

Two Readings of James Joyce's "Eveline"

Ambiguity and Oppression: The Illusion of Choice in Joyce's "Eveline"

by Maria Ajith

In his complex short story "Eveline," James Joyce explores the relationship between choice, oppression, and interpretation. The main character Eveline's dilemma regarding whether to stay with her father or to leave with her lover is further complicated by her subjugation to these men. On a larger scale, this complication reflects, as Lesli Mortenson puts it, "the meta-political theme of British imperial oppression towards Ireland" (5). Moreover, Joyce's narrative approach accentuates this complexity via deliberate ambiguity in phrasing and punctuation that leaves room for interpretation. As a reader, you can either conclude that Eveline chose to stay with her father or to leave with her lover. However, I contend that this deliberate ambiguity and the oppression she faces upend both Eveline's and the reader's autonomy over that choice, and ultimately render choice irrelevant. Therefore, I argue that the portrayal of choice in the text, via both content and form, is fundamentally compromised. The omnipotent oppressive forces of patriarchy and colonialism create the illusion of choice for Eveline, whereas the reader experiences the same illusion of choice via the ambiguity of interpretation. Therefore, any choice made by either the reader or Eveline is untenable.

The text showcases the oppressive influence of the patriarchy through Eveline's relationship with her father. Even though Eveline is a grown woman, she still feels herself to be in danger from her father's violent behavior. The constant need to be wary of her father's bad moods has even led to her poor health, and she mentions her heart palpitations and the constant weariness she experiences because of their arguments over money (Joyce). These instances paint a picture of her hard life at home, one in which she can never put her own needs first. She is the one who needs to take care of the household by sacrificing her own emotional needs and enduring her father's difficult personality.

By contrast, Eveline's relationship with her lover Frank appears to be liberating. However, Frank is self-centered and reflects another facet of the patriarchal oppression that stifles Eveline. He takes her to the opera and meets her outside The Stores (where she works) every evening to see her home (Joyce). In these ways, he appears intent on courting Eveline in a public manner. He tells her stories of his travels and wants to take her away to live with him in Buenos Aires (Joyce). These grandiose gestures seem designed to sweep Eveline off her feet and could be an indicator that Frank is an unscrupulous seducer, which makes him self-centered in his pursuit of Eveline. But even if he is a genuine suitor, regardless of how in love he believes himself to be, Frank is still inconsiderate of Eveline's paralysis. He has established Buenos Aires as the home he has waiting for her, "and had come over to the old country just for a holiday" (Joyce). This statement illustrates his unwillingness to entertain the prospect of living in Ireland with Eveline. Perhaps this alternative has not even crossed his mind. As an emigrant who left Ireland to find better opportunities, he probably expects Eveline to follow suit. This expectation again reveals his self-centeredness in his pursuit of Eveline. Therefore, Frank's priority is his

need to leave Ireland, and, in this way, he puts his needs first over his supposed love for Eveline. He expects Eveline to upend her life for him. Thus, Frank's romantic pursuit stifles Eveline's emotional needs and acts as yet another patriarchal force that oppresses her.

Eveline's choice to stay or leave hinges upon her reliance on the men in her life. Regardless of the choice she makes, Eveline faces emotional anguish, and thus, her paralysis is understandable. In choosing to leave with Frank, she faces unknowable hardships. The stress of leaving the only home she has ever known, leaving behind her family, and assimilating into a new country are what lie ahead for her. If she chooses to stay, however, "she had to work hard, both in the house and at business" (Joyce). By staying, she faces a predictable future filled with her current sacrifices of handling her father's temper, being a caretaker for two young children and being subservient at her job at The Stores. Regardless of whether she decides to leave or stay, she does not experience any great freedom from her oppression by patriarchal and colonial forces nor any autonomy for herself. Either way, there is emotional anguish for Eveline. She is constrained by her dependence on her father and her lover.

