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'because she was a girl': Gender identity and the Postcolonial in James Joyce's 'Eveline'

Eugene O'Brien

That postcolonial studies have become a seminal part of academic life is now beyond debate. Indeed, the very term 'postcolonial' has become the latest 'catchall term' to 'dazzle the academic mind' (Jacoby, 1995, 30) by becoming part of the 'intellectual / academic industry taking as its topic the colonial division of the world' (Smyth, 1995, 27). At an epistemological level, however, there has been considerable debate as to the epistemological status of postcolonialism:

such has been the elasticity of the concept postcolonial that in recent years some commentators have begun to express anxiety that there may be a danger of it imploding as an analytic concept without any real cutting edge. (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, 11)

A further level of complexity is introduced into this debate

when the matter of Ireland is considered. Luke Gibbons has speculated that the problem with Ireland and postcolonial studies is simply that 'a native population which happened to be white was an affront to the very idea of "white man's burden", and threw into disarray some of the constitutive categories of colonial discourse' (Gibbons, 1996, 149). However, academic opinion has diverged considerably on this issue¹.

There has been ongoing debate about this topic within the academy, with some theorists, notably Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* and in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, arguing that Ireland was complicit in the colonizing of other cultures and hence cannot be seen as part of the postcolonial paradigm. The point here is that the complicity of Irish soldiers in the 'British colonial enterprise' makes the

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Irish seem more colonizer than colonized, and makes it difficult for 'colonized peoples outside Britain to accept their identity as post-colonial' (Ashcroft et al, 1989, 33). Liam Kennedy makes a similar point, suggesting that: 'Ireland, in effect, was a junior partner in that vast exploitative enterprise known as the British Empire' (Kennedy 1996, 176). Declan Kiberd, however, demurs from this position, noting that '*The Empire Writes Back*, passes over the Irish case very swiftly, perhaps because the authors find these white Europeans too strange an instance to justify their sustained attention' (Kiberd, 1996, 5). Kiberd's point is well taken, and Caitríona Moloney and Helen Thompson have made the relevant suggestion that, in order for Ireland to be considered 'part of the postcolonial paradigm, the paradigm itself must change' (Moloney and Thompson, 2000, 4). Perhaps this is the key to the point at issue. There can be no doubting the value of postcolonial theory as an instrument of critique. Colin Graham makes the valid point that:

It is these abilities to read culture as ideological, while criticising the homogeneity of ideology, and to prioritise cultural interchange within a colonial structure, which makes postcolonial theory an essential critical tool for understanding Irish culture. (Graham, 2001, 93).

However, if postcolonial writing is not to leave itself open to a tu quoque charge of setting up its own, inverted Manichean allegory², then the complications involved in the constitution of any form of hybridity or liminality must be taken into account. The matter of Ireland, especially the work of the canonical writers Yeats and Joyce, has profound implications for the epistemological status of the postcolonial paradigm. While Yeats can be seen as a poet of empire, as a central part of the canon of English literature, he can also be seen, as demonstrated by Edward Said's suggestion that while Yeats has been almost completely assimilated into the canons of 'modern English Literature' and 'European high modernism, can nevertheless be seen as belonging to the tradition of 'the colonial world ruled by European imperialism' (Said, 1990, 69).

Perhaps the most interesting conclusion that can be drawn from Said's argument is that there can really be no simple either/or

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choice underlying the postcolonial paradigm if that paradigm is to perform any sort of transformative critique of current and past colonial enterprises³. As Ania Loomba notes, the question is now being asked of postcolonial theory as to whether, in 'the process of exposing the ideological and historical functioning of such binaries, we are in danger of reproducing them' (Loomba, 1998, 104). Instead of this either/or choice, what is needed is a more nuanced form of interaction between selfhood and alterity, between coloniser and colonised. This is a form of critique that has been advocated by Jacques Derrida, who, speaking about his early neologism, *différance*, notes that it is 'neither this nor that; but rather this and that (e.g. the act of differing and of deferring) without being reducible to a dialectical logic either' (Derrida, 1981, 161).

