

**Universidad Nacional de La Pampa**  
**Facultad de Ciencias Humanas**  
**Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras**

**LICENCIATURA EN LENGUA Y LITERATURA INGLESA**

**“BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE PRESENT:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF IRISH IDENTITY  
IN CONTEMPORARY NOVELS BY  
COLM TÓIBÍN”.**

**TESIS DE LICENCIATURA**

Autora: María Isabel Arriaga

Directora: Magister María Graciela Adámoli

Co-directora: Magister Miriam Patricia Germani

Santa Rosa, La Pampa  
2017

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## Abstract

During the last three decades Ireland has been undergoing a number of socio-cultural transformations that have given place to structural modifications in its national identity. By 1987 the historically revolutionary and impoverished Republic of Ireland emerged as one of the economic miracles of Europe, due to “The Celtic Tiger” boom. By joining the EC and through the introduction of progressive politics, the former provincial nation started its process towards modernization, which has allowed its inhabitants to enjoy a higher standard of living. However, becoming a global nation has undermined the traditional values on which the Republic had been built, offering new social models and alternative forms of families. Historical revisionism has also provided a fresh reading of the Irish bloody past, all of which has taken Irish people to face unprecedented questions about their past and future identity.

As a result, ambivalences and institutional inconsistencies -typical of a period of social transition in the history of this nation- have emerged, forcing Irish people into a process of “re-imagining Ireland” in order to become a more tolerant and pluralistic society for its own people, for foreigners but also for those who once decided to leave their homeland and constituted the Irish diaspora. The purpose of this research work is to analyse representations of contemporary Ireland and the process of reconstruction of individual and national identities, as they are reflected in two contemporary novels by Irish writer Colm Tóibín, one of the most acclaimed post-nationalist literary figures today, in Ireland and abroad.

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 The research problem

I have been interested in the area of Irish Studies since I attended a seminar on the “Narratives of the Irish Diaspora” in 2006 -as part of the undergraduate seminars I was required for my Bachelor’s Degree course. Since then I have been working on this field as a member of three projects in the Department of Foreign Languages of the National University of La Pampa: “*Irlandeses en Argentina: recuperación de fuentes, traducción y crítica*” (2007-2010), “*Las Américas e Irlanda. Estudios culturales y traducción*” (2011-2014) and “*Literatura irlandesa: estudios socio-críticos y traducción como diálogo intercultural*”, since 2015.

In my previous explorations within Irish Studies I researched on the narrative of the Irish diaspora in Argentina, covering a period between the late 1800s and the early 1900s. For this second stage of my investigation I have focused on contemporary Irish literature in English, in order to analyse the impact of transcendental cultural changes in more recent Irish fiction.

A new socio-political scenery has emerged in the Irish territory in the last three decades, characterized by the economic success of Ireland, its incorporation to the globalized world, a low unemployment rate and a greater freedom gained by some groups considered, until recently, as a minority. These phenomena have also allowed Ireland to start overcoming the diasporic period that affected it from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, which left the country with one of the highest emigration rates in history.

Within this recent socio-political and economic background, new patterns of individual and collective identity have emerged together with new cultural forms, which clash with traditional beliefs and values. As a result, identity crises and contradictions - common in the confluence of the past and the present- challenge Irish individuals in this changing social context. Thus, in spite of being fictional constructions, novels become the most useful literary genre to portray several aspects of the social reality in which they are produced or contextualized.

## 1.2 Purpose and objectives

The purpose of this research work is to analyse the representations of contemporary Ireland and the process of reconstruction of individual and national identity after the numerous transformations that have taken place in the Irish society since the late 1980s, as they are represented in two contemporary novels by Irish writer Colm Tóibín: *The Heather Blazing* (1992) and *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999).

The most general objective of this work attempts to determine what intersections can be established between the concepts of identity, time and space/place in the corpus under analysis, and to what extent these issues can be associated to the process of re-inventing itself that Ireland has been undergoing during the last thirty years.

## 1.3 Hypothesis and research questions

Tóibín's fictions interrogate the problematic relationship between republican ideology, constitutional discourse and social reality in modern Ireland. For this research work I chose two of Tóibín's novels since he is considered as one of the most prominent figures within the literary movement of contemporary Ireland as well as one of the main Irish revisionists of these times.

Therefore, my hypothesis is that like many other contemporary Irish novels, Tóibín's novels faithfully depict key socio-political transformations that took place in Ireland by the late 1980s and early 1990s, which have had a tremendous impact on the identity of that country. In addition, and as a result of their personal lifestories, Tóibín's protagonists have identities in crisis, which are crossed by the identity crisis of the Irish nation.

Through my research, I intend to answer the following questions:

- ❖ How do Tóibín's characters manage tensions and contradictions while they attempt to rebuild their individual and collective identity in the context of the latest socio-cultural and political changes?
- ❖ What narrative strategies are used by the author in order to represent the identity of the Irish characters as "fragmented"? In particular, what role do place and time play in these works by Tóibín?

## 1.4 Previous research

To my knowledge, apart from several reviews available, there are only a few previous research works done on Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship*, most of which only cover some of the topics I am going to deal with here. These works will be discussed as I develop this thesis:

- ❖ Carregal-Romero, José. "Colm Tóibín and Post-Nationalist Ireland: Redefining Family Through Alterity". University of Vigo, Spain. *Estudios Irlandeses*, Number 7: 1-9, 2012.
- ❖ Harte, Liam. "The Endless Mutation of the Shore: Colm Tóibín's Marine Imaginary". Routledge. Copyright © Taylor & Francis Group, LLC. *Critique*, 51:333–349, 2010.
- ❖ Harte, Liam. "History, Text and Society in Colm Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing*. *New Hibernia Review*", Vol. 6, N° 4. Geimhreadh, 2002: 55-67. University of St. Thomas.
- ❖ Ryan, Matthew. "Abstract homes: deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation in the work of Colm Tóibín". *Irish Studies Review*, Vol. 16, N° 1: 19-32. London and New York: Routledge, February 2008, ISSN 0967-0882 print/ISSN 1469-9303 online.

## 1.5 Description of the corpus and plot overview

My discussion is based on the analysis of two of Tóibín's first novels: *The Heather Blazing* (1992) and *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), both of which -framed in the peculiar context of a changing Ireland in the 1990s- allow the exploration of emotional processes and narrative strategies through which fractured identities are (re)constructed. The first novel deals with broad aspects of the Irish society, focusing on institutional transformations. The second one focuses on the social and cultural changes that took place as a consequence of Ireland entering the global world. Within this context, Tóibín's novels are stories about ordinary people in moments of vulnerability and change -like Ireland itself- which allow him to explore human relationships and the dynamics of contemporary families.

### a) *The Heather Blazing*

*The Heather Blazing* tells the life story of Eamon Redmond, a middle-aged judge at the Four Courts in Dublin, who has held that post for the last twenty-five years after a successful career through his affiliation to the *Fianna Fáil* party<sup>1</sup>. He lives in Dublin with his wife Carmel. Eamon is a very serious and complex man, extremely reserved and quiet, too cold to show affection even towards his dearest ones. He prefers activities he can do alone. Obsessed all his life by the letter of the law, he is beginning to discover how painfully disconnected he is from other human beings. Eamon and Carmel have two grown-up children: Niamh and Donal. Niamh is a single mother and lives with his baby son, Michael. She works in Statistics, dealing with opinion surveys about the social change. She has separated herself from her family while growing up until she gets pregnant and becomes closer to her mother. Donal works in Legal Aid for free, but he is a successful man in his own way. He seems to have inherited from his father the same distant attitude with respect to his interpersonal relationships. Neither of Eamon's offsprings get on very well with their father and are very critical of Eamon's verdicts during that period of socio-cultural transformations.

Throughout the novel, Eamon reflects upon the many social transformations that have taken place in Ireland since the beginning of his career, and realises the many tensions and contradictions they generate for individuals.

## **b) *The Blackwater Lightship***

*The Blackwater Lightship* is developed in eight chapters, in which past and present alternate. It is set in the early 1990s, like *The Heather Blazing*. Similarly, most of this story takes place on the coast of County Wexford. The story is structured around two deaths in the Breen family: the first one is Helen and Declan's father's, occurred twenty years before, which

is the starting point of the conflicting story between Helen and her mother, Lily. The second one is Declan's imminent death, which reunites the family in an attempt to reconcile his sister, his mother and also his grandmother, Dora Devereux.

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<sup>1</sup> Fianna Fáil -The Republican Party- emerged from a split among those in the Sinn Féin Party who had rejected the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. The new party decided that its members, if elected, should take seats in the Free State Parliament. Among the party's stated aims were re-unification of the national territory, restoration of the Irish language, and redistribution of wealth. *Fianna Fáil* first came to power in 1932, and governed the country from 1932-48; 1951-54; 1957-73; 1977-81; 1982; 1987-89. In 1989 it entered a coalition government with the Progressive Democrat Party. Source: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/205756/Fianna-Fail>



Declan is gay and is dying of AIDS, but he has not told his family yet. Paul, one of his best friends, visits Helen to tell her all about it. The news of Declan's illness and the necessity to meet her mother to inform her about Declan's illness arise in Helen's remembrances of sad events from their childhood, which gave place to bitter resentments among the three women of the family for years. Declan's illness makes Helen and her mother stay at Dora's place after a decade of estrangement, as he expects to spend his last weeks at Dora's old house in the company of the three women of the family and his two best friends (Paul and Larry). There, the six of them, from different generations and with different beliefs, must listen to and come to terms with one another. This situation gives the three women the opportunity to repair the fractured and distant mother-daughter relationship they have had for years.