Eveline's plight is symptomatic of the larger struggle for Irish autonomy in the face of British rule. This view is put forth by Mortenson, who claims, "Just as Eveline was unable to separate herself from her persecutor, Joyce argues that Ireland has never been able to cut itself off from the colonial influence of England" (5). I concur with Mortenson's assertion, and I find that Joyce's work was greatly influenced by his lived experience as an Irishman trying to maintain a national identity under British rule. There is not much real choice in the matter for people in Ireland. They are granted the illusion that they still possess autonomy, but ultimately British rule dictates their decisions. Eveline's paralysis mirrors Ireland's plight in the futility of the choices available to her. Yes, she can technically choose and put into effect a life-altering decision, but it is only under the dictates of the men in her life that she can experience either possibility. If Eveline chooses to stay with her father, it is his unpredictable mood and her weariness and fear of him that will govern her life henceforth. If Eveline chooses to leave with Frank, it is the unknowable reliability of his character and the extent of his love (or goodwill) that will govern her fate on a whole new continent. Therefore, either way, her choice does not grant her any peace or even guarantee a happy ending. Similarly, Ireland has no real choice in governing itself. Any real control lies with the British. Eveline's fear of leaving the familiar behind and venturing into the unknown can be seen as a representation of Ireland's struggle to break free from the political, economic, and cultural constraints imposed by England. By presenting Eveline's dilemma as emblematic of the broader struggle faced by Ireland, Joyce highlights the difficulties of asserting independence and making decisions free from the constraints of colonialism.

Until now, I have emphasized the role of the characters and plot in highlighting how oppressive forces like patriarchy and colonialism can render one's available choices redundant in the face of their circumstances. To further comprehend the illusion of choice within the text, the ambiguous interpretive possibilities of Joyce's narrative form need to be considered. Readers experience an irrelevance of choice in their own reading practice when it comes to ambiguous interpretive possibilities.

The significance of Eveline's relationship with her mother and the phrase "Derevaun Seraun" in influencing her choice is one such moment of ambiguity within the text. "Derevaun Seraun" is a significant phrase in the text as it is the key to the epiphanic moment Eveline experiences. The sound of an organ playing triggers Eveline's epiphany. On remembering these last words her mother uttered, she makes her choice (Joyce). Scholars have offered a wide array of interpretations for the phrase, ranging from it having many meanings to being gibberish. Just as the phrase itself could mean anything and nothing, similarly, in the context

of Eveline's relationship with her mother, the phrase is open to interpretation. In this way, the phrase is a formal feature which mirrors the ambiguity of the text. Eveline recalls her mother's life as a pitiful life of commonplace sacrifices, concluding in a final madness with the phrase "Derevaun Seraun" (Joyce). The use of phrases like "pitiful" and "commonplace sacrifices" reinforce the interpretation that Eveline views her mother's life with disdain. She is afraid of facing a fate like her mother's, wasting away her life in accommodating and adjusting for the comfort of others. Therefore, Eveline's strong feelings regarding her mother's life and subsequent fate could have played a major role in her choosing to stay with her father or to leave with Frank. Staying with her father to take care of him and his household means succumbing to the same life of commonplace sacrifices as her mother and acting as her replacement. In this context, it is understandable if Eveline chooses to leave, horrified at the thought of becoming like her mother. However, leaving with Frank, keeping his house for him, and dedicating her life to being his partner is also a sacrifice of her autonomy and self. Moving out and living at the mercy of a man she married is another way in which she fulfills her mother's fate. It is understandable if she wants to avoid that, by choosing to stay home and continue facing the known rather than an unknown, potentially worse fate. Hence, the interpretation of this important memory is ambivalent to the reader; there are two equally possible interpretations. If the meaning Eveline attaches to her recollection of this specific phrase were clearer, the reader could confidently predict what Eveline chose as a result of her epiphany. Yet, all we know is that the memory of "Derevaun Seraun" is what catapults Eveline into suddenly making her choice. This ambivalence in interpretation reveals that neither choice could have been truly epiphanic for Eveline. The epiphany lies in the ambivalence; no matter the interpretation, she is trapped. Therefore, the ambiguity of this phrase and its context is an important example from the text for two reasons: it indicates the irrelevance of the choice Eveline faces, and it also highlights the ambiguous interpretive route the reader could take.

