

## Reading James Joyce’s “Eveline” through Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*

Sungjin Jang

“An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang forever over this act of madness or despair.”

Joseph Conrad (*The Secret Agent* 250, emphasis original)

“All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would *drown* her. She gripped with both hands at the iron railing.”

James Joyce (*D* 31, emphasis mine)

### I. Introduction

In “James Joyce and the Conrad Connection: The Anxiety of Influence,” Jane Ford argues that Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* possibly influenced Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Knowing that “Joyce’s marked copy of *The Secret Agent* was part of his Trieste library,” Ford finds many things—the use of Homer’s *Odyssey* legend, ironic patterns, and recurring themes—in Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* appear in Joyce’s *Ulysses* (5). Thus, Ford suggests that *Ulysses* is “a reversal of the sparse and tautly constructed [The] *Secret Agent*” (7).<sup>1)</sup> In this regard,

Ford argues that Joyce would use Conrad's *The Secret Agent* as one of his writing materials for *Ulysses*. Considering that Joyce repurposed many and often unidentified things for his writing, Conrad's *The Secret Agent* could be one of *Ulysses*'s sources.

Critics such as Agata Szczeszak-Brewer and Robert Hampson have paid attention to their colonial backgrounds, reading their works through the lens of space and place. However, unlike them, Ford is interested in the possible relationship between Conrad and Joyce based on the similarities between *The Secret Agent* and *Ulysses*. In this respect, Ford's reading is new and even intriguing. However, while agreeing with Ford, I would like to argue that Joyce's work can also be Conrad's writing material. If Ford finds commonalities between *The Secret Agent* and *Ulysses*, many striking resemblances and repeated patterns exist in Joyce's "Eveline" and *The Secret Agent*. Just as Joyce's Dublin is a colonized city where people become paralyzed, Conrad's London is an "enormous" and "monstrous" town where "it would take years to find the right way" (*The Secret Agent* 34). If "Eveline" can be read as a matter of immigration and emigration, *The Secret Agent* is a spy novel that deals with terrorists of many different nationalities. Both stories deal with their characters' failures. Verloc fails to destroy the Greenwich observatory; Stevie fails his errand to put the bomb inside the observatory; Winnie fails to take care of Stevie and escape from London; and the Professor fails to invent a perfect detonator that "that would adjust itself

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- 1) Jane Ford writes: "In addition to the ironic use of the Homeric legend, they are: (1) basic configurations of characters and their relationships, (2) recurrent imagery, and (3) central themes. These features occur within sharply delineated time-frames, with death at the heart of each novel: Dignam's 11:00 funeral and Stevie's destruction in the park at 11:30. Stevie's murder in a park has its echo in the recurrent leitmotif of the political Phoenix Park murders throughout *Ulysses*, murder in a park being a natural oxymoron. Greenwich Observatory, the target of Verloc's bomb, and Dunsink, its Dublin counterpart, are linked twice in *Ulysses* (167, 717)" (7).

to all conditions of action, and even to unexpected changes of conditions" (84). Similarly, Eveline fails to keep the promise to her mother; she fails to take care of the family; she fails to leave Dublin with Frank, and she fails to start her new life. Both stories have violent fathers and nominal (absent) mothers. Because of these reasons, Eveline and Winnie become quasi-mothers to Harry, Ernest, and Stevie, respectively. Frank and Verloc live in lodgings, and Eveline and Winnie meet them in the lodgings. Eveline and Winnie are offered a better life by Frank and Ossipon. Eveline and Winnie use these men to escape from their prison-like situations. If Kenner's reading of "Eveline" suggests Frank's possible disloyalty, Winnie becomes betrayed by Verloc and Ossipon. Whereas Eveline fears that Frank would drown her, Ossipon indirectly drowns Winnie.

