

DEMISTIFYING STEREOTYPES OF THE IRISH MIGRANT YOUNG WOMAN IN COLM TÓIBÍN'S *BROOKLYN**

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ABSTRACT

Colm Tóibín's novel, *Brooklyn* (2009), recounts the story of a young woman who emigrates from Ireland to the United States in the early 1950s. Although reluctant and discouraged by received idealized notions of "the promise land" and of a hopeful future, Eilis nevertheless pursues her desire to fulfil a career of her own and to achieve some kind of independence: two unusual aspirations for a woman of her time. In the author's attempt at reversing traditional stereotypes associated to the Irish emigrant, Tóibín explores such themes as the displacement of the foreign other, the cultural divide, the dislocation of the subject at home and abroad, and the alienating experience of growth and awakening. Caught in between two worlds, the apparent liberal values projected by North America are finally engulfed by the moral duties that an extremely patriarchal Irish society has imposed on the protagonist. Therefore, bearing all these questions in mind, the purpose of the present discussion is to bring to the fore matters related to Tóibín's deconstruction of the Irish diasporic subject, its subversion and its process of demythologization in contemporary Irish narrative.

KEY WORDS: Colm Tóibín, *Brooklyn*, diaspora, emigration, dislocation, Ireland, migrant subject.

RESUMEN

La novela de Colm Tóibín, *Brooklyn* (2009), traza la historia de una joven emigrante irlandesa a Estados Unidos en la década de los 50. Aunque reacia y poco confiante de versiones idealizadas sobre "la tierra prometida" y su esperanzador futuro, Eilis se marcha persiguiendo el deseo de terminar su carrera y ser independiente, dos aspiraciones poco comunes para una mujer de su tiempo. En un claro intento de transgredir y cuestionar estereotipos tradicionales sobre la figura del/la inmigrante Irlandés/a, Tóibín explora temas como el desplazamiento del otro/extranjero, el choque cultural, la dislocación del sujeto tanto en su propio país como fuera, la alienación y la experiencia del despertar como proceso de maduración. Atrapada entre dos mundos, los valores liberales que aparentemente definen a Norteamérica quedarán finalmente absorbidos por las obligaciones morales que la sociedad patriarcal irlandesa impone en la protagonista. Partiendo de estas premisas, el objetivo del presente artículo es ahondar en cuestiones relacionadas con la deconstrucción del sujeto diaspórico, la subversión y el proceso de desmitologización que lleva a cabo Tóibín en esta novela.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Colm Tóibín, *Brooklyn*, diáspora, emigración, dislocación, Irlanda, sujeto migratorio.





When Colm Tóibín was only twelve, he lost his father after suffering from a long illness. At one of the social gatherings during which people went to his house to pay their respects to his mother, he heard a curious story of a young woman who had emigrated to the United States in pursuit of a better life and whose return to her beloved Ireland had only served to force her back by marriage and the keeping of appearances (Witchel 33; Tóibín, “Writing”). For many decades amazing and dreadful stories of returned immigrants had fueled the imagination of Irish people all over the country (Murphy 87; Travers 188), but this poignant account remained in Tóibín’s mind for almost forty years, before he decided to rework it into a fictional fabrication that could also accommodate a hard social criticism on the Ireland of his youth.¹ The result was *Brooklyn*, a novel that explored the rights and wrongs, as much as the truths and the myths that lay behind female Irish diaspora.² Although some years before he had written the short story “House for Sale,” which dealt with the account he had heard as much as with life at home after his father’s death, he did not include it in his collection *Mothers and Sons* (2006) as he had already planned to write a second part that would make it “fit in seamlessly” (Tóibín, “Writing”). Therefore, *Brooklyn* was the result of a need to return to his origins while at the same time he would reflect on his own exile in such diverse places as Barcelona, Argentina or the United States. Regarded as a thriving and realistic account of post-famine emigration, *Brooklyn* has been praised internationally both by critics and the general public, was nominated for the 2009 Booker Prize for literature, won the prestigious Costa Novel Award in 2010,³ and was shortlisted in 2011 for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

