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THE ANATOMY OF DISILLUSIONMENT: FROM ROMANTIC IDEALISM TO MORAL INSIGHT IN JOHN UPDIKE'S A&P AND JAMES JOYCE'S ARABY

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Abstract: The passage from adolescence to a nuanced understanding of the world often encompass a painful confrontation between idealized internal realms and indifferent external realities. The short stories, namely John Updike's "A&P" and James Joyce's "Araby" both masterfully portray this arduous journey through the experiences of their young protagonists, Sammy and the unnamed narrator, respectively. While separated by setting and social milieu, these two characters are united by their youthful idealism and their fervent, often misguided, navigation of a world that fails to meet their romanticized expectations. A comparative analysis of Sammy and the "Araby" narrator reveals a shared, profound head-heart disproportion where emotional impulses consistently override rational assessment. However, their agency manifests in distinctly different ways: Sammy's as a performative rebellion seeking external validation, while the "Araby" narrator's is an internalized quest. Ultimately, their trajectories of disillusionment lead to divergent forms of moral insight, with Sammy achieving a melancholic yet pragmatic acceptance of the "hardness" of the adult world, contrasting sharply with the "Araby" narrator's violent, self-lacerating awakening of personal vanity and folly.
Keywords: Disillusionment; Adolescence; Idealism vs. Reality; Agency; Moral insight; John Updike; James Joyce

1 INTRODUCTION

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is frequently marked by a crisis of perception, in which deeply held ideals collide with an unyielding reality. This paper examines that critical passage as depicted in two seminal short stories of the twentieth century: John Updike's "A&P" and James Joyce's "Araby." Both narratives center on young male protagonists whose romantic infatuations catalyze a journey from naïve idealism toward a painful, but necessary, moral awareness[1]. While Sammy, the checkout clerk in Updike's suburban supermarket, and Joyce's unnamed narrator, wandering the dreary streets of Dublin, occupy vastly different social worlds, they are psychological kin. Each is governed by a head–heart disproportion that privileges emotional impulse over reason, each asserts agency in a manner reflective of his temperament, and each arrives at a form of disillusionment that constitutes his first genuine step toward maturity. Through a comparative analysis, this essay argues that the protagonists' shared flaw—an imbalance between emotion and reason—initiates their romantic quests, while the contrasting nature of their agency (performative versus internalized) shapes the unique quality of their ultimate moral insights. In tracing these parallel yet divergent paths, the stories collectively illuminate the arduous, often sorrowful, process by which youthful illusion gives way to adult understanding[2].

2 THE HEAD–HEART DISPROPORTION: EMOTION OVERRIDING REASON IN "A&P" AND "ARABY"

First and foremost, both Sammy and the "Araby" narrator exhibit a striking imbalance between their head (rationality) and heart (emotion), where romantic idealism and impulsive desires override reason, driving them to construct subjective worlds that collide with reality and prompt inconsiderate decisions.

Sammy's emotional primacy is first evident in his initial reaction to the girls: "In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits. I'm in the third check-out slot, with my back to the door, so I don't see them until they're over by the bread." The blunt, colloquial opening "In walks these three girls" signifies his immediate sensory engagement, and the subtle subject–verb disagreement ("walks" instead of walk) mirrors the disjunction between perception and cognition that exposes how instinct precedes thought, encapsulating the head and heart disproportion[3].

Sammy's physical attraction is similarly devoid of intellectual depth, where he describes Queenie as "the longer her neck was, the more of her there was." This anatomical focus reduces his attraction to a near quantitative fascination rather than admiration, suggesting that his emotional and aesthetic sensibilities operate on very superficial impressions. It could perhaps be argued that Sammy perceives beauty as measurable substance rather than expressive individuality, where his "heart" dominates perception while his "head" fails to interpret meaning beyond sensual immediacy.

Later in the story, Sammy's vivid imaginative construction of Queenie's affluent home life, triggered by mere vocal inflection, exemplifies romantic idealization: "All of a sudden, I slid right down her voice into her living room[4]. Her father and the other men were standing around in ice-cream coats and bow ties and the women were in sandals picking up herring snacks on toothpicks off a big plate… all holding drinks the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in them." The hyper-specific sensory imagery with "ice-cream coats" and "herring snacks on toothpicks" dramatizes his

infatuation with glamour and perceived refinement. These details, however, border on parody, which exposes the shallowness of the ideal he constructs. The verb “slid” encapsulates the effortless, uncritical motion of his imagination, where emotional desire bypasses rational scrutiny to fabricate an idealized world that can temporarily free him from the mundane reality of life in the A&P.