Considering that "Eveline" was first published in 1904 and *The Secret Agent* was published in 1907, it would be possible to say, following Ford's reasoning, that Conrad might use Joyce's "Eveline" as a source for *The Secret Agent*. However, instead of simply focusing on one writer's influence on the other, I would like to argue that Conrad's 442-paged *The Secret Agent* is an extended version of Joyce's 5-paged "Eveline." If Joyce ends "Eveline" with Eveline's unexpected paralysis, Conrad, who brings Joyce's "Eveline" into his *The Secret Agent*, relates what will happen if Eveline leaves Dublin with Frank through Winnie's attempt to leave London with Ossipon. By extending the length and storyline of "Eveline," Conrad presents Winnie's story as an extended version of "Eveline."<sup>2</sup>

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2) In his 1920 Author's Note to *The Secret Agent*, Conrad calls this book "the Story of Winnie Verloc" (35).

## II. Conrad's Winnie as Joyce's Eveline

On the surface, Joyce's "Eveline" seems to be a simple story because it is only 5 pages. The story can be summarized by saying Eveline, who suffers from her father's violence and is not treated well at work, finally decides to leave Dublin with her boyfriend Frank. When Eveline is about to board a ship to Buenos Aires with Frank, she suddenly becomes paralyzed like "a helpless animal" (32). Despite its short length, interpretations of the story have been different and even conflicting because Eveline's would-be-happy marriage really depends on Frank, whose name literally suggests that he is *frank*. Should Eveline leave Dublin with Frank, or should Eveline stay to take care of her family, including her violent father? Much like Eveline, critics seem to be in between these two choices. Hugh Kenner writes: "The hidden story of 'Eveline' is the story of Frank, a bounder with a glib line, who tried to pick himself up a piece of skirt. She will spend her life regretting the great refusal. But what she refused was just what her father would have said it was, the patter of an experienced *seducer*" (21, emphasis mine). Paying attention to the unusual commas ("He had fallen on his feet in Buenos Ayres [comma] he said [comma] and had come over to the old country just for a holiday"), Kenner believes that Frank, unlike Eveline's dead brother Ernest, is not "frank"; instead, Frank is an untrustworthy "bounder" who tells a lie to consummate his relationship with Eveline. In a hotel in Liverpool, she is supposed to take a ship for Buenos Aires, *where* Frank has a home, *where* Eveline can make herself at home. Thus, unlike this rosy future, Frank turns out to be a "white slave trader," if I borrow Katherine Mullin's term, and Eveline becomes the victim/prostitute of this trade (184).

However, going against these Kenner readings, Sidney Feshbach argues that "The discussion of Frank by Kenner is a flimsy house of cards . . . I

suggest that [Kenner's] Frank changes from being a character in a short story by Joyce to an invention of his own" (223). Much like Feshbach's argument, Bernard Benstock at first believes that Kenner's reading is absurd: "When I first encountered his interpretation [which was Frank being a bounder] in *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), I tended to scoff at the serious misreading; when I next heard it presented at the *Ulysses* conference at the University of Tulsa in 1972, under the title 'Molly's Masterstroke, or Who Moved the Furniture?' I was impressed but still unconvinced" (428). But while listening to Kenner's presentation again and again, Benstock admits that he is willing to "meet Kenner halfway and admit that Frank (or 'Frank') is no longer convincing to me" (430).<sup>3</sup>

If these critics, much like Eveline, choose to side with Kenner or not, David Ben-Merre, paying attention to Joyce's use of ambiguous and often uncertain pronouns, such as "he" and "it," argues that Eveline, who has been paralyzed since its publication, finally escapes Dublin with Frank. Almost at the end of the story, Eveline is on the Dublin port with Frank. The narrator describes this port scene: "No! No! No! It was impossible. Her hands clutched the iron in frenzy. Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish. —Eveline! Evvy! He rushed beyond the barrier and called to her to follow" (31-32). Readers will most likely identify the "he" as Frank after reading this ending. However, going against this reading, Ben-Merre argues: "We know Frank's pet name for Eveline; it is one of the few details we are given about their relationship

