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## ■ THE INESCAPABLE ENCOUNTER WITH TRAUMA IN JAMES JOYCE'S "EVELINE"

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Ovaj rad se bavi problematikom nerazjašnjene lične traume u priči Džejmsa Džojso „Evelin”. Cilj je da se utvrdi poreklo psiholoških rana glavne junakinje i istraži njihovo nasleđe u vidu emocionalnih ožiljaka koji nisu zalečeni uprkos prolaznosti vremena. Rad teži da dokaže da Evelin na kraju odbija da započne nov život u inostranstvu zbog svog poriva za samoodržanjem. Ovaj odbrambeni mehanizam je nagoni da ne realizuje svoj plan iseljenja koji bi mogao da izazove stanje bespomoćnosti koje je neraskidivo povezano sa traumom. Stoga, ovo tumačenje Džojsovog teksta se oslanja na psihoanalitičku teoriju i nastoji da pronikne u uzročno-posledičnu vezu između Evelininih ranih trauma i njenog kasnijeg ponašanja.

Ključne reči: Evelin, Džojso, trauma, anksioznost, paraliza.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The motif of paralysis pervades the entire collection of Joyce's *Dubliners*, but it is most haunting in the final scene of "Eveline" when the eponymous protagonist's plan to depart her hometown turns into a shattered illusion. The tragic heroine, Eveline Hill, faces an onerous dilemma: she can either stay with her abusive father in suffocating domesticity, or she can elope with a sailor named Frank to a "distant unknown country" where he has a "home waiting for her" (Joyce 2006: 28–29). The prospect of selecting the latter emerges towards the end of the story when Miss Hill arrives at the pier to board the ship to Buenos Aires. Instead of seizing the opportunity to make a fresh start with her love interest, she stands "passive, like a helpless animal" (Joyce 2006: 32) divested of agency, autonomy, and voice. She cannot liberate herself from the patriarchal confines of Dublin.

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The tragic outcome of this tale is likely to strike an emotional chord in the reader that will resonate long after the first reading of the text. The Irish novelist and playwright Sebastian Barry echoes this sentiment forty years after his first reading. He confesses in an interview with the *Guardian* that the heartache induced by the story's ending remains with him: "I am still inclined to cry out the same thing I cried out the first time I read it, aged 17: 'Get on the bloody boat, Eveline'" (Alladrice 2013). The tragic moment of the protagonist's paralysis has long puzzled readers and garnered much attention and debate among scholars. As Clive Hart notes, "the interest of the story lies not in the events, but in the reasons for Eveline's failure to accept the offer of salvation" (1969: 48). Numerous theories have been proposed regarding Eveline's refusal to board the ship with Frank. Many critics attribute a significance to the restrictive nature of the socio-cultural, political, and religious factors that mold the mind of every character in *Dubliners*, including Eveline's. Such theories nevertheless offer a one-dimensional and generalized explanation because they limit their focus to the influence of external forces on the protagonist without accounting for the close correlation between Eveline's personal experiences and her unconscious impulses. What becomes largely overlooked is the issue of her psychological nature, an involuntary and powerful enough force that prompts the heroine to become physically and emotionally frozen on the dock—a debilitating anxiety attack as a response to the expected situation of trauma.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to demonstrate that Eveline is the victim of a repressed psychological trauma such that she reflexively attempts to flee from any sensations, thoughts, and activities that are even minimally reminiscent of her initial traumatic experience. This paper examines the story primarily through the psychoanalytic theory of trauma and anxiety, which sheds light on three essential aspects of Eveline's trauma: its occurrence in childhood, its recrudescence in the present, and its strong link to anxiety and paralysis. The investigation of Joyce's tale through a psychoanalytic framework offers a new way of assessing the protagonist's actions and enhances the understanding of how unconscious mental processes operating in the deep layers of the brain guide human behavior.

