
Colm Tóibín and Post-Nationalist Ireland: Redefining Family Through Alterity

José Carregal-Romero
University of Vigo, Spain

Copyright (c) 2012 by José Carregal-Romero. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged for access.

Abstract. In nationalist Ireland, definitions of family have traditionally followed a hetero-normative and sexist pattern whereby husbands and wives fulfilled deeply unequal roles. Moreover, the notion of family has been too often idealized as a site of peace and unconditional love, its members being united by unbreakable bonds of mutual affection. In Colm Tóibín's fiction, "traditional" families tend to be dysfunctional and the relations between their members become strained because of emotional distance, regrets and distrust. However, Tóibín's protagonists do find their sense of home and domesticity outside the traditional parameters of family. In this regard, this paper intends to analyze the manner in which Tóibín de-stabilizes canonical definitions through his revisionist agenda and his inscription of alternative forms of family. In order to shed light on these points, I shall refer to his novels *The South* (1990), *The Heather Blazing* (1992), *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) and his short stories "A Long Winter" (*Mothers and Sons*, 2006), "Two Women" and "The Street" (*The Empty Family*, 2010).

Key Words. Alterity, ambiguity, family, gender transgressions, post-nationalism, Irish literature, revisionism.

Resumen. En el ideario nacionalista irlandés, cualquier definición de familia seguía un patrón hetero-normativo y sexista en el que hombres y mujeres debían desempeñar roles profundamente opuestos y desiguales. Además, la noción de familia ha sido, a menudo, objeto de idealizaciones que la caracterizaban como remanso de paz, concordia y amor mutuo e incondicional entre sus miembros. En las obras de Colm Tóibín, las relaciones familiares vienen marcadas por distanciamientos emocionales, desconfianzas y arrepentimientos. Sin embargo, los protagonistas en sus obras sí encuentran en otros individuos un sentido de hogar y domesticidad que va más allá del modelo tradicional de familia. En este artículo se va a analizar la manera en que Tóibín desestabiliza el concepto canónico de tal institución mediante una visión revisionista y una inscripción alternativa de familia. Para ilustrar estos argumentos, me referiré a sus novelas *The South* (1990), *The Heather Blazing* (1992), *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) y a sus relatos cortos "A Long Winter" (*Mothers and Sons*, 2006), "Two Women" y "The Street" (*The Empty Family*, 2010).

Palabras Clave. Alteridad, ambigüedad, familia, transgresiones de género, post-nacionalismo, literatura irlandesa, revisionismo.

1. Introduction

Colm Tóibín is generally considered one of the most prominent figures within the contemporary literary panorama of Ireland, as attested by the popularity of many of his works, highly praised and critically acclaimed.

Apart from his successful career as a creative writer, Tóibín has conducted academic work as an editor of books of criticism. He is also a noted essayist and cultural commentator, being the author of a substantial number of articles dealing with Irish history, politics and society.

The decade in which Tóibín started his literary career, the 1990s, saw the awakening of a new Ireland which was experiencing an unprecedented impulse of modernization. It is a period in which the Republic underwent drastic changes as regards its economic and socio-cultural profile. The Ireland of the 1990s is that of the Church scandals, as well as that of the Celtic Tiger or the Ireland of profound legal changes, when homosexuality was decriminalized and the ban on divorce was finally removed. Unsurprisingly, these rapid transformations have had a remarkable impact on Ireland's cultural life, with the emergence of what has been labelled as "post-nationalist" Irish literature. In one of her articles on the post-nationalist novel in Ireland, critic Eve Patten (2006: 259) develops the following idea:

With a confidence bolstered by the 1990 election to the Irish presidency of a female reformist lawyer, Mary Robinson, the Irish began to face up to their position as modern Europeans ... Where political culture led, writers followed, and in the publishing boom of the 1990s, the Irish novel repeatedly highlighted the institutional and ideological failings of the country, tracing the halting progress of Ireland's cultural, sexual and economic evolution, and foregrounding voices of dissent.