Hence, it is clear from the text that Eveline has made a choice at this point, to stay or to leave. However, Joyce has left it up to the reader to interpret what this choice could be. A key example of this ambiguity that is often cited occurs at the end of the story and involves a voice calling Eveline to follow. Most commentators on the text agree that Eveline has chosen to stay and the voice is thought to be Frank atop the leaving ship, desperately calling out to her to change her mind (Joyce). However, Edward Ben-Merre argues that it is equally likely that the voice calling her to "Come!" is her father, and that Eveline has chosen to leave. Ben-Merre posits that specific choices Joyce makes in narrative content and form and the very structure of the story give us room to interpret in this manner (460). To support his interpretation, Ben-Merre offers certain textual evidence. One such piece of textual evidence is the pronoun "he" at the end of the story which Ben-Merre believes refers to Eveline's father and not to Frank. Ben-Merre argues that the "he" who is holding Eveline's hand, the "he" who is speaking to her, the "he" who would drown her, and the "he" who calls her to follow can all be interpreted as being her father (462). This interpretation of the text could be as follows: As Eveline ponders the upcoming passage with Frank, she wonders if she can still draw back after all he has done for her (Joyce). This could be her wondering if she can still leave and betray her father, after he has given her a home and parental support all her life. The "he" who is speaking to her is her father on the dock, saying something about the passage over and over, perhaps begging her to reconsider her decision to leave with Frank. Her father's repeated demands that she stay may be the reason she feels "he" will drown her (Joyce). This could have been her moment where she decides to break free from "him" and board the ship, her hands clutching the iron of the ship in a frenzy (Joyce). In this case, her father is the one on the dock, rushing beyond the barrier, calling for her to come back and follow "him" home (Joyce).

However, the same “he” can equally be read as referring to Frank, which completely changes the situation with Eveline having chosen to stay behind in Ireland. Before the ambiguous “he” pronouns are employed by Joyce within the text, Eveline is thinking about her passage with Frank. Thus, it is natural for the reader to assume that the subsequent “he” pronouns are used in reference to Frank. A second interpretation of the same text could be as follows: Eveline wonders if she can still draw back after all he has done for her (Joyce). This could be her wondering if she should stay behind and betray Frank even after he has offered her a chance at a new life and made future plans which revolve around their life together elsewhere. The “he” who is speaking to her is Frank on the dock as they are about to board the ship, saying something about the passage over and over, perhaps telling her some details about the passage which she is not registering in the moment. Frank has boarded the ship and is holding out his hand now to Eveline, urging her to board the ship as well. At Frank’s insistence, she overwhelmingly feels “he” will drown her, and she grips the iron railing of the dock, refusing to board the ship (Joyce). Frank is helplessly watching from the boat as the entryway is closed, rushing beyond the barrier, and calling for her to follow “him” (Joyce).

The reader is aware that Eveline’s dilemma regarding whether to stay or to go has been established as the central conflict and emotional crux of the story. However, as I have shown, the reader can equally extrapolate either of these outcomes from the text. If Eveline’s central conflict is shrouded in such ambiguity, this means that the choice was never really a choice in the first place. The reader is also constrained in their choice as different readers may interpret the same text in different ways, and so, ultimately, there is no correct choice for the reader either. The reader should start to feel that any choice Eveline or they themselves possess in the matter is irrelevant.

I find that the aforementioned issue of ambiguity in narrative form further complicates the current critical conversation on “Eveline” in a very significant way. It shifts the focus of the conversation from Eveline’s choice to questioning if the choice was ever hers to begin with. In engaging with the text, Joanna Luft highlights how any interpretation of Eveline’s choice is ultimately dependent upon the morals of the reader (51). I agree with this analysis, and I believe, therefore, that Eveline’s paralysis of choice is intrinsically connected to the reader’s paralysis of ambivalent interpretation. The paralysis in both cases is because there is no concrete choice available for Eveline or the reader to make confidently. The choices available are muddled by the omnipotence of the oppressive forces of the patriarchy and colonialism which plague Eveline and, via Joyce’s ambiguous narrative form, plague the reader. In this way, oppressive situations greatly diminish the autonomy to make a choice as well as the value of a choice overall. Eveline has less autonomy to make her choice due to the patriarchal and colonial norms she is subject to. Therefore, any choice is redundant and completely irrelevant to any outcome that Eveline could face.