In tone with Tóibín’s own assertion that he is “writing a lot about Irish people being away from home because it is one of the great subjects that governs Irish history” (Wiesenfarth 26), *Brooklyn* deals with Eilis Lacey’s reluctant migration from the small village of Enniscorthy in Co. Wexford—where the author himself lived much of his childhood—to the United States in the early 1950s. Although unwilling to take at first value either received idealized notions of the promised land, or exaggerations on the dangers and evils of such modern world, Eilis dutifully accepts the decisions made by

* The research carried out for the writing of this article has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, previously Ministry of Science and Innovation (MINECO, research project FFI2011-23941).

¹ Colm Tóibín, who was a prominent journalist before he became an internationally acclaimed author, has been regarded as one of the brightest voices in Irish literature. He has written seven novels—*The South* (1990), *The Heather Blazing* (1992), *The Story of the Night* (1996), *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), *The Master* (2004) *Brooklyn* (2009) and *The Testament of Mary* (2012)—some of which have been awarded with long-established literary prizes, two collection of short stories—*Mothers and Sons* (2006) and *The Empty Family* (2010)—plays, essays, journalist articles, travel books and some literary criticism.

² As much as his own desire to return to his origins (Fernández 84), the author has explained that: “I never stopped thinking how strange it was that a stray anecdote told almost a half century earlier could stay in my mind that long, linger there and grow. If those two women had known I was listening so intently, I am sure my mother would have decided that the story shouldn’t be told until her 12-year-old had left the room. I was lucky that she didn’t” (Tóibín, “Writing”).

³ This is the previous Whitbread Book Award, which changed its denomination in 2006.

her mother and older sister, and is sent to a voyage across the Atlantic in search for a hopeful future. With unusual aspirations for a woman of her time—these being, to resume her bookkeeping studies, to find a job and to attain some kind of independence—she manages to fulfill her wishes until dramatic news call her back home. In the author's attempt to revise traditional stereotypes associated to the female Irish emigrant, *Tóibín* explores such themes as the displacement of the foreign woman-as-other, the cultural divide, the dislocation of the subject at home and abroad, and the alienating experience of growth and awakening. Caught in between two worlds, Eilis will finally end up engulfed by both the apparent liberal values of the American culture and by the moral obligations of a narrow-minded Irish society. Therefore, in light of all these issues, my intention with the present discussion is to bring to the fore *Tóibín's* concerns with the demystification of the Irish diasporic female subject and with the deconstruction of the notion of home for the emigrant imaginary.

For centuries history has placed Ireland as the epitome of the emigrant land whose peoples had to flee to different parts of the world in pursuit of better conditions of living. The Irish diaspora, however, is a too broad and multifarious subject to be simplified in such terms (Arrowsmith; Wondrich; Ward; Mulligan). Roberta Wondrich, for instance, claims that: "The issue of the Irish myth of exile, along with the many facets of the so called Irish diaspora, both in sociological terms of mass-emigration since the latter half of the nineteenth century and as an artistic phenomenon often inappropriately labeled as such, are too complex and controversial to be briefly and superficially resumed" (1). To start with, distinctions would need to be made between emigration before and after the famine, between Britain, America—including Canada—and other destinations, and between male and female emigrants. As Maureen Murphy has explained, critics have adopted two positions to explain the possible reasons that lie behind post-famine emigration. On the one hand, there are those who blamed British repression and a strong policy on Ireland for the exile of so many thousands of people. An on the other, there are the ones who argue that emigration was the result of a choice that gave people further opportunities to improve their lives, economically, socially or even in terms of marriage (85). For Pauric Travers, the nationalist view of emigration as a consequence of British colonialism was maintained since an alternative interpretation of the reasons to emigrate "was a difficult and traumatic one, not least because it involved confronting deep-rooted forces in Irish society" (188). Be it either one or the other, or more probably, a mixture of both, what remains at stake here is that Irish migration to the United States became a prominent issue in the fiction produced at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, contributing in many ways to export oversimplified clichés of the two nations.

