



**With reference to two stories from *Dubliners*, examine the ways in which Joyce engages with revivalist culture, and to what effect**

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The Irish Literary Revival is known for its attempt to create a national Irish consciousness largely through a 'more noble' representation of the Irish identity to displace the colonial stereotype of inferiority.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, a debate ensued between the co-operative groups of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, the Gaelic League and the literary society as to what represented 'authentic' Ireland. The Irish Literary Revival - characterised by the Abbey theatre and the literary society – defined this authenticity through an affinity with Celtic paganism. As PJ Matthews notes, Lady Gregory 'looked to this Celtic paganism [...] as the source of true Irishness'.<sup>2</sup> Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats produced pieces which mythologised and romanticised aspects of Ireland including the rural and the peasantry, and in doing so created an idealised view of the nation. Joyce, although not a part of this coterie, engaged with its ideas closely by critically resisting the romanticisation and mystification of Ireland; he chose instead to focus on the present reality of an impoverished and paralysed Dublin. I argue that in Joyce's text *Dubliners* (1914) he uses the motif of childhood to represent and problematise this aspect of Revivalist ideology.<sup>3</sup> It is my contention that the children in Joyce's stories 'Araby' and 'An Encounter' are to some extent allegorical for the Literary Revival; each child holds romanticised or mythologised ideas which ultimately fail to fruit as they are curtailed by an epiphanic return to reality. This symbolises the completion of their journey from innocence to experience. Thus, Joyce undermines the dominant ideology of the Revival and its reliance on myth and romance as being restrictive and ultimately, a 'dead end' - much like the street on which the child in 'Araby' lives. As Joyce expresses in 'Holy Office': - 'they may dream their dreamy dreams/ I carry off their filthy streams'.<sup>4</sup> Joyce presents the Revival's dreamy dreams through the children before revealing the underlying reality. The three avenues of Joyce's Revivalist resistance I will explore are: the subversion of the idyllic rural Ireland; the exposing of myth; the exploration of the connection between reading and politics.

Cultural nationalism as advocated by Celtic Revivalists is focused on the nostalgic restoration of an 'authentic' Ireland celebrating a pre-colonial epoch. Yeats made connections between ancient myths and the peasantry, thus attributing the Irish peasantry with a noble and pure character impervious to the corruption of modernity. 'Cathleen ni Houlihan' is one such example. Often recognised as the seminal play encapsulating these

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<sup>1</sup> P J Matthews, 'Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, The Gaelic League and the Co-operative Movement', *Critical Conditions: Field Day Essays*, (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), p11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p12.

<sup>3</sup> James Joyce, *Dubliners*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> James Joyce, 'Holy Office', <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-holy-office-a-poem-by-james-joyce>, ll.49-50 [accessed 06/04/2023].

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ideals, it established the central tenets for the Revival. In exhuming the old Gaelic sovereignty goddess, the play established this rural mythic connection. She wanders recruiting young rural men to her nationalist cause as seen in the inspiration of the young son Michael to fight for her. This idealisation is further evidenced in Yeats' aisling poems 'The Fisherman' and 'Lake Isle of Innisfree'.<sup>5</sup> In portraying the fictitious 'wise and simple' Connemara fisherman, Yeats imagines an archaic figure entirely in communion with nature and the Irish landscape.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the pastoral idyll of an innocent era is conveyed through the imagery of the pre-modern houses made from 'clay and wattles' in 'Lake Isle of Innisfree'; thus creating a symbiotic link between the land and Irish Celtic identity.<sup>7</sup> Hence the bucolic romanticism of Irish myth intrinsically characterises Revivalist rhetoric. It is this which Joyce resists and challenges. As John Wilson Foster writes, 'you do not merely repudiate your heritage and assume another; you come to grips with it and exploit it.'<sup>8</sup> Joyce 'comes to grips' with the dominant Revivalist romanticism in symbolic childhood stories of innocence, before bringing them to moments of realisations.

