

# Getting Away? Migration and Emancipation in Colm Tóibín's Brooklyn (2009)

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**Getting away? Migration and Emancipation in Colm Tóibín's  
*Brooklyn* (2009)**

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## **Abstract**

Eilis Lacey, the main character of the novel *Brooklyn* (2009) by Colm Tóibín, moves in the 1950s from Ireland to America in search of a better future. She secures herself financially there, finishes school and soon meets a guy, Tony Fiorello, with whom she starts a relationship and later marries. When a family tragedy occurs, Eilis is forced to return to Ireland, where she discovers that Ireland can suddenly provide her as much as America - a job and an emotional life. Torn between two places, she has to make a difficult decision regarding her future. Through the character of Eilis, Tóibín illustrates both the positive and negative sides of migration and shows what it feels like not having a place to call home. The focus of this thesis is the question of whether Eilis benefits, financially and emotionally, from migration, particularly in light of how the church and her Irish background affect her adaptation to America.

**Key Words:** Brooklyn, Colm Tóibín, migration, church, Ireland, America, women, freedom and limitations

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# 1 Introduction

Colm Tóibín's 2009 novel *Brooklyn* follows the main character, a young woman, Eilis Lacey, who, due to poor living standards in Ireland in the 1950s and no prosperous job opportunities, migrates to America in the hope that she will be offered a better future there. Eilis leaves Enniscorthy in Ireland, where she had lived up to that point with her mother and sister Rose, and goes to Brooklyn, where her only acquaintance is Father Flood, who organized her migration to America and found her accommodation, job and enrolled her in school there. At first, Eilis has a hard time adjusting to America, she feels homesick, her days are lonely, but once she meets a guy, Tony Fiorello, at the dance, everything changes. As she started to like Tony more and more, she also began to fall in love with her life in America. However, just when Eilis finally feels that everything is working out for her in America - she has a boyfriend, a degree and is financially stable, news comes from Ireland that her sister Rose has died. Eilis decides to visit her mother in Enniscorthy, but before her departure, she secretly marries Tony. In Ireland, the possibility opens up for Eilis to spend her future there, near her family, as she is offered both a job and a good marriage. She thus finds herself between two men, two countries, two possible futures, and between being an ordinary Irish girl and an Irish migrant. However, because of her marriage in New York, these choices, though tempting, are illusory.

Colm Tóibín was born on 30 May 1955 in Enniscorthy, Ireland, and is one of the most famous contemporary Irish authors. (Carregal-Romero 2012: 1) He attended University College Dublin after which he migrated to Spain. Later, he moved to the US, which gave him the personal experience to write about migrating and being away from home. Besides being an author, he is also a journalist, travel writer, and professor. (Colm Tóibín Official Website, 10.09.2022) Tóibín wrote *Brooklyn* in 2009 inspired by a real story he heard as a boy at home. (Morales Ladrón 2013: 183) The novel was a great success and won the 2009 UK Costa Novel Award. (Colm Tóibín Official Website, 10.09.2022)

The novel consists of four parts. The first part takes place in Ireland, in Eilis's hometown of Enniscorthy, the second and third parts follow Eilis in America - the second part is marked by Eilis's homesickness and feeling of sadness being alone in the unknown; in the third part she starts to like her new life abroad. The last part of the novel is set again in Ireland.

Following Eilis's journey to America and back to Ireland, this thesis will study the way in which Eilis, in terms of her sexual life and financial situation profited from migration. This thesis is divided into three chapters, each related to the two places Eilis inhabits. The first chapter deals with Eilis's life in Ireland before migration focusing on her family's economic situation, her social and sexual life, and the overall situation in Ireland which was the reason for Eilis's migration to America. The second chapter follows Eilis's adaptation to America and examines the role of the church, which practically organizes her entire life there. Emphasis will be placed on how the Irish background affects Eilis's actions in America and prevents her from exploring possibilities in the new home. The last chapter of this thesis follows Eilis's return to Ireland, where she tries to rebuild her life, but fails because of decisions she has made in America. In the conclusion, the film adaptation of this novel will be discussed.

## 2 Ireland in the 1950s – historical background of the novel

Bruce Gaston describes the 1950s in Ireland as a “period of economic hardship, unemployment and emigration.” (2012: 54) All this can be seen in the Lacey family - the family separated due to poverty (Eilis’s brothers migrated to England), the women who remained lived a simple and modest life, with no suitable job opportunities for Eilis. Emigration was rampant, and as Eilis observed, years ago “the seats in the central aisle of the cathedral had almost been full”, (Tóibín 2009: 12) while nowadays it was hardly possible to count a few of them. According to O’Carroll, it was estimated that more than 400,000 people migrated in the 1950s, which was the largest recorded number of migrations in Ireland since the 1850s. (O’Carroll 2015: 102) The consequences of the Second World War and the economy that was based exclusively on agriculture, made Ireland a country with low living standards and high unemployment. (O’Carroll 2015: 99) In search of better wages and a better life, mostly young people emigrated (Bardon 2008: 941), both men and women.

In the 1950s the majority to emigrate were women. (O’Carroll 2015: 46) As Jonathan Bardon states “for every 1,000 males emigrating there were 1,365 females.” (2008: 941) In addition to economic reasons, women migrated from Ireland because of their position in Irish society. Ireland was a conservative country, families were patriarchal, and society was governed by church rules. (Gaston 2012: 55) Women who migrated were thus searching not only for a job offer and the bases for a decent life, but also for greater freedom in other areas of life.

In the novel, Eilis emigrates to America after all three of her brothers had already emigrated to England. These were also the destinations where the Irish migrated the most. England was the most favourable for migration due to its proximity to Ireland, but with slightly better living standards. (O’Carroll 2015: 104) It offered Irish people jobs in factories (which is where Eilis's brothers ended up) and women found jobs in the production of “footwear, clothing, iron and steel, and into jobs in transport and agriculture.” (O’Carroll 2015: 102) As Eilis herself said, those who moved to England had ordinary lives, they missed their homes in Ireland but were able to come home and visit their families. England, therefore, offered jobs to the Irish, but no extraordinary life or earnings. On the other hand, moving to America meant glamour and excitement, at least that was what Irish people believed. As Eilis states, people who moved to America had the opportunity to get rich and have a luxurious life, and those migrants did not miss their homes and rarely came back because of the distance. (Tóibín 2009: 24)

However, although the 1950s in Ireland were not easy for most people, there were also those who, despite Ireland's poor economic state, were well-off, like, for example, Miss Kelly in the novel. Miss Kelly was the owner of the shop in Enniscorthy which was known for the expensive products it sold and that not everyone could afford (Eilis's family for example). Miss Kelly thought highly of herself and looked down on those who were less fortunate than her. This can be seen in her attitude towards Eilis and, another employee, Mary, who she openly insulted. When Eilis came to Miss Kelly's place at her invitation, without formally greeting her, Miss Kelly eyed her and just said "here you are, then." (Tóibín 2009: 5) Obviously she did this to appear superior to and belittle Eilis. Furthermore, she did not ask if she wanted to work for her, but considered this to be inevitable since Eilis did not have a job and her family was not affluent. Miss Kelly treated her customers in the same way;

As each customer came into the shop [...] Eilis noticed that Miss Kelly had a different tone. Sometimes she said nothing at all, merely clenched her jaw and stood behind the counter in a pose that suggested deep disapproval of the customer's presence in her shop and an impatience for that customer to go. For others she smiled drily and studied them with grim forbearance, taking the money as though offering an immense favour. And then there were customers whom she greeted warmly and by name. (Tóibín 2009: 9).

