

Conflict and Assimilation under Patriarchy: An Auditory Narrative Study of “Araby”

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Abstract

Many scholars have interpreted the boy’s epiphany in James Joyce’s short story “Araby” as a disillusionment of his ideals, but this does not adequately explain the origins of his “anguish” and “anger”. Auditory narrative provides a new path for re-reading the classics. There is no lack of direct or indirect depiction of sounds in the story, constituting different “soundscapes”. In this paper, we start from the clues of sounds, and listen to the hidden growth process of the boy from conflict with the patriarchal society to being assimilated in the deep structure of the story, which provides a powerful addition to the explanation of his epiphany.

Keywords: Araby, Auditory narrative, Epiphany, Soundscape.

1 Introduction

“Araby” is one of the most popular stories in James Joyce’s collection of short stories, *Dubliners*. Set in Ireland, then under British colonial jurisdiction and Catholic oppression, it tells the story of a boy’s growth as he pursued love but ultimately had his illusions shattered and gained an epiphany. Most scholars have interpreted his epiphany as a disillusionment of his ideals, a desperate end to the psychotic paralysis of Ireland at the time, but this does not fully explain the boy’s “anguish” and “anger” after his epiphany. So far, scholars have focused on archetypal analyses, oriental images, themes of growth, and narrative strategies of “Araby”, and almost all of them start from visual imagery to interpret it. However, in fact, there are many auditory narratives implicitly embedded in the story, which can provide more interpretative possibilities for the themes of the story. And although some scholars have noticed the sounds in the story, they have only analyzed their connotations as imagery and have not enriched the thematic interpretation of the story by using auditory narrative as a means of rereading the story. Any sound in narrative has its own unique role, and analyzing a classic text from the perspective of

auditory narrative can give it new meaning and interpretation in “listening” to it. In this paper, we re-listen to “Araby” from auditory narrative perspective to decipher the story’s implicit journey of the boy’s growth from conflict to assimilation in a patriarchal society in his dual role as oppressed and oppressor, providing a complementary explanation of the story’s epiphany.

2 The conflicting relationship of characters based on “listening” and “being listened to”

2.1 Power relations embedded in “listening” and “being listened to”

Auditory perception is not limited to sounds. “Listening” and “being listened to” as well as the various subjective consciousnesses of listening, etc., are all categories within the concept of auditory perception(Zhou, 2018:108-113). In the visual field, the counterpart of “listening” and “being listened to” is “seeing” and “being seen”. And “seeing” and “being seen” imply a discourse of power and control. In his “Theories of the Gaze”, Hawthorne has pointed out that “seeing” is not only an act of perception, but also a mode of discourse on issues of gender, class, subjectivity, ideology, etc.(Hawthorn, 2006:509). Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, refers to the “round prison”, a uniquely shaped prison whose main function is to ensure constant and automatic surveillance of the prisoners by means of a dominant, supervisory gaze(Foucault, 1980:152). Hierarchical power relations are established through the “gaze”, the “eye of power”(Foucault, 1980:147). Therefore, there is an unbalanced power relationship between the “seeing” and the “seen” as the subject and the object of the “gaze”. The seeing subject has an absolute dominant and dominating position, and through the “gaze” achieves control and domestication of the seeing object, that is to say, as Foucault put it, it becomes a “docile body”(Foucault, 1979:137). Like “seeing” and “being seen”, there is also an imbalance of power between those who “listen” and those who “are listened to”. However, the different ways in which the gaze is projected and the sound is transmitted also create differences in the power structures that are formed. Because of the qualities of sound emanation and reception, the “listened to” person is given a special status as a sound emitter(Fu, 2015:117-133). And the “listener”, as the receiver of the sound, is in the position of being led. Therefore, the exact counterparts of “seeing” and “being seen” should be “being listened to” and “listening”, and the latter seems to be more often used to measure the dominant and the dominated in power

relations. For example, it is common for couples in everyday life to determine who “listens” to whom in order to determine the pattern of power in the family. In “Araby”, by grasping the relationship between ‘listening’ and ‘being listened to’, we can clearly see the power structure in a patriarchal society.

Auditory narratives must not stop at listening to the surface information, but listen to the underlying meaning in relation to the specific context of the narrative text and the social and cultural context in which the author is embedded(Zhou, 2018:108-113). In terms of Joyce’s personal experience, patriarchal rule was a shrouded presence. His father was a typical image of a patriarchal society when he was growing up. He was in control of the family and often physically assaulted his mother, so one can imagine Joyce’s distaste for patriarchal rule. Furthermore, his country, Ireland, was dominated by a patriarchal Catholicism that banned abortion, divorce, and women’s entry into the workplace, and exercised its power of discipline in the name of “protecting” women and children. Under the influence of this patriarchal society, Joyce’s stories and characters were naturally affected as he was.

