
The Abyss Between Humans and Sacred in "Eveline"

What happens to a dream deferred? According to James Joyce, perhaps nothing. Illustrated in his short story *Eveline*, this Dublin-born author both poses and responds to the age-old question of comfort versus risk. In a time of upheaval throughout the continent, Eveline serves as an archetypal damsel in distress, accessible only by the man she loves, but conversely as the template of a person subservient to her own mind. Validated only by her male superiors, Eveline trips into the pitfalls surrounding the ideas of her own happiness, sparring internally with her duty as a woman. Gripped by fear of the unknown yet exhausted by the monotony of her daily life, *Eveline* represents both the internal struggle between mind and heart while still reflecting the religious goings-on across Europe, and the subsequent treatment of women thereof.

The story revolves around Eveline, a nineteen-year-old girl from Dublin, reflecting on the time that has passed in her home. She gazes out the window, both mentally and physically in a prison from which she cannot escape. She considers her role in the household, the passing of her brother and deranged mother, and the abuse she endured by the hand of her father. She plans to escape to Buenos Aires with her clandestine lover, a sailor named Frank, whom her father greatly dislikes. Though the difference between her closeted life and a path of adventure is more than apparent, the chasm between the present and the future is much too foreign for Eveline to grasp. This supposed freedom of choice is actually anything but: Eveline must either succumb to her life of inadequacy and subservience, or take a blind leap of faith. Yet she feels strongly about neither of these ideas, her heart pulling her in one direction and her mind pulling her in the other. Her obvious sensations of entrapment are apparent within the first few lines, as Joyce writes about the evening "invading" the avenue. Eveline looks about the room, at the familiar furniture, and wonders "where all the dust came from", alluding to the obvious passage of time and the mundane quality of her everyday life (407). As the night "deepens" into the avenue, she oscillates between her love for Frank, her fear of her father, and the duty she promised to her late mother to keep the home. When the time comes to board the ship, she is too paralyzed with terror to even move, forever suspended in the purgatory between what she thinks and what she feels.

Eveline embodies the typical female homemaker, providing her entire salary to her father, who believes that if he does not acquire her money, she will spend it frivolously. He even forbids his grown daughter from seeing her single source of happiness, forever confined to the home that she is bound to, forever under the threat of her father's disapproval and violence. The father's first of his infrequent dialogue is centered around a discolored photograph of an old priest, whom Eveline realizes she never became familiar with. In passing, her father would say, "He is in Melbourne now." This brief but relevant exchange between her father and her faith casts a

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shadow on the home she keeps, shedding light onto the fact that religion is hardly a part of her life. There, juxtaposed with the "yellowing" photograph, is a colored print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque (407). The twelve promises involve the blessing of the homes in which she is displayed and the assurance of everlasting life to souls that receive Communion. The promises are devoted to His Sacred Heart, an interesting juxtaposition with Eveline's "human heart", and her desires of the flesh rather than of the spirit.

It is important to understand the religious and historical context in which this story was written. James Joyce was born in Dublin, but rejected his Irish-Catholic heritage, believing that the Irish were restricted to their faith by ecclesiastical privilege and governmental authority (402). Joyce left Dublin, but wrote his stories around his native city anyway, regardless of the internal and external alienation he experienced. If this is to be taken into consideration, and the author viewed religion as a restriction more than anything else, it would do well to create a character reflecting this belief. Furthermore, *Eveline* is a social commentary on the treatment of women in the household. Joyce's protagonist craves marriage in order to finally be "respected", in some haven in South America where she would never be treated as her mother had been (407-408). The stigma that comes with being a wed woman is coupled with a life of significance and higher status. With marriage comes validation. Eveline believes she deserves happiness until she stands on the shore, looking at the ship and the porthole to her new life, but becomes plagued by the uncertainties in her mind.

Though the ideas of religion and marriage are not always similar, Joyce subtly links the two. Eveline forever hovers in a state of indecision and helplessness. She looks to Frank for salvation: "He would give her life, perhaps love, too...Frank would take her in his arms, fold her in his arms. He would save her" (409). Eveline, without worth when she is alone, is only ever validated by her superiors (the men in her life.) Though her father has provided no relative love, security, or blessing, she is still sure that he will miss her, reflecting complacently over rare moments of his care and loving touch. Yet she is also fearsome of both men, her father justifiably so, but Frank irrationally so: in her frantic thoughts she conjures the idea that he will drown her. Eveline is only ever subservient to her father's command, perhaps a reflection on the subjects of the church, in which its clergy is meant to be happily bound to servitude to the Lord. Though she was raised in the rigidity of the Catholic Church, Eveline still employs her faith even in the final moments of the story, as she moves her lips in "silent prayer."

When the time comes, Eveline cannot make a decision. She is frozen with fear of the unknown yet still unsatisfied with the insufficient lifestyle she occupies. She chooses, therefore, to remain in a noncommittal hiatus, quite like the participants of the Catholic Church. Joyce implements these themes of indecision due to the influx of modernism during his time, which caused writing to revolve around "the everyday lives of ordinary people trying to make sense of themselves" (403). Therefore, it was simple for Joyce, the ostracized author yet typical Dubliner, to display

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his inner turmoil by way of a character who cannot choose a single path. At this same time, the prefaces of the Reformation were quickly sweeping across the European continent, forcing Catholics to decide whether to remain in a religion they were unsatisfied with, or release their inhibitions and press on towards something unknown.

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