At Miss Kelly's, the person who entered the store first would not be served first, but rather those she thought deserved to be served first. Additionally, those with a higher reputation also received better quality food (fresh bread for special customers and tomatoes only for certain customers). (Tóibín 2009: 13)

## **2.1 The Lacey Family**

Eilis Lacey is the protagonist of the novel *Brooklyn* and readers are introduced to her at the beginning of the novel as she watches her older sister Rose coming home from work through the window of her living room in the family house on Friary Street. Eilis has a close relationship with her sister, who she admires and sees as a role model: "Eilis was proud of her sister" (Tóibín 2009: 11) and considered her "more glamorous every year." (Tóibín 2009: 11). Rose worked in the office of Davis's Mills and loved golf and, although she was 30 years old and most of her friends were married to rich bankers, she preferred to be alone, "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 2009: 11) However, her decision also reflects the fact that Rose is well aware that her family depends on her.

Rose, as the older sister, takes responsibility for Eilis's future, from doing her small favours like giving her money for the cinema (Tóibín 2009: 4) to more significant ones like planning a better life for Eilis on the other side of the world. Aware that the situation in Ireland offers nothing to young people and that “working behind the counter of a grocery shop was not good enough for (Eilis)” (Tóibín 2009: 6), she encouraged her sister to study so that one day she could become a bookkeeper. Rose puts her sister's well-being before her own needs in the hope that her sister can migrate to America in search of more fruitful work. As Eilis herself noted, her migration meant Rose sacrificed her own future as she would lose the opportunity to create her own family and to get married. Instead of that, Rose “would have to stay with her mother, living as she was now, working in Davis’s office, playing golf at the weekend and on summer evenings.” (Tóibín 2009: 30) With the later development of events in the novel, it becomes clear that Rose was suffering from an illness and knew that she would not be able to take care of her family forever, and wanted to secure her sister's future, knowing that Eilis herself would never have agreed to such change in her life without her encouragement.

Eilis and Rose had three brothers, Jack, Pat and Martin, who had all emigrated to Birmingham in England, so besides Rose and Eilis, only their mother lived with them in their house. Since their father died and the brothers left Ireland, the atmosphere in their house was often depressing, and Eilis would always notice the rare moments of laughter at the table and, to cheer up her mother and sister, she would tell them some painstakingly memorized conversations with Miss Kelly and all the events from the shop.

Although it seemed on the surface that Eilis had a close relationship with her mother, this was not entirely the case. The two of them loved each other, but they never openly shared their feelings for each other and did not talk in the same way that her mother talked to Rose. Kovács has argued that the Lacey family is “communicating through silence” (2016: 3) meaning that they mainly talked about everyday topics concerning other people from Enniscorthy, but when it came to more serious topics (like Eilis's migration) that concerned the lives of their family members, such topics remained undiscussed. For Román-Sotelo, this “silence is a natural reaction to a traumatic experience that evinces the inability to cope with the situation” (2020: 162) that Eilis's family found itself in when only the female members of the family were left in the house after their father died and her brothers emigrated to Birmingham. Eilis notices how the atmosphere in the house changed when the youngest brother Jack migrated and how, since

then, they rarely laughed at the table. She also recalled how before his departure everyone “would do anything to distract themselves from the thought that they were losing him.” (Tóibín 2009: 28) When the decision is made that Eilis will migrate, although Eilis expects that it will be discussed since it is a life-changing decision, the same silence greets the decision. When Father Flood’s letter arrived, Eilis’s mother “moved about the kitchen with her back to her, saying nothing. Eilis sat at the table, not speaking either, wondering how long it would take her mother to turn towards her and say something.” (Tóibín 2009: 25) Not being able to cope with the fact that one more family member will leave their home, everyone pretended as if nothing was happening. Eilis noticed that the house was “unusually, almost unnaturally happy” (Tóibín 2009: 28) and that everything was “full of too much talk and laughter,” (Tóibín 2009: 28) and each of them coped by themselves in silence. Instead of communicating about the situation and her feelings, Eilis’s mother gradually distances herself from Eilis by “making work for herself so that she would not have to” (Tóibín 2009: 25) talk about it and then goes to cry alone in a room. Consequently, not having been used to talking about her feelings with her family, when Eilis finds out that she is going to America, she had no one with whom she could openly talk about how she feels about this major change. There is no one to whom she can tell that she does not really want to go to America. Eilis was aware that she had been given a rare opportunity that, under the circumstances in which she lived and where she worked, she could not afford not to take, whether she wanted to or not, but she felt a terrible fear of the unknown, “she felt that she was being singled out for something for which she was not in any way prepared” (Tóibín 2009: 28); instead, “she would prefer to stay at home, sleep in [her] room, live in [her] house” (Tóibín 2009: 29) and that her sister went to America in her place.

The Lacey family not only communicated through silence, but when they act and make decisions, they also do that through silence, that is, by not communicating. – “In the silence that had lingered, she realized, it had somehow been tacitly arranged that Eilis would go to America.” (Tóibín 2009: 23) Eilis’s migration to America was arranged without her; although she was present during Father Flood’s visit, no one asked Eilis’s opinion. And even when the decision was made, no one said out loud that Eilis was migrating, rather “it was the silence itself that led Eilis to believe that Rose and her mother had discussed it and were in favour of it.” (Tóibín 2009: 24)

It seems understandable that the only right decision should be for Eilis to go to America and escape Miss Kelly’s exploitation. There she could use her knowledge in bookkeeping, get a

well-paid job and secure her future. Nonetheless, Eilis did not want to leave Ireland. And yet, in the end, she goes to America regardless of her wish. Why? The reason for this can again be found in acts of silent communication. Eilis was taught that in her family things are not discussed but are rather just accepted, so she stays silent and faces the fact that she is migrating. Just like the members of her family who, by distracting themselves, tried not to think about her migration, she herself tried to occupy herself by worrying over her luggage, money, and the voyage across the Atlantic. (Tóibín 2009: 29) In addition to this, Eilis was aware that Rose was sacrificing her own future so that her sister would have a better one: Rose “had decided to let Eilis go” (Tóibín 2009: 30) because her sister wanted to do everything for her well-being and wanted her to migrate. Feeling a sense of duty towards her family, Eilis knew that if Rose and her mother had made the decision that Eilis was going to America, she could not disappoint them and oppose them. Rather she tried to appear happy, she decided that she would pretend “at all times that she was filled with excitement” (Tóibín 2009: 31) and that “she would make them believe [...] that she was looking forward to America and leaving home for the first time” (Tóibín 2009: 31). In addition to that, “she promised herself that not for one moment would she give them the smallest hint of how she felt” (Tóibín 2009: 31) which goes back to the fact that she communicates with silence and thus hides her real feelings towards migration.

Another reason why Eilis does something that is not her desire can be connected with the moral principles of the church and her upbringing. As a woman, Eilis has been taught that she must be obedient and think of the well-being of others before her own desires. So Eilis has a habit of pleasing others not only when it concerns her family; Eilis accepted Miss Kelly's job offer mainly because Miss Kelly asked her to work for her and that was like a demand for Eilis; she never said anything about being underpaid and working whenever it suited Miss Kelly. Another instance of this behaviour can be seen when she went to a dance, even though she did not want to, because her friend, Nancy, asked her to go with her and Eilis was taught to be a good, self-sacrificing, woman.