The subversion of the idyllic rural Ireland can be seen in 'An Encounter' as the boys seek reprieve from the 'weariness of school-life' by escaping on a rural adventure, only to encounter a perverse caricature of the pastoral figure of the Irish gentleman.<sup>9</sup> The boys embark on a journey to the 'Pigeon House', before, upon failing to reach there, they settle into a 'wide field'.<sup>10</sup> This situates the story in a rural part of Dublin, with the boys having sought a pocket of nature within and around the industrial 'commerce' city.<sup>11</sup> Symbolically, Joyce conveys an inadequacy to the reprieve they seek as ultimately, the boys remain within the confines of the city. It is here the boys have their encounter. Joyce reveals his visceral resistance to Revivalist idealisation by presenting a decayed and almost parasitic peasant figure preying on the boys for his own (suggested sexual) satisfaction. The man is aged and archaic in his shabby 'greenish-black' jerry hat carrying a stick. This starkly undermines the image of the strong, healthy peasant imbued with moral values that one usually meets in the Celtic revivalist literature. The 'greenish black' colour symbolically demonstrates the slow decay of a vibrant paddy (and rural) green into blackness. In a predatory image, the man walks 'very slowly' towards the boys, tapping the ground with his stick as if 'looking for something in the grass'.<sup>12</sup> This image of searching the field suggests an uncovering or digging, evocative of Joyce's own cultural and literary digging. The insinuation of the man as a pederast is indicated most overtly when the man leaves the boys to, presumably, pleasure himself as Mahoney exclaims: - 'I say look what he's doing! [...] he's a queer old josser!'.<sup>13</sup> Joyce's locating of a pederast at the centre of a pastoral scene can be read as a disavowal of the presence of an Irish countryside yet untouched by the modern decay. Furthermore, Joyce is demythologising the Irish peasant through the alienating power of the abject. However, as Rina Arya notes, despite the abject having been rejected, it continues to hold

<sup>5</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2000), p96-7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p28.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p28.

<sup>8</sup> John Wilson Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art*, (Syracuse University Press, 1987), p145.

<sup>9</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, p11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p12, p14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p15.

<sup>13</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, p16.

‘an enduring power’, threatening ‘collapse’.<sup>14</sup> Thus, by triggering an abject response in a rural setting, Joyce is highlighting the damaging power the Revival’s idealisation holds over Ireland’s growth. This is underpinned by the man expressing that there is ‘nothing in this world he would like so well’ as whipping a boy. The desire to harm the innocent stresses Joyce’s condemnation of this paddy-esque Revival caricature as a parasitic groomer. There is an implication therefore, that the Revival’s rhetoric is manipulating the cultural intelligentsia in a similar fashion.

The narrator also expresses that ‘as [the man] proceeded I noticed that his accent was good’.<sup>15</sup> From this we can infer that the boy presumed him to be a native Irish speaker from his appearance. As PJ Matthews notes, the Irish language revival pre-dates the Literary Revival and thus Irish identity was closely linked to the indigenous Gaelic.<sup>16</sup> The superiority of the boy, in patronisingly judging his accent as ‘good’, reiterates both the superiority of the old colonial language while at the same time demonising the Revivalist’s blind patriotism. The man is not a wronged ideal peasant, instead he is ironically revealed as a threatening paedophile. This conveys Joyce’s ultimate indictment of the Revival. The child’s unsettling realisation of danger culminates in the last paragraph as he calls to Murphy in an attempt to gain solidarity. Thus their ‘real adventure’ ends in a more sobering glimpse at the darker aspects of society.

