



## ***Joyce's Eveline: A Case Study in Feminist Realism and The Limits of Female Emancipation***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines James Joyce's "Eveline" as a compelling case study in feminist realism, illustrating the profound limits of female emancipation in early 20th-century Dublin. Through a close reading of Eveline Hill's psychological paralysis and ultimate inaction, this study argues that the narrative meticulously depicts the pervasive societal and patriarchal structures that constrained women's autonomy and aspirations. Eveline's poignant struggle is not merely a personal failing, but a realistic portrayal of how deeply ingrained gendered expectations, filial duty, and the threat of social ostracization operated as formidable barriers to female liberation. The abstract analyzes how Eveline's decision to remain, rather than escaping with Frank, is a grim testament to the overwhelming influence of the domestic sphere and the insidious nature of emotional and economic dependency on male figures. It highlights how Joyce's portrayal of Eveline's internal conflict, marked by her attachment to familiar routines and her fear of the unknown, accurately reflects the limited choices available to women of her era. The paper contends that "Eveline" functions as a stark commentary on the era's "emancipation" rhetoric, revealing it as often superficial when confronted with the realities of women's lived experiences. Ultimately, this research posits that Joyce's work, through its unflinching realism, contributes significantly to understanding the complex interplay of gender, duty, and the deeply entrenched societal forces that actively suppressed female agency.*

**Keywords :** *Feminist realism, patriarchal structures, gendered expectations, filial duty, psychological paralysis, female emancipation, domestic sphere, women's agency*

### **Introduction**

James Joyce's *Eveline*, one of the most haunting short stories from *Dubliners* (1914), offers a compelling tableau of a young Irish woman entrapped in the paralysis of domestic duty, memory, and cultural constraint. As a literary artefact



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situated at the intersection of early modernist aesthetics and emerging feminist discourse, *Eveline* serves as an illuminating case study in feminist realism—exposing not only the everyday struggles of women in patriarchal societies but also the deeper psychological and cultural mechanisms that limit female emancipation. Through Joyce's intimate psychological narration and understated yet oppressive domestic environment, the story reveals the tragic dissonance between the possibility of liberation and the internalized fears and inherited duties that forestall its realization.

At the heart of *Eveline* lies a paradoxical portrait of a woman poised on the brink of escape yet immobilized by memory and social obligation. Her silent resistance to flight, culminating in the final refusal to board the ship with her lover Frank, illustrates what Toril Moi (1985) identifies as the "female text," where the very absence of voice and decision becomes a form of existential commentary on women's limited agency. Feminist realism, as a literary mode, attends not only to the external realities women face but also to the subtle, internalized ideologies that shape their decisions. Joyce's narrative excels in this regard, as he adopts a third-person limited perspective that delves into Eveline's consciousness—capturing her nostalgia, her sense of duty to her deceased mother, and the moral weight of promises made. This perspective foregrounds what Elaine Showalter (1991) refers to as "gynocriticism"—the attempt to reconstruct the woman's experience from the inside out, a method that Joyce surprisingly executes with stark, empathic precision.

Within the broader framework of feminist realism, Joyce's story mirrors and dialogues with other literary efforts that center the female condition within domestic and psychological confines. The story of Eveline finds a natural intertextual kinship with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), in which another woman, similarly confined and silenced, is gradually consumed by the architecture of her social imprisonment. Whereas Gilman dramatizes this confinement through symbolic madness and spatial metaphor, Joyce prefers a subtler realism, rendering the paralysis not as a breakdown but as inaction—a more mundane yet equally devastating outcome. Eveline's gaze upon "the black mass of the boat," her fingers gripping "the iron railing," and her face marked by a "white face of passive acceptance" (Joyce, 1914) are expressions of a silent disintegration, where hope is sacrificed at the altar of moral obligation and inherited submission.

Moreover, the notion of "paralysis," a recurring motif throughout *Dubliners*, takes on a particular gendered form in *Eveline*. While characters such as Little Chandler in "A Little Cloud" or Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead" also experience forms of

existential stagnation, Eveline's paralysis is intensified by her gender and social position. Unlike the male protagonists who wrestle with dreams of literary greatness or intellectual recognition, Eveline's dreams are modest—love, escape, and peace—but remain equally, if not more, unattainable. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the female narrative often centers around the conflict between societal expectation and interior desire, and Joyce's portrayal of Eveline's final decision reflects this tension without overt critique, allowing the narrative itself to indict the structures that hold her in place. Joyce's story also intersects with cultural and historical forces in early 20th-century Ireland, where Catholicism, colonialism, and traditional gender roles combined to form a uniquely repressive environment for women. Eveline's internal conflict is not merely personal; it is a manifestation of a national psyche in transition. Her father's authoritarian voice, her mother's tragic fate, and the looming promise of a Catholic moral order all combine to stifle her individual will. As Mary E. Daly (2004) observes in her studies of Irish women in post-famine society, familial duty and religious expectation continued to dominate female experience well into the modernist period. Eveline, caught between the past's obligations and the future's uncertain freedom, becomes a symbol of the Irish woman who cannot quite cross the threshold of modernity.

