



THE CORINTHIAN
The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College

The Corinthian

Volume 8

Article 11

2007

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Leigh Griffith

Georgia College & State University

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Recommended Citation

Griffith, Leigh (2007) "Oppression and the Double Bind of "Eveline";" *The Corinthian*: Vol. 8 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol8/iss1/11>

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Oppression and the Double Bind of "Eveline"

Leigh Griffith

Danielle Wyckoff
Faculty Sponsor

"Eveline" by James Joyce reveals the discrimination of women as described in Marilyn Frye's "Oppression." Frye's article discusses a "double-bind," the restraining nature of society in which a woman must present herself in a certain manner or she will be rebuked. Frye also compares a woman's situation to a birdcage. Women are encaged and not free to present themselves however they wish. If only a single perspective or "wire" of the cage is studied, women seem unsuppressed. Such is the reason the world does not understand the prejudice. We do not see more than one "wire" at a time. Eveline wishes to leave her under-appreciative father and family and pursue a life of happiness, but she fears the uncertain future. Eveline's "double-bind" is her inability to escape oppression. Her environment suggests that she is indeed caged. Frye's article investigates the reality of being a woman. More than one factor of Eveline's life causes suffering. These circumstances may seem easy to repair. One may see many options for Eveline to escape her present servitude, but a more thorough look reveals the multi-layered oppression of women and the inability to overcome the double-bind.

In this story, Eveline is a character experienced in the ways of oppression. She lost her mother to illness and must work long and hard hours. Eveline must also cloth and feed children who are not her own. She gives all her wages to her father and then must beg him for the money to buy groceries for the family. He is verbally threatening and physically abusive, beating the boys and yelling at Eveline. A woman in this time period cannot survive alone. She must rely on a man to provide and protect. In the case of Eveline, her father protects her but is also the cause of much harm and abuse. The double-bind for Eveline is that she must live with this abuse. If she chooses to leave, she forfeits her protection and her provision.

She is offered an opportunity to escape her restraining life. Frank has promised to take her away and make a new life. On the surface, it appears that Eveline can be free from her restrictions. She can conceivably choose

Frank and leave her old and submissive life behind. She has been given freedom; she can release herself from the chains of servitude and responsibility. The doors of the birdcage have been opened and Eveline can be happy if she runs away with Frank. This is the myopic view of what Eveline is facing. Marilyn Frye explains the danger of this narrow-minded viewpoint: "if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you still could not see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time" (7). Indeed, if we only look at the opportunity for Frank to take her away from her old life, we would see Eveline's chance to overcome her oppression. However, this approach is inaccurate. Eveline cannot simply leave with Frank and escape all her problems. Only when one looks at Eveline's situation in society, will one see that her triumph is far from possible. While Eveline can flee her current oppressor, she cannot avoid oppression altogether. To understand why, one must look closely at not only her options but also the outcome of those options.

While running away with Frank will undoubtedly save Eveline from her current struggles, only new and similar struggles await her. When Eveline ponders leaving, she thinks of going away "to be his wife" (Joyce 281). This very thought reveals much about how Eveline will be treated by Frank. While he may care about her, she is his and she is a wife, not a partner or companion who is equal but simply a married woman. The words "his wife" denote ownership. Eveline will be a possession of Frank's. Nothing of this thought, being "his wife" discloses a desire in Eveline to run away with Frank, neither does it show that she loves him. In fact, the conclusion can be made that Eveline does not love Frank. Her thoughts reveal her uncertainty of love in their relationship: "Frank would save her. He would give her life, perhaps love too. But she wanted to live" (Joyce 283). At this time, while Eveline is prepared to leave everything familiar, she is unsure that Frank can provide her with love. He has arranged for her to come away with him; she has had no part in this decision. She knows nothing about the place they are going or where they will live: "Buenos Ayers where he had a home waiting for her" (Joyce 281). Frank has prepared a place for Eveline, but it is not even her home; it is Frank's house where he has proposed they live. One may ask why Eveline does not get a say in where they make their home. Why must they go far away to Buenos Ayers when her family and those she has known all her life are close by? Why would Eveline consider such a sacrifice if she does not love Frank and is not confident of his reciprocation of that love? Eveline's motiva-

tion for leaving, then, is for another and more imperative reason. She desires to escape her oppressive situation with her father. The reason is yet another wire to the birdcage.