A large amount of novels dealing with the famine published after the 1840s dwelled on images of poverty and stagnation, and explored the struggles that the Irish people had to face in America.⁴ In fact, Melissa Fegan demonstrates that,

⁴ Examples abound, among which we could list the following: Charles Cannon's *Bickerton; or, The Immigrant's Daughter* (1855), Mary Anne Sadlier's *Elinor Preston; or, the Scenes at Home and*



as the century progressed, the Famine as literary subject became loaded with political issues. There was always an agenda at stake: emigration, conversion, the Irish language, the Land League—the Famine was a political tool, a complex metaphor which became a shorthand for violence and oppression. Several evangelical Protestant texts even sought to claim the Famine for Protestant converts, arguing that they suffered most during Famine. Ironically, as the novels became more critically acclaimed, the material stopped being controversial: in 1910 the *Times Literary Supplement* praised Mildred Darby's *The Hunger* without even seeking to challenge its claim that two million people died of starvation and disease during the Famine due to government incompetence. The Famine ceased to be historical, and begun to be literature. (9)

Most of the novels published after 1850 showed how, in order to preserve Irish traditional values, communities were built around a parish where immigrants could practice their religion and distinguish themselves from the Protestant Americans. The equation Irish-Catholic became then interchangeable, and idealized images of the homeland based on piety, nature, family and community were exported in influential novels, such as Mary Anne Sadlier's *Willy Burke; or, The Irish Orphan in America* (1850), and *Bessy Conway; or, The Irish Girl in America* (1861).⁵ In these, as much as in other narratives of the time, the host land emerged as an imagined site that represented either a promising future or a degraded world, while Ireland stood as the pastoral ideal, the Motherland that could embrace all her people on their due return. The Preface to Sadlier's *Bessy Conway* should not, in this regard, pass unnoticed:

The object of the book is plain; so plain, indeed, that there is no possibility of any one mistaking it for a better or a worse. It is simply an attempt to point out to Irish girls in America — specially that numerous class whose lot is to hire themselves out for work, the true and never — failing path to success in this world, and happiness in the next. Perhaps in the vast extent of the civilized world, there is no class more exposed to evil influences than the Irish Catholic girls who earn a precarious living at service in America... I have written this book from a *sincere* and heartfelt desire to benefit these young country-women of mine, by showing them how to win respect and inspire confidence on the part of their employers, and at the same time, to avoid the snares and pitfalls which have been the ruin of so many of their own class. Let them be assured that it rests with themselves whether they do well

Abroad (1861), David Power Conyngham's *Frank O'Donnell* (1861), Julia and Edmund O'Ryan's *In re Garland* (1870), John McElgun's *Annie Reilly* (1873) or Margaret Brew's *The Chronicles of Castle Cloyne* (1885). One should also add here that the third generation of Irish Americans tried to abandon this untruthful recreation of their imagined homeland as set in opposition to their actual American home.

⁵ Sadlier (1820-1903) had emigrated to Canada in 1844 and her purposely didactic works aimed at alerting readers of the dangers of the new world, encouraging them to remain faithful to their original Irish identity mainly through the practice of religion and customs (Colman 153).



or ill in America, whether they do honor to their country and their faith, or bring shame and reproach to both. (5)