Related to the notion of "post-nationalism", historical revisionism has stressed the need to address the impact of nationalism on Irish historiography. As has been remarked by scholar Alfred Markey, this historical trend's imperative was "the necessity of tackling the myth-making weakness at the heart of so much of history writing" (2005: 91). With a view to analyzing the role played by Irish nationalism in the early 20th century, Richard Kearney observes that "where reality indicated division and dispossession, myth provided an answering poetics of unity and sovereignty" (1997:113). It is common knowledge that these myths included the belief that Ireland is essentially Catholic, an idealization of the Irish countryside, as well as the myth of the happy and cozy Irish homestead, together with the image of the self-satisfied mother. In this sense, Clair Wills draws attention to the role of the myth of rural Ireland in the shaping of Irish politics: "The official ideology of the state expressed a concern to preserve the supposed purity of a mainly rural and Catholic society

from the corrosive effects of liberal individualism and social modernization" (2000: 1124).

In 1993, Colm Tóibín published his well-known essay, "New Ways of Killing your Father", in which he states his intellectual involvement in historical revisionism, which is an integral part of his first two novels, *The South* (1990) and *The Heather Blazing* (1992). With the intention of avoiding biased approaches to the past of Ireland, Tóibín concludes his essay by pointing out that, when reconsidering history, "ambiguity is what is needed". This turn towards ambiguity, he believes, would encourage a more balanced reading of history. Moreover, the writer seems to suggest that ambiguity would dismantle binary oppositions that have traditionally demonized certain sections of society. Aligning himself with revisionist historian Roy Foster, Tóibín expresses that "Foster's position is clear: he wants Ireland to become a pluralist, post-nationalist, all-inclusive, non-sectarian place. So do I".

Together with the notion of ambiguity, the concept of alterity will be used in this essay to help explain Tóibín's reconfigurations of the idea of family within the context of revisionism and post-nationalism. In *Alterity Politics*, Jeffrey Nealon defines alterity as "any gap in the nation's self-definition which becomes a privileged site for locating ethical resistance and for a political re-articulation of national and subjective identity" (1998: 10). According to the critic, what has been rejected, obscured or deemed "anomalous" by official discourses would be part of those "gaps" of any nation or society. In order to do away with false myths and stereotypes, artists and writers should turn to diverse representations of the hidden or "unofficial" aspects of life.

2. Family as a Cultural and Political Institution

In this paper, the concept of family will be approached as a cultural institution that has been regulated by moral and political discourses. In patriarchal countries such as Ireland, the notion of family has been traditionally located within the institution of marriage, which has been devised as the ultimate and highest purpose of heteronormative love relationships. A paradigmatic case of the family as an ideological construction

can be found in the 1937 Irish Free State Constitution, as the following quotation illustrates:

The state, therefore, guarantees to protect family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the nation and the state. In particular, the state recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The state shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home (Article 41, Paragraph 2).

This “master narrative” of Irish nationhood not only places the welfare of the nation in its own definition of family, but it also specifies the roles that women must play within such institution. Furthermore, the 1937 Constitution reasserts the centrality of the figure of the mother within family, though its conceptualization of motherhood blatantly calls for the confinement and subjugation of women. In order to “protect” family, different laws were approved during that period, such as those which prevented married women from economic emancipation and those which refused to indict abusive husbands. As is often the case in many patriarchal societies, there have been numerous “qualities” attached to motherhood, which presuppose that a mother must be willing to suffer for her children and sacrifice her own self interests for the benefit of the whole family.

