

LITERATURE

A Summary and Analysis of James Joyce's 'An Encounter'

Acommentary on one of Joyce's *Dubliners* stories

'An Encounter' is one of the early stories in James Joyce's *Dubliners*, the 1914 collection of short stories which is now regarded as one of the landmark texts of modernist literature. At the time, sales were poor, with just 379 copies being sold in the first year (famously, 120 of these were bought by Joyce himself). 'An Encounter' is not one of the best-known stories in the collection, but like many of the short stories that make up *Dubliners* the story shows Joyce addressing taboo issues, as well as the boredom and disappointment of everyday life, with consummate stylistic skill and attention to detail. You can read 'An Encounter' [here](#).

'An Encounter', in summary, is narrated by a man who is recalling an episode from his childhood, and specifically his schooldays in Dublin. The boy recounts how one of his schoolfriends, Leo Dillon, introduced him and a number of other boys to the adventure and excitement of the Wild West, and how they would play cowboys and Indians together. However, the narrator yearned for real adventure, and, realising that you have to go out and find it (rather than sitting at home and waiting for adventure to come to you), he and a couple of school friends, Leo Dillon and a boy named Mahony, decide to play truant for a day ('miching', as they call it), pretending to be ill and sacking off school. Leo Dillon (or 'Fatty', as Mahony unflatteringly refers to him) gets cold feet and bails on them, but Mahony and the narrator are quite pleased about that: each of the three of them had stumped up sixpence to pay for food and other provisions for their day

off, and now they have a shilling and sixpence to spend between two of them rather than between three.

The two boys spend the morning wandering around Dublin, and cross the river Liffey on the ferry. They buy some biscuits and chocolate to eat, and some raspberry lemonade to drink. Mahony, armed with his catapult which he wants to use to attack birds, chases a cat down an alley. They then wander into a field where they meet a suspicious old man who strikes up a conversation with them. The boys are at first bored by the old man's small talk. He asks them if they read books and tells them he has all of the books by Sir Walter Scott and Sir



Edward Bulwer-Lytton at home.

The narrator pretends to have read them, which impresses the man. The man says that Mahony seems to be more into games than books. He then asks them if they have any sweethearts, and Mahony replies that he has three girls, while the narrator says he has none.

The old man then starts talking about young girls at great length, before getting up and going to do something nearby (probably, although it is never stated, pleasuring himself), much to the boys' shock. The narrator and Mahony resolve to give false names, Murphy and Smith, if the man asks for their names. When the man returns to the boys, he talks of how wayward boys should be disciplined by being whipped, while Mahony goes chasing after the cat again and the narrator is left talking to the man. Going back on his earlier liberal sentiments, the man says that if any boy ever expresses any interest in girls, he should be whipped for it. Unsettled by this talk, the narrator

gets up and leaves the man, calling out for Mahony (as the false name 'Murphy') to come after him. The narrator confides that he was relieved to get away from the man with Mahony safely in tow, even though he had always despised Mahony a little.

Joyce's title, 'An Encounter', obviously refers to the conversation the two boys have with the older man towards the end of the story. But what kind of an encounter is it? It's difficult to analyse or pin down, because, in true modernist fashion, Joyce offers us only hints and insinuations, gaps and silences, rather than explicit description of what goes on. Partly, as in 'The Sisters', this is because the narrator was a young boy at the time of the events described, and didn't have an adult's knowledge of the real world.

But as with that earlier story, Joyce offers several hints that there is something very unsavoury about the old man with a moustache who starts talking to the boys. First, the fact that when he mentions the books of Lytton, he remarks that 'there were some of Lord Lytton's works which boys couldn't read.' Not because they are too difficult for a boy to understand, but because they address more adult themes (not just sex but violence and the macabre: it's also worth noting that Lytton was associated with scandal, partly for having his wife locked away for insanity when she heckled him at a political event, and partly for having an affair with Byron's old mistress, Lady Caroline Lamb). Second, that the boy seems very interested in the love lives of the two boys (or even premature sex lives? How old are they, exactly?). Third, and most damningly, there is the behaviour of the man when he leaves the boys for a few moments and, it is implied, touches himself nearby (in some analyses and interpretations of 'An Encounter', critics suggest the man masturbates before he returns to them).

And then there is the way the old man talked about girls to the two boys:

His attitude on this point struck me as strangely liberal in a man of his age. In my heart I thought that what he said about boys and sweethearts was reasonable. But I disliked the words in his mouth and I wondered why he shivered once or twice as if he feared something or felt a sudden chill. As he proceeded I noticed that his accent was good. He began to speak to us about girls, saying what nice soft hair they had and how soft their hands were and how all girls were not so good as they seemed to be if one only knew. There was nothing he liked, he said, so much as looking at a nice young girl, at her nice white hands and her beautiful soft hair.