All these imbalances culminate in the moment Sammy quits his job with a naïve, almost childish tone, “‘Fiddle-de-doo,’” when he cannot articulate genuine defiance but relies on a grandmotherly saying. The fact that he is unable to look inwards and voice his thoughts at the emotional peak of resignation underscores how his “head” lacks the tools to discipline his “heart.” Moreover, even when confronted by Lengel’s rational appeal that he wouldn’t want to do this to his parents, Sammy concedes, “It’s true, I don’t,” yet persists in quitting, excusing himself with “once you begin a gesture it’s fatal not to go through with it.” This admission signals a momentary flash of rational awareness but simultaneously an abdication of volition, where the “fatal” gesture suggests that his rebellion is driven not by principle but by performative pride[5]. Interestingly, Sammy later tells readers that his decision makes a “good story” for him, not his parents, which reveals a self-justifying moral lens that prioritizes personal motives over ethical introspection that requires “the head.”

Similarly, the “Araby” narrator demonstrates a profound head–heart disproportion, albeit in a more inward and introspective register. The story’s opening line, depicting the “blind” nature of “NORTH RICHMOND STREET,” metaphorically foreshadows the narrator’s internal blindness, for it is through his lens that readers explore the setting. What’s more, the narrator’s attraction to The Memoirs of Vidocq is solely based on the fact that “its leaves were yellow” rather than its content, demonstrating that the external replaces intellectual curiosity, where the narrator values surface exoticism over substance.

The narrator’s infatuation with Mangan’s sister is likewise purely emotional: “I had never spoken to her, except for a few casual words, and yet her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood.” Here, “summons” evokes a spiritual compulsion that transcends logic, and “foolish blood” marks his self-awareness of irrationality, yet he remains governed by it. This is further exemplified when the narrator reflects that his “eyes were often full of tears (I could not tell why) and at times a flood from my heart seemed to pour itself out into my bosom.” The “flood” metaphor captures emotional excess devoid of any intellectual cause, where the narrator is overwhelmed by feeling, and, like Sammy, submerged in passion he cannot articulate.

This emotional saturation results in paralysis when fantasy collides with reality. When Mangan’s sister finally speaks to him, he “did not know what to answer.” This moment exposes how the narrator’s emotional self, inflated by imagination, collapses before the real, revealing his underdeveloped rational counterpart. Such imbalances further manifest in his intellectual life, where “At night in my bedroom and by day in the classroom her image came between me and the page I strove to read.” This description shows how the narrator’s inner obsession literally materializes as a barrier to learning that obstructs the “page,” while his dismissal of “the serious work of life” as “child’s play, ugly monotonous child’s play” reverses normative values, as emotional fantasy subverts rational pursuit.

Ultimately, both Joyce and Updike use these characters’ head–heart imbalances to dramatize youthful disillusionment, challenging readers to question the extent to which the characters’ decisions are justified. Emotional intensity, when divorced from understanding, becomes a catalyst for self-deception, rendering the process of self-recognition—bridging superficial idealism and maturity—inevitably painful.

3 DIVERGENT AGENCIES: PERFORMATIVE REBELLION VS. INTERNALIZED QUEST

While both protagonists are driven by emotional impulses, their agency manifests in distinctly different ways: Sammy's as a performative rebellion seeking external validation and challenging local norms through disdainful public gestures, whereas the “Araby” narrator's agency is more internalized and driven by a private, transcendent ideal which culminates in acts of self-dedication rather than outward confrontation.

Firstly, in “A&P”, Sammy's confession—"The girls, and who'd blame them, are in a hurry to get out, so I say 'I quit' to Lengel quick enough for them to hear, hoping they'll stop and watch me, their unsuspected hero"—is a pivotal statement on his performative agency. The timing of his declaration, "quick enough for them to hear," overtly demonstrates how his act is deliberately staged for an audience, underscoring its performative rather than intrinsic motivation. His use of "unsuspected hero" also reveals his motive for external validation, highlighting how his heroism is conditional on recognition and how he constructs his identity through the gaze of others.

This performative aspect is further fueled by his disdain for conformity, expressed through his characterization of customers as "sheep pushing their carts down the aisle... were pretty hilarious," and the hyperbolic thought, "I bet you could set off dynamite in an A & P and the people would by and large keep reaching...". The crude exaggeration of "set off dynamite" and the image of passive customers underscore his profound, cynical contempt for those unwilling to challenge norms or meaningfully engage with their surroundings. Arguably, this renders Sammy’s agency superficially admirable; however, due to the shallow reasoning behind his choices, it ultimately works against him, as emphasis shifts toward his perceived intellectual superiority over the “sheep,” which fuels his outward—but hollow—assertion of agency.