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3) Benstock still presents many interesting and convincing things that go against Kenner's reading. For example, he says: "What at first appears to be Kenner's strongest clout may well be his weakest. He hypothesizes Frank's intention to seduce and abandon naive Eveline in Liverpool, since no ships sailed from Dublin to Buenos Aires, but the one they were to board at the North Wall was destined for Liverpool. Kenner presents this salient piece of information as a new discovery, but other readers of the story may have been aware of it for a long time, and those who were always aware of it were Joyce's Irish readers" (430).

'Evvy' but 'Poppens' (*D* 39). Why presume now that Frank would suddenly call her 'Evvy'? What I am trying, in a roundabout way, to suggest here is that this 'he' in the final scene might be Eveline's father" (462). With this realization in mind, Ben-Merre goes back to the previous description: "Her hands clutched the iron in frenzy." Since in this reading the "he" is Eveline's father, the iron should be understood as "that of the ship" (462). Thus, Eveline, at this famous ending, does not become paralyzed. Instead, she is on the boat with Frank to Buenos Aires. When she is about to escape Dublin, Eveline's father, who used to say, "I know these sailor chaps," comes too late to stop them (30).

Whether Eveline should leave or stay and whether or not Eveline finally succeeds in leaving Dublin, these readings still seem to be a matter of choice. Frank might be a savior who can provide Eveline with a happy marriage. By contrast, Frank might be a white slave trader who wants to consummate his relationship with Eveline only to sell her to a brothel. Or, Eveline might leave Dublin even without Frank. Nonetheless, what will Eveline's life be like if she leaves Dublin? (we know she already chooses to leave Dublin before the story begins). The narrator says: "But in her new home, in a distant unknown country, it would not be like that. Then she should would be married . . . People would treat her with respect then" (28). Like this promising expectation, will she have a happy marriage? Will she be a different person whom people treat with respect? Let us answer these questions through the lens of Conrad's Winnie.

Eveline and Winnie are, strangely enough, in similar situations. One of the most striking similarities is their violent fathers. When Eveline's mother was alive, her father seemed kind and nice to her. But since Eveline's mother passed away, her father has become violent, and Eveline, who is over nineteen, feels "herself in danger of her father's violence" (28). Her father's

violence is well pronounced through the narrator's description of the children's play:

The children of the avenue used to play together in that field—the Devines, the Waters, the Dunns, little Keogh the cripple, she and her brothers and sisters. Ernest, however, never played: he was too grown up. Her father used to *hunt* them in out of the field with his *blackthorn* stick but usually little Keogh used to keep nix and call out when he saw her father coming. (27, emphasis mine)

On the surface, the description of the children's play seems to be peaceful and cheerful. However, when it comes to Eveline's father, the narrator uses the verb "hunt" to describe her father. Dictionary.com defines the word: "1. to chase or search for (game or other wild animals) to catch or kill 2. to pursue with force, hostility, etc., in order to capture." Considering that the word "hunt" is usually associated with "catching," "killing," "force," and "hostility," the narrator's use of the word suggests that Eveline's father is an abusive person and that he does not treat the children properly; he seems to view these children as his attacking targets. As if assuring this assumption, Eveline's father holds "his blackthorn stick." Although this stick is apparently "A stout walking stick made from the stem of the blackthorn shrub," it can be viewed as a rod used to whip children (Norris 27). Thus, little Keogh is the sentry to keep away from Eveline's intimidating father.