In terms of an investigation of postcoloniality, one can look no further than Joyce to problematise the epistemological status of the postcolonial while at the same time enhancing the validity of postcoloniality as an informed mode of critique. The notion that postcoloniality is some form of all-embracing metanarrative is deconstructed along gender lines in this book as the experience of the male characters is vastly different from that of the female characters, a point that will become clear on an even cursory examination of any of the stories. The focal point of this essay will be Joyce's exploration of female subjectivity in *Dubliners*, specifically in the fourth story from that collection, 'Eveline'. In a book whose structure has been the topic of much discussion, the role of the female characters has been surprisingly neglected.

There has been comparatively none given to the development of female subjectivity in *Dubliners*. What we will see is that Joyce is in the process of tracing how the experience of women within the *Lebenswelt* of colonial Dublin differed from that of men, and this should strike a chord with the postcolonial paradigm given its particularist stance and its reluctance to accept overarching totalisations⁴. The importance of language in the construction of subjectivity is a concern shared by Joyce and one of his more influential critics, the French psychoanalytic theorist, Jacques Lacan.

For Lacan, subjectivity is centred on the interaction of the developing ego with what he terms the 'other'. For Lacan, the identity of the human subject comes about through a number of interactions between the individual and two orders of meaning which he has termed the imaginary and the symbolic. Lacan suggests that self-recognition, or to put it more correctly misrecognition (*méconnaissance*), is constitutive of the development of the human subject. In the mirror stage, Lacan postulates a child seeing its image in a mirror and becoming fixated on the image, which is both unified and coherent, as opposed to the child's own inchoate motor development. However, the image is also two-dimensional as opposed to three-dimensional. The fragmented infant identifies with, and desires to be like, an image of such wholeness, a process which Lacan sees as seminal to the imaginary order.

For Lacan, desire is the prime agency of human subjective development, and it is always directed at some form of otherness. As he puts it, writing about 'The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis': 'the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other' (Lacan, 1977, 58). For Lacan, the very nature of desire means that it is always unfulfilled: 'I always find my desire outside of me, because what I desire is always something that I lack, that is other to me' (Sarup, 1992, 68-69). In the establishment of the ego the desire for some form of identity is paramount. From infancy, we seek to be desired and loved by the Other, a term which, as Bracher notes, alters as we develop. Initially, at the beginning of life, this designation refers to the 'mother, then both parents, later one's peers, and finally any number of bodies or figures of authority, including God, Society and nature' (Bracher, 1993, 24). In many ways, it is the growth and development of our notion of the other that structures the type of identity which we develop, and language is the material dimension where such development can take place. This is true at both a conscious and an unconscious level, given Lacan's oft-quoted maxim that 'what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language' (Lacan, 1977, 147). In the world of *Dubliners*, this other is very different for men and women.

Consider the case of Eveline Hill, the eponymous heroine of the fourth story in *Dubliners*. Her subjectivity, in Lacanian terms, is defined in terms of her own personal and social other, and it becomes clear that her position is far worse than that of her male family members. In a parallel of the Freudian repetition complex, her life, by the end of the story, will be seen to repeat many of the destructive patterns of her mother's before her. Her sense of self is predicated on a reflection in the men of her life at present, and in reflected memories of her past in terms of women and children. In terms of the mirror stage, her desire to be of some worth is located through the male gaze, whether that of her brother, her father or her 'fellow', Frank. Speaking of the moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end, Lacan says: 'it is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other' (Lacan, 1989, 6). For Lacan, the notion of the other begins with an identification with an object different from itself, usually the mother, and then develops into the 'Symbolic other, or the real father' (Ragland Sullivan, 1986, 16).

For Lacan, the initial object of desire is the identification with the image of the self in the mirror, a process symbolic of the identification with the 'ideal-I'. In Lacanian desire, there is an *objet petit a*, or an object that satiates need, which is already lost. For instance, the breast of the mother is lost to her child and never can be regained. The lost character of the *objet petit a* means that the subject can never regain the feeling of being whole. Thus, desire can never be satisfied by the object of its need, and its object is always elsewhere. The demand for love always exceeds the possibility of its satisfaction. In other words, the possibility of fulfilling desire through the procurement of a needed object falls away, and you are left with desire of the 'other' in and of itself. Thus Eveline desired to have a boyfriend before she desired Frank personally: in terms of a validation of her selfhood, the notion that she is now seen as mature: '[f]irst of all it had been an excitement for her to have a fellow and then she had begun to like him' (Joyce, 1994, 28). Frank is both her object of desire and at the same time, the signifier through which she comes to a form of full identity as herself. In a manner redolent of Othello, Frank woos her by telling stories of