## **2.2 Employment**

Although Eilis attended the Vocational School for bookkeeping and worked hard at the encouragement of her sister, there was no job position for her in that profession in her hometown. Moreover, there was “no work for anyone in Enniscorthy, no matter what their qualifications.” (Tóibín 2009:11) were. Her family depended on Rose's salary, which was just about enough for their needs (Tóibín 2009: 10), and they needed to be careful about how they

managed their money (when shopping for clothes, always carefully choosing clothes that would be wearable in the coming years). So Eilis had no other choice but to accept the only job that was offered to her - a post in Miss Kelly's shop.

The working conditions in Miss Kelly's shop can be described as exploitation, which Rose herself mentions in the novel when she calls Mary, Miss Kelly's "slave" (Tóibín 2009: 15). Miss Kelly treated her employees Eilis and Mary without respect, Eilis was underpaid and overworked. Miss Kelly did not keep to their agreement about working hours; Eilis was only to work on Sundays, but she expected Eilis to come to work whenever she needed her, regardless of Eilis's other responsibilities. In return, Miss Kelly would not even pay her fairly giving her "two shillings but kept her for hours" (Tóibín 2009: 21) and giving her bread "which Eilis knew was stale" (Tóibín 2009: 21), as if she was doing so to make fun of her and her family. In addition to that, Eilis had no breaks to eat during the entire working hours, and there was also no opportunity for promotion. José Carregal-Romero has explored how Irish women were forced to give up on their personal desires and put their womanly duties and family obligations first, and has stated that, for women who worked in the shops at that time, these working conditions were normal and frequently "compared to a 'system of slavery'". (2018: 133)

### **2.3 Social life**

For women, social life in Enniscorthy consisted of going to the movies and dances, which Eilis attended with her friends Nancy Byrne and Annette O'Brien. Compared to them, Eilis seemed not very interested in going out - when Nancy and Annette went to the cinema, Eilis stayed at home saying that she was tired, Eilis would go to the dances reluctantly, just because Nancy begged her to go with her. She did not care too much about her appearance – while the other girls paid much more attention to how they dressed up for the dance, Eilis would only wash her hair, would not put on any make-up and was aware that she "had not made enough effort with her appearance" (Tóibín 2009: 16) and that she looked "dowdy." (Tóibín 2009: 16) The reason why Eilis's friends paid so much attention to their appearance at the dance was because the dances were places where they would meet young men and potential future husbands, and marrying wealthy was a way of gaining a better reputation in society and a better life. Therefore, when Nancy was noticed by George Sheridan, the son of shop owners and a member of the Enniscorthy middle class, her mother and sister were so excited about it they helped Nancy

prepare for the dance. Dancing with George Sheridan could be Nancy's ticket to more respectable society. As Eilis herself described it, "Nancy [...] worked in Buttle's Barley-Fed Bacon behind the counter," and if she managed to snap up George Sheridan it would be "a dream she [would] not want to wake from." (Tóibín 2009: 17) Despite this idea of finding a husband and securing a better future, Eilis seemed not at all interested in local young men, she "hated[ed] all those country fellows, and the town fellows" (Tóibín 2009: 8), nor was she thinking about marriage, and the episode with Jim Farrell, George's friend, who neither invited Eilis to dance nor spoke to her, shows that they were not interested in her either.

## **2.4 The Church**

Although it can be concluded that Eilis's life was dull and not overly exciting, she seemed satisfied with her life and did not wish to change it. She was convinced "that she would live in the town all her life, [...], having the same friends and neighbours, the same routines in the same streets" (Tóibín 2009: 27), however, Rose believed that her sister could have, and deserved, a better life. Rose was aware that Ireland had nothing to offer to young people like Eilis. They were forced to either work in terrible conditions if they could find a job in the first place (like Eilis), marry rich (like Nancy) or forced to leave the country (the brothers, and later Eilis). Not wanting Eilis to be used by Miss Kelly anymore, when Rose meets an Irish priest based in Brooklyn, Father Flood, while playing golf, she invites him to her home. Hearing about Eilis's work conditions and her salary, Father Flood "expressed shock at how low it was" (Tóibín 2009: 22) and compares it with Brooklyn where there is a "plenty of work for someone like (her) and with good pay." (Tóibín 2009: 22) Even though they did not know each other before, Eilis's mother accepted this offer to send her daughter to the unknown because Father Flood "seem[ed] very genuine". (Tóibín 2009: 25) He was a man of the church and that meant that he could be trusted, that he was honest and that he would do all for the benefit of her daughter.

Father Flood agreed to help, and he organized a whole new life for Eilis in Brooklyn; he found her a job and a place to stay. Since he was a man of the church it can be thought that that he did this because he should be helping others, but the reason he gives is that they "...need Irish girls in Brooklyn.". (Tóibín 2009: 78) By gathering people from Ireland in one place, churches started to create Irish communities where Irish migrants could connect with other Irish migrants and so preserve abroad Irish customs and traditions (Irish dances, Christmas dinner, Irish

songs). Father Flood himself pointed out the similarity between Brooklyn and Ireland; considering that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the Great Famine about 4 million Irish people migrated to New York (O’Carroll 2015: 38) “parts of Brooklyn [were] just like Ireland. They [were] full of Irish.” (Tóibín 2009: 23)

Another reason why the churches took upon itself the role of organizing the migration of Irish women was so that they could control them and ensure that they remain faithful to their role as obedient women and not gain too much freedom in America. In his book *A History of Ireland* Jonathan Bardon noted the widespread worry in Ireland about the “moral welfare” of Irish women migrating to America. (2008: 941) This will be explored more in the second chapter of this thesis, which examines Eilis’s life in Brooklyn.

### **3 America – The land of possibilities**

It is mentioned in the first chapter that in the 1950s Ireland was a conservative country, ruled by the church and its moral principles. (Gaston 2012: 55) Families were patriarchal, which often put women in an incredibly negative position: their freedom was restricted, they were tied to the home and had to care for their children, which prevented them from realizing their personal desires. As Breda Gray states, in this period, unsatisfied with this position, Irish women “have left Ireland in search of life opportunities, sexual liberation and career advancement.” (Pavia 2020) The best destination to achieve this was America, according to Román-Sotelo. She notes that it was a popular belief among Irish people that America could give them freedom and the sort of opportunities that Ireland (or Britain) could not offer them. (2020: 160) So, when Rose “sent” Eilis to migrate to America, she hoped that Eilis's life would thus improve in all aspects. However, in this chapter it will be argued that, despite being in a land with so many possibilities, Eilis cannot escape the way she was shaped in Ireland. She never explores the possibilities that America could offer her and continues to be trapped in the role of an Irish girl in America, and acts as if she was still living in Enniscorthy.