### **1.5 Methodology and thesis organization**

In order to analyse the different variables I have chosen for my work, I have appealed to two theoretical approaches: Bakhtin's theory of language and Cultural Studies. The former is basically approached through Bakhtin's theory of the *chronotopes* and some of his considerations about the dialogic nature of the novel. The main contribution of Cultural Studies in this dissertation mainly considers Stuart Hall's theory of identity and David Harvey's theory of space and time. In addition, Yi Fu Tuan's theory of space and place provides a suitable theoretical context for my research, due to the essential role that the "sense of the place" plays in the development of identity.

The analysis is divided into three chapters: the first one offers an overview of the political development of Ireland along the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the socio-historical context in which both novels are set, the author and his context of production and reception, and the development of the main background theory I have used to carry out and support my research work. The second one provides an analysis of the concepts of the sense of place in Tóibin's works and the main chronotopes present in these two novels, focusing on their decisive role in the construction of the protagonists' identity. Reflections on the linguistic devices used by the author to convey contextual meanings also contribute to the analysis of the texts. Finally, the third chapter deals with the treatment of place and time in *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship*. This research closes with the main conclusions I have reached on the topics analysed.

# CHAPTER I

## Context and background theory

### 1.1 Ireland: past and present. The socio-historical context

“In Ireland everything mixes with everything and the writer can not separate from the political and social reality that surrounds him. To a great extent because this reality conditions him and he appropriates it. It makes him its voice and prophet”<sup>2</sup> (O’Connell 3).

In order to comprehend the socio-political changes taking place in contemporary Ireland, it is necessary to know some historical data about this insular country and its process of independence. Along its history, Ireland suffered a series of invasions -the Celts, the Vikings and the Normans-, until the English colonized it in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the British kept their domain on the Irish territory, after overcoming rebellions, confiscating the people’s lands and transplanting protestant English speaking colonists, mainly to Ulster. By the end of that century, the island was divided into two parts: a major Catholic population dispossessed of its Gaelic language, its religion and many of its rights, on the one hand; and a minority of Protestant English speaking landowners, on the other.

By mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ireland had to overcome the worst disaster of its history, the “Great Famine” (1845-1849), with its devastating consequences: over a million people died during those years due to starvation. A huge emigration took place, starting a process of depopulation of the country which would last for nearly a century. At the same time, a number of unsuccessful rebellions against the tyrannical British Crown spread through the island, and although they all ended quickly and violently, they effectively installed the seeds of rebellion among many Irish. Most of Ireland remained “nationalist” (in favour of separating from the British Crown) while the north-east province of Ulster became mainly “unionist” (in favour of maintaining the union with Great Britain).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a well-known uprising took place on Easter Sunday 1916. Once again it failed, with fourteen of its leaders being captured and executed. That violent use of force

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<sup>2</sup> All the translations into the English language in this work belong to me.

against the Irish rebels led to the union of Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters<sup>3</sup>, who were determined to achieve their freedom from the Crown. In 1919 the parliament of a self-proclaimed Irish Republic established the declaration of independence with the outbreak of the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921). After a brief period of bloody killings, the British and the New Irish government agreed to a truce and the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in 1922. As a consequence, the Irish Republic was abolished and the “Irish Free State” came into existence. However, during the 1930s the candidate belonging to the party of the opponents of the Treaty (the *Fianna Fáil*) was elected as president. In 1937 produced a new constitution that gave the new state the name of *Éire* or Ireland, and in 1948 it seceded from the dominion of Great Britain, declaring itself a Republic in 1949.

Along the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the process of modernization of Ireland took different paths in both parts of the island. Whereas in Northern Ireland the unionist community kept the political control and applied a discriminatory legislation, the rest of Ireland faced a civil war. It took the Republic several decades to abandon its poverty, its provincialism and Catholic conservatism, all of which condemned many Irish people to exile and put the Catholic Church at the head of many political issues of the state for a long time. In the nationalist model that prevailed in the Republic from the 1930s to the 1980s, Catholicism and nationalism worked as the dominant variables of a democracy of changing social basis, in which political parties could not be easily classified as right or left-wing.

During the first decades that followed its declaration of independence, the new state remained financially solvent, in spite of its high rates of emigration and unemployment. In 1973 Ireland entered the European Economic Community (EEC). As a result, Irish economy slightly improved. By those years, the powerful influence of the Catholic Church over the Irish State manifested itself through its conservative policies, banning, for example, divorce, contraception, abortion, pornography and even applying censure on books and films. The Church also had the control of the state hospitals and schools and provided many other social services.

In the late 1980s, the country experienced a huge economic success, through the phenomenon known as the “Celtic Tiger”, which opened Ireland to the rest of the world and restructured its position within the international sphere. In 2007 Ireland became the fifth

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<sup>3</sup> Members of a religious body separated from the Established Church or any other kind of Protestant who refuses to recognise the supremacy of the Established Church

richest country in the world and the second one in the European Union (EU). The economic growth and the new political scenery of the 1990s helped promote the image of Ireland as a prosperous, progressive and modern nation, where the decreasing rate of unemployment as well as the improvement of the standards of life quality allowed it to reverse the emigration process that had affected the country years before. Between 1993 and 1999 the labour force rose and Ireland began to be seen as the land of opportunity by many workers from EU member states.

Ireland has kept a remarkably stable political history since its independence: “Ireland is one of the very few states emerging after the First World War which retained constitutional government unimpaired by the instabilities which prevailed between the two world wars” (Girvin 3). The reasons for such a phenomenon lie in the existence of a “political culture”, which is transmitted through family, education and society. Other conditions are also necessary in order to achieve stability and continuity, since basic values for this community are to be found mainly in religion, nationalism and language. These three values are important in two senses: firstly, because they express the unity of this society; secondly, because they distinguish Ireland from other European states. This level of political culture works by means of consensus, without which it would not be possible, and also serves as a bond of identity:

A political culture contains certain values which are shared by all in a particular society. . . . its main function is that of system maintenance and consequently places a high value on continuity. The values which are associated with a political culture will create a strong sense of identity among its members . . . Political socialisation is the method by which these values are transmitted to each generation. While the core values of a political culture do not change easily, the process of political socialisation is affected by changes in the society and this may have an impact not only on how the values are transmitted, but on how they are received or internalised (Girvin 1).

Until 1970 the homogeneity of the Irish society was reflected in its political stability, the influence of the Catholic Church and an agricultural economy, formerly reinforced by the nationalism expressed in the 1937 Constitution and the model of an ideal Irish society influenced by Eamon De Valera<sup>4</sup>. This model attempted to maintain an idealised -though

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<sup>4</sup> Eamon De Valera was one of the leaders in the failed [1916 Easter Uprising](#). He founded the opposition political party Fianna Fáil. In 1932, Fianna Fáil was elected to power in a coalition with Labour politicians. During the 16 years De Valera was to remain Ireland's Prime Minister he tried to totally cut Ireland from any form of British linkage. De Valera kept *Eire* neutral during [World War Two](#). Fianna Fáil won the 1951 election and De Valera returned to the Prime Minister's office until 1954. He was Prime Minister again between 1957-1959. In 1959, he stood for and won *Eire's* presidential election -an election he won again in 1966. De Valera was the first Irish leader to address America's Congress (1964) and he gained considerable prestige abroad. Under De Valera's rule, the cultural identity of the Irish Republic as Roman Catholic and Gaelic was asserted.

Source: [http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/eamonn\\_de\\_valera.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/eamonn_de_valera.htm)

never achieved- country whose aims coincided with the main features of the 1922 Irish political culture that had prevailed since then. Within this socio-political framework, the possibility of change seemed rather unlikely. However, since the incorporation of Ireland into the EU in 1973 and its consequent economic diversification, industrialization grew quickly in this country and together with other factors, some incipient changes began to take place. One of those factors was the end of the traditional agrarian culture fostered by De Valera; another was the convocation of the Vatican Council, which had a great impact on Irish Catholicism, as it opened up the possibility of a “more liberal expression of religion and pluralism” (Girvin 2).

In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Irish community was morally challenged by the influence of television mainly, which expressed more permissive attitudes, reinforced by the emergence of liberal, feminist and gay activism. At the same time, the Irish government fostered programmes of great economic investment in education and new policies of redistribution of wealth as well as huge investments in social services. But although those transformations challenged the traditional patriarchal and religious cultural consensus prevailing in Ireland, they did not replace them in the national political culture. In fact, in the political field there was almost no change at first. Most political parties, still powerfully influenced by religion, manifested a strong resistance to reforming certain laws. Nevertheless, the seed of change had been planted within Ireland and transformation was inevitable.

Former consensus became contested and attitudes started to change between the 1970s and early 1980s. In particular, conflicts concerning moral and theocratic issues could be partly attributed to the acceleration with which transformations took place in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. New social patterns were rapidly introduced by the late 1980s, such as the widespread use of contraceptives or the increase in marital breakdowns, all of which brought consequences for the political culture, even though not many of these changes were institutionalised by law or by the constitution until recently.