Contrarily, emigration to Britain was of a different nature. It was more seasonal, it did not include the “element of romance” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 32)⁶ that involved crossing the Atlantic—as *Brooklyn* clearly shows—and since immigrants were less prepared to stay there was no need to “transplant” a replica of the Irish community making them, in turn, less influenced by the host land. Not surprisingly, in one of the gatherings organized by Father Flood in Brooklyn, Eilis notices “as she sat down with a glass of sherry in her hand, that it could have been a parish hall anywhere in Ireland on the night of a concert or a wedding” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 89). Besides, Travers explains that up until the late 1920s, Irish emigrants preferred to go to America, but that after this date Britain became the first choice, to which America, Canada and Australia followed (190). This opinion is also shared by Aidan Arrowsmith, who maintains that silence has defined “the Irish emigrant experience,” turning particularly applicable to women: “Despite consistently outnumbering male emigrants from Ireland to England, women’s voices are absent from the texts and debates surrounding the issue” (129). In the novel under discussion, Eilis wonders why she is being encouraged to go to America while her three brothers have emigrated to Britain in pursuit of better job opportunities. On comparing both destinies, she reflects on the validity of the unquestioned appropriation of a myth, since

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. (Tóibín, *Brooklyn*: 24)

In spite of her young age, her lack of agency and the patronizing attitudes of her mother and sister, Eilis is able to see the bigger commitment that moving to America entails, leaving the family behind in a very likely one-way journey. Besides, she comes to think that the lack of frequent news of the emigrant’s doings there did not necessarily mean that a more fortunate future awaited them.⁷ Tóibín’s masterful use of a narrative voice that constantly guides the reader into unexpected outcomes will, therefore, constitute a basic resource in the story as I hope to have the opportunity to demonstrate along the following pages.

⁶ It is Eilis who reflects on the fact that differences between America and England cannot be reduced to distance and foreignness, since “going to work in a shop in Brooklyn with lodgings a few streets away, all organized by a priest, had an element of romance that she and Rose were fully alert to... Going to work in a shop in Birmingham or Liverpool or Coventry or even London was sheer dullness compared to this” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 32).

⁷ While 52,000 women emigrated to the United States, 180,000 chose Britain. This figure applies to the decades between the mid-twenties to the early fifties (Ingman 15).



According to the history of Irish diaspora, female emigration also differed from male in a good variety of types and degrees. Travers maintains that between 1871 and 1971 the numbers of immigrant women surpassed those of men but that the figures have been overlooked by historians and would need to be analyzed paying a closer attention to “a gendered understanding of the emigration process” (187). In effect, during the 1940s and 1950s emigration of single women was significant inasmuch as it was not caused mainly by a shortage of jobs or a lack of means but, as Heather Ingman explains, by “women’s real dissatisfaction with their life and status in Ireland” (15).⁸ In the case of *Brooklyn*, Eilis’ sister, Rose, already thirty and single, is well aware of the limitations that being a woman in Ireland with a menial job and no marriage prospects entail.⁹ Too late to start her own family, Rose is expected to remain at home and take the responsibility of minding her mother and providing for her family. This apparent sacrifice of her future in favour of her younger sister was part of a duty that she could willingly take (30).¹⁰

Nevertheless, with superb ironic subtlety, Tóibín’s novel misguidedly leads the reader into the belief that Eilis’s journey to the unknown land will prefigure that “the rest of her life would be a struggle with the unfamiliar” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 30). First of all, during her voyage and even before she steps on American soil, she is alerted by her English travel mate, Georgina, that her suitcase looks “too Irish” and that Irish are suspicious there (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 49). However, as the narrative develops, misleading happenings are set to contrast received expectations with the reality she encounters, turning into efficient devices to do away with received myths that have been constructed around emigration. Travers has remarked that there existed a contradiction between the large numbers of immigrants that left Ireland and “the official state ethos” that “saw emigration as evil, dangerous, even antisocial” (190). In the novel, Father Flood, whose “accent was a mixture of Irish and American” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 22), best illustrates this ambivalence, assuring Eilis’ mother and sister that: “Parts of Brooklyn [...] are just like Ireland. They’re full of Irish” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 23). The role that this acculturated priest¹¹ plays in the narrative is an interesting case in point since emigration was not generally supported by the Catholic church, which “highlighted the moral danger posed to young women who

⁸ For a comparative discussion between Edna O’Brien’s *The Light of Evening* and Tóibín’s *Brooklyn*, in light of a similar treatment of the female diasporic subject, although in different decades of Irish history, see my own article, “(M)Others.”