Likewise, Winnie's father is aggressive, although his anger goes to Winnie's beloved Stevie, not Winnie. The narrator says: "However, [Stevie] never had any fits (which was encouraging); and before the natural outbursts of impatience on the part of his father he could always, in his childhood's days, run for protection behind the short skirts of his sister Winnie" (43). Winnie's father, who does not take his son kindly and who has always tried

to find fault with Stevie, easily gets angry with Stevie. Much like Eveline, Stevie is often under the threat of his father's violence. As soon as his father becomes angry, Stevie runs towards Winnie for protection. Oddly enough, their mother is not there to stop this offensive father. Instead, Winnie tries to protect Stevie from their father, therefore becoming a symbolic mother to Stevie. Of course, they have a mother: "Winnie's mother was a stout, wheezy woman, with a large brown face. She wore a black wig under a white cap. Her swollen legs rendered her inactive" (41). Winnie's mother's "swollen legs" suggest that she is a physically and symbolically "inactive" mother who does not fulfill her role as a mother. Realizing that she is unable to keep her motherly role, Winnie's mother forces Winnie to be Stevie's real mother. When Winnie chooses Verloc for the safety of Stevie, Winnie's mother is relieved: Winnie's mother "felt that the poor boy was pretty safe in this rough world. And in her heart of hearts she was not perhaps displeased that the Verlocs had no children. As that circumstance seemed perfectly indifferent to Mr Verloc, and as Winnie found an object of quasi-maternal affection in her brother, perhaps this was just as well for poor Stevie" (42). At first, Winnie's mother seems to agree with Winnie's decision to marry Verloc only for Stevie's security. However, Winnie's growing quasi-maternal affection towards Stevie and their childlessness signify that Winnie is taking over her mother's role, and Winnie's mother acknowledges this transition.

This mother role transition becomes complete when Winnie's mother literally leaves the Verloc house. Winnie's mother knows that she and Stevie have been a burden on Verloc. To relieve this burden, she decides to leave the house, thereby hoping to secure Stevie's safety. Observing Winnie's mother's sacrifice, the narrator calls her "the heroic old woman" (144). However, this praise should be understood as an ironic statement. That is, Winnie's mother is not a heroic old woman but selfish with no sense of



motherly responsibility. When Winnie's mother is about to leave Verloc's house, she tells Winnie: "Everything I leave here is altogether your own now, my dear" (146). Of course, "Everything" seems to be Winnie's mother's furniture. To assure this assumption, the narrator spends almost one and a half pages talking about the furniture: Winnie's mother brought her furniture to Verloc's house when Winnie gets engaged with Verloc; Winnie's mother needs a few pieces of the furniture in the almshouse for herself; she chooses "the least valuable and most dilapidated articles" (145); and she will give the furniture to Winnie, not Stevie. Following this narration, it is more likely that "Everything" is Winnie's mother's leftover furniture. However, we should know that everything Winnie's mother leaves in Verloc's house includes Stevie. Thus, while handing the furniture *and* Stevie "altogether" to Winnie, Winnie's mother figuratively urges Winnie to care for her brother. The famous cab-ride scene finally confirms that Winnie becomes a mother figure to Stevie. When Winnie's mother, Winnie, and Stevie arrive at the nursing home, the narrator very briefly describes their breakup: "After once more assuring the old woman on the threshold that she would know how to guard against the risk of Stevie losing himself for very long on his pilgrimages of filial piety, she took her brother's arm to walk away" (156). After this short depiction, Winnie's mother does not appear throughout the story. She becomes absent, therefore becoming a nominal mother. With the absence of her mother, Winnie becomes a mother to Stevie: Winnie herself says that "He [Stevie] was much more mine than mother's" (228).

Much like Winnie's mother, Eveline's mother also asks Eveline to take care of her family: "Strange that it should come that very night to remind her of the promise to her mother, her promise to keep the home together as long as she could. She remembered the last night of her mother's illness . . . 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” (30-31). The narrator tells us that Eveline promised her mother to run the family. The conversation between them is not presented to us. Eveline’s mother, just like Winnie’s mother, might say: “Everything I leave here is altogether your own now, my dear.” Although this assumption cannot be confirmed, we do know that Eveline’s mother was sick, went crazy, and finally passed away. Considering the progression of the disease, Eveline might have taken care of the family for a long time, just as the young Winnie began to protect Stevie from their violent father. In this light, Eveline’s mother, much like Winnie’s mother, has been nominal. If Winnie’s mother remains a nominal mother, Eveline’s mother literally becomes an absent mother. No one can run the family except Eveline.

