

“Sweet Duplicity: Jamesian Moral Ambiguity in Colm Tóibín’s *Brooklyn*” *Mitoszok bővületében: Ünnepi kötet Virágos Zsolt Kálmán 70. születésnapjára. / Enchanted by Myth. A Volume for Kálmán Zsolt Virágos on his 70th Birthday*. Németh Lenke, Zoltán Simon, András Tarnóc, and Gabriella Varró, eds. Debrecen: Kossuth UP, 2012. 82-87.

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Colm Tóibín (1955) the internationally renowned Irish novelist published his sixth novel *Brooklyn* in 2009, which won the Costa Book award the same year. It relates the story of Eilis Lacey, a young Irishwoman who emigrates to the US looking for a better life in the 1950s. The book is a fascinating read both because of how it handles the problem of cultural difference between the US and Ireland of the 1950s and also because of the detached storytelling, the use of point of view limited to the perspective of one character, that allows for multiple readings of the same imaginative scenario. Incidentally, both themes, the negotiation of cultural difference and the limited point of view triggering diverse reactions tie the book in with Tóibín’s other novels, his avowed psychological interest, the so called Jamesian legacy.

In this essay, I am going to pinpoint those elements of *Brooklyn* that create a moral dilemma constructed along Jamesian lines. I claim that the subjects of illicit love, misguided loyalty, and moral ambiguity in the novel are themes that are connected to the Jamesian power of secrets Tóibín continues to explore. In order to make my position clear, first I am exploring those elements of the plot in *Brooklyn* that lead to Eilis’s moral dilemma about secret lovers. Then I focus on the ambiguities involved in the dilemma and the sweetness of postponing articulation that, with a typically Jamesian touch, turns sour eventually. Finally, I link the theme of secrets and misguided loyalty to Tóibín’s previous work so that *Brooklyn*’s position to them becomes clearer.

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Certainty

Tóibín is an Irish novelist, non-fiction writer, critic and journalist who has published eight volumes of fiction to date: *The South* (1990), *The Heather Blazing* (1992), *The Story of the Night* (1996), *The Backwater Lightship* (1999), *The Master* (2004), *Mothers and Sons* (2006), *Brooklyn* (2009), and *The Empty Family* (2010). Most famous of them all, *The Master* recreates a fictional biography of Henry James the novelist in the 1890s, when the failure of James’ dramas make him write novels in a psychologically oriented manner that will eventually result in his proto-Modernist major novels. Tóibín’s nonfiction ranges from travel writing, e.g. *Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border* (1987) through journalism to literary criticism like *Love in a Dark Time and Other Explorations of Gay Lives and Literature* (2001) and a collection of essays *Colm Tóibín on Henry James* (2011).

The representation of the protagonist’s moral dilemma in *Brooklyn* links the book to Tóibín’s interest in Henry James, so it is worth tracing the emergence of the ambiguity. *Brooklyn* focuses on the story of an ordinary mind in an ordinary situation and traces the emergence of a moral dilemma in an ordinary world of unquestioned decency. Eilis Lacey, aged around 20, from Enniscorthy, finds herself in a vacuum in the Ireland of the 1950s. Her father died four years earlier, while her three brothers have left for England to find jobs. Only her elder sister, Rose works in the household they share with their widowed mother. Although Eilis has completed a course in accounting, she has no proper job, not even the prospect of one, and even worse, no one with a personal interest in her who would guide her safely to marriage. So she is not in the position to question the plan to work in the US that has been devised for her by her sister and Father Flood, an Irish priest home at Enniscorthy from Brooklyn for his holidays. Father Flood arranges for her a place to work and a place to live in Brooklyn, gets all the papers necessary from the Embassy, and Eilis is practically shipped to

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her destination in a matter of months. There she works on the shop floor of a large store as a sales assistant, and lives in a respectable but crowded lodging house for Irish girls. The tedium and loneliness of her days result in a bulge of homesickness she can only handle by signing up for a course in bookkeeping at Brooklyn College that provides her with things to think about and a tight schedule to keep to. Also, at a dance organized by father Flood, she meets Anthony Fiorello, an Italian American man she begins to go out with and experience Brooklyn, Coney Island, baseball games, diners, movie theaters of Brooklyn in the 1950s. Life gets back its rhythm and color for her.

The complication arrives in the form of Rose’s untimely and unexpected death. Her mother remains alone and would like Eilis to come back to her. Yet Eilis, despite her strict Catholic education, has had sex with her boyfriend and gets married to him before she sets out on a visit to Ireland. At home all seems sweet and comfortable and innocent. Her mother appears uninterested in her American life, so after a while even for Eilis it is as if the American interlude had never happened, despite the fact that she is a married woman now. And she makes sure nobody knows anything about her marital status. An old acquaintance suddenly takes interest in her and they begin to go out. She is flattered and content because the young man owns a bar, has a position in town, and is able to behave respectfully without forgetting his sense of humor. When he proposes to her after the wedding of her best friend, Eilis confronts a terrible dilemma between duty and love.