The old man seems almost to be lost in his own thoughts. Is he recollecting his own lost youth, and remembering ([as the narrator of 'Araby' does](#)) what it was like to feel the powerful pangs of first love? Not quite: he seems to dwell with a little too much detail on the softness of young girls. The next words of the narrator are suggestive, if not quite outright revealing:

He gave me the impression that he was repeating something which he had learned by heart or that, magnetised by some words of his own speech, his mind was slowly circling round and round in the same orbit. At times he spoke as if he were simply alluding to some fact that everybody knew, and at times he lowered his voice and spoke mysteriously as if he were telling us something secret which he did not wish others to overhear.

This can be analysed – albeit tentatively – as the behaviour of a man setting out to ‘groom’ young boys. The fact that the narrator picks up on the script-like speech of the old man, as if the man is trying out his best lines on the boys in the hopes of impressing them, showing himself to be a kindred spirit, implies as much. But the narrator, being only a young boy, was unable to grasp this for sure: he can’t swear he knows what the man’s intentions were.

‘An Encounter’ is another example of James Joyce’s ability to suggest so much without having to be explicit. Through using the elliptical methods of modernist literature, some examples of which we’ve analysed above, he explores how childhood and adolescence often present us with moments whose full meaning and import pass us by, and can only be apprehended and analysed more definitely once we reach adulthood.

Eveline (short story)

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For the township in the U.S., see [Eveline Township, Michigan](#).

"Eveline"	
Author	James Joyce
Country	Ireland
Language	English
Genre(s)	short story
Published in	Irish Homestead
Publication type	Journal
Media type	Print
Publication date	1904
Preceded by	"Araby"
Followed by	"After the Race"

"**Eveline**" is a [short story](#) by the Irish writer [James Joyce](#). It was first published in 1904 by the journal [Irish Homestead](#)^[1] and later featured in his 1914 collection of short stories [Dubliners](#).



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The story[\[edit\]](#)

A young woman, Eveline, of about nineteen years of age sits by her window, waiting to leave home. She muses on the aspects of her life that are driving her away, while "in her nostrils was the odor of dusty [cretonne](#)". Her mother has died as has her older brother Ernest. Her remaining brother, Harry, is on the road "in the church decorating business". She fears that her father will beat her as he used to beat her brothers and she has little loyalty for her sales job. She has fallen for a sailor named Frank who promises to take her with him to [Buenos Aires](#). Before leaving to meet Frank, she hears an [organ grinder](#) outside, which reminds her of a melody that played on an organ on the day her mother died and the promise she made to her mother to look after the home. At the dock where she and Frank are ready to embark on a ship together, Eveline is deeply conflicted and makes the painful decision not to leave with him. Nonetheless, her face registers no emotion at all.^[2]

Like other tales in *Dubliners*, such as "[Araby](#)", "Eveline" features a circular journey, where a character decides to go back to where their journey began and where the result of their journey is disappointment and reluctance to travel.^[*citation needed*]

External links[\[edit\]](#)

- [Full text](#)

References[\[edit\]](#)

- ↑ Uphaus, Maxwell (2014). "An Unworkable Compound: Ireland and Empire in "Eveline"". *Modern Fiction Studies*. **60** (1).
- ↑ http://www.online-literature.com/james_joyce/959/

External links[\[edit\]](#)

-  [Eveline](#) public domain audiobook at [LibriVox](#)

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	Short stories	<div> <div><i>Dubliners</i> (1914, written 1904–07)</div> <div>"<i>The Sisters</i>"</div> <div>"<i>Eveline</i>"</div> <div>"<i>After the Race</i>"</div> <div>"<i>An Encounter</i>"</div> <div>"<i>Araby</i>"</div> <div>"<i>The Boarding House</i>"</div> <div>"<i>Counterparts</i>"</div> <div>"<i>Clay</i>"</div> <div>"<i>A Painful Case</i>"</div> <div>"<i>Ivy Day in the Committee Room</i>"</div> <div>"<i>A Mother</i>"</div> <div>"<i>Two Gallants</i>"</div> <div>"<i>A Little Cloud</i>"</div> <div>"<i>Grace</i>"</div> <div>"<i>The Dead</i>"</div> </div>
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	Lucia Joyce (daughter)
	John Stanislaus Joyce (father)
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