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Drowning in "Eveline"

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Drowning in "Eveline"

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Eveline, the title character in the fourth story of James Joyce's *Dubliners*, finds herself in the middle of a world that is slowly closing in on her. Every place she looks, Eveline sees images of suffocation and the destruction of her life. Epifanio San Juan, Jr. says of Eveline that "[t]he description of her existence in time and place tallies with the recurring image of drowning or of being engulfed" (73). Though her thoughts have turned towards escaping this world that is slowly suffocating her, the sea that could be her freedom becomes just one more element of drowning and destruction. Brewster Ghiselin tells us that throughout *Dubliners*, "[n]ot even the predominant element of the sea, water itself, always implies

the sea or its vital freedom" (67). This is certainly true of Eveline; the sea that could give her freedom becomes death in her mind. Almost everything in Eveline's world acts as a drowning force or is in some way related to water. Through the language he uses to describe events surrounding Eveline, the filth and decay that pervade her life, religious images that tie to water, the character of Frank the sailor, and general references to the sea itself, Joyce shows Eveline to be drowning both in her Dublin world and her attempt to escape it.

A great deal of the language that Joyce uses suggests the struggle for life against an angry sea. Rather than use beautiful images to describe the setting sun that Eveline watches through the window, for example, Joyce has "the evening *invade* the avenue" (29 my emphasis). Like rising water threatening to invade the lungs of one cast out to sea, the evening fills the avenue with darkness, and "the evening deepen[s] in the avenue" (32). Eveline is often described in terms that suggest a struggle to keep her head above the drowning forces of her life: "Eveline was tired" (29) and fights with her father "had begun to weary her unspeakably" (31).

The very names of the families Eveline remembers as she stares out the window suggest the aquatic theme of the story. One family "the Waters" (29) had returned to England, had braved the body of water that separates England from Ireland in order to seek a better life, something Eveline is unable to do. Another family "the Devines" (29) has a name that suggests water in two ways. The name evokes the divinity and its sacraments. Though it is spelled differently, the name also reminds readers of the ancient practice of divining, a means of searching for water beneath the earth's surface. This indicates Eveline's search for the water that will take her to freedom and a better life. The language of critics even reflects this water theme, as Epifanio San Juan, Jr. says that Eveline "remains moored to the firm core of her motherly self" (71), showing Eveline as trapped in her world by using aquatic language. San Juan also says that a *nix* "refers to a [mythological] Germanic . . . water sprite who sometimes appears as part fish" (73). This dual meaning of the word adds new meaning to Joyce's language by referring to Eveline as a *water* sprite, a characterization that interacts violently

with Eveline's fear of the ocean. At the same time, it suggests a similarity between Dublin and the sea. Just as the sea's waters close around anything that falls into them, Dublin closes around Eveline.

Eveline's tiny Dublin world is overrun with filth that closes in on her, filling her lungs and slowly draining her of life. She is unable to rid herself of the dust and dirt that surround her, drowning her in a sea of grime; no matter how much she cleans, the dust remains. The furniture and objects in the house are things "which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from" (Joyce 30). The more she cleans, the more dust appears. These old, broken objects covered with dust hold her closely to her home. They cling to her, demanding to be cleaned, rid of the dust that ebbs when she cleans and flows back once again as soon as Eveline turns her back. San Juan says that because of these trapping features, Eveline "can do nothing now but stay submerged in a double retreat of introspection and reminiscence" (72). All she can do is clean the objects and feel them holding her to the place. Even the "yellowing

photograph on the wall above the broken harmonium beside the coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque”¹ (30) holds her home, demanding to be cleaned. As she looks out on the avenue, thinking about her childhood, the dust creeps closer and closer: She “leaned against the window curtains and in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne” (29). The dust covers the objects in the house and it covers Eveline too, sticking to her and invading her lungs as she stares out the window. She is drowning in the swirl of dust that surrounds her, covering her like waves.

The religious images related to water and Eveline’s struggle for freedom cannot be ignored because of their overwhelming presence in the story. “The coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque” (30) takes on great significance against the backdrop of Joyce’s theme of water and drowning. Promise number six states: “Sinners shall find in My Heart the source and infinite ocean of mercy” (McDonnell 1). This idea of the heart of God as the ocean sheds new light on Eveline’s quest for freedom and her eventual fear of the sea. This fear of the

ocean removes Eveline's chances for salvation, and her fear of being trapped forever in the drowning world of Dublin becomes something deeper. Her fear of the saving waters of the heart of Christ places her in danger of winding up in a place where there is no water at all. Ghiselin states that throughout *Dubliners*, "physically their goal must be another country; spiritually it has the aspect of a new life" (65), but Eveline is unable to pursue either. Promise number nine states: "I will bless the homes in which the image of My Sacred Heart² shall be exposed and honored" (1), but Eveline's home does not seem to be blessed by the grace of God. Instead, her home seems to be excluded from those blessings, as Eveline is excluded from the fifth promise, "I will pour abundant blessings on all their undertakings" (1). She undertakes the quest for freedom but winds up turning back because of her lack of faith.