The political division over how the society should respond to these changes in institutional terms could not be denied by the 1990s. During the previous decade, support for removing the constitutional ban on divorce, for instance, had not been strong enough to bring about change. By the early 1990s nearly two thirds of the population supported the deletion of the relevant article from the Constitution, which eventually was signed into law in 1997. Issues like abortion were also open to debate by those years, but it took Ireland

another decade to achieve its fullest expression in social terms and for new values to be translated into concrete political change.

The political arena of Ireland at the end of the 20th century was divided by traditional and conservative forces represented by the political ancestral party *Fianna Fáil* and more liberal tendencies, represented by the Democratic Progressive Party, the *Fine Gael*, the Labour Party, the Democratic Left and the Greens. The main dissent between both tendencies was reflected in the attempts to reform the Constitution during the 1980s, since the 1937 Constitution was considered as an institutionalisation of the values that were central to the political culture on which the national identity was built. Therefore, while the more progressive parties shared the view that amending some of its main features was necessary in order to accompany the recent political and social change, *Fianna Fáil* remained anxious to preserve it as it was.

The collapse of rural values and a certain weakening of traditionally conservative sectors of the Irish society helped rapid transformations to be under way since the late 1980s, especially in Dublin and many other urban areas, where the well-educated were becoming increasingly sceptical of traditional parties.

In this socio-historical overview of the Irish situation that surrounds Tóibín's novels something is clear: many social and moral issues have been under debate during the last decades in Ireland, and others will still be for a long time. But the important thing is that the hegemonic traditional values have weakened, allowing the emergence of an increasing pluralism and liberty within different ideologies that had kept many Irish people separated for centuries. Even the relations with Northern Ireland have been improved, as the ideal of a "unified Ireland" driven by the *Fianna Fáil* has faded away.

## **1.2 The development of the Irish novel: the Irish society and the Irish writer**

In spite of being a country of reduced geographical dimensions and a small population, Ireland has always stood out by its cultural dimension. Irish literature became well-known between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the Irish Literary Revival. It was a multifaceted movement that aimed at reviving ancient Irish folklore,

legends and traditions in new literary works. At a very basic level the writers involved in the [Irish Revival](#) simply reversed many of the stereotypical characteristics that until then had been applied to Irish people. The movement was in part the cultural branch of a political movement that was concerned with self-government for Ireland and with discovering a literary past that would be relevant to the struggle for independence. It signalled a turning away from considering London as the centre of influence and was intended to make Ireland a place of innovation and action.

The revival produced some of the best plays of the 20th century and some of the greatest literature ever written in English. Since then, four Irish writers have received Nobel prizes for literature: W. B. Yeats (1865-1906), George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) and Seamus Heaney (1939-2013). Besides, James Joyce (1882-1941) is considered one of the greatest writers in the English language.

“In order to start talking about Irish literature we have to begin on the basis that it is not alike any other, anywhere in the world”, claims writer Viviana O’Connell (2009:1). So strong is the Irish writers’s desire to build an identity of their own that, even from exile, they always write about the Island. To Inés Praga Terente (2005) “the Irish novel has a way of its own and is ruled by some intrinsic laws which derive from and are intertwined in a historical and social context of extraordinary singularity” (Introduction:XI). In fact, contemporary Irish fiction in English emerged as a creative literary genre, unique in its style, which has advanced towards plurality and diversity after having overcome some obstacles that delayed its appearance. The Irish novel had to go a long way before acquiring the status it has today, not only “as a novel” but also “as Irish”, since even within the Irish context it has faced a series of prejudices and lack of definition.

The contemporary Irish novel requires to be read contextually, as it deals with historical, political and socio-cultural issues embedded in Irish national identity: “the Irish novel can only be approached and appreciated within an ideological and cultural debate of a wide spectrum” (Praga Terente 5). The social instability, the bilingual nature of its culture or the predominance of an oral tradition became a rich potential to be exploited by the Irish novelists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Particularly, “the Irish novel has been a genre in which to explore the nature of nationhood and national identity, and a compulsory vehicle for the ideological debate” (Praga Terente 6). By the end of the 20th century “writers were enjoined to engage with a new, confident, inclusive Ireland of advance factories, material affluence, liberal education and a self-reforming church” (581-582).

In addition, the new wave of Irish emigration of the 20<sup>th</sup> century became a challenge to the older generation, who had to consider to what extent the national renaissance had been successful. Once more, society in Ireland came to be divided into two groups: traditionalists and revisionists, and a new type of literature came into being during the late 1980s. Also, this phenomenon coincided with the very moment in which Ireland was able to overcome the diasporic period that had affected it in the last two centuries, though it was not until the 1990s that Ireland became a host to huge masses of immigrants, attracted by the economic growth and the increase of sources of employment on the emerald island. Within this context, the contemporary novel occupies “a specially complex cultural and intellectual space where there is a strong sense of both continuity and disruption” (Linden Peach, qtd in Praga Terente 3,6).

The Irish novel followed a number of variations in style, content and form along the second half of the previous century. Different positions emerged during those times among Irish writers: those who accepted the Irish past as a basis on which to build the Irish present; and those who went into a ferocious reaction against the older traditions and even repudiated Irish nationalism (Kiberd 611). Within this context, any attempt to typify or stereotype the Irish novel of the last decades becomes a fruitless task, since “novels are all so different that there is no archetypal Irish novel any more; that is to say, Irish writers have the confidence to actually write very different and varied books, they are very diverse and yet all of them are also a true reflection of a changing society”, according to novelist and editor Dermot Bolger (González, qtd in Praga Terente 3-4).

Since Joyce, contemporary Irish writers have learned to take risks, to improvise and to experiment with forms according to their chosen themes, adding a new ingredient to their stories: a great deal of subjectivity and locality. No matter whether Irish writers write in Ireland or abroad, it is the sense of place -not only the physical Irish space but mainly the spiritual space- and the Irish individual as protagonist of his own reality that they all portray through literature. In the case of Tóibín, both *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship* are set in Enniscorthy, his home town, reflecting that, in spite of being a travel writer and moving within international contexts and multiple cultures, it is there where home is for him.



### 1.3 The author: context of production and reception

Colm Tóibín is an Irish novelist and journalist who was born in Enniscorthy Co. Wexford, Ireland, in 1955. He was educated at University College Dublin, where he studied History and English. After graduating, Tóibín moved to Barcelona to teach English for three years. As he returned to Ireland, he started a career as a journalist, columnist and editor for several Irish papers and magazines from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, gaining an audience through his regular columns in the *Dublin Sunday Independent*, and ultimately becoming the editor of *Magill*, Ireland's leading current-affairs magazine (1982-1985). After leaving the magazine, Tóibín settled in Argentina for a while.

Tóibín has been a prolific creative writer since the 1990s and has conducted academic work as an editor of books of criticism, such as *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (1999). He is also a noted essayist and cultural commentator, and the author of a great number of articles dealing with Irish history, politics and society. His vast production includes novels, collections of short stories, a play and also non-fiction writing, many of which have been nationally and internationally awarded. He is the author of several other novels, including: *The South* (1990), *The Story of the Night* (1996), *The Master* (2004), *Brooklyn* (2009), *The Testament of Mary* (2012) and *Nora Webster* (2015). He is also the author of two collections of short stories: *Mothers and Sons* (2006) and *The Empty Family* (2010). Besides, Tóibín has written three books as a journalist and travel writer: *The Trial of the Generals* (1980), *Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border* (1987) and *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe* (1994). His non-fiction production is also prolific and includes: *Love in a Dark time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almodovar* (2002), *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush* (2002), as well as a collection of critical essays: *New Ways of Killing Your Father* (1993) and *New Ways to Kill Your Mother: Writers and their Families* (2012), among others. In 2011 he wrote a play, *Testament*, performed in the Dublin Theatre Festival. Some of his productions have been staged or made into films such as *Brooklyn*, which was released in November 2015.

Tóibín's work has been translated into thirty languages. He has received honorary doctorates from the University of Ulster and from University College Dublin. Today he is a regular contributor to the *Dublin Review*, the *New York Review of Books* and the *London Review of Books*. In 2006 he was appointed to the Arts Council in Ireland. He has twice been Stein Visiting Writer at Stanford University and a visiting writer at the Michener Center at the University of Texas, in Austin. He taught at Princeton (2009-2011), and was

Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Manchester in the autumn of 2011. He is currently Mellon Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, although he goes on living in Ireland.

#### **1.4 Critical approaches to Tóibín's work**

Tóibín is considered as one of the most prominent figures within the contemporary literary world in Ireland. His success is confirmed by the popularity achieved by many of his works worldwide and by considerable critical acclaim. Since he started his career as a creative writer, Tóibín's production has been framed in the so called "post-nationalist" Irish literature; a literature that tends to counteract the myths of nationalism. Tóibín is the only contemporary Irish author whose works have almost completely been translated into Spanish. He has been shortlisted for many of his books and has received many and varied awards along his career, such as the Irish Times/ Aer Lingus First Fiction Award for First Novel for *The South* (1991), the Encore Award (1992) for *The Heather Blazing*, (1996), the Costa Novel of the Year (2009) for *Brooklyn*, and he was shortlisted for the IMPAC Dublin Prize and the Booker Prize for his novel *The Blackwater Lightship*.