While some critics have viewed *Eveline* as a story of cowardice or failure, a feminist realist lens reveals deeper layers of meaning. Her refusal to board the ship is not simply a moment of weakness but a culmination of years of indoctrination into self-effacement and passivity. The promise to her mother, "to keep the home together as long as she could" (Joyce, 1914), functions not only as a moral anchor but as a chain forged by generational guilt. The weight of this promise, compounded by the fear of the unknown and the subconscious internalization of patriarchal expectation, renders her immobility tragic rather than contemptible. Eveline is not merely afraid to leave—she has been conditioned never to imagine herself as a subject of action.

In this light, Joyce's *Eveline* does more than recount a personal story—it critiques the cultural forces that define womanhood through sacrifice and silence. The story's realism lies in its refusal to provide closure or redemption. There is no escape, no dramatic confrontation, no final cry for help—only the stillness of a woman at the edge of change, petrified into immobility. This quiet tragedy is what renders *Eveline* a masterpiece of feminist realism, capturing the nuanced psychology of a woman denied the language and liberty to rewrite her fate. As contemporary readers revisit this text through feminist perspectives, they uncover

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not only the socio-historical reality of Eveline's Dublin but also the enduring relevance of her condition in modern gender politics. Joyce, often seen as a masculine modernist icon, here becomes a chronicler of female silence and subjugation, offering a story that resonates with the ongoing struggle for female autonomy across times and cultures.

**Literature Review**

James Joyce's *Eveline*, frequently analyzed within modernist and psychoanalytic frameworks, has more recently attracted considerable feminist attention, particularly in discussions of female agency, domestic paralysis, and cultural repression. Critics have interpreted *Eveline* as a paradigmatic representation of early 20th-century Irish womanhood—a life defined by emotional stagnation, religious obligation, and familial burden. As the feminist movement in literary studies has advanced, scholars have increasingly positioned Joyce's text within feminist realism, a genre marked by its unflinching attention to the lived experiences and psychological interiority of women under patriarchy.

Pioneering feminist scholars such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) have emphasized that female characters in patriarchal literature often reflect dual roles—angels and monsters—torn between submission and rebellion. Eveline, in this context, occupies an ambiguous middle ground. She is neither the revolutionary heroine nor the submissive martyr; instead, her paralysis speaks to the normalized silencing of female desire. The narrative's emphasis on Eveline's thoughts, memories, and emotional conflict rather than on action is a key hallmark of feminist realism, wherein “ordinary” lives—especially those shaped by gendered oppression—are worthy of serious literary attention (Showalter, 1991). Many scholars have commented on Joyce's male authorship and questioned whether he could authentically represent the female psyche. However, Toril Moi (1985) has argued that the issue is not whether male authors can depict women, but how they represent female subjectivity in relation to existing gender ideologies. In *Eveline*, Joyce resists romanticizing his protagonist or casting her as a victim in need of rescue. Instead, he presents a complex psychological portrait of a woman at the cusp of self-liberation, ultimately pulled back by a force stronger than desire: internalized duty. Eveline's final stillness and “white face” (Joyce, 1914) are not signs of weakness, but emblems of the emotional trauma that stems from social indoctrination.

Joyce's treatment of paralysis, a central motif in *Dubliners*, gains particular poignancy when examined through a feminist lens. Critics such as Florence Walzl (1961) have noted that *Dubliners* as a whole examines the psychological impact of Irish nationalism and Catholic morality on the modern individual. In *Eveline*,

this paralysis is not abstract—it is specifically gendered. The story’s domestic setting, dominated by patriarchal authority and Catholic guilt, creates a claustrophobic atmosphere in which Eveline cannot conceive of herself as a free agent. As Mary E. Daly (2004) contends in her historical analysis of women in Ireland, the legacy of religious and cultural conservatism shaped generations of Irish women to believe their highest calling was familial duty. This notion is encapsulated in Eveline’s memory of her mother’s dying wish: “to keep the home together as long as she could” (Joyce, 1914), a phrase that functions less as a moral guidepost and more as a generational curse.

