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History, Emigration and Family, in Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn*

by

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"After my father died, people used to call at the house and this woman was telling this story about her daughter. It was all Brooklyn, Brooklyn, Brooklyn."

(The Guardian, April 26, 2009. Interview with Robert McCrum)

The process of choosing a topic for a thesis can be a daunting one for many, and it often takes a considerable amount of research and many false starts. In this respect, I feel I was lucky, as upon reading Colm Tóibín's novel, *Brooklyn*, I knew that this was the work which I wanted to focus on. Colm Tóibín is perhaps one of Ireland's most well-known contemporary writers, having been nominated for the Man Booker prize three times, as well as winning various other awards for his work, including the Costa Book Award for *Brooklyn* in 2009.

Colm Tóibín was born in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, Ireland, in 1955, one of five children. His family was staunchly republican, his grandfather and grand-uncle were both active members of the Irish Republican Army, and directly involved in the Easter 1916 Rising. At the age of 17, Tóibín read *The Essential Hemingway*, which sparked his fascination with Spain, a nation that would become an important fixture in his literary career. Graduating with a degree in History and English from University College Dublin in 1975, Tóibín moved to Barcelona, where he lived until returning to Ireland in 1978. He began his career in journalism in 1978, and worked in the field until 1985, when he left Ireland to travel to Africa and South America. His writing took off in the mid-1980s, and includes novels, travel logs and nonfiction works. He has taught creative writing at

Princeton, Manchester University, and is currently the Mellon Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. *Brooklyn* is the story of a young woman emigrating from a small, rural town in 1950s Ireland to Brooklyn. The narrative presents the protagonist's numerous travails, particularly the difficulties stemming from diaspora and living in a foreign culture. It is a story that resonates with anyone who has, for whatever reason, left home in search of a different life in another country. *Brooklyn* struck a chord with me, not just because I understood where she was coming from, and going to, but particularly because it mirrored my own mother's experience, which also perfectly matched the time frame in which the novel is set. The main protagonist in the novel is a young woman, Eilis Lacey, who is helped by a visiting priest from Brooklyn to leave her dead-end job in the small town of Enniscorthy, in the southeast of Ireland, and relocate to Brooklyn, where he has arranged a job for her in a department store, and lodgings in an Irish-run boarding house, where all the residents are either Irish-born, or Irish-American. Eilis—possibly an allusion to Ellis Island—is a shy young woman, who goes through a period of intense homesickness, but eventually settles into her new life, in part with the help of the priest, and gradually gains the confidence to enjoy all that her new life can offer.

In time Eilis meets a young man, and gets introduced to her Italian-American boyfriend's family, which offers another culture shock for her. As the relationship develops further, Eilis suddenly receives bad news from home about the death of her beloved sister. She is immediately called home to help her mother, but not before her boyfriend convinces her that they should get married before she leaves for Ireland, as he

is fearful that, once back home, Eilis may not return to New York. Agreeing to this, they have a civil marriage, and Eilis plans to stay with her mother for some weeks. While back in Ireland, her mother does all she can to ensure that her daughter does not return to New York. Eilis meets a young man, whom she had known briefly before she emigrated, and they quickly establish a romantic interest.

Unknown to Eilis, her former employer in her hometown is related to her landlady in Brooklyn, who discovers that Eilis was married, and passes on this information to her cousin, who lets Eilis know that she is aware of her marital status and the fact that she is dating a very eligible young man in Enniscorthy. This news prompts Eilis to make an immediate decision to return to Brooklyn, which she had already postponed doing, and forces her to confess to her mother that she is in fact married.

My mother emigrated from Ireland to New York in the early 1950s, traveling to an arranged job and lodgings, and was the same age as Eilis, about 19 or 20 years old. Coming from a very small, rural village, she was perhaps even less worldly than Eilis, although this was very much the norm, since Ireland in the post-war years was struggling and largely rural, and the economic situation was generally desperate. "Taking the boat," a popular way to express the concept of emigrating, was an accepted reality for the country. My mother also found her feet in her new homeland, and eventually love too, ultimately getting engaged to a man in New York. Like Eilis, she was pulled back to Ireland by bad news—my grandmother's impending death. A return ticket was purchased, and her life in New York was temporarily put on hold. My grandmother hung

on to life for much longer than was anticipated, while like Eilis, my mother postponed her return trip to New York. It was during this extended stay in Ireland that my mother met a man at a local dance, and like Eilis, started dating him.

While they were both faced with the same dilemma—to remain in Ireland or return to New York—they ultimately came to different decisions. This was my initial attraction and fascination with this novel, that it so accurately reflected my own family's history, but upon further re-reading, it transpired to be a work of such understated complexity, that the reader is gripped and drawn full-force into the ordinary, everyday reality of a shy young woman, trying to make a life in an utterly new world.

Colm Tóibín's educational background is in History and English, and his formative years as writer were spent working as a journalist for various publications in Ireland. Both these points are of interest when discussing any work by Tóibín, but they are especially relevant in relation to his fiction. With a degree in History from University College Dublin, Tóibín has a very informed and strong point of view, which often puts him at odds with the accepted historical narrative. The historian R.F. Foster, a professor of Irish history at Hertford College, Oxford, has the following to say about Tóibín, "The fact that he himself was a history student before he became a journalist and then a novelist has not, perhaps, been as much remarked by commentators on his *oeuvre* as it should be" (Delaney, 21). This is a salient point, while it is not necessary to have any detailed, or in fact, any knowledge of the history of Ireland, to enjoy *Brooklyn*, the finer points will be

missed. Tóibín has been accused of being a revisionist and a traditionalist,¹ however I believe that while he may adhere to a more traditional understanding of Irish history, he does question accepted truths of the country's established historical narrative, especially in relation to the Famine.

Tóibín grew up in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, which was a key site of the United Irishmen rebellion in 1798. The Tóibín family was strongly republican, and, as stated, members of his family were also involved in the Easter Rising of 1916. From an early age, he would have been engulfed in the history of the fight for independence, both at home and in school. Tóibín's father was a local historian, and together with a local priest they bought an old castle, which belonged to a member of the Ascendancy, the ruling Protestant class in Ireland, and turned it into a history museum, centered on the famous Battle of Vinegar Hill of 1798. Tóibín challenges the established narrative that was firmly ensconced in the young republic, and has vocally expressed his opinions on both this accepted history of the country, and the direction that he saw historians taking, starting while he was a university student in the early 1970s:

[...] being an atheist or being gay in Ireland at that time seemed easier to deal with as transgressions than the idea that you could cease believing in the Great Events of Irish nationalist history. No Cromwell as cruel monster, say; the executions after 1916 as understandable in the circumstances; 1798 as a small outbreak of rural tribalism; partition as inevitable. (New Ways of Killing Your Father)

¹ See Terry Eagleton's review of *Blackwater Lightship*, London Review of Books, Vol. 21, No. 20, 14 Oct. 1999, www.lrb.co.uk

As a student, he was also very critical of what he saw as an over-reliance and fawning for research emanating from British institutions, and a serious lack of research using Irish sources.

Tóibín began his writing career working for a current affairs and entertainment listing magazine, *In Dublin*, in 1978, after having lived in Barcelona for the previous three years. He worked with various publications, until, once again, he left Ireland, in 1985, traveling to South Africa, and then Argentina, where he subsequently began to focus on fiction and travel writing. Tóibín's writing style is very much a product of his earlier years as both a history student, and a journalist; it is usually sparse and to the point, and devoid of apparent artistic flourishes, as can be clearly seen in the following excerpt:

She had a sense too, she did not know from where, that, while the boys and girls from the town who had gone to England did ordinary work for ordinary money, people who went to America could become rich. She tried to work out how she had come to believe also that, while people from the town who lived in England missed Enniscorthy, no one who went to America missed home. Instead, they were happy there and proud. She wondered if that could be true. (*Brooklyn*, 26)

Tóibín makes his point by focusing on the inner workings of his characters, using simple language to draw the reader into these inner worlds. The style of his writing reflects his background, and the often uniquely succinct phrasing, sparingly adorned with stinging irony, which is quite common in Hiberno-English:

“Oh, you’ve come at the worst time now,” Miss Kelly said. “Just when we thought we would have a bit of peace. Now don’t disturb that Mary one whatever you do.” She inclined her head in the direction of the ladder.