Considering Tóibín's work in a broader context, many of his novels have been subject of study in different countries and a number of articles have been written in Brazil, Argentina, Spain, the US, England and Ireland, about different issues developed by this Irish writer. However, according to authorial critics like Liam Harte, in-depth studies about Tóibín have not been published yet. In 2013 Eibhear Walshe published his book entitled *A Different Story: The Writings of Colm Tóibin*, where he traces how this writer moves away from nationalism towards aesthetic and political freedom. In an interview published in *Writing.ie* (2013) Walshe said: "Tóibín's fictions have a different story to tell within the landscape of current Irish writing and have had a crucial influence in reshaping the contemporary novel and short story and on wider cultural discourse about Irish identity". Val Nolan<sup>5</sup> argues that although Walshe has laid firm foundations for future scholars, more in-depth volumes remain to be written on

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<sup>5</sup> Val Nolan teaches 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary literature at NUI Galway. Available at [www.irishexaminer.com/books/highly-readable-text-lays-foundation-for-critical-study-of-celebrated-author-246760.html](http://www.irishexaminer.com/books/highly-readable-text-lays-foundation-for-critical-study-of-celebrated-author-246760.html). Accessed on 20 Jan 2014.

specific facets of this author's work. A similar criticism is made by Harte about other critical works written on Tóibín's novels. In his 2002 article "History, Text and Society in Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing*", Harte claims: "Despite the widespread acclaim that greeted its publication in 1992, Colm Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing* has received remarkably little detailed critical attention" (55). He makes explicit reference to Gerry Smyth's *The Novel and the Nation* (1997) and Christina Hunt Mahony's *Contemporary Irish Literature* (1998), as well as to some editions of journals devoted to contemporary Irish fiction. Harte is surprised about this fact taking into account "the high claims made for the novel by such critics as Neil Corcoran and Tom Herron, both of whom regard *The Heather Blazing* as an important work of Irish literary revisionism" (55)

In contrast, there are several critical essays written on some of the topics dealt by Tóibín in his stories, among them: Carregal-Romero's "Colm Tóibín and Post-Nationalist Ireland: Redefining Family Through Alterity" (2012), Harte's "The Endless Mutation of the Shore: Colm Tóibín's Marine Imagery" (2010), "History, text and Society in Colm Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing*. *New Hibernia Review*" (2002) and *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel 1987-2007* (2014); Eagleton's "Mothering" (1999) and Paul Delaney's collection of essays *Reading Colm Tóibín* (2008), which gathers some of the most prominent figures currently working in Irish Studies, including: Roy Foster, Anne Fogarty, Liam Harte, Eibhear Walshe and Christina Hunt Mahony. There are also several reviews on both *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship* published by online newspapers and literary websites, most of them portraying a positive view of both pieces of literature.

## **1.5 Background theory**

### **A) Space and time as inseparable elements of the novel**

"Language -like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives- is never unitary" (Bakhtin 288). As Bakhtin himself explains in "Discourse in the Novel" (1981), literary language is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation, whereas it is stratified and heteroglot as an expressive system, in the way it carries its meanings:

Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These "languages" of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying "languages" (Bakhtin 291).

All languages of what Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia" are "specific world views, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values" (291-292). Nevertheless, the dialogic aspect of discourse and all the phenomena connected with it had remained beyond the limits of linguistics, stylistics and the philosophy of language before Bakhtin. The Bakhtinian School was probably the first modern literary theoretical approach to reject the Saussurean notion of language, insisting on the fact that all instances of language had to be considered in a social context. Bakhtin's ideas about how language works continues to have validity in our days. According to him, what we perceive as meaningful is perceived "dialogically", as an act of communication, and the novel is, in fact, *the* dialogical genre.

Bakhtin develops his ideas on language and literacy through the study of the novel. From his point of view, *heteroglossia* is the main characteristic of prose fiction, since any utterance takes place at a particular historical moment in a socially-specific environment. Once incorporated into the novel, heteroglossia becomes "another's speech in another's language" (324). This is so because Bakhtin understands language as "ideologically saturated" (271) and this dialogic orientation of discourse, as a property of any living discourse (279). Dialogism characterises the entire social world. In this context, he sees literature as discourse, as a form of expression and communication among individuals, and therefore, as a social practice: literature is a discourse made of enunciations produced by an individual subject, but each word of these enunciations has a historical, cultural and social load. Hence, and because it is part of culture, literature expresses realities and views of the world, although it does not represent reality but discourses that represent this reality.

Bakhtin claims that the heteroglot nature of the novel implies the unavoidable "possibility of other's point of view" (328). In this way the novel, which Bakhtin defines as "multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" (261), displays the voices of multiple characters instead of holding a single author's point of view. There we find the author's own voice and the narrator's voice coexisting with those of various characters' forming a multi-voiced text. In a dialogical text ideas are not presented as abstractions but embodied in the lives of protagonists. For Bakhtin, each voice in the novel represents a

different point of view, which materialises the perspectives of different classes or groups in society<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, what the reader sees is how reality is perceived by each character.

In Bakhtin's theory the character in the novel is a "speaking human being" and each one owns a unique ideological discourse, his/her own language, and all of them together help form the reader's perception of the existence of several socio-linguistic differentiations. Since discourse implies interaction, dialogical pieces of writing become more objective and realistic than monological ones as everything is said in response to other statements or in anticipation of future statements. Being able to represent a multiplicity of speech-genres, a novel can be a place for heteroglossia, through which it reflects the debates of a time-period and even brings opposing perspectives together. There is a fragmentation of perspective in a novel, a dispersion of it in different competing directions and, as a result, it becomes "dialogical".

There seems to be a mutual relationship between the novel and society in which both influence and condition one another. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that "the novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding. Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process" (Bakhtin 7). All these Bakhtinian concepts around the nature of language and the novel necessarily produced a change in paradigm, which in turn led to the development of new methods of literary analysis and interpretation, which required the study of texts in relation to the socio-cultural context.

As Bakhtin puts it, it is precisely in the novel where the decentralization of the verbal-ideological world finds its expression, by assuming the existence of differentiated social groups in interaction with one another beyond the words, forms and styles (368). In other words, dialogism reveals to readers a world that cannot be reduced to unity: no single meaning can be found in this world but a multitude of contesting meanings. Bakhtin claims that meaning is always in-between different factors: the reader and the text, the society and the individual, one utterance and another.

In addition, the analysis of a literary work requires more than the unveiling of the languages that enter the composition of the novel. From Bakhtin's point of view,

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<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin claims that "even in the novel heteroglossia is by and large always personified, incarnated in individual human figures, with disagreements and oppositions individualized. But such oppositions of individual wills and minds are submerged in social heteroglossia, they are reconceptualized through it" (326)

what is present in the novel is an artistic *system* of languages or more accurately a system of *images* of languages, and the real task of stylistic analysis consists of uncovering all the available orchestrating languages in the composition of the novel, grasping the precise degree of distancing that separates each language from its most immediate semantic instantiation in the work as a whole, and the varying angles of refraction of intentions within it, understanding their dialogic interrelationships and -finally- if there *is* direct authorial discourse, determining the heteroglot background outside the work that dialogizes with it (Bakhtin 416)

In fact, criticism of a novel requires references to the concrete social context of the discourse since “the novel must be forced to reveal the social and historical voices populating language . . . which provide language with its particular concrete conceptualisations” (Bakhtin 678). The analysis of the context requires the consideration of two essential elements: time and space. Space and time have been considered as essential concepts in understanding humanity, although the importance of each element in this binomial has changed along different historical moments. Bakhtin’s essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (1981) offers a suitable theoretical frame for this analysis, since his arguments on the concept of the *chronotope* are of undeniable value for research on how time- space relationships work in Tóibín’s novels.

Bakhtin coined the term *chronotope* (following Kant’s philosophy and Einstein’s Relativity Theory) in order to refer to the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). Bakhtin does not define this term with exact precision. For him, space and time do not exist separately in literature and art, since both categories fuse, giving birth to a new concept -that of the *chronotope*- which expresses the inseparability of space and time:

The chronotope is where the knots of a narrative are tied and untied ... Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel’s abstract elements –philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analysis of cause and effect- gravitate towards the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imagining power of art to do its work (Bakhtin 250).

Bakhtin emphasizes that *chronotopes* are constitutive of literature, as they fuse in an intelligible whole: the backbone of any narrative. The way in which a chronotope represents time and space allows the writer to organise the literary structure of a narration and gives sense to it:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plots and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope (Bakhtin 84)

Bakhtin clarifies from the beginning of his essay that the *chronotope* should only be considered as a formal constitutive category of literature, since he does not deal with this

concept in other dimensions of culture. However, chronotopes can also be seen as a fundamental unity through which human beings perceive and structure their everyday reality.

In his article “The Fugue of Chronotope”, Michael Holquist claims that Bakhtin signals the distinctive role that “Forms of the Chronotope” plays in the evolution of his own thinking. He argues that “time-space coordinates serve to ground what is in effect a first philosophy: they are the fundamental constituents of understanding, and thus provide the indices for measuring other aspects of human existence, first and foremost, the identity of the self” (Holquist 27). In this way, “the chronotope is, (like Kant’s categories and intuitions), an instrument for calibrating existence” (31). Thus, although Bakhtin was not aware of the philosophical and literary extent his theory of the novel could ever reach, his concluding words illuminate the essential role of the chronotopes in our cognitive development. He affirms that in order to enter our social experience “meanings must take on the form of a sign that is audible and visible for us (a hieroglyph, a mathematical formula, a verbal or linguistic expression, a sketch, etc). Without such temporal-spatial expression, even abstract thought is impossible: every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope” (Bakhtin 258).

