Eveline’s awakening of woman consciousness—The analysis of *Eveline* by James Joyce from the perspective of feminism

YANG Shuang-ju, GAO Yi-xian
(Tangshan Branch, Hebei University of Science & Technology, Tangshan 063000, China)

Abstract: *Eveline* is one of the stories in *Dubliners* by James Joyce, a story about moral paralysis and a quest for vitality in vain. This paper attempts to analyze the protagonist of the story, Eveline’s awakening of woman consciousness and make a tentative probe into the factors that lead to her final subservience to the patriarchal society.

Key words: *Eveline*; woman consciousness; subservience

1. Introduction

*Dubliners* is James Joyce’s collection of short stories. In this collection all the fifteen stories revolve around the life of the Irish middle class in and around the capital city of Ireland—Dublin in the early years of the 20th century. *Eveline* is the fourth one among the fifteen stories. The story happens in a town in Ireland. Eveline, the heroine, lives with her father and brothers in a poor family. At home she is responsible for taking care of her whole family, and in the meantime, she is hired to do tedious and monotonous work as a saleswoman. Her father is a closefisted and bad-tempered person. Her employer, the owner of the store is not kind to her, either. Later she meets Frank, a “very kind, manly and open-hearted” sailor (James Joyce, 1999, p. 14), and falls in love with him. Frank is very kind to Eveline. She promises to go to Buenos Ayres with Frank where they will get married and live a happy new life. However, when the last moment comes, she hesitates and chooses to stay with her family instead of going with Frank to Buenos Ayres. *Eveline* is a story about local people’s spiritual paralysis and their failed quest for new life and vitality. However, in the story Eveline demonstrates her awakening of woman consciousness and makes some attempts to change her social state even though in vain at last, which is the indication of the Dubliners’ hope for change and vitality in life.

2. Eveline’s awakening of woman consciousness

Traditionally, women are viewed as subordinate and inferior to men. In *Genesis*, Eve is created from Adam’s rib, and later Eve is led astray by the serpent betraying the Lord, thereafter, Eve is punished by God, defining her female subordination, “thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (LIU Yi-qing, et al., 1989, p. 14). Thus sets the patriarchal social convention that man should command and woman should obey. In classical Greek culture, the male is identified with civilization, reason and order, while the female, with nature, emotion and chaos. For centuries, women have been considered to be, by nature, dependent on and inferior to men. As time...
goes on, these notions come to be widely accepted as social norms and are strictly observed by all the members of the society, men as well as women. In the story, Eveline’s mother serves as a model woman image in a patriarchal society. She lives heart and soul, as the society required, for her husband and even for the whole family, but at last she gets insane and dead. Eveline remembers that “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” (James Joyce, 1999, p. 14). The story does not tell us clearly about the life of her mother, but from Eveline’s psychological activities, we can get an inference about her life. At that time, women may have no free choice of her own husband of her own will, in this sense, she most probably is forced to marry a man of lazy, alcoholic and bad-tempered nature. She lives completely for her husband and her children, like a loyal servant of the family. She loses her vigor and vitality little by little without any expectation and hope for life. Later the pressure of life and the exhaustion of mentality drives her crazy. Eveline’s conflict in her heart reaches the highest level when she remembers her mother’s whole life experience and her final death. Her mother’s miserable life greatly impresses her. Her mother lives a common life and dies of a tragic one that terrifies her. Then she gets an idea of escape. Eveline’s mother is a victim of the patriarchal society. Having witnessed her mother’s miserable life, Eveline determines that she will not live her mother’s tragic life and instead, make a pursuit of a happy life because she believes she “has a right to happiness” (James Joyce, 1999, p. 14). The use of the image “dust” in the story is a good manifestation of Eveline’s unbearable feeling of her tedious and boring life, the paralysis of Dublin and her awakening of woman consciousness and hope for a change of life full of vitality (LI Man-ping, 2002, p. 31). She “looked round the room, reviewing all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from”. “Her head was leaned against the window curtains and in her nostrils was the odor of dusty crotome. She was tired” (James Joyce, 1999, p. 14). She does not want to live a life like her mother in a state of numbness and paralysis. Eveline takes Argentina as a place where she can avoid the threat of her father’s violence as well as her dead mother’s “life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness” (James Joyce, 1999, p. 14). In the story, the image of “water” signifies rejuvenation, the possibilities of a new life (LI Man-ping, 2002, p. 32). In contrast to her present life full of “hard work—a hard life”, Eveline looks forward to exploring “another life with Frank” (James Joyce, 1999, p. 14) and a new her across the sea. Compared to re-living her dead mother’s life, Eveline has a chance to start her own life with Frank that is brand new, open-ended and unstamped by the impressions of the past. She imagines it is a place where “People would treat her with respect” (James Joyce, 1999, p. 15). Thus, Eveline’s strong sense of woman consciousness is well presented in front of the readers.

