

The Grown Up Version of Adolescent Crush--Self-Differentiation in “Araby”

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Abstract: *Self-differentiation refers to the differentiation of the past “I” and the present “I”, which exists in all self-narratives. In “Araby”, the third story of Dubliners, the adult narrator “I” tells the story of his adolescent love for his neighbour’s sister. The narrator tells his past story either in the language of the present “I” or of the past “I”. Therefore, the present “I” and the past “I” alternate, causing the difference in the language and consciousness of the narrator. With both unity and division, the tension of the two narrative voices is caused, which on the one hand enriches the meaning of the story and on the other guides narratees to actively participate in the interpretation of the story.*

Keywords: *James Joyce; Araby; Self-differentiation; Self-narrative; Acceptance aesthetics*

1. Introduction

“Araby”, the third story of *Dubliners*, the adult narrator “I” tells the story of his adolescent crush. The story revolves around a boy who develops a crush on his neighbor, Mangan’s sister, and he hopes to buy a gift for her at Araby bazaar, but due to his uncle’s delay, he returns empty-handed and disillusioned. The short story adopts first-person narrative in which the grown-up protagonist looks back at his adolescence and recounts his first love. With the present “I” telling “my” past story, “Araby” belongs to homodiegesis. As Zhao Yiheng points out, since there is fission in the time order and the self-awareness between the present narrator and the past narrator in all of the first person narratives, the self-differentiation is inevitable in all self-narratives.^[1] Self-differentiation can either display in the language style or consciousness, and both unity and division can be found in the narrations of the past “I” and the present “I”.

In the case of “Araby”, told by the protagonist himself after he has reached maturity, self-differentiation can be found throughout the story. Although the present “I” seems to dominate the story, readers may find that sometimes the language used and the insights included show there are actually two voices narrating the story as if the present “I” and the past “I” are in fight for the power to speak. See the following two examples. “Among these I found a few paper-covered books...I liked the last because its leaves were yellow.”^[2] Here the consciousness belongs to the young boy. As a boy he does not know exactly what the books tell about, instead, what interests him is the color of the pages. The story ends with the sentence “I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity...” (Joyce, p.249). Obviously, a young boy is impossible to have the wisdom or the vocabulary to express his feelings in this way.

After the brief introduction of the self-differentiation in “Araby”, the author comes up with three questions: How do the two narrative voices function? In what way are they related? What effects does such kind of self-narrative produce and influence the reading process? In order to answer these questions, this paper will firstly examine the boy and the adult’s narration separately to make it clear about how their narrative voices function. Then the relationship between the present and the past narrator will be discussed. Last, the paper is going to take a reader-response approach to analyze the effects this narrative mode produces. The second part will focus on the relationship between the present “I” and the past “I”. Although “I” in the present is more experienced than “I” in the past, in recalling the past, the present “I” and the past “I” gradually come closer and finally merge into one. Since the reader is the only one who understands what’s going on in the narrator’s mind, the narrator can express himself through narration and thus both “I” in the present and the past can get healed. Based on German critic Wolfgang Iser’s theory of acceptance aesthetics, part three demonstrates how the narrative strategy of “Araby” influence the reading process. Joyce provides readers with a lonely and sensitive young boy whose narrative arouses the sympathy of readers, while the narrative of the adult narrator greatly enriches the significance of the text. By deliberately leaving gaps in the text, Joyce invites his readers to take an active part in constructing of the meaning of the text, which offers the story endless vitality.

2. Functions of the past and the present narrator

Throughout the story, both the past and the present narrator get the chance to speak, so it is necessary to make clear the roles that the two narrators play in plotting and conveying the meaning of the story. As the one who has actually experienced the event, the past "I" is responsible for depicting his living circumstances and conveying first-hand experience. The present "I", on the other hand, comments on his childhood and satirizes on the spiritual paralysis of Dubliners, the repressive Catholic Church and the materialistic adult world.

2.1. *The past "I" as the narrator*

The past "I" is the one who has actually experienced the whole story, therefore, his narration is the first-hand information readers can get.

