

## Making James Joyce Contemporary: Recreating Classical Fiction

Rebecca Clay  
*University of Texas at Dallas*

Can you make James Joyce's short story "Eveline" contemporary and create a modern short story based on Joyce's work? The purpose of this study was to provide a context to Joyce's short story "Eveline," illustrate the journey of my fiction writing, and expand the conversation on using classical fiction as a guide to modern short story writing. I attempted to create a short story within the spirit of "Eveline," while incorporating modern Irish history within Joyce's form. My story mirrors themes similar to Joyce's: paralysis, what it means to be Irish and the Irish struggle, the meaning of brother, the relatedness of the term "mother" and the depth of family ties between the characters. My story examines two Irish brothers who fight one another in childhood and then fight for the cause of independence. Fate has one brother leaving for a journey to America and one brother staying in Ireland. Sean, the brother who left for America, is a newly retired Green Beret who has been away from Dublin for over twenty years, as the story unfolds during the height of activity of the IRA, and the end of the Vietnam War. Joyce wrote a female protagonist in "Eveline," and I wrote a male protagonist in my story, to give a mirror image approach. The twist at the end of the story, the placing of memorable objects within the text, and the creation of a dying promise to a mother by older brother Patrick, all reflect features of Joycean techniques. Paralysis was a major feature of "Eveline" and I use paralysis in the modern world, in my story, to depict the state of modern warfare, which was just beginning a few years after "Eveline" was published. In this study, I introduced my short story I developed as a result of my training in creative writing at the University of Texas at Dallas. Based on my study and practice of creative writing, performance, and literature, and my background in psychology and history, I used an interdisciplinary approach to creative writing. Using an exhaustive bibliography, I discussed some of the historical background for my fiction, as well as some of the critical sources that shaped my thought process. I made copies of Joyce's story, as well as my own, for each participant to look over and compare at my presentation. I discussed how the readings lead to the first draft, and how the creative process works for me. I illustrated how I used the creative process to write my short story, and what steps other writers can use to create art through classical fiction.

**Keywords:** James Joyce, Eveline, Dubliners, Creative Writing, Creative Writing Process

Short story writing requires determination, reflection, patience, attention to detail, and not to mention, a vivid imagination. Stories can start from chance events, autobiographical memories, and themes gleaned from other writers. When I first learned to write creatively twenty years ago, I studied James Joyce's *Dubliners*. This project took me back to my roots as a writer and challenged me to go further than I had gone

before. Creative writing is a living, breathing thing. It ebbs and flows as our minds create new realities. Following please find my exposition on how I created my short story "Sean," and then, the final version of my short story I created to present at the ICIS Conference in April 2015.

## The Exposition Paper

My first exposure to writing a short story for my project was my renewed love with the short stories of James Joyce, through a class I was taking on Irish Renaissance Literature. By the second class I had made a request for a creative project for the semester. The frantic search for reading materials began. I spent my time reading and rereading Joyce's stories. I started sending text messages of scenes to myself. For the first time as a writer, the ending was complete and Sean, named after my favorite Bond man, and Patrick, named after the patron saint of Ireland, would end up as my main characters. Paralysis and oppression would move the plot like hands of time. Two Irish brothers, one in America, one left in Ireland, make their return, or not.

The question my main idea hinged on was: Can you make James Joyce contemporary in our world? First I focused on *Dubliners* in general as a period piece, while looking for its inner value for our generation. Oppression and paralysis are still with us. I read some of the critical pieces but found more within my own response. I kept reading editions of *Dubliners* and making mental notes.

Once I read those copies, I began a journey of historical fiction analysis, or what might have happened if Subject A met B and C in a certain town at a certain time and certain historical events took place. The first actual writing on my laptop took place on my abstract and my proposal. I fleshed out my sketches against an open landscape, quite like a famous painter sketches before she uses color. The abstract gave me focus, and my professor, gave me guidance in preparing a proposal that would be accepted. The abstract gave me function and the proposal put my thoughts to speed.