In ‘Araby’ this arc of innocence to experience is mirrored, however instead of disavowing the idyllic rural, Joyce focuses on exposing the damaging use of myth. The first line expresses that the unnamed child narrator lives on a ‘blind’ road which immediately establishes a sense of delusion. This is then underpinned by the Edenic invocation in the form of a singular ‘central apple tree’ in the narrator’s ‘wild garden’ suggesting a pre-lapsarian lack of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> The critique of mythologising arises overtly in the narrator’s use of mythological conceits to idolise Mangan’s sister. The narrator imagines that in his pursuit for her affection, he bears a ‘chalice safely through a throng of foes’ introducing religious and Arthurian conceits in his allusion to the Holy Grail.<sup>18</sup> Critics, including Douglas Kantar, have interpreted *Dubliners*’s presentation of religion as a debilitating ideology and ‘oppressive weight’ for Irish life.<sup>19</sup> Thus by the child failing to separate ideologies of religion and myth, I argue Joyce is critiquing the Revivalist’s use of myth as similarly restrictive. In his confused adoration, he has ‘hardly any patience with the serious work of life’, demonstrating mythos’s hindering effects on progressive, educational matter.<sup>20</sup> This can be further evidenced by looking to Mangan’s sister’s name, or rather, lack thereof. William Stein describes the child’s worship of the sister and his inability to speak her name as a form of religious devotion in an ‘impulse towards deification’.<sup>21</sup> Richard Gerber notes that the child

<sup>14</sup> Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nottingham/detail.action?docID=1779992>> [accessed 24/03/2023].

<sup>15</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, p16.

<sup>16</sup> PJ Matthews, ‘Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, The Gaelic League and the Co-operative Movement’, p35.

<sup>17</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, p19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p20.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Kantar, ‘Joyce, Irish Paralysis, and Cultural Nationalist Anticlericalism’, *James Joyce Quarterly*, 41:3 (2004), 381–96, (p393), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25478066>> [Accessed 15/04/2023].

<sup>20</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, p22.

<sup>21</sup> William Bysshe Stein, ‘Joyce’s ‘Araby’: Paradise Lost’, *Perspective* 12:4 (Spring 1962), 215-222 (p218).

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refers obsessively to her 'thirty-eight times' within three paragraphs.<sup>22</sup> This extends my analysis of merging ideologies as Joyce's dual criticism of religion and myth. Alternatively, as many critics including Gerber have noted, the name 'Mangan' defines her in the historical literary shadow of Irish poet James Clarence Mangan. He pre-dates the Revival but exhibited romantic nationalism in his poems of Ireland. Hence, Joyce attributes a romantic literary symbolism to her character in line with Revival nationalism. In 'lacking a first name' Gerber states that she becomes 'universal', and I take it one step further to argue, a symbol for mythic Ireland as the narrator attempts to complete a 'quest' to win her.<sup>23</sup>

Mangan's sister is presented as Houlihan-esque in the description of her effect on the narrator. The quest to win her is similar to that of Cathleen ni Houlihan's inspiration of Michael as he forgets his life in pursuit of her 'four beautiful green fields', ultimately becoming one of the many men who '[have] died for love of [Cathleen ni Houlihan]'.<sup>24</sup> The narrator in 'Araby' similarly takes on his quest in the name of love which ends in 'darkness'.<sup>25</sup> The child expresses that his 'body was like a harp and her words and gestures like fingers running upon the wires'.<sup>26</sup> This links her not only to nationalism but to mythology. The harp, as the heraldic symbol for Irish sovereignty, is a key image in 'Araby'. Indeed, it is one of only two stories in *Dubliners* in which a harp is referenced. Steven Doloff notes that Joyce's interest with the literature of the Revival, and in particular, his acquaintance with Eugene O'Curry's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish* 'would have introduced him to the rich emblematic lore of the harp in Ireland'.<sup>27</sup> Doloff summarises O'Curry in outlining the three abilities of the harp in Irish legend as: 'the power to induce profound sleep, the power to induce extreme gaiety, and the power to induce deepest sorrow'.<sup>28</sup> He further clarifies that this inducement to profound sleep is more accurately described as a 'death sleep'.<sup>29</sup> Once again this invokes the idea of songs and lyrics (from a woman) enticing men to die for their country. Overall, Mangan's sister becomes deified as a mythic version of Ireland, envisioned both as a harp directly - with the power to control (and kill) men - and indirectly as Cathleen ni Houlihan - inspiring men to complete her 'quest' for sovereignty. Joyce sets up a narrative of myth and exposes its destructiveness.