Ultimately, “Eveline” reflects how illusory choices can be in the face of oppression. Patriarchal norms and colonial influence can stifle individual choice to the point where no outcome is satisfactory or beneficial to the individual. Ambiguous narrative similarly stifles agency and strips the reader’s autonomy to make an informed choice. A situation may appear to offer a choice, but if there are great constraints upon your autonomy to decide, the choice is ultimately out of your control and that renders the choice irrelevant. A further study may approach the text in the context of the religious loyalties of Eveline, Joyce, and - on a larger scale - Ireland, and explore how viewing the choices made through this lens shapes the critique of the illusion of choice. Regardless of the new approach, one must acknowledge the intertwined role of interpretive ambiguity and oppression in illegitimizing choice which is at the heart of the text.

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Seizing Agency: Oppression and Feminine Resilience in James Joyce's "Eveline"

by Jahnvi Dangeti

James Joyce's "Eveline" underscores the burden of misogyny and gender hierarchy on women in colonized Ireland. Throughout the text, the eponymous character's resilience despite paralysis symbolizes the hope through which oppressed women overcome patriarchal setbacks. During her identity crisis, Eveline contemplates whether to relinquish her one opportunity of escaping a violent life in Dublin by leaving her father to join her lover, Frank, in Buenos Aires. I contend that she ultimately pursues liberation from both Frank and her father. Eugene O'Brien notes that even though Eveline views her gender role as a blessing because her father never "went for her like he used to go for Harry and Ernest, because she was a girl" (27), it ultimately limits her choices, actions, and personal growth in patriarchal Ireland. Eveline's father and the surrounding society confine her within the boundaries forged by misogyny. She is not allowed to follow her desires, a reality she resists. Although Eveline's voice against oppression is considered marginal by most scholars, her agency becomes evident through her desire for freedom. By exploring Eveline's experiences as a woman in colonized Ireland and her sense of identity resulting from these conditions, I claim that Eveline is both a victim of and a warrior against the injustices she suffers. Ultimately, these experiences and her internal yearning for freedom drive Eveline towards an independent life instead of choosing between an uncertain future with Frank or being trapped with her abusive father.

Ambiguity in "Eveline" allows for various interpretations of the story's themes and climax. For instance, Joanna Luft claims that imagery and allusion in the story create an extreme vagueness surrounding Eveline's ultimate decision on whether she should leave Ireland with Frank (49). This literary feature of ambiguity creates a visual image of Eveline's entrapment and the reader's hermeneutical conundrum (Luft 48). The reader is paralyzed by the story's ambiguity, just as conflicting feelings of obligation paralyze Eveline. The use of ambiguity in the text invites readers to engage with "Eveline" at a deeper level and discover new interpretations. According to Luft, there are only two options available to Eveline, but my argument suggests a third option: that she embarks on her own path without her father or Frank. By closely analyzing the story, the reader can uncover a feminist reading highlighting Eveline's independence. Her decision to escape alone instead of staying with her father or leaving with Frank to Buenos Aires underscores her agency and self-determination. The ambiguity in the text supports this reading and encourages readers to consider feminist interpretations of the story's ending.

When we consider the context of the women's suffrage movement for equal rights that was taking place in colonized Ireland, together with Joyce's intention to write about women's role in society, Eveline's decision to separate herself from the ties that bind her gains more significance. According to Michael Wainright, Joyce's writing can be read as a commentary on the importance of women's rights and equality in the way that it challenges traditional gender roles and expectations (676). For Wainright, Joyce's work is an essential contribution to the ongoing struggle for gender equality. His writing often portrays women as strong and independent characters, challenging traditional gender roles and expectations. Additionally, Joyce's narratives highlight the im

importance of women's rights and equality, and his portrayal of women reflects the struggle for gender equality during the suffrage movement in Ireland (Wainright). Furthermore, Joyce's stream-of-consciousness narration allows readers to access his female characters' innermost thoughts and feelings, giving voice to women's experiences in a male-dominated society. In this sense, Eveline's desire for freedom and independence from her abusive father and unreliable lover is a feminist stance that resonates with the suffrage movement.