Furthermore, the notion of family has too often been idealized as a site of peace and unconditional love, its members being united by unbreakable bonds of mutual affection. Curiously enough, Irish artists and intellectuals have frequently subverted such ideas about family and society. In *Love in a Dark Time* (2001), a collection of essays where Tóibín describes the lives of different homosexual artists throughout the 20th century, the author claims that “Irish writing seems at its most content where there is a dead father or a dead child and domestic chaos” (26). Tóibín also goes back to James Joyce and reminds us that Leopold Bloom’s father committed suicide and his son is dead. A substantial number of family conflicts also occur in *Dubliners* (1914) and, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Stephen Dedalus feels the necessity to free

himself from his family.

Despite the traditional certainty about the idea of family, the truth is that such notion has a very complex nature. Since it describes relations that are established between sets of people, it could be argued that the concept of the family has a prominently personal and emotional meaning. Nevertheless, it should not be obviated that there is a socio-political side to it and, for that reason, much legal discussion focuses on what constitutes a family. Moreover, the structure of families and the role that each member is expected to perform can be indicative of the cultural practices that are favoured by a given society. In the following quotation, legal expert Frank Martin reflects on the malleable nature of the conceptualizations about family: “what is agreed among academics, social scientists and lawyers is that, even in contemporary Irish society, ‘the family’ is a concept open to multiple interpretations reflecting political or ideological sets of values” (2005: 18). What may remain clear is that a rigid, inflexible definition may pave the way for social inequalities and the marginalization of those who do not or cannot conform to the privileged version of the institution.

In his article “Inside Out: Time and Space in Global Ireland”, cultural critic Michael Cronin applies the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold to his study of contemporary Ireland. Ingold has proposed an interesting paradigm for the analysis of social politics; the genealogical and progenerative models. The first one is based upon notions of essence and bloodline. That would be the model which, according to Cronin, informed the 2004 Referendum that denied automatic Irish citizenship to children who were born to immigrant parents. On the other hand, the progenerative model would be based on context and “positionality”. Cronin affirms that the latter model entails “the sets of relationships which individuals and communities enter into at a given moment which engender change and the emergence of new forms, forms which are not obsessively pre-scripted by birthright” (2009: 17). The progenerative model, in which “forms” are in constant flux, may also help deepen the readers’ understanding of Colm Tóibín’s politics of representation as regards the institution of the family.

3. Redefining Family through Alterity in Colm Tóibín's Fiction

In Colm Tóibín's fiction, 'traditional' families tend to be dysfunctional and the relations between their members too often become strained because of emotional distance, regrets and distrust. Therefore, we should not expect portraits of happy, unproblematic family relations. Instead, Tóibín is more interested in the clash between selfhood and society, where one's family circle frequently becomes an intimate but conflictive arena. Following this track, this paper intends to analyze how Tóibín de-stabilizes canonical definitions of such a social institution, subverting its politics while inscribing alternative family configurations.

Colm Tóibín's first novel, *The South* (1990), explores history from an unusual perspective. Its central character, Katherine Proctor, is a Protestant woman scarred by the haunting memory of the Troubles, when, as a child, her neighbours set her house on fire. This tragic event also provoked her mother's exile to London, while young Katherine remained in Ireland with her father. As an adult woman and after long years of silence, she tries to confront her trauma in a letter to her mother; "The locals turned on us. That's what happened. That's what the Troubles were for us" (89). The Proctors lived in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, where many historical accounts have focused on the narrative of the struggle for Catholic emancipation. However, in his fiction, the writer tends to concentrate on those individuals whose stories have seldom received official recognition. For doing so, the writer openly exposes the often neglected version of the story, thus calling the reader's attention to the ambivalence inherent to the interpretation of any historical or personal event. In this regard, critic Michael Böss has convincingly argued that "ambivalence and an acute awareness of the nuances of reality, past and present, are precisely what always characterises the humanism of Colm Tóibín" (2005: 29).