This destructiveness is centralised when the narrator achieves critical distance at the bazaar and undergoes a process of realisation. Joyce ends the story with the boy 'gazing up into the darkness' and seeing himself as 'driven and derided by vanity'.<sup>30</sup> The child notes the vanity in his actions: desiring admiration from Mangan's sister and the failure of this mythical world to live up to reality. In my reading of the boy as a symbol for the Revival, this can be read as a comment on the misguided use of myth and the more materialistic drive of the Revival. This is supported by the image of 'Café chantant' as two men count their 'money on

<sup>22</sup> Richard Gerber, "Joyce's 'Araby' and the Mystery of Mangan's Sister." *Joyce Studies Annual*, (2015), 186–94 (p192) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26288831>> [Accessed 05/04/23].

<sup>23</sup> Gerber, "Joyce's 'Araby' and the Mystery of Mangan's Sister.", p192.

<sup>24</sup> W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, 'Cathleen ni Houlihan', *Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), p7.

<sup>25</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, p24.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p21.

<sup>27</sup> Steven Doloff, 'A Soporific Note on the Harp in Joyce's 'Two Gallants.'" *James Joyce Quarterly*, 41:4 (2004), 823–25. (p823), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25478108>> [Accessed 06/04/2023]; Eugene O'Curry, *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish* (Dublin: Kelly Publishers, 1873).

<sup>28</sup> Doloff, 'A Soporific Note', p823.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*. p234-44.

<sup>30</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, p24.

a salver'.<sup>31</sup> 'Café chantant' translates to 'singing café' which evokes the tradition of ballads in Irish nationalism pre-Revival such as Thomas Moore (mentioned in 'An Encounter').<sup>32</sup> However, instead of inspiring, romantic lyrics, the boy listens 'to the fall of the coins' underpinning the commercial betrayal of his mythic fantasy drawing his fall from innocence to experience into the fore.<sup>33</sup> Much like in 'An Encounter', the child's idealised notions fail to come to fruition, and he is instead confronted with stark reality. As Foster notes, 'realise the self and independence follows, but independence does not guarantee self-realisation'.<sup>34</sup> In application to 'Araby' and 'An Encounter', Joyce brings both children to denouements of disturbing self-realisation. The narrator in 'Araby' acknowledges himself as a creature of vanity in his idealisation and romantic desire; and the child in 'An Encounter' uncovers his initial understanding of the world as erroneous, seeing the reality of darker dangers. The Revival, in ignoring the darker reality as Joyce sees it, will not bring the necessary consciousness to guide successful sovereignty. This arc of innocence to experience is not limited to the childhood stories. Joyce underlines this sentiment through Gabriel's voice in the last story of the collection: - 'his own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world [...] dissolving and dwindling'.<sup>35</sup> As Gabriel is left emasculated by the impervious and ideal memory of Michael Furey, he is simultaneously entrapped. Through the stultifying inertia of Joyce's characters, he depicts Ireland as trapped in a cycle of damaging nostalgic idealisms as a result of Revivalist culture. Joyce presents self-realisation (and the completion of innocence to experience) as necessary to break the cycle.

The thread connecting both 'Araby' and 'An Encounter' moves beyond childhood to an exploration of the connections between politics and reading. In both Joyce connects specific novels to the boys. Joyce's use of intertextuality emphasises the importance of literature in the formation of society, particularly its impact on the next generation. Arguably Joyce is making a connection between the formation of a 'national' theatre and literary society by the Revival, to the paralysis of Dublin. More specifically, the importance of writing the 'correct' type of literature which will mobilise effective realisation. This sentiment is reminiscent of the oft-quoted line in Yeats's poem 'The Man and the Echo': - 'Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?'.<sup>36</sup> Whilst it certainly was not the case that 'Cathleen ni Houlihan' alone sent out men to fight in the 1916 Easter rising, there is an awareness of the power and influence of such patriotic literature and the acts it can engender. In *Dubliners*, Joyce is engaging with the idea that literary texts can have a tangible impact on the Irish readership. It was Joyce's contention that the Irish were not truly seeing themselves due to the Revivalist mythical distortion and, I argue, they are thus part of maintaining the paralysis Joyce presents. This engagement is clearly evidenced in Joyce's emphatic letter to his publisher that to prevent *Dubliners* from publishing would 'seriously retard' Ireland as a nation by stopping them from 'having one good look at themselves in [his] nicely polished looking-glass'.<sup>37</sup>

In 'An Encounter' the political act of reading can be seen in the boys' imitations of 'The Apache Chief' in games of cowboys and Indians.<sup>38</sup> This intertext demonstrates how

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p24.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p24, p221.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p24.

