James Joyce (1882-1941)

Eveline (1914)

She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. Her head was leaned

against the window curtains and in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne. She was

tired.

Few people passed. 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.

Home! She looked round the room, reviewing all its familiar objects which she had

dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from.

Perhaps she would never see again those familiar objects from which she had never dreamed

of being divided. And yet during all those years she had never found out the name of the

priest whose yellowing photograph hung on the wall above the broken harmonium beside the

coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque. He had been a

school friend of her father. Whenever he showed the photograph to a visitor her father used

to pass it with a casual word:

“He is in Melbourne now.”

She had consented to go away, to leave her home. Was that wise? She tried to weigh

each side of the question. In her home anyway she had shelter and food; she had those whom

she had known all her life about her. Of course she had to work hard, both in the house and at

business. What would they say of her in the Stores when they found out that she had run

away with a fellow? Say she was a fool, perhaps; and her place would be filled up by

advertisement. Miss Gavan would be glad. She had always had an edge on her, especially

whenever there were people listening.

“Miss Hill, don't you see these ladies are waiting?”

“Look lively, Miss Hill, please.”

She would not cry many tears at leaving the Stores.

But in her new home, in a distant unknown country, it would not be like that. Then

she would be married—she, Eveline. People would treat her with respect then. She would not

be treated as her mother had been. Even now, though she was over nineteen, she sometimes

felt herself in danger of her father's violence. She knew it was that that had given her the

palpitations. When they were growing up he had never gone for her like he used to go for

Harry and Ernest, because she was a girl; but latterly he had begun to threaten her and say

what he would do to her only for her dead mother's sake. And now she had nobody to protect

her. Ernest was dead and Harry, who was in the church decorating business, was nearly

always down somewhere in the country. Besides, the invariable squabble for money on

Saturday nights had begun to weary her unspeakably. She always gave her entire wages—

seven shillings—and Harry always sent up what he could but the trouble was to get any

money from her father. He said she used to squander the money, that she had no head, that he

wasn't going to give her his hard-earned money to throw about the streets, and much more,

for he was usually fairly bad on Saturday night. In the end he would give her the money and

ask her had she any intention of buying Sunday's dinner. Then she had to rush out as quickly

as she could and do her marketing, holding her black leather purse tightly in her hand as she

elbowed her way through the crowds and returning home late under her load of provisions.

She had hard work to keep the house together and to see that the two young children who had

been left to hr charge went to school regularly and got their meals regularly. It was hard

work—a hard life—but now that she was about to leave it she did not find it a wholly

undesirable life.

She was about to explore another life with Frank. Frank was very kind, manly, openhearted.

She was to go away with him by the night-boat to be his wife and to live with him in

Buenos Ayres where he had a home waiting for her. How well she remembered the first time

she had seen him; he was lodging in a house on the main road where she used to visit. It

seemed a few weeks ago. He was standing at the gate, his peaked cap pushed back on his

head and his hair tumbled forward over a face of bronze. Then they had come to know each

other. He used to meet her outside the Stores every evening and see her home. He took her to

see The Bohemian Girl and she felt elated as she sat in an unaccustomed part of the theatre

with him. He was awfully fond of music and sang a little. People knew that they were

courting and, when he sang about the lass that loves a sailor, she always felt pleasantly

confused. He used to call her Poppens out of fun. First of all it had been an excitement for

her to have a fellow and then she had begun to like him. He had tales of distant countries. He

had started as a deck boy at a pound a month on a ship of the Allan Line going out to

Canada. He told her the names of the ships he had been on and the names of the different

services. He had sailed through the Straits of Magellan and he told her stories of the terrible

Patagonians. He had fallen on his feet in Buenos Ayres, he said, and had come over to the

old country just for a holiday. Of course, her father had found out the affair and had

forbidden her to have anything to say to him.

“I know these sailor chaps,” he said.

One day he had quarrelled with Frank and after that she had to meet her lover

secretly.

The evening deepened in the avenue. The white of two letters in her lap grew

indistinct. One was to Harry; the other was to her father. Ernest had been her favourite but

she liked Harry too. Her father was becoming old lately, she noticed; he would miss her.

Sometimes he could be very nice. Not long before, when she had been laid up for a day, he

had read her out a ghost story and made toast for her at the fire. Another day, when their

mother was alive, they had all gone for a picnic to the Hill of Howth. She remembered her

father putting on her mother’s bonnet to make the children laugh.

Her time was running out but she continued to sit by the window, leaning her head

against the window curtain, inhaling the odour of dusty cretonne. Down far in the avenue she

could hear a street organ playing. She knew the air. Strange that it should come that very

night to remind her of the promise to her mother, her promise to keep the home together as

long as she could. She remembered the last night of her mother's illness; she was again in the

close dark room at the other side of the hall and outside she heard a melancholy air of Italy.

The organ-player had been ordered to go away and given sixpence. She remembered her

father strutting back into the sickroom saying:

“Damned Italians! coming over here!”

As she mused the pitiful vision of her mother's life laid its spell on the very quick of

her being—that life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness. She trembled as she

heard again her mother's voice saying constantly with foolish insistence:

“Derevaun Seraun! Derevaun Seraun!”

She stood up in a sudden 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, fold her in his

arms. He would save her.

She stood among the swaying crowd in the station at the North Wall. He held her

hand and she knew that he was speaking to her, saying something about the passage over and

over again. The station was full of soldiers with brown baggages. Through the wide doors of

the sheds she caught a glimpse of the black mass of the boat, lying in beside the quay wall,

with illumined portholes. She answered nothing. She felt her cheek pale and cold and, out of

a maze of distress, she prayed to God to direct her, to show her what was her duty. The boat

blew a long mournful whistle into the mist. If she went, tomorrow she would be on the sea

with Frank, steaming towards Buenos Ayres. Their passage had been booked. Could she still

draw back after all he had done for her? Her distress awoke a nausea in her body and she

kept moving her lips in silent fervent prayer.

A bell clanged upon her heart. She felt him seize her hand:

“Come!”

All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he

would drown her. She gripped with both hands at the iron railing.

“Come!”

No! No! No! It was impossible. Her hands clutched the iron in frenzy. Amid the seas

she sent a cry of anguish.

“Eveline! Evvy!”

He rushed beyond the barrier and called to her to follow. He was shouted at to go on

but he still called to her. She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her

eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition.

Write summary and analysis of passage

1. Why did Eveline want to leave her home? List THREE reasons
2. Eveline's home is full of dust. What does it symbolize?
3. What made Eveline stay in Dublin?