Considering Joyce's deliberate exploration of the lives of women in Dublin, the oppressive nature of the patriarchy plays as a crucial factor that propels Eveline towards choosing independence over living with her abusive father. The narrator explains how Eveline felt "in danger of her father's violence" and feared the way that "he had begun to threaten her" (Joyce). Here, the father wants Eveline to be like her mother, a submissive woman. So, as a patriarch, he threatens her. Her father's violent and threatening behavior towards her reflects the toxic and domineering nature of the patriarchy. Furthermore, Eveline's financial autonomy is systematically curtailed: Eveline always gave her entire salary to the household, "seven shillings,"; meanwhile, her brother "Harry always sent up what he could" and "the trouble was to get any money from her father" (Joyce). The contrast between the treatment of Eveline and her brother highlights the limitations placed on women within patriarchal structures. Harry has the freedom to move out and send whatever money he can. Meanwhile, Eveline is stuck in her hometown with her violent father and must work and handle domestic chores; her father takes away all her earnings, and she must beg her father for her own money to buy groceries. The absurdity of this situation highlights the harmful effects of patriarchal beliefs on women. However, despite these challenges, Eveline manages to win the battle with her father by persistently saving money to escape. By choosing to leave and forge her own path, Eveline challenges the gendered power dynamics of her society, highlighting the need for broader social and political change to combat the pervasive and corrosive impact of the patriarchy on women's lives.

Building on our previous discussion, it is clear that Eveline's upbringing within a patriarchal system has shaped her. Her mother, involuntarily complicit in the domestic abuse that she suffers at the Hill house by her father, highlights the problematic nature of patriarchal violence and its misogynistic internalization by victims of domestic abuse. The narrator recounts her mother's last words before her death: "Derevaun Seraun! Derevaun Seraun!" (Joyce). These words are ambiguous, and many translators cannot decipher their meaning. The figurative language creates ambiguity, metaphorically showcasing the incarceration of women—both Eveline and her mother—within family responsibilities. Even in death, Eveline's mother thinks of her family, as Eveline indicates that her mother is asking her to stay. The narrator describes Eveline's feelings as she remembers her mother dying: "Escape! She must escape!" (Joyce). Eveline's need for escape intensifies as soon as she remembers her mother dying, highlighting the profound psychological impact of her mother's death on her sense of self and her desire for autonomy. The sudden recollection of her mother's passing brings to the forefront the weight of her responsibilities as a daughter and the realization that her life has been defined by duty and sacrifice rather than by her desires and aspirations. Her mother's death serves as a catalyst for her to confront the reality of her situation and to acknowledge her unhappiness and unfulfilled longings. Thus, Eveline's need for escape is a desire to break free from her oppressive environment and a desperate attempt to reclaim agency over her own life and assert her identity beyond the confines of her familial obligations. This marks a pivotal departure from the cycle of abuse, which her mother could not escape.

Eveline successfully breaks the chains of the perpetual cycle of violence by choosing to emigrate from Ireland. This decision

not only indicates to the reader that Eveline wants to leave, but also substantiates the contention that her decision is profoundly shaped by the trauma she has suffered under the misogynistic upbringing at her patriarchal home. Eveline's motivation to escape her abusive household is driven more by her longing for freedom than her affection for Frank. The narrator describes Eveline's conflict: "She would not be treated as her mother had been" (Joyce). This statement portrays that Eveline wants agency, equal rights, and freedom, which her mother did not have. Eveline wants to be treated with respect and not be scared by misogynistic acts of violence at the hands of men like her father and lover, Frank. Despite Eveline's violent upbringing and the constraints of her social context, her persistent desire for a different life reflects her resilience and determination to overcome her traumatic family relationships and pursue freedom.

The following paragraphs will explore the themes of patriarchy, agency, and identity in more detail by analyzing Eveline's relationship with her father and Frank.