Eveline's father does not approve of her relations with a sailor. Joyce writes, "Of course her father had found out the affair and had forbidden her to have anything to say to him" (282). She is not allowed to see Frank as long as her father is around. One can expect he will not condone a marriage either and will make trouble for the couple if Eveline disobeys his wishes. Another bind is created. She cannot feasibly have a husband and her family. She must choose. Eveline cannot be with Frank while living in this city. Her only option to be with him is to leave her home, her duty, her family, and the familiar.

One option is eliminated. She cannot stay with Frank while living here. The next logical option would be for her to leave, to go away with Frank. She is unhappy with her life here, so she should leave. Eveline feels trapped and longs to be free. When she ponders her current situation, she cries out in frustration: "Escape! She must escape!" (283). Eveline tells herself that if she goes with Frank, she can escape the mundane repressions of everyday life. "How perfect;" one might say, the ultimate solution to her problems. If Eveline goes to Buenos Ayers, she will no longer be burdened by work; she will not be abused by her father. She will not have to constantly make sure the children are attended to; she can do whatever she wants. When we look microscopically at this solution, it seems to be flawless. However, a more inclusive and macroscopic approach will reveal the double bind that this solution creates.

If she leaves, she will be abandoning her family. The entire town will talk of how she ran off with some sailor. Eveline considers how they will call her a "fool" for deserting her duties (281). She will break the promise she made to her dying mother, "her promise to keep the home together as long as she could" (Joyce 282). Eveline will have to live knowing that she did not obey her mother's wishes. What kind of a woman disappears so irresponsibly without a care for her family? The town will not be accepting of her actions. She will be talked about as a selfish woman, an insensitive woman. As noted in Frye's article, "sensitivity is one of the few virtues that have been assigned to [women]. If we are found insensitive, we may fear we have no redeeming traits at all and perhaps are not real women" (Frye 6). No matter what Eveline has done for her family in the past, her departure from her female

responsibilities will leave society labeling her as insensitive. She cannot be redeemed. Now, because she has lost her "natural" sensitivity, she is hardly even a woman at all. She is not revered like a man and she will not even be given the docile treatment a sensitive woman may deserve. Eveline cannot win; she will either be a disgrace to womankind or continue to be ensnared in her current situation.

Eveline is a woman of circumstance. She has been oppressed her entire life and will continue to be until the world around her changes. No decision or resolution made by Eveline herself can amend her current distress. This story tells of the desperation of a woman who must choose her poison. Joyce depresses the reader with sad truths. Our society is one that believes there is a specific place for a woman. Certain jobs, clothes, hobbies, strengths and even personalities are reserved and acceptable for women. Living up to all these ideals is impossible. For women who do not follow these normal expectations, an equal and opposite assumption awaits. An example can be found in Frye's article. A woman is thought to be weak and susceptible to harm. She should not walk alone at night because she might be molested. She should ask a man to escort her. If a woman decides not to ask for protection though, then she deserves whatever she gets. She is being hard or too proud and reluctant to seek help. If she does ask for assistance, then she can be chided for being weak or scared. She is playing into the hands of those who believe a woman is weak-willed. These assumptions prevent women from making the right or best decision. Whatever she chooses, she will be reprimanded for later. Frye's example echoes Eveline's oppression. Looking at the options of Eveline, one can see what all women face or have faced over time. The conclusion we may draw about oppression and the double-bind is simply that there is just no choice at all. There may be no solution or end to women's discrimination because at every turn the decision leads to the same result. To comprehend the suffering of women, one must realize not only the existence of the double-bind but also the reality that because every choice results in oppression, there really is no choice at all.

Now that we have divulged the real consequences of Eveline's decision, we can see that neither option is freeing. Eveline cannot escape oppression. The bind is not only double but manifold. In every opportunity, an underlying oppressor is waiting to be discovered. Similarly, in every missed opportunity, a present oppressor continues to block this woman with prevailing discrimi-

nation. This is the double bind: "situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation" (Frye 6). In every direction of Eveline's life, the future is filled with repression. She will be misused by her father. She will be admonished by other women. She will be Frank's possession. She will be scorned by society. She has no solution, no quick fix, or even a fix at all. Eveline's case represents a woman during the 1900's, but her struggles exist today for women everywhere. Women must choose the lesser of two evil reputations in any and every moment, decision, action, and word they possess.

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