#### **3.1 The power of the church opens all doors**

The most important guide and helper that Eilis had in America was Father Flood. His actions back up his claim that “the power of the Holy Roman and Apostolic Church is not to be underestimated.” (Tóibín 2009: 77) He was not only able to “bring” Eilis to America but continued to pull strings in order to help her and provide her with what Eilis alone, as an Irish migrant, could never do. Already on the voyage to America, the power held by the church can be seen when a fellow emigrant, Georgina, notices that Eilis has a full work permit, not a temporary one, which is apparently difficult to obtain “even with the help of a priest” (Tóibín 2009: 49), and comments that “the priest must know someone”. (Tóibín 2009: 50)

Furthermore, thanks to Father Flood's web of influence, Eilis got a job at Bartocci's store. Although Miss Fortini, Eilis's supervisor, followed her every step as closely as Miss Kelly in Ireland, the working conditions at Bartocci's were completely different. Eilis was respected as an employee, she knew exactly what was expected from her and she knew her working hours. Unlike Miss Kelly's store, which was full of snobbery and elevated prices, the prices at

Bartocci's were “low” and “manners high” (Tóibín 2009: 59): all customers, whether they were Italians, Poles, Irish or Jews, were welcomed with a smile and treated nicely. While Miss Kelly used to give Eilis stale bread to take home, Bartocci offered Eilis a staff discount on their products, and when Eilis needed it, Miss Fortini showed compassion towards her and willingness to help her. The most crucial element for Eilis was the fact that Bartocci's store was a place where she could make progress, and one day work in the office as a bookkeeper. Moreover, they even offered to “pay part of the tuition” (Tóibín 2009: 60) for her night classes.

Besides work, Father Flood found Eilis a place to live in the house of his acquaintance from Wexford, Mrs Kehoe. Mrs Kehoe rented her house to Eilis and five other girls who were all Irish or partly Irish. Mrs Kehoe was strict and the girls had to follow certain rules in the house; talking during meals was forbidden as well as any mention of boys, and before dinner, the girls and Mrs Kehoe would stand up “solemnly and join [...] their hands and Mrs Kehoe [would] led them in saying grace.” (Tóibín 2009: 54)

In addition to providing her with material things, Father Flood was also there for Eilis in her lowest and loneliest moments. After receiving letters from home for the first time, Eilis became aware of how far she is from her family, and that she could no longer share life's moments with them no matter how many letters they sent to each other. Letters were “nothing that sounded like anyone's own voice” (Tóibín 2009: 66), and could never replace a real person. Her life in America felt completely unimportant and meaningless in those moments: in America she was “nobody” (Tóibín 2009: 67) and she felt like a “ghost” (Tóibín 2009: 67) Her homesickness affected both her sleep and working, and she got better only after talking with Father Flood and hearing his words of comfort.

### **3.2 The power of the church suppresses change**

Colm Tóibín offers an interesting portrayal of a priest considering that this novel was written in 2009, when innumerable controversies relating to the Irish Catholic Church's actions in the 20th century had come to light. These included as sex scandals involving priests and people from the church, and the physical abuse of children, as well as its stance on issues of contraception and birth control. This has greatly damaged the reputation of the church and created a gap between the church and the Irish people. (Donnelly 2000) Tóibín has often publicly criticized the church, its history of abuse and its questionable morality. Notwithstanding this, Father Flood in the novel is extremely benevolent, kind and always ready



to help. Nevertheless, the reason for his kindness is not just because he is extremely generous, but because he has a specific goal. In order to preserve the Irish tradition and customs in Brooklyn, he needed new people to come to his parish.

America was not Ireland, where the church was part of its everyday life and where its moral strictures had to be followed. America offered many opportunities and a life away from the church's influence. America could thus give young women like Eilis the possibility of becoming independent and "free" of the church. According to Marisol Morales Ladrón, for the church these possibilities were considered the "dangers of the unknown world" (2013: 187) and it worked to prevent its adherents from encountering these. Therefore, in order to have people in his parish, it was not enough for Father Flood to just invite people to America and help them migrate, but he had to somehow ensure that they remain part of the church. So, even after giving Eilis a base for life in America, instead of leaving her on her own to learn to stand on her own feet from there on, he remains always there ready to help her. Thus, "to keep [herself] busy" (Tóibín 2009: 75), Father Flood enrolls Eilis in a night class in bookkeeping and preliminary accountancy at Brooklyn University. Although the semesters had already started and under normal circumstances, it was impossible to enrol in the course, Father Flood made that possible. He does not stop here, but also paid for the first year of Eilis's course, bought her books and even organized with Mrs Kehoe for Eilis to get a packed lunch for the first couple of weeks. In addition to that, when it came time for Eilis to pay for her second year of studies, even though she had enough money saved, one of Father Flood's parishioners had already paid it for her. (Tóibín 2009: 156) When Eilis wanted to visit her home in Ireland after Rose's death, Father Flood organized her trip again and, instead of Eilis asking for permission from Mr Bartocci for leave from work, Father Flood does it and even started arranging a job for Eilis in the office upon her return.

In that way, by helping her even then when she did not really need his help and not letting her take care of herself on her own, Father Flood asserts control over her. While Eilis received a "sense of both security and identity" (Carregal-Romero 2018: 135) from the church and the parish, on the other hand, the church limited her "individual desires for self-invention and autonomy." (Carregal-Romero 2018: 135) Because she felt grateful towards Father Flood, but mostly because she was used to thinking that a life led by the church was the only right way of living it, in America Eilis continues to follow the moral principles of the church and fulfils what is expected of her. Eilis, thus, agreed to help serve the Christmas dinner that Father Flood organized "at any time he needed her." (Tóibín 2009: 81) Also, even though "she wished she

could have found an excuse to stay at home” (Tóibín 2009: 106), Eilis agrees to go to the Irish dance, because it was again organized by Father Flood.

At one of the dances Eilis met Tony Fiorello, a young man of Italian origin, her future husband. In addition to providing her with a job, a place to live and schooling, thanks to Father Flood, Eilis now had a richer social life and the possibility of a sexual life. However, Father Flood and the church also showed their control even in this sphere of Eilis’s life. Father Flood watched Eilis and Tony at the dance, checking what kind of person Tony was and reporting back to Rose (Tóibín 2009: 139). When Eilis sleeps with Tony and believes that Father Flood somehow knows about it, she feels remorse and sees this act, even though she enjoyed it, as something “wrong” (Tóibín 2009: 189). Under the pressure of the moral principles of the church, feeling ashamed that Mrs Kehoe and Father Flood know something about her “immorality” - the idea that one of the girls brought a boyfriend to the house “was in the realm of the unthinkable” (Tóibín 2009: 188) - Eilis urgently goes to confession and demands the same from Tony. (Tóibín 2009: 186)

According to Carregal-Romero when Eilis migrates, Father Flood made her “an object of exchange between cultures”. (2018: 135) Eilis brings to America with her a part of Ireland - Irish customs, norms and moral principles, and when Father Flood gathered people in his parish, he needed exactly such people - those shaped by Irish customs with a strong moral sense that will also in Brooklyn continue to live by “the molds of [their] Irish Catholic background.” (Carregal-Romero 2018: 135)

By behaving in this way, Eilis somehow keeps herself apart from people in America. This is especially visible in her relationship with the girls she lived with. The other girls did not help Father Flood at Christmas dinner and subordinate their lives completely to the church; instead, some of them had failed relationships and changed boyfriends regularly. Eilis behaved very differently: she participated in the church community, she never said anything that Mrs Kehoe considered inappropriate, and was in a happy relationship. Eilis did not get too close to these girls, she never looked upon them as friends but only as flatmates, and while the other girls were talking, she would usually only half listen to them and communicated with them only when she needed something from them; learning how to eat spaghetti properly, picking up fashion advice, and hanging out with Patty and Diana at the dance just to avoid Dolores. Because of her impeccable behaviour, Mrs Kehoe also singled Eilis out, giving her the best room in the house and calling her “the nicest girl she’s ever had staying.” (Tóibín 2009: 72)

