

Analysis of eveline essay



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James Joyce's "Eveline", one of the short stories in "The Dubliners", is a tale based upon the friction which can exist between familial and romantic love, the conflicts between the opposite choices of perpetuating the status quo versus initiating irreversible change, and the agonies that are experienced when pivotal decisions have to be made and powerful but divergent emotions inevitably collide.

The plot is not complex. The story opens – we see a young woman who is agonising over a vital life choice. She is bored and overworked, victimised and threatened by her aggressive and occasionally drunken father yet she has been offered the chance of salvation from these circumstances by a potential lover who would transport her far away perhaps never to return. Her decision as to whether to take this chance causes her much distress as she wrestles with the arguments for both staying and going.

In the end she decides to stay, perhaps no less anguished, perhaps in the future to regret what might have been; we are not told – the story closes. Such has been the basic theme, with of course some variations, for countless stories, anecdotes, legends, dramas, novels (ancient and modern), and even fairy tales. Twist the ending and we have the story of "Cinderella"; modify the father to a crippled husband and we have the basis for "Lady Chatterley's Lover"; keep the ending, alter the setting and exaggerate the motivation of the main characters and we see "Brief Encounter". If we delve at random into a shelf of Mills and Boon novellas or riffle through the pages of any one of a number of women's periodical magazines we risk discovering this recurrent image :- girl stressed and unhappy, girl falls in love, girl offered chance of a lifetime, girl torments

herself with decision – (should she ? , shouldn't she ?) , girl decides , girl lives with the consequences of the decision happily or ruefully as the case may be.

So it is not for the originality of its plot that we should commend Joyce's work – nor indeed for the colour of the setting for what little action there is. We know the location is Dublin because of the story's inclusion in the collection of tales about characters in that city and also by the incidental mentioning of places in the Dublin area – ' when their mother was alive , they had all gone for a picnic to the Hill of Howth. '. Whilst we have a hint of Eveline's Catholicism – ' beside the colour print of the Blessed Margaret Mary' and her mother's erstwhile raving in Gaelic – ' Derevaun Seraun' , we get little sense of Dublin or even Ireland from the piece. Even though there are a few little extra hints within Joyce's language – Frank had – ' come over to the old country for a holiday' and we learn Miss Gavan – ' always had an edge on her' , these are surely not intended to persuade us of any special Irish dimension to the story and are merely written in that fashion for no other reason than Joyce himself was Dublin Irish.

Thus the circumstances of this tale could quite easily have surrounded any Catholic family resident in any large industrial seaport in the British Isles – Dublin of course , but quite easily Liverpool , Glasgow , London , Cork , Belfast , Swansea , Bristol , Newcastle. Knowing Joyce for the brilliant writer that he developed into with his publication of " Ulysses" , a work commonly regarded as a great leap forward for fiction , only eight years after " The Dubliners " , we must assume that he was trying to communicate to the reader images and ideas over and above the banality of the basic plot and

the independence of location and environment. To establish these images , we have to probe the characters , the nature of the conflict and the complex emotions which Eveline is experiencing together with their reasons. As with many of Joyce’s works , when we probe we find concepts that are only hinted at or are virtually unsaid ; these can help provide us with the keys to unlock our understanding of Eveline’s pain – in short our answer as to why – ‘ her hands clutched the iron in frenzy. Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish! ‘ , at the closing summit of the story.

There are three principal individuals within the story – Eveline , the eponymous character from whose viewpoint the story is written , her (unnamed) father who manifests many of the conflicting causes for her anxiety and Frank , her would-be lover and husband , who offers an apparent opportunity for Eveline to escape from the stifling and potentially violent drudgery which is her life in the Dublin of 1914. Other members of the family play barely mentioned (yet vital as we shall see) roles – Eveline’s late mother , her two brothers (Harry and Ernest (deceased)) , and two young apparently unattached children. The story opens with Eveline pondering the choice she is faced with and clearly finding a decision most elusive. The opening paragraph creates for us a powerful image of her own recognition of what she will be leaving behind if indeed she escapes with Frank.