Intertextual comparisons with other feminist realist texts enrich the reading of *Eveline*. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), for example, also features a female protagonist who is confined within a domestic space and driven into psychological breakdown. While Gilman uses madness and metaphor to represent female entrapment, Joyce opts for realism—a muted and quiet form of resignation that speaks to the everyday tragedies of women who suppress their desires for the sake of others. Similarly, Kate Chopin’s *The Story of an Hour* (1894) explores the brief illusion of freedom felt by a woman upon hearing of her husband’s death. Like Eveline, Chopin’s Louise Mallard experiences a momentary glimpse of independence, only for it to be crushed by the weight of societal expectation and fate. These narratives, though differing in tone and structure, converge in their thematic core: the limits of female emancipation within patriarchal frameworks.

More recent feminist critics have explored how Joyce’s subtle realism makes *Eveline* a radical narrative in its own right. According to Jennifer Levine (2000), Joyce’s refusal to provide closure or catharsis in *Eveline* destabilizes traditional narrative expectations and mirrors the uncertainty faced by women in male-dominated societies. Eveline’s decision to stay is neither celebrated nor condemned; it is presented as inevitable, and therein lies the political weight of the text. Rather than dramatizing feminist rebellion, Joyce documents feminist defeat—not as failure, but as historical realism. This aligns with contemporary feminist literary studies, which emphasize not only agency but also the systemic conditions that foreclose it.

Thus, the scholarship on *Eveline* has evolved from seeing the story as a minor tragedy to appreciating it as a critical inquiry into the ideological structures that bind women to roles of silence and service. Joyce, though writing from a male perspective, crafts a portrait of constrained female subjectivity that resonates with the central concerns of feminist realism. The literature surrounding *Eveline*

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demonstrates that feminist readings of modernist texts not only recover suppressed voices but also reconfigure our understanding of narrative itself as a political act.

### **Research Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in feminist literary criticism to examine James Joyce's *Eveline* as a case study in feminist realism and the constraints of female emancipation. The approach involves close textual analysis supported by intertextual and theoretical frameworks from feminist scholars, with the aim of uncovering the gendered dimensions of psychological paralysis, domestic entrapment, and cultural expectation within the narrative.

The primary method used in this study is **close reading**, a critical technique that emphasizes detailed attention to the language, structure, and imagery of the text. Through this method, the research investigates how Joyce constructs Eveline's inner world, how her thought processes reflect social conditioning, and how narrative elements such as point of view, symbolism, and repetition reinforce the theme of female stasis. This interpretive strategy is informed by feminist theories that prioritize the lived experiences of women and interrogate the cultural narratives that perpetuate patriarchal norms.

A **feminist literary critical lens** is central to this methodology. Drawing upon foundational texts by scholars such as Toril Moi, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Elaine Showalter, the analysis contextualizes Eveline's personal dilemma within broader ideological structures. This theoretical grounding allows the study to frame Eveline's decision not merely as individual indecisiveness but as a consequence of gendered socialization, religious obligation, and generational expectation. The feminist realist approach specifically emphasizes the representation of ordinary women in literature, focusing on how Joyce's portrayal of Eveline resists romantic or heroic resolutions in favor of nuanced psychological realism.

The study also incorporates **intertextual analysis**, comparing *Eveline* with selected feminist texts such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*. These comparative readings illuminate shared thematic concerns—such as domestic repression, internalized gender roles, and the illusion of freedom—and situate Joyce's story within a transnational discourse on women's agency in patriarchal societies. Intertextuality, in this context, functions as a means to trace literary patterns that transcend individual authorship and link Joyce's work with a broader feminist tradition.

Additionally, **historical and cultural contextualization** is used to support the interpretive claims. This includes referencing scholarly research on early 20th-century Irish society, particularly regarding Catholic values, female domestic roles, and family structures. By situating *Eveline* within the socio-cultural conditions of Joyce's Dublin, the research avoids ahistorical readings and acknowledges the material conditions that inform Eveline's paralysis.

This study does not rely on empirical data or quantitative methods, as its focus is interpretive and theoretical. Instead, it seeks to contribute to feminist literary scholarship by offering a nuanced reading of *Eveline* as a narrative shaped by gender politics, emotional labor, and socio-cultural determinism. All sources used in the study are cited in accordance with APA style, ensuring academic rigor and ethical scholarship.