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adventures in far-flung destinations, of how he started as a 'deck boy at a pound a month on a ship of the Allan Line going out to Canada', how he had 'sailed through the Straits of Magellan and he told her stories of the terrible Patagonians', and how he had fallen on his feet in Buenos Aires (Joyce, 1994, 28-9). The contrast of this much-travelled male with the static Eveline could not be starker. We are reminded of how the story begins, with a seated Eveline watching 'the evening invade the avenue' (Joyce, 1994, 26). Her desire is achieved in being the object of Frank's desire: he is active while she is passive – he has the ability, through his gender-sanctioned role, to escape from colonial Ireland, while her only 'escape' is to go to the Saturday evening market to buy food for the family, having managed to wring some of her own money back from an increasingly abusive father. In postcolonial terms, his range of options and choices is far greater than hers, and thus the gender aspect of the postcolonial paradigm is brought to the fore, with these characters standing as metonyms for the gendered mediation of the postcolonial experience⁵.

It is interesting that the role of the father is so important in this story as for Lacan, the development of subjectivity through language is predicated on the what he terms the 'Name-of-the-Father'. In what is basically a linguistic reinterpretation of the Freudian Oedipus Complex, he sees the metaphor of the Name of the father substituting for the desire of the mother. Thus, the initial mirror stage, where the child, in the imaginary order, identifies with both its own ideal image and with the mother as the satisfier of all infantile demands. With the advent of entry into the Symbolic order, the Name-of-the-Father substitutes for the presence of the mother, with the attendant sense of unfulfilled desire.

For Eveline, her relationship with her mother has been foreclosed by death, and the sense of loss may be the reason for her perceived passivity. This relationship has also been temporally frozen. Eveline's memories of her mother are specifically related to illness and death. The final hours of her mother's life repeat in Eveline's mind, specifically as she sits pondering her own decision. Here the repression of woman in this society becomes almost a

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pattern. The sound of the organ reminds her of the same sound at the time of her mother's death, and this in turn reminds her of the life her mother led: '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' (Joyce, 1994, 29-30). The cause of that craziness has been hinted at earlier in the story, when evidence of her self-delusional logic is brought to the fore:

Then she would be married – she, Eveline. People would treat her with respect then. She would not be treated as her mother had been.

As noted earlier, Frank provides the means through which Eveline can satisfy her desire, a desire that has been societally enculturated within her, namely, to be married. The juxtaposition of the pronoun and proper noun in the above quotation 'she, Eveline' enacts the sense of imaginary fullness that she believes marriage will bring: only through becoming Frank's wife can she completely valorise her female identity. Only then will she achieve that sense of wholeness that Lacan sees as essential to our subjectivity. Only then would she get 'respect'.

In a very real sense, Eveline is a commodity in this story. Her stark choice here is to remain the daughter of one man, a violent man who had driven her mother to her death, or else to become the wife of another man who is largely unknown to her⁶. For Eveline, her desire to be loved by her father is an important aspect of her subjective development. Even as she describes an obviously violent man, she is at the same time making excuses:

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, Ernest was dead and Harry, who was in the church decorating business, was nearly always down somewhere in the country. (Joyce, 1994, 26-7)

Her sense of self, reflected in the mirror of a father who was first introduced as wielding a 'blackthorn stick' (Joyce, 1994, 26), is passive in the extreme. Just as she is compared with the dynamic Frank, so her father is seen as active and dynamic, while she is in need of protection.

This passivity is further underscored by the weekly row over money when, having handed her father her total week's wages (seven shillings) she had to endure a haranguing about thrift from her father before he would deign to return some of that money to her so she could shop for groceries. Clearly, Eveline is not highly prized by him, nor, given that this is her sense of selfhood, does she value herself highly. Frank is a different mirror image with whom she can identify. As already noted, at first, Eveline is not interested in Frank qua Frank; rather is she interested in having 'a fellow and then she had begun to like him'. What we see here is the desire to be valued by the other. Her relationship with her father, despite her best efforts in attenuating his levels of violence, is based on fear.

