Introduction

The Grail Quest is a well-known plot to the Christian world, moreover to the British culture. Its pattern of a hero who journeys to exotic landscapes, facing difficulties and struggling to fulfil his religious promise was repeated, in literature, over and over, disguised under different story-telling with other characters, other timing, other setting. But the core plot is always there.

Considering the mythological aspect of that saga, it is possible to state that James Joyce perverted the heroic path as the epiphanic moment in Araby emphasizes disillusion, rather than religious joy and certitude: after overhearing the shallow, flirty conversation between the English shop girl and her male mates, the narrator realizes how foolish he was to feed a pious-like love, as well as the belief in an adventurous life. He then faces the materialistic, commercialized reality he was once alienated from. The change he experiences is not spiritual nor grand, but from childish innocence to disillusioned, probably cynical, adolescence.

As readers, we are driven by the narrator’s point-of-view to a sequence of descriptions and happenings narrated in first person, with very few dialogues, and lacking explanations – characteristic of the stream of consciousness stylistic choice: it is up to us to fulfil the blanks of the boy’s mind and find clues to reach meaning. The familiarity this closeness to the story promotes is crucial to follow the boy’s crescent loneliness and anguish, as well as to make us react to them: we can foresee he is going to end up, at least, frustrated, because we recognize “the same old story”, because we are more mature and experienced (and disillusioned) than he is. Although we may expect a surprising happy end, our faith is weakened when we remember it is James Joyce…

Fulfilling the blanks

The subject at the very first clause of the tale is “North Richmond Street”, with the narrator drawing our attention to the ambiance of the story he is about to tell. So, it shows, at the very beginning, a disposition to concreteness, to the physical description of a real space , but this realism is immediately broken by the statement in the end of the same paragraph: “The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.” That personification betrays the objective description of a neighbourhood, opening the text to bitter, though disguised, criticism, as we may get from “decent” and “imperturbable”.

In the second paragraph, the information about a former tenant of the focused house – a priests who had died in its back drawing-room – may create expectation over the facts that will follow, especially if we remember the use of the word “decent” just above. The narrator describes his findings while exploring the building, which leads us to be sure the story will go around some mystery involving the priest living in the house: we expect to find out the links among those remaining objects.

Then, three books are named: The Abbot by Walter Scott, The Devout Communicant and The Memoirs of Vidoq. A romantic adventure, a protestant’s religious pamphlet, a detective story. Surprising readings for a priest! The boy only likes the yellow leaves of the old books, but we can perceive Joyce’s disguised criticism towards the Catholic Institution, as far as it was responsible for the Irish educational system. The existence of such a library brings ambiguity to this priest, and to the Church as an extension.

The third paragraph is dedicated to the depiction of a gloomy wintry scenery, where we recognize the narrator as a boy through his shouts echoing in the silent street, together with his companions’. He also tells us about a typical kids’ play: “(...) through the dark muddy lanes behind the houses where we ran the gauntlet of the rough tribes from the cottages”, it means, their exploring the space in group, at the back of the houses, like they had left the real space and entered the imagination world. A kid’s magical and adventurous view of the surroundings. Though, in the same paragraph, the boy mentions a girl who will confuse his childhood certainties and slowly bring him to loneliness. He describes her in a venerable way, as if she were a kind of angel, pictured by luminosity and feminine perfection, like the Virgin: “(...) her figure defined by the light from the half-opened door. (...) Her dress swung as she moved her body and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side.”

We watch him giving up his routine because of his confused feelings towards the girl. He is more and more lonely. He follows her pace now: “When she came out on the door-step my heart leaped. I ran to the hall, seized my books and followed her.” And “this happened morning after morning”, the narrator showing us the passage of time, and his soaring anxiety as well.

It is still a kid’s kind of love: “I had never spoken to her.” But again, some ambiguity is introduced: “(...), and yet her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood.” Blood. Flushing the face, raising the body temperature, accelerating breath: it is celestial but it is also about the body.