Since every literary image is chronotopic for the Russian critic, each major chronotope can contain an unlimited number of minor chronotopes, which can have different kinds of relationship among them, although it is common that one of those chronotopes dominates the others. What is important for Bakhtin is that relationships among chronotopes are *dialogical* as he argues that the dialogue enters the world of the author and that of the readers, worlds that are also chronotopic. To Bakhtin, chronotopes in literature and art itself cannot be analysed in isolation, as they are loaded with “chronotopic values of different degree and scope” (243).

As regards the components of the duality embedded in the term chronotope, Bakhtin focuses -from the very title of his essay “Forms of the Chronotopes”- mainly on the category of *time*, which is not odd if we consider that his essay dates from the late 1930s, previous to the time-space revolution that took place after mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bakhtin argues that the fact that time becomes palpable and visible in chronotopes facilitates the representation of events: “time materializes in space”, because time markers increase their concreteness through the time of human life and the historical time in well-defined spatial areas (Bakhtin 250). In his description of the major chronotopes that determine the most important generic variations in the novel, Bakhtin mentions the *chronotope of encounter*;

“marked by a higher intensity in emotions and values” (Bakhtin 243) in which the temporal element predominates, as well as the *chronotope of the road*, whose main pivot is the flow of time (244), even though the author recognises that time fuses with space and flows in it. This chronotope, which is associated with less emotional intensity, represents both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement. Regarding the *chronotope of the castle*, Bakhtin expresses that it is “saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past” (245-246). Finally, as he describes the *chronotope of the threshold*, which is related with crisis and breaks in life, Bakhtin refers to its time as instantaneous: “it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time” (248). Bakhtin opens the discussion of how assumptions about time condition narrative forms, how narratives reconstruct experience and how the characters’ temporality shapes their perceptions of time within any narrative.

The importance of the two categories enclosed in Bakhtin’s chronotope lies in the fact that “they provide a framework through which we learn who or what we are in society” (214), but when the local goes global this perception shifts, making our identity unstable. No doubt rapid changes in the qualities of social space and time are confusing and disturbing not only for individuals but also for societies, due to their impact upon every sphere of life. Due to these changes, the constructed conceptions of space and time also change in order to accommodate to new social practices, becoming new ways of assigning value to them in a determined context.

Besides, Bakhtin emphasizes the representational importance of the chronotope, since it functions as “the primary means for materialising *time* in *space*, as a centre for concretizing representation (250), as it becomes time palpable and visible giving life to the entire novel.” In his book *The Postmodern Chronotope: Reading Space and Time in Postmodern Fiction* (2000)

Paul Smethurst describes Postmodernism as “a significant shift in the indicators of space and time” that affects different areas of life. Postmodernism has brought significant transformations that have to do with a spatial and temporal change in the way we see the world: “the time-spaces of modernism are more transparently linked with the artistic, cultural and material projects of modernity”, whereas “the postmodern is affected more by the lack of development, the loss of direction, and ambivalent approaches to past and future” (2). For Smethurst, the only clear relation between project and material conditions in postmodernism is concretized through globalisation. He describes “time” as



predominantly future-oriented and “space” as abstract, homogeneous and expansive in modernism. In this way, chronotopes used to be significant carriers of the characteristics of a modernity governed by temporality; however, “in the postmodern chronotope, there is far more emphasis on the dynamics of space” (10).

## **B) Notions on the constructions of identity**

Cultural critic Stuart Hall claims that identity fixes the subject into the cultural structure so that both subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit are reciprocally more unified and predictable (598). But along the last thirty years this former stability seems to be shifting. Consequently, since “modern identities are being de-centered; that is, dislocated or fragmented” (Hall, *Modernity* 597), it is not strange to talk about “a crisis of identity” in late-modernity, an expression that makes reference to the global process of transformation where the old traditions, which were responsible for giving individuals social anchorage in their world, are in decline. Such a dislocation of the central structures of modern societies, mainly under the influence of capitalism and globalisation, has undermined the socio-cultural framework, producing shifts in complex concepts such as those of identity and national culture. Hall argues that the process of identification through which we project ourselves into our cultural identities has become open-ended, diverse and problematic, giving place to the post-modern subject, who may be defined as having no fixed or permanent identity: “within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about” (598). Consequently, “identities, our own and those of others, are fragmented, full of contradictions and ambiguities” (Sarup 1996 14).

Besides, since identity is developed as well as transformed in relation to the cultural systems we are part of, it is historically -not biologically- defined: “the subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self’ ” (Hall, *Modernity* 598). As identity and life itself have become fragmented and unstable, the postmodern look tends to be rather nostalgic. The Irish novel -emerged within this peculiar context- also represents this reality and is deeply nostalgic in many senses. The focus on this state of the mind is a constant mark in the novels under analysis in this work, since Tóibín’s main characters undergo nostalgia for a past that has gone but that still lives very vividly in their minds, a past that has moulded their adult identity to a great

extent, but which has to be overcome in order to go on with their lives. Nostalgia does not only take place at a personal level but also at a national one, after the many socio-cultural transformations experienced in Ireland during the last thirty years, which have altered Irish identity in many aspects. Undoubtedly, memory plays an essential role in the emergence of nostalgia, since human beings become melancholic when they remember a past that is perceived as better or when they perceive an incomplete present. Memory is also a key component in the preservation of traditions and, consequently, in the maintenance of a national political culture, which contains certain values that are shared by most people in a particular society.

As Hall explains, identity can only be understood as “a construction, a process never completed” (Hall, *Questions* 2). Madan Sarup (1996) agrees with Hall in that identity is a process and it is heterogeneous (Sarup xvi). This means our identities are not fully determined and are subject to a number of counter-identifications. The fact that identity is a process denotes that it has to do with becoming instead of with being (Sarup 6) as it is not an inherent quality. And in this process, it acquires a history (Sarup 14). We construct our identity in our interaction with others, this is why the emphasis of the idea of identity lays in that it is a process. Thus, our identities are not only constituted by past events but also by how we interpret them retrospectively. According to Sarup, when considering someone’s identity we link the effect of social dynamics such as gender, nation, ethnicity, religion and class, and we select and organise them into a narrative (15), an autobiography that emphasises “the individual, the development of the self” (18). The other face of the coin of identity is constituted by its collective aspect: our identity is also defined by our relationship between “the self and the other, subject and object, inner and outer” (19).

From a postmodernist view, it is no longer possible to conceive the individual as an alienated subject because “to be alienated presupposes a coherent rather than fragmented sense of the self from which to be alienated” (Sarup p. 97), a characteristic of identity he shares with Hall. In this context, the present is experienced as overwhelming and confusing. This interest in personal and collective identity has been more noticeable since the early 1970s, the moment in which many countries in the world started an incredible period of modernization and globalization.

In addition, the interdisciplinary field of Cultural Studies offers another useful approach to analyse the Irish phenomenon represented in Tóibín’s novels since it seeks to understand how meaning is generated, disseminated and produced from the social, political and economic spheres in a given culture. Within this diverse field of study, geographer and

social theoretician David Harvey takes Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), and he coincides with the latter's view of time and space as basic categories of human existence. Harvey claims that both concepts and the compound time-space have been marked by a number of epistemological breaks and redefinitions along history, globalization being one of the latest ones. For Harvey, since ephemerality, collage and fragmentation seem to characterise postmodernism, there is a greater search for personal and collective identity in our times. Harvey's concept of "time-space compression" shows how shifts in the experience of space and time lead to new struggles in fields such as aesthetics and cultural representation, as well as with regards to processes of social production and reproduction. Thus, heterogeneity and difference have led to the acknowledgement of multiple forms of "otherness" derived from plural forms of gender, race, class, sexuality and subjectivity, which is at the basis of social change.

Harvey also challenges "the idea of a single and objective sense of time or space, against which we can measure the diversity of human conceptions and perceptions" (Harvey 203), insisting on the fact that "neither time nor space can be assigned objective meanings independently of material processes" (204). Equally important is the notion that different societies possess different conceptions of space and time and that in contemporary society many different *senses* of time, sometimes conflictive ones, can be found altogether. In *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (1996) Harvey recovers this idea, joining the general consensus of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century about the fact that "time and space are social constructs" (207). The representation of time and space goes beyond practice to enter the realm of theory, according to Harvey, as it moulds how human beings interpret and behave with respect to the world. Liam Harte joins these theoreticians in the study of space to analyse how contemporary Irish writers linguistically focus on spacial images to create specific meanings in their fictions.

Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) deepens the contemporary study of space from the perspective of experience by contrasting two key ideas: *space* and *place* as the basic components of the lived world. These two concepts, taken from humanistic geography, are of great interest in the analysis of Irish literature, due to the enchantment that Irish writers have always felt about the local landscape and the attachment they show for it in their literary works. However, as "space" and "place" do not mean the same, they deserve clarification:

In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. "Space" is more abstract than "place." What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value . . . The ideas "space" and "place" require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of

space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place (Tuan 6).

Tuan argues that in order to understand how people feel about space and place, different modes of experience (sensorimotor, tactile, visual, conceptual) have to be taken into account, and that space and place have to be interpreted as images of complex -often ambivalent-feelings (6-7). The experience of space and time is largely subconscious as well as subjective from Tuan's point of view, since people differ in their awareness of space and time and in the way they elaborate a spatio-temporal world.