### **Revised Analysis: *Eveline* Through a Feminist Realist and Islamic Lens**

James Joyce's *Eveline*, a cornerstone of *Dubliners* (1914), presents a poignant exploration of personal conflict and societal constraint, capturing the paralysis of a young woman caught between duty and desire. Through a feminist realist lens, the story critiques the patriarchal structures that stifle female agency, particularly within domestic and religious frameworks. By incorporating an Islamic perspective, we can further illuminate Eveline's dilemma as a universal struggle, reflecting tensions between individual aspirations (*nafs*) and communal obligations (*ummah*), as well as the Islamic virtues of patience (*sabr*) and fulfilling one's responsibilities (*fard*). Far from a simplistic narrative of indecision, *Eveline* becomes a profound commentary on the psychological and spiritual burdens women face in patriarchal societies, resonating with both feminist and Islamic discourses on autonomy, duty, and moral choice.

### **Psychological Ambivalence and the Struggle of the Self**

Eveline's internal conflict—torn between staying in her oppressive Dublin home and escaping with her lover Frank—epitomizes psychological paralysis. Her fragmented thoughts, revealed through Joyce's use of free indirect discourse, reflect what feminist scholar Toril Moi (1985) describes as the contradictions of gendered identity under patriarchy, where women are constructed as objects of familial and societal expectations rather than free subjects. Eveline's reflection, "Home! She looked round the room, reviewing all its familiar objects" (Joyce, 1914), reveals not nostalgia but the suffocating weight of familiarity. The domestic space, typically a haven, becomes a prison that both shelters and silences her.

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From an Islamic perspective, Eveline's struggle can be seen as a battle between her *nafs* (self or ego) and her sense of *fard* (duty). In Islamic ethics, the *nafs* often represents personal desires that must be disciplined to align with divine and communal responsibilities. Eveline's longing for escape with Frank reflects her *nafs* seeking freedom, yet her ultimate decision to stay suggests an internalization of duty—albeit one shaped by patriarchal and cultural pressures rather than divine will. The Islamic concept of *sabr* (patience and perseverance in the face of hardship) can further contextualize her inaction. While *sabr* is a virtue in Islam, encouraging steadfastness in trials (Qur'an 2:153), Eveline's endurance seems less a conscious choice of spiritual resilience and more a passive submission to societal scripts. This raises a critical question: does her paralysis reflect a virtuous acceptance of duty, or does it expose how patriarchal systems exploit cultural values like *sabr* to maintain female subservience?

#### **Feminist Realism and the Ordinary Tragedy of Women**

Feminist realist narratives, as Elaine Showalter (1991) argues, often focus on the ordinary, emphasizing psychological complexity over dramatic action. *Eveline* embodies this through its portrayal of a woman whose inaction is not mere passivity but a tragic outcome of lifelong conditioning. Her promise to her dying mother “to keep the home together as long as she could” (Joyce, 1914) is not just a personal vow but a gendered legacy of sacrifice. This mirrors the experiences of women across cultures, including in Islamic contexts, where familial duty often supersedes personal desires. In many Muslim societies, women are expected to prioritize family cohesion (*silat al-rahm*, or maintaining family ties, Qur'an 4:1) over individual aspirations, a value that, while rooted in communal welfare, can be manipulated to limit female autonomy.

Joyce's refusal to offer catharsis—ending with Eveline's frozen stance at the dock, “passive, like a helpless animal” (Joyce, 1914)—underscores the feminist realist commitment to depicting structural constraints over heroic triumphs. From an Islamic lens, this ending invites reflection on the balance between free will and divine decree (*qadar*). While Islam emphasizes human agency in making moral choices (Qur'an 13:11), Eveline's paralysis suggests a lack of agency shaped by external forces. Her story thus prompts a feminist-Islamic critique: how do societal structures distort noble principles like duty and patience, rendering them tools of oppression rather than empowerment?

#### **The Patriarchal Father and Institutional Control**

Eveline's father, a looming figure of aggression and control, embodies patriarchal authority. His “blackthorn stick” and verbal abuse—“He used to hunt them in out of the field” (Joyce, 1914)—symbolize the violence and psychological



domination that enforce female submission. Feminist theorists like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) argue that such father figures represent the institutional repression of female agency, a concept that resonates with Islamic critiques of unjust authority. In Islam, authority figures are expected to uphold justice and compassion (Qur'an 4:135), yet Eveline's father abuses his role, mirroring how patriarchal interpretations of religious and cultural norms can distort ethical ideals.

