

• LITERATURE

A Summary and Analysis of James Joyce's 'Eveline'

Aclose reading of Joyce's story by Dr Oliver Tearle

'Eveline' is one of the shortest stories that make up [James Joyce](#)'s collection *Dubliners* (1914), a volume that was not an initial commercial success (it sold just 379 copies in its first year of publication, and 120 of those were bought by Joyce himself). Yet *Dubliners* redefined the short story and is now viewed as a classic work of modernist fiction, with each of its fifteen short stories repaying [close analysis](#). 'Eveline' focuses on a young Irish woman of nineteen years of age, who plans to leave her abusive father and poverty-stricken existence in Ireland, and seek out a new, better life for herself and her lover Frank in Buenos Aires. You can read 'Eveline' [here](#).

First, a brief summary of 'Eveline'. Eveline is a young woman living in Dublin with her father. Her mother is dead. Dreaming of a better life beyond the shores of Ireland, Eveline plans to elope with Frank, a sailor who is her secret lover (Eveline's father having forbade Eveline to see Frank after the two men fell out), and start a new life in Argentina. With her mother gone, Eveline is responsible for the day-to-day running of the household: her father is drunk and only reluctantly tips up his share of the weekly housekeeping money, and her brother Harry is busy working and is away a lot on business (another brother, Ernest, has died).

Eveline herself keeps down a job working in a shop. On Saturday nights, when she asks her father for some money, he tends to unleash a tirade of verbal abuse, and is often drunk. When he eventually hands over his housekeeping money, Eveline has to go to the shops and buy the food for the Sunday dinner at the last minute. Eveline is tired of this life, and so she and Frank book onto a ship leaving for Argentina. But as she is just about to board the ship, Eveline suffers a failure of resolve, and cannot go through with it. She wordlessly turns round and goes home, leaving Frank to board the ship alone.



Like many stories in *Dubliners*, 'Eveline'

explores the relationship between the past and the future by examining a single person's attitude to their life in Dublin. Joyce was interested in this relationship, and believed that Ireland – which often had a habit of nostalgically looking backwards and holding onto the past – needed to progress and strive to bring itself up to date. In contrast to those writers and artists such as W. B. Yeats who embraced the 'Celtic Twilight' – a mythical, traditional view of Ireland as a land of faery and history – Joyce wanted to see Ireland bring itself into the modern world.

In many ways, Eveline typifies the difficulties faced by many Dubliners at the time. Joyce depicts her current existence as dull, uninspiring, even oppressive, with her abusive father highlighting the idea that the older generation needs to be cast off if young Ireland is to forge itself into a new nation. Even the good aspects of the old Ireland, such as Eveline's mother and her older brother Ernest, are dead and gone. The promise of a new start in a new country (in a city that means literally 'good air') seems like the best way to shake off the musty old air of Ireland:

She was about to explore another life with Frank. Frank was very kind, manly, open-hearted. She was to go away with him by the night-boat to be his wife and to live with him in Buenos Aires where he had a home waiting for her.

And yet when it comes to crunch time, to the moment when she must board the boat, Eveline is unable to do so, and instead clings to the barrier as though literally clinging to old Ireland and the past which is dead and gone but which she cannot leave behind. She cannot let go of the past, as the early sections of the story reveal:

The man out of the last house passed on his way home; she heard his footsteps clacking along the concrete pavement and afterwards crunching on the cinder path before the new red houses. One time there used to be a field there in which they used to play every evening with other people's children. Then a man from Belfast bought the field and built houses in it – not like their little brown houses but bright brick houses with shining roofs. The children of the avenue used to play together in that field – the Devines, the Waters, the Dunns, little Keogh the cripple, she and her brothers and sisters. Ernest, however, never played: he was too grown up. Her father used often to hunt them in out of the field with his blackthorn stick; but usually little Keogh used to keep nix and call out when he saw her father coming. Still they seemed to have been rather happy then. Her father was not so bad then; and besides, her mother was alive. That was a long

time ago; she and 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. Everything changes. Now she was going to go away like the others, to leave her home.

‘That was a long time ago’, and everything has changed, yet Eveline sits and reminisces about this happy time from her childhood. And this brings us to one of the most difficult aspects of Joyce’s story to analyse and pin down. Is it this nostalgia for old Ireland – embodied by her childhood memories – that prevents her from emigrating with Frank? Perhaps. The masterstroke on Joyce’s part is refraining from telling us precisely *what* makes Eveline stay in Dublin at the end of the story. Is it filial duty to her father and brother? Or is it a nostalgic attachment to Ireland, and the happy memories that it carries for her, even though most of the people who shared those memories with her have either emigrated (*back to* England, revealingly) or have died?

One of the key words in Joyce’s *Dubliners* is ‘paralysis’: people feel immobilised, unable to move or progress, trapped in their own lives. This, Joyce believed, is what Dublin – and, indeed, much of Ireland – was like as a whole: paralysed. ‘Eveline’ offers in a little snapshot an example of how deeply such paralysis could run, even leading a young woman to forgo the chance of a new start in favour of remaining in an abusive, dead-end life.

If you found this analysis of Joyce’s ‘Eveline’ interesting, check out our [commentary on Joyce’s ‘An Encounter’](#), our [thoughts on Joyce’s ‘A Painful Case’](#), our [discussion of Joyce’s story ‘Clay’](#), and our [summary of his classic story ‘The Sisters’](#). You might also enjoy our [thoughts on Kate Chopin’s short modernist story, ‘The Story of an Hour’](#).

We’ve offered some [tips for writing a brilliant English Literature essay here](#).

The author of this article, Dr Oliver Tearle, is a literary critic and lecturer in English at Loughborough University. He is the author of, among others, [The Secret Library: A Book-Lovers’ Journey Through Curiosities of History](#) and [The Great War, The Waste Land and the Modernist Long Poem](#).

Image: Hardwicke Street, Dublin in c. 1912, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).