

Searching Between the Lines:

Ambiguity, Paralysis and Revisionist Readings of
Joyce's "Eveline"

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Chris Wieczorek's "Searching Between the Lines: Ambiguity, Paralysis and Revisionist Readings of Joyce's Eveline" is an exemplary research essay that, as its title suggests, spells out its thesis in its methodology, taking the reader step by logical step through the act and history of interpreting one of the most critically acclaimed and debated stories in James Joyce's *Dubliners*. It deftly and articulately summarizes a wide range of interpretations, both traditional and revisionist, before coming up the middle to turn the light on reader response. In a collection that famously focusses on the paralysis that afflicts turn-of-the-century Irish society, readers have traditionally focussed on Eveline's failures, while historicist and revisionary critics have highlighted the failures of Frank, her suspiciously glib paramour. After crisply summarizing these interpretations, Wieczorek draws attention to their gaps, and argues that the story is actually about failures in the reader, who is "repeatedly forced to question, and then re-evaluate, our judgements about Eveline's decision." Persuasive, immaculately structured and accessibly written, this essay seems to enjoy doing what we do in English, and I think its readers will agree.

—Dr. Judith Thompson

James Joyce's "Eveline" tells of its namesake protagonist's stagnant life in Dublin, and her subsequent paralysis when faced with a decision to either yoke herself to a life of unpromising domesticity or to instead

secretly elope to Buenos Aires. Such an orthodox reading of the text – seeing Eveline as a casualty of dead Irish society, unable to flee but yet also unwilling to stay – has been decried as “stubbornly conventional” by revisionist critics (Sigler 185). This paper largely circumvents the traditional paralytic interpretation of the text, instead offering a summation of both the orthodox and revisionist interpretations, before going on to argue that neither of these readings accurately captures the essence of Eveline’s dilemma. Although there is both merit to the traditional and the revisionist works done by respective critics, the central paralysis of the story lies not with Eveline’s inability to make a decision, but rather with the reader’s failure to accurately evaluate the decision that Eveline has made.

While traditional interpretations of “Eveline” are by this point in time largely universal, it is helpful to briefly summarize their argumentation so that the interpretation may be compared with those in the revisionist camp. Orthodox critics have argued that the “mode of sensibility” that “Eveline” presents furthers the “core theme of paralysis in the story” (Pirnajmuddin & Teymoortash 36). The central dilemma results when Eveline must decide “whether to keep her promise to Frank [...] or to keep her promise to her dead mother” (36). What transpires is Eveline’s introspective battle, created by two characters that never actually appear before the reader. Eveline must confirm her allegiance to one of them, but the two are mutually exclusive. As Lee Spinks argues, the protagonist is “suspended between identities and role,” with her life

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failing to contain more than a “passive watchfulness, enervation and a nameless sense of threat” (50). Crucial to the orthodox interpretation is Spinks’ assertion that Eveline is “suspended”, or unable to act when faced with the dilemma. Although she does ultimately choose to stay at home, this is not portrayed as her own decision. Eveline seems to have lost the idea of agency and cannot act for herself. She vacillates wildly between hoping that “people would treat her differently” once she has eloped with Frank (Joyce 2223) and worrying that her father – for which there is substantial textual evidence to indicate that he has abused Eveline – is “becoming old lately” and “will miss her” (2224). At its core, the orthodox reading is almost entirely about Eveline and her inability to decide. Pirnajmuddin and Teymoortash argue that Eveline “*leans on her past,*”^{*} and consequently she “cannot break free of it” (37). She resigns herself to the past that she cannot leave, returning to a familiar but quotidian life in Dublin.