“She’d fall as soon as she’d look at you.” (*Brooklyn*, 28)

In analyzing *Brooklyn*, it is necessary to examine a number of Tóibín’s other works, specifically *The Blackwater Lightship*, *Mother and Sons*, and *The South*. All of these works deal with similar themes of family, history and emigration, which are obviously closely tied to not only the author’s own experiences but also are expressive of a highly-defined worldview. Tóibín also tends to use many of the same characters in his novels or short stories, although there is never a clear or deliberate connection made between any of these works. *The Blackwater Lightship*, set in the early 1990s, deals with a family coming to terms with a gay son/grandson/brother who is dying from an AIDS-related illness, though the main focus is really about damaged relationships, unhealed issues, and how different generations react to the news of the imminent death of a loved one due to AIDS.

Mother and Sons is a collection of nine short stories centered on the mother and son relationship, while also incorporating other subsidiary themes such as repression, failed communication, coping with death, or dealing with other traumatic issues that could tear a family apart. *The South*, which was Tóibín’s first novel, is the history of a woman fleeing from a loveless marriage and establishing a new life in Spain, in the early 1950s, and ultimately reconciling with her abandoned son in Ireland. In all of these works,

Tóibín maintains a similar concern with history, family relationships and diaspora. His style of writing is sparse, yet dialogue and minute details reveal the psychological underpinnings of the characters, and the raw emotion that drives them.

In order to situate *Brooklyn*, it is necessary to place it in a historical context. This is important, as the history of Ireland is very much linked to Tóibín's stories. As previously noted, one can obviously enjoy reading Tóibín without having a full understanding of the country's history. A broader knowledge, however, does help one appreciate the degree to which Tóibín's narratives attempt to draw on history or engage themselves with it. As a former colony, the Republic of Ireland has been shaped by some 800 years of domination by its colonial master, at first England, and then the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, which is currently the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This creates a long-lasting trauma in the colonized, and given that the Republic of Ireland only came into existence in 1949, 68 years ago, it is therefore not surprising that one can see the scars of this history on the psyche of the country. History, then, in Tóibín's works is always framed within this discourse of colonial struggle and diaspora.

Post-Colonial Theory offers a useful tool for analyzing this history and understanding how it impacts on a novel such as *Brooklyn*. By way of initial example, the reader unfamiliar with Ireland's troubled colonial past may not fully appreciate the significance of the following exchange between Eilis and her brother Jack, who lives in England:

“What are they like?” she asked.

“Who?”

“The English.”

“They’re fair, they’re decent,” Jack said. “If you do your job, then they appreciate that. It’s all they care about, most of them. You get shouted at a bit on the street, but that’s just Saturday night. You pay no attention to it.”

(*Brooklyn*, 36)

This exchange illustrates the complicated and painful history between the two countries, and why there is big difference in the way emigration to the United States and England is treated. It is only since the 1980s that Ireland was even discussed within a post-colonial context. Prior to and during the 1980s and 1990s, many even believed that Ireland was not a post-colonial country.

Thankfully, this is no longer the case; however, in the 1950s—the period in which *Brooklyn* is set—the relations between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom were politically fraught. In 1932, the Irish Free State, as the Republic of Ireland was then known, refused to pay land annuities to Britain for loans granted to Irish tenant farmers to purchase their farms. This led to an economic trade war between the Free State and Britain, which lasted until 1938. The result was grave hardship in Ireland, and it fostered an ongoing, large-scale emigration, primarily to the United Kingdom.

Post-Colonial Theory offers a framework to understand the relationship between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. The island of Ireland is still divided, by the colonizer, making it a far more complicated case of just the colonizer and the previously colonized. Within the Republic of Ireland, coming to terms with this ongoing situation is

a very thorny and difficult issue, as evidenced in the divisive debates triggered by the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising. Understanding this complex and painful history needs to take into consideration all sides, and I believe that using a post-colonial framework will help to achieve this, while also shedding light on how Tóibín portrays this history in his work.

The first section of this thesis will focus on the history of Ireland, giving a brief overview of what happened and its contextual significance. I will also be focusing on emigration and how that has shaped the Irish psyche. The impact of emigration on the country cannot be understated, and the recent upsurge in the exodus of people following the economic crisis of 2008, was, once again, traumatic for all. The second section, will look at Tóibín, as a writer, and his influences, and then on the two other major themes in his work, family, and exile.

Section One

Historical Overview

Ireland first came into England's sphere in the mid-to-late twelfth century, when Pope Adrian IV, the first, and only English pope, concerned at the direction of the church in Ireland, gave Henry II, King of England, authority to invade Ireland, ostensibly to straighten out the Irish church and bring it in to line with Rome. The actual invasion occurred in 1169, and was done at the request of an Irish king, of which there were four at this time, as Ireland was not a united kingdom. The King of Leinster, was at war, and losing control of Leinster, he fled to England, where he solicited help from Henry II. Henry II sent a force to Ireland, under the direction of Richard Fitzgilbert de Clare, commonly known as Strongbow, where the king of Leinster was able to regain control of his kingdom.

Fearing Strongbow's growing power in Ireland, Henry launched another campaign to Ireland in 1171, effectively forcing Strongbow to submit to him, and firmly establishing English control on the island. This control was to last down to the present day, in the northern part of the country, in what is called Northern Ireland. While this meant that ultimately Ireland was controlled directly by the English Crown, the reality was of course somewhat less clear. The east coast of Ireland was much more under the direct influence of England, while the west was still essentially very much unchanged.

The next significant marker was in 1366, by which time the English crown was concerned about the level of intermarriage and adaptation of Irish customs on the part of

the English settlers. Virtually every Irish child would have heard the phrase that "The Old English became more Irish than the Irish themselves." The term Old English was used to distinguish the original settlers from the twelfth century, from the English settlers who arrived during the reign of Elizabeth II, and subsequent years. In an attempt to counteract this, the English drew up a set of laws, known as the Statutes of Kilkenny, which comprised 35 acts forbidding the Hiberno-Anglo Normans from marrying Irish, speaking Irish, adapting Irish customs, and also barred Irish speakers from holding any type of office, either secular or religious. An interesting side note is that they were actually written in French. While largely unenforceable, and having had little real impact on everyday life in Ireland, the Statutes are an indication of the long history of subjugation and oppression by the English.

Perhaps the more important developments came in the mid-sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, when the plantation system was introduced across Ireland. These mostly all failed, with the exception of the Ulster plantation, ultimately leading to the current situation of a divided island. Due to these plantations, the seventeenth century was a time of great conflict in Ireland, with numerous skirmishes breaking out across the country. However, the resistance to the English colonization only began to really take effect in the late eighteenth century.

The conflict which is most directly related to Tóibín's work is the United Irishmen rebellion of 1798, which was inspired by the both the French and American revolutions. Colm Tóibín's hometown of Enniscorthy played a vital role, as the site of the Battle of

Vinegar Hill. The rebellion, of course, was a failure, due in large part to informants alerting the government about what was to happen. What is noteworthy about the rebellion, is that it was led, for the most part, by Protestants, mainly from Ulster. Ulster Presbyterians were just as ill-treated as Catholics, as they went against the established church, which is why the rebellion was primarily led by them.

Tóibín has often commented on this part of Ireland's history, encouraging people to look past the deeply engrained prejudice and the unquestioned narrative of the brutality of the English, and the glorious striving for liberty of the Irish nation, as he very clearly stated in *The Guardian*: [a British newspaper] "Ireland has torn itself apart in the name of a single view of history—a history filled with myth and prejudice, rather than scrutinized with irony and intelligence" (History students will no longer tolerate or believe grand narratives). The Celtic Revival, from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, was instrumental in feeding into and nourishing a sense of Irish nationalism. A result of this, and the subsequent War of Independence, was the emergence of a fiercely proud Irish identity politics.