### 3.3 In the mould of Ireland

In addition to the Irish standards of behaviour that she brought with her to America, Eilis's personality still remained under the mould of Ireland, and she largely acts and goes through life in America in the ways discussed in the last chapter. To describe her actions in America, Kovács once again uses the term communication through silence. (2016: 3) In America, Eilis “minds her manners, learns not to ask questions about her landlady's husband, remain silent on the problematic issues at the dinner table.” (Kovács 2016: 3)

Communication through silence leads Eilis, who was taught to be silent and to accept everything that was happening around her, to continue to do things she does not want to do and to please others. Eilis's obedience is best described in the following sentences:

“I was wondering if you would do me a special favour,” she said. “Of course I would, Mrs Kehoe,” Eilis said. It was something her mother had taught her to say if anyone asked her to do them a favour. “Would you take Dolores to the dance”...Eilis hesitated... “All right.” She found herself nodding (Tóibín 2009: 122)

Raised to be extremely polite even when she does not want to, Eilis will either fulfil everyone's wish or remain silent in situations where she disagrees with someone. Although she really does not want to, Eilis silently agrees to go to the dance with Dolores only because Mrs Kehoe asked her to and because she knows it would be rude to refuse. Another example is when Mrs Kehoe tells Eilis that she has to move to a new room. In order to oblige Mrs Kehoe, despite knowing that other girls wish to get that room and that this will create problems for her, Eilis packs her things, moves room and stays quiet.

Eilis's and Tony's relationship was also largely based on Eilis putting Tony's needs and wishes before hers and letting Tony control her actions. Tony was a nice guy, confident and, from the first moment, openly showed that he liked Eilis. Having Tony in her life, Eilis was for the first time genuinely happy in Brooklyn and had a reason to look forward to “Friday night and being collected from the house by a man she had met and going to the dance with him in the hall...” (Tóibín 2009: 131) She enjoyed his company and how he made her laugh, and so she did not hate dances anymore. Tony listened with interest to her stories about her day, her work and the girls she lived with; with him Eilis had, for the first time, someone she could talk to in America. Tony “did not want to disturb her from her studies” (Tóibín 2009: 137), he was considerate and sensitive. Eilis described him as being “not like anyone else she had ever met” (Tóibín 2009:139), she trusted him and enjoyed being around him. When Eilis and Tony went to the movies, Eilis thought the movie would be an excuse for kissing, and she was pleasantly

surprised when Tony and she actually watched it. Eilis felt safe around him and in moments of sadness he was the only person she wanted by her side – “the only person who could be any use to her was Tony.” (Tóibín 2009: 181) In addition to being a source of happiness for Eilis, Tony showed her that life in America went beyond her work and Mrs Kehoe's house - he took her to Coney Island, Manhattan, to the movies and a baseball game.

However, Tony was Eilis's first boyfriend and she was just learning about relationships, love and her emotions. Often she did not know what she wanted, or how she felt, and she was unsure of her feelings toward Tony. Tony, on the other hand, has already been in a relationship and was much more confident in himself and, as Eilis said, “in his mind Tony was moving faster than she was.” (Tóibín 2009: 143) While Eilis was still trying to understand how she felt about Tony, he was already mentioning marriage and “want[ing] [their] kids to be Dodger fans.” (Tóibín 2009: 142)

Moving forward so fast intimidated Eilis, therefore when Tony declares his love for her and presses her to meet his family, she withdraws and feels discomfort with the speed of events. While Tony wanted to build a family with Eilis, she just wanted to enjoy being in a relationship, having a boyfriend, going out with him and not worrying about the future. Tony's attitude started suffocating her because it “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 2009: 143) and that this was her only option. Therefore, when Tony wanted to introduce her to his family, she postpones the meeting as much as possible because she believed “she was going to be presented to them as something more than a girlfriend” (Tóibín 2009: 146) and “she found herself pulling away from him” (Tóibín 2009: 143) when he told her that he loved her and tried to make her say it back by kissing her.

Although Eilis tried to take a stand, telling Tony “Don't push me!” (Tóibín 2009: 145) and asked him to go slower, in the end, Eilis agreed to everything Tony proposes. Eilis tried to talk herself into agreeing to Tony's fast pace in the relationship by only looking at his qualities. In that light she could not oppose him as he had made her life so much better, “he was considerate and interesting and good-looking. She knew that he liked her, not only because he said that he did, but by the way he responded to her and listened to her when she spoke.” (Tóibín 2009: 142) She hated seeing him hurt and that is why she eventually tells him that she loves him.

Well, I didn't really know what to say. So maybe I should say that I have thought about you and I like you, I like seeing you, I care for you and maybe I love you too. And the next time if you tell me you love me, I'll- [...] I'll say I love you too. (Tóibín 2009: 145)

Besides that, when Tony showed Eilis the land on Long Island where their future home could be, she notes that “this was his way not only of asking her to marry him but of suggesting that marriage had been already tacitly agreed between them”. (Tóibín 2009: 167) She agrees to live there with him because she found it sweet how he planned their whole life and “how practical he was as he spoke and how serious and sincere” he was (Tóibín 2009: 167), although she was not entirely sure that she wanted this future.

Likewise, Tony manipulated her into getting married. When the time came for Eilis to visit her family in Ireland, Tony was afraid that he would lose her and proposed to her. He believed that “If” she goes to Ireland, she “won't come back” (Tóibín 2009: 196). When asked why he just cannot trust her to come back, Tony says “If you can promise, then you can easily do this.” (Tóibín 2009: 197) Thus, although she was not ready for such a big step and did not entirely want to, Eilis agreed to the marriage because she believed that she would return to America anyway and that someday she would marry Tony. - “I would like to marry him, but I am not ready to marry him now.” (Tóibín 2009: 190)

However, when she went back to Ireland, Eilis realized that there was a possibility for her to have a good life in Ireland, which she could not have because she had a husband waiting for her in America. So, when Tony persuaded Eilis to agree to marry him just so he could feel safer and secure himself, he did not allow Eilis to choose to be with her family and so reduced her freedom. This will be discussed in more detail in the third chapter.

Because Eilis grew up being used to other people making decisions for her that she just needed to accept, she does the same in America. Maureen Corrigan notes that although Eilis goes to America intending to create a better future, she does not make a new life for herself; instead, others are doing that for her. (Corrigan, 2009) Thus, even the preparations for migrating are done by others: Rose talked to the embassy and did the paperwork, bought her clothes, found someone to help Eilis with her suitcases and Father Flood, as mentioned, organized everything in Brooklyn. Being used to not having to take matters into her own hands or make much effort, Eilis becomes inactive. When Father Flood tells her that her studies for the second year are paid for her, even though she planned to pay for it herself, she just accepts that fact. She is not complaining or really trying to do something for herself and so establish some kind of control over her own life.

Furthermore, Eilis is not independent at all. In Ireland, her whole life was taken care of by her mother and Rose, and when she goes to America she needs someone who would stand in place

as her mother, sister or father figure. Even on the way to America, Georgina, an experienced passenger, helped Eilis a lot. On the ship, Eilis was completely left alone to take care of herself for the first time, and did not have a mother or a sister to warn her of difficulties, about the storm or locking the restroom first. If it had not been for Georgina, who gave her advice about how to cope with the storm and how to deal with the authorities on Ellis Island, Eilis would have had a much harder time getting to America.

