

EVELINA: A NEW WOMANLY WOMAN

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Someone had to break the curse,
someone had to wake Sleeping
Beauty without ultimately sending
her to her destruction, someone
had to shout once and for all:
Fly and live to tell the tale!
Erica Jong *How to Save Your Own Life*

Evelina or the history of a young lady's entrance into the world chronicles the groping and growth of its protagonist, Evelina, and depicts her journey into self-knowledge and her struggle against male oppression and patriarchal conventions, which are not only personally repressive but socially stultifying. It traces Evelina's growth and her progress towards identity and autonomy, that is, towards selfhood. It evinces Evelina's individual effort to make sense of her life and to integrate into society, an effort which embodies a desire for personal choice and self-determination. It is an expression of a woman's painful but ultimately successful journey to freedom and authentic selfhood.

Evelina is a new womanly woman who extricates herself from the strangling formalities that shackle her spirit. She listens to her own inner voice, and demonstrates good sense and sound judgment. She transcends her own limitations, for, unlike Clarissa, she is not limited by her need to be an exemplar. Evelina is not enclosed in silence; she writes or encodes her own story and her individual history. She tells her tale from her own perspective, and satirically portrays the hegemony of male power and many of society's patriarchal values and self-denying myths that have been incorporated and internalized within women's consciousness. In defeat, Evelina remains undefeated, for she does not sink into

permanent despair after being subjected to the battles and trials of life in a male's world or domain. Evelina endures, and reclaims herself. She wins.

Fanny Burney renders Evelina a female hero who does not stoop but continues to struggle and move forward. Evelina's story is one of apprenticeship, an education; of a coming to development and growth of self; a quest for authenticity, of rebellion and of resolution. Evelina makes her entrance into the world, and experiences emptiness in her own life, in her self-negation, in her being a victim, in her relationships with men, and in the values that have shaped her life. Experiencing nothingness, she questions the meaning of her life, and this questioning grounds her in a new understanding of her being and of her position in the world. Her eyes shed their scales, and she gradually rids herself of her sense of being a nobody and of being a victim. Her developing awareness and her burgeoning experiences enable her to emerge from her husky existence and to shed any encumbrances that might halt her growth.

Evelina's journey into selfhood is not without anguish and feelings of perturbation and discomposure. She undoubtedly falls into conflict with the harsh realities of eighteenth-century cultural mythology of men, but she manages to acquire prudence, to sustain her growth, and to assert herself against a misogynistic society that is inimical to the very existence of women. Evelina's power resides in her ability to retain her individual identity and to regain her social self by acquiring her rightful inheritance and her rightful place in society. It is true that she does not forcefully challenge the status quo, but she does exercise her power of choice which waives the stifling precepts of decorum and cultural stereotyping. She also finds ways to work within the constrictive conventions of her society, and turn them to her own advantage. Moreover, she has no trouble in recognizing fools or repudiating folly. Besides, she fends off her assaults.

Evelina's retaliatory powers and her self-defense may indeed be subtle and not easily perceived or felt, but her freedom of mind, wise perceptions, and private opinions are a brilliant rendition of the psychological emancipation of the female mind. Evelina definitely has no virginal mind. She is a new voice that voices and verbalizes its own desire to deconstruct the prevailing order of patriarchal societies where men are dominant and women subservient. Her heightened and abrasive discourse not only unpackages and foregrounds the oppressive and restrictive conditions of women, but it also offers new ideological possibilities. These alternatives are mainly invested in her external readers or audience, in us. Evelina's candid and honest journal delineates the prevailing intellectual and ideological issues of her age, and it also reshapes ideology closer to women's desires and needs. It actually grows to become a book of the survival of one woman "presented to all young people upon their first introduction into public company" (Burney 1982: 83).