After the Civil War, 1922-23, the political scene was dominated by Fianna Fail, (Soldiers of Ireland) who arose from the republican movement. The party was led by the charismatic Éamon de Valera, one of the few leaders of the Easter 1916 rebellion to survive, because he was a citizen of the United States of America. De Valera was both a gifted orator, shrewd politician, and a devout Roman Catholic.

The Easter Rising of 1916, though it failed, did act to unify the country, or at least a significant portion of it, and help to propel the fight for independence, which did occur, to some degree, in 1921, resulting in the splitting of the country into what is now the Republic of Ireland, and the smaller Northern Ireland, which remains part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As is common in many post-independence countries, a shared identity and vision is critical to creating a lasting, and successful country. In Ireland, this took the form of a rabid anti-English sentiment which was fostered through the public education system, and a strong Roman Catholic presence, which ultimately dictated the direction the country was to take for many decades.

While many people associate emigration from Ireland with the Famine, the first extensive emigration was in 1607, known as the Flight of the Earls, when the majority of the Irish landowning class were forced into exile, allowing for English and Scottish Protestant landlords to take control of nearly the entire country. There was major forced depopulation at various times between 1607 and the mid-1700s, but it was not until the 1840s, when the famine struck, that emigration took such a devastating toll on the country. Up to the 1840s, emigration was associated in the popular imagination with the oppression by the colonizing English, and Scottish settlers in the north. Once the horror of the famine was realized, popular opinion very quickly centered blame squarely on the British, and on the Ascendency in Ireland. The Ascendency were the Anglo-Irish, protestant land-owning class, many of whom spent a great deal of their time living in England. In most regards, they were considered the most ruthless, and therefore the most hated—the absentee landlord.

To understand the impact of emigration on the Irish psyche it should be pointed out that in 1840, just prior to the famine, the population of the island stood at just over 8.5 million. Today, the population of the island is 6.5 million. The number of people in the world who claim Irish heritage is a staggering 70 million. Sustained, heavy emigration has been an essential part of life in Ireland since the mid-1840s, and no family has been left untouched. The population dropped from approximately 8.5 million to 4.5 million in 1970, of which 3 million lived in the republic. The most popular destination was Britain, followed by the United States of America, Canada, and Australia.

It is very easy to see how this has impacted the island; this is clearly demonstrated in the literature, music and art of the island as Eoghan Smith has commented on in his review of Joseph O' Conner's *Ghost Light* :

Indeed, the Celtic Tiger years have seen a generation of writers emerge that has found in history a way of thinking about the present. It is unsurprising that four of the last high-profile Irish novels produced—Colum McCann's *Let The Great World Spin*, Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn*, William Trevor's *Love and Summer* and now *Ghost Light*—are set in the past. (Smith)

Music was likewise dominated by the theme of emigration, with many songs dealing with the idea of the “American wake.” At a time when travel was not so easy, or affordable, the likely hood of someone emigrating to the USA ever returning home was remote. This

led to the family holding a wake for the departing relative. Traditional Irish music is full of songs and music describing this scenario.

As the opening quote to this thesis states, Tóibín was inspired to write *Brooklyn* when he heard a woman talking about her daughter who was living in Brooklyn. As a student of history, and later a journalist, Tóibín was inspired to write a novel dealing with this issue. *Brooklyn*, at face value, is a novel about a young woman who emigrates to the U.S.; it is, however, also clearly informed by the author's reading of history, how he relates to this history, and the contemporary state of a post-colonial society. As a young student at University College Dublin in the early 1970s, he studied History and English, and was very critical of his experience:

I went to University College Dublin in 1972 to study History and English. If there was a forbidden "f" word or a forbidden "c" word while we studied there, they were "Fenian" or "colonial," all the Irish history we studied was parliamentary and constitutional [.....] Outside in the world there were car bombs and hunger strikes, done in the name of our nation, in the name of history. Inside we were cleansing history, concentrating on those aspects of our past which would make us good, worthy citizens.

(*Reading Colm Tóibín*, 33)

Tóibín has both written and spoken about Irish history, as a novelist, an academic and a journalist. His thoughts on the subject are informed by his own family history, as a student and a professor, and they are not always easily defined. For Tóibín, the

mythologizing of Ireland's history from the time of the Celtic Revival through to his own childhood and early adulthood has caused the nation to ignore facets of history that contradict the accepted narrative, and place the blame for all the failings and calamities firmly on the shoulders of the colonizing power.

Given the stature of the Roman Catholic Church in the newly independent republic, which wanted to declare its difference from the colonizer, the Roman Catholic Church became a focal point in virtually every community in the country. Even to this day, the vast majority of public primary schools in Ireland are controlled by the local parish priest, who has the ultimate say in who is hired or fired. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, Tóibín has stated that this tendency to only blame the English is simplistic:

To suggest that it was merely England or Irish landlords who stood by while Ireland starved is to miss the point. An entire class of Irish Catholics survived the Famine; many, indeed, improved their prospects and this legacy may be more difficult for us to deal with in Ireland now than the legacy of those who died or emigrated. (New Ways of Killing Your Father)

To back up this assertion, Tóibín explains how in the midst of the potato crisis of the 1840s, the Church completed a huge new cathedral in his hometown of Enniscorthy, at a prohibitive price, which was largely funded by well-off Catholics.

Such hypocritical actions occurred, according to Tóibín, while the nation condemned Britain for inaction, looking away, all the time, at such examples of heinous extravagance

on the part of the Church. Catholic emancipation only came in 1829, prior to that there were grave restrictions on Catholics, most of the oldest churches and cathedrals were taken over by the Church of Ireland, which was the arm of the Anglican Church in Ireland. The desire to replace those taken over by the Church of Ireland is understandable, though perhaps, as Tóibín indicates, it was not the time to be engaging in expensive buildings, when the money could have gone toward famine relief.

Memory can be selective, and how one remembers the past, be it one's own personal history, or the collective memory of the community/ nation, is often difficult to understand. Tóibín is very clear about how he sees the past, and its impact on the present, his own family history is intimately woven into the birth of the modern republic. Despite this, Tóibín is usually seen as a revisionist, mainly because he questions the passive role attributed to Irish Catholics, and that the English were responsible for all of Ireland's ills.

Not everyone agrees with this point of view, however. Declan Kiberd, The Donald and Marilyn Keough Professor of Irish Studies, at the University of Notre Dame, has referred to Tóibín as a "liberal post-Nationalist" (Kiberd, 609) and someone who is "going to war against the past" (Kiberd, 610). Kiberd, admittedly, adheres much more to the standard historical narrative. He approaches Ireland's history from a post-colonial perspective, a view not shared by Tóibín. Again, in the *London Review of Books*, Tóibín is very critical of Kiberd, when he reviewed Kiberd's book *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*,

Later, without explanation or justification, Kiberd uses the phrase “occupied Ireland” about Ireland in 1907. This is a phrase which might appear now and again in IRA propaganda, but it cannot be thrown casually into a book full of sophisticated distinctions. (Playboys of the GPO)

This puts Tóibín at odds with the majority of historians in the country, and more aligned with writers such as Conor Cruise O’Brien, an Irish journalist, who believed that we should acknowledge our close ties to Britain, and not allow the country to be dominated by an anti-British sentiment which was born out of the struggle for independence.

The emergence of the IRA in the late 1960s, and the subsequent campaign they launched in Northern Ireland, and England, created something of an identity crisis in the Republic of Ireland. Proud of attaining independence, guilty about Northern Ireland, abhorrence at the violence of the IRA, all meant that most Irish people in the Republic rejected the IRA, and consequently attempted to distance themselves from Northern Ireland.

This ambivalence toward the fight for independence was clearly visible in the run-up to the centenary celebrations of the 1916 Easter Rising. Despite the fact that there has been sustained peace in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, there has been a dogged reluctance to celebrate the event that ultimately led to independence, due to the campaign waged by the IRA to unite the country.

