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English 475

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Come on Eileen;

Beat Down Eyes Sunk in Smoke Dried Faces

The novel *Eileen: A Novel* by Ottessa Moshfegh is aptly titled as everything about it builds into the complex and fascinating character. The style in which Moshfegh writes is a way of describing Eileen as a character. Though the novel is written from Eileen’s perspective, the reader gets the sense that the narrator is unreliable. The reader is left to wonder at who she really is, since the descriptions of herself and the language used are clearly those of an older self, remembering her youth. This older perspective is very critical of the way Eileen lives her life, echoing the voice of her abusive parents and sour opinions of her character shared by her coworkers and townspeople. Young Eileen is not who she appears to be at first glance; with nearly all signs of self-expression and thoughtfulness internalized and hidden. From the beginning of the novel Eileen describes herself as having a face, “...heavy with soft, rumbling acne scars blurring whatever delight or madness lay beneath that cold and deadly New England exterior” (Moshfegh 1). The development of Eileen’s hidden character determines the outcome of the story she is telling. Moshfegh’s use of alcoholism serves as a societal structure in which Eileen operates and how she identifies herself in her dark world. The presence or absence of alcohol at different times throughout *Eileen: A Novel*, is telling of where Eileen’s character and identity lands on a spectrum of misery to happiness as well as authority to victimization.

It’s human nature to want to present the best version of oneself when meeting someone new. The reader’s introduction to Eileen however, shows that she does not present herself in the most favorable light. In fact, the kindest phrase she uses to describe her younger self is “average, I guess” (Moshfegh 2). The reluctance and distaste with which she regards herself is palpable in these first few pages, and the reader is introduced to the figure of Eileen’s father in a similar, unflattering manner. When his alcoholism is addressed, it is to say that it’s a fact of their life together, and that she has since, “lived with many alcoholic men over the years… each [teaching her] that it is useless to worry, fruitless to ask why, suicide to try to help them. They are who they are, for better or worse” (Moshfegh 4). Moshfegh’s use of alcoholism throughout the novel is especially poignant alongside the novel’s focus on taboos of the 1960’s, violence, and unreliable memory. While it is never stated explicitly in the novel that women shouldn’t drink or that it is a negative habit, Eileen almost proudly claims her other “taboo” habits of smoking and lack of cleanliness, implying a pride in her own drinking as well. Her resignation toward alcoholism applies to her father as a person as well. This is evident in several comments throughout the novel when Eileen wishes death upon her father, without wishing to take responsibility for it (Moshfegh 69). So she accepts her place in this abusive society, and goes on with her life in a monotonous way, harboring these private thoughts from day to day.

With the confessional style narration of her interests and intimate habits, it’s easy to see how the reader might have been lulled into believing everything presented in the novel is the truth. Eileen discloses information to the reader most would rather keep hidden, such as the soreness and heaviness of her breasts during menstruation (Moshfegh 59) and her preoccupation with the contents of her bowels (87). This trust between the reader and Eileen that builds throughout the novel could be the manifestation of how she justifies her past actions to her future self. The reader, after all, is learning about the events through the relationship between Eileen as an old woman, and her past self. Additionally, since the older Eileen freely admits that her memory may be fallible, there are moments where the reader may question the accuracy of an event. The narrator even goes so far as to say, “perhaps I’m inventing. I liked twisting things like that” (Moshfegh 70). Though this ugliness of Eileen’s character is apparent to the reader, in her interactions with other people, she quiets herself, waiting for someone to make an assertion first before agreeing with them to appear more likeable and agreeable (Moshfegh 98). As Eileen tailors herself to the opinions of whoever she is around, she is living a sort of false life. In doing so, Eileen is never truly living for herself, and condemns herself as described in an article on the human pursuit of happiness, “underneath our quest for vibrant health lurks a tragic kind of discreet death: the demise of everything that is eccentric and messy about human life” (Ruti 7).

Through the unreliability of the narration, it is clear that Eileen wants to portray herself exactly in this way. This could be a manifestation of the social standards enforced by the presence of alcohol throughout Eileen’s life, shaping her relationships with others. The values Eileen holds were established by her alcoholic parents, and reinforced by the oppressive culture she found herself in. In painting herself in this light, Eileen is emphasizing the importance of those values in her life and solidifying the role alcohol plays. Without it, Eileen’s values and identity are unstable, potentially forcing her to face her own internal assertions and uncomfortable conclusions without the twisted sort of comfort the abuse and alcoholism bring her. The words Eileen uses to tell her story fit with the vocabulary and values of her parents and those of her employers and coworkers at the juvenile correctional facility, echoing the social standards she was taught. Slurs, blunt statements, and graphic descriptions are prevalent in Eileen’s environment and so too, in her own internal narrative.