Dilemma

The choice she has to make poses difficult questions about where love and duty are to be found in her life. Before she sets out for Ireland, these issues are still clear. She is in love with Tony and is also, incidentally, married to him. She has no intention to remain in Ireland

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despite her mother’s silent claim for her. Her duty to her lonely mother is second to her love to Tony.

From the outset of the story, Eilis is equipped with a strong sense of right and wrong replete with self-reflection. A docile girl with a good head for numbers, she shares her sister’s and mother’s perspective and opinions. However, they also share a sense of mocking humor primarily aimed at others who fail to come up to their standards. Most of the gossip at home consists of recounting such scenarios or mock imitations of persons less reflective than themselves. Eilis accepts the plan to emigrate because of this attitude: although she does not wish to leave, she knows she has no right to say no when she has no job and Rose is ready to stay with their mother, and she keeps up cheery appearances until the very last moment. Similarly, she is ready to have her fun when possible also later on, tolerating but satirizing the girls at the lodging house or the store, too. She loves to find out about others having small secrets that motivate their behavior, knowing the line between what is decent to mention and what is not. Her regard for her boyfriend actually grows when she notices one such secret of his:

Eilis asked him if they could have a go on the huge wheel – he refused, managing each time to find an excuse why they could not. ... he gave her no hint that he had lost his previous girlfriend because he took her on the wheel. Eilis was fascinated by this, the easy, casual way he prevented them from going there, his sweet duplicity in giving no sign of what had happened before. She was almost glad to know that he had secrets and had ways of calmly keeping them. (161)

However, her certainties tumble down as her weeks in Ireland go by. When her mother quietly disregards her American life, when everyone around her seems to take it for granted that she stays with them now, when she is offered a job (Rose’s) as an accountant, her old certainties are turned upside down. Her American life fades into the background and the sweet comfortable innocence of her old life comes to the fore.

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She looked at the two envelopes, at his handwriting, and she stood in the room with the door closed wondering how strange it was that everything about him seemed remote. And not only that, but everything else that had happened in Brooklyn seemed as though it had almost dissolved and was no longer richly present for her ... She went through all of it as though she were trying to recover what had seemed so filled with detail, so solid, just a few weeks before. (231)

It is as if the place where you live and relations there determined your image of yourself, and this image could be changed by changing of the sites to which they are linked. Eilis is frightened by the impression but is unable to prevent this from happening.

As the days go by and she is invited out again and again, she feels much more comfortable in her home setting than she did in Brooklyn. She realizes this with a shudder, her image of Tony changing at the same time: “She had to make an effort now to remember that she really was married to Tony... that she would face into a life that now seemed an ordeal... . She tried to think of Tony now as a loving and comforting presence, but she saw instead 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 return” (232). She is sure she does not love Tony any more, she is tied to him by duty only, by the marriage that links them. Love now is to be found on the other side, in Ireland, where her emerging love and prospects for the comfortable life she always dreamed about go hand in hand with her mother’s wishes for her.

She thinks about these matters in privacy and goes on being silent about her American self because it is more comfortable to keep up appearances and enjoy the pleasant care for her than to confess. Or is it possible for an Irish woman in the 1950s to get a divorce and start a new life at 20? She reminds herself again and again that she has to return to Brooklyn, yet she only delays having to handle the situation. Her reasons for this are perfectly clear: “she saw all three of them – Tony, Jim, her mother – as figures whom she could only damage, as

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innocent people surrounded by light and clarity, and circling around them was herself, dark, uncertain.”(237) Despite her knowledge, the temptation to deceive is hard to resist. At the wedding of her best friend, she wishes she had not had married Tony and were free “to join the side of sweetness, certainty, and innocence” (237.). But this is impossible because her earlier decision has delineated her position clearly. “No matter what she decided, she thought, there would not be a way to avoid the consequences of what she had done, or what she might do now”. However, when she is proposed to that afternoon by Jim Farrell she never mentions that fact that she is married already.

When she tries to tell Jim about her dilemma later on, she finds her concerns are beyond the scope of his comprehension. They go out to dine and she watches Jim and spares him the info because “He was, she thought, good, and he was also wise and clever in certain ways, but he was conservative. ... He had never done anything unusual in his life, and, she thought, he never would. His version of the world and himself and the world did not include the possibility of spending time with a married woman and, even worse, a woman who had not told him or anybody else that she was married (242). So, not wanting to break the spell of innocence and clarity, she remains silent still.

The situation gets out of control when she is reminded of her duty in America by one of the gossipy Irish spinsters of the neighborhood, whose uncanny information about her marital status sends her back to Brooklyn immediately. As a solution to her dilemma, she has to choose duty to Tony because of social mores of the time, burning all emotional bridges to Ireland behind her abruptly.