Maurice Fitzpatrick, writing about Colm Tóibín as a historian, made the following observation: "After centuries of colonial occupation, easy distinctions between rulers and the ruled can no longer be made or, at least if they are made, it is to smooth over some uncomfortable self-realizations" (Fitzpatrick, 10). The reality is that Ireland and Britain are very closely intertwined, from both a familial, and national context, and it is difficult to see how they could be otherwise. Tóibín, like Conor Cruise O'Brien, believes in collective memory. Both writers have discussed how the community impacts the way we see history, how we experience events that have long since passed, and how we interact with others, in particular the former colonizer.

Growing up in a relatively recent post-independence society, Tóibín has reacted to this need to present a monolithic version of Irish history. As a child, he would have been steeped, as all Irish children were, in the heroic tales of Irish mythology, the official version of history, which was pro-Catholic, anti-Protestant, anti-English, and dominated by Irish sports. Tóibín reacted very strongly to this, and in one way or another, most of his work reflects these reactions. Oona Frawley, in her essay *The Difficult Work of Remembering: Tóibín and Cultural Memory*, describes how Tóibín "offers multiple, conflicting and concentric narratives that draw on the notions of 'collective memory' and 'postmemory'" (Delaney, 71). Frawley believes that Tóibín questions and offers critiques of the standard historical narrative, which has glossed over many complexities. She states that he goes beyond the notion of collective memory, preferring instead the idea of "cultural memory," [which she defines as "Cultural memory"], on the other hand, stretches beyond the limited horizon of several generations and functions instead as a repository

for the narratives, records and symbols on which a culture draws its shape and identity” (Delaney, 71).

Tóibín’s position on Irish history reflects the very different feelings that many commentators have about Ireland, especially within the field of post-colonialism. In regard to post-colonialism, Ireland is a relative new-comer, having been dismissed as not qualifying as a post-colonial society by many scholars outside the country, while within Ireland, as Tóibín has stated, many were simply more interested in maintaining the established narrative, which was firmly focused on the past.

The notion of what is or is not post-colonialism is a fraught one, even the way the word is written has caused some debate, is it one word, two words or hyphenated? While Ireland was clearly a colony for a long period of time, and the Republic of Ireland only became such in 1948, having been a member of the British Commonwealth from the time of independence in 1922. Thus, many of the established advocates for post-colonialism have believed that it simply does not fit the criteria to be labeled as such.

Writing in *The Empire Strikes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffins, and Helen Tiffin, state: “while it is possible to argue that these societies [Ireland, Scotland and Wales] were the first victims of English expansion, their subsequent complicity in the British imperial enterprise makes it difficult for colonized peoples outside Britain to accept their identity as post-colonial” (Ashcroft, 33). This assertion is troubling, as it ignores the lived experience of these countries. While the Irish, Scots and Welsh have certainly played a

role in the expansion of the British empire, this is only due to the fact that they were colonized; participation in that expansion was hardly a voluntary exercise on their part. It seems grossly unfair to label a colonized people as complicit in the actions of the colonizer, when they have had no other option open to them.

As Ireland has for most of its history been a white homogeneous society, and not so tremendously different from its colonizer, at least in ethnic composition, this has led some to question the applicability of the term to Ireland. Eoin Flannery writing in the journal *Postcolonial Text* makes the following observation that “A range of internal factors complicates readings of Ireland’s colonial history, in which all notions of language, ethnicity, faith, class, and gender were drastically affected-factors expand and challenge the mandate of postcolonial studies” (Flannery, 1). Given the centuries of occupation by the English, and later the British Crown, it is difficult to disentangle these elements, and this fact may make it uncomfortable for many to see the complexities, on both sides of the equation. Tóibín appears to agree with this sentiment, that it is simply not a case of black or white. His views have generated a range of contradictory interpretations of how he fits into such labeling. Given Tóibín’s more general unorthodoxy, this is possibly something that he enjoys.

To conclude, no one writes in a vacuum, and while it is completely possible to read an author without any major background knowledge, and have a deeper understanding, knowing more about the historical context that Tóibín works within, leads to a more profound reading of his work, and a much greater appreciation of Colm Tóibín as a

realist. The historical setting was a very long time in the making, and it is a complex one, which has greatly impacted the nation. The often-cited "Irish melancholy," for example, does not truly make much sense, if one has no inkling about the harrowing, externally imposed factors of Irish history.

Section Two

Colm Tóibín: Influences, Family and Exile in *Brooklyn*

Colm Tóibín is one of Ireland's most internationally recognized contemporary writers. As previously noted, he began his writing career as a young journalist, one who was not afraid to speak out against injustices that he witnessed. While not a household name, he was well respected by his peers, who considered his willingness to tackle difficult or painful topics, admirable. Abandoning his life as a journalist, Tóibín traveled and focused on his nonfiction writing. His work thus represents both his experience as a young man, an emigrant, and a historian.

With a background in history, and journalism, it is not surprising that his writing has a certain matter-of-fact austerity to it, which might position him as an heir apparent of Realism and Naturalism. Apparently, however, Tóibín would reject those labels. Speaking with Gabe Wood, for an article published [in the British newspaper], *The Telegraph*, on October 4, 2014, Tóibín claims that he has little interest in Realism, per se, or the novel as a form, stating in his own words: "I would take Realism as something where the sentences provide information" (Wood).

Tobin's prose has often been described as austere, by critics such as Terry Eagleton, Gaby Woods of *The Telegraph*, Alex Clark for *The Guardian*, and he himself has stated that his style is heavily influenced by his time as a journalist. In an interview with Fintan

O'Toole,² a writer with *The Irish Times*, Tóibín discussed the influence of New Journalism—an American literary movement that started in the 1960s-'70s, which pushed the boundaries of journalism and nonfiction writing. Tom Wolfe was the first to use the term, and it has been applied to writers such as Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson and Gay Talese (Delaney, 187). The genre emphasized the importance of truth over facts, using direct dialogue rather than quotes, and focusing on everyday details of life, family and work.

Tóibín's debut in nonfiction writing came in the form of stints for the *In Dublin* and *Magill* magazines. *In Dublin* was an events and cultural oriented weekly magazine, which featured the work of young journalists trying to make a start, and *Magill* was a current affairs magazine, known for its hard-hitting reporting. Speaking about the influence of New Journalism in these publications, Tóibín writes:

And the idea was that a long piece for In Dublin, and Magill-and Vincent Browne who owned Magill was very interested in this idea as well—a piece of between five and ten thousand words, should be as well written as a story. It should have a beginning it should have an image at the beginning, and it should bring you in slowly into it (Delaney, 188).

With regard to specific practitioners of Realism, Henry James plays a central influential role in Tóibín's work, and perhaps his most widely acknowledged work, *The Master*, is about James's life in England. James focused in many of his works on the clash between the Old World and the New World, and much of his writing deals with how he, as an

² See Delaney, Paul, ed. *Reading Colm Tóibín*. Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2008

American, navigates the Old World. This theme of exile is something that Tóibín and James share, as noted by Robert McCrum who interviewed Tóibín for an article on the writer published in *The Guardian* newspaper:

Tóibín's exile from his childhood and family began when his father died and he went away to school. Before that, there was an idyllic upbringing in the little town of Enniscorthy in the remote south-east of Ireland, the place he frequently returns to in his fiction. His family lies in the graveyard there: father, grandfather, great-grandfather, generations of loyal republicans, some of whom fought in the Easter Rising of 1916 (McCrum).

The familial experience is also central to both these writers, and they share a desire to escape from the family, but are inevitably, constantly drawn back to it. Tóibín left Ireland to live in Spain, and explore Europe, as well as moving to Argentina for a period of time.

