion of music in *Dubliners*, Robert Hass defines Joyce's ways of employing music in this collection. Although he applied such definitions discursively rather than focusing on "Araby," they can all be applied to this short story only if we extend the idea of music to the one including musical sounds. His first point is that music "serves to define the real world" (19). In "Araby," we can be informed of the colonial condition of Ireland and the popular sentiment of melancholy originating from such conditions through the street songs the boy hears in the market, such as "O'Donovan Rossa[5] or a ballad about the troubles in our native land" (*D* 22). However, for the boy, these songs are no different from the other noises of the market, such as "bargaining women," "the curses of labourers," and "the shrill litanies of shop boys" (*D* 21-22). The second function of music Hass observes is its transcendental capacity that "move[s] the characters beyond their daily lives" (20). A palpable example is when the Irish harp appears; when the characters stop to listen to the harp, they forget their daily struggle and enter into the world of romance (Hass 20). Likewise in "Araby," the boy feels as if his body is turned into a harp: "But my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires" (*D* 22). A harp being the traditional symbol of Ireland, the boy by analogy becomes the land colonized and oppressed by Britain. In this way, his feeling for the

5) Jeremiah O'Donovan (1831-1915) is one of the leaders of the Irish rebels (*D* 22).

outside world, "places the most hostile to romance" like the market, as well as his desire to transcend such reality is expressed and even amplified (*D* 21). Indeed, this is Hass's third point: an outlet through which "Joyce's characters reveal themselves" (2). The harp analogy reveals the boy's extreme sensitivity and responsiveness to Mangan's sister. Through music, the boy's psychological and emotional state against the reality is effectively communicated.

Laura Jok, in "Sounds and Impostures: James Joyce's Poetic Prose," interprets the harp analogy as one of the pivotal moments of transformation. "[A]lready something of a troubadour," she points out, "[t]he tangible and the ordinary—the boy's body, every mundane word and gesture of the girl—are elevated musical performance" (312). As a result, the boy's conversation with Mangan's sister becomes a poetry or a song instead of a natural conversation (312). The example Jok gives is indeed substantial to the idea of musical language: "She **asked** me **was** I **goi**ng to **Ar**aby. I for**get whe**ther I **ans**wered **yes** or **no**. It would **be** a s**plen**did ba**zaar**, she **said**; **she** would **love** to **go**" (*D* 22; Jok 312). Observing a loose iambic rhythm in the lines above, Jok also finds internal rhymes such as "me" and "Araby," and "no" and "go" (312).[6] Here the "weaker rhyme" of the first pair than the other, she argues, predicts the boy's final failure in his quest in Araby, as he "never manages to associate . . . the splendid bazaar and himself, in the girl's eyes" (313). Such a failure, Jok notices, is manifest in the final lines of the story. The alliteration of "d" sound in such words as "darkness," "driven" and "derided," as well as the one of "ang" sound in "anguish" and "anger" does not evoke the intended effects by the narrator (*D* 26).[7] Instead, "The melodrama of the final lines

6) Jok observes other contributions to the musical effects as well; assonating the word "whether" with "splendid," for example, also enhances the lines' musicality (312).

7) Vincent Cheng, in his article "The Twinning Stresses, Two by Two": The Prosody of Joyce's Prose," explains the ending of "Araby" with Anglo-Saxon strong-stress (or accentual) alliterative meter (394).

emphasizes the disparity between how the boy sees himself and how he appears," as the reader already knows his insignificance against his camouflage in poetic language (Jok 313). The examples Jok gives are illuminating. As the critic claims, they prove "Joyce approximates music more subtly and insidiously at the level of language by inflecting his prose with the techniques of poetry" (311). By doing so, Joyce instrumentalizes music and musicality in language to intensify what he intends to reveal: the boy's ultimate dissonance with the reality.

In the film *Araby*, Courtney emphasizes the boy's emotion using the repetition of the same music. *Araby* opens with the Irish tune based on the heavy sounds of a cello. The main music is played over and over when the boy sees or thinks of Mangan's sister. The music is first heard when he gazes at her contour on the stairs, yet it is also heard in other scenes where he cannot concentrate on his duty in school or in church. When the boy listens to a priest's prayer and happens to gaze at a statue of the Virgin Mary in the church, for example, the background music changes to the Irish tune. We can know from the music that his attention is diverted to Mangan's sister. It is the same in the scene when he is reminded of her image alone at night. His reminiscence of her figure is expressed through the music against the background of thunder and rain sounds. Under the partial outside light is given the narration that "Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand." His infatuation with her becomes religious fervor. In the following scene of the boy's prayer-like murmuring, "Oh love, oh love, oh love, oh love," his heightened emotion is delivered by the combination of music and light. If the same tune played in the scene suggests his romantic passion, the trickling rain on the window reflecting his face divulges the accompanied sorrow. By putting the amplified effects of music and light together, Courtney successfully conveys how the

boy's feelings for Mangan's sister are caught in themselves and intensified in a sort of dead-end state. The repetition of the main music shows this state of the boy.

