Analysis of Symbolism in James Joyce's "Eveline"

Ties to the past create a permanent sentiment—that is, as attachments to past promises and experiences exist not only in the past, but presently and forever as memories, it is impossible to leave them behind. For the title character in James Joyce's "Eveline," this creates a paralysis or inability to change; she must repeat her current life forever, as her attachment to the past is woven into her current state of mind.

Limiting the third-person narrative to Eveline's perspective allows Joyce to assign a greater meaning to her environment—both atmospheric and physical. From the dusty window curtains to the invading evening, that which surrounds Eveline becomes through her lens a physical manifestation of her memories and coming transition.

As the story opens, Eveline sits by the window and watches “the evening invade the avenue” (658). The window here is physically, but also symbolically, the lens through which Eveline observes the world. It sets up immediately for the reader that the main thrust of the narrative is guided by Eveline's observation. As a lens physically, the window functions as a symbol for the relationship between the individual—here: Eveline—and the individual's position in the world.

As Eveline watches the coming transition loom closer, the reader is allowed to float away with her into memories. As she looks over the new construction in town—an evident symbol to changes in home life—her mind wanders to memories of her childhood playing in
what was previously the field there. This symbol for change is thereby corrupted by
Eveline’s lens; she is unable to remove her mind from her past and memories.

These memories are what prevent Eveline from leaving her current daily life, and
they appropriately take the physical form of objects in her home.

The window presented at the story’s opening is covered by curtains made of dusty
cretonne. The dust certainly is a symbol for the past, and the choice for such a heavy fabric
reinforces the looming quality the past has upon Eveline’s view of an outside world,
obscuring it with reminiscence.

Fueled by her memories of the field and her childhood, Eveline’s perspective shifts
from the outside world to her home and “all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a
week for so many years” (658). Dust and dusting symbolize together the past and daily
routine. Further abstracted, dusting can be seen as a symbolic action for Eveline’s failure to
separate her daily life from the past. Though she removes the dust, it always returns.

Of the home objects, the broken harmonium is the one most symbolically tied to
Eveline’s condition. That it is broken evokes again ties to the past, yet it is the musicality
that is of particular pertinence.

Music seems to be of some importance to Eveline, and is mentioned not only by way
of reference to the harmonium, but also to a musical she sees with Frank, and—most
importantly—to the familiar street organ music present both in the world beyond her window and in Eveline's memory of her dying mother.

Music is only the repetition of past traditions. Whether in the form of familiar melodies or certain styles, music is the echo of the past. It is the music that echoes Eveline's promise to her mother “to keep the home together as long as she could” (660), yet she desires change and struggles to deal with the past’s imposition upon her potential happiness.

While the invading evening deepens on the avenue (660), Eveline is struggles to deal with the impending change, as night here functions as a symbol for transition. The night-boat on which Eveline is scheduled to run away with her lover is the transition between her current life and the tomorrow when “she would be on the sea with Frank” (661).

The sea functions not only the actual method by which Eveline plans to escape, but also the symbolic barrier between her present life and the one she hopes to have. The sea separates Ireland from the outside world, and Eveline must pass through it in order to escape. As she struggles to decide what to do, her instability and wavering mindset is compared with and contrasted against the physical motions of being at sea.

While making up her mind, Eveline stands at the docks “among the swaying crowd” (660); she does not sway as well. This motional dichotomy symbolizes Eveline's inability to shift her focus (sway) to the future and her decision without being rooted (standing still) in her current place (the past). Moreover, she is overwhelmed at being placed in this swaying
environment of change. The distress awakens “a nausea in her body” (661). Nausea is often a reaction for those unused to life at sea. This notion of seasickness presents Eveline as one unused to life with changes or decisions.

Interesting, Eveline’s reaction to this is prayer for guidance. Prayer, like music, symbolizes the repetition of past traditions, and in her moment of transition, Eveline reverts to reliance on the past for comfort. This is the moment where Eveline does undergo a change, but rather than the expected change to a woman with a new life, Eveline changes from a hopefully girl to a sort of automaton stuck in tradition and “moving her lips in silent fervent prayer.”

It is at that moment that Eveline is characterized as an animal. Like an automaton, animals live their entire lives in routine, and that is exactly what Eveline has become. She is stuck in the repetition of her daily life fueled by past promises and unable to change—“a helpless animal” holding onto the iron railing in frenzy (661).

Whether the iron railing symbolizes a cage or the rigid structures Eveline finds comforting and habitual, it is this that she clutches to in her moment of weakness. Just as her mind always was, her body is now too attached to her life at home.