In the following chapters I will use these theoretical concepts to analyse the main chronotopes present in Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship* as well as the role of the categories of time and place in the (re)construction of individual and national identity in the narrative structure of both novels.

## CHAPTER II

### Space and time as essential axes of literary imagination

#### 2.1 Landscape in Tóibin's novels: the sense of place and memory

Places are dynamic and changing, but, like human beings, they also maintain an identity. “A homeland has its landmarks, which may be features of high visibility and public significance, such as monuments, shrines, a hallowed battlefield or cemetery. These visible signs serve to enhance a people's sense of identity” (Tuan, *The Perspective of Experience* 159). Even though the concepts of space and place take on different characteristics from the humanistic perspective (Tuan, “Space and Place - Humanistic Perspective” 421), these two notions are closely linked to the concept of *landscape*, which has always been deeply present in Irish literature. The term is viewed as one of the most contested concepts in humanistic geography and other disciplines, and has endured several semantic changes and definitions through time. The expression “geographical landscape” alludes to the geographical features that are characteristic of a particular area, which give it certain natural uniformity, and are a distinctive mark with regard to other parts of the Earth's surface<sup>7</sup>.

Landscapes are complex phenomena which reflect a living amalgamation of people and places that is essential to the configuration of local and national identity, since they are loaded with cultural values<sup>8</sup>. They combine elements of space and time, and represent social and cultural constructs. As they evolve over time, they acquire many different meanings that can be analysed mainly through historical, archaeological, geographical and sociological approaches. No matter how varied a landscape can be, its character helps define the self-image of the people who inhabit it and the sense of place that differentiates one region from another.

In 2010, the Chairman of The Heritage Council Conor Newman synthesised the value of local landscape for Irish people in these words: “The Irish landscape is a living compendium of human and natural history, its character a testament to the lives and aspirations of countless

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<sup>7</sup> From the encyclopedic entry of the National Geographic Society: <http://nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/landscape/>

<sup>8</sup> Lyn Leader-Elliott, Richard Maltby and Heather Burke. “Understanding Cultural Landscapes Discussion paper”. 28 July 2004. [http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/humanities/exchange/asri/define\\_cl.html](http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/humanities/exchange/asri/define_cl.html)

generations. It has been our inspiration and is an essential part of our identity. The landscape sustains us in every way possible: it is both our inheritance and our gift to the future”<sup>9</sup>. Consequently, it is not odd that Irish literature has consistently engaged with landscape since its very beginning.

In the last three decades of the 20th century, the rural landscape lost predominance in Irish cultural representations, and townscapes began to dominate representations of Ireland both in literature and politics. This meant a new turn in the history of the Irish novel, which has become essentially urban, although the binomial rural/urban is still present in many contemporary Irish novels and serves as an anchor of time for the main characters in the novels under analysis, as it will be developed later. Within this context, the contemporary Irish novel occupies a special cultural space where a high sense of both continuity and disruption prevails.

Tóibín is one of those contemporary Irish writers with a strong sense of place. The protagonists of the two novels under analysis here, Eamon Redmond (*The Heather Blazing*) and Helen Breen O’Doherty (*The Blackwater Lightship*) are from Enniscorthy, Tóibín’s home town. It is situated in the middle of County Wexford and on the banks of River Slaney, in the south east of the province of Leinster, on the east coast of Ireland. Enniscorthy, the second-largest town in County Wexford, is located between the Blackstairs Mountains and the sea, and on the main national route from Dublin to Rosslare Harbour. Almost the entire coast of Wexford is a series of long sandy beaches that can be easily reached on foot (most of which are mentioned along these literary works) and the waters around it are calm and safe for swimming, which is also portrayed in both novels.

Southeast Ireland is also a region with historic cities (for example, Enniscorthy), great landscapes, market towns (such as Gorey), rural villages (like Blackwater) and beautiful beaches (Cush Gap, Curraclloe, Ballyconnigar, among others), all separated by very short distances. The region is known as the Sunny Southeast because it gets the best weather in Ireland. Vivid descriptions of this landscape appear repeatedly in Tóibín’s novels, as a way of sharing with readers the experience of the Irish landscape:

the musky heat of the day would settle now into a warm evening in Cush, the moths flitting

against the lightshades, and the beam from the lighthouse of Tuskar Rock . . . He went back

to his desk and thought about it: the short strand at the bottom of the cliff, the red marl clay, the

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<sup>9</sup>Published by The Heritage Council, 2010, ISBN: 978-1-906304-13-3.

slow curve of the coastline going south to Ballyconnigar, Ballyvaloo, Curracloe, Raven's Point and beyond them to the sloblands and Wexford town (Tóibín, *The Heather* 9).

The naming of places becomes a crucial act for many Irish writers. Tóibín's novels are full of names of Irish streets, buildings, towns, cities, beaches, landmarks and other public places that carry an important historical heritage for the nation. All those elements contribute to transmit the sense of realism that characterises contemporary Irish fiction. In *The Heather Blazing* several places in Dublin are mentioned to recreate Eamon's working atmosphere and the way in which his career has developed: the River Liffey (which flows through the centre of the old city and can be seen from Eamon's office in the Four Courts), The Round Hall (where barristers and judges meet, have lunch or investigate in the Law Library); Stephen's Greens, some hotels and his own house are among the places where Eamon's urban life takes place. In *The Blackwater Lightship* Helen's daily life develops mainly among her house, the comprehensive school of which she is the principal, some shops and the Department of Education. However, neither Eamon nor Helen feel for places in Dublin the special attachment they feel for Enniscorthy and the villages near the coast.

“Place is never merely geographical; it is also ideological” (Harte, “The Endless Mutation” 337). The phrase *sense of place* involves a personal approach to a place and makes reference to a double process: a person's interpretation of the environment and their emotional reaction to it. In the same way as personality is unique, so are places. Tuan assures that the feelings human beings have for a place that is “home” for them - the locus of memory – are difficult to explain. His arguments help understand Eamon and Helen's unconscious attraction for the Irish coastal landscape they have grown up in. Since the conception of place involves close associations with human beings, the places they have become familiar with can have a nurturing role in their lives because people learn attitudes and behaviour patterns in them, they interact with others and they ascribe meanings to those places. People often become fully aware of their attachment to a place when they have left it and can see it as a whole from a distance, as it becomes more acute when we feel homesick (Tuan, “Space and Place - Humanistic Perspective” 411).

Although these two stories are utterly contextualised in Ireland, they do not take place entirely in Tóibín's home town. Enniscorthy is only the place of childhood and adolescence for Helen and Eamon, mainly associated to painful memories of their beloved fathers, both dead when Eamon and Helen were very young. As adults, both characters avoid visiting the town. The first chapters of *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship* contain scenes

full of crucial events in the early lives of the protagonists, which took place in their family houses in Enniscorthy: school days, family reunions, and also illnesses and deaths. The central position of Enniscorthy and Wexford allows Tóibín's characters to move easily to and from Dublin, as well as to and from nearby seaside villages and beaches. This is not a secondary issue in these novels, as those drives along the country roads towards the coast represent a temporal fragmentation and an ambivalent psychological state for Eamon and Helen, where psychological time overcomes clock time (fixed in the present moment) and consequently, they get trapped in their past lives once and again.

Thus, as Eamon once sits to have a coffee and watch from the porch window of the summer house, he remembers his father: "the swim that day in the past, his arms around his father's neck, the texture of his father's wet skin and the thrill of the water were still with him" (Toibín, *The Heather* 55). Later that summer, when Eamon and Carmel paid a visit to his Aunt Margaret -who was about 85 and lived in Eamon's grandfather's old house- Eamon could still feel the safety that emerged from the sense of place his childhood town always inspired in him, in spite of having avoided that place for a long time: "But as he drove into Templeshannon he felt that he had always been there; the sudden clarity of his recognition made the rest of the world strange and unfamiliar" (59). Then, during dinner, Eamon thinks about all the things he wanted to know, "of which he possessed only snatches now, things that would disappear with [Aunt Margaret's] her death" (61). In this way, the heavy burden of Eamon's past life is constantly shadowing his present life. Besides, Helen also lives psychologically trapped in the event of her childhood that conditioned the rest of her life: her father's death. When Helen drives to her grandmother's place, she is overwhelmed by sadness, as she thinks about Declan's illness and their father's death: "she passed a mud ruin . . . and she would have given anything then to go back to the years before their father died, when they were children here and did not know what was in store for them" (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 46).

People give meaning to places because they are essential to the development of their identity. They can experience self-understanding, reflection or introspection in places that have emotionally marked their lives. Places are locations filled with history, memories, and emotional and symbolic meanings. Eamon's attachment to the coast of Cush has developed since his very early childhood, from the time when his father took him there every summer to spend their holidays with some friends. It is only there where, in contact with the Cullen's



young girls, the little boy could imagine what his mother was like. Eamon's best remembrances of his father are related to learning to swim in the sea with him.

Equally, Declan's attachment to the coast and his grandmother's house evolved along his childhood days at Dora's place during his father's illness. By then, Dora began to treat Helen as an adult and Declan as a child, and although both siblings continued to treat each other as equal, Helen became her brother's protector whenever any argument arose about food or because "he was afraid of the dark and the cold and of his grandparents' movements upstairs which seem to echo in the rooms below" (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 56). And although Declan never mentioned it, Helen understood that above everything else he was afraid of being left there by their parents.

