

“A right to happiness”: The Appropriation of Joyce’s “Eveline” in Mary O’Donnell’s “Mrs Ward’s Diary” and Sara Benvenuto’s Válvula

“O direito à felicidade”: A apropriação de “Eveline”, de Joyce, em “Mrs Ward’s Diary”, de Mary O’Donnell, e em Válvula, de Sara Benvenuto

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Abstract: This article aims to explore how two contemporary artistic works – Mary O’Donnell’s short story “Mrs Ward’s Diary” and Sara Benvenuto’s short film Válvula – appropriate and subvert one of the most renowned stories in James Joyce’s Dubliners: “Eveline”. O’Donnell and Benvenuto present fictional narratives that echo and at the same time disrupt themes and characters from Joyce’s emblematic short story, delving into analogous marks of peripheral realities and simultaneously proposing new solutions for shared forms of oppression.

Keywords: James Joyce; Mary O’Donnell; Sara Benvenuto; Appropriation; Eveline.

Resumo: Este artigo visa explorar como dois trabalhos artísticos contemporâneos – o conto “Mrs Ward’s Diary” de Mary O’Donnell e o curta Válvula de Sara Benvenuto – se apropriam e subvertem uma das histórias mais renomadas do livro Dublinenses de James Joyce: “Eveline”. O’Donnell e Benvenuto apresentam narrativas ficcionais que ecoam e ao mesmo tempo rompem com os temas e as personagens do conto emblemático de Joyce, explorando traços de realidades periféricas análogas e propondo, simultaneamente, novas soluções para formas compartilhadas de opressão.

Palavras-chave: *James Joyce; Mary O'Donnell; Sara Benvenuto; Apropriação; Eveline.*

“Eveline” is one of Joyce’s most famous works. Originally published in 1904 in *The Irish Homestead*, it was the second story Joyce wrote for *Dubliners*, and it was his first fictional narrative with a female protagonist. As it is widely known, the short story has as its main character Eveline, a young woman living in the turn-of-the-century Dublin who has to deal with a dysfunctional family, a sick and abusive father and the dilemma generated by the possibility of leaving the life she knows behind and escape with Frank, a sailor with whom she has a romantic entanglement and who invites her to follow him to Buenos Aires, where they could start a new life.

Throughout the narrative, we follow Eveline’s thoughts about her situation and the sea of possibilities Frank represents. We learn that even though she cares for her sick father and for her brothers, even though she sort of cherishes the life she knows and is used to, Eveline does not want to die like her mother, crazy and delirious. In this sad state of affairs, Frank becomes a possible way out: “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).

The famous momentous final scene of the short story, though, presents us with an Eveline incapable of abandoning the life she knows for an extremely uncertain future next to Frank. His sea of possibilities would drown her: “No! No! No! It was impossible” (31), she thinks. As much as Frank called to her to follow him, she would not, she could not, as the last sentences of the short story let us know: “She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition.” (32).

For more than a century now, “Eveline” has been endlessly interpreted and reinterpreted by Joycean scholars, teachers, students, artists, and general readers alike. From the seemingly unending interest in the themes of paralysis and epiphany to more contemporary discussions on immigration and even sexual trafficking and exploitation, the short story, which has also been studied through the lens of the biographical undertones that permeate it, continues to inspire new readings.

For instance, two contemporary works, Irish writer Mary O'Donnell's short story "Mrs Ward's Diary" and Brazilian filmmaker Sara Benvenuto's short film *Válvula*, present fictional narratives that appropriate, echo, and at the same time disrupt themes and characters from Joyce's "Eveline". Both works help us to look at Joyce's short story with fresh eyes, as well as make us reconsider the various ways in which "Eveline" continues to inspire intellectual and artistic explorations of past and present issues our society still has to deal with.

In *Adaptation and Appropriation* Julie Sanders argues that in an artistic appropriation, "we have a whole sale rethinking of the terms of the original" (28), for it "affects a [...] decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (26) in which "the appropriated text or texts are not always [...] clearly signalled or acknowledge" (26). Bearing Sanders's points in mind, we may understand both contemporary Irish writer Mary O'Donnell's short story "Mrs Ward's Diary" and Brazilian filmmaker Sara Benvenuto's short film *Válvula* as appropriations of Joyce's "Eveline". The following paragraphs briefly present the different, albeit related, ways in which O'Donnell and Benvenuto appropriate Joyce's story.