Now it was time to choose the first sentence. What would a Green Beret of the Vietnam era think? Look? Act, if he is Irish born? Who is Sean? Who is Patrick? How does my reading tell me who they are? What do I see Sean doing in the first sentence? What can the first sentence tell me about the arc of the beginning and ending of the story? What place or object can serve as the arc of the creation of the story?

Green Berets have a love for the breeze and open sky, so let us talk about airplanes. Several

Green Berets liked living near airport lights to warm their hearts and remind themselves of their many missions. An airport could be a circular theme, encompassing the plot.

I knew the closing scene before I knew the first scene. That had never happened to me before but I ran a base storyline by some friends of mine and they fell in love with it. I was in. The ending was a flash, or like a dream that unfolded first. I had Patrick, Sean, Ireland, the USA, and mother. I settled on "Eveline" as my main story to imitate after studying *Dubliners* back and forth. "Eveline" had always caught my eye. This said, the main idea of the proposal went fairly quickly, and my story began to take shape like a form in the depths of the ocean, dark, murky but with pinpoints of light.

So I started with writing little scenes on my phone, and I texted them to myself when the muse hit. The first scene I texted was the one in the playground with Sean, Patrick, and Mary. I finally got behind the laptop and began free writing, and the first rough draft poured onto the page. Mary, given the impact of her name: Madonna, child, prostitute, soldier, showed us how one woman can be indemnified by a name and how the plight of the Irish woman lay in Ireland. What makes a woman a freedom fighter? What makes an Army different from a terrorist group?

Previous to all this I read my bibliography over and studied those books and articles I had chosen. I preferred my interpretation to the critics, but it was informing to read the critics. For instance, Marilyn French argues in her article that Eveline is not a simple story (French, 1978: 452). French argues that there are things left out of the story, like the fact if Eveline goes with Frank there is no guarantee Frank will marry her and she will be in a worse state than her present one (French, 1978: 452-3). I agree with this, and I mirror this ambiguity in my story by having Sean longing to go home despite his brother's connections to the IRA, and the fact Sean is better off with his "new family" in the States.

In the proposal, I lay out the plot structure and the interwoven themes. Paralysis takes on a multi edged sword for my story, as I write deeper and deeper into my story. Could paralysis mean for "Eveline" that she was trapped at home

in a paralysis of abuse, loyalties to a dead mother, the plight of the Irish woman, and the process that eats alive beings until they are dead? Or am I exploring other forms of paralysis in sibling rivalry, loyalty to a dead mother, the plight of the Irish woman, or the paralysis that makes you keep your word to your mother to get your brother to the United States, and keep him away from trouble? How far can paralysis stop brotherly and family love? Can “Eveline’s” paralysis be stopped by her romance? Can blood break the ties of paralysis and use love to open up a new era of dialogue free from “Irish paralysis?”

The story starts filling itself in, and the beginning and the closing become more hexagonal and distinct. The story begins to tell itself, and it is I who pieces through the threads to interconnect the plot, theme, dialogue, objects, and of course, the panoramic views and the pictures.

A majority of my rewriting takes place in strange circumstances, and on my phone the second rewriting takes place and forms the rooms, and places, and objects that the story is told with. “Show don’t tell” was how I was taught to write. Use a minimum on dialogue and let your objects propel the scenes. Paralysis between two Irish brothers found itself within my writing as a female writer writing a male protagonist, while Joyce wrote as a male writer writing a female protagonist.

To the conference I brought a highlighted version of my story for my presentation, along with copies of “Eveline” to compare and contrast. My session was well attended and I had attendees from Turkey as well as India and the United States. I was not nervous because I had discussed my story in detail to several people before the conference. I knew what I wrote and why I crafted the story according to certain rules that were within “Eveline” and translated into my story. I started by reading the first three pages of my exposition paper while giving the attendees a chance to look over both stories. I then began my literary analysis and compared and contrasted elements of both stories. My presentation was well received and I heard comments about once you have made a home in the United States that you cannot go back home and that the person felt like Sean did. I was told

that was a universal truth in moving to the United States. Then I was complemented on my ability to talk and explain difficult concepts.