James spent his adult life moving between his home in New England and England, where he died. James felt the need to get away from his family, and possibly Tóibín had a similar desire, though it may have been more to do with the Irish psyche, where emigration was an expected norm for the country. Speaking to Helena Wulff for her article, "Colm Tóibín as Travel Writer," for the *Nordic Irish Studies Journal*, he puts it rather succinctly: "Why do Irish people travel so much?' I asked Colm Tóibín. 'Because they live on an island', he replied" (Wulff).

Henry James was a complex character, who never fully revealed himself. He was hiding more than just his ambiguous sexuality, which he always attempted to keep very private, and which his family struggled to control in the years after his death, by refusing to allow publication of his letters, or at the very least having them heavily edited. The other main aspect of James that he always kept undercover, in as much as he could, was the fact of his Irish heritage, his paternal grandfather was from county Cavan.

Although James's father was a great admirer of the executed Irish freedom fighter, Robert Emmet, whose brother emigrated to the United States, and became close friends with Henry James Senior, his son did not share his father's love for the rebel, or for Ireland, and its ongoing struggle for independence. While living in England, James always attempted to hide his Irish ties, though despite his best efforts, it sometimes was made public. Carol Taaffe, in her review of Tóibín's book, *All a Novelist Needs: Colm Tóibín on Henry James*, published in *The Dublin Review of Books*, shares James's thoughts about his late sister, Alice:

When his sister's diary was printed two years after her death, he remarked how the years which Alice spent in England had revealed her to be "really an Irishwoman! ... in spite of her so much larger and finer than Irish intelligence." Needless to say, James did not share what he regarded as her atavistic passion for Home Rule. (Taaffe)

Tóibín openly claims that James was a major influence on his work. Speaking of James's novel, *The Ambassadors*, Tóibín notes, "But the way this novel changed my life was

through its own complex textures, its own deep opposition to complacency, its own refusal to settle for anything small.”

Like James, Tóibín also struggled to come to terms with his sexuality, and only began to explore it once he had left the country, when he moved to Barcelona, after finishing his studies in Dublin. Ireland, for him in the 1960s and ‘70s was a lonely place for a young gay person. He has said that as a gay teenager growing up in Ireland, he was attracted to the priesthood, seeing it as the only viable option for a gay man, at that time.³ However, he ultimately rejected it as untenable, due to the attraction he had for several priests. Though he did write some very explicit short stories in Barcelona, with graphic details of gay sex, it was not what his work became known for. Like James, he relied heavily on the theme of exile, indeed that was what his first novel was about, *The South*.

The South, published in 1990, was Tóibín’s first novel, though he had published extensively before this, both short stories and nonfiction, and he was firmly established as an up-and-coming young writer. The novel, set in 1950s Ireland, is about a young married woman who escapes a loveless marriage by moving to Barcelona, leaving behind her husband and young son. It sets up what would become common themes in Tóibín’s work—exile and a female main character, one who is trying to discover herself and a lost or repressed identity.

It is no coincidence that Tóibín has largely focused on the past, dealing with identity, self-discovery, and exile. If we look at his contemporaries, we see that, for the most part,

³ See Rustin, Susanna, “A Life in Books: Colm Tóibín” in *The Guardian*, 25 October 2010

there is a tendency to deal with very similar themes (exile, family, self-discovery, and the dominant mother figure), which are undoubtedly familiar to anyone who has explored contemporary Irish writing. As Eoghan Smith, [reviewing Joseph O'Connor's novel, *Haunted by Ghosts*], noted:

It is unsurprising that four of the last high-profile Irish novels produced – Colum McCann's *Let The Great World Spin*, Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn*, William Trevor's *Love and Summer* and now *Ghost Light* – are set in the past. Trapped in cycles of bad memories, these novels are excavations, or better perhaps, exorcisms (Smith).

Not only do these works deal with the past, but they also focus heavily on the family, and this is certainly true when you look at the collected work of Tóibín.

Anne Enright, winner of the Man Booker prize in 2007 for her novel *The Gathering*, also fits readily into this group. Her works, including *The Gathering*, and *The Green Road* (her most recent novel), are dark, brooding, the equivalent to ripping off a bandage to expose the hurt and pain within. These works center upon dysfunctional families, and flip between the past and the present, exile and returning home. They focus on the past because there is a realization that it is the only way to truly understand the present, and ultimately come to some kind of reckoning, and ability to move forward.

The common ground for these writers is how, as Irish, there is an attempt to escape from the past, to escape the suffocating strictures of the Catholic Church, and the overpowering role of the family. José Carregal-Romero makes this point very clear:

Furthermore, the notion of the family has too often been idealized as a site of peace and unconditional love, its members being united by unbreakable bonds of mutual affection. Curiously enough, Irish artists and intellectuals have frequently subverted such ideas about family and society. (Carregal-Romero, 3)

The concept of the family, and specifically the role of mothers and wives, was enshrined in the Irish psyche by a famous radio address that the then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Éamon de Valera gave to the nation on St. Patrick's Day, 1943. The address became famous for, ironically, something he actually never said, "comely maidens dancing at the crossroads," but it came to represent how many Irish felt about the very traditional and heavily Catholic role the church played in Irish society. Though a misquotation, it did encapsulate what de Valera envisioned for the newly independent nation:

A land whose countryside would be bright with cozy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live (De Valera, 466)

This depiction is utter nationalistic fantasy, even for that time. As recent events have revealed in the scandal of the "mother and baby homes," the Irish were also aware of an institutionalized policy where unmarried women were housed apart from society until

they gave birth, and often stayed in such homes for a number of years. The Catholic Church, and the State, systematically ignored the plight of young unmarried mothers and their children, condemning the young women to lives of servitude and abandonment in State-condoned, religiously run institutions, which resulted in massive infant mortality. Those children who did survive were adopted by good Catholic families primarily in the United States. The children were essentially sold to the highest bidder, and the adoptions were not legally carried out. The young women were locked up in these "homes," where they amounted to nothing more than free labor for the nuns.

This is the background that Tóibín, and his contemporaries grew up in. Ireland, as a "postcolonial" society, still retained a colonized mentality, evidenced in part by an inferiority complex in relation to the colonizer. The country created a slightly different hierarchy, one in which the new master, and internal colonizer, was the Roman Catholic Church. It is therefore not at all surprising that those writers and artists who felt alienated by this very oppressive culture focused on the past. Ireland, as an independent nation, is just now painfully coming to terms with many of the painful aspects of its colonial and postcolonial history. The country has changed and the role of the Church is largely diminished, however, as Carol Taaffe states about Anne Enright, which would be equally applicable to Tóibín: "But that placelessness is a dream, a fantasy, and Enright's wandering characters often discover that they are still enmeshed within the Irish family and the Irish home" (Taaffe).

Colm Tóibín, has been described as being many contradictory things: historian, journalist, revisionist, traditionalist, anti-revisionist. While there may be many varying perspectives concerning Tóibín's most obvious influences or even his own political agenda, most would be in agreement regarding his style. As Terry Eagleton has noted: "Colm Tóibín's austere, monkish prose, in which everything is exactly itself and redolent of nothing else." (Eagleton) He has used this style of writing from the start of his career, in his first novel, *The South*, it is very striking, very bare, yet very effective at creating resonant images. Katherine Proctor, the main character in the novel, has recently left her husband and son, in Ireland, and has just arrived in Barcelona, where the novel is primarily set, until the conclusion. Katherine is trying to make sense of her surroundings, and when she stumbles upon a deserted square one night, inevitably, her mind returns to the family and place she abandoned:

I thought of Enniscorthy. I thought of Tom sitting in the draughty house thinking about me, trying to come to some conclusion about me. I thought of what it would be like to be there. I thought about what it would be like to settle down for the night there with crows and the jackdaws chattering in the bare oak trees near the river. (*The South*, 9)

The prose here is very sparse, the repetition of "I" highlights the sense of loneliness she is experiencing, while also revealing other aspects of the main character that will later emerge. The short sentences make it feel very real, it is easy to imagine Katherine alone, in this foreign country, but it also emphasizes for Katherine that she has made the right decision. The "draughty house," the birds "chattering in the bare oak trees near the river" conjure a cold, dark, unloving place. Yet as she goes on to state in the next paragraph, it

is the desolation of the deserted square in Barcelona that calls her mind back to the bleakness of the family farm close to Enniscorthy, and helps her accept that, yes, she made the right decision, "I knew I had to be here" (*The South*, 9).