The boy begins with a great part to portray his surroundings. Many objects are related to the death imagery. He lives on the dead end street where the air is misty and the houses are brown and the priest who rents their house is dead. Adults have got accustomed to the gloomy environment but the young boy is still sensitive, feeling suppressed by it. Besides the physical world, the relationship between the boy and his family is also distant and indifferent. He lives with his aunt and uncle and we have no idea about where his parents are. But what we know for sure is that the boy gets little love and care from his family, especially from his uncle. He provokes fear in the boy and his friends when he returns from work to home. He is the man with bad manners, namely, drinking problems.

In the boy's mundane daily life, Mangan's sister is the one and only existence that excites him. Only if to let the boy to narrate can his innocent and naive affection be vividly conveyed to readers. Adults are unlikely to behave like this: "When she came out on the doorstep my heart leaped. I ran to the hall, seized my books and followed her. I kept her brown figure always in my eye and, when we came near the point at which our ways diverged, I quickened my pace and passed her." (p.250) Any reader who shares the similar experience is going to resonate with the boy's narrative. However, because of the youthfulness and his Catholic upbringing, the boy can neither understand the mysterious feelings nor find someone to talk to. Tortured by it, what he can do is to enter the empty drawing room one rainy evening and murmur "O love!" for many times. Moreover, Araby can only enchant the unexperienced young boy. He has no idea of what Araby is, but in his immature mind, as long as he brings something from the fair to please the girl, there will be an outcome for his love. "Araby" is the term which conjures the otherness and excitement. It is totally new and exotic, greatly distinguish from the Christian world he grows up and implies the potential to bring changes for his life.

Meanwhile, the protagonist's waiting can only be narrated by the boy because adults can hardly understand how painful it is. The boy has to wait for the drunken uncle to go home early and wishes he could give him some pocket money so that he could buy something for Mangan's sister. When finally getting the bazar, the female shopkeeper he encounters is the last person that totally destroys the boy's fantasy. The flirt of the shopkeeper and the two men make him feel strange and uncomfortable. Throughout the story, the boy sees himself chivalrous and his affection as noble and holy as the chalice. Deeply influenced by the Christian faith, he is unable to separate the secular from the sacred. Also, the shopkeeper who speaks English and behaves in English way contradicts his exotic fantasies which he expects to have on Araby. The shopkeeper even pays no attention to the boy and talks to him in an absurd manner, which discourages him from buying anything. Further, her flirt brings realization in the boy about the silliness of the attempt to impress Mangan's sister with a gift.

2.2. *The present "I" as the narrator*

While the past "I" narrates his mentality, the present "I", who is far more mature and sophisticated, looks back upon his past "detachedly and judicially"^[3]. The present "I" majorly functions in two aspects. One is to make comments on his adolescent actions and the other is to satire on Catholic Church, on the mental paralysis of Irelanders, and on the indifferent and materialized adult society.

For one thing, the adult narrator looks upon his past and makes comments on his adolescent crush. On the one hand, he uses the words like "foolish blood", "confused adoration", and "innumerable follies", referring to the boy's youthful infatuation. On the other, he helps the past narrator to describe the love in more precise and vivid way. For instance, when the past narrator says that he keeps daydreaming about the girl and speaks her name "at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand" (p.250), the present narrator uses a metaphor to help the past narrator express the feeling

more clearly: “my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires.” (p. 249). The past narrator is going through the mysterious impulse that he himself gets confused, therefore, the present narrator assists him to describe it in more sophisticated languages.

For another, the present “I” make implements to the young boy’s narrative, which expands the significance of the story far beyond a mere first love thing. Taking a closer look, there are a lot symbols in the short story. First, readers can find many elements related to religion. Much like Joyce himself, the protagonist grows up in the community where his experience is limited only to Catholic belief, and Joyce’s negative attitude towards Christianity is hidden in lines the narrator speaks. By saying the Christian Brother’s School “set the boys free” (p.249), the present “I” compares the school to prison where the freedom of the boys is taken away. Besides, the priest’s death symbolizes the death of the present narrator’s religious belief. While talking about the dead priest’s abandoned belongings, the present “I” seems to unintentionally mention about the three books about romance and adventures, which exhibit the priest’s secret life that he is indulged in works which are non-religious. More importantly, the narrator compares his quest for love to the quest of chalice, and as he fails to buy a proper gift for Mangan’s sister, the chalice is also nowhere to be found.