I found out I had written a solid short story. No one pointed holes in the plot or criticized my techniques. Everyone seemed to enjoy my story and take something from it. Yes, it seems that you can make James Joyce contemporary.

### **The Final Version of the Short Story**

Sean

He looked through the unadorned front window of his spacious home, waiting for the familiar lights of the airport to bring him solace. His head tilted towards the pane of glass; his eyelids were heavy and in his eyes was a luster.

He walked towards the cedar and brass table and chairs in the dining room, where a green beret with a red and gold phoenix patch lay at the head of the table. It was here where Mahoney, Neil, Beckett, Farnsworth, Miller, Carroll, and Odell used to meet for poker every Friday night. There were four gold boxes at Sean’s end of the table, next to a fifth of Jameson and a fifth of Jack, with a slew of crystal highball glasses. Mahoney picked up the smallest box and placed it in Sean’s palm. Sean opened it and laughed at the micro camera he had been tasked with.

“Take some pictures of some pretty girls,” said Odell, with a laugh.

The next package was from Farnsworth and Miller, and it contained a gold Cross set with a listening device and a pen knife. The duffle bag packed for Dublin was beside the table, and each gift carefully tucked itself inside. A bottle of Quervo 1800 made its way out of a box. High class hooch for Sean’s brother, he thought. A gold box of Hai Karate, and a black and emerald green gi came from Carroll and Beckett to inaugurate the newest member of the family. A set of weighted throwing knives and a pouch of Native American tobacco came from Odell and Neal.

“Sean’s going home for a visit. It’s about darn time,” said Neal.

“I hope Patrick likes cheap cologne,” Miller said with a sly smile.

Out came the jar of pennies and four decks of cards, beer nuts, pretzels, Crown, and another fifth of Jack. It was payday, and Sean and Mahoney bought more of those large lead crystal ashtrays to leave about the house ready to throw at a target. Last, but not least, there were Cuban cigars and swisher sweets.

The game started at nine; by midnight Farnsworth and Miller were busted up, physically, as well as tabbed out. Sean showed his friends one of the empty guest rooms and took their keys. The game went on until four, Sean and Mahoney divided the pot, and Odell and Neal started coffee while Carroll and Beckett made breakfast.

Sean grasped his beret and whisked it to his bedroom headquarters. His mattress pad and box springs lay on the floor, draped with one olive drab wool blanket. A pillow, brown striped with age, stood firm at the head of the bed. A large, lead, crystal ashtray sat on the carpet beside the head of the bed. A red standard desk phone and a black standard desk phone sat next to the ash tray. The beret went in the top shelf of the closet, where it had stayed every night for three years when Sean was not out on a mission or a trip. Another night of cold repose fit the night, and the thoughts of seeing Mary once again filled Sean’s head with icicles.

It was the first day of school. During recess, Patrick slammed Sean across the face and tumbled Sean head over heels into the slide Mary was gliding down. Slam! Sean struck Mary’s heels with a bang. Mary got up, brushed herself off, walked away, and never looked back.

Sean dashed home from school to find himself alone. He stared hard at the poster of New York his mother bought for him when he was three years old. Patrick forced in the door with Mary and shoved Sean face first into the poster. Mother entered the door and had the boys prepare for supper. Mary set the table for Patrick’s mother. It was the law. It was always the law.

Mary kept the law her entire life. Father Quinn said the picture of the Immaculate Conception did not do Mary justice. Sean had to

keep his distance from Mary, and all the Marys while he was in Dublin visiting Patrick. He will leave on the red-eye flight tomorrow for Dublin. He lit a cigarette and put the match out in the ash tray. Sean watched the smoke billow in the air, while he waited and watched for the next move or the next call.

“Ring, ring...” It was a call patch from Patrick.

“Man, it has been awhile since I heard from you. What’s up? I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“Things have been pretty tense around here. Don’t you read the papers?”

“We don’t get the same news as you. So tell me.”

“Are you sure you want to come for a visit?”

“We have been planning this for six months.”

“Call me back in a couple of hours.”