Fanny Burney's novel has evoked diverging views of Evelina as protagonist. Critics have differed in their assessment of Evelina's struggle and growth. Patricia Spacks observes that Evelina is dominated by a sense of "female fear" of negative judgment, self-doubt, dependency, and deference to masculine authority, multivalent, inhibitive emotions which shape her attitude and initiate her actions (1976: 158-192). Susan Staves notes Evelina's physical limitations and psychological restraints which make her too weak to resist male ideology (1976: 368-381). Another critic, Katharine M. Rogers, makes clear how the crippling freedom of Evelina is engendered by the destructive effects of cultural stereotyping and conventional propriety that are enforced and imposed upon the lives of women (1984: 110-117).

Although these several critics persuasively argue their cases in very stimulating discussions, they somewhat fail to see Evelina's growing sense of power and control as signs of progress towards a new self-definition. Evelina is, unquestionably, unconventional in her personal vision of life's true meaning. She is intelligent, and speaks her mind. She is, moreover, vigorous, conflict-ridden, and ever-questioning. She negotiates male and female values upon her first visit to London while still protecting her own femininity. She responds to the self-suppressing pressure of society, and does not too readily acquiesce to male value systems. She scrupulously handles men's rhetoric, a social repartee which is, to her, either blatantly devoid of any sincerity of meaning or is completely unintelligible. She struggles against men's liberties and assumes responsibility because, unlike Clarissa, she does not depend on God as her armor, for she strives for a better life in the here and not in the hereafter. She also earns the respect and love of Lord Orville, who chooses her as his wife without any regard to family and fortune. Evelina becomes a victor, not a victim in the life struggle. Her self-development towards self-fulfillment and self-determination we must grant, for she matures and eventually contributes to what Raymond Williams calls a whole way of life.

Evelina, irrespective of what we are told about her by Mr. Villars and Lady Howard of her lack of finesse and artifice, is depicted right at the beginning of the novel as a woman who has an independent mind. Invited to London by the Mirvans, she expresses her strong desire of going. In a letter to her guardian Mr. Villars, she seems to express her indifference to the invitation, but she, in fact, cannot contain her readiness for going. She cannot even bridle her thoughts: "I made a resolution when I began, that I would not be urgent; but my pen – or rather my thoughts, will not suffer me to keep it – for I acknowledge, I must acknowledge, I cannot help wishing for your permission" (Burney 1982: 24). Evelina's thoughts spur her on her journey from her rural seclusion to the dazzling world of London. She is, like any normal young lady of her age, enchanted by the prospect of experiencing city life and attending the "Opera-

House, – Ranelagh, – the Pantheon” (Burney 1982: 24). Her spontaneous and impulsive thoughts are a clear manifestation of her self-assertion; they mark her choice and heart’s desire to plunge into life and to experience London and its glamour.

On her arrival in London, Evelina is enamored of the diverse entertainments: the theater, the opera, the dance, the ridotto, and the museum. She is not, however, a mere spectator; she actually becomes a participant in the game of life and an astute observer and satirist of male ideology. Surely, her first ball swirls her into the vortex of male rules. At the ball, Evelina is extremely offended by the behavior of the men. She notices that the men have the right to choose their partners: “they thought we were quite at their disposal . . . and they sauntered about, in a careless, indolent manner, as if with a view to keep us in suspense” (Burney 1982: 28). She, therefore, decides that she would “rather not dance at all, than with any one who should seem to think me ready to accept the first partner who would condescend to take me (Burney 1982: 29). Such liberating thoughts suggest both the independence of Evelina’s mind and her rebellious attitude towards the patriarchal ironclad traditions and modes of behavior. Evelina’s strong desire to assert her individuality cannot be made clearer or be more directly stated.