2.2 Conflicting relationships between vulnerable groups and ruling groups in the patriarchal society

In a patriarchal society, women and children are the vulnerable groups who are subject to discipline. In “Araby”, the boy and Mangan’s sister are both vulnerable in a patriarchal society, and their vulnerability is reflected in their position as “listeners” and their failure to “be listened to”.

In the story, it is clear that the uncle was the one in charge of the family. When the boy wanted to go to the Araby bazaar, the aunt, although she knew what he wanted, did not have the authority to allow him to go or to give him some pocket money. He still needed to get permission from the uncle, which is consistent with the “listening” and “being listened to” relationship between the vulnerable group and the ruling class. And the boy’s repeated attempts to have his request heard ended in failure. He reminded his uncle that he was going to the Araby bazaar in the evening, but the uncle, who was busy looking for his hat, only replied that he knew. From the subsequent development of the plot we learn that here the boy’s reminder to his uncle actually has a hidden meaning that he is not only asking for his permission, but also hinting to his uncle to give him some money. The classical Chinese book *Wenzi* divides “listening” into three levels:

listening by ears, listening by heart and listening by soul. Here the uncle's listening is obviously at the stage of listening by ears, which is indifferent and emotionless, not hearing the extra meaning of the boy's words, and naturally not giving him the money as the boy expected him to do. This failure to "be listened to" results in the boy having to wait at home for his uncle to come home and ask for money, and directly contributes to the delay in the boy's journey to Araby, foreshadowing the epiphany that follows his failure. And when his uncle came home, the little boy once more plucked up courage to express his wish to his uncle halfway through his dinner. Perhaps because of the failure of his first hint, this time he made it clear directly to his uncle that he wished him to give him money to go to the market. But this attempt to "be listened to" still ended in failure. In response to this direct request, the uncle once again ignored his words, telling him that "the people are in bed now and after their first sleep now". Not only did he not hear his pleas, but he even tried to prevent him from going, until the aunt bluntly said, "Can't you give him the money and let him go?" and the uncle gave him two pennies. What is even more ironic is that after giving "me" the money, the uncle was still asking "me" where "I" was going. As the controller who was "listened to", the uncle did not listen to the boy, who was in the position of the "listener", thus constructing a typical family relationship in a patriarchal society and clarifying the boy's identity as the oppressor. The failure of the boy's attempt to be "listened to" also demonstrates the difficult situation of children as a vulnerable group in a patriarchal society and their conflict with the ruling class. This conflict is evident in the story. For example, when his uncle was at home, he felt that the atmosphere in the house was not good and left the house to go to school. After being told by his uncle that it was too late, he did not laugh or respond. As the "listener", he had no right to accuse the person "being listened to", only to show his defiance by remaining silent. Auscultizing to the storyline from the perspective of "listening" and "being listened to", the boy's identity as an vulnerable group and his conflicting relationship with his uncle as a member of the ruling class are clearly and completely revealed.

2.3 The conflicting relationship between the boy and Mangan's sister

Mangan's sister, as a woman in a patriarchal society, is naturally in the position of a "listener". She obeyed the patriarchal dictates, accepted the religious discipline, stayed at home, took care of her brother, and had to abandon her plans to go to Araby because she had to go on a retreat. The notable image of Mangan's sister was on the steps of her house and was always

accompanied by her brother. The voice she made was always a call to his brother, creating an image of her as a traditional woman in a patriarchal society. Her brother, on the other hand, was always playing and had to tease before responding to his sister's calls. Her voice was a sign of the patriarchal statute of womanhood, but as the oppressed, she was not "listened to" either.

The boy and Mangan's sister share the same identity, both belonging to the oppressed under the patriarchy, both in the position of "listening" and neither "being listened to". From this point of view, his pursuit of Mangan's sister implies an attraction between kindred spirits, the desire of the oppressed in a patriarchal society to empathize with other oppressed people.

However, the two of them constitute an ambivalent relationship in themselves, rooted in the boy's dual identity as oppressed and oppressor. In patriarchal societies, women are domesticated to submit to male-centred values, while boys are domesticated to reinforce the patriarchal dominant group. The boy only recognized that he was the same as the girl, but did not understand his status as an oppressor, let alone realized that he was already under the influence of the patriarchy to exert power over women. The boy's watching and spying on Mangan's sister in the story is often seen as the boy's pursuit for love, but it is also a patriarchal male's surveillance of the female, showing the unequal power relationship between the boy and the girl.