The protagonist's disaffection for her marital life is heightened by the role she is supposed to play as a housewife, which is in direct conflict with her artistic vocation as a painter. Rebelling against the conditions imposed on her, Katherine abandons home and family for a

new life in Barcelona. During her time in the Catalan capital, Katherine befriends a group of painters, a fact which facilitates her artistic formation and future artistic career. She falls in love with one of them, Miguel, with whom she is to live in the Pyrenees. A former anarchist, Miguel raises the suspicions of his neighbours. Interestingly enough, this oppressive social climate in Franco's Spain finds its parallel in the Ireland where Katherine Proctor grew up- a place governed by fear and distrust of the neighbour. Eventually, Miguel will be arrested for days and brutally beaten up by the police. A victim of severe mental disorders, he will die together with their daughter, Isona, in a mysterious car accident. Once again, as happened during the Troubles, politics and history intrude into the domestic realm of the family, which is not immune to external, public factors.

In Spain, Katherine also develops a long and sincere friendship with Michael Graves, who escaped Ireland after his long internment in a sanatorium because of tuberculosis. Back in Ireland, after all the years and shared experiences in Catalonia, both Katherine and Michael only have each other to remember those moments. Occasionally, they also spend days together immersed in cosy domesticity and intimacy, having created a sentimental bond of affection and mutual dependence over the years. As the following quotation reflects, Michael has become indispensable in Katherine's life; "she cared for him. Perhaps loved him. She needed him at the other side of the city, as a visitor, as a constant companion" (176).

In his second novel, *The Heather Blazing*, first published in 1992, Colm Tóibín appropriates the 1937 Constitution through the voice of a judge, Eamon Redmond. In one of the passages of the novel, the author contextualizes this foundational text within a realistic situation of social conflict; a pregnant sixteen year old girl has sued her school authorities for their decision to expel her, based on the assumption that her pregnancy violates the Catholic ethos. Nevertheless, as Eamon reflects, their decision ignores values that belong to the language of religion, such as "charity, mercy, forgiveness" (91).

The schoolgirl, whose self-confidence is boosted by the active support of her mother,

refuses to be ostracized, becoming a living example of how a young girl must not behave. Moreover, she questions the moral righteousness of the school authorities, who have expelled her from the only educational institution of her town. But more importantly, she is also claiming her right to be a legitimate mother by defending her case before the Law. As regards the father of the future baby, once again, moral discourses are shown to be much more lenient with males; “No one wanted to expel the boy ... although some people knew who he was” (89). These inequalities highlight the inconsistencies and ideological components of many institutions, a fact which de-stabilizes the very notion of justice.

Instead of being a source of absolute truth and closed meanings, the Irish Constitution will prove to be ambiguous and contradictory. In fact, though the constitutional text constructs its own world of order and meaning, it could never encompass the complexities of life and human relations. Considering the rights of families over institutions, the judge ponders how to direct his decision:

The family, according to the Constitution, was the basic unit in society. He read the words in the Constitution: “a moral institution possessing alienable rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law”. What was a family? The Constitution did not define a family, and at the time it was written in 1937 the term was perfectly understood: a man, his wife and their children. But the Constitution was written in the present tense ... *It was his job to define and redefine these terms now. Could not a girl and her child be a family?* And if they were, did the girl have rights arising from her becoming a mother, thus creating a family, greater than the rights of any institution? (91: emphasis added).

Eventually, Eamon decides in favour of the school authorities, denying the pregnant schoolgirl and her future baby a legal status as a family, since they do not conform to the traditional definition of this social institution. In this sense, the novel exposes the inconsistency of stable and rigid meanings when applied to certain words and concepts, and thus illustrates how such rigidity creates subaltern versions of family which are necessarily relegated to the margins of the official discourses. Moreover, *Tóibín* not only demonstrates that the concept of family is not

as “natural” or evident as it may appear, but it is also a political idea regulated by external discourses. The pregnant schoolgirl, by refusing to have an abortion abroad, risks her education and social position. Having decided to have her baby with no help from the father, the schoolgirl only receives punishment instead of support. Paradoxically, the legal and religious institutions which are believed to defend family become detrimental to the values they are supposed to protect.