The language that Eileen uses throughout the novel to describe her world is blunt and oftentimes describes the gritty or obscene. Even something as simple as a car key worn around her neck like a pendant conjures abject images. She remarks: “I remember the weight of [the pendant] dangling there between my measly bosoms, thudding around, sticking to my hard and sweaty breastplate, scraping against my skin…” (Moshfegh 53). As if to punctuate this framework of how Eileen sees the world, her narrative is often disrupted by intrusive thoughts of violence or filth (Moshfegh 126). As miserable as Eileen seems to be with the direction her life is headed, these brief flashes give further insight to how Eileen frames her thoughts regarding her situation. Whilst pining for Rebecca, when Eileen thinks she may be sexually involved with Lee Polk, Eileen suddenly thinks to herself violent yet casual thoughts of suicide: “Once again I imagined driving my Dodge off the cliffs and down onto the rocks by the ocean” (Moshfegh 135). In this instance, and many others throughout the novel, Eileen never speaks her thoughts aloud to clarify her assumptions of the thoughts of others or social situations. Rather she accepts her interpretations of a given situation as fact. Eileen states simple, clear truths about herself which establishes trust with the reader and propels the story forward while emphasizing the significance in hindsight, of these unspoken assumptions to her own mental health: “I had no idea that other people - men or women - felt things as deeply as I did” (Moshfegh 117).

When these reflections are made in the voice of the much older Eileen, it is easy to see the naivete in her past self that is easily manipulated by the more world-weary Rebecca. With the introduction of Rebecca, the reader sees Eileen interact in a significant social way for the first time. In this way, the reader is forced away from immersion into Eileen’s consciousness and feels a sense of foreshadowing in the potential friendship unfolding between them. Rebecca is continuously described as perfect in every way, in stark contrast to the descriptions Eileen gives of herself. When she is shown the slightest kindness, Eileen decides that Rebecca is there to make her “future erupt around [her] in an avalanche of glory” (Moshfegh 124). Eileen is so battered from her life with her father, and the prominent role substance abuse played already in her childhood, that she continuously grasps at what she sees as opportunities.

Referencing the human tendency to pursue happiness, Mari Ruti states that, “...[we] feel so anxious about feeling anxious that when we catch ourselves getting a little stirred up, a little excited, even in a good way, we end up suppressing our feelings because we fear that our ardor might deliver us straight into the lair of ... anxiety” (Ruti 2). This is exactly what we see happening to Eileen as her actions become more and more erratic. She obtains lipstick in a drastic shade she’s never wanted to try before and once again lets alcohol control her actions when she goes out to the bar and drinks excessively with men she doesn’t know. The alcoholism throughout the story is used as an obvious crutch for Eileen; it’s comfortable, nostalgic and a means of escaping (and simultaneously reinforcing) the brutal reality of her father’s abuse in which she lives. She decides, much like the attempted adoption of her mother’s identity, that she’ll “try on” Rebecca’s lifestyle to see whether it fits her personality. When Rebecca invites Eileen out for a drink, Eileen is flustered and reacts with an extreme amount of gratitude, unknowingly placing all of her trust and safety in Rebecca’s hands, whom she barely knows. Eileen goes on, anxiously suppressing her own personality traits and familiar mannerisms in an attempt to escape the misery she associates with them, only to drink excessively and end up in the same world when she awakens the next morning (Moshfegh 152).

The reader is able to see Eileen act as her own person for the first time in the novel when she takes control of the hostage situation Rebecca has tricked her into. This rebellion against both her father and her life, seems to be the first time Eileen is acting of her own desires and identity and not simply impersonating her parents or coworkers. Despite the high stress and illegality of the situation she finds herself in, this is a freeing moment for her where she realizes her own desires, separate from the expectations of others. In her conversation with Rebecca about the possible motives Lee Polk might have had to kill his father, Eileen acknowledges to herself that she has struggled with the same thoughts and reached a similar conclusion. This acknowledgment reveals to her that she is not alone in her struggles and places her life into perspective with that of Lee Polk (Moshfegh 219). With this realization, she places less importance on her friendship with Rebecca, and hardly seems to care that she knows she’ll never see Rebecca again (Moshfegh 255). After focusing so much of her energy on her budding friendship with Rebecca, this doesn’t seem to make sense until looking more closely at what may have been motivating Eileen throughout the novel up to that point.

Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory talks about the process children undergo of identifying oneself via the desire for connections with other people around them (Sharpe). According to the lens Lacan provides, Eileen’s father and the alcoholism that dominates him, is “a symbol of the social order that is recognized by the mother as well and taught to the child as more important than the child’s attachment and willingness to please its mother. The child’s willingness to please its mother has to do with establishing and reinforcing its own sense of identity.” The mother then, is the earliest of these connections and fulfills the need the child feels to solidify its individuality and identity in the world (Sharpe). With this structure applied to Eileen and her story, it’s easier to see how Eileen may have struggled to find her own identity with little or no approval from either of her parents growing up. She continues this struggle into her adult years, manifesting as the same desire for approval from others. Exploring this idea further, “[w]e get a sense of his meaning when we consider such social phenomena as fashion” (Sharpe). Specifically, in the case of Eileen, fashion is not only an expression of desire to satisfy others, but a way for her to physically embody her deceased mother. This embodiment speaks to Eileen’s desire to please her father and those around her, which in turn establishes her place and identity in her society. Since her mother held her father’s approval, Eileen’s logic seems to dictate that she would be able to gain the same approval by fulfilling the void left after her death (Moshfegh 84). Not only does this not work, with her father continually criticizing her looks and personality, but Eileen’s father seems to hate her even more for wearing her mother’s clothes and embodying this different version of her, saying she has “no respect” for wearing her mother’s nicer clothes to head out to the bar with Rebecca (Moshfegh 160).