Her passivity is again foregrounded as her brothers, as males, were in the position of escaping from the violent attentions of her father. Interestingly, despite the fact that Eveline works in 'the Stores' and earns 'seven shillings' a week, which she 'gives up' to her father (Joyce, 1994, 28), and that her father is no longer depicted as having any earning power, nevertheless, it is Eveline who is depicted as having to ask for money to go shopping for groceries on a Saturday night. Meanwhile, her father is seen twice in the story giving money: once in the weekly wrangle with Eveline, as he returns a portion of her wages to her, and secondly, in the memory of the last night of her mother's illness:

she was again in the close, dark room at the other side of the hall and outside she heard a melancholy air of Italy. The organ-player had been ordered to go away and given sixpence. She remembered her father strutting back into the sick-room saying: 'Damned Italians! coming over here!' (Joyce, 1994, 29)

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In terms of the power of money as an index of self worth, her father and Frank, who bought the tickets for the boat, are both seen as powerful and generous. Clearly their range of choices is larger than that of Eveline who can keep house for her father in Dublin, or in Buenos Aires with Frank.

In terms of living in a colonial society, there is very little overt reference to be found in either this story or the collection as a whole. All of these characters are working class, and all have become comodified by the colonial process, albeit to different degrees. Empire, by placing men in a hegemonic position, attempts to displace any form of rebellion by allowing men far more freedom than women, and also by placing men in the position of authority over women. Thus, the women in these stories are repressed by their men who are, in turn, repressed by a colonial and class system which condemns them to menial jobs.

Eveline's father maintains his sense of selfhood through the threat of violence and a mixture of misogynistic and xenophobic attitudes. He also attempts to exert a form of epistemological as well as financial control over Eveline, who still has never been told the name of the priest whose photograph has been on the wall since her birth:

And yet during all those years she had never found out the name of the priest whose yellowing photograph hung on the wall above the broken harmonium beside the coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque. He had been a school friend of her father. Whenever he showed the photograph to a visitor her father used to pass it with a casual word: 'He is in Melbourne now.' (Joyce, 1994, 27)

Eveline's function is to dust this picture, but not to be part of its epistemological context. This example stresses that there are subtle hierarchies of power to be found within this seemingly amorphous body of working class Dubliners. Frank has, through emigration, managed to escape some of the claustrophobic atmosphere which has made Mr Hill become cruel and violent. Of course, in becoming

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a sailor, Frank has become interpellated, in an Althusserian sense, into precisely the role required of a young Irishman by the British Empire – merchant navy canon fodder. He is providing the manpower for the ongoing ruling of the waves by Britannia, and in so doing, achieving more personal freedom and empowerment than will ever be open to Eveline. Like Harry, the church-painter, Frank is defined in terms of selfhood by his job; gender definition is not enough, there must be a more graded sense of selfhood associated with occupation. Eveline, on the other hand, is not. This is abundantly clear in her comments on the song about the 'lass that loved a sailor' (Joyce, 1994, 28): Frank is defined by his social occupation while Eveline is gender-defined.

Perhaps the most significant degree of gender difference pointed up in this story is in the area of choice. From the outset, the male characters have choices, and more importantly, exercise levels of control over the choices of the women in their lives. Our first view of Eveline's father is of his coming to end the play of the children, his stick standing as a metonym of the violence through which he holds sway in his family. Eveline's brother, Harry, exercises the choice of moving away from the home 'somewhere down the country' (Joyce, 1994, 27). Frank exercises choice throughout the story, finally choosing to leave Eveline in the end. The choices of women, on the other hand, are clearly attenuated. Eveline's mother has circumscribed Eveline's own life-choices by interpellating her into the traditional role of carer by asking her to 'keep the home together for as long as she could' (Joyce, 1994, 29). For Eveline, part of her reflective mirror is that haunting promise made to a dying woman; it has fixed her in a passive state and refuses to allow her to develop along the lines cited by Bracher above, when he itemises how growth is predicated on a development of the 'other' in our lives.