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Ambiguity

Reviewers seem to agree that the simple sounding story takes on depth in the novel psychologically (Tayler) as Eilis’s simple law-abiding personality takes on darker hues. Jonathan Yardley states that Eilis’s choice between her American and Irish lives is, in the end “difficult and painful,” the characters remain believable all the way through, but he offers no further explanation of the issue. Liesl Shillinger asserts that Eilis, in choosing to return to Tony, takes revenge on those who had formally made her leave, and Tóibín’s plot shows how “place can assert itself, enfolding the visitor, staking its claim” (Schillinger). By contrast, Aamer Hussein focuses on the psychological aspect to argue that the book is a transitory piece in Tóibín’s fictional *oeuvre*, partly because of the flaw in motivating the simple girl in handling her final dilemma. It is “hard to fathom how the possibility of deceit and deception comes so easily to her” and “whether there is something perverse and mixed that we’ve missed in her seemingly mild character” (Hussein). For him it seems difficult to understand why at the end of the story Eilis sounds suddenly deep in not wanting to make the necessary decision.

I suggest that if one considers Eilis’s dilemma and final decision in terms of an ambiguous moral dilemma, it can be linked to Tóibín’s ongoing major concern with Henry James. As is well known, Tóibín has been linked to James on many counts. Not only did he write James’ fictional biography, he also wrote about James in the capacity of the literary critic, and has commented on his relation to James in interviews. As a starting point, in a commentary to *Brooklyn* for *The Washington Post*, Tóibín asserts that in *Brooklyn* he formed the plot by making use of what he “learnt from Henry James about the power of secrets and the need to control point of view.” (Tóibín 2009) But what has he learnt? In an essay on

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James and New York, Tóibín’s explanation of James’ main concerns gives us a good idea

Tóibín’s sense of the major themes connected to Jamesian secrets:

Duplicity and greed, disappointment and renunciation, which became his most pressing themes, occurred for James the novelist in the private realm ... the stories are careful and restrained but make clear that the subject of illicit love or misguided loyalty interested James deeply, as did the subject of sexual coldness. (Tóibín 2010, 52)

The subjects of illicit love, misguided loyalty, and sexual coldness are definitely themes that are connected the Jamesian power of secrets Tóibín continues to explore.

The main character’s dilemma in Tóibín’s *The Heather Blazing* appears similar to the one Eilis is to handle in *Brooklyn*. Commenting on his *The Heather Blazing* Tóibín, makes an even more explicit statement on the way the power of secrets is utilized in his creative production. He comments on his main focus of interest in the novel as being somebody who is: “very easily led who could move into areas of slow, small corruption very, very easily without having an enormous moral sense but also not being evil. And the reader could watch this movement, which I tried to describe with some subtlety, and could see that as each act took place it was neither good or bad, or did not seem so at the time (Wiesenfarth 7-8). Tóibín’s interest lies in the representation of the process of change in the character who remains silent and secretive about his/her actions and thoughts because of the not clear, possibly but only possibly questionable moral status of his actions towards others.

I find that the themes of duplicity, disloyalty, and moral ambiguity that appear in *Brooklyn* form part of Tóibín’s Jamesian legacy. The representation of Eilis’s secret lovemaking and marriage unfolds slowly, and follows how the initial actions become parts of a longer chain of events. As each act takes place, it is neither good or bad, or at least does not seem so at the time. Even so, as series of actions emerge, one can consider the ambiguity of Eilis’s choices to the full. Is it disloyal to Tony and deceptive to her mother to choose to

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remain silent about her marital status once she is back in Ireland in the first place? Tony did not want her to publicize the event, her mother surely does not want to hear such information. Then, as she begins to enjoy her stay at home, is it disloyal to Tony to go bathing and dancing with another guy, is it deceptive not to tell the other guy that he has no chance whatever his advantages are? Maybe, but as the new date has no future, it seems too insignificant to mention it to Tony, and as a confession would offer no choice of action for Jim, this has no point, either. Even later on, as Eilis is offered the possibility of a safe marriage in Ireland, is it deceptive and disloyal to choose to leave for Brooklyn and Tony eventually? She has not revealed anything to Jim but, in turn, has not promised anything to him yet, either. As the action unfolds, she understands fully that no matter whether she stays or goes, she will hurt somebody she loves, as there is no good answer to the question of staying or leaving. As Tóibín puts this: “The answer was that there was no answer.” (242)

There are no clear yes-no answers to Eilis’s moral dilemma and there are certainly no value judgments connected to the representation of the dilemma in *Brooklyn*, either. The text provides a subtle representation of a devastating moral choice through a limited point of view. The action is told from Eilis’s perspective, in progress, following the emergence of the dilemma step by step. Eilis’s rational explanations about the impossibility of giving the right answer are accompanied by the accounts of her not so rational reactions and silences. This becomes the Jamesian framework of deception through which Tóibín reports about the vagaries of feeling in the relation between men and women.

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