What’s more, Sammy's confrontational agency is most evident in his exchange with Lengel: "'You didn't have to embarrass them.' 'It was they who were embarrassing us.'" The aforementioned instance in which Sammy invokes the “fatal gesture” as justification for following through with his resignation further reveals the theatrical nature of his agency, where symbolic completion outweighs pragmatic consideration. The deliberate, almost ritualistic act—"I fold

the apron, 'Sammy' stitched in red on the pocket, and put it on the counter, and drop the bow tie on top of it. The bow tie is theirs, if you've ever wondered"[6]—vividly demonstrates his performative disaffiliation. The emphasis on the "red" stitching and the definitive claim that "The bow tie is theirs" show how he consciously sheds an imposed identity and asserts a newly constructed one, transforming resignation into a public declaration of selfhood staged before an imagined audience.

Even Sammy's concern for a "clean exit"—"One advantage to this scene taking place in summer, I can follow this up with a clean exit, there's no fumbling around getting your coat and galoshes..."—reinforces this performative dimension. The phrase "fumbling around" suggests his desire for his act of rebellion to appear effortless, composed, and dignified, reinforcing that his agency is oriented toward aesthetic impact rather than reflective principle.

In stark contrast, the "Araby" narrator's agency is predominantly internalized and devotional. His agency begins with the inward decision to romanticize Mangan's sister: "Her image accompanied me even in places the most hostile to romance"[7]. The phrase "accompanied me even in places the most hostile to romance" indicates his active, sustained cultivation of the ideal despite contradicting realities, demonstrating a private assertion of will that shapes perception rather than social space. Unlike Sammy's public performance, the narrator's agency operates as a secret act of mental devotion.

This inward agency manifests in how he transforms mundane experiences into sacred trials, imagining that he "bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes" while performing Saturday errands. The religious symbolism of "chalice" and the heroic imagery of "throng of foes" elevate ordinary labor into spiritual quest, while simultaneously revealing his lack of empathy toward those merely engaged in daily survival. His agency thus lies not in resistance to authority but in the mythologizing of self through inward fantasy.

Moreover, the narrator's agency is characterized by a voluntary surrender to exotic idealism: "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 active verb "luxuriated" highlights how he consciously indulges in this fantasy, revealing his complicity in constructing an illusory internal world. This cultivated enchantment further distances him from reality, which he dismisses as "the serious work of life," reduced to "ugly monotonous child's play." Such language demonstrates a willful devaluation of the real in favor of emotional transcendence.

The persistence of his internal resolve is further revealed in his reaction to obstacles—his uncle's forgetfulness and the "intolerable delay" of the train—which only intensify his emotional urgency. Yet, upon finally entering the bazaar, reality exposes the limits of this inward agency: "I walked into the centre of the bazaar timidly"[8]. The contrast between the epic scope of his imagined quest and the timidity of his physical presence underscores how his agency, though powerful in internal cultivation, collapses when confronted with the material world.

Hence, while both protagonists assert agency through emotionally charged impulses, Joyce and Updike reveal that whether outwardly theatrical or inwardly idealized, such agency remains constrained by immaturity. Ultimately, the texts suggest that true freedom requires not merely bold gestures or private reverie, but self-awareness capable of reconciling emotion with understanding.

4 MORAL INSIGHT: MELANCHOLIC ACCEPTANCE VS. SELF-LACERATING AWAKENING

Finally, the trajectories of disillusionment for Sammy and the "Araby" narrator culminate in distinct forms of moral insight: Sammy achieves a melancholic yet pragmatic acceptance of the "hardness" of an indifferent adult world, resulting in a hesitant, cost-aware maturity, whereas the "Araby" narrator's journey leads to a violent, self-lacerating awareness of personal folly that marks a more profound and anguished moral awakening[9].

In "A&P", Sammy's disillusionment begins with the swift and oblivious departure of the girls: "The girls, and who'd blame them, are in a hurry to get out… They keep right on going, into the electric eye; the door flies open and they flicker across the lot to their car… leaving me with Lengel and a kink in his eyebrow." The phrase "flicker across the lot to their car" emphasizes the fleeting, insubstantial nature of their presence and their complete indifference to his grand gesture, immediately triggering his initial disillusionment. This absence of recognition demonstrates how Sammy's performative agency fails to achieve its intended validation, thus initiating his awakening to the world's indifference.

This realization is swiftly reinforced by the reassertion of mundane reality once the girls are gone: "I look around for my girls, but they're gone, of course. There wasn't anybody but some young married screaming with her children about some candy they didn't get by the door of a powder-blue Falcon station wagon." The irritating specificity of the "screaming" mother and the banal "powder-blue Falcon station wagon" grounds his disillusionment in sensory detail, illustrating how the ordinary world he despises immediately fills the void left by his failed rebellion[10]. This moment underscores that his gesture has neither transformed his environment nor offered escape from the mediocrity he sought to reject.