## 2. EVELINE'S CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

The close reading of Joyce's "Eveline" reveals that the protagonist bears profound emotional scars in the hidden corners of her unconscious that stem from the trauma sustained during her childhood. The narrator only alludes to them, providing few specific details, which necessitates a close examination if one is to comprehend the protagonist's actions. To understand Eveline's childhood, it is imperative to grasp what type of event or situation qualifies as trauma. Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, posits that any experience that is distressing enough to inflict injury upon the psyche and disrupt the individual's normal functioning meets the level of trauma (Freud 1989: 23). When the protective barrier that regulates stimuli from the outside world fails, the mind becomes unable to shield itself from an unbridled amount of excitation:

We describe as 'traumatic' any excitations from outside that are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of an organism's energy and to set in motion every possible defensive measure. (Freud 1989: 23)

Freud also remarks that children are particularly susceptible to trauma because their immature ego stands unprotected against outside pressures. This vulnerability can generate long-lasting detrimental consequences. He ultimately defines trauma as the feeling of psychic helplessness instigated by excessive stimulation that cannot be normalized (Freud 1959: 166). These ideas match contemporary psychoanalytic thinking, according to which a traumatic experience subsumes "any conditions which seem definitely unfavorable, noxious, or dramatically injurious to the developing young individual" (Greenacre 1967: 128).

Another critical aspect of trauma is its association with the concept of loss. The most notable representation of a devastating loss is the passing of a loved one, typically a family member, a friend, or any cherished person (Sullender 2018: 58). What an individual finds particularly disconcerting are the scenes of suffering that precede the death of a loved one, such as in the case of fatal illness, because they exacerbate one's feelings of impotence and hopelessness. However, not all losses are physical; some are more tacit and psychological, such as the loss of identity, loss of hope, or loss of support (Lemma/Levy 2004: 11-12). These losses also have a deleterious influence on the welfare of individuals as they can adversely affect behaviors and relationships in the future.

The severity of a loss suffered varies depending on the degree to which one feels attached to the loss—the higher the degree, the more complex and long-lasting the mental damage. To tackle the harsh reality of the loss, survivors tend to demonstrate several defense mechanisms, including repression,<sup>2</sup> which temporarily erases the trauma from their awareness, and disassociation,<sup>3</sup> which helps to circumvent or minimize pain (McQuillan *et al.* 2009: 444). Survivors also tend to develop fears about the safety of self, so their innate urge to protect themselves may engender reclusiveness and anxiety in the long run.

These theories regarding a traumatic experience apply to the context of Joyce's "Eveline." The protagonist, who is just "over nineteen" (Joyce 2006: 28), demonstrates signs of lingering mental fatigue, which is unusual for someone of her age. Eveline is completely absorbed in her ruminations as she apathetically watches the world go by. This mental state reflects her passive role in life: "She sat at the window watching the

2 The term was first mentioned in 1893 by Sigmund Freud who theorized that the main objective of this defense mechanism was to keep potentially hazardous mental material out of conscious awareness. See Akhtar's *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (2009: 246).

3 Dissociation denotes the process of disconnecting from one's personal experience. It is a protective mental activity adopted by individuals who have been exposed to serious trauma, and its aim is to temporarily alleviate mental distress (Akhtar 2009: 82).

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" (Joyce 2006: 26). The burdens of the past and her reveries of a happier future impinge upon Eveline's mind, magnifying her sense of vulnerability.

Miss Hill's fragmentary recollections of her childhood are ambivalent: on the one hand, her past reminds her of playful innocence and triggers a nostalgic response; on the other hand, it hides unprocessed traumatic material. The latter chiefly refers to the illness and death of her mother and the untimely loss of her beloved brother Ernest. The absence of specificity characterizes both tragic events and suggests Eveline's reluctance to excavate the trauma from the depths of her unconscious because of its potential to awaken her anxiety. The reader learns that during Mrs. Hill and Ernest's life, Eveline's existence seemed less arduous and more tolerable. The heroine wistfully recalls pleasant memories of days past, such as going on a picnic to the Hill of Howth with her entire family or playing in a field with other children. Accordingly, she concludes that "they seemed to have been rather happy then" (Joyce 2006: 27).

After the traumatic loss of her loved ones, Eveline's life descends into complete chaos. A simple but lugubrious realization starts to sink in: "Everything changes" (Joyce 2006: 27). Irreversibly stripped of maternal support and brotherly love—Ernest was her favorite brother—Eveline feels a gaping void in her heart that she cannot fill. Her sense of identity and normalcy is radically disturbed. With all the domestic responsibilities automatically shifted to her, she must assume the role of mother and primary caretaker of her family: "She had hard work to keep the house together and to see that the two young children who had been left to her charge went to school regularly and got their meals regularly" (Joyce 2006: 29).