Mary O'Donnell is an awarded contemporary Irish writer whose substantial literary output encompasses poetry, novels, and short stories. In 2018, she released *Empire*, her third collection of short stories. As Irish scholar Eamon Maher puts it, the interconnected short narratives of *Empire* examine "Ireland's slow and painful emergence from the shadow of colonialism during the early decades of the twentieth century" (Maher). From the arrival of a middle-class family from Dublin in colonial Burma during WWI to the way an impoverished girl witnesses and elaborates on the East Rising, O'Donnell's stories present us with a vast and intricate overview of Ireland fighting its way out of its colonial past.

"Mrs Ward's Diary" is one of the short stories in *Empire*. In it, we read about Mrs Ward's son, Francis, a young man who is a member of the Irish Citizen Army and who falls in love with a Jewish refugee singer from Russia, Anna Basheva, who's passing through Dublin as a part of her European tour. Scattered with political overtones and illuminating insights into the various ways in which different members of Dublin society reacted to the East Rising, this remarkable short story might also be read as a sort of a reversed "Eveline", a curious upside-down version of Joyce's acclaimed work.

Just like in "Eveline", in O'Donnell's story, we read about a supposed love affair that is prone to failure. However, the lovers seem to be in reversed position: in Joyce's story, Eveline,

the misfortunate female character, is the one who falls for a traveling and exciting figure who could ‘save’ her, Frank; in “Mrs Ward’s Diary”, the one in love is Francis, and the passing, exhilarating other is a more mature woman, Anna, the touring singer. Much like Eveline, Francis is helplessly left alone as his beloved fades away along with the train that would take her to the next stop in her tour. But differently from Joyce’s protagonist, Francis runs and screams, as we may read in the following passage: “He ran like a boy as the train picked up speed, legs stretching as he pounded the platform, roaring after her, *I love you, dearest Anna, please don’t go!*” (133).

Despite their obvious differences, Eveline and Francis have a lot in common: both are Dubliners who fall in love with traveling figures who present them with new possibilities that make them rethink and reconsider their lives and values. Both have one of their parents dead – Eveline’s mother and Francis’s father – and the surviving one – Eveline’s father and Francis’s mother – is against their romantic infatuation. Both characters have siblings who live away from home: Eveline’s brothers, Francis’s sister. Nevertheless, there are other striking – and curious – differences as well.

Eveline’s father is sick and abusive; Francis’s mother has some minor health issues, but she’s an active suffragette. Eveline is depreciated at home and at work and drained by her oppressive reality; Francis is a kind of local hero who fought for his country, but who’s being drained by his passion. Eveline knows she could eventually feel ‘even love’ for Frank; Francis knows Anna “would not miss him very deeply” (132).

If all of these twistedly mirrored contrasts and similarities were not enough to infer the link between Joyce’s and O’Donnell’s stories, such a connection is made quite explicit when Joyce himself is mentioned in “Mrs Ward’s Diary” in the following passage:

“Mother had once commandeered Margaret to a recital by the strange and controversial new writer, Mr Joyce. But that was many years before, and Margaret – even if she were there – might not remember the occasion. Mr Joyce, though, was an accomplished singer and it was beyond Francis as to why he had turned his back on his own lyrical tenor voice” (118).

This peculiar reference to Joyce, ‘the accomplished singer’, capstones what I see as O’Donnell’s intention of bringing forth an appropriated, feminist version of “Eveline”, one in which the one who’s left behind is not a poor young woman, but a hero-like young man; the supposed liberating force isn’t a male figure, but a mature, artistic woman. In the family

portrayed in “Mrs Ward’s Diary,” the women are the ones who leave – Anna, Francis’s sister Margaret, and even his mother, who’s actively fighting for her rights and the male figures and either dead or paralysed by infatuation; the voices of reason – and of conning – are female ones. Symptomatically, even in the protagonist’s name – Francis – reverberate gender issues: it is gender neutral and it may ironically be understood as ‘freeman’. In O’Donnell’s subversion of Joyce’s “Eveline,” female figures have way more agency than in the original story. It is also possible to argue that Sara Benvenuto conceived her short film *Válvula* in much the same fashion.