### III. Winnie as a Failed Eveline

While thinking about the promise with her mother, Eveline “stood up in a sudden impulse of terror. Escape! She must escape! Frank would save her. He would give her life, perhaps love, too. But she wanted to live. Why should she be unhappy? She had a right to happiness. Frank would take her in his arms, fold her in his arms. He would save her” (31). Eveline, who does not want to be her mother, decides not to sacrifice her life for the family. As the narrator says, she believes that she has a right to be happy. The twice-repeated word “escape” emphasizes Eveline’s firm decision to have her own and free life.

If Eveline finally chooses her better life, Stevie’s death makes Winnie stop sacrificing herself, therefore becoming a free woman. Through the conversation with Chief Inspector Heat, Winnie knows that Verloc made

Stevie put the explosive inside the observatory; while carrying the bomb, Stevie tripped over tree branches, and Stevie, as a result, was killed in the explosion. Since Verloc essentially killed Stevie, Winnie realizes that she no longer has to be Stevie's quasi-mother. She finally becomes free from the maternal responsibilities *and* roles as Verloc's wife: "She had her freedom. Her contract with existence, as represented by that man [Verloc] standing over there, was at an end. She was a free woman" (212). Ironically, with the death of Stevie, the old Winnie, who sacrificed herself for Stevie, is now dead, and a new Winnie, as a result, is reborn to be a free woman. In this light, Winnie's black veil is not for Stevie but for both Stevie and the old Winnie.

But it turns out that this new-born Winnie is not free from her black veil. When Winnie tries to leave the prison-like house, she kills Verloc. Since Verloc's death, Winnie becomes terrified by the image of the gallows. This six-time-repeated sentence ("The drop given was fourteen feet") from the newspaper has constantly tormented Winnie (223). The black veil, which just went to Verloc, now returns to Winnie again. If Eveline's inability to make a decision paralyzes her, the fear of the gallows immobilizes Winnie: "Her hands shook so that she failed twice in the task of refastening her veil" (223) and "She dragged herself painfully across the shop, and had to hold on to the handle of the door before she found the necessary fortitude to open it" (224). Much like the word "escape" in "Eveline," Winnie must escape from this house and London to avoid execution.

If Frank can offer Eveline a better life, Winnie believes that Ossipon can save her from the gallows. While Winnie is wandering aimlessly, she meets Ossipon. Knowing that Ossipon has been interested in her, Winnie begs Ossipon for help: "Don't let them hang me, Tom! Take me out of the country. I'll work for you. I'll slave for you. I'll love you. I've no one in the world. . . . Who would look at me if you don't!" (238). If she can be free from the

gallows, she will do anything for Ossipon. Ellen Burton Harrington argues: “Fearful of her newfound freedom, the formerly respectable Winnie then offers to prostitute herself to one of Verloc’s unscrupulous friends in desperation” (56). To Winnie, love does not matter. If Winnie sacrificed herself for Stevie, now she is willing to sacrifice herself to be free of the gallows. If Eveline uses Frank as a springboard for her different life, Winnie uses Ossipon to leave the country. It does not matter whether her savior is Ossipon or not.