Then he becomes totally alienated by his feelings: “Her image accompanied me even in places the most hostile to romance”. This passage is crucial to understand his religious devotion and marks the beginning of a self-imposed struggle, as far as he would give up doing his usual boy’s duties - like helping the aunt carry parcels in a marketplace – if he could. This rejection is highlighted by the contrast he creates between what he feels and the banality of life around, as if he was alone with his noble feelings, never shared with others – pure and immaculate: “(...) the nasal chanting of street-singers, who sang a come-all-you about O’Donovan Rossa , or a ballad about the troubles in our native land. These noises converged in a single sensation of life for me: I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes.”

The “chalice”. Could there be a clearer reference to the Holy Grail? Thus, the narrator elevates his crush to a level of worship, his love being the sacred chalice which must be protected against contamination, besides guiding him to the right path. The symbolism here is strong, because he believes to be guided by an invisible force, but the sensitive world around is shouting about a different kind of guidance – the political one, with the independence fight in Ireland being an issue of every citizen, something that could not be ignored, poverty itself being directly associated to the English oppression. Hints to the boy’s belonging to the working-class are everywhere in the text, he does not seem to be aware of that, though. Yet.

Up to this point, the narration gives the impression of day after day, of a general state of mind: “(…) my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires”. Suddenly, a paragraph starts with “one evening”, announcing an unusual fact. He describes a solitary scene. A masturbation scene? “I was thankful that I could see so little. All 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.” A praying scene? Once more the ambiguity between the body and the spirit, the carnal desire and the catholic education, the “natural” and the “pious” love, the concrete world and imagination, the child and the grown-up. The immediate after paragraph starts: “At least she spoke to me.”

The dialogue is naïve. Probably small talk. But not in the context of his inner life. For him it is an opportunity to finally go on his quest to the East, like a knight-errant on a mission on behalf of his lady fair. He promises her to bring a gift from the bazaar held by the church. From Araby, from the marvellous, luxurious Orient, both a place of the exotic and of the commercial trade . He is excited and dominated by his planning: “what innumerable follies laid waste my waking and sleeping thoughts after that evening! I wished to annihilate the tedious intervening days. (…) The syllables of the word Araby were called to me through the silence in which my soul luxuriated and cast an Eastern enchantment over me.”

“The air was pitilessly raw” when the so expected night comes. We suffer watching his boyhood’s impotence while waiting for his uncle to get home, for it is a social class impotence as well: the pawnbroker’s widow is visiting the house, which will probably make his indebted uncle to be late, or maybe he has just stopped by the Pub. The neighbourhood common people are already going to bed because the following day is business. Trifles of the heart have no room in this place, maybe that is why he keeps it secret.

Because it is secret he is alone. His trip to the bazaar is the summit of his loneliness and helplessness: he must rush, he takes a late night deserted train which “after an intolerable delay moved out of the station slowly”. It seems something is conspiring against him, and at the same time, he succeeds in the last minute, which is typical of a hero who must prove himself right and is helped by magical powers: “At Westland Row Station a crowd of people pressed to the carriage doors; but the porters moved them back, saying that it was a special train to the bazaar.” He must be alone to face his epiphany.

At his arrival, the bazaar was about to close so, ironically, revelation will come in a darkened place. The first glimpse of disillusionment: “Before a curtain, over which the words Café Chantant were written in coloured lamps, two men were counting money on a salver. I listened to the fall of the coins.” So Araby is close to the marketplace he goes with his aunt? The throng of foes is there too.

He approaches a stall - “remembering with difficulty why I had come”- and overhears a conversation that proves to be highly contrastive with his noble intentions. A shop girl is engaged in meaningless talk with two young gentlemen. They are flirting: commercial love for sale like vases and flowered tea-sets. He pretends to be adapted: “I lingered before her stall, though I knew my stay was useless, to make my interest in her wares seem the more real.” But he is devastated: “I heard a voice call from one end of the gallery that the light was out. (…) Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.”

The fact that the stall attendant is English must be underlined: the oriental atmosphere he expected is fake (cruelly fake! the place of wonders is the place of the oppressor), as is fake his belief that Mangan’s sister cares for him, as is fake his daring to be more than an unnamed boy who lives in a dead-end in brown Dublin, at the turn of the twentieth century. The epiphany: loss of innocence and idealism, suffocating any possibility of romantic scape. He went on a quest of faith destruction. Modernism itself?