This bare yet lapidary prose is continued in *Brooklyn*, where details are reduced to the minimum, and with little that registers as flowery, or unnecessary: "She watched Rose crossing the street from sunlight into shade, carrying the new leather handbag that she has bought in Clery's in Dublin in the sale. Rose was wearing a cream-coloured cardigan over her shoulders" (*Brooklyn*, 3). It is easy to imagine the scene, due to its reminiscence of stage directions, which is also a hallmark of Tóibín's style. He is an expert at putting the reader in the middle of the action, while also managing to make a subtler statement than it appears. From these two lines, in the opening paragraph, we get a sense of who Rose is, stylish, yet sensibly so. The ironic little detail that may not be obvious to the foreign reader: She did buy her leather handbag on sale, however in what was then one of Dublin's premier department stores.

Such details are also refracted from Eilis's own perspective, a technique that can be seen throughout the novel. There are many observations which begin with "she thought," "she felt," "she wondered," and these phrases guide the reader to concentrate more on Eilis's reaction to something, rather than the event or action itself. Tóibín keeps the reader engaged in Eilis, and instead of getting caught up in the details of her new situation, we are instead focused on how Eilis sees things and experiences them. Yet it is in the recounting of details, objects and gestures that psychology is also revealed. This indirect

or subjective focus is similar to the way that Tóibín has portrayed Henry James, in *The Master*.

Tóibín manages to combine this austere style very effectively with perfectly rendered Irish dialogue. He catches the cadences and intricacies of Hiberno-English in such an honest and truthful way, so that it sounds neither forced nor staged. Using a very natural dialogue allows Tóibín to say much more than just what is happening in the actual scene—he captures the ability to make an elusive comment about Irish society, be it social mores, small-town gossip, or veiled racism:

“Here you are, then,” Miss Kelly said.

Eilis noticed a number of black umbrellas resting against the hallstand.

“I hear you have no job at all but a great head for figures.”

“Is that right?”

“Oh the whole town, anyone who is anyone, comes into the shop and I hear everything.” (*Brooklyn*, 5)

In this scene, Eilis has just been summoned to call on a local shop owner, who is interested in hiring her on a part-time basis. The point that Miss Kelly is making is that Eilis’s family does not shop there. It is perfectly Irish, displaying a biting comment, while supposedly being nice to someone.

In her Brooklyn lodging house, arranged by Fr. Flood, Eilis has a conversation with her landlady, a fellow Irish citizen from her hometown, about Fr. Flood, who is the local parish priest in their Brooklyn neighborhood. With just a few very short sentences,

Tóibín manages to make a comment about the racism of many Irish people in the U.S., and the strong strain of anti-clericalism that exists in Ireland, even by devout, practicing Catholics. It is so concise, yet succeeds in making these two important observations:

“He is very nice,” Eilis said.

“He’s nice to those he’s nice to,” Mrs. Kehoe said. “But I hate a priest rubbing his hands together and smiling. You see that a lot with the Italian priests and I don’t like it. I wish he was more dignified. That’s all I have to say about him.”

(*Brooklyn*, 81-82).

In an interview with *Bookslut*, [book review blog] Tóibín is asked if he feels a greater sense of connection with Irish subjects, he responded by saying that he does not generally think about being Irish “most of the time,” and that he in no way confines himself to reading or listening to only Irish books or music. He makes the point that he is using the sounds he grew up with:

With Irish dialogue, you’re working with memory. You’re working with the way your mother spoke or your grandmother spoke. You’re working with the sounds you’re hearing around you when you’re the dialogue. So in a novel like *Brooklyn*, or *The Blackwater Lightship*, the dialogue emerges much stronger than the prose does. (Bookslut)

Using this dialogue style allows Tóibín to roam across topics of racism and class snobbery very convincingly. This includes the racist attitudes toward Irish people, and racism expressed by Irish people. As mentioned in the introduction, during the period in

which the novel is set, the prime destination for Irish emigrants was Britain, specifically England. During that time, there was rampant anti-Irish sentiment, which Tóibín captures in a very understated yet effective way. When Eilis arrives in Liverpool, where she is to catch the ship taking her to New York, she is met by her brother, who lives there. Tóibín, makes a very wry comment on the social awkwardness of the Irish, and general discomfort with physicality, even within your own family:

She saw Jack as soon as she descended from the boat. She did not know whether she should embrace him or not. They had never embraced before. When he put out his hand to shake her hand, she stopped and looked at him. He seemed embarrassed until he smiled. She moved towards him as though to hug him.

“That’s enough of that now,” he said as he gently pushed her away.

“People will think...”

“What?”

“It’s great to see you,” he said. He was blushing. “Really great to see you.” (*Brooklyn*, 34-35)

This inability to simply hug his sister, who in all likelihood he may not see again for many, many years, is not an anomaly in Irish society. It can be read as a subtle reference to the stifling nature of a society dominated by a clergy, which frowns on any form of physicality, even when it is within a family.

When Eilis questions her brother on what the English are like, he tells her that if you work hard they are decent, he begins to comment on what happens when they are out socializing, but seems to try to walk it back, so as not to upset his sister:

“You get shouted at a bit on the street, but that’s just Saturday night. You pay no attention to it.”

“What do they shout?”

“Nothing for the ears of a nice girl going to America.”

“Tell me!”

I certainly will not.”

“Bad words?”

“Yes, but you learn to pay no attention and we have our own pubs so anything that would happen would be just on the way home.” (*Brooklyn*,

36)

Tóibín shines in such moments, subtly capturing the complexities of being an emigrant in a country that, while seemingly open to receiving outsiders, has many dogged elements within it that are less than welcoming. This experience of Eilis’s brother Jack is in contrast to what she will find in New York. Eilis is never confronted with the outright racism that her brothers experience in England. What she does discover is the small-mindedness and blatant racism of her fellow Irish, and Irish-Americans. In the lodging house where she lives in Brooklyn, Eilis, as the newest arrival, becomes the focus of attention from her housemates. All women, and Irish, with the exception of an Irish-

American and an Irish-Italian American, yet it is Eilis who seems to be the most open-minded of the group.

Eilis is the young, naïve emigrant, who has to quickly adapt to her new surroundings, and a new job. While lodging in a house with primarily Irish residents could seem like a good way to ease into life in a new country, Eilis quickly concludes that the less she engages with them, the better. All the lodgers dine together, especially for dinner, and it is the setting for numerous disagreements between the young women. Tóibín, using the device of letter writing, has Eilis describe all her housemates to her mother and sister. Some of these epistolary portraits are more successfully done than others. The character of Miss McAdam is perhaps the most filled out, but also very stereotypical. She is from Belfast, and now working as a secretary. Described by Eilis, she tends to look down upon the other women in the house who, like Eilis, work in a non-office environment. Miss McAdam appears like a caricature of a prim, prudish, Northern Irish Protestant, with undisguised racist attitudes. Tóibín does not put racism to the fore, yet he casually introduces it to conversations, with very detailed and pointed references to the period. It is not only Miss McAdam who has racist attitudes, but she is the most vocal.

One evening after work, the ladies are discussing the department store where Eilis works, Bartocci's, in downtown Brooklyn. The store has just recently decided to cater to African-Americans by introducing some items that are specifically targeted to them. Eilis has been designated as one of the staff to assist African-American women in the store. One evening as the ladies were planning an evening out, Eilis pretends to have a cold in

an attempt to get out of socializing with the other women. Miss McAdam uses this as an excuse to get in a remark about Bartocci's and their new customers: "'I'd say in that store,' Miss McAdam said to Eilis, 'you could get all sorts of germs'" (*Brooklyn*, 121). Mrs. Kehoe, the landlady, who has her own issues with Italians, nevertheless seems to have a more open-minded attitude toward African-Americans than her younger tenants: "'Well, we mightn't like them but the Negro men fought in the overseas war, didn't they?' Mrs. Kehoe asked. 'And they were killed just the same as our men. I always say that. No one minded them when they needed them'" (*Brooklyn*, 121).