While understanding why Eveline would not return to her abusive home clarifies one side of this crisis, it is also necessary to consider why she would not leave Dublin with Frank. Doing so will reveal how Eveline's motivations for leaving Ireland arise from her need for respect and agency over her own life and not from her love towards Frank. Therefore, Frank assumes the role of a catalyst for her true desire for respect and agency because the patriarchal upbringing of Eveline has conditioned her into believing that the only way she can attain freedom from her abusive father is through her lover Frank. In terms of her abusive family relationship, O'Brien argues that Joyce explores the themes of gender identity and postcolonialism through the character of Eveline and her relationship with her father (205). In this sense, Eveline metaphorically represents all marginalized women in Dublin. O'Brien argues that Eveline's father represents a patriarchal and colonialist figure who controls Eveline's life and identity. Eveline's struggle to break free from this control reflects more significant societal issues related to gender and colonialism (208). My arguments regarding Eveline's oppression align with O'Brien's discussion of the subaltern and the silencing of marginalized voices, particularly those of women in postcolonial societies (211).

Eveline's realization of her true desires causes an identity crisis that leads to her paralysis, suggesting that she has come to recognize the possibility of living a life of her choosing. The life she dreams of transcends her relationships with Frank and her father. She demonstrates her agency and resilience through paralysis. Frank is defined by his occupation, which suggests he has a clear sense of identity and purpose in life, while Eveline is gender-defined, indicating that societal expectations of women limit her (O'Brien 210). This conflict suggests she has limited agency because she is defined and restricted by the expectations imposed on her gender. These expectations further limit her desires, such as her desire for freedom. Therefore, eloping with Frank is the only rational way to project her desire for freedom. The ultimate realization that she does not require Frank to start a new life away from her father triggers an identity crisis because being independent goes against everything she has been taught since birth. These realizations and identity crises lead to her paralysis, and by staying immobile, she seizes agency over her life.

Given Eveline's upbringing in a misogynistic environment, her inclination to use Frank to achieve freedom from her father's abuse becomes understandable. The narrator provides us with a deeper understanding of Eveline's feelings when a memory of her mother triggers her paralysis, "She stood up in an impulse of terror. Escape! She must escape! Frank would save her. He would give her life, perhaps love, too. But she wanted to live. Why should she be unhappy? She had a right to happiness. Frank would take her in

his arms and fold her in his arms. He would save her” (Joyce). These statements reveal Eveline’s inner turmoil as she wrestles with her fears and desires. She is terrified by the prospect of staying in Dublin and continuing to live a joyless existence. Her desire for escape is so strong that she believes Frank, a man she barely knows, can provide her with a better life. She believes he can save her, not only by offering her love but also by freeing her from her oppressive circumstances. Eveline’s desire for freedom is intertwined with her desire for happiness. She believes she has a right to be happy and is willing to take a chance on Frank to find it. She yearns to be folded in his arms, to feel safe and loved, and to escape her current life of pain and misery. Her reaction toward the climax proves that she realizes this complex inconsistency in her desire for Frank, which is not for love but for independence. Therefore, this realization of her true desires throws her into a crisis of identity which manifests as paralysis.

In light of these findings, it is clear that Eveline’s struggle for agency and independence reflects more significant societal issues related to gender and colonialism. Her desires for freedom and happiness are intertwined, and her realization of these desires leads to a crisis of identity and paralysis. Furthermore, the conflict between Frank’s clear sense of purpose and identity as defined by his occupation and Eveline’s gender-defined identity further illustrates the limitations placed on women by societal expectations.

Ultimately, “Eveline” serves as a compelling narrative encapsulating proto-feminist ideals and it provides us with a glimpse into the resilience of oppressed women in Dublin. The eventual realization of Eveline’s seeming lack of agency paradoxically functions as a subtle form of showcasing agency. Although she suffers at home, Eveline’s desire for freedom is never thwarted and it is enlivened by Frank. However, the story’s ambiguous ending gives us the responsibility of rooting for Eveline to choose herself over her family or Frank and eliminate the regressive sentiment that women have to end up with a man. A further study of Eveline’s resistance could shed light on how oppressed women navigate their circumstances, potentially leading to a better understanding of the implications of patriarchal oppression on women’s lives.

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