

## Notes on Eveline by James Joyce

### Summary

Eveline Hill sits at a window in her home and looks out onto the street while fondly recalling her childhood, when she played with other children in a field now developed with new homes. Her thoughts turn to her sometimes abusive father with whom she lives, and to the prospect of freeing herself from her hard life juggling jobs as a shop worker and a nanny to support herself and her father. Eveline faces a difficult dilemma: remain at home like a dutiful daughter, or leave Dublin with her lover, Frank, who is a sailor. He wants her to marry him and live with him in Buenos Aires, and she has already agreed to leave with him in secret. As Eveline recalls, Frank's courtship of her was pleasant until her father began to voice his disapproval and bicker with Frank. After that, the two lovers met clandestinely.

As Eveline reviews her decision to embark on a new life, she holds in her lap two letters, one to her father and one to her brother Harry. She begins to favor the sunnier memories of her old family life, when her mother was alive and her brother was living at home, and notes that she did promise her mother to dedicate herself to maintaining the home. She reasons that her life at home, cleaning and cooking, is hard but perhaps not the worst option—her father is not always mean, after all. The sound of a street organ then reminds her of her mother's death, and her thoughts change course. She remembers her mother's uneventful, sad life, and passionately embraces her decision to escape the same fate by leaving with Frank.

At the docks in Dublin, Eveline waits in a crowd to board the ship with Frank. She appears detached and worried, overwhelmed by the images around her, and prays to God for direction. Her previous declaration of intent seems to have never happened. When the boat whistle blows and Frank pulls on her hand to lead her with him, Eveline resists. She clutches the barrier as Frank is swept into the throng moving toward the ship. He continually shouts "Come!" but Eveline remains fixed to the land, motionless and emotionless.

### Analysis

Eveline's story illustrates the pitfalls of holding onto the past when facing the future. Hers is the first portrait of a female in *Dubliners*, and it reflects the conflicting pull many women in early twentieth-century Dublin felt between a domestic life rooted in the past and the possibility of a new married life abroad. One moment, Eveline feels happy to leave her hard life, yet at the next moment she worries about fulfilling promises to her dead mother. She grasps the letters she's written to her father and brother, revealing her inability to let go of those family relationships, despite her father's cruelty and her brother's absence. She clings to the older and more pleasant memories and imagines what other people want her to do or will do for her. She sees Frank as a rescuer, saving her from her domestic situation. Eveline suspends herself between the call of home and the past and the call of new experiences and the future, unable to make a decision. The threat of repeating her mother's life spurs Eveline's epiphany that she must leave with Frank and embark on a new phase in her life, but this realization is short-lived. She

hears a street organ, and when she remembers the street organ that played on the night before her mother's death, Eveline resolves not to repeat her mother's life of "commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness," but she does exactly that. Like the young boys of "An Encounter" and "Araby," she desires escape, but her reliance on routine and repetition overrides such impulses. On the docks with Frank, away from the familiarity of home, Eveline seeks guidance in the routine habit of prayer. Her action is the first sign that she in fact hasn't made a decision, but instead remains fixed in a circle of indecision. She will keep her lips moving in the safe practice of repetitive prayer rather than join her love on a new and different path. Though Eveline fears that Frank will drown her in their new life, her reliance on everyday rituals is what causes Eveline to freeze and not follow Frank onto the ship.

Eveline's paralysis within an orbit of repetition leaves her a "helpless animal," stripped of human will and emotion. The story does not suggest that Eveline placidly returns home and continues her life, but shows her transformation into an automaton that lacks expression. Eveline, the story suggests, will hover in mindless repetition, on her own, in Dublin. On the docks with Frank, the possibility of living a fully realized life left her.