Joyce’s choice of language communicates how emotionally exhausting this decision process is for Eveline – ‘ her head was leaned against the window curtains

..... she was tired’.

Clear also, from the physical changes to her surroundings, is the fact that Eveline has been living in the same place at least since early childhood and will thus possibly experience even greater homesickness as a consequence of her life experience to date being concentrated within just one intense environment. Joyce lets us know this as he refers to the changes Eveline has witnessed and the evolution of the personalities within her family and set of family friends – ‘Everything changes’, we are told; Eveline considers this and realises that everybody around her has experienced some form of change or departure....

... xcept her! Now, for the first time she is faced with abandoning all of her roots – ‘Now she was going to go away like the others, to leave her home’. So what sort of person is Eveline? Naturally confined by the limited scope of the short story, Joyce skilfully tells us just enough for us to form our preliminary opinions and make our subsequent judgements. The only physical fact Joyce tells us about Eveline is that – ‘she was over nineteen’, nothing about her appearance, nothing really significant about her demeanour outside of the confines of the momentous decision she has to take; thus, we have to guess if we are interested; is she dark or fair? – is she pretty or plain? – is she normally a happy person or a sad one? – is she shy or outgoing? We can only make up our own questions and speculate upon the answers – if Joyce omits telling us then they are unimportant.

What can we learn about Eveline from what Joyce does tell us however?

Clearly she has grown lonely as members of her family have died or departed and her father has become more hostile to her. One feels that prior to Frank’s arrival in her life she was exposed to very little sympathetic adult

company in recent times – ‘ Her brothers and sisters were all grown up ; her mother was dead. Tizzie Dunn was dead , too , and the Waters had gone back to England’. We learn that she resents her job at the stores and the fact that (as she perceives it) , she is undervalued – ‘ her place would be filled up by advertisement. Miss Gavan would be glad..

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.... She would not cry many tears at leaving the stores’ .

Eveline herself probably also has doubts about her own self-worth ; she believes that marriage would ensure – ‘ People would treat her with respect then. She would not be treated as her mother had been. ‘. From the text itself – ‘ It was hard work – a hard life’ , she is clearly an industrious person combining a job with looking after a household which includes two young children (maybe her nephews / nieces by her late brother Ernest – we are never told) and the ever sinister presence of her potentially violent and money-obsessed father – ‘ he wasn’t going to give her his hard-earned money to throw about the streets’.

The reader can almost hear these same words being used to Eveline’s mother years previously – certainly Eveline can. It is thus the relationship with her father that lies at the heart of any desire Eveline has to escape from her current life. We learn that years ago , things were better than today – ‘ Her father was not so bad then ; and besides , her mother was alive. ‘ , and that on the day of the Hill of Howth picnic he had been a source of fun – ‘ She remembered her father putting on her mother’s bonnet to make the children laugh’. Things have sadly degenerated now however ; Joyce skilfully paints a

picture for us of a man , perhaps himself having failed to recover from the grief of his wife’s death , venting his wrath upon the only other human within reach.

There is a hint of drunken anger – ‘ for he was usually fairly bad of a Saturday night’ ; we know Eveline is vulnerable as a lone female who evokes memories of her mother in him – a mother whom he used to mistreat ; ‘ And now she had nobody to protect her. Ernest was dead and Harry

... was nearly always down somewhere in the country. ‘.