Because she does not know how to be on her own, it actually suits Eilis that her life is constantly organized by others, and that is one of the reasons why she never tries to go beyond the church or get out of their protection. Similarly, her routine gave her a feeling of having a certain level of control over her life. Given that her routine in America was very similar to what it was in Ireland, it gave her a sense of security in America, where everything was unknown to her. Both in America and in Ireland she lived with women, and socialized both in America and Ireland by going dancing or to the movies. Every week was the same for Eilis; she went to work, to school and, on the weekends, to the cinema or dancing with Tony. In addition to that, she saw him always on the same days of the week.

Soon, then, a pattern developed. Every Thursday, Tony stood outside the college, or discreetly inside the hall if it were raining, and he accompanied her onto the trolley-car and then he walked her home. (Tóibín 2009: 137)

Both church and this routine gave her a feeling of familiarity in an unfamiliar place. And that is why she never considers exploring what America has to offer and think about what kind of different life she could lead there. That would mean that she would have to leave what she feels comfortable in, and depend more on herself. Considering that Tony was a big part of her routine, if Eilis lost him, a considerable part of her routine would fall apart. The fear of losing Tony can thus also be the reason why she wanted to please Tony - if she contradicted him and did not show that she feels the same way as he does, she was afraid that this would be exactly what would happen.

### **3.4 How does Eilis benefit through migration?**

While Eilis never achieved what Rose wanted for her and did not use the freedom that moving to America offered her, some aspects of her life still improved in America. The first aspect is her degree in bookkeeping. Eilis studied hard, passed her exams with ease and at the end of the course, she was a qualified bookkeeper. The knowledge she acquired in school and the degree opened up better job opportunities in America, as Father Flood told her: “If you do it for two

years and pass all their tests, there's no office in New York won't want you.” (Tóibín 2009: 77) Moreover, it transpired that it also gave her the opportunity to get a desired job in Ireland. For these reasons, her degree was the most important benefit of her migration: it was “much more than she had imagined she would have when she arrived in Brooklyn first.” (Tóibín 2009: 156)

Apart from her degree, Eilis’s financial situation improved significantly. In Ireland, Rose provided Eilis with money and her salary at Miss Kelly's was enough for Eilis to “be able to go to the Athenaeum” (Tóibín 2009: 8)<sup>1</sup> with Nancy but not to take care of herself. In America, Eilis had a decent salary that enabled her to buy things for herself, but also to send gifts to her family. When the Bartocci store had sales, Eilis bought nylon stockings for herself, her sister, her mother, and Mrs Kehoe. When Christmas came, Eilis decided to buy her family items that could not be found in Ireland - Angora wool cardigans for her mother and her sister and watches for her brothers. Although they already owned watches, these “were from America, which might mean something in Birmingham.” (Tóibín 2009: 82)

This shows that everything that was American was considered better and more valuable, so Eilis's life also became better in terms of clothes and her own appearance. When she went to her first dance in America, Eilis felt dissatisfied with her appearance, and the other girls there awakened her desire to pay more attention to her looks, her hair and the way she dresses. She decided to “look carefully at what other women were wearing at the dance and make sure the next time that she did not look too plain.” (Tóibín 2009: 106). At Mrs Kehoe's house, “changing fashions and new trends were [...] daily topic” (Tóibín 2009: 54) and both Mrs Kehoe and the girls loved to discuss clothes and sales, which also made Eilis more knowledgeable in it.

By hanging out with Tony, Eilis got to know a little about Italian culture, their dishes and how to eat spaghetti properly. So the time spent in America gave her an insight into different customs and other cultures and gave her experience that will later distinguish her from other people in Ireland. In addition to the fact that she became more confident in her own appearance, she also gained confidence in talking to other people; “she had learned to be brave and decisive”. (Tóibín 2009: 113)

These experiences had a positive effect on Eilis's confidence. In America Eilis was just one of the many women in the crowd and she started to be satisfied with herself, and this became more

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<sup>1</sup> In an extended piece by the author for the Waterstones edition of the novel, Colm Tóibín explains that the Athenaeum is an old gentleman's club in Enniscorthy where, in the novel, dances were held (Tóibín 2009: 257)

visible when Eilis came back to Ireland, bringing with her a dose of American glamour that Irish women did not have.



## 4 Back to Ireland

When Eilis came back to Ireland to visit her mother in Enniscorthy, she seems satisfied with her life in America and how people view her since she returned. To them, she appeared to be a new woman. As Nancy described her, “you seem more grown up and serious. And in your American clothes you look different. You have an air about you.” (Tóibín 2009: 230) Since it was not every day that someone from America returned to Enniscorthy, everyone looked at Eilis with interest. Wherever she appeared in the town, people would either observe her or openly compliment her “beautiful clothes, her sophisticated hairstyle and her suntan.” (Tóibín 2009: 211-212) However, when she realizes that she wants her future to be in Ireland, decisions made in America, that is, marriage prevented her from staying there. Consequently, in Ireland, she began to struggle to accept that she is the same person who lives in Brooklyn and is now visiting her family in Ireland, rather she starts acting as if they are too different 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 2009: 218) As Tony was the reason that tied her to America, Eilis began to see in him only “someone she was allied with whether she liked it or not, someone who was, she thought, unlikely to allow her to forget the nature of the alliance and his need for her to return.” (Tóibín 2009: 232) Even her life in America, Eilis saw now as if it belonged to someone else; it felt “remote” (Tóibín 2009: 231) to her and not real. By pretending that her life in America did not exist, Eilis created a new life in Ireland, a fake one where she was not married, and she started acting more and more as if it was her real life. As this was the first time that Eilis had to deal with something on her own, faking her life and deceiving others was the easiest thing for her to do. In addition to that, it was not just that it was easier, but considering that her whole life others always made decisions for her and guided her, she did not even know how to cope with anything on her own.

Eilis “splitting herself into two Eilises” began when Eilis attempted to talk with her mother about her life in America. She could not wait to tell her mother everything about her new life, however “her mother had not asked her one question about her time in America, or even her trip home.” (Tóibín 2009: 204) In order to avoid talking about America, her mother prepared topics to talk about and activities to do in advance – answering letters, going through Rose’s clothes, talking about life in Ireland, Rose’s funeral, Nancy’s wedding... Her mother not only did not want to mention America, but she did not want to acknowledge the existence of Eilis's

life there: the present Eilis brought her mother, she had “almost absent-mindedly left [...] aside” (Tóibín 2009: 204), she “pretended that she had not heard her” (Tóibín 2009: 212) when Eilis talked about her “American” clothes and agreed that Eilis would attend Nancy's wedding even though the date of the wedding was when Eilis was already supposed to return to America. (Tóibín 2009: 210) The reason for this mother's behaviour can again be connected to the fact that the Lacey family, as mentioned previously, found it hard to talk about life-changing decisions and events, however, it can be said that Eilis's mother did this on purpose because she wanted her daughter to stay with her in Ireland and not to be left alone. By ignoring Eilis's life in America, and later encouraging her to go out with Jim, maybe her mother wanted to make Eilis forget about America and show her that she does not need America for a happy life and thus make her stay with her in Enniscorthy. This mother's plan actually succeeds because, although Eilis wanted to talk about it and “resent[ed] her mother's lack of interest in discussing anything, any single detail, about her time in America” (Tóibín 2009: 217), Eilis eventually does not say anything about her new life, nor about Tony or marriage. The reason why she decided to keep silent about something that she obviously wanted to discuss with her mother could be that she did not know how to start the subject of something as important as marriage, especially when her mother obviously did not want to talk about it. However, the reason could also be related to the fact that Eilis herself did not completely want marriage with Tony in the first place, or she was not sure if she wanted it. As in America, only Tony and she knew about it, for other people, not knowing anything about it, their marriage was not real. If she told her mother, it would mean that someone else would know about it - her mother, and soon other people from Enniscorthy, and Eilis would have to accept her marriage as her reality. And that was perhaps something she did not want to. The fact that Eilis does not want to admit to herself that she is married can be concluded from the fact that she never refers to Tony as her husband, but says “that she has someone special in Brooklyn.” (Tóibín 2009: 224) Besides, Eilis did not even show much effort to try to talk to her mother at all, she waited for her mother to ask her about America, when Eilis could have started the conversation first. So not having to admit to her mother anything, can be seen also as a relief for Eilis. If Eilis said that she had a husband in America, what she feared would become true - her life would be “spent away from home.” (Tóibín 2009: 143) Here it can be seen that Eilis always considers Enniscorthy as a place where she wants to spend her life, despite migrating to America. Although America had so much to offer her, Eilis is not attracted to return because she has never experienced any of it. She mentions multiple times that America was glamorous and that she felt “glamorous” (Tóibín