This connection of religion and water brings to mind other Biblical images. The idea of the life-giving practice of baptism is reflected in the image of the sea that could give Eveline freedom and a new life. Her rejection of the new life

offered by the sea can be tied to her rejection of the gift of eternal life through baptism. The Biblical story of Jesus's walk on water can be seen in "Eveline" as well. Peter wants to walk out and meet Jesus on the water, and indeed he starts to, but his faith falters and he begins to sink. This is what happens to Eveline when she is trying to leave with Frank. "He holds her hand and she knows that he was speaking to her . . ." (Joyce 33) but her faith in Frank is beginning to waver. She begins to doubt that "[h]e would save her" (33), and her doubt causes her to rebel against the desire to leave with Frank, to walk across the sea to a new life in Buenos Aires. Like Peter of little faith, Eveline cannot trust in Frank to insure her safety and happiness once they leave Dublin. Peter gets another chance to prove his faith and trust, but Eveline just sinks down into the sea of her fear and goes back home alone.

Frank the sailor is himself the image of water and the sea personified. At first, Frank represents escape and the freedom of the open seas more than anything else in the story. Eveline feels that only he can free her from the rolling tide of

her life and pull her safely onto his ship and into his world: "He would give her life, perhaps love, too" (33). He holds the promise of a better future for Eveline, with more money and more opportunities because "he ha[s] fallen on his feet in Buenos Ayres" and is able to "come over to the old country just for holiday" (32). He is the representation of all the opportunities and promises held by the sea. He has the ability to bear her away from all the problems and suffocation of her old world, to take her out onto his sea and into freedom. Like the sea, Frank has touched the shores of foreign lands and "he [tells] tales of distant countries" (32) to Eveline, about "the Straits of Magellan" (32) and "the terrible Patagonians" (32). All she has to do is board that ship and she, too, can touch those distant shores and have tales to tell. She can become one with the sea, as Frank is. She can "explore another life with Frank" (31) and "he [will] take her in his arms" (33) and bear her away from the trap of Dublin.

A shift in Eveline's feelings marks a shift in the imagery that surrounds Frank: a reversal of feelings towards him and

the sea. As Peter is afraid to walk upon the water with Jesus, to take that great step towards faith and a higher understanding, Eveline is afraid to step with Frank out of her old world. As Frank is the representation of the sea, it is easy to understand why Eveline balks at being with him. The strong arms of the sea that could carry her away from Dublin become the force that will pull her under and drown her. Frank has those strong arms, the arms that Eveline was certain "would save her" (33). Ghiselin says that the inability to leave Dublin for new worlds shows the characters of *Dubliners* pointing "far westward, into death" (60) and he points out that "this pattern may show at most the frustration of Dubliners unable to escape eastward, out of the seaport and overseas, to a more living world" (61). In Eveline's case, though, she feels that she is turning away from death by avoiding the voyage across the sea. Her turn westward, away from Frank and the sea, is to her a turn towards life. Like the sea, instead of representing salvation, Frank has come to represent destruction: "All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would drown her" (34). The sea and Frank, both of

which should represent life, freedom, and hope, become ominous, deadly forces to Eveline.

Eveline spends most of the story sinking further and further into the drowning waters of her small existence in Dublin, but just as she is about to be whisked away to an exotic land with the promise of a new life, Dublin becomes her life preserver. Even though everything in her Dublin world is dragging her down and suffocating her, nothing there is as bad as the unknown across the waters. Like Eveline, Ireland faced the choice of stagnating in a world that most likely would not change for the better or of being dragged along behind the innovations taking place in England. Brewster Ghiselin points out that “[Eveline] is the first of the characters in *Dubliners* to attempt . . . to escape from Ireland and cross the waters to a far country and a new life; and she is the last” (72). Eveline’s realization of the dangers of leaving her safe haven and crossing the waters pervades the rest of the stories, keeping the characters from making the move to free themselves.

Notes

¹Margaret Mary Alacoque, a French nun canonized by the Catholic Church in 1920, was born in 1647. She believed that she had a vision from Christ in which he revealed his heart as the source of three endlessly flowing streams: mercy, charity, and love. The vision was based on the image of Christ as water pouring into the hearts of those devoted to him. The vision included 12 promises, blessings Christ would bestow on the faithful. The common representation of the Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque is that of a nun kneeling before Christ with the light of his heart pouring over her (Catholic Forum).

²The standard Catholic image of the Sacred Heart illustrates the heart of Christ wearing a crown of thorns that represents his sacrifices (Catholic Forum).

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