⁹ No matter how unusual this may sound for a woman of her time, Rose’s assertiveness seems to have led her to make this choice her own. Eilis, in fact, feels proud of the decisions of her elder sister regarding her status: “Rose, at thirty, Eilis thought, was more glamorous every year, and, while she had had several boyfriends, she remained single; she often remarked that she had a much better life than many of her former schoolmates who were to be seen pushing prams through the streets” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 11).

¹⁰ As Eilis recognizes, “in making it easy for her to go, [Rose] was giving up any real prospect of leaving this house herself and having her own house, with her own family” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 30).

¹¹ I am using here a concept of acculturation defined in terms of the “changes in an individual or in a group as a result of contact with another cultural group” (Berry 475).



preferred the ‘kitchens, factories and dancehalls of other lands’ and fled from ‘the green fields of Ireland to the grey streets of an alien underworld’” (Travers 190).¹² Contrarily, but in tone with the function of Irish parishes in America, Father Flood sponsors Eilis’ journey, finds her a decent job, a good place to live and even arranges her tuition in bookkeeping and accountancy in Brooklyn College where she is, in fact, the first Irish girl to attend it (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 77). He assures her family that, “were Eilis to prove satisfactory in her first job, there would be plenty of opportunity for promotion and very good prospects” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 25), and he lives up to his promise. However, growing wary of his intentions, she directly interrogates him: “Did Rose ask you to do this? Is that why you are doing it? I’m doing it for the Lord, he said. Tell me really why you are doing it” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 77). For Claire Bracken, Father Flood’s intentions should be interpreted as a medium through which Eilis can position herself “as an object of exchange between cultures,” assisting the priest to construct an Irish community in America: “Just like her letters, she crosses and re-crosses the Atlantic. The tragedy of her story lies in her positioning by others as an object with no power” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 167). Interestingly, Father Flood’s truly genuine intentions also contrast with Tóibín’s habitual negative attitude towards the Catholic Church in Ireland (Böss 24; Delaney 33; Wiesenfarth 18) and ultimately serve to emphasize the clash that exists between the uncommon opportunities Eilis finds in America and her sad ending, trapped in between two incompatible worlds.

In addition to Father Flood’s disinterested help, she is privileged by her lodger, Mrs Kehoe, who offers her the best room in the house, so that she can have more space, more freedom and the quietness she needs for her study. However, she suspects that there must be a deceitful reason behind: “It was unlikely, she thought, that Mrs Kehoe had genuinely given her the room out of pure generosity” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 103). Furthermore, she meets and falls in love with the Italian Tony, whose respectful nature, honesty and truthfulness appear so unreal in such harsh reality that the reader as much as Eilis once again become wary of him. When he finally seduces her, knowing that making a dishonest woman of Eilis will only force them together, he proposes. Apparently, he is the perfect match, except for the fact that his expectations of having kids who would become Dodgers fans freeze her: “His saying that he loved her and his expecting a reply frightened her, made her feel that she would have to accept that this was the only life she was going to have, a life spent away from home” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 143). These instances exemplify the kind of life Eilis encounters in America and serve Tóibín to deconstruct a received notion of the United States as a dangerous Other and as an evil place, which formed part of the imaginary of so many Irish people of the time. In light of this, *Brooklyn* should be interpreted as a novel that bluntly exposes the limitations encountered by a young migrant woman, who is given all possible options to escape from her past, but who

¹² Travers explains that these statements were pronounced by Bishop Lucey of Cork. In fact, they appeared in the *Irish Press* (23 April 1948) three years before Eilis actually moved to America in Tóibín’s novel (190).



cannot take any advantage of them. As a passive executer of the wishes of others, and either for duty or for her need to belong to her community, she ends up fulfilling their expectations, until she is eventually engulfed both by her lack of agency and the limited concerns of a narrow-minded society. Forcing herself to leave the house “smiling,” when she accepts her destiny, she decides to make them believe “that she was looking forward to America [...]. She promised herself that not for one moment would she give them the smallest hint of how she felt, and she would keep it from herself if she had to until she was away from them” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 31).