Courtney also uses the variation of music to express the fluctuation of the boy's emotion. When the boy requests money from his uncle to go to Araby, he tells the boy to wait until he comes back home. The occasional sound of the cello being plucked in the background, though not the sounds of a harp, is a tell-tale sign of the boy's strained state of mind. When the uncle returns home late, having completely forgotten the boy's request, the same plucking sounds express the boy's anxiety. When he is reminded of the event, the uncle simply dismisses it, saying, "People are in bed by now after their first sleep." The boy's apprehension is heard again through the plucking sounds inserted between the aunt's urging the uncle for his permission and the uncle's ultimate consent. However, the feel of the music changes rapidly when his consent is given. When the boy answers that Araby is the destination of his trip, the usual cello sound is heard, but this time its sound is much more cheerful and spirited, as if reflecting the boy's happiness. The music's tempo increases in speed as the boy runs to hop the train to Araby, slowing down only when the boy nears the bazaar. The music stops abruptly when he discovers that the door is closed. Such variations are employed to express the boy's emotional ups and downs.

In addition to the music, diverse sounds reveal the boy's conflicting psychology in the film *Araby*. Kestner points out Courtney's use of "subjective sound,"[8] exemplified in "the clock and Mrs. Mercer's voice" during the tea (244). The ticking sound of a clock is unbearably loud, and the chattering of Mrs. Mercer is almost incomprehensible to the boy. His impatience with them

8) Another conspicuous example of subjective sound would be the pounding drum beat in the scene where the boy follows Mangan's sister in the morning.

plainly shows that he is not able to maintain his focus on anything else other than going to Araby. The subjective sound is also found in the market. On Saturdays, the boy would go to the market to help his aunt with her shopping basket. The noises of the market are well represented in the movie through a woman's flirtatious words and laughter, men's singing of Irish ballads, and anonymous people's bargaining words and unexpected shouts. Making his way through these people and their noises, the boy narrates, "I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes" (*D* 22). The boy's unharmonious relationship with his surroundings is articulated by the dissonant sounds[9] in the scene. To the boy's disappointment, the discord even continues in Araby. Under the exotic tune of Arabian music, the boy hears the sounds of falling coins and a flirting woman's laughter. As Kestner puts it, "It is the moment of his brutal epiphanic self-confrontation and harsh awakening to the realities of erotic life and social oppression" (245). The laughter seems to be deliberately deployed in both scenes to maximize such impacts on the boy. In the end, Araby turns out to be the same as the ordinary market to which he used to go. All these dissonant sounds in the markets reflect the boy's anxiety and pain—feelings that arise whenever he has to face reality. It is natural enough for Courtney to end his film with the slamming sound of the doors.

IV. Conclusion

"Araby" is a story of a boy's initiation into the adult world through his epiphany experienced in the bazaar of Araby. In this experience, the motif of blindness is central as the story begins and ends with the boy's blindness in his love for Mangan's sister, the world, and himself helplessly rendered in it.

9) The possibility of dissonance even occurs in the boy's main theme.

If it were not for Joyce's skillful deployment of the motif of blindness, the story would not have such a strong impact on readers. Aware of such importance of vision, Courtney takes particular care of the lighting in his film version of "Araby." In scenes that include Mangan's sister, for example, he makes it clear that the boy is too infatuated to see that she is a real person with her own desire, like himself. The intensity and subtle changes of his emotion are further delivered through the use of music, in particular, through the repetition and variation of a few tunes. Such emphasis of music in the film is foreseeable when considering Joyce's active employment of music in his writing. Though not giving direct auditory stimulation to his reader, "Araby" stimulates, with its rhythms and rhymes, the reader's imaginative sense of sound and music. What Courtney had to do with sounds in *Araby* is to actualize them to deliver the heightened tension of the boy's emotion, and the director effectively does the job with the skillful deployment of sound effects, to say nothing of music. The cinematic techniques of lighting and sound effects enable Courtney to capture the spirit of Joyce's story: the blind enchantment and disappointment in first love.

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Abstract

"her figure defined by light": An Analysis of Light and Music in James Joyce's "Araby" and Dennis Courtney's *Araby*

Younghee Kho

This essay explores how light and music are deployed in Joyce's "Araby" and its film adaptation *Araby* by Dennis Courtney. In Joyce's short story, both light and music are utilized in order to heighten the boy's enchantment with Mangan's sister and his subsequent disillusion. The lights that illuminate her on the stairs, for example, blind the boy to her real person and desire, causing him to perceive her only as an object for his own desire. Meanwhile, references to music in "Araby" reveal how the boy interacts with the world. According to Hass, music in *Dubliners* not only helps define the reality, but also has the characters transcend reality and reveal themselves. Jok, on the other hand, explores music and musicality within Joyce's language. In adapting "Araby" into his short film, Courtney seems to be aware of the role of light and music. This essay thus argues that he skillfully adopts such cinematic techniques as lighting, music, and other sound effects in order to deliver and enhance the theme of the story, thereby narrating how the boy romanticizes his love, experiences discord with reality, and ultimately faces the moment of disillusionment more effectively than any storytelling does.

■ Key words : Adaptation, Light, Blindness, Music, Subjective Sound
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