Sammy's ultimate moral insight arrives with the powerful closing image of Lengel: "His face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he'd just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter." This image serves as a grim premonition of Sammy's own future. His visceral response—"my stomach kind of fell"—signals an internal shift in which he recognizes that, although he has challenged the system, his rebellion carries lasting consequences. This realization marks a cost-aware maturity: an understanding that freedom and individuality come at a price. The moment echoes his earlier contempt for figures such as "Stokesie's married, with two babies chalked up on his fuselage" and the "house-slaves," suggesting that his idealism had not prepared him for the practical void left by his defiant gesture.

The “Araby” narrator’s trajectory, in contrast, culminates in a far more violent form of disillusionment. His awakening begins subtly with the mounting frustrations of the “intolerable delay” on the train and his uncle’s forgetfulness, moments that cause his “heart [to misgive]” and his fists to clench[11]. These bodily reactions indicate that emotional strain accumulates before conscious recognition, signaling that his quest is failing even before his mind fully accepts it.

The full force of his disillusionment strikes within the bazaar itself, where expected vibrancy gives way to bleak emptiness: “Nearly all the stalls were closed and the greater part of the hall was in darkness.” This pervasive “darkness” operates as a powerful metaphor for the death of his exotic dream, as the stark visual reality obliterates the imaginative projections he had nurtured. The subsequent “silence like that which pervades a church after a service” replaces anticipated excitement with hollow stillness, suggesting not merely disappointment but a spiritual void where meaning once resided. The simile of a “church after a service” reinforces the sense of desecration, as if a sacred illusion has been stripped of its power.

The crushing blow comes with the trivial exchange between the shop girl and the young men: “O, I never said such a thing!—O, but you did!—O, but I didn’t!—Didn’t she say that?—Yes. I heard her.—O, there’s a… fib!” This banal, repetitive, and childish dialogue exposes the cheap commercial reality of the bazaar and destroys the narrator’s transcendent romantic fantasy. The utter triviality of the scene reveals how far removed his idealism is from human reality, reducing his imagined quest to an embarrassing misunderstanding of the world[12].

This realization culminates in the narrator’s devastating moral insight: “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 verbs “driven” and “derided,” combined with the charged moral term “vanity,” articulate a moment of ruthless self-condemnation. Unlike Sammy’s outward-facing acceptance of hardship, the narrator internalizes blame, recognizing himself as an active participant in his own delusion. The physical sensation that his eyes “burned with anguish and anger” captures the violence of this revelation, as moral insight manifests as bodily pain and emotional rupture.

Thus, while both characters awaken from illusion into knowledge, Joyce and Updike suggest that moral awakening is inseparable from suffering, shaped by the protagonists’ immaturity and flawed idealism. Whether through Sammy’s subdued recognition of the world’s hardness or the “Araby” narrator’s searing self-reproach, disillusionment becomes the necessary catalyst for growth. In this sense, the collapse of illusion itself constitutes the first genuine act of maturity.

5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both Sammy in “A&P” and the narrator in “Araby” undertake transformative journeys from youthful idealism to a more nuanced, albeit painful, understanding of reality, their experiences meticulously crafted through their internal states and external decision-making processes. Their shared head–heart disproportion, where emotional impulses consistently usurp rational thought, initially propels them toward romanticized actions that fundamentally shape their flawed perceptions.

To be specific, Sammy’s active choice to interpret his narrative as one of triumph—consciously filtering out parental concerns—contrasts sharply with the “Araby” narrator’s passive surrender to overwhelming emotion and his inability to articulate the source of his tears. These differences reveal distinct mechanisms through which each character maintains a subjective reality, insulating himself from rational scrutiny while indulging emotional intensity.

However, the nature of their agency diverges significantly. Sammy’s agency manifests as a performative, outwardly directed rebellion, rooted in disdain for conformity and a desire for public validation. By contrast, the “Araby” narrator’s agency is internalized and devotional, characterized by his mental transformation of mundane tasks into sacred acts and his voluntary surrender to exotic fantasy, where meaningful action unfolds almost entirely within the confines of his own mind.

Ultimately, their paths of disillusionment lead to distinct forms of moral insight, rendering adolescent awakening complex rather than uniform. Sammy’s journey culminates in a thoughtful, melancholic recognition that his rebellion, while liberating, lacks the power to alter the indifferent structures of the adult world. In contrast, the “Araby” narrator experiences a violent, self-lacerating awakening, brutally triggered by the banal shop-girl conversation and the desolate darkness of the bazaar, where self-condemnation centers on his own role in constructing and sustaining illusion.

Both narratives thus illuminate how character flaws, motivations, and perceptual mechanisms shape agency and determine the nature of inevitable disillusionment, shedding light on the arduous passage from innocence to experience. In doing so, Joyce and Updike suggest that maturity is born not merely from disappointment, but from the painful recognition of one’s complicity in illusion itself.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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