What is largely ignored in the orthodox reading, however, is that Eveline does make a decision about her future. Central to traditional interpretations is what is presumed to be the binary nature of the text – Eveline can either choose life in Dublin, or love and romance with Frank. Yet, the notion of love is largely untouched in “Eveline”; studying the relationship between Frank and Eveline, the reader only gleans such trivialities as “he was awfully fond of music” (Joyce 2224). When Eveline seems to

* Italics here are from the authors.

finally commit to the idea of eloping with Frank, it is because he would “save her” from a life of drudgery (2224), and will “give her life, perhaps love, too” (2224). Joyce crucially positions the first clause, that of giving Eveline “life”, before the thought of “love”. The inclusion of “perhaps” also aids our understanding of Eveline’s decision. She is not leaving because she loves Frank, as his ability to provide her with love is dubious at best. Instead, she chooses to go because of Frank’s potential to give her “life” – a new start. Even at the docks, when indecision once again compromises her ability to think rationally, Eveline prays to God “to show her what was her duty” (2225). Notably, Eveline asks not for God to guide her to true love, instead referring to duty, an idea which has already been referenced in the promise that was made to her mother to “keep the home together for as long as she could” (2224). Eveline is praying for an answer that she already knows: she must keep the remnants of her family together. The final line, of giving Frank “no sign of love or farewell or recognition” is ambiguous, and has been used by critics in a multitude of different arguments. It is strongly suggested, however, that Eveline has in fact made a decision – a decision to remain at home. Eveline’s central dilemma, framed as choosing her family or Frank’s love, is incorrect. It is about choosing either to stay with her family or to run away from them. Eveline quite clearly chooses the former.

It was with Hugh Kenner, however, that a credible revisionist reading of “Eveline” truly emerged. Central to Kenner’s argument is his reinterpretation of the character of

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Frank; rather than offering a superficial reading of what seems to be an archetypal character, Kenner instead argues that Frank has a narrative of his own – a narrative, primarily, of deception (20). Hinging his argument almost entirely on the weight of two commas in one sentence – “he had fallen on his feet in Buenos Aries [comma] he said [comma] and had come over to the old country just for a holiday (20) – Kenner proceeds to convincingly argue that Eveline is not simply quoting Frank in this passage, deducing instead that Frank has been quoting as well from “the kind of fiction Eveline will believe, the fiction in which ready lads ‘fall on their feet’” (20). He claims to have a “home waiting for [Eveline]” in Buenos Aries (Joyce 2223), but this is suspicious at best. The promise of a better life in a far away land is almost appallingly cliché when the unavoidable cynical undertones of *Dubliners* are considered; even more crucially, this promise is entirely unverifiable by either Eveline or the reader. Ambitious revisionists since Kenner have gone on to suggest that “‘going to Buenos Aires’ was recognised as code for being sold into prostitution” (Kreshner 305); this claim, however, is irresponsible given the lack of support from the text. Instead, as Frank “pushed back on his head and his hair tumbled forward over a face of bronze” (Joyce 2223), one senses that this is a hyper-romanticized version of the actual events. Verisimilitude may exist in other parts of the story, but it is certainly not found in “a face of bronze”, given that Frank has ostensibly spent at least several months courting Eveline in dreary Ireland. Whereas

orthodox critics reduce “Eveline” down to a narrative about a girl who cannot make a decision, Kenner opines that the hidden story of “Eveline” is the story of Frank, “a bonder with a glib line, who tried to pick himself up a piece of skirt” (21). A reduction of narratives does not exist in this reading, rather, a duplicity emerges. On the one hand, the ambiguity of Eveline’s own personal decision is certainly a factor, however one still must consider, “the patter of an experienced seducer” (Kenner 21). This is also a story with a second, even more sinister narrative than an initial reading would suggest.

Kenner’s reading receives much-needed corroboration from historical investigations into the time period, negating some critics who have argued that Frank’s nature cannot be deduced with “the lights Kenner brings to illuminate the text” (Feshbach 226). A large part of Frank’s fairy-tale narrative is his story of life on the seas; he “sailed through the Straits of Magellan and he told [Eveline] stories of the terrible Patagonians” (Joyce 2224). Using a colloquialism to explain his newfound affluence—having “fallen on his feet in Buenos Aries” (2224)—serves a dual purpose for Frank. Not only does it give him a credible explanation as to why he can afford both a vacation in Ireland and a house in South America on a sailor’s salary, but it also distracts from the impracticality of what Frank is claiming. Reinales invalidates Frank’s Patagonian claim, noting that the “Patagonians had long been wiped out by the time Frank travelled around the world” (530); she also argues that the group was “not nearly as ‘terrible’ as Frank portrays them”