Evelina’s preference for partners and her heartfelt desire for choice prescribe her wilful actions. She will not dance with Mr. Lovel because he has looked at the women for some time “with a kind of negligent impertinence” (Burney 1982: 29). She also declines his offer because he is “very ugly”, and his dress is so “foppish” (Burney 1982: 29). She even “could scarce forbear laughing” in his face (Burney 1982: 29). Her heart’s desire dictates her choice, and she simply exercises her right to choose the man whom she really admires. And it so happens that Mr. Lovel does not fit the image of the man she wants to be with. After all, Mr. Lovel believes that women are “mere dolls” (Burney 1982: 113) that can be toyed with and then disposed of. Evelina’s deliberate action illustrates women’s right to pick and choose. Obviously, the error is not in her but in her male-dominated society where men make the rules and women have to obey.

Evelina’s desire is to place herself outside the conventional roles that women feel obliged to conform to. Thus, by accepting Lord Orville when he asks her to be his partner in the dance, she breaches the rule that a young woman cannot dance with one man after refusing another. Though Evelina claims that she was not aware of the rules, her mistake seems to be wilful. Her embarrassment is not the cause of her ignorance of the rules but of her resentment at perceiving how women are treated in this world and at her own self-negation. Although Evelina now really feels the stultifying conventionality and restrictions of male ideology, she is not forced into passivity. She responds to the pressure, and her

self-defending actions and defensive satires mark her power, self-control, and autonomy.

Although Evelina is caught in the enmeshing web of masculine values, she grows in autonomy and self-control during her stay in London. She gains insight into her self and the world. She acquires some fortitude and firmness, and, now, she manages to use societal rules for her own advantage and protection, for she finds it oppressive to be constantly impinged upon and abused or exploited by men. She will not do what she cannot bring herself to do. The extreme vanities of men and their dictating authority and rudeness make her exert some spirit to battle their assaults and to respond to them with total disregard to their wishes. She is not essentially powerless to avoid men and to resist their impositions. She is mentally alert and very perceptive. She acts rebelliously and, in some cases, rashly. But then who would not under the same circumstances? Evelina leaves a mark, even if it is a tiny footprint, upon the encircling traditions and conventions that imprison her. Her freedom, no matter how small and slight, is the key to her self-assertiveness.

Evelina assumes an authoritative air in her relationships with men who engineer their plots against her and who are determined to make her one of their possessions. She is clearly preyed upon by men, but she defies them, and extricates herself from the psychology of oppression. She, for instance, criticizes Sir Clement and recognizes the artificiality of his language, which is generally part and parcel of male discourse that consists of expressions and utterances that are only used as “words of course, without any . . . study of propriety” (Burney 1982: 29). Sir Clement dons a mask of civility in order to conceal his true intention to seduce and trap Evelina. He believes that Evelina has deliberately sought the dark alleys at Vauxhall which are known to be the haunts of prostitutes. His seductive attempts are, however, either thwarted or aborted, for Evelina manages to pass her trials and to emerge superior. Evelina is a tower of strength.

Even Mr. Smith conspires against Evelina, and attempts to degrade her. He, however, also fails, for, although assisted by Evelina’s grandmother to force Evelina to attend the Hampstead assembly, he cannot make Evelina dance and is, thus, forced to dance with her grandmother. Surely, he gets a dose of his own bitter medicine, and becomes the laughingstock of everyone present in the room. Evelina also defends herself against Branghton, who thinks that he can impose his will upon her. She dissociates herself from him, and brands his exploitative behavior. It is true that Evelina cries and even faints upon occasion, but, in her strenuous and arduous struggles, she grows to be effectual and strong.

The men that Evelina falls into conflict with are either manipulators or seducers. Lord Orville is, however, the only exception. He seems to represent

not what a man is but what a man ought to be. He is the exemplum, and we are told that he is "the most amiable of men" who has "every virtue under heaven" (Burney 1982: 308). Although his first impression of Evelina is that she is "a pretty modest-looking girl," "a *silent* [angel]", and "a poor weak girl" (Burney 1982: 35), he comes to realize that Evelina is "informed, sensible, and intelligent" (Burney 1982: 347). After all, first impressions tend to be quite misleading. What is more, Lord Orville cannot help but admit later that Evelina "is not, indeed, like most modern young ladies, to be known in half an hour" (Burney 1982: 347). He goes on to say that "her modest worth, and fearful excellence, require both time and encouragement to shew themselves" (Burney 1982: 347). His support for Evelina and his expression of his concern for her well-being reflect the mechanism of his mind and the true feelings of his heart. His proposal to Evelina, without regard to her "obscure birth" (Burney 1982: 347), is a living testimony of his genuineness and love.