Eventually, her dishonest behavior in the eyes of her Irish community and her condition of foreigner in America place her as a dislocated subject, at home and abroad, neither a member of the American community nor of her own family in Ireland. Discussing Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing*, Matthew Ryan comments precisely on this point making it perfectly applicable to *Brooklyn*:

Tóibín's writing manifests a tension between location and dislocation... While his novels are clearly critical of the nationalist past and its legacies, they also evince a reticence to dismiss the “need for roots.” The image of erosion captures, at once, a sense of the inevitability of losing the past, of the liberation of the present and of trepidation about a future in which, following Nietzsche's metaphor, “there is no longer any land.” (24)

Along the novel, the only connection between the two lands, Ireland and America, is provided by the letters Eilis receives from her mother and sister, which are of a different kind. Her mother's detached writing not only “told Eilis little; there was hardly anything personal in them and nothing that sounded like anyone's own voice” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 66), they also made her feel that: “She was nobody here... Nothing meant anything... Nothing here was part of her. It was false, empty [...]. There was nothing she could do. It was as if she had been locked away” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 67). And “locked away” is precisely the metaphor that best describes her alienation from both her mother and her motherland.

One should comment in this regard that detached, cold, abject or even monstrous mothers abound in Tóibín's production influenced, as the author has recognized, by the image of his own mother, whose emotional distance left a profound mark in his childhood (Witchel 32; Wiesenfarth 8-10). Eilis' return to her mother and motherland at the end of her novel will only serve to enhance her dislocation, as she is unable to reconcile the duties she has committed to in America with her need for freedom in Ireland. Caught in between two culturally different communities, whose values and loyalties do not cohere, she realizes that she cannot belong entirely to any of them and feels utterly divided, “as though she were two people, one who had battled against two cold winters and many hard days in Brooklyn and fallen in love there, and the other who was her mother's daughter, the Eilis whom everyone, knew, or thought they knew” (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 218). At the end of the novel, both her real mother and her allegorical mother(land) will callously dispatch Eilis, incapable as they are to accommodate the uncertainties and ambiguities that have molded her. Therefore, Tóibín's alluring final twist highlights Eilis' return to



Ireland, to her homeland, as her real journey to the unknown, to a place where the loyalties to duties and strong traditions have not evolved along time and cannot welcome her new construction of womanhood, married to a man whom she has just discovered she does not love.

The means through which the author challenges established notions about the diasporic subject and about the fluid concept of home, so present in all Tóibín's writings, is embodied in the protagonist herself.¹³ As Alex Witchel has explained, "the longing for home, coupled with the knowledge that as an ideal, it can never exist. His characters are often far from where they grew up, or far from Ireland, and once they return, they remain ambivalent" (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 32). In the novel, Eilis is neither an Irish citizen displaced by diaspora, nor an assimilated Irish-American, but an Irish living abroad and about to sharing her life with an American-Italian. As she recognizes: "It made her almost smile at the idea that no one in Ireland knew that America was the coldest place on earth and its people on a cold morning like this the most deeply miserable" (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 97). Therefore, tracing the story of Eilis in America, a non-typical Irish female emigrant, Tóibín is challenging stereotypical images of the migrant young woman in a number of different ways. First, the protagonist is reluctant to emigrate. Secondly, in America she cannot identify with her fellow Irish lodgers, who are more typical diasporic subjects in their constant re-creation of an idealized version of their own land. Thirdly, the nostalgic myth of return is reversed when she is called back to Ireland after the dramatic death of her sister and by her brother's insistent plea to making her assume the responsibility of caring for her mother now that there is no other woman in the house.¹⁴ And fourthly, she agrees on a secret marriage knowing that, as an only daughter now, she will be expected to remain in Ireland. On top of this, one should not underestimate the fact that in America she is given plenty of opportunities to fulfill the independent life she has always dreamed of although, at some point, she even wonders whether people are conspiring against her or whether "she herself were the problem, reading malice into motives when there was none intended" (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 103). However, in the end, either due to her own lack of experience or to a strong desire to lead her own life, it seems that she makes the wrong options. Having concealed her own true status as a married woman, she is finally punished with the denial of her longed freedom and the building of a career of her own. The place she will finally occupy, as a physical and emotionally divided woman, will be molded by a torn in-betweenness defined by ambivalence and ambiguity. And one should note