Apart from the Roman Catholic Church, the protagonist’s fantasy is also thwarted by the Irish tradition. The narrator draws a coarse picture of Dublin when visiting the market with his aunt. He emphasizes ill-mannered people and the dirtiness of Dublin, and the streets are “jostled by drunken men and bargaining women, amid the curses of laborers, the shrill litanies of shop-boys who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs’ cheeks” (p.250). Besides, the narrator’s uncle is a dominant figure throughout the story, and much similar to Joyce’s father who kills time by talking and drinking in bars, he represents the typical lifestyle of Irish men. It is the uncle’s irresponsibility and lateness that causes the boy to miss the bazaar.

Moreover, when recalling his experience at the bazaar, the present “I” critiques the materialism. The spell of this “Eastern enchantment” is broken by the indifference of the adult world. When the protagonist arrives at the bazaar, the only sounds he hears are the “fall of the coins” and the banal banter of the shopkeepers. These cold details of commerce awaken him from delusions. His desire to fulfill a romantic quest is unmet by the real world he finds at Araby. In this moment of epiphany, the boy’s childish fantasy erodes, and he sees the world in truer colors—a pivotal moment in his identity formation and coming-of-age.

3. The relationship between the present “I” and the past “I”

After analyzing two narrators respectively, this part is going to elaborate on the relationship between the past “I” and the present “I”. Generally, due to the richer experience and growing intelligence, the present narrator is wiser than the past narrator. In this light, the present “I” acquires more knowledge about human life and adult society than the past “I”, so Present I > Past I. It is also true in “Araby”, yet what is unique lies in that the present “I” does not take a superior stand, rather, he tries to protect the past “I” and in return seeks for healing by narrating the story. As readers have already been aware, the protagonist is isolated from the outside world. He is lonely and sensitive. As he grows older and acquires the power to speak and write, he chooses to show how his fantasy is destroyed by his Catholic upbringing and the indifferent adult world.

With the narrative moving to the end, the present narrator reexamines his past and the old feelings seize him again. See how the narrator describes Mangan’s sister: “The light from the lamp opposite our 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, just visible as she stood at ease” (p. 251). As some feminist readings have proposed, the narrator objectifies Mangan’s sister. For the young boy, her hair, neck and her gesture evoke the sexual desire that he for the first time encounters. The sexual feeling is ambiguous and mysterious for the young boy to comprehend while the older narrator knows exactly what it means. By recalling, the older narrator sees his first love again and he unconsciously pays attention to her body.

At the end of the story, when “I” reaches the emotional peak, the two narrative voices finally overlap. At this moment, the feeling of disillusionment is shared by both the present I and the past I. It is at this moment that the consciousness of the two narrators come into one, so Present I = Past I. Araby is highly anticipated, and whatever it symbolizes—love, faith or Ireland—becomes meaningless for both narrators. The life experiences of the same person at different times suddenly come together and the pain is so overwhelming that both narrators’ eyes burn with anguish and anger. Although the boy cannot find the

proper words to express his pain, the man that he grows into is now capable of recognizing and expressing his sentiments. At past, “I” had no one to turn to and could only suffer from the disillusionment alone. However, now the present “I” can share the pain with the past “I”, staying as his own company. What’s more, the present “I” have got the readers who are very likely to empathize, which would be a healing for the narrator from both the past and the present. In a word, the past “I” and the present “I” heal each other.

4. To read under the guidance of the narrator

As analysed before, two narrative voices make implements for each other’s narration, and looks for heal through narrating. In this way the readers are guided to explore the meaning of the story. Wolfgang Iser draws attention to two important features of the reading process. The first is that reading is a temporal activity, and one that is not linear. Whatever we read sinks into our memory and may be evoked again sometime, enabling us to develop connections we have not anticipated. Hence the “reading experience can illuminate basic patterns of real experience”. The second is that when readers are confronted with unwritten implications or what Iser calls “gaps”, they can be active and creative in order to search for consistency.^[4] The places of indeterminacy can only be filled by the active readers and a network of response-inviting structures is designated which impel the readers to grasp the text.^[5]