When declaring his verdict, Judge Redmond consciously avoids making eye contact with the schoolgirl, which may be symptomatic of both his lack of conviction and his reluctance to read judgment upon him. Later, the protagonist will spend a short holiday in Blackwater with his wife and daughter, Niamh, an unmarried mother herself who resents her father’s resolution of the case. Sympathizing with the schoolgirl, Eamon’s daughter asserts the validity of her own judgment basing it on her life experiences; “I know what it’s like to be a woman in this country, and I know what it’s like to have a child here” (99). However, the judge recoils from arguing and simply responds that his daughter is no legal expert. This point of friction remains relegated to silence and distance between father and daughter, as they are unable to reach a mutual understanding. In this respect, as expressed by Liam Harte, “*Tóibín* dramatises the personal and societal consequences of cleaving too rigidly to institutional imperatives rather than responding reflexively to the evolving rights and demands of a diverse citizenry” (2008: 54).

Another factor to be considered when studying contemporary Irish culture and literature is the effect of the legal achievements of the 1990s. The decriminalization of homosexuality was a turning point for the work of many intellectuals and artists in Ireland. That would be case of *Tóibín*, who not only “came out” as a gay author, but would also start to include homosexual characters and concerns in his fiction. As Eibhear Walshe has remarked, “decriminalisation of homosexuality ... facilitated the creation of a cultural space for Irish lesbian and gay writers to identify openly as sexually other and to create fictions which were informed by that validation” (2008: 116).

The Blackwater Lightship, first published in 1999, is set in 1993, the year when homosexuality

was decriminalized in Ireland. One of the protagonists, Declan, has suffered AIDS for years, a fact which he has concealed from his sister, mother and grandmother. Early in the novel, when she is informed about Declan's fatal disease, Helen, his sister, comes to the sudden realization that "Declan ... had replaced his family with his friends" (34). One of those friends that Helen refers to is Paul, who, on many occasions, has accompanied Declan to hospital and knows how to take care of him. But, more importantly, Paul has offered Declan the love and emotional support that he needed.

A gay migrant in Belgium, Paul practices an alternative form of Catholic faith which treats homosexuals as equals and not as deviant people in desperate need of moral correction. Having found an accepting priest in Brussels, Paul marries François, the man he has loved since adolescence. Paul proposed marriage to him when François was suffering from depression because of the tragic loss of his parents and his fear of being abandoned, which demonstrates Paul's sincere and strong attachment to his soul-mate. Though their marriage is not officially recognized by the Church, Paul feels that they have received "a very special grace" (173). Contrary to pernicious stereotypes of homosexuals as sexual degenerates, Paul and François embody the ideals of love preached by the Catholic Church, based on monogamy and everlasting commitment.

At home in Brussels, Paul and François often received the visits of Declan, who "was like a small boy, and he'd talk and doze and play with our feet. François always joked about adopting him" (174). In his review, critic Terry Eagleton has referred to *The Blackwater Lightship* as a novel about mothering where "the most proficient at the task turn out to be a couple of homosexual men" (1999). In addition, I would also argue that, more significantly, Tóibín defends here the legitimacy of homosexual parenthood- to this day illegal in most countries and frequently judged as a modern perversity which violates the very foundations of family and society. In this respect, Tóibín's novel refuses to conform to traditional convention and arbitrary judgments and offers instead the opposite; a homosexual couple which does fulfil the moral and spiritual values often attached specifically to heterosexual marriage and parenthood.