It is a short exchange, and again Tóibín demonstrates his adeptness at not just dealing with difficult topics, but also his eye for period detail. In her letters, Eilis describes what her life is like in Brooklyn, and they include a lot of accurate detail for the era. Tóibín does a lot of research for his novels, and often it is for what would appear to be very minor details. Talking to Robert McCrum [of *The Guardian* newspaper], Tóibín describes the research he undertook for Red Fox stockings, which were introduced to Bartocci's store for the African-American community. The excerpt ironically reveals other forms of ingrained racism:

"I did a lot of work on Red Fox stockings," Tóibín says, describing his investigation of "brasalettes" and women's underwear with the relish of a Victorian missionary penetrating the Dark Continent [*sic*]. "I discovered that, for women of colour there was also Sepia and Coffee as well as Red Fox. So then I had a scene. 'Oh, wow!' I thought. 'Look what I can do with

that." And he does. Nothing goes to waste in Brooklyn. It has the intensity of a short story and the emotional canvas of grand opera. (McCrum)

As in all of his works, Tóibín considers the deep connections to family and place, often centering around his hometown of Enniscorthy. Some of his characters turn up in different stories or novels, either as the very same person, or he simply uses the same name, and place, yet applied to obviously different characters. It is interesting that in *Brooklyn*, the young couple, George and Nancy, whose wedding Eilis attends while she is back in Ireland visiting her mother, first appear in his collection of short stories, *Mothers and Sons*, published in 2006, three years before *Brooklyn* was published. In *Mothers and Sons*, we meet them much later in life. George has just recently passed away, and Nancy is left to raise her teenage children and run a dying business concern.

As noted earlier, there is an ambiguous approach to the central themes of homeland, exile, and identity. In *The South*, the main character is escaping a loveless marriage, yet there is the added layer since she is also Protestant, which, given that the narrative is set in the 1950s Ireland and Barcelona, cannot have been an easy thing. In that work, Protestant identity looms large in often tragic and violent ways, which also reflect the ongoing resentment of the Catholic majority. *The Blackwater Lightship*, published in 1999, centers on how a fractured family come together dealing with a son who is dying from AIDS-related complications. Perhaps the theme of exile is less defined, yet the need to escape from a culture that is not welcoming to homosexuality, or any kind of otherness, is very much central to the story. Both works echo the sometimes grotesque

imperfections of a society that has been colonized by other nefarious forces, most notably in the form of Catholic dogma and ingrained prejudice. It is interesting how the lodging house in *Brooklyn* presents a microcosm of this stunted and closed society.

The role of the mother is always significant in Tobin's work. While Eilis's mother is not as fleshed-out a character as some of his other mother figures, she does play an important role in the story. Mrs. Tracey knows much about Eilis's life in Brooklyn. Eilis is diligent in writing, and spares no details about her life in America, with some exceptions. She never mentions her terrible seasickness, or how she had to be sent home due to a severe bout of homesickness, after reading letters from home. The most significant omission is her relationship with Tony, which is somewhat baffling. As Liam McIlvanney notes: "*Brooklyn*, we begin to understand, is the story of what Eilis leaves out in her letters home" (McIlvanney). This of course ultimately leads to the terrible dilemma that Eilis finds herself in, when she returns to Ireland, and though her mother does all she can to keep her daughter in Ireland, she quickly concedes and encourages Eilis to return to Brooklyn, upon learning of her marriage.

The mother figure has always played an important part in the Irish psyche, this can be seen in the mythical figure of Kathleen Ni Houlihan, or as she is also known as Sean Bhean Bhocht (Poor Old Woman). The Irish Literary Revival, also known as the Celtic Revival, and the Irish Literary Renaissance, played a large part in consolidating this idea of the heroic woman who sacrifices everything for her country. W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory wrote a play titled *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), which was stridently

nationalistic, and encouraged young men to fight for Ireland's independence. Kathleen Ni Houlihan came to represent the feminization of the symbol of Ireland, though this did not lead to a greater role for women in Irish society, but rather an idealized notion of motherhood and family.

Tóibín's mother figures are always very strong, and are often depicted fighting against the stifling constraints of society. He tells Fintan O'Toole, when discussing his mother's early life and her interest in poetry: "But the fact that she stopped writing, I think, was on her mind, always. That she could have, if circumstances had been different, that she could have been a different sort of person. So that was in the house as well and it was just as important." (Delaney, 185). In *The Blackwater Lightship*, it is the mother and grandmother who seem to buck conventions, refusing to adhere to the role society has scripted for them. This does, however, come with a price, as Helen does not talk with her mother, Lily, and Lily has fallen out with her own mother, Dora.

The novel centers on a dysfunctional family attempting to come together and deal with Paul's pending death, a clash between the idolized society that was supposed to be, and the actual reality of the modern world, with all of its complexities. Terry Eagleton links this with Ireland's past as a formerly colonized nation:

In Ireland, mothers are more than mothers because they are symbols of the suffering nation; and though *The Blackwater Lightship* is not in any obvious sense a political novel, it is not hard to see in Helen's settling of

accounts with Lily something of the vexed relation between past and present in contemporary Ireland. (Eagleton)

In *Brooklyn*, we see a stark contrast between Eilis's family and that of her Italian-American boyfriend. The Lacey family, Eilis, her sister Rose, and her mother, seem incapable of expressing their feelings, which is also revealed in Eilis's epistolary omissions. Eilis, as was the case for many emigrating to the United States during this time, would most likely not be returning for a very long time. Despite this fact, the family try to avoid all mention of this, and pretend that everything is normal:

She would make them believe, if she could, that she was looking forward to America and leaving home for the first time. She promised herself that not for one moment would she give them the slightest hint of how she felt, and she would keep it from herself if she had to until she was away from them.

There was, she thought, enough sadness in the house, maybe even more than she realized. She would try as best she could not to add to it.

(*Brooklyn*, 33).

Tony's Italian-American family are very different, and at first Eilis is taken aback at how open and expressive they are. When Eilis is first introduced to them, she is bewildered by this loving, jocular, and highly expressive form of familial life. Around the dinner table, the family talk openly and jest with one another, and Eilis finds it all very disorienting and even troubling. At home, with her mother and sister, the conversation would be far

more staid and less expressive. The same is true, though to a lesser extent, with her fellow lodgers in Brooklyn, who are essentially supervised by Mrs. Kehoe, the landlady, who acts as a surrogate mother figure.

In an interview with Paul Morton, Tóibín is asked about this issue, and why he didn't make Eilis immediately fall for Tony's family. His response highlights how many Irish people view this "charm" that they find in the United States:

For the reader it looks like happiness. But of course, for Eilis, it looks like a sort of trap. There are moments where she's watching Tony. And it's about Ireland and America. If you have an Irish guy who's all charm, he doesn't mean it. (Bookslut)

Eilis, according to Tóibín, sees the charm, but since she is Irish, she has a real distrust of it. She needs—as Tóibín would suggest that Irish people do, in general—to see the darker side, the rage beneath the wit, the ulterior motives. Everything is initially suspect. We see this in the dialogue between Irish people in the novel, where sarcasm, underhanded compliments and jealousy are some of the main components.

Over the course of the novel, Eilis transforms from a naïve and withdrawn young woman. This transformation even begins before she lands in New York, when she is prodded by her cabin mate. The older and more streetwise woman, helps her get ready to go through emigration, and gives her tips on how to act, helping her apply makeup, and what clothes to wear. Eilis is shy, and like most Irish people during this time, was very uneasy with any discussion about her body, or anyone else's. Tóibín captures this perfectly in the

scene in the department store when Eilis is helped by her supervisor, Miss Fortini, to pick out a bathing suit for her first trip to the beach with Tony.