Besides, a few weeks after moving to their grandparents' Declan also started having nightmares: "the nightmares changed him; during the day he became withdrawn, and often, as they went through a lesson or played cards, he became forgetful and distant . . . On the other nights, as soon as the shouting began, both Helen and her grandmother would run to him and always . . . it would take five or ten minutes to calm him down and bring him back to the world they lived in" (68). Within this context, it is not odd that Declan feels safe in this place instead of in her mother's house, as it was Cush where his fears were overcome in his early years when his parents were absent.

Multiple senses of time and space can be at work within any narrative. In both *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship*, Tóibín turns the space of the eroded coast of Enniscorthy into a place of encounter for the main characters with their own past and their deepest sorrows. But at the same time, this specific marine location that lives very vividly in Tóibín's mind becomes a place for understanding that past and the characters involved in it for Eamon and Helen: it is a personal space for self-analysis, reconciliation, forgiveness and decision-making. Within Tóibín's stories, the image of the eroded sea coast also contributes to produce a fragmentation of time in the narrative sequence of these novels, which forces protagonists to make a stop in their daily life, and makes the reader unify the text into a new whole. The use of flashbacks as a narrative device in Tóibín's works lets the omniscient narrator reconstruct the past lives of the characters by providing readers with snapshots of their personal lifestories. These "cuts" in the chronology of events allow protagonists to go back in time and to face their present difficulties with a look not only into their past, but also with a future perspective.

Places can also be significant as providing continuity in people's lives or as the starting point of a change, and can even awake in human subjects feelings of safety, belonging,

self-expression or freedom. Those feelings can play an essential role in forming and maintaining connections between place and identity. The nature of the relationship between interpersonal ties and a certain area of space is not simple and seems to be created through repeated experience:

the functional pattern of our lives is capable of establishing a sense of place. In carrying out our daily routines we go regularly from one point to another, following established paths, so that in time a web of nodes and their links is imprinted in our perceptual system and affects our bodily expectations (Tuan, *Humanistic perspective* 418).

Tóibín has always felt especially attached to his local landscape and has captured the importance of place more than many writers of other nationalities. With its combination of isolation and natural beauty, the Irish landscape has such an enchanting power as to serve as an everlasting source of inspiration for them. Even when writing from exile or living abroad, most of his novels, plays or poems are usually set in Ireland, more specifically, in his home town or places he feels as “home”. In addition, he has become an international writer making home away from “home”, and he also feels a special need to (re)connect with his local roots constantly through literature.

## **2.2 Main chronotopes in Tóibín’s novels**

From the humanistic perspective, “the study of space is the study of people’s spatial feelings in the stream of experience” (Tuan, *Humanistic perspective* 388). Human beings charge places with meaning and thus they become essential in the construction of their individual, collective and national identity. Bakhtin does not conceive the existence of neither space nor time separately: each becomes a dimension of the other in the concept of the *chronotope*.

Applied to literary analysis, chronotopes act as the underlying structural threads in the composition of a novel. Bakhtin concedes an essential representational function to the chronotope: events could not be represented at all if they did not have the ground provided by the chronotope, because “it serves as the primary point from which ‘scenes’ in a novel unfold” (250). Other events, which Bakhtin considers as secondary (binding events), communicate only facts since they are outside the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time chronotopes. In addition, a chronotope can only be realized as an image that can be observed by the mind’s eye. Then, in Bakhtin’s theory, the

chronotope is the elementary unit of literary imagination, and this in turn, constitutes the cornerstone of aesthetic experience.

Chronotopes act as organizing centres for the main events in the novel since they define the spatial and temporal frame in which the narrative takes place and play a key role in the construction of meaning. Besides, chronotopes not only define the internal structure of a novel but also help connect the text and the socio-cultural context of a narrative due to the inseparable nature of time and space in artistic creation. A particular chronotope usually invokes other times and realities, and is intrinsically related to the idea of change. Since chronotopes become recurrent motifs in the text, there are a number of literary images present along the narrative of these two novels, which will be related to four of Bakhtin's chronotopes in this work: those of the *threshold*, the *road*, the *encounter* and the *castle*.

In my analysis of Tóibín's novels the capacity of chronotopes to be representations of reality takes form mainly through the chronotope of the *threshold*, highly charged with emotion and value (Bakhtin 248). Since Tóibín's main characters seem to be at a loss due to the difficult times they are currently undergoing, and because of events from their past they have been unable to solve through the years, this chronotope - "highly charged with emotion and value" (248) - is the one that best represents how they feel and how they process new information from their social context in order to adapt to changing times. Here "time is instantaneous because it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time"- claims Bakhtin (248).

The term "threshold" has a metaphorical meaning, as it has to do with moments of crisis, with decisions that change a life, but also with the indecisiveness that hinders the characters' change in life because of the fear they experience to step over the threshold. A threshold is a space of transition, characterised by uncertainty and which implicitly carries the potential for a radical change. Thus, the protagonists of both novels are standing on a threshold of their life, facing a stage of maturity which unavoidably involves "crossing the bridge" and finding points of transition that will lead them to new forms of identity and relations.

First, there are two recurrent images that cross both novels, which are determinant in the psychological and emotional state of the main characters. The most outstanding imagery in *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship* is that of the menacing cliff; the second important image is that of death. Since both of them are used by Tóibín to reveal a crisis of some kind and a break in life, they can be considered as a representation of Bakhtin's chronotope of the *threshold*. These images force Tóibín's protagonists to

reflect about painful past events and their lives and, at the same time, they challenge them to forget and forgive that past and move forwards. Besides, these two chronotopic images are mutually interrelated in *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship*, as it will be developed in the following paragraphs.

On the one hand, Eamon Redmond moves towards the coast every summer in order to escape the pressures of his professional life in an Ireland that is rapidly changing and that makes him question the very foundations of his national identity, personal values and professional convictions. But in contact with a place he knows very well since childhood, his mind feels free from restraints, making him see his entire life in retrospection. Eamon's earliest remembrances of his father and his solitary childhood emerge when he comes to this place on holidays as an adult man and starts his traditional routine of going swimming alone: "He was out of his depth now, but able to keep himself up in the water without his father's help . . . His father swam out, while Eamon moved towards the shore and practised his strokes" (Tóibín, *The Heather* 53-54). In contact with water Eamon is able to recover that former stage of his identity he had tried to forget in his adulthood.

On the other hand, in *The Blackwater Lightship* Helen has started a new life with her husband and children in Dublin, distancing herself from her mother and her grandmother as much as possible for ten years. But it is now, when she has to face another imminent loss in the family, as her younger brother Declan is dying, that she feels the need of approaching the shore in order to think, as Declan did some time before when he knew about his illness. There, she notices the silent destruction that erosion has continually been causing around the cliff during the last decades, as well as the power of the inexorable sea, which resembles that of death for her:

The sea was more itself, monumental and untouchable . . . The world would go on. The virus that was destroying Declan . . . or the memories and echoes that came to her in her grandmother's house, or the love for her family she could not summon up, these were nothing, and now, as she stood at the edge of the cliff, they seemed like nothing. (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 260)

In this way, the watery image associated with a crisis in life plays an essential role in their emotional state as adults. It is through this image that Eamon connects with his dearest affective relations (his father and Carmel) once they have gone, and goes on with his life in hard times, as water provides him with a sense of security, ease and freedom. As for Helen, her attachment to the coast lies rather in the fact that it is in this dramatic environment where she can bring his father back to her memory. Life and death seem to fuse for her in that gloomy and destructive landscape but, at the same time, she tries to accept death and to find answers in the immensity of the sea as she walks down the strand.

By the end of both novels, the watery image reappears but this time as a signal of renewal or rebirth, since it is through water that Eamon gradually wins his baby grandson's confidence by introducing him to playing with a bowl of water (something he remembers Carmel doing for their own children) and the book ends with the judge carrying his grandson out of the sea on his shoulders. By observing the destructive power of the sea, Helen finally understands that although life includes love, loss, suffering and death, the future will also bring new opportunities for restoring the distorted relationship with her mother, another form of rebirth. In fact, it is the proximity of the sea that brings Helen and Lily together, as a conversation by the strand is the first step in the new beginning mother and daughter are starting, which is reinforced at the end of the novel when both of them are at Helen's house making plans for Lily's future visits. As it can be seen, the immensity of the sea also brings characters hope for a better future. Regarding Declan, the watery image is always in his mind whenever he has to face a difficult time. The moment he realises he has AIDS, he goes to Cush and spends a certain time swimming and thinking, probably about the dichotomy of life and death. Later, as he sees the advance of his illness he decides to stay in Dora's place near the sea as it represents home for him.

In both novels, the marine chronotope appears accompanied by the figure of the isolated observer, which acts as a "governing consciousness in Tóibín's fictions" (Harte, "The Endless Mutation" 334) and as a spatial-temporal anchorage for Eamon, Helen, Lily and even Declan, who goes to Cush as soon as he realises about his illness and chooses this place to rest with his family and friends as he feels he is starting to die. In *The Heather Blazing*, the author usually focuses on the image of Eamon alone by the coast, walking and evaluating the effects of erosion: "The sea was rough, the water glinting steely-grey. He moved down the strand, away from a family group who had installed themselves at the bottom of the cliff" (Tóibín, *The Heather* 35); or simply concentrated on his own remembrances. After Carmel's death, the image of the lonely observer is even reinforced in the novel: "He sat on the wall, watching a herd of cows gathering against the fence in a field across the river . . . There were a few caravans in the field . . . But there was no one to be seen" (206). In his adult life Eamon enjoys being alone -in the same way as he used to be a solitary boy- and he feels he becomes stronger and fitter as he walks along the coastline and swims in the sea everyday during his holidays in Cush.