At first, Ossipon is willing to leave London with Winnie. Ossipon knows that he will be in trouble because of the Greenwich explosion. Thus, running away with Winnie would be a good idea: “He had by dint of cudgeling his brains just thought of the Southampton—St Malo service. The boat left about midnight. There was a train at 10.30.” (233).<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Ossipon’s plan reminds us of Frank’s travel plan. Holding Eveline’s hand, Frank is “saying something about the passage over and over again” (31). As Joycean critics have understood, their passage would be: 1. Take a night boat for Liverpool; 2. Stay at a Liverpool hotel; 3. Take a boat for Buenos Ayres. Similarly, Winnie and Ossipon will take a train for Southampton at 10:30 and then a night boat for St. Malo at 12:00. Both Eveline and Winnie will leave Dublin and London by taking night boats.

In Paris, as Eveline expects, Winnie hopes that “it would not be like that”; she no longer has to fear the gallows. However, Ossipon takes Winnie’s money and abandons her. Knowing that Winnie killed Verloc, Ossipon fears that he would be arrested as an accomplice of Winnie. As soon as the train for Southampton leaves, Ossipon leaves Winnie behind by jumping out of the train. Left alone, Winnie takes the night boat for St. Malo and drowns herself. Since Winnie’s last moments before killing herself are hidden from readers,

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4) Tanya Agathocleous says: “A cross-Channel service from Southampton in the south of England to St. Malo in northwest France” (233)

there is no way to know what happened to Winnie. But her last moments would be like this if we read the ending of "Eveline": "She felt her cheek pale and cold and, out of a maze of distress, she prayed to God to direct her, to show her what was her duty. The boat blew a long mournful whistle into the mist" (31). Much like Eveline, Winnie, in despair, feels confused and does not know what to do. Winnie might pray for God to guide her. When "The boat blew a long mournful whistle into the mist," Winnie might jump herself into the mist. Then, the narrator in "Eveline" writes: "All the seas of the world tumbled about her[Eveline's] heart. He was drawing her into them" (31). Likewise, when Winnie is in the sea, "All the seas of the world tumbled about" Winnie. It is Ossipon who "was drawing her into them."

#### IV. Conclusion

Despite the similarities that Conrad and Joyce had, nothing has been known so far about their possible relationship. We do not know whether they met physically or shared their literary interests. However, the commonalities among their works suggest that they might use their works for their writing materials. If Joyce used *The Secret Agent* for *Ulysses*, Conrad might use "Eveline" for *The Secret Agent*. In the stories, Winnie's mother leaves Verloc's home, forcing Winnie to sacrifice to be Stevie's mother. Likewise, on her deathbed, Eveline's mother asks Eveline to care for her two younger brothers. In doing so, Eveline, much like Winnie, becomes a symbolic mother to the brothers. However, when Winnie and Eveline are about to achieve their freedom, they are abandoned by Ossipon and Frank, respectively. In despair, at the end of the story, Winnie drowns herself, and Eveline fears being drowned.

Although Conrad and Joyce did not interact with each other when they were alive, they might have used their works as writing materials to express their views of women at the turn of the century. Women were constantly asked to be faithful Queens of Gardens if I borrow John Ruskin's terms. They were to be faithful wives and mothers to families and men. If women sought their independence, they were more likely to fail. In the presence of the other, Conrad and Joyce observed these miserable situations of women and pronounced them through their works.

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**Abstract**

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This paper argues that James Joyce's "Eveline" might be a writing material for Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. If Joyce used *The Secret Agent* for *Ulysses*, Conrad might use "Eveline" for *The Secret Agent*. In the stories, Winnie's mother leaves Verloc's home, forcing Winnie to sacrifice to be Stevie's mother. Likewise, on her deathbed, Eveline's mother asks Eveline to care for her two younger brothers. In doing so, Eveline, much like Winnie, becomes a symbolic mother to the brothers. However, when Winnie and Eveline are about to achieve their freedom, they are abandoned by Ossipon and Frank, respectively. In despair, at the end of the story, Winnie drowns herself, and Eveline fears being drowned. Although Conrad and Joyce did not interact with each other when they were alive, they might have used their works as writing materials to express their views of the peril of women at the turn of the century.

■ Key words: James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, "Eveline," *The Secret Agent*, women

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