The experience of Eveline is passive, a fact instantiated in the circular logic of the story. She is seen sitting down, in the opening lines, leaning against a window, and dwelling on the past of her childhood, a memory process itself which is maimed, featuring images of violence and physical disability. Her story ends as she grips

'because she was a girl': Gender Identity and the Postcolonial in 'Eveline'

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'with both hands at the iron railing' of the North Wall harbour terminal, refusing to move. Her complete inability to communicate with Frank at this crucial juncture 'amidst the seas she sent a cry of anguish' is eerily redolent of her mother's final words, the oft cited 'Derevaun Seraun! Derevaun Seraun!' (Joyce 1994, 30). To attempt to translate these lines into Irish is futile, and totally misses the point of the Joycean encapsulation of the experience of women in this story.

Just as Lacan sees language, and the oscillation between the imaginary and symbolic orders, as central to subjectivity, so in this world, where such development is forcibly stunted in the case of women, language itself loses its ability to communicate and becomes almost autistic, as both mother and daughter regress into incomprehension and non-verbal sound respectively, in the face of the crises of their lives. Though Eveline sees her gender role as a blessing, as her father had never 'gone for her like he used to go for Harry and Ernest, because she was a girl' (Joyce, 1994, 27), in actual fact, it completely circumscribes her actions, choices and personal development.

What Joyce has given us in this exemplary text, is a graphic account of the dialectics and hierarchies of power that accrue in a working class, colonial culture. Far from being an undifferentiated group, the men and women of *Dubliners* each inhabit different discursive and existential regimes. What a Lacanian and postcolonial reading of this text reveal are the nuances delineated by Joyce in terms of the gender politics of the time. Whatever problems are faced by the men in the story, both women are reduced to an inability to communicate. As Frank leaves, the final picture of Eveline is less than human: 'she set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition' (Joyce, 1994, 31); and this is, so the story would indicate, because she was a girl.

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Notes

- ¹ A thorough discussion of the usage of this term in a specifically Irish context is to be found in *Semicolonial Joyce*.
- ² Abdul JanMohamed's seminal article: 'The Economy of the Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature'. JanMohamed's thesis (referring to a 3rd century Persian cult which saw God and Satan as absolutely separate and locked in eternal conflict) is that colonial literature subverts 'the traditional dialectic of self and Other' (JanMohamed, 1995, 18), and sets up a fetishised 'nondialectical fixed opposition between the self and the native' (JanMohamed, 1995, 19). Colonization, as an ideology, power relationship and discourse, endorses such a fixed binary opposition, with the colonized self being defined in contradistinction to the colonized 'other', and thus JanMohamed's point is well taken.
- ³ I think, given the examples cited, that this is a real danger for the postcolonial paradigm. To allow oppositions to become reified is to attenuate the possibilities of influence, interaction, intersection and ultimately, transformation. It is also to predicate one's theoretical premises on the past as opposed to the future. If the colonizer/colonized opposition is seen as definitive within a culture, even though, as in Ireland, the initial acts of colonization occurred hundreds of years ago, then *ipso facto*, developments in the fields of politics, society and culture are limited by this reified definition of self and other. Issues of identity are ultimately settled by reference to this *terminus a quo* from which all such identificatory politics derives. Such a perspective narrows the theoretical scope of postcolonial discourse, and oversimplifies complex issues of interaction and influence (O'Brien, 2003, 138).
- ⁴ One of the key generative texts of the postcolonial paradigm is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's much-anthologised essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak'. Indeed, this essay has given a name to a particular sub-genre of postcolonialism, namely Subaltern Studies. However, what is interesting is that the full title of this essay is seldom seen, namely: 'Can the Subaltern Speak?: Speculations on Widow Sacrifice'. The original focus on this most essentialist silencing of a gendered subaltern has often been lost in the ongoing success of Spivak's argument.

because she was a girl' Gender Identity and the Postcolonial in 'Eveline'

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- ⁵ For an informative and wide-ranging discussion of Joyce and colonialism see *Semicolonial Joyce*.
- ⁶ Hugh Kenner has famously suggested that the destination that Frank has in mind is more likely to be Liverpool rather than Buenos Aires, underlining the almost complete lack of information given about Frank in this story.

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Eugene O'Brien

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'because she was a girl': Gender Identity and the Postcolonial in 'Eveline'

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