

2000

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Recommended Citation

Lyons, Joanna (2000) ""The end of pleasure is pain": Why Eveline Could Not Leave," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol2/iss1/8>

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“The end of pleasure is pain”: Why Eveline Could Not Leave

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There are many difficult questions in life that envelope each of us in a “maze of distress” (Joyce 514). Each one seems more confusing than the last, but the next one will seem even more so. In James Joyce’s “Eveline,” a woman must choose between the possibility of happiness with her love or a continued life of drudgery as the caretaker of her family. Even though a difficult family life destroyed her mother, Eveline’s decision is confused by her obligation to her family. Oddly enough, Eveline makes what seems to be an unbelievable choice: to stay with her family. After delving into the particulars of her life, she chooses to stay because she has no other alternative.

James Joyce’s heroine must either stay with her dysfunctional family or go with Frank, the man who has swept her off her feet. On the night of her elopement she is reminded “of the promise to her mother, her promise to keep the home together as long as she [can]” (514). This promise is partly responsible for Eveline’s choice. She cannot break the promise she made to her mother. If Eveline lets the family fall apart, then her mother’s “life of commonplace sacrifices” was all for nothing (514). Eveline’s life with her father is “a hard life” (513); but “conditioned by her mother’s sense of duty” (Walzl 48), Eveline cannot leave her family behind. Her word becomes a bond that she cannot break. She must fulfill “her duty” to both her family and her mother (Joyce 514).

Her father, who “was becoming old lately” (Joyce 514), pulls on her sympathetic strings indirectly. Because of his advancing age, she does not want to abandon him like her mother did. Although there were good times when all the family was together, times are hard without Eveline’s mother. However, Eveline’s sense

of duty and her love for her family make her stay. Unfortunately, "the life she returns to is a repetition of her mother's life" (Walzl 48), which may leave her broken and feeling used.

Eveline's lack of real options is commonplace in Joyce's Irish society, yet her story shows "sympathy for women caught in restrictive social conditions" (Walzl 53). Eveline, like many other Irish women, is paralyzed by "the limited economic possibilities for women in Ireland" (Walzl 47). She has but two choices: she can stay with her abusive father or risk the unknown with Frank. She does not have the multiple options that a modern-day woman has. Her limited options paralyze her, leaving her with only one real choice: her family. She cannot decide until the last moment when Frank calls for her to "Come" (Joyce 515). She weighs the pros and cons of her two limited options and chooses to stay as he "rush[es] beyond the barrier" (Joyce 515). Eveline's decision not to go with Frank is a product of her reason for loving him: he represents escape. Eveline associates happiness with an "escape to some distant and exotic haven" (Litz 52). She loves Frank because he provides a means of escape, but she cannot blindly choose him because of all of the implications of loving him. Loving Frank means a world of insecurities and possible failure. She realizes that escape "exists only in reveries, in dreams" (Litz 52). "All the seas of the world" (Joyce 515) crash in on her, and she chooses the certainty of her present life over life with Frank.

Frank represents many uncertainties; Joyce presents very little concrete information about Frank. For Eveline, Frank epitomizes escape. There may or may not be happiness with him. With nothing but the promise of escape, Eveline cannot abandon the safety of the known for the unknown. Her life with her father is not perfect, but she does "not find it a wholly undesirable life" (513). She knows what life is like with him. The uncertainties of a life with Frank scare her. Her mother's warning that "the end of pleasure is pain" (514) also keeps her from making the decision to go with Frank. She might be happy with Frank for a while, but the pain noted in her mother's warning is sure to follow. Eveline, a socially paralyzed young woman, "is too frightened to grasp her

chance at life and love" (Walzl 52). Eveline, confronted with the ambiguities of sexual and romantic love, chooses to stay at home and take her place as her father's caretaker.

Eveline makes the decision she has been raised to make. She is faithful to the promise she made to her mother and assumes her role as the matriarch of the family. Eveline does not "take a single step" of her own in Joyce's story (Weir 72). She is a puppet in her own life, both to her mother's and to society's wishes. She even fears what her coworkers would say "when they found out that she had run away with a fellow" (Joyce 513). She is paralyzed by Irish society and a strong sense of family obligation. She can make no other decision than to be loyal to her family. In modern society, when women have possibilities other than marriage or taking care of the family, Eveline's choice might not be the best one. Joyce presents Eveline's case with much sympathy, but he does not say whether or not her decision is the best one. I believe, however, that, faced with a monumental decision, Eveline chooses wisely in remaining faithful to her promise.

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