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(530). Both of these facts lend support to Kenner's argument that Frank is weaving Eveline a story that she will believe, despite the fact that it is "clearly a myth" (Reinares 530). In dealing with Frank's assertion that he owns property in Buenos Aires, Reinares adds that by the beginning of the 1900s, the native Argentinean oligarchy took pride in its possession of native land and property (530). For this reason, it is implausible that Frank, or for that matter, "any other working class immigrant, would have been able to purchase (very expensive) real estate" (Reinares 530).[†] Traditional critics are not wrong, in that Eveline undergoes tremendous personal angst in her attempts to make a decision about her future. However, such a narrow reading ignores the subtleties of Joyce's work. A look at this broader context "considerably complicates Eveline's 'idyllic' plan of escape, and Frank's invitation looks far from innocent" (Reinares 532). "Eveline" is not just a story about the titular character; according to revisionists, it is also a story about outside characters intertwining their personal narratives with this titular character.

Although a credible theory, the revisionist reading still leaves large gaps which are filled by assumptions. Eveline herself never seems to acknowledge any of the problems with Frank's story; hence there is never a textually based reciprocation of Kenner's work, other than the ambiguous mention of Eveline's father forbidding the affair because he "[knows] these sailor chaps" (Joyce 2224). The revisionist

[†] Brackets here are from Reinares.

reading assumes that Frank's deceitful motives will impact the other characters in the story, and particularly Eveline's decision. Although her father's comment is obviously meant to be read with a negative connotation, it is doubtful that he forbids the relationship because he suspects Frank of planning to fulfill a consummation of sorts. If this were the case, he would likely speak to her directly, so as to alert the reader to this crucial point. A much more probable explanation for her father's disapproval is the fact that he is "becoming very old lately" (2224), and is likely frightened that he will lose what is ostensibly his only source of income for alcohol-filled Saturday nights (2224). Although the modern reader may not realize that Frank is being dishonest, Reinares suggests that a reader at the turn of the twentieth century would likely be aware of Frank's deception; at the very least, they would question the discrepancies in his story (532). Be it through lack of education, her abysmal situation at home, or a desire to believe whatever she hears, Eveline does not question Frank's narrative or his motives in the same way the reader does.

Eveline's failure to respond to the implied threat that Frank poses - and thus, the inability of Frank to have a direct impact on the story - leads to questions about the usefulness of revisionist interpretations. Margot Norris, eulogizing Kenner's passing in, "The Voice and the Void: Hugh Kenner's Joyce," recounts how the critic "loved to sleuth for what was [...] untold and inaudible yet capable of being inferred" (486). Norris is correct here, in that what

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seems at first to be an ambitious assertion – Frank’s true desires are radically different than we first assume – is empirically justified. Does this realization matter? Just as the orthodox reading is discredited for being solely focussed on Eveline, Kenner’s interpretation should be scrutinized for what seems to be his devotion to Frank. Central to the revisionist interpretation is the colloquial framing of Frank as a ‘bad person’, who will ultimately harm Eveline. Kenner seems to think that Joyce uses Frank as a direct foil to Eveline, influencing her to remain at home. This is incorrect, as Frank’s desires fail to have a meaningful impact on the characters in the story. Imperatively, rather than using Frank to influence Eveline, Joyce uses Frank to influence the reader; we alone are supposed to have knowledge of his true intentions, not Eveline.