Enduring an alcoholic father who poses a threat of substantial harm to her health amplifies the gravity and difficulty of Eveline's position. Mr. Hill displays proclivities toward violence when Eveline is just a child; he would go outside looking for her brothers with a blackthorn stick, implying that he physically victimized them. After the loss of his wife, his temper grows worse, with Eveline placed at risk of being assaulted:

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. (Joyce 2006: 28)

Much of Eveline's apprehension stems from her father's alcohol-related aggression, which causes her to develop palpitations—an overt physical manifestation of anxiety. The reader becomes cognizant of the fact that Eveline's relationship with her father seems based on fear and submission. She must keep the family together by replicating her mother's life of servility and "commonplace sacrifices" (Joyce 2006: 31). Moreover, Mr. Hill's tendency to drink heavily on Saturday nights, followed by the verbal harassment he directs at his daughter when he confiscates her weekly grocery wages, only aggravates Eveline's sense of despair.

To cope with the domestic hardships, Eveline resorts to several defense mechanisms, mainly rationalization<sup>4</sup> and dissociation. The former is evident when, despite being well acquainted with her father's capacity for violence, she believes he "could be very nice" (Joyce 2006: 30) because she could remember a few isolated episodes of decent behavior as if they had the potency to override all the negative effects of his unforgivable cruelty. The latter refers to her propensity to seek refuge from reality by either plunging into the sentimentality and nostalgia of the past or by retreating into a fantasy world where she saw herself "married" and "treated with respect" (Joyce 2006: 28).

These defensive measures indicate a psychological disturbance caused by childhood trauma that interfered with the protagonist's developmental process (Dryden/Mytton 2017: 39). Although they provide a brief escape from reality, Eveline's unresolved emotional issues resurface when she least expects them, as the following section of the article will show.

### 3. "ESCAPE! SHE MUST ESCAPE!"—EPIPHANY OR THE RECURRENCE OF TRAUMA?

As established, Eveline, for the most part, appears lost in a complex web of thoughts and enslaved by inertia. The possibility of agency emerges while she muses to the sound of a street organ that triggers an involuntary memory of the final night of her mother's deadly illness:

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! (Joyce 2006: 31)

At first glance, it is tempting to believe that such a recollection enables Eveline to experience an epiphany.<sup>5</sup> She realizes that her mother's life of servitude and the resulting end-stage dementia, marked by the arguably nonsensical words "Derevaun Seraun," might easily become her future unless she alters the course of her life. Her instant resolution to run off with Frank, whom she unreservedly regards as the only person capable of infusing her life with renewal and stability, does not defy the laws of logic.

However, upon further inquiry, such an interpretation oversimplifies Eveline's motives by disregarding the powerful unconscious mechanisms that play a major role in defining the protagonist's psyche. In other words, what appears to be an epiphany

4 The term was first used by Ernest Jones in 1908. It represents a mental process by which one considers only a positive interpretation of a behavior, disregarding the negative ones in order to prevent the stimulation of anxiety (Akhtar 2009: 239).

5 "Epiphany" is regarded as a moment "when the truth of things, their essence, normally concealed, is revealed" (Belluc/Benejam 2018: 63).

is a reactivation of Eveline's blocked traumatic memory brought about by the sensory elements that mimicked those associated with the original trauma.

As Freud carefully observes, some of the repercussions of trauma are "endeavours to revive the trauma, to remember the forgotten experience, or, better still, to make it real— to live once more through a repetition of it ..." (1939: 122). Thus, a repressed memory not only exists despite being submerged into the unconscious, but it can erupt abruptly into consciousness under favorable conditions. Drawing on Freud's notions of trauma and its belatedness, Cathy Caruth argues in her book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* that a disturbing incident cannot be entirely experienced at the time of its initial occurrence; rather, it presents itself at a later stage (1995: 4–5). She claims that a delayed response to the original traumatic event manifests itself in the form of "repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviors stemming from the event," adding that "to be traumatized means to be possessed by an image or event". (Caruth 1995: 4–5)

Hence, the reader can deduce that Joyce's Eveline is strongly "possessed" by the memory of her mother's final hours as it evokes strong physical and emotional reactions, including trembling and intense feelings of terror. Her invasive flashback indicates a response to her earlier traumatic experience, which although relegated to the murky corners of her subconscious mind, comes back to haunt her. Unable to deal with the immense amount of grief she keeps buried, Eveline desperately attempts to close the door to her past by deciding to elope with her lover.