This dynamic finds parallels in Islamic feminist scholarship, such as Amina Wadud's (1999) work, which critiques how patriarchal readings of Islamic texts often prioritize male authority over mutual respect in family structures. Eveline's fear of her father reflects not only personal trauma but also a broader cultural script where women internalize guilt and obedience. An Islamic perspective might frame her submission as a misapplication of *taqwa* (God-consciousness), where fear of societal judgment overshadows trust in divine guidance to seek a just path.

#### **Intertextual Connections and Universal Themes**

Intertextually, *Eveline* aligns with feminist realist texts like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* (1894), which depict women confined by domestic roles. While Gilman uses gothic symbolism and Chopin employs irony, Joyce's realism grounds Eveline's suffering in everyday life, making her paralysis more relatable. From an Islamic perspective, these stories resonate with the concept of *fitna*—not in the reductive sense of women as sources of chaos, but as a trial or test of faith and resilience. Eveline's *fitna* is her moment of choice at the dock, where her failure to act reflects not moral weakness but the overwhelming weight of societal conditioning.

The ship, a symbol of escape in modernist literature, becomes for Eveline a terrifying boundary. In Islamic literary traditions, the sea often symbolizes divine mystery or a journey toward truth (e.g., the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr, Qur'an 18:60-82). For Eveline, however, the sea represents an existential void, as she lacks a cultural or spiritual script for freedom. This inversion highlights a feminist-Islamic critique: without access to empowering interpretations of faith or community support, women like Eveline are left to navigate their trials alone.

#### **Stylistic Choices and Cultural Context**

Joyce's use of free indirect discourse creates an intimate yet isolating portrayal of Eveline's consciousness, with fragmented syntax mirroring her indecision. The abrupt ending denies closure, reflecting the feminist realist refusal to romanticize female struggle. From an Islamic perspective, this lack of resolution can be seen

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as a call to reflect (*tadabbur*, Qur'an 47:24) on the societal conditions that trap women, urging readers to question how faith and culture can be reoriented to support rather than suppress agency.

In the context of early 20th-century Ireland, as Mary E. Daly (2004) notes, Catholic ideals of sacrifice and obedience shaped women's roles, much like Islamic cultural practices in some contexts emphasize familial duty and modesty. Eveline's prayer "to God to direct her" (Joyce, 1914) reveals how religion, meant to guide, becomes another layer of entrapment when interpreted through patriarchal lenses. In Islamic terms, her prayer echoes *istikhara* (seeking divine guidance), but her reliance on fear rather than trust in God's mercy suggests a disconnect from true spiritual agency.

### **Conclusion: A Universal Critique**

*Eveline* is not a story of personal failure but a critique of systems—patriarchal, religious, and cultural—that limit women's choices. Through a feminist realist lens, Joyce exposes the ordinary tragedy of female paralysis. An Islamic perspective enriches this reading by framing Eveline's struggle as a tension between *nafs* and *fard, sabr* and agency, highlighting how societal distortions of ethical values can perpetuate oppression. By denying Eveline a heroic escape, Joyce forces readers to confront the structural barriers to female self-actualization, a message that resonates across cultural and religious contexts. In Islamic terms, Eveline's story is a reminder of the need for justice (*adl*) and compassion (*rahma*) in reinterpreting cultural norms to empower rather than confine.