A few phone calls, and a few favors later, there was nothing to know. Patrick had a nervous stomach since he was a boy, and he was not going to cancel his visit home. With yet another phone patch to tell his overprotective brother the coast was clear, Sean could get some sleep. Patrick took it seriously when their Mother died, and their mother made Patrick promise he would get Sean to New York with what savings Mother had left over. Mother could not live with the fact that Patrick got caught up with the IRA, and she said on her deathbed that she wanted her savings to send Sean as far away from Ireland as possible.

“Patrick, where is that call from Patrick?” Sean said to himself.

Sean lit another cigarette to pass the time and start relaxing to go to sleep, as it was nearly 10 a.m. Sean snubbed out the butt, and rolled over awhile.

When the phone patch went through, it was almost 9 p.m., and the flight left in three hours. Sean packed before he dozed, but the ring of the phone sent him straight for the ceiling. Sean caught his composure and answered Patrick. His brother seemed like he had changed his mind about the trip. He had a business trip that had just come up. Patrick was in an export and import business, and these things happened. His

brother could only spend a week with him if he came instead of a month. It was 10:45 by now, and Patrick was going to be late for his flight. Talking could take place in Dublin.

As Sean tore down the streets to the airport, heavy rain hit the windshield and the pavement. Hydroplaning into airport parking, Sean got out of his truck and slipped and fell carrying his duffel bag. Wet, sloppy boots carried him into the airport jet way. Alas, the gate was closed and the ticket agent told him there were no refunds for his type of ticket.

Sean walked away from the jet way and sat in the seats in front of the gate with his head buried in his hands. After a few minutes, he sauntered towards airport parking and found his truck. As he looked up at the moonlit sky, the flight he planned to catch exploded with a crash and a boom, like a fireball in mid-air.

### Author Biography

REBECCA CLAY is a PhD. Student in the School of Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas. She wrote a collection of short stories for her Master's Thesis in 1995 and has been published in a Native American newspaper. She received her B.S. in Human Relations and Business from Amber University. She is of Cherokee and Irish descent and her father served in the U.S. Army, Signal Corps attached to Special Forces for twenty-one years. She has lived in South Korea, Germany and many places in the United States.

### References

Adair, Gilbert (1981). *Vietnam on Film: From the Green Berets to Apocalypse Now*.

Bell, J. Bowyer (1980). *The Secret Army: The IRA, 1916-1979*.

Benstock, Bernard (1994). *Narrative Con/texts in Dubliners*.

Bloom, Harold (1988). *James Joyce's Dubliners*.

Cahill, Thomas (1995). *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*.

French, Marilyn (1978). *Missing Pieces in Joyce's Dubliners*. *Twentieth Century Literature* 24(4), 443-72.

Gordon, John (1995). *Dubliners and the Art of Losing*. *Studies in Short Fiction* 32(3).

Haughey, Jim (1995). *Joyce and Trevor's Dubliners: The Legacy of Colonialism*. *Studies in Short Fiction* 32(3).

Joyce, James (1996). *Dubliners: Text, Criticism, and Notes*.

Joyce, James, John Wyse. Jackson, and Bernard McGinley (1993). *James Joyce's Dubliners*.

Joyce, Stanislaus (1958). *My Brother's Keeper*.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1965). *The Savage Mind*.

Moloney, Ed (2002). *A Secret History of the IRA*.

Norris, Margot (1995). *Blind Streets and Seeing Houses: Araby's Dim Glass Revisited*. *Studies in Short Fiction* 32(3).

O'Nan, Stewart (1998). *The Vietnam Reader: The Definitive Collection of American Fiction and Nonfiction on the War*.

Paige, Linda (1995). *James Joyce's Darkly Colored Portraits of 'mother' in Dubliners*. *Studies in Short Fiction* 32(3).

Rice, Thomas Jackson (1995). *Paradigm Lost: 'grace' and the Arrangement of Dubliners*. *Studies in Short Fiction* 32(3).

Wright, David G (1995). *Interactive Stories in Dubliners*. *Studies in Short Fiction* 32(3).