2009: 227), but she never really tried anything glamorous there. Her life in Brooklyn and routine, as mentioned in the second chapter, were almost the same as in Ireland.

In the second chapter, as one of the reasons why Eilis never experienced anything new in America, inactivity was mentioned. Eilis “acquired” this trait by growing up in Enniscorthy. Since her whole life in Ireland, she was not expected to do anything besides what others expected her to do, Eilis never really had any purpose for doing things, she never had anything that she strives to achieve. Therefore, when she hears that she was going to migrate to America, unlike her sister Rose who was aware of the possibilities in America, Eilis was not delighted at all and did not feel motivated by the idea that her life could go beyond Miss Kelly's shop and being at home with her mother. Moreover, because she felt safe there at home, she even longs for such a life and would gladly change place with Rose. When she comes to America and adapts, Eilis seems to like being there, but that is because, as already said, she created almost the same life as in Enniscorthy; she did not change her habits or behaviour, the only different thing was that she did not have Tony in Ireland, that is, a boyfriend. And so when she returns to Enniscorthy that is again where she wants her future to be. In the article *‘Eilis’ biggest weakness is her duty to please others* it is stated that Enniscorthy, by never giving her “a cause or passion” (tsfx, 12.09.2022) for her actions, but rather just making her obey others, “restrict[ed] Eilis from reaching her full potential.” (tsfx, 12.09.2022) Consequently, even though Eilis migrated, she never tried to explore any possibilities that America offers and thus never used her full potential of what she could have become in America. Therefore, Eilis never sees America as a place full of opportunities to spend her life there, but more as improving the old life in Ireland. If she had not been married, she could have had such a life because considering her degree in America, she was offered a job as a bookkeeper at Davis's Mills, where Rose used to work, and because of her change in confidence and appearance, she attracted the attention of Jim Farrell, local guy.

Since her mother did not know anything about Tony, Eilis could not say anything to her friends either, considering how quickly the news spread in Enniscorthy. Not telling others that she was married, Eilis created a new reality in which people believed that she was not obliged to return to America and that set a basis from which people began to create a life for her in Ireland. People began to consider Eilis's visit to Ireland almost as a return since she was expected to take care of her mother, now that Rose, who had been doing this until now, has died. From the letter that Eilis receives from her brother Jack, while she was in America, it was evident that,

even though Eilis lived further away than her brothers and, just like them, had a job and her life outside Enniscorthy, no one expected one of them to stay with their mother, because they were men and “they have to go back to work.” (Tóibín 2009: 180) Carregal-Romero describes this expectation as typical in “traditional rural life in Ireland, when one of the daughters was always ‘pressurised to stay and care for an ailing parent’.” (2018: 136) In addition to that, when people saw that Eilis was hanging out with Jim, not knowing that she was married, they automatically started thinking of them as a couple, talking openly about their future and getting married, and completely ignoring any possibility that Eilis would go back to America. Jim's mother even greeted Eilis “with an effusive warmth that Eilis found almost unsettling” (Tóibín 2009: 216) as if she was already welcoming her to the family.

As it was already established that Eilis never had any control over her life, very quickly she was pulled in by society and began to behave as society expected her to. She accepted the job offer at Davis's and started going out with Jim. Although Eilis did not like Jim at first, she was encouraged by her mother and Nancy to spend more and more time with him, so she eventually began to like him. As George, Nancy, Jim and Eilis constantly spent time together, it was almost as if Eilis and Jim were “just as much a couple as Nancy and George” (Tóibín 2009: 223), and they started to behave in that way - Jim carried Eilis's bag to the beach, they posed together embraced for the picture, they danced together... Eventually, Eilis found herself kissing Jim and him proposing to her: “I mean, if you have to go back, then maybe we could get engaged before you go.” (Tóibín 2009: 241)

This kind of behaviour, flirting with another man while being married, is very contradictory to Eilis's usual behaviour considering that she always tried to behave morally and not to do something wrong. She went to confession immediately after sleeping with Tony, but being a married woman and kissing another guy was suddenly acceptable to her. It seems that Eilis suddenly forgets about morality... Or maybe she got buried so deeply in the idea that there were two Eilises and that she was not actually the one being married so she does not consider doing anything wrong? Eilis was aware that what she did was wrong and “that she should not have let things move so quickly” (Tóibín 2009: 225) but continues only to find excuses for her behaviour. She decides that “it was best to do nothing” (Tóibín 2009: 225) because soon she will return to her reality in America anyway and give herself the freedom to have fun with Jim under the pretence that she was on “her holidays and it was harmless”. (Tóibín 2009: 223) Besides that, even though being married to Tony, she allows herself to fantasize “about herself

being there at the altar and her brothers home for the wedding and her mother knowing that Eilis would be living in a nice house just a few streets from her.” (Tóibín 2009: 236) This shows that Eilis was completely detached from reality because she did not consider her actions as cheating or lying considering Tony will not know about them. However, this fact does not change her actions of doing something immorally. It seems that for Eilis morality exists only when there is a possibility that someone else knows about it. Otherwise, she justified them.

Regardless of everything, Eilis thus continues to live the fake life she has created in Ireland. She enjoyed more and more being with Jim - he belonged to the Irish “middle class” (Kovács 2016: 1), his parents were pub owners and highly respected in the town and he lived in “one of the nicest houses in the town,” (Tóibín 2009: 231) in the same town where Eilis’s mother and friends were. Jim could offer her a life close to home, to marry affluent and enter the respected middle-class society. This achievement “would count for something in the town” (Tóibín 2009: 227) meaning that being married rich was one of the greatest goals that a woman in Enniscorthy could accomplish. The fact that for Eilis this achievement was more appealing than life in America, shows how much she actually was shaped by Irish society. She liked how others looked at her when she was with Jim and “she was proud to be with him.” (Tóibín 2009: 228)

It is interesting how when Eilis compares the life that Tony offers her and the life that she could have in Ireland, Eilis says that with Tony, given that they are married, she would never be able to work in an office as a bookkeeper, rather she would have to “stay at home, cleaning the house and preparing food and shopping and then having children and looking after them.” (Tóibín 2009: 219-220) As working as a bookkeeper was actually Eilis's only wish that she mentions in the novel, this is quite an important factor for her when she thinks about where she would like to spend her future. In Ireland she worked as a bookkeeper at Davis's, however, she does not think about the fact that if she married Jim, she would have the same role as a wife and mother as with Tony and would not be able to work again. This is even mentioned in the novel: “She had expected that she would find a job in the town, and then marry someone and give up the job and have children.” (Tóibín 2009: 27-28) When she thinks about America, Eilis obviously only thinks about how she would have to give up her job and how Tony, who belonged to the American “working class” (Kovács 2016: 1) and was a plumber, awaits her there. Although in America, Eilis did not care that Tony was a plumber, she mentions when writing a letter to Rose that her sister would consider Tony not being good enough for Eilis because according to Irish standards someone who worked as a plumber would be perceived as “rough and awkward and

(would) use bad grammar.” (Tóibín 2009: 140). Perhaps once she came back to Ireland, this was not good enough for her either.