3 Re-listening to the boy's quest for "love"

From the previous section we know that there is an oppressor-oppressed relationship between the young boy and Mangan's sister. Re-listening to the young boy's quest for love with this relationship in mind can reveal a different story.

There are two particular auditory narratives in the depiction of the boy's feelings of love that are significant in understanding the origin of the boy's love. The first one happens at his trip to the market with his aunt to pick up something. The boy was in the market carrying some of the parcels and listening to all kinds of noisy sounds around him. The sounds made him imagine in his mind that he was walking through a throng of foes with the chalice in his hand. The human response to sound is an instinctive one, with auditory signals passing through numerous obstacles to reach the sensory nerve endings, evoking imagery and emotion closely linked to the original sensations (Fu, 2013:220-231). Reactions and associations to sounds can be a true reflection of a person's thoughts. These noisy sounds come from the life of the Irish people, and

the boy imagined in his mind that these “marketplace” sounds were the enemy, which was evocative. In our daily life, when we hear the music of life composed of various sounds made by the people in our life, those who have a positive attitude towards life will define it as lively, while those who are negative and reject this kind of life will define it as noisy. Here, the boy’s association as such is a side effect of his dissatisfaction with the circumstances of his life. Ireland was dark and paralyzed at the time and the boy’s dissatisfaction was justified. Dissatisfaction with life naturally leads to a search for the good. In the boy’s imagination, he was a heroic being who was the opposite of the “enemy” of his life, and holding the chalice is a noble, unearthly act. This association illustrates the noble place of religion in the boy’s mind, which is the very thing the boy seeks. Immediately after this, the boy thought of his “love”. Her name came out of his mouth from time to time during his prayers and praises. The juxtaposition of Mangan’s sister and religion suggests that she holds as sacred a place in the boy’s heart as religion, and that the “love” he seeks is inextricably linked to religion.

The second auditory narrative takes place in the back drawing room where the priest died. On that dark and rainy night, vision almost lost and only the sense of listening was highly sensitive, creating a soundscape made up of “solo-hearing”, in which the listener was immersed and triggered infinite associations. The boy heard “the rain impinge upon the earth, the fine incessant needles of water playing in the sodden beds”, which is a typical example of “hearing shapes”. In contrast to vision, hearing is the labeled item, i.e., the attended, spoken non-constant item, with its own discursive power (Zhao, 2013:28-29). The labeling of the voice here then suggests the anxious mental state and inner emotions of the boy, who desperately wanted to pursue the good in order to comfort his parched soul. When the other senses disappeared, he let the sounds go through his ears and finally came up with the answer “love”. It is noteworthy, however, that when he said “love”, his hands were still folded in prayer, and he listened to the scene in the room where the priest had died. His associations with love are always in parallel with religion.

The exalted position of patriarchal religion in his heart inevitably disciplines him to be a male who reinforces patriarchy, shapes his values, and his “love” juxtaposed with religion is inevitably disciplined as well. Mangan’s sister becomes the repository of the goodness he seeks precisely, because she exemplifies the traditional image of femininity as disciplined by a

patriarchal society and conforms to the image of goodness as perceived by a boy disciplined by patriarchal values. The boy believed that his particular emotion was love, but in reality it is a value choice that he has been conditioned to make by the patriarchy, a fantasy of “escape” from his conflict with the patriarchy. He is unaware of the subtle domestication he has undergone, unaware of the fact that he is already in a cage.

4 Re-listening to the boy's epiphany

The boy had a religious “love” fantasy for Mangan's sister and had never spoken to her. Mangan's sister's first dialogue with the boy was to tell him that he should go to Araby. The girl's description of Araby and the desire to go there very much instantly built the little boy's fantasy of Araby. Like a brave knight, he wanted to fulfil the girl's wish for her and promised to bring her back something. From then on, his fantasy of “love” is replaced by Araby, on which he places his hope for “love”. “The syllables of the word Araby were called to me through the silence”, which is a kind of hallucinatory hearing, that is, an illusory perception that takes place in the auditory organ(Fu, 2017:99-110). This not only shows the urgency of his pursuit of “love”, but also highlights his urgent desire to “escape” from real life.