Clearly the situation is not only threatening for Eveline but is worsening and besides – ‘ had begun to weary her unspeakably ‘. Within the paragraph which describes the degeneration of Eveline’s relationship with her father and the increasing level of verbal violence coupled with the threat of this becoming eventually physical , Joyce uses an accomplished yet complex metaphor. Previously we have been told of Eveline’s determination – ‘ not to be treated as her mother had been ‘, yet we are then immediately and almost directly told by Joyce that this is in fact the inevitable outcome towards which her father’s hostility is leading her – ‘ he had begun to threaten her and say what he would do to her only for her dead mother’s sake’. The metaphor occurs in the description of Eveline after yet another financial quarrel with her father as she struggles to do her shopping – ‘ Then she had to rush out as quickly as she could and do her marketing , holding her black leather purse tightly in her hand as she elbowed through the crowds and returning home late under her load of provisions. Why do we need such a relatively long description of a somewhat trivial aspect of

Eveline's routine ? To show us surely that she has effectively become her mother – doing household things which her mother used to undertake in reaction to the same abuse.

When , in the next sentence , we are told about Eveline's obligations towards the children – ‘ She had hard work to keep the house together and to see that the two young children....

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ent to school regularly and got their meals ‘ then the transfer is complete ; she has totally , but inadvertently perhaps , assumed the role of her dead mother within the new family unit and will presumably be subjected to the same miseries , humiliation and maybe even early madness and death. Into this scenario of drudgery , humiliation , stress and fear appears Eveline's potential personal saviour in the form , not of Prince Charming , but of Frank the sailor. Instead of a glittering coach to the ball , he offers marriage and a home in Buenos Aires. As the relationship develops , Eveline , from being initially flattered and grateful for his courtesy – ‘ he used to meet her outside the Stores every evening and see her home’ , becomes ‘ elated ‘ by going with him to the theatre then experiences ‘ excitement’ at having ‘ a fellow ‘ ; later this excitement is probably enhanced when her father bans the liaison and forces the affair to become illicitly progressed. The question has to be of course “ Where is love in all of this? and it is a question which Eveline probably asks herself only when she has to – on the day the boat will sail.

Joyce tells us of many positive aspects of her feelings for the opportunities presented by a life with Frank :- she will be married ; Frank is – ‘ very kind ,

manly , open-hearted’ ; he has a home awaiting her far away ; he is handsome – ‘ his hair tumbled forward over a face of bronze ‘ ; they had come to know each other ; Frank would save her , would – ‘ take her in his arms , fold her in his arms’ ; she – ‘ had even begun to like him’ ! In spite of all of the negatives about Eveline’s existence Joyce intimates to us early in the story that she harbours strong doubts about giving up everything which is familiar to her in exchange for a new life from which there would be no going back. His choice of words cleverly intimate Eveline’s doubts to us ; we are told – ‘ She had consented to go away , to leave her home ‘ and that – ‘ in her new home in a distant unknown country etc. etc. and of course the fact that the strongest emotion Eveline feels for Frank is to – ‘ like him’ – hardly words which indicate a yearning for a new life based upon romance and love. So to the choice itself and Eveline’s dilemma as the time draws near and she must depart with Frank. The disparity in the volume of information we are given by Joyce about each alternative (‘ staying’ or ‘ going’) is very evident ; the story inundates us with information which is negative about Eveline’s life , positive about Frank and his offer , all of which is therefore , on the face of it , supportive of the ‘ going’ case.

We are told at length about the drudgery of her job and home life , the bad relationship with her father , Frank’s qualities and what he would provide , Eveline’s fundamental need to escape. Thus the quantity of the argument for ‘ going’ would seem to make the option impregnable. But we know that in life quantity counts for little and that , founded as they are , mainly upon negative emotions the quality of the arguments for running away with Frank are weak. This is the essence of this story and it is Joyce’s brilliance in subtly

making us aware of the feelings and the anchors which will ultimately cause Eveline to choose to stay , which earmark him as a great author. What are the emotions which conflict with Eveline’s surface desire to go – in brief these are :- fear of change from the familiar ; doubts as to whether her father is that bad ; fear of being forgotten ; the fact that the decision would be virtually irreversible ; fear of Frank not living up to expectations ; the promise she gave to her dying mother.