Frank becomes a beacon of hope. He is the promise of a better life in a faraway land that seems like the light at the end of the dark and lonely tunnel in which Eveline resides: "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" (Joyce 2006: 31). Eveline's words convey a distinct sense of despair and a burning urge to escape from the nightmarish remnants of her traumatic past. Frank, whom Eveline views as an agent of change, becomes the epitome of her salvation. She expects him to provide her with the protection and care she urgently requires. Although Frank's motives are dubious—it is uncertain if he legitimately intends to marry Eveline or whether he has other plans in mind—the reader would not be wrong to assume that Eveline needs him to assert her "right to happiness" (Joyce 2006: 31). She reduces his principal mission to the act of rescuing her from her plight. The fact that there is no indication in the narrative that Eveline is in love with him or that he is in love with her is made clear by the line, "He would give her life, perhaps love, too" (Joyce 2006: 31) and reinforces this impression. As a result, running off with Frank is not best seen as a heroic act of defiance against the oppressive forces of Irish society or a willingness to seek a fresh start with the man with whom she is in love, but rather as self-deception. Eveline erroneously believes that the only way to cope with the intolerable weight of her traumatic history is to avoid confronting it at all costs, thus robbing herself of the possibility of rehabilitation. It is important to note that her failure to address the root of her crisis is inextricably related to the fact that she is a resident of Dublin, a place that Joyce famously referred to as "that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city" (Joyce 1957: 55) to express his revolt against the constraining power of its religious, cultural, and social protocols. Accordingly, Eveline

also becomes the victim of a repressive system that strongly discourages free will and the verbal expression of personal struggles.

#### 4. THE CULMINATION OF TRAUMA IN THE FAILURE TO LEAVE

At the end of "Eveline," the protagonist fails to leave her hometown because she suffers from an acute anxiety attack that leaves her physically and emotionally immobile. Questions arise over the development of this psychological phenomenon. First, where does Eveline's anxiety emanate from? And second, how does it relate to her state of paralysis? Freud's revised theory of anxiety as proposed in his seminal work *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* helps elucidate the answers. Freud argues that anxiety is a reaction to a dangerous situation. When one believes they do not possess the sufficient strength to successfully cope with a future peril, they expect trauma to set in unless it is adequately stopped (Freud 1959: 166). The dangerous situation allows for the anticipation of an oncoming threat analogous to one's experience in the past. This prediction prompts the motivation needed to avoid potential exposure to trauma:

It is in this situation that the signal of anxiety is given. The signal announces: 'I am expecting a situation of helplessness to set in', or: 'The present situation reminds me of one of the traumatic experiences I have had before. Therefore I will anticipate the trauma and behave as though it had already come, while there is yet time to turn it aside. (Freud 1959: 166)

Consequently, Freud defines anxiety as both an expectation of trauma and the reappearance of it in a diminished form. The expedient nature of anxiety serves as a warning system that triggers the activation of fight-or-flight to preserve the individual's mental well-being.

However, the question remains whether one can successfully resort to defense-oriented methods if the anxiety they undergo is excessive. According to Freud, if one experiences high anxiety levels, one's mind is at risk of being obstructed by an emotional overload that prevents protective mechanisms from functioning. The mind's ability to cope with threats is impaired, and this leads to paralysis:

There are two reactions to real danger. One is an affective reaction, an outbreak of anxiety. The other is a protective action. [...] We know how the two reactions can co-operate in an expedient way, the one giving the signal for the other to appear. But we also know that they can behave in an inexpedient way: paralysis from anxiety may set in, and the one reaction spread at the cost of the other. (Freud 1959: 165)

Thus, an anxiety attack occurs when the ego is overwhelmed to the point where it lacks the power to mobilize the defense mechanisms. Consequently, paralysis becomes the physical manifestation of anxiety that renders an individual unable to cope with a situation of helplessness.