Sara Benvenuto is a Brazilian film director and university professor who has been the recipient of awards and nominations for her cinematic production. Benvenuto is also the coordinator of the academic extension project Cineclube Cine Alicerce, which aims at developing artistic awareness in groups of undergraduate students from Faculdade de Educação, Ciências e Letras de Iguatu, an advanced campus of the State University of Ceará.

Benvenuto – alongside Isabela David de Lima Damasceno and Raquel Ferreira Ribeiro – describes her 2020 short film *Válvula* as a free adaptation of Joyce’s “Eveline”. However, differently from both Joyce’s and O’Donnell’s short stories, *Válvula* is not set in a past Dublin. As Benvenuto lets us know, the narrative of the film “takes place in our times, in Iguatu, a city in the backlands of Ceará state” (243).

Despite this significant changing of settings, the protagonists of both “Eveline” and *Válvula* do have a lot in common. In Benvenuto’s own words, “Both characters include the possibilities of changing their lives, but they also deal with restraints imposed by their sex and their sociocultural context.” (243). In addition, the two main characters have basically the same name – the difference being the way they are pronounced in English and in Portuguese –; Both of them find themselves in romantic entanglements with men named Frank, who supposedly and/or temporarily could free them from the oppressive realities they find themselves in; both of them have to deal with abusive male family members, as well as with the void left by dead mothers.

Another striking connection between Joyce’s and Benvenuto’s works is the one established through the presence – or absence – of water in the narratives. In Joyce’s short story, Frank, a sailor, could simultaneously take Eveline across the sea to a new life and/or drown her. Evelin even thinks that “All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart” (31). In the short film, on the other hand, Eveline and Frank are depicted in scenes at *Válvula* de

Orós, a huge water dispersion valve that is described by Benvenuto et al. as “an emblematic site of the central backlands of Ceará due to its great water outflow, as well as to its capability of supplying water to arid regions”¹ (p. 252, my translation). That is, the couple would meet amid a huge volume of moving water, thus connecting the freedom and passion of their time together with water. Conversely, at home, Eveline has irregular access to water. Sometimes there’s no water at all. This scarcity mirrors her lack of freedom at home. We may, thus, infer that in *Válvula*, water stands for freedom. Or at least, it stands for a means to liberty. We read something quite similar in Joyce’s “Eveline”.

It is precisely through the symbolism attached to water that Benvenuto’s film conveys one of its most striking subversions of Joyce’s “Eveline”. Whereas in the emblematic last scene of the short story Frank calls to a motionless Eveline to follow him, in the last scenes of *Válvula* we see Frank almost forcing Eveline to dive with him into the waters of Válvula de Orós – a scene that presents a violent side of Frank’s which had not yet been revealed.

He dives first. She watches him disappear into the waters. He never resurfaces. She screams his name multiple times. No answer. No sign of him anywhere. Eveline could have gone after him to look for him. But she doesn’t. She takes her backpack and walks away. For good.

Differently from Joyce’s Eveline, Benvenuto’s chooses to leave. Alone. And the one who drowns is Frank. Symbolically speaking, we can say that the waters of her freedom drowned him.

It is possible to identify clear feminist reassessments of Joyce’s “Eveline” in both O’Donnell’s “Mrs Ward’s Diary” and Benvenuto’s *Válvula*. In these new takes on Joyce’s story, women are far from ‘passive, like helpless animals’, but exert their agency in ways more akin to contemporary understandings and expectations of female roles. With their works, O’Donell and Benvenuto make us reconsider Joyce’s as they, to use Indian theorist Homi Bhabha’s terms, restage the past and consequently introduce “other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of a tradition” (p. 2) and, at the same time, strange “any immediate access to an originary identity or a ‘received’ tradition” (p. 2). That is, by appropriating, adapting, and ultimately subverting Joyce’s “Eveline”, O’Donnell and Benvenuto not only include their works in a tradition of possible readings of Joyce’s short story but also alter this very tradition by adding unprecedeted takes on the original story. In addition, they highlight analogous

marks of peripheral realities – Irish and Brazilian – and simultaneously propose new solutions for shared forms of oppression.

Notes

- 1 “um local emblemático do sertão central cearense pela sua grande vazão de água e capacidade de abastecimento de regiões áridas” (Benvenuto et al., 2023, p. 252).

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