In her struggle for survival and growth, Evelina does not only foreground the hegemony of male power, but she also negotiates female values that are basically endorsed by men. She shows her resentment and condemnation of the trivialities that women tend to preoccupy themselves with in order to make themselves marriageable. She hates her grandmother's indulgence in and obsession with toiletries, and looks with scorn at the Branghton sisters' vanity and superficiality. A woman who indulges herself in female pursuits is both physically and mentally debilitating herself. Evelina is even embarrassed of the way she has had her hair dressed, and ends one of her letters with an apology to her guardian for "the wretched stuff I write" (Burney 1982: 28).

Evelina is contemptuous of women's petty toiletries because women tend to believe that their dresses and painted faces are a pleasant manifestation of their identities. The truth of the matter is that female's superficial pursuits are one way of self-effacement, for these same pursuits only project the crippling male culture whereby women are considered to be mere ornaments or decorations and not full-fledged citizens. A woman has to strip off the masks of narrow ideals that she has worn to please men and be ready to face herself and direct her energies more purposefully and productively. After all, a woman who plays a false role eventually becomes that role and never discovers her true identity.

Evelina also sees the anguish that the institution of marriage enforces on women. Her apparent lack of any wish to marry and commit herself to any man is clear. Marriage is presented as a microcosm of patriarchy because it is based on possession, rule, and order. Of course, the wife is the one to be possessed, ruled, and ordered. Wedlock is padlock; it is a form of self-immolation, bondage, and servitude. Evelina observes that Mrs. Mirvan's "principal study seems to be healing these wounds which her husband inflicts" (Burney 1982: 53). Clearly, Mrs. Mirvan lives a life of quiet suffering, for her husband is

profoundly contemptuous of her and his daughter, and bullies or silences them upon occasion. He even tolerates Evelina in order to abuse her grandmother whom he warrants will "moulder away as fast as her neighbours," for she is a rotten piece of meat (Burney 1982: 112). He, undoubtedly, illustrates the absolute, tyrannical power of the male in marriage.

Evelina is, rightly, disillusioned with the institution of marriage, but she does not criticize marriage as an institution. What she decries is the darker vision of marriage which proceeds from the conflicting and irreconcilable dichotomy of the patriarchal system: male superiority and female inferiority. Evelina comes to see marriage as a trap set by society to confine women and to turn them into obedient servants to their male superiors. She, therefore, turns away from Mr. Mirvan with disgust when he extends his tyranny over his wife, daughter, and mother-in-law. Mr. Mirvan's reaction to his family is that of a ship's captain to a potentially mutinous crew: "As to all you, I expect obedience and submission to orders . . . or [else] I shall look upon you as mutinying, and turn you adrift" (Burney 1982: 139).

Having cushioned the shock of how marriage cripples a woman's existence and renders it self-effacing, Evelina starts to have control over her life and choices. Her dormant wish to get married, however, gradually awakens when she meets Lord Orville and falls in love. Her marriage to Lord Orville is a triumph because it is sweetened by romantic love and is based on compatibility. It is not a compromise or an escape; it, therefore, does not threaten physical and psychological annihilation. It leads to self-assertion rather than to self-suppression, for Evelina will be able to foster her individuality within it without any drastic problems or difficulties.