Brooklyn, 159

The exchange between Eilis and Miss Fortini, shows how uncomfortable Eilis is in exposing her body, and the shock of the suggested sexual interest of Miss Fortini in Eilis. Miss Fortini selects different bathing suits for Eilis to try on, and offers her opinion on each one, while adjusting and checking the fit on Eilis. Unused to such close intimacy, Eilis tries to retain her composure, but is determined to get out of the situation as quickly as possible:

She walked around Eilis so that she could inspect how it fitted from behind, and moving closer, put her hand under the firm elastic that held the bathing suit in place at the top of Eilis's thighs. She pulled the elastic down a fraction and then patted Eilis twice on the bottom, letting her hand linger the second time. (*Brooklyn*, 159)

Eilis is extremely uncomfortable with the experience, but she does not balk, which may also be indicative of her transformation. This particular scene, again focusing on simple objects and gestures, reveals the very different world that Eilis now has to navigate.

When discussing going to the beach, the two women have the following exchange, which perfectly encapsulates this idea: "'In Ireland no one looks,' Eilis said. 'It would be bad manners.' 'In Italy it would be bad manners not to look.'" (*Brooklyn*, 158)

By the time she returns to Enniscorthy to see her mother, Eilis is now a married woman, though no one knows about the marriage. She is a more confident, assertive person, and

makes many astute observations about Irish social norms. On a day trip to the beach with friends, she notes how awkwardly the men interact with each other, and seem to pay little attention to the women they are with. They lack the confidence of American men.

Talking with her mother, she notes all the petty gossip, and the rigid class distinctions that exist even in a small town—the “townies” who look down on the “culchies” (people who live in the countryside; a word commonly used to describe people of a farming background throughout the country).

She realizes that her mother has little interest in her life in America, and talks with apparently no expectation of a reply:

Eilis wondered if her mother had always had this way of speaking that seemed to welcome no reply, and suddenly realized that she had seldom been alone with her before, she always had Rose to stand between her and her mother (*Brooklyn*, 213)

Her mother immediately puts Eilis to work, writing thank-you notes to those who sent condolences on her sister Rose’s passing, and then wants Eilis to help her sort through Rose’s clothes. Eilis complies, but at a certain point insists that she needs to see her friends. Her mother, who is hoping that Eilis will not return to Brooklyn, does her best to keep Eilis wrapped up in the life in the town, even using Rose’s passing to achieve this.

Within a relatively small time, Eilis has become Americanized. This is also shown in the flashy clothes she wears, which her mother looks at disapprovingly, telling her to wear

something sensible, and not too American. Despite her mother's insistence, Eilis dresses in her own style. Walking through the streets of town, she is confident and observant of how she is perceived: "She noticed a woman studying her dress and her stockings and her shoes and then her tanned skin, and she realized with amusement as she moved towards Nancy's house that she must look glamorous in these streets" (*Brooklyn*, 217).

Here, Tóibín again uses objects and gestures to reveal Eilis's transformation—she is the returning "Yank," as all Irish people who emigrated to America were called when they would return at any point to Ireland. This new confidence is more than just about Eilis's sense of style. It is a comment on the Irish psyche, with its inbred inferiority complex inherited from the colonial past, and its present dominated by a Church that controls virtually all aspects of society.

This questioning of social mores and constricts is explored by continual references to the past, and how past events continue to resonate in the present. *The Blackwater Lightship* deals with the conflicts of the past and how a modern problem helps the family to come to terms with all the hurt each member experienced growing up, both within the family and in society at large. *The South*, *Mothers and Sons*, and *The Heather Blazing*, also broach these issues.

Eilis's newfound confidence does more than just get her noticed in her small hometown, it also brings to a head the pull she feels for home and her new life in Brooklyn. Eilis is very diligent in writing to Tony when she first arrives home, she declines hanging out with her friends at one point, making the excuse her mother needs her, so as to avoid spending time with the man that would become Tony's rival for her affection. The newly

glamorous Eilis becomes the attention of one of Enniscorthy's most eligible bachelors, Jim Farrell. Slowly, after socializing with her friends, she comes to the realization that she has access to the higher classes in the town, and begins to fall for Jim. Tony slips from her mind, and Eilis begins to wonder if perhaps, she had not made a mistake.

Reflecting on a night out they had at a local dance, before Eilis emigrated, Jim tells Eilis that he had wanted to ask her for a dance, but was too shy:

“If I ask her to dance I'll be tongue-tied, but I still thought I should. I hated standing there on my own, but I couldn't bring myself to ask you.”

“You should have,” she said.

“And then I heard you were gone I thought it was just my luck.” (Brooklyn, 250)

With those 3 words, “You should have” Eilis betrays her regret about having left Ireland.

The South and *Brooklyn*, both have a female as the main character, a character who at the start of each novel is an unassuming, somewhat complacent woman, who has a very defined role in society. Katherine Proctor is the dutiful wife and mother, albeit bored and frustrated, and Eilis is the shy, obedient daughter, who seems to lack any real ambition. Eilis goes from the acquiescent daughter at home, who accepts the plan presented to her by Fr. Flood to emigrate to New York, to the well-mannered young tenant to her landlady. She complies with Tony's request to get married, despite her own reservations. What leads them to becoming more confident, self-assured women, is the shared experience of exile. Joining the diaspora, they discover who they are, but only come to a full resolution by returning to Ireland, Eilis temporarily, and Katherine for good.

In *Brooklyn*, Eilis can only find peace when she returns home, after her sister's death, when she is confronted by her past life. She struggles, since she is caught between her life in Brooklyn and her former (and now newer) life in Ireland. This moral dilemma is possibly one of the most resonant aspects of the novel, particularly since it unveils a double betrayal—the betrayal by the surrogate mother figure of Mrs. Kehoe (who has informed on Eilis), and Eilis's own betrayal of Tony. Oddly enough, it is the first betrayal that enables resolution. Given Eilis's ties to the old world (through her obligations to take her sister's place as her mother's inevitable caregiver) and her ties to the new (through her marriage to Tony, which has its own ambiguities), we can also wonder whether Eilis has any agency at all. Imagining her mother telling her neighbors that she has returned to America, Eilis is able to come to terms with her decision and the peace it brings her.

Conclusion

Whether it is exploring fractured identities, exile, or family dynamics, Tóibín does so in a prose that humanizes, questions, but never outright dismisses. His narratives are focused on the past, yet they are never dominated by it. He claims that he was inspired by the Irish writer John McGahern, who wrote about growing up in an Irish family, post-independence, and had an early novel banned, forcing him to move to England, which allowed him to write about the same themes constantly, “John McGahern taught me that it is okay to write repeatedly about the same things.” (McCrum)

Brooklyn is a beautifully written novel about a young emigrant exploring her new world, and coming to terms with her ties to the old, as well as a comment on Ireland’s past and how it has dealt with issues of diaspora and exile. What Tóibín has achieved with this work is making Eilis’s story accessible to the reader not familiar with Ireland and offering the Irish reader a very subtle commentary on a shared history, and where that society is now. In Ireland, as in probably most places, there is a tendency to look at the past and view it nostalgically. Tóibín, like his fellow contemporary writers, challenges this perception. The skill with which he can make very subtle statements about Ireland, past and present, may very well be lost on the reader unfamiliar with Irish history, however the themes of family conflict and exile are certainly universal.

Many of his characters have split identities, are distanced from all they think of as home but also know why they left in the first place. Existing between two places, they also belong nowhere. The past haunts them, yet they cannot escape either into it or from

it. Certain of Tóibín's characters are constantly reappearing in his works, and this inevitably leads one to ponder what might happen to Eilis, and her life in New York in some other narrative incarnation—how will she develop, will she come to regret her decision to return to Tony or live a life constantly tormented about what could have been? Eilis Lacey, perhaps like her creator, may be constantly reflecting on her past, and using that past to understand where she now is, a present that is caught between two worlds. As one recedes, the present is still yet to fully reveal itself.

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