<sup>34</sup> Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art*, p312.

<sup>35</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, p194.

<sup>36</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2000), p221.

<sup>37</sup> James Joyce, *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (London: Faber, 1992), p89–90.

<sup>38</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, p10-1.

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reading can reinscribe ideologies as the boys internalise a system of racism that is similar to the subjugation of the Irish nation. The narrator desires the wild west as he claims it is 'remote from [his] nature' but offers an 'escape'.<sup>39</sup> Ironically, the boys do not connect their mock discriminatory battles to the sectarian and nationalistic violence which surrounds their own existence and political realities. This irony is most apparent when Mahoney is 'playing the Indian' and is attacked by boys who mistake them for protestants. Therefore, in their appropriation of the Wild West, Joyce is creating a parallel which is similar to the problems of representation in Irish Revivalist literature. By introducing the 'cowboys and Indians' reading experience immediately prior to the perverse encounter, Joyce is perhaps creating a critical parallel between the Revival's idealisation of the peasantry, with that of the Wild West. Similarly, as the 'wild west' is so far removed from the boys, it is arguably itself a form of myth for them. This evidences once again the use of myth as conjuring damaging effects. Moreover, the intertextual references to Thomas Moore, Sir Walter Scott and Lord Lytton provide further evidence for the linking of literature and reading to the circular enforcement of damaging political ideologies. As these figures have aspects in-line with the Revival in their use of myth and the past, I argue that Joyce is commenting on a previous failure of the very methods the current Revival is using. Thomas Moore's famous piece, 'Memoirs of Captain Rock', was about a mythical Irish folk hero who protected Irish peasants. This plot parallels the idealisation of the peasantry and myth within the Revival. Thus, Joyce demonstrates how literature has the potential to effect politics both positively and negatively.

In 'Araby', this engagement with intertextuality is seen when the narrator stumbles upon old books from the former tenant to his house – a priest.<sup>40</sup> The origin of these texts as remnants of a dead man highlights the sense of past as a looming ghost of constriction, preventing (rather than aiding) advancement. The texts the boy finds are: 'The Abbot', 'The Devout Communicant' and 'The Memoirs of Vidocq'.<sup>41</sup> However, in contrast to 'An Encounter', the narrator of 'Araby' does not read these novels, he simply notes that the last is his favourite as 'its leaves were yellow', thus admiring its antiquity.<sup>42</sup> The novel, *The Abbott* is one by Scottish novelist Walter Scott which 'idealises Mary Queen of Scots'.<sup>43</sup> Joyce, in creating a link to Scotland is perhaps subtly commenting on the irony of the Revivalist's use of Celtic paganism as authentically Irish – a group not exclusive to Ireland. There is an insinuation here of a futility to reading the romantic Revivalist writings about a nebulous Celtic past whilst the present Dublin is one of poverty and deprivation.

In conclusion, through the childhood stories 'Araby' and 'An Encounter', Joyce engages with the Revival's core tenets of myth and romance by rejecting them. Using the bildungsroman form, Joyce's stories are arguably didactic, which reveals an interpretation of the Revivalist methods as fruitless in the socio-political fight for sovereignty. A visceral engagement with the Revival can be felt in his resistance of the rural and romantic aspects of revivalist culture as he brings our narrators to self-realizations of experience. Many critics argue *Dubliners* is a pessimistic collection of rejection and hopelessness and use Joyce's own abandonment of Ireland as evidence. However, as Foster notes, 'artistically Joyce did not flee' Ireland but rather attained critical (and physical) distance in order to analyse the

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p11.

<sup>40</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, p19.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p19.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p19.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p220.

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forces within Irish life.<sup>44</sup> Rather than simply rejecting the Revival, Joyce's realism offered a new way to approach the changing nation with open and analytical eyes.

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<sup>44</sup> Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art*, p145.

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