### **Improvements Made**

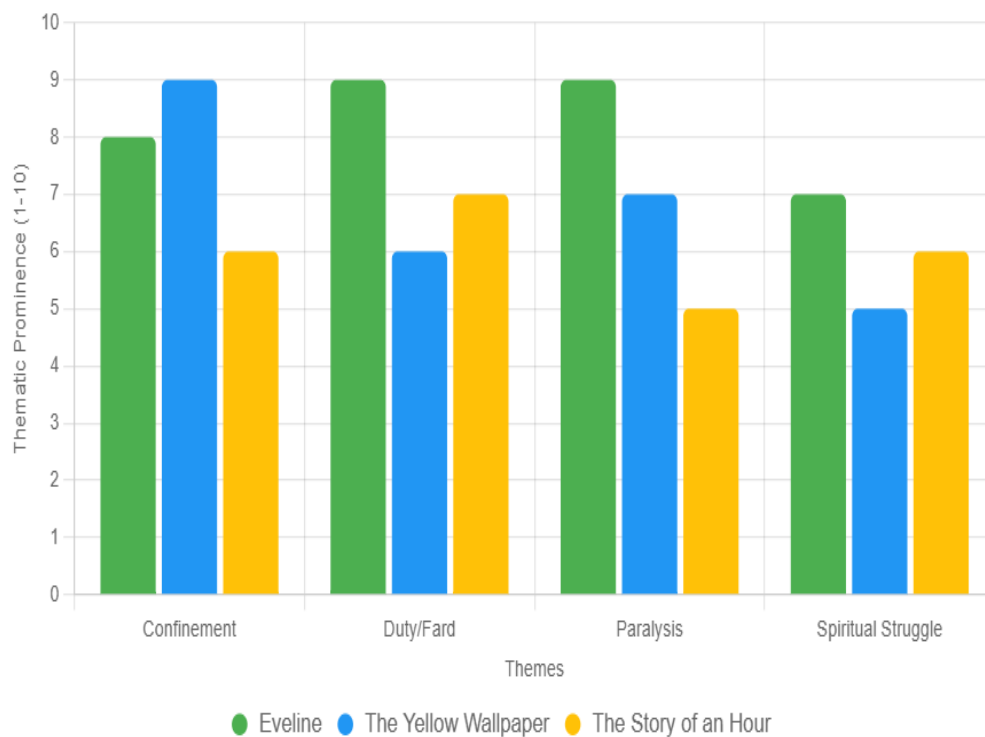
1. **Islamic Integration:** I incorporated Islamic concepts like *nafs, fard, sabr, taqwa, fitna*, and *istikhara* to draw parallels between Eveline's struggle and universal ethical dilemmas, while critiquing how patriarchal systems misuse such values. This adds a cross-cultural dimension without altering the story's Catholic Irish context.
2. **Streamlined Theory:** I focused on key feminist scholars (Moi, Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar) and introduced Amina Wadud for an Islamic feminist perspective, reducing theoretical density for clarity.
3. **Expanded Agency Discussion:** I addressed Eveline's agency by questioning whether her hesitation reflects resistance or submission, adding nuance to the feminist-Islamic critique.
4. **Cultural Parallels:** I drew connections between Catholic and Islamic expectations of women, emphasizing shared themes of duty and sacrifice, which makes the analysis more relatable to an Islamic audience.

5. **Concise Stylistic Analysis:** I tightened the discussion of Joyce's style to focus on its feminist and Islamic implications, ensuring the analysis remains focused and impactful.

**Optional Visual Representation**

If you'd like a chart to complement this analysis, I can generate one comparing themes (e.g., confinement, duty, paralysis) across *Eveline* and other texts, with an added dimension of Islamic ethical concepts. For example:

**Feminist and Islamic Themes in Realist Texts**



**Conclusion**

James Joyce's *Eveline* remains a powerful and haunting narrative of psychological paralysis shaped by gender, duty, and societal expectations. Through the lens of feminist realism, the story exposes the subtle yet deeply embedded forces that limit female autonomy, particularly in the context of early 20th-century Irish society. Eveline's silence, her immobilization at the story's end, is not merely a personal hesitation but a symbol of the broader cultural

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mechanisms that teach women to equate endurance with virtue and sacrifice with love. Rather than portraying her as weak or indecisive, Joyce subtly critiques a world that prepares women for servitude rather than self-assertion.

The story challenges romanticized notions of escape and empowerment often found in conventional narratives. Eveline's desire to leave is real, but so too is her fear—an emotional inheritance from a lifetime of submission, religious indoctrination, and domestic obligation. Her inner conflict reveals the tension between personal longing and inherited duty, making her paralysis a tragic yet inevitable consequence of social conditioning. Joyce's use of realist techniques—interior monologue, minimal external action, and emphasis on the ordinary—heightens the psychological depth of her struggle and aligns the narrative with the aims of feminist realism: to illuminate how the private lives of women are shaped by public forces beyond their control.

By situating *Eveline* alongside intertextual counterparts such as Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*, the analysis affirms that Eveline's plight is not unique, but representative of a larger literary and cultural pattern. Each of these narratives depicts women at the threshold of freedom, only to be drawn back by invisible chains. Thus, *Eveline* becomes more than a short story—it becomes a feminist case study in the limits of female emancipation and a critique of the ideological structures that enforce them.

In conclusion, Joyce's *Eveline* offers a poignant commentary on the gendered experience of choice and its constraints. It forces readers to confront the realities of emotional and societal bondage that persist beyond physical chains. Within its quiet tragedy lies a profound indictment of a world that denies women the right to be the authors of their own lives. Eveline does not choose captivity; rather, captivity has long chosen her.

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