Giving the reader certain privileges while simultaneously withholding much of Eveline’s thought process seems to suggest that a third interpretation of “Eveline” inherently exists. Rather than being an narrative about Eveline’s inability to make a decision, “Eveline” is truly about the reader’s failure to judge the decision that Eveline does make. What transpires is indecisiveness on the part of the reader – crucial ambiguities exist where we need concrete information in order to solidify our judgement about her final decision. What changes in the final 25 lines, between Eveline’s epiphany that “she must escape!” (Joyce 2224), and when she gives Frank no sign of recognition as she chooses to fulfill her duty to the family? Although we may originally think – as Eveline seems to – that it would be

better to escape a life of staggering dullness and potential abuse, Frank's true intentions cloud our judgement irreconcilably. Although Eveline does not realize his nefarious motives, they complicate how the reader feels about her decision, perhaps leading us to think that she is better off remaining in Dublin. We are repeatedly forced to question, and then re-evaluate, our judgements about Eveline's decision, and it seems as if "there is no end to this questioning" (Luft 49). Significant events repeatedly take place in "Eveline" without proper explanation for the reader. Deprived of the knowledge as to why these events have happened, the reader is incapable of making broad judgements. A universal meaning or profound truth is antithetical to the existence of "Eveline" as a story because it is incapable of being reduced to a singular meaning. "[T]he story does not imply that one option is better than the other" based on what is given to the reader through the text (Luft 48) – not enough information is available.

A better way to interpret "Eveline", perhaps, is through the lens of reader response theory. Rather than forcing the text to fit a meaning, multiple readings should be accepted in accordance with our personal experiences. Luft writes that the reader is caught "in a similar, hermeneutic, conflict" as Eveline is (50), but this conflict has a different resolution for all of us. Admittedly, reader response theory can be, and is, applied to almost any piece of literature; as Harkin correctly notes, "today it's fair to say that reader-response *conceptions* are simply assumed in virtually every aspect of

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[literary] work" (413).[‡] Yet I argue that "Eveline" is different from "virtually every aspect of literary work" that Harkin cites because the response of the reader is not just a facet of our overall experience; rather, as with much modernist work, the reader's response is the primary contributor to the overall experience. The ambiguity of "Eveline" encourages self-reflection because it catalyses our ideas about what Eveline should have done and why. These opinions "are based on the values and mental habits of the reader rather than the story itself" (Luft 50). Joyce does not encourage reflection from the titular character, but instead reflection from the reader about this character. Unlike Eveline - who is able to make a conscious decision to remain at home - readers are "trapped [...] by conflicting interpretations of the story", implying that the dilemma is irresolvable (Luft 49). Hartman argues that the story challenges readers to stay within this indeterminate state for as long as possible. This fosters an attitude of understanding, based on how we personally relate to the text, rather than one of judging what Eveline's correct approach should have been (270). The reader is able to navigate this impasse to some extent, and look at the text from his or her own personal experience. Although Joyce refuses "to resolve the fundamental ambiguity of the story" (Luft 51), we can find significant individual meaning from components within it. Perhaps we see ourselves in the flawed father who is afraid to let go of something he loves, or maybe we relate with Eveline's

[‡] Italics here are from Harkin.

intense emotional connection to her deceased mother. Each character is created by Joyce to make the reader think; not necessarily of what Eveline should do, but rather of what they would do.

It is clear that "Eveline" has not ceased to be a controversial text. Two primary interpretative theories – the orthodox and the revisionist – have done significant work to further our understanding of the story. It is clear, however, that unsolved questions remain. Luft argues that "Eveline" is about more than "the anguish of decisions having to do with obligation, emigration, marriage, and love. It is about the complexities and ethics of interpretation" (50). Any reading or interpretation of a text attempts to provide meaning to extrapolate on what is given to us by the author, and to create something out of what is often the mosaic of modern literature. The problem with "Eveline" is that the mosaic remains unfinished; large, unavoidable gaps exist where we expect there to be colour and meaning. Trying to deduce meaning solely from what is in front of us – as the majority of critics up until this point have attempted to do – is largely impossible. We do not have enough pieces to complete the puzzle. Rather than trying to fit the text to a monolithic theory, it must be allowed that people will fill in the gaps of the mosaic with their own personal theories and knowledge. "Eveline" is not a story about Eveline's paralysis – it is more a story about our paralysis, and our attempts to break free from a personal dead society.

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