EVELINE by James Joyce

Summary:

The story begins with Eveline, a young woman from Dublin, Ireland, who is looking out of the window looking at the street at dusk, and thinking about her life. The smell of dust from the heavy cotton curtains permeates her thoughts. She reflects on her life, beginning with her childhood. She was about to leave her home and start a new life in Buenos Aires with her boyfriend, Frank. But now, thoughts of her life keep her stuck where she is. Most of the action of the story takes place inside Eveline's mind as she tries to resolve the conflict between her duty to her family (which means: self-sacrifice) and her only chance to find true love and happiness (self-fulfilment) by marrying Frank.

On the one hand, we are told about her unhappy, miserable childhood and terrible family life with a cruel and violent father. Her mother and her favorite brother both died, and Eveline has the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings and taking care of the house, as she promised her dying mother she would do.

On the other hand, Frank's proposal to sail away with him to Beunos Aires would give her the chance to escape her unhappy life. Frank's life is the complete opposite of Eveline's. He is vital and active, kind, manly and open-hearted; whereas she is passive and "dead". Frank represents her only chance of happiness. He is her saviour. He offers her the hope of a new beginning and endless love in a new country. Frank is a mysterious character and the reader is not told much about him.

But the influence of the past is stronger on Eveline than that of the future. Having never been loved or valued for herself, Eveline does not truly believe in her right to happiness and self-fulfillment. So in the end, her sense of duty wins the inner battle she has. She remains in Dublin, simply because she lacks the will to make an active decision of her own. Her fate has been decided for her.

The final scene shows Frank pleading with Eveline on the deck of the ship to go with him. But she grips the iron railing tightly and gives him "no sign of love, of farewell or recognition". At the last moment before the ship sails, Frank rushes onto it, leaving Eveline standing there "passive" like "a helpless animal". At 19, life for Eveline is over.
Analysis:

Theme: Paralysis

Critics have noted that one of the most important themes in *Dubliners* is the tendency for its characters to be frozen in a state of psychological and spiritual arrest, or "paralysis." As shown in the collection, Dublin suffers from harsh social conditions, the lack of moral hope, and spiritual emptiness, which combine to stop any positive change in many of its characters. Eveline is an example of this. She is doomed and completely immobile.

Theme: Physical and Emotional abuse

On either side of Eveline's major life decision about whether to leave her home is a suspect and potentially abusive man. She must choose one of them. Her inability to make a different decision is partly due to what is probably the result of years of psychological and physical abuse, Eveline pictures both of these men as her potential protector. She seems to be searching for a tender father figure; somewhat illogically, she tries to balance her father's increasing capacity for violence by remembering three random acts of gentleness. On the other hand, she pictures Frank in a similar way, although the illusion to going to Beunos Aires conjures up a loose life-style, one in which she would drown, and one cannot but wonder what kind of life she will actually have with a man like Frank.

Theme: Rejection

When Eveline meets Frank at the station and they are set to board the ship, Eveline suddenly decides she cannot leave with Frank, because "he would drown her" in "all the seas of the world" (51). But Eveline's rejection of Frank is not just a rejection of love, but also a rejection of a new life abroad and escape from her hard life at home. And water, as the practical method of escape, as well as a symbol of both rejuvenation and emotional vitality, functions in a multi-faceted way to show all that Eveline loses through her fear and lack of courage. By not plunging into those "seas of the world that tumble[d] about her heart" (51), Eveline forsakes escape, life, and love for the past, duty, and death.

Eveline also rejects love and emotional vitality as represented by "the seas of the world" (51). When she contemplates leaving with Frank, Eveline thinks of home as providing "shelter and food" and the companionship of "those she had known all her life" (47); not once does she think of leaving behind those who love her. Eveline knows her father and siblings depend on her and need her but she doesn't feel loved. But "Frank was very kind, manly, open- hearted" (48) and after the "excitement" of being courted she "had begun to like him" (49). She knows Frank can give her a new life, and "perhaps love, too"
and "she had a right to happiness" (50). Yet Eveline is not certain she will find love with Frank, just as she doesn't know what kind of life they will have together. The adult world of desire, longing, fulfillment, and heartbreak roil about in "the seas of the world that tumbled about her heart" (51) and this unknown world of emotional vitality and power is as frightening to Eveline as the physical reality of sailing halfway round the world. In this realm she might drown, yes, but she might just as likely learn to swim. Yet by declining "to test the waters" Eveline condemns herself to a life without emotional fulfillment at all. In the rite of passage from adolescence into adulthood, Eveline feels only that the transformative experience will "drown" her old self and she is unable to adequately imagine a new self emerging from the waves.

Theme: Escape

Like many of the stories in Dubliners, moving eastward in "Eveline" is associated with new life. But for Eveline, sailing eastward with Frank is as much an escape as a promise of something better. From the story's opening, she is passive and tired (46) and remembers old neighbors like "the Waters" who have since escaped east "to England" (47). She looks forward to "going... away like the others" (47). She admits she will not be missed at her job (47) and at nineteen, without the former protection of her older brothers, she is beginning to feel "herself in danger of her father's violence" (48). Her father takes what little money she earns and she is in charge of her two younger siblings as well (48).

The sound of a street organ playing an Italian tune is both a call to her from the East across the water and a reminder of her mother's death. She cannot end up like her mother, "living a life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness" and her only recourse is to "escape" with Frank; "He would save her" (50) if she goes with him east across the seas. When she fails to go with Frank, Eveline indeed succumbs to the prospect of an imprisoning life like her mother's.

Theme: New Possibilities

Water also signifies rejuvenation, the possibilities of a new life. In contrast to her present life full of "hard work-a hard life," Eveline looks forward to exploring "another life with Frank" (48) and a new her across the seas (49). Compared to re-living her dead mother's life, Eveline has a chance to live her own life and begin something with Frank that is brand new, open-ended, and unstamped by the impressions of the past. Though she can hardly imagine what her new life might be like, Eveline knows it will be different to the one mapped out for her by her father. But perhaps it is the very uncertainty about her life with Frank that finally terrifies her. Known duty and hardship is finally preferable to unknown possibility, and as Frank draws her into the "seas of the world," she feels at last that "it was impossible" (51). One cannot begin
a new life unless one leaves behind the old, and "the seas" of rebirth are too much for her. Unable to make that leap of faith, she remains behind, "passive, like a helpless animal" (51).

**Style:**

**Epiphany**

This is the use of a character's brief realization of truth and clarity, usually signaling a new direction and understanding of the world. Eveline experiences an "epiphany" after she remembers her mother's dying words "Derevaun Seraun" and makes the ecstatic resolution to escape to a new life, although she is unable to follow a new course when the time comes.

Stream of consciousness

Thoughts or a flowing of ideas

The meaning of the name:
A free man – German –Frank
Light – Celtic –Eveline

Eveline's mother's final words before she dies are: "**Derevaun Seraun**: What does this mean? There are a few interpretations: The end of pleasure is pain. The end of freedom. The end is pain.

What James Joyce said about writing Eveline:

"My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to be the centre of paralysis.....I have written in for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness...."

About James Joyce's stories:

The stories contain no real plot to speak of, little action, and certainly no climax or resolution of a typical sort – aspects which shocked and baffled many of his contemporaries.