And what did the boy hear when he arrived in Araby? He first recognized a “silence”, then he heard the sound of coins falling, two men and a woman talking, the woman talking to him, the sound of coins clinking in his own pocket, and a call for the lights to go out. These sounds are strung together to form the boy's growth and epiphany. Fu(2015:59-69) argues that “Silence” is also a soundscape. Throughout the whole text, it is not difficult to find that “quietness” or “silence” throughout. It is the “ground” of the soundscape of the whole story. But the “silence” here is reversed into a ‘figure’ as the main character's attention shifts, and there is a facsimile and association of this sound. Auditory narratives serve as a hook and foil to the plot when they are grounds, and when they are reversed into figures, they facilitate our understanding of the story and provoke deeper reflection on the narrative themes(Zhou, 2018:108-113). The sudden change in soundscape foreshadows the boy's next growth and sets the stage for the epiphany that follows. In the midst of this silence, “I” first heard the sound of a coin, a “soundmark” from the adult world. This sound is foreign to the boy, beyond the cognitive scope of the child's world, and cannot be decoded. So the boy was overwhelmed by the sound and lost sight of his original

purpose. When he finally remembered the purpose of his visit and came to the stall, he heard a young woman and two young men laughing and joking. Upon seeing the boy, the woman came over and asked him if he wanted to buy anything, only to be dismissed as “not encouraging ‘me’ to buy” and that she just wanted to continue joking with the men. Why would “I” make such negative assumptions about the woman’s voice? It is because of the values instilled in him by his patriarchal upbringing. Patriarchal ideology produces a dual moral and ethical paradigm and a double standard of morality throughout society, just as the two basic morals espoused by Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: the morality of the master and the morality of the slave. In the morality of the master (male), good means to be the ruler of the world, and evil means to be suppressed, subdued or trampled underfoot. The morality of the slave (female), on the other hand, is the polar opposite of the master’s moral standard: traits such as humility and passivity are seen as virtues of the slave, while traits such as determination and mobility are seen as vices of the slave (female). Patriarchal discipline reinforces the boy’s double moral standards. He believed his pursuit of girls to be as noble as holding the chalice, but was displeased when he saw active behaviour by women that did not conform to the passive, humble image of femininity espoused by the patriarchal system.

At the same time, the woman’s neglect of him deprived him of his male dominance, which the boy attributed to his lack of maturity, not being as attractive to her as the two young men. And the sound of coins he had just heard gave him a hint about money relations in the adult world. So he lingered in front of the woman’s stall as if he were interested in her goods, in other words, to show that he had the financial means to buy her goods, but he also understood that this was not true. He then slowly left the place, letting the coins in his pockets rattle, marking his maturity with this soundmark of the adult world. But with the shout of extinguishing the lights, the Araby bazaar came to an end, and the illusion of Araby was finally shattered for good in a series of sounds.

At this point, the boy is equipped for growth and has achieved an epiphany. He regarded himself as “a creature driven and derided by vanity”, which coincides with the vanity he had just shown in his dealing with the woman. He came here in pursuit of “love” but was derided and his self-esteem as a male of the patriarchal dominant group was hurt. At the same time, he realized from his displeasure with the woman’s behaviour that he was the oppressor. He could no longer

escape from the patriarchal control and his pursuit of “love” was only a choice of patriarchal values. All fantasies of “escape” and the pursuit of “goodness” were illusory. So his eyes burned with “anguish” and “anger”. At this point, the assimilation process of the boy’s acceptance of patriarchal domestication and reinforcement of patriarchal domination is completed with the construction of the boy’s self-perception of his identity. A young boy’s journey from conflict to assimilation in a patriarchal society is revealed.

5 Conclusion

In “Araby”, the auditory narrative plays an important role in presenting the conflicting relationships of the characters and deconstructing the theme of the story, which drives the whole narrative process. By exploring the neglected auditory narrative of the story, this paper re-listened to the story of a boy’s growth from conflict to assimilation in a patriarchal society. It provides new possibilities for the story’s thematic interpretation and a more powerful addition to the protagonist’s epiphany, allowing Joyce’s classic tale to emanate an auditory fragrance. In a letter to his publisher, Joyce wrote, “I believe that I have taken the first step towards the spiritual emancipation of my country by following my usual creative path in the composition of this chapter of moral history.” It is thus clear that one of Joyce’s creative aims is to achieve the spiritual liberation of the nation. Interpreting the boy’s journey from oppressed to oppressor allows Joyce’s dissatisfaction with the state of Ireland at the time and his satire, as well as his endeavour to liberate the spirit of his countrymen, to be revealed in the story. In addition, it opens the reader’s eyes to the ills of Dublin society, bringing enlightenment to the modern world.

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