Eileen’s mother is an interesting and enigmatic figure throughout the novel. She is described by Eileen with some apathy or bitterness, which seems strange since her mother’s death was a traumatic experience for her. Eileen remembers her mother’s death, describing it to readers apathetically: “Once my mother got sick - ‘fell ill’ is an expression I like for its prissiness and, hence, it’s irony to her violent demise…” (Moshfegh 48). Despite this apparent distaste for her mother, she spends the entirety of the novel dressing in her mother’s old clothes and taking care of her father in the way her mother might have. In several ways, she’s fulfilling the void her mother left behind when she died. According to Nadine Muller’s studies:

“a daughter’s awareness of her mother’s past and her consciousness of being her mother’s progeny can have a significant impact on the way a daughter performs her own present identity. As Carter suggests, this performance is characterised by a paradoxical connection between imitation of and escape from the inherited maternal narrative, since the daughter can re-enact as well as alter it, but never wholly free herself from her existence as her mother’s sequel.”

Considering the clothing she wears and the habits they share such as drinking, Eileen seems to be trying hard to act the part of her “normal” mother, even though she admits she doesn’t know why she does this. This effort involves pushing herself aside however and makes Eileen even more miserable with her state of living. Eileen seems to truly embody the thought that, “...the more we pursue happy, balanced lives, the more bland and boring, the more devoid of character, we become” (Ruti 5). It’s only after meeting Rebecca that Eileen begins to find herself and her own identity, developing into the more complex character the reader has come to know as the narrator.

By the end of Eileen’s story, after countless mentions of violent thoughts and frustration with her life, the reader is led to believe that Eileen would follow through with framing her father for the murder of Mrs. Polk. When she doesn’t frame him for the murder, the reader is left to wonder why. Not only was the plan a believable course of action for her, but by her account, her father deserved the fate she had planned. Eileen’s father was abusive, stooping to unnecessary cruelty and possible resentment toward Eileen for how she cared for him, though Eileen is careful to say that his cruelty is in large part due to his drunkenness. Before she meets Rebecca outside of work for the first time, Eileen feels as though she must drink to take the edge off (Moshfegh 139). This more casual meeting with Rebecca is starkly contrasted with the criminal situation of high stress at the end of the novel, where it’s socially acceptable to want a drink to “take the edge off,” where Eileen now refuses that drink (Moshfegh 226). She suddenly has the freedom to act outside of the trapping persona of her mother. Eileen at this point has gained the approval of Rebecca, whether this approval is sinister or innocent in nature seems irrelevant to both Eileen and the reader. She does not need her father’s approval to deflect her involvement in the murder since it is a direct rebellion against him, his household, and alcoholism.

In the end, Eileen adopts a different demeanor that even seems to surprise herself. When Eileen learns of Rebecca’s actions with Mrs. Polk, she responds bitterly at first, “She [Rebecca] thought I’d be useful to her, and I suppose in the end I was” (Moshfegh 224). From that point on, the older Eileen reflects about how different her life became. “I could stay in X-ville and face hell, or I could disappear” (Moshfegh 246) She even adopts another name to accompany this newfound identity. The calm we see at the end of the novel is not explained fully to the reader, and we are left to speculate whether Eileen is merely resigned to her path, or maybe relieved to be finally leaving X-ville. As stated in an article on the pursuit of happiness, “[t]he irony of happiness is that it's precisely when we manage to feel happy that we are also most keenly aware that the feeling might not last” (Ruti 3). So it seems when Eileen goes to frame her father for the murder of Mrs. Polk. Though the narrative never explicitly says so, Eileen shifts her malice from her father and seems to choose instead the path out of X-ville, to another city. Eileen may have known somewhere deep down that her friendship with Rebecca was not real and would not be lasting. The narration of her older self belies this perceived serenity with confirmation of further heartaches and lessons Eileen has yet to suffer, free from the hands of her father, “...it's a deviously roundabout means of producing anxiety” (Ruti 3).  The reader is left with a sense of peace in Eileen’s mind; a resolution to the path her life is on, or more importantly, her abandonment of the life she has left behind: “I really saw myself for the first time that night, a small creature in the throes of life, changing” (Moshfegh 256)

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