Fear of change is a powerful human emotion and of course Eveline is feeling fearful. We see her recalling her childhood and reassessing the objects in her home now that she plans to leave – ‘ She looked round the room , reviewing all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years ‘ ; we can almost feel the anticipated homesickness here! Cleverly , Joyce strengthens this by noting that as Eveline is sitting at the window considering all of this – ‘ in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne’. The author knows that smells are one of the most powerfully evocative senses ; how often do we the readers recall childhood memories instantaneously when we come across a barely-remembered aroma? Joyce actually uses this image twice – towards the end of the description of Eveline’s thoughts he again tells us she was – ‘ leaning her head against the window curtain , inhaling the odour of dusty cretonne. ‘. We see Eveline , in her indecision , beginning to doubt whether her father is that bad. It is almost as if she has decided to herself that “ absence makes the heart grow fonder” even before she has gone.

We are told that , in spite of his threats and hostility towards her , – ‘ Sometimes he could be very nice’ , that he had been kind when Eveline had

been unwell and that – ‘ she did not find it a wholly undesirable life’. She is also fearful perhaps of being forgotten – the description of the photograph has been inserted to let us know of this – ‘ Whenever he showed the photograph to a visitor her father used to pass it with a casual word: – He is in Melbourne now. but Eveline – ‘ never found out the name’. Is she imagining that in very few years she will become just a faded memory ; can she hear in her mind – “ She is in Argentina now” ? That a decision to go would be irreversible is less complex to understand when we consider the very geography of her would-be destination and its distance from Dublin and how that would appear in 1914 ; also the fact that in Catholic Ireland a marriage would be absolutely permanent. More subtle are the fears that she harbours over Frank ; although we are told only good things about him , we become aware , through the account of his experiences that he is probably quite a bit older than Eveline and certainly more experienced in the ways of the world in contrast to her virginal naivety??.

Her father had said – ‘ I know these sailor chaps’ when he forbade the relationship and although Eveline carried on meeting Frank secretly , how much of her father’s words struck home? After all she only met Frank – ‘ a few weeks ago’. Then we come to the promise made to her dead mother to – ‘ keep the home together as long as she could’ ; presumably to continue to look after her father and the two (unidentified) children. Possibly these are her mother’s grandchildren , probably the offspring of Eveline’s dead brother Ernest – we can only guess but clearly the family was significant enough for her mother to extract such a promise. In the story Eveline recalls her mother and the promise by the sound of an organ-player who is reminiscent of the

night she died – (sound as well as smell is evocative!)So how significant is this promise? As a Catholic , Eveline would probably be fearful of breaking a promise to the dead even though she might be able to confess it later. But she seems to recall at the same time – ‘ the pitiful vision of her mother’s life..

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.. that life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness’. How valid , she might be considering , would a promise be when it was made to a woman in the advanced stages of delirium.

Eveline asks herself too – ‘ Why should she be unhappy? ‘ and probably thinks “ would Mother have wanted me to be so unhappy? “. Yet in the end Eveline decides to stay and we are witness to the wonderfully descriptive scene as she finally agonises and then succumbs to let her fears of the unknown dominate her decision. I believe it is purely fear that keeps Eveline in Ireland and that the promise made to her dying mother will be used by her , in the future , to justify her decision to herself ; a decision that she had already made. Joyce’s story is a powerfully crafted piece which is very successful in portraying the pressures which can exist when security and fear of the unknown become represented as family and romantic love and then vie for a decision.

The anguish that Eveline experiences builds during the story from the quiet time when she – ‘ sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue’ to the zenith of the tale when – ‘ Her distress awoke a nausea in her body and she kept moving her lips in silent fervent prayer. A bell clanged upon her heart’. The sadness of the story however is paradoxically in its

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anticlimactic ending when , deprived of love , deprived of escape, – both situations perhaps self-inflicted – , Eveline looks after Frank and - ‘ her eyes gave him no sign of love or recognition’.