¹³ Costello-Sullivan in fact reads the novel as a type of "diasporic *Bildungsroman*" since her journey will trigger her "personal growth and cultural negotiation in relation to the competing locales in the novel" (190).

¹⁴ In a society of such strong traditional customs, her brother Jack does not hesitate to make her feel guilty through emotional blackmail: "The thing is that we have to go back to work and I don't think Mamma knows that yet. She thinks one of us might be able to stay but we can't... I think she wants you to come home. She's never slept a night on her own in the house and she keeps saying that she won't be able to. But we have to go back" (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 181).



here that this stretched concept of home nicely echoes Dermot Bolger's novel *The Journey Home* (1990), when at the end the reader learns that: "Home is not the place where you were born but the place you created for yourself, where you did not need to explain, where you finally became what you were" (264).

As Michael Böss has explained, Tóibín has often been labeled as a revisionist intellectual, while he in fact stands in an in-between position making "a virtue of his own ambivalences towards notions of tradition, community and nationhood" (23). The way Ireland is portrayed in *Brooklyn* shares more with the Joycean trope of "the old sow that eats her farrow" (*Portrait* 203) than with the Mother Ireland of much previous fiction written about the Irish diaspora. Eilis is eventually forced to go back to America for good because there is no place in Ireland for a woman who has defied duty and who has transgressed the values of the community. Like Tóibín, who once claimed that he did not think he had an identity (Boss 23), Eilis will have to construct her own outside the confines of Ireland: "She would face into a life that seemed now an ordeal, with strange people, strange accents, strange streets" (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 232). And it is precisely at the end of the novel, after America has been seen from the outside, from within and in comparison with Ireland, when we can take Georgina's description of this nation as "the land of the free and the brave" (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 49) at face value. Once seen as the Other, America is now the welcoming site for an Irish woman who has married an Italian man and will resume her job in a departmental store where her boss, Miss Bartocy, admits that they do not discriminate people by their nationality: "Brooklyn changes every day... New people arrive and they could be Jewish or Irish or Polish or even coloured [...]. We treat everyone the same. We welcome every single person who comes into this store. They all have money to spend. We keep our prices low and our manners high. If people like it here, they'll come back" (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 59). This rather moralistic ending presages that her journey back will indeed be an enforced journey of self-awareness. In the United States, her new homeland, she will free herself from family duties and communal expectations and, at the same time, she will have the opportunity of reinventing herself so as to fit in a new site of hybrid identities. The ending of the novel speaks for itself:

"She has gone back to Brooklyn," her mother would say. And, as the train rolled past Macmine Bridge on its way towards Wexford, Eilis imagined the years ahead, when these words would come to mean less and less to the man who heard them and would come to mean more and more to herself. She almost smiled at the thought of it, then closed her eyes and tried to imagine nothing more. (Tóibín, *Brooklyn* 252)

Received for Publication: September 27, 2013; Acceptance for Publication: March 24, 2014.



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