Freud's theoretical observations help demystify the enigma of Eveline's choice on the closing page of the story. The final scene depicts Eveline standing at the dock with Frank after she "consented" to travel to Buenos Aires with him (Joyce 2006: 28). Her contradictory thoughts about the upcoming voyage betray clear signs of her reluctance to leave her home country: "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?" (Joyce 2006: 31) Confronted with carrying out her decision—to start a new life abroad—Eveline's mind vacillates and is plagued by a severe amount of anxiety explained in Freudian terms as a reaction to a situation of danger. Eveline subconsciously suspects that the prospect of eloping with her lover constitutes a danger to her welfare that could potentially result in helplessness associated with trauma. Even the dark and misty atmosphere surrounding the dock where she stands mirrors her gloomy mood.

Eveline's feelings towards Frank are now in stark contrast to those described earlier in the text. Previously, she allowed her mind to believe in the utopian vision of a possible future with Frank; he would bestow love, respect, and kindness upon her, unlike her father. This wishful thinking demonstrates her attempt to distance herself from the unpleasant reality she faces and provides temporary relief and comfort. But now, Eveline uneasily comes to a subconscious realization that Frank personifies the hazards of losing one's security and identity to a world that is alien and incomprehensible to her. This uncertainty heightens her anxiety level so that she experiences nausea, a physiological response arising from her aversion to leaving home. The notion of never seeing "those familiar objects from which she had never dreamed of being divided" (Joyce 2006: 27) proves unfathomable after all. When Frank declares that it is time for them to board the ship, Eveline does not perceive his words with affection. Instead, she interprets them as a threat: "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" (Joyce 2006: 31). Instantly, her previous notion of Frank as having the capacity to protect her is entirely obliterated and replaced with the conviction that he, and the vast sea of the unknown that he embodies, could metaphorically drown her. In other words, he could expunge her sense of self.

As a result, she responds to this dangerous situation with an impulse to flee. She frantically grabs the iron railing at the dock determined to evade the trauma she expects to face if she goes with Frank. Eveline's anxiety at that moment reaches its culminating point—"Her hands clutched the iron in frenzy. Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish" (Joyce 2006: 31)—and thwarts the successful operation of the flight mechanism, resulting in paralysis. This somatic and emotional reaction to anxiety renders Eveline unable to act. She cannot muster any strength to bid farewell to her lover, which underscores the helplessness that engulfs her, as if she is already experiencing trauma in a mitigated form. At the end of the story, she remains indefinitely trapped in the world of Dublin; the iron railings she desperately holds become symbolic of prison bars.



## 5. CONCLUSION

Although the validity of Eveline's pessimistic assessment of her future in Argentina may be met with skepticism, one may conclude, based on the psychoanalytic theory, that her ultimate rejection of Frank and the unknown he symbolizes is not only expected but justified. Eveline's traumatic past—the loss of her favorite brother, the painful illness and death of her mother, and the mistreatment by her father—colors her perception of the future. The images of loss, neglect, and powerlessness remain firm in her mind, and they subconsciously affect her thoughts, behavior, and actions. For this reason, she cannot believe that Frank or any other man would treat her any differently than her abusive father. She also assumes she will not find long-lasting happiness by accepting change since change previously signified the onset of trauma. The vision of a future that provides safety and solace is thus bound to remain locked into Eveline's mind as a product of her imagination, a mere thought forever devoid of the power to transform itself into reality. Eveline's paralysis, juxtaposed to that of a "helpless animal," (Joyce 2006: 32) could ultimately demonstrate Joyce's attempt to illustrate how people often felt dehumanized and lost in the oppressive climate of early twentieth-century Dublin, especially when faced with psychological challenges.

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## SUMMARY

### THE INESCAPABLE ENCOUNTER WITH TRAUMA IN JAMES JOYCE'S "EVELINE"

This paper deals with the issue of unresolved personal trauma in James Joyce's "Eveline." It aims to identify the origin of the protagonist's psychological wounds and investigate their legacy as emotional scars unhealed by the passage of time. The paper seeks to demonstrate that Eveline's ultimate refusal to pursue a new life abroad stems from her impulse for self-preservation. This defense mechanism impels her to abort her emigration plan because of its potential to induce helplessness, which is constitutive of trauma. For that purpose, this interpretation of Joyce's narrative relies on psychoanalytic theory and intends to provide insight into the causal relationship between Eveline's early trauma experiences and her subsequent behavior.

**KEYWORDS:** Eveline, Joyce, trauma, anxiety, paralysis.

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