Mothers and Sons (2006), Tóibín's first collection of short stories, has also at its centre the examination of family relations. In this collection, fathers are usually turned into flat or absent characters. Therefore, Tóibín's primary focus on the mother figure, John McCourt indicates, might be interpreted as a reaction against a long tradition in which "mothers are either absent or of secondary importance" (2008: 151). In an interview with Fintan O'Toole, the writer speaks of his own mother and her frustrated literary career:

My mother had published poems before she was married, in the Irish Press. She had cut those poems out, and she kept her books totally apart from my father's ... She knew a lot of poetry. But the fact that she had stopped writing, I think, was on her mind, always. That she could have, if circumstances had been different, that she could have been a different sort of person (2008: 185).

The implications of such biographic data reverberate through Tóibín's fiction, with the exploration of characters whose inner self is often constrained by the demands of society, history or family. In *Mothers and Sons*, as argued by McCourt, most of his fictional mothers and sons are entangled in "a question of finding, claiming and maintaining an independent personal space in which to live and develop" (154).

One of the mothers who is most profoundly victimized by her domestic life is found in "A Long Winter", set in the Pyrenees in the heart of a dysfunctional family. During his military service, Miquel can only dream about home. However, once he is back, he discovers that his mother is in fact an isolated and depressed woman who can only find solace in alcoholism. Such incursion into the hidden side of the mother terrifies Miquel- he is paralyzed with shock and feels unable to help her. His mother's escape into a blizzard and subsequent disappearance will only fill him with remorse- "The feelings were sharpened by guilt, a gnawing presence in his chest ... He regretted now that he has never ... come in like this to her kitchen ... or keep her company while she worked" (284).

Home turns into "empty shadow bareness" (282) while their farm animals, which only the mother could properly tend, start to die. Just as Miquel is considering his own escape, his father arrives with Manolo, an orphan who has

been deprived of any sense of home or family shelter. His former employer rapidly agreed to release him, as there was little work to do at his farm. Here, Tóibín incorporates a character that has been relegated from the traditional picture of a family, but who will revitalize a decaying home. As a contrast to the coarse father figure, Manolo will offer Miquel the emotional support that he longed for. Those uplifting feelings will be also mixed with a seemingly sexual liberation on the part of Miquel, who has been craving for love and affection. When Miquel cries for the loss of his own mother, Manolo will be the one to comfort him. They eventually hold each other tight, materializing their need for human contact, “Miquel looked around him and knew that he could embrace Manolo for as long as he pleased on this empty road and could hold him as closely as he wished” (303).

The Empty Family (2010) is Colm Tóibín’s latest literary work and second short-story collection. Here the analysis will focus on two stories- “Two Women” and “The Street”- which are centred round the notion of the alternative family. In “Two Women”, the main character is an old woman whose personality resists the old but persistent stereotypes of femininity that have been tenaciously inculcated in past generations. At a young age, she abandoned Ireland for a new life in the US. Instead of a stereotypical grandmother, Frances is a proficient set designer who has flown to Dublin to work in a film. Though she never married or had children, sentiments of home, domesticity and love have not been absent from her life.

After her visit to the National Gallery, one of the porters’ demeanour brings to her mind the late Luke Freaney – who represents “the single time in her life she had been in love” (45). A competent actor himself, Luke felt the frustration of being typecast as a fool or servant because he was recognizably Irish. For most of the time, over their long phone calls, Frances would love his jokes, his voice and his earnestness when he spoke of his work. It may also be presumed that their common interests and artistic concerns enriched their relation, as they both worked in the film industry. Had Frances become a traditional wife, with no further life than the household, the dynamics of their relation and the nature of the bond between them would have been totally different.

Their brief moments together were so charged with emotion that “his way of greeting her, or of seeing her off to a taxi, almost tearful in the amount of tenderness he could offer, stood in for the domestic life they never had together” (46).

In Dublin, Frances starts to long for the company of Rosario and Ito, her closest neighbours and the ones who look after her house when she is away. Her affection for them becomes evident when Frances makes a will in which the Guatemalan couple- and not her distant niece in Ireland- will inherit all her money and property. This emotional decision is based on Frances’ belief that “by that time there was no one more important in her life and she knew that there would not be again” (43). After all, it is Ito who drives to the airport to pick her up on her return home, and it is Rosario who watches over Frances when she is sick in bed. Rosario and Ito have become the protagonist’s next of kin and create in her feelings of homeliness and protection which amount to a peaceful and pleasant sense of family life.