Taken Iser’s assumption into consideration, the self-person narrative adopted is effective in guiding readers to participate in the production of meaning. Joyce is a consummate craftsman who guides his readers through the story itself, thereby seducing them into considering his themes. First, he offers readers the protagonist whose sensitivity and loneliness elicit sympathy in readers. Then he provides the protagonist with the specific and dramatic conflict—the yearning to impress Mangan’s sister with a unique gift from exotic bazaar Araby. Though apparently trivial, this desire is compelling because it is so intensely felt by the protagonist. He cares, and the reader cares. Then Joyce puts roadblocks in the way of the boy and the reader: the wait for Saturday itself, and then for the uncle’s return from work. Joyce expands time, stretches it out, by piling on the trivial details that torture the boy as he waits: the ticking of the clock, the cries of the protagonist’s playmates outside, the gossiping of Mrs. Mercer, the scratching of the uncle’s key in the lock, and the rocking of the hallstand.

As mentioned in part two, the present “I” seeks for healing from readers’ empathy. No one understands what is going on in the boy’s mind except for readers. By letting the past narrator to describe his waiting and disillusion, readers can directly feel his pain. While the boy walks around anxiously, readers are also waiting with him, wondering whether if he could make it to the bazaar, and when the uncle comes home drunken, readers may also get upset. They spend as much time waiting as the boy does, and expect him to go to the bazaar and fulfil his dream. The longer the process lasts, the more readers would expect, and the more disappointed they would be when the boy finally gets there. The bazaar is virtually over, the lights are going out and the merriment has ceased. When reaching the end of the story, sophisticated readers would look back upon the whole text, and if he notices the symbols the present narrator intentionally mentions, they would come to the conclusion that the boy is victimized by his own circumstances and trapped in the mental paralysis of Dublin.

There are also what Iser calls “gaps”, or places of indeterminacy in the text that invite readers to imagine and create. The story ends without telling us what will befall the narrator and the girl who haunts his dreams. Readers may wonder: Will the boy still be interested in Mangan’s sister? How will the experience shape the boy’s personality? Will it produce negative influence upon his viewpoint of the world he lives in? Joyce deliberately leaves the gaps to his readers. While the story happens on a dead end street, it leaves the readers with an open end. However, by the clues and hints given by Joyce, it is reasonable and logical for the readers to conclude that the protagonist relationship with the girl would lead to nowhere. Also, with the negative description given by the present “I”, readers who have knowledge of the historical context and Joyce’s life experience would not find it hard to identify the theme of disillusionment and mental paralysis of the story. Anyway, with the guidance offered by the narrator, readers try to combine their own consciousness and the text in order to fill the gaps left by Joyce. For readers, they get aesthetic pleasure through close reading and textual analysis, while for the text, “each new interpretation adds to and slightly alters the language in which the story is and will be discussed”.^[6]

5. Conclusions

Self-differentiation is inevitable in self-narratives. In “Araby”, the differentiation between the past narrator and the present narrator is mainly shown in the difference in the language used and consciousness involved. As analyzed in part one, the past narrator tells readers about his first-hand experience and the present narrator makes implements to it. From the narration of the past narrator, we can see the contrast between the bland reality and his grandiose imagination, which reveals the gulf between the romantic dreams of his childhood and the adult world he is about to enter. And what the present narrator offers is not only the delicate language but also symbols of the religious failure and spiritual paralysis in Irish society, which make “Araby” not a mere love story and closely relate to the central theme of *Dubliners*.

In many first-person narratives, especially in confessions, the present narrator often criticizes on the past narrator for his wrongdoings. However, in “Araby”, the narrator narrates to heal himself and to get resonance from narratees. In the process of narrating, the present narrator is seized again by his old feelings and at the end he shares the same feelings with the past narrator. For the narrator, his narratee is the only one who can look into his mind, therefore, by narrating, his adolescent trauma gets soothed. Readers resonate and empathize with the narrator. Leaving an open end, Joyce invites his readers to fill the places of indeterminacy through their own consciousness and with the guidance of the narrator.

In a nutshell, the self-differentiation in “Araby” is the key which makes the story so touching. On the one hand, it helps form the plot structure and thus becomes the fundamental driving force for promoting narrative. On the other, it guides readers to consider Joyce’s theme and participate in the construction of its meaning.

References

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