However, regardless of where Eilis wanted to spend her future, it did not matter, because no matter how much Eilis pretended that there were two Eilises and that each one led a separate life, in reality, it was all the same Eilis. One Eilis and her two lives on the two continents were overlapping and the decisions she makes at one place influence the other place and vice versa. Her whole life in Ireland and all the events that happened there after her return from America could never be real. That is what Eilis wanted, but could never be possible for her because she was married in America meaning that she had to return there. There is no scenario in which Eilis could live in Ireland because as a married woman, her obligation was to be with her husband and, if she divorced, which she considered, she would no longer be accepted in Irish society as a divorcee, since divorce in the 1950s was in Ireland illegal. (Gaston 2012: 55) On the other hand, in America divorce was allowed, so Eilis thought about “what would happen if she were to write to Tony to say that their marriage was a mistake?” (Tóibín 2009: 236) However, even then she would not be able to marry Jim. The church would never marry someone who was already divorced and Jim and society would not be able to accept her because they would not be able to understand something they were not used to. (Tóibín 2009: 236)

What Eilis could do in this situation, but never considered, was facing the consequences of her actions – that she cannot stay in Ireland and lead a double life, go back to America, divorce Tony and find a job in the office as that was her wish and she had all the qualifications for it. If not that, America had countless other possibilities to offer her to rebuild her life on her own. Eilis does not do that because, as has already been established, she has never been taught to take matters into her own hands and she does not know how to cope when there is no one else to do it for her. So, she did what she was doing her whole life, she remained silent and passively watched life unfolds around her - she simply postpones her return, does not contact the travel agency, or write a letter to anyone in America.

Since she did not do anything to get out of this situation, the only way she could stay in Ireland was if no one knew she was married. Therefore, Eilis just takes on the role of the unmarried woman that she had created and continues to lie. However, Eilis does not think about the fact that it does not have to be her that has to say that she was married in order for others to find out about it. There were other ways - Tony wrote letters to her which someone could see accidentally, there somewhere were letters that Eilis sent Rose and mentioned that she had a boyfriend, someone from America could contact someone in Ireland... Which eventually

happened with Miss Kelly. Eilis was aware, that now when someone else also knew about her being married, two different Eilises, the one who lives in Brooklyn and the one who lives in Ireland, would become the same person, and she could not pretend to be someone else anymore and stay in Ireland. Her reality, in both worlds, would be Eilis, a married woman who has to return to America. Ironically, Eilis considered her life in America “fantasy” (Tóibín 2009: 217) when America and being married to Tony was her reality all along. It was Ireland that she made up in her mind, and was unreal.

When Miss Kelly wakes her up from that dream and reminded her what her reality was, not wanting to be present when others find out about her lying and deception, Eilis immediately goes to the travel agency and books her return to Brooklyn. Once again not taking any responsibility for her actions.

## 5 Conclusion

In his novel *Brooklyn* Colm Tóibín shows how looking for a better life in a country that should offer more promising opportunities and ensure a more successful future does not necessarily mean a happier life. Although according to Eilis's description at the beginning of the novel (Tóibín 2009: 24), America seems like a “promised land” where people get rich, live glamorously and have no need to return to Ireland, it was not like that in Eilis's case. Through her character, it is seen that migration is a process full of sacrifices and dilemmas, and that to migrate means that a person always has to leave something behind, especially when migrating and re-migrating. This novel shows what happens when a person fails to find a home and a sense of belonging in a new country and when, at the same time, they cannot return home, and so feel that their former home is not their home anymore. Although Eilis benefited from migration in some spheres of her life, in the end, she lost more than she gained. By never going beyond the church and leaving old habits behind, Eilis does not achieve in America what she could. On the other side, America gave her a good basis to create a better life in Ireland than she had before leaving Enniscorthy, and so, when she returns, she is offered a desirable job and a rich suitor. Eilis cannot take that opportunity because of the marriage she agreed to despite not wanting it completely, which obliged her to return to America. By agreeing to marry in America, she restricted her freedom in Ireland. Considering that her marital status, either as a married woman or divorcee would not be accepted there, her future could never be in Ireland.

In 2015 an adaptation of this novel, directed by John Crowley and with a screenplay by Nick Hornby, was filmed. The film was nominated 161 times, including three Oscars nominations, and received 38 awards. (IMDb, 09.09.2022) Many attribute the film's success to the lead actress Saoirse Ronan, whose performance is described as “luminous” (Bradshaw, 2015), and who is referred to as “the heart and point of this film”. (Bradshaw, 2015) While both the film and the novel portray the same story, migration is presented in a rather different way in the film. The film has quite a “Hollywood” approach, with fewer layers of complexity and more love and romance. In the film, migration is embellished and romanticized. There are no “bad guys” in the film, Father Flood is a sweet old man, very likeable and generous, who shows only good intentions towards Eilis. Similarly, Tony is portrayed as caring and without flaws: the somewhat pushy and manipulative character in the novel is replaced in the film by someone who does everything because he is in love and wants to be with his girlfriend. While in the novel Eilis felt rushed into her relationship with Tony, in the film, she was “all in”, and certain decisions



regarding her relationship that she made were not seen as forced but rather motivated by Tony's love. Her migration to America comes across as being very successful. Apart from initial homesickness, it is not shown that she had any other problems, she is happy, in love and looking forward to life in America.

This is a romantic film, not a film about migration, and when Eilis returns to Ireland, her dilemma comes down to being torn between two men and two countries rather than having a problem of belonging, and an existential crisis. The whole situation with Jim in Ireland is only shown as a kind of small crisis where Eilis is tempted to stay in Ireland due to sudden opportunities there, but her relationship with him does not go beyond hanging out - there is no kissing or marriage proposals. While in the novel Eilis returns to America because she has no other option, because she is afraid of what will happen when others find out that she is married, in the film Eilis shows that she is not afraid of Miss Kelly and proudly says that her name is "Eilis Fiorello". (*Brooklyn*, 2015) Moreover, Eilis says that she forgot how things are in Enniscorthy indicating she has "outgrown" the slightly backward Enniscorthy, the close-minded people and small society where gossiping is part of everyday life. In the film, Eilis goes back to America because she realized that she belonged in America, because she loves Tony and, as she tells her mother, because she "want[s] to be with [her] husband" (*Brooklyn*, 2015).

To conclude, the novel displays both limitations and freedom that migration to America offers. Although the goal of Eilis's migration was to have a better future in America, she only partly profits through migration and it can be said that migration puts her in a rather helpless position in the end. On the other hand, the film has a "happy ending" and shows migration as the best thing that could have happened to Eilis, offering her a happy life in America and a love that is stronger than anything that ties her to her home in Ireland.

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