

Failed escapism in "eveline" by james joyce's



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James Joyce paints a grim picture of the sheltered life of 19th century women in Dublin, in his story *Eveline*. Part of a series, called *Dubliners*, *Eveline* is the account of a young woman torn between sentimental duty and the opportunity for escape. *Eveline* chooses neither; her life instead reflects a cyclical and unmoving position, one which characterizes the bleakness of Joyce's comment on life in Dublin overall. Her struggle is articulated through a unique narrative that is comprised of third-person perspective and stream of consciousness technique. The point of view in *Eveline* is integral to the conveyance of the protagonist's literal and mental conflict in regards to her obligation to stay and her fantasy for freedom. By entering the mind of *Eveline*, the narrative explores her thoughts and desires which are responsible for carrying the plot. Although the story lacks physical action, the importance lies in *Eveline*'s inability to move, her psychological and spiritual paralysis. The perspective coincides with three major figures: the window, the perpetual dust, and the memory of *Eveline*'s deceased mother. These figures represent the transcendent turmoil that ails the individual *Eveline*, as well as the larger context of the city of Dublin. The significance of a third-person narrative, aided by stream of consciousness method, exposes the paralysis that *Eveline* is left crippled with, both in mind and body.

Joyce's narrative begins as a depiction of the protagonist from afar, as if he is sitting across the room from *Eveline*. He remarks on her physical description and some details of her immediate setting, however, the voice slips into *Eveline*'s consciousness when she begins to reminisce of the innocence that was pivotal in her childhood. It eventually reaches a point in the fifth paragraph, where the narrative resembles *Eveline*'s own voice and

her personal polarizing thoughts. Eveline mentally notes that "It was hard work — a hard life — but now that she was about to leave it she did not find it a wholly undesirable life." (Joyce 553) The sentence lacks grammatical structure and the absence of commas simulates a steady flow of cerebral activity. The narrative returns to standard third person perspective in the final scene with a simple, yet emphatic description: "She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition." (Joyce 555) By exiting Eveline's consciousness, she is reduced to an emotional void,

Joyce makes reference to 'windows' and 'dust' generously throughout the text and Eveline physically and mentally interacts with both. The figure of the window represents a divide between the domestic space and the exterior world. The repressed nature of Eveline and the anticipatory symbol of the window create a subtle juxtaposition of hope and hopelessness. The window appears in the narrative outside of Eveline's consciousness, creating a duality: Eveline's time spent by the window is both a form of subconscious imprisonment and a breach to liberated life. The duality, however, is unstable due to Joyce's second figure of the 'dust'. They are mentioned alongside each other in two instances: "SHE sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. Her head was leaned against the window curtains and in her nostrils was the odor of dusty cretonne. She was tired." (Joyce 552) And again on page 554: "Her time was running out but she continued to sit by the window, leaning her head against the window curtain, inhaling the odor of dusty cretonne." (Joyce 554) The dust that collects on the drapery represents the passing of time with uninterrupted

physical movement. This highly resembles Eveline's situation; the dust resonates with her own case of 'paralysis' and prolonged static lifestyle. Together, the window and the dust collection pertain to the hopelessness of Eveline ever seeking out that which lies beyond the window, for she herself "inhales" and endures through the dust that surrounds her. Joyce remarks on her corrupted nostalgia for the dust that covers her possessions:

"...reviewing all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from. Perhaps she would never see again those familiar objects from which she had never dreamed of being divided." (Joyce 552)

Eveline's life is sustained from mundane and repetitive activities, such as dusting her surroundings. The activity of dusting and material dust inhibits her from pursuing a life outside the home. The point of view in the passage is crucial in conveying Eveline's psychological and spiritual shackles to domestic life, and the anxiety she experiences in possible escape.

Although the story is not lengthy, Joyce's narrative proves efficient in Eveline's thought processes, which are comprised of both mental journeys to the past and fearful speculations on the future. Eveline's mother is Joyce's most complex figure that relies on his stream of consciousness technique for effectiveness. The deceased mother represents numerous layers of Eveline's anxieties: she is a nefarious model for Eveline to follow, a nostalgic memory of comfort, and an example for the abusive lifestyle that Eveline is considering adopting. Eveline's thoughts turn to her obligatory life path when she hears organ music, as the narrative details "that it should come that

very night to remind her of the promise to her mother, her promise to keep the home together as long as she could." (Joyce 555) The point of view of the story also inserts a pleasant memory of Eveline's: "Another day, when their mother was alive, they had all gone for a picnic to the Hill of Howth. She remembered her father putting on her mother's bonnet to make the children laugh." (Joyce 554) The protagonist's thoughts, made possible by Joyce's streaming narrative, extend to a depressive state in regard to her mother: "As she mused the pitiful vision of her mother's life laid its spell on the very quick of her being — that life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness." (Joyce 555)

This final image of Eveline's mother leaves the daughter's impression ambiguous; Eveline's thoughts, though erratic, are steeped in caution and warning. However, her choice at the story's close is reminiscent of her mother's past decisions, an inescapable paralysis that plagues the 19th century women of Dublin.

Joyce's combination of narrative methods proves to be effective in the telling of Eveline's mental conflicts. It is through this technique that harsh realism and dense symbolism thrive. The prison of routine and the desire for escape characterizes this story, like many in Joyce's collection. Eveline, left empty and emotionally irreducible, relies only on the window, the dust and the memories of her mother. These figures represent the transcendent turmoil that ails the individual Eveline, as well as the larger context of the city of Dublin. The significance of a third-person narrative, aided by stream of consciousness method, exposes the paralysis that Eveline is left crippled with, both in mind and body.