3. Eveline’s subservience to the patriarchal norms

Though Eveline attempts to escape from her boring, intolerable life and pursue another life full of vitality, the deep-rooted patriarchal norms that confine women’s inferior position restrict her action, leading to her subservience to the society and deciding to stay in her usual tedious life.

At that time, women are defined in relation to men: “daughter to a father, mother to a child, wife to a man, or a widow to a deceased man. Marriage meant the transfer of the authority from one male to another” (ZHU Zhi-juan & ZHOU Xiu-min, 2006, p. 169). It is regretted that Eveline pins her hope for a happy new life on a man instead of depending on herself and getting firm hold of her own destiny in her own hand. At home she depends on her brother Ernest for spirit assurance and psychological comfort before his death when her father has no
ability to provide her with sense of security. Later, after Ernest’s death, she meets Frank, whom she falls in love with and plans to marry. She puts her hope of happiness on Frank, her future husband, admitting her subordinate position as inferior to male defined by the patriarchal society, “Frank would save her. He would give her life, perhaps love, too….Frank would take her in his arms, fold her in his arms. He would save her” (James Joyce, 1999, p. 15). On the one hand, Frank’s appearance into her life eliminates the suffocating air of her life and brings her what she desires: “Frank came across with her and took her to the cinema and sang for her. He told her his adventures in another country and his experiences on the sea. Frank brought a new world to her who is quite different from the life she lived before” (James Joyce, 1999, p. 15). Their love fills her heart with great expectations for their marriage life abroad. On the other hand, although she knows that Frank can give her a new life, and “perhaps love, too” and “she had a right to happiness” (James Joyce, 1999, p. 14), Eveline is uncertain whether she will find love with Frank, just as she does not know what kind of life they will have together. The adult world of desire, longing, fulfillment, and heartbreak roil about in “the seas of the world that tumbled about her heart” (James Joyce, 1999, p. 15) and this unknown world of emotional vitality and power is frightening to her. She suddenly realizes that she cannot go with Frank, because “he would drown her” in “all the seas of the world” (James Joyce, 1999, p. 15). Therefore, when she thinks about the uncertainty of her marriage with Frank, fear of the unknown future frightens her and she retreats before their departure. At the end of the story, Eveline stands on the pier, frozen in a state of fear and guilt. On the one hand, she hopes to leave Ireland. But on the other hand, she caught by fear, cannot move, speak, or even express emotion on her face. “He was shouted at to go on but he still called to her. She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition” (James Joyce, 1999, p. 15).

Another influential reason for Eveline’s returning to the meaninglessness of life is her determination to follow the will of her late mother who is deeply influenced by the conventional norms stipulated by male that women’s poison is to take care of her husband, children and her whole family and that they should be obedient, sacrificed, totally ignorant of their own existence. She complies with the patriarchal rules for women as the subordinate to men. On her death, she does not encourage Eveline to explore a new life, but presses her own life on her daughter, and wants her daughter to carry on her unfinished mission to take care of the whole family and sacrificing herself like her. Finally the thought of abandoning her father and siblings arouses Eveline’s sense of guilt and restricts her steps forward.

Eveline’s value of chastity also contributes to her subservience to the society. In Eveline’s society, woman’s virginity is highly valued. As a general rule, women’s sexual needs are considered evil and immoral. Women are taken as a creature without physical sexual desire at all. Those who seek sexual pleasure will be contended as indecent and vicious. A woman managing to compress her sexual desires will win herself and her family respect from society. Otherwise, she will plummet her and her family into an unfathomable abyss of disgrace and humiliation. Living in this social circumstance, Eveline cherishes her fame and value of chastity so much that she fears that her elope with Frank will be despised by people of her society and bring disgrace to her family. Eveline’s perplexity about her loss of chastity adds to her abortion of escape.

4. Conclusion

Although Eveline is well aware of the tiredness and numbness of her life and the paralysis of her city Dublin,