If Evelina sees marriage as a deterrent to a woman's growth, she also cannot help but perceive the limited options in a woman's life. She finds that spinsterhood is no option for a woman, for it brings about negative social attitudes. She, for instance, notices how Mrs. Selwyn is condemned by everyone even if she is witty, and proves, on more than one occasion, to be men's intellectual equal. Lord Merton snubs Mrs. Selwyn, and calls her an impertinent woman who is only in people's way. He exclaims: "A woman wants nothing to recommend her, but beauty and good-nature; in everything else she is either impertinent or unnatural" (Burney 1982: 361). Sir Clement also finds her intolerable. It is true that in some instances, Evelina even observes that Mrs. Selwyn is "*masculine*" (Burney 1982: 268) and lacks "gentleness" (Burney 1982: 269). It should be noted, however, that Evelina does not criticize Mrs. Selwyn for her assertiveness, learning, and common sense, as may be thought, but for her replacing the gentleness of her sex by the rude audacity of men; that is, for her being unwomanly. A woman should be able to assert herself without assailing her womanhood and femininity, as Evelina contends.

Evelina's growth gains an extra dimension when she demonstrates her compassion, goodness, and kindness. These qualities add glory and glamour to her life. The Macartney episodes reveal Evelina's fortitude, strength, effectuality, and gentleness. Evelina is capable of self-possessed and self-assertive action. She seizes Mr. Macartney's pistols, and prevents him from committing suicide. She later does not betray him by revealing his private ordeal to Lord Orville. Mr. Villars is pleased with Evelina's actions: "Though gentleness and modesty are the peculiar attributes of your sex, yet fortitude and firmness, when occasion demands them, are virtues as noble and as becoming in women as in men" (Burney 1982: 217). Evelina struggles for her self-preservation as well as the self-preservation of others in dire needs. She initiates action, and is an agent of change.

Evelina also proves to be superior to everybody else when she shows compassion for the two old women involved in the hideous race. The brutality of the men in question does not transfix her in her place. Evelina musters her strength, and goes to assist one of the old women who slips and falls down. Clearly, Evelina not only has the capacity to pity the old women, but she also has the capacity to act and do something about it. Her noble action, however, miscarries when Lord Merton stops her, calling out "'No foul play! no foul play!'" (Burney 1982: 312). Evelina may have been unable to thwart the brutal attempts of the men, but she manages to show her capability of independent action in a situation of conflict. Her kindness is, moreover, an indication of her abhorrence of men's victimization of women, and a manifestation of her individual autonomy.

Furthermore, Evelina's emerging desire for character growth and self-determination propels her forward to meet her long-absent father, Sir John Belmont. The union between Evelina and her father promotes and furthers Evelina's growth of character. Evelina is charitable towards her father when he comes forth to claim her as his abandoned child because she realizes that he is more a victim than she is, and his neglect of her "was not the effect of insensibility or unkindness, but of imposition and error" (Burney 1982: 375). When she finds that he is nothing but an empty shell, she feels that nothing can warrant so terrible a fate. Besides, Sir John Belmont humiliates himself in front of her, and implores her not to hate him. What is more, he bestows upon her her social right and inheritance, which is to be spent in any way she desires. Evelina emerges here as a fully realized character who is armed to face life. She is alive and well, living on the threshold of her bright future.

Evelina's experiences and myriad trials in her arduous journey of recognition and selfhood release her from bondage to myths about herself, and sustain her growth and her recognition of her right to her own mode of being. Evelina discovers an inner strength with which to survive the entanglements of the pa-

triarchal society. She negotiates male and female values, and foregrounds the injustices of a male-dominated society. She endures the hegemony of male power and the falsity of women's self-denying conventional myths that cause women to distrust their own perceptions and reality. She sheds her fears and her sense of being a nobody, and matures significantly. She reclaims herself and finds solace and companionship in her marriage to Lord Orville. She unites "herself for ever with the object of her dearest, her eternal affection!" (Burney 1982: 406). Evelina achieves an appreciable level of self-realization, despite the devastating experiences she passes through. She prevails, and secures for herself a strong foothold in the world. She tells her tale, and proves that there is more than one story in history and more than one voice in the world.

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