In “The Street”, the central character, Malik, has traveled a long way from Pakistan to the unknown country of Spain. He is far away from home and detached from his beloved ones. The Pakistani community where he lives is a closed and exclusively male environment that differs drastically from his previous life and heightens his sense of dislocation. Fortunately, a character who will help Malik in this new situation is Super, one of the oldest members of the community. Super will not only be the first to call the protagonist by his name and show interest in his life, but he will also give him valuable advice on immigrant life in Barcelona. Moreover, he will defend Malik from Baldy, Malik’s abusive and exploitative boss. In this respect, Super turns out to be Malik’s paternalistic figure in the alien city, where he is as defenseless as a child would be.

Progressively, Malik starts to fix his attention on Abdul, who works as a barber in the community. In their reduced social life, both of them appear to be two isolated figures, as Malik reflects that “it was not unusual for lodgers in the house ... to have a friend, someone they had known at home perhaps ... Abdul, he realized, had no such friend; nor did he” (173). One night, upon hearing Abdul’s

incessant coughing, Malik will be the only roommate to take care of him. When he realizes that Abdul has a high temperature, Malik sponges his skin with cold water and his act provokes an incipient sexual tension between the two. This moment makes Malik develop feelings of closeness with Abdul – “he felt a bond with him, felt that something had happened between them” (168).

Their growing intimacy culminates in a sexual relationship which, unfortunately, Baldy will accidentally witness. Enraged, the boss beats Malik up until he almost loses consciousness. Such a homophobic attack will certainly have a detrimental effect on the relation between Abdul and Malik. Despite their initial fear and insecurity, they eventually overcome loneliness and alienation thanks to their mutual affection and desire for the other. Within their homophobic environment, their sentimental attachment may only find recognition in the lovers themselves. Although their relation will be relegated to utmost secrecy, it has become for them “more real” than their official families. Eventually, Abdul, who found it difficult to accept his longing for Malik, transfers his sense of home and family to his relation with him:

But your real family is your wife and your children?

Abdul looked away and was silent for a while. Then he whispered something that Malik could not catch.

What did you say?

I said that my real family is you (212)

Concluding Remarks

Throughout his literary career, Colm Tóibín has frequently revisited several of his favourite topics; history, migration and exile, home and family, gay identities and the transgression of gender imperatives. As has been observed, the writer has also inscribed impressive portraits of the lives of Irish women and homosexual men in a diversity of contexts. Many of his stories are centered round “anomalous” identities that have been traditionally marginalized, punished or strongly stereotyped in order to promote sympathy with characters that embody what was once considered “improper” or deviant. In

Works Cited

Böss, Michael. 2005. “‘Belonging without Belonging’: Colm Tóibín’s Dialogue with the Past”. *Estudios Irlandeses* 0. 22-9.

this sense, the politics that the author seems to advocate is that, for Ireland to be pluralist and tolerant, its society should develop an understanding of the conditions of the silenced other.

In this paper, Colm Tóibín’s fiction has been contextualized within the post-nationalist literary panorama in Ireland, in which the certainties of the past are under examination. Through his revisionist agenda, the writer has certainly undermined the authority and righteousness of previously “sacred” texts of Irish nationhood, such as the Constitution and the dogmas of the Catholic Church. These closed “texts” favoured the creation of fixed roles and identities which amount to an ideology through which people comprehend reality- as is the case with many other hegemonic discourses, whose subjectivities become “natural” and “obvious” facts of life. In this respect, I would claim that the concept of family in Ireland, considered for generations as a social institution regulated by Law and moral discourses, is undermined by the writer’s discourse of alterity and emphasis on ambivalence. Thus, Tóibín resists genealogical discourses on family, favouring an alternative definition that is determined by context rather than essence.

In summary, this essay has attempted to demonstrate how Tóibín deconstructs canonical definitions of family through a type of fiction that portrays how sincere feelings of domesticity and mutual affection may also thrive under different types of human relations. The author’s repeated characterization of the “traditional” family as distant or dysfunctional may put an emphasis on his effort to demonstrate that the values that this social institution is said to protect can be present in myriad forms that differ from the privileged one. Kinship based on blood- apart from being an elemental bond with other human beings- provides only one of the bases from which the very concept of family is understood. In his fiction, Tóibín seems to claim that the notion of home and family can have a fluid nature that will evolve in correlation with one’s personal circumstances, as well as with the incidence of external conditions.

- Cronin, Michael. 2009. "Inside Out: Time and Place in Global Ireland". *Cultural Perspectives on Globalisation and Ireland*. Ed. Eamon Maher. Tallaght: Institute of Technology. 11-30.
- Dawe, Gerald. 2008. "The Story of the Republic: Tóibín's Generation". *Reading Colm Tóibín*. Ed. Delaney, Paul. Dublin: The Liffey Press. 41-52.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1999. "Mothering". *London Review of Books*. 14 October. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n20/terry-eagleton/mothering> [retrieved: 4/5/2011]
- Harte, Liam. 2008. "Uncertain Terms, Unstable Sands: *The Heather Blazing*". Delaney. 53-69.
- Irish Free State Constitution*. 1937. Article 41, Paragraph 2.
<http://legislationline.org/documents/action/popup/id/5284>
- Kearney, Richard. 1997. *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture and Society*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Markey, Alfred. 2005. "Revisionisms and the Story of Ireland: From Sean O'Faolain to Roy Foster". *Estudios Irlandeses* 0. 91-101.
- Martin, Frank. 2005. "The Changing Face of Family Law in Ireland". *Judicial Studies Institute Journal* 5:1. 16-41.
- McCourt, John. 2008. "A Battle for Space: *Mothers and Sons*". Delaney. 149-68.
- Nealon, Jeffrey. 1998. *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke UP.
- O'Toole, Fintan. 2008. "Appendix: An Interview with Colm Tóibín". Delaney. 183-208.
- Patten, Eve. 2006. "Contemporary Irish Fiction". *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*. Ed Foster, J.W. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 259-75.
- Tóibín, Colm. 2000 (1999). *The Blackwater Lightship*. London. Picador.
- _____. 2010. *The Empty Family*. London: Viking.
- _____. 1993 (1992). *The Heather Blazing*. London: Picador.
- _____. 2006. "A Long Winter". *Mothers and Sons*. London: Picador. 228-310.
- _____. 2001. *Love in a Dark Time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almodóvar*. London: Picador.
- _____. 1993. "New Ways of Killing Your Father." *London Review of Books*. 18 November.
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v15/n22/colm-toibin/new-ways-of-killing-your-father> [retrieved: 04/05/2011]
- _____. 2010. (1990). *The South*. London: Picador.
- Walshe, Eibhear. 2008. "'This Particular Genie': The Elusive Gay Male Body in Tóibín's Novels". Delaney. 115-30.
- Wills, Clair. 2002. "Contemporary Writing 1960-2001". *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing. Vol IV: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*. Ed. A. Bourke, S. Kilfeather, M. Luddy, M. MacCurtain, G. Meaney, M. N. Dhomhachadh, M. O'Dowd and C. Wills. Cork: Cork UP in Association with Field Day. 1123-29

Received 17 November 2011 Last version 14 January 2012

José Carregal-Romero has a degree in English Philology from the University of Vigo, where he has completed a MA program in English Studies. He hopes to devote his PhD project to the study of Colm Tóibín's novels.