The isolated watcher is equally present in *The Blackwater Lightship*. Walking by the strand connects Helen with her childhood, too, with the part of her life that had been

haunting her for the last twenty years. Her recollections are about the days before and after her father's funeral. This experience also forces her to meet the people she has attempted to ignore in the new life she has started with her husband Hugh and their two sons. There are two occasions in the novel when Helen feels the need to go to the strand alone. The first is when she visits her grandmother to tell her the bad news about Declan's illness, before driving to Wexford to inform her mother about it: "As Helen walked down the lane, she could see only the soft blue horizon and she could not imagine what the sea would look like in this light . . . The sea was calm and the waves rolled over with an easy, whispering crash . . . But no strangers were expected here; even in the summer it was not a place for casual visitors" (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 50). The emptiness of the sea is similar to Helen's solitude and the deserted seashore seems to reinforce the feeling of isolation in her.

The second time takes place when Helen, Lily, Declan and his two friends -Paul and Larry- are installed in Dora's house. This time Helen realizes that, even if the sea was very near her grandmother's house, she had hardly been on the strand in those days, in the same way as her grandparents used to pay no attention to the sea: "Helen and Declan learned to pay no attention to it either" (59). Tóibín's recurrent image of the solitary watcher takes place again as Helen walks by the sea, where she feels a sort of emptiness both about life and people:

She stood at the edge of the cliff and watched the sea . . . There was no one to be seen . . . the sea would roar softly and withdraw without witnesses or spectators. It was clear to her now, . . . that there was no need for people, that it did not matter whether there were people or not. Imaginings and resonances and pain and small longings and prejudices. They meant nothing against the resolute hardness of the sea . . . It might have been better, she felt, if there never had been people . . . (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 259-260).

Helen had previously felt this same feeling in her late childhood. In spite of the passing of time, Helen still feels that when her father died nobody from her family was there for her, neither her mother nor her grandmother, when she needed them most: firstly, as she managed to be left alone in her house before her mother's arrival, she arranged her father's clothes on the bed so as to feel his presence once again: "she placed herself on her mother's side of the bed, carefully and gingerly so as not to disturb him . . . . She reached over and lifted the cap and kissed where his mouth should be. She snuggled up against him" (82).

Secondly, as Lily arrived for the funeral, Helen could not avoid feeling abandoned once again by her mother since -as Dora tells Helen- Lily "was doing her best but she couldn't manage" (88) when her husband died. By the end of Tóibín's novel, mother and daughter

are able to sincere with each other and Helen explains to her mother the source of her self-detachment from them: “Declan and I felt abandoned then, even though Granny and Grandad were nice to us, we felt abandoned, yes, if that’s what you want to know. Yes, and I suppose it’s true that it has been eating away at me all these years, as you put it. I’m the one who took it to heart” (211). As a result, when Helen grew up and was determined to start a new life with her husband Hugh, she decided that she did not want her mother and grandmother there. The solitary and detached attitude of Eamon and Helen by the sea can be interpreted as a narrative strategy to emphasise that the crisis that involves the whole of their stories is of a personal nature and that the condition of being on the threshold of understanding their past and accept it or not is also a personal challenge for them. Harte claims that “the condition of solitary outsidership in Tóibín’s fiction is closely linked to feelings of loss that typically stem from some unspoken childhood trauma, the repression of which causes an enduring psychic reverberation. These psychic wounds are related to early, unresolved experiences of death or abandonment, the deferred effects of which are shown to be profoundly determinative of subsequent behaviour” (Harte, “The Endless Mutation” 334), as Tóibín’s novels show.

The presence of the sea is what makes the protagonists realize of the idea of loss and the implacable power of death. Harte claims that there is a distinctive tidal rhythm to the narrative oscillation between scenes from Eamon’s anguished adulthood and his claustrophobic childhood: “Cush is the place where Eamon was taken as a baby after his mother’s death, a fact that seems to have caused a kind of emotional transference to occur within him, making the sea a mothering refuge, in contradistinction to houses, which are consistently figured as bare, unwelcoming emblems of motherless absence” (Harte, “The Endless Mutation” 343). The more demanding his judicial role becomes, the greater is Eamon’s need to get immersed in the sea, where he is able to “forget himself” for some minutes. That freeing experience, only shared with his father, allows Eamon to create a habit pattern in which he feels comfortable and safe, as it is the one that Eamon goes on repeating along his adult life.

When his wife dies, the sea becomes his greatest companion and an encouragement to go on living. Thus, long walks along the beaches and swimming to exhaustion is the new routine that Eamon sets himself to keep him alive and overcome his grief for Carmel’s absence: “Since he began to spend each day walking he had learned how to divide up the time” (207) while his memories about their life together become clearer for him. Reflections make Eamon understand that by spending his days in this way, he is trying to

deny Carmel's death as well as to lose awareness of real time. However, he knows that he has to go back to his life in Dublin soon and that he can not continue with this routine, but for the time being, forcing himself to keep going means surviving, and this eventually helps him accept that his wife is dead.

It is when confronted with the immensity of the sea and its powerful destructive effects that Eamon and Helen in the respective novels become aware of the passing of time. In spite of its corrosive force, the sea has always been there, in contrast to their dear ones, an everlasting presence that allows them to connect again with their inner selves. The shade of loneliness, death, isolation, distorted interpretations of past episodes and misunderstanding with other people have turned them into solitary, distant persons, sometimes unable to express affection and with no friends. Both protagonists have built a sort of close world of their own in order to protect themselves. In this chronotope of the threshold the impossibility of separating the two elements of Bakhtin's chronotope in the analysis of the narrative structure can be noticed, since in the mind of both characters the passing of time is intimately associated with the changes in the eroded cliff which, like life itself, has turned into a point of no return for Tóibín's protagonists.

References to death in the family can be found at the beginning and end of both novels probably because it is this essential event what puts Tóibín's protagonists on the threshold of a significant change in life. Thus, Tóibín portrays Eamon's emotional detachment, even from his closest family relations, as a consequence of his mother's death occurred when he was born, a loss that has left him empty, with the sensation that nobody has ever loved him. In different moments of their married life Carmel tells him that she sometimes feels him very close to her, but that she finds him very distant in other moments (Tóibín, *The Heather* 224-225). Carmel used to like his being so reserved at first, but as this attitude increases with the years, she tells Eamon that he looks strange whenever either of his parents is mentioned. She knows there are some deep wounds in him, so she wants him to talk about them as she has talked to him about her parents before. However, it is hard for Eamon to talk about these things, and when Carmel asks him how he feels about his mother's death, he answers that "she is just someone who wasn't there" (227). He adds that he and his father had managed together anyway, but this had made him very self-sufficient, able to look after himself: "I learned never to need anything from anybody. I suppose that's true" (228).

For Helen, the unexpressed grief she experienced at the death of her father, together with the resentment she felt at being abandoned by her mother, led her to a deep feeling of



loss: “My mother taught me never to trust anyone’s love because she was always on the verge of withdrawing her own. I associated love with loss, that’s what I did. And the only way that I could live with Hugh and bring up my children was to keep my mother and my grandmother away from me” (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 188). As she opens herself to Paul, she is able to express the reasons why she felt no need to make up with her mother or her grandmother for so long: “when my father died, half my world collapsed, but I did not know this had happened . . . . When my father died I was left alone by my mother and grandmother. I know that they had their own problems and maybe they could not have helped . . . , but I got no comfort or consolation from them” (187).

Eamon and Helen share the feeling of being torn by a contradictory desire of being free from the burden of their past and the need of interrogating it so as to understand it better “in order to make the present and future more liveable” (Harte, “The Endless Mutation” 337). Harte attributes to Tóibín a subtle geographical imagination in which space, place, and landscape are active determinants of identity and experience: “many of the unifying preoccupations of his fiction -the difficulties of reconciling individual freedoms with communal expectations . . . the combustible cultural effects of confusing history, memory, and mythology; the complexities of love and loss; the continuance of secrecy, repression, and traumas within families- are underpinned by a spatial poetics” (337). To Matthew Ryan (2008) land and sea highlight the solitariness of characters in Tóibín’s works and serve to show the lack of connection of the individual to the world.

By the end of these two novels Tóibín uses the image of death again, but this time in order to bring peace and understanding to his protagonists. A new crisis and imminent death in the family brings the painful past back for Eamon, Helen and Lily and the three of them feel their lives collapsing once again in a setting which is also collapsing, closing in this way Bakhtin’s idea of the chronotope of the threshold with the acceptance of a new change in life, with another loss. On the one hand, it is through the suffering that Carmel’s illness and consequent death brings into Eamon’s life that he must struggle for his own existence and learn to overcome his pain without forgetting his wife. In fact, it is by means of his remembrances that he can establish a new and nice relationship with his little grandson, finding in him a new hope and the possibility of repairing the detached relation he always had with his own family and the disconnection he always felt towards other human beings. On the other hand, it is when Helen and Lily have to face another death in their family that they can bring their past back in order to solve the conflicts that previous death occurred twenty years before produced between them.

In this chronotope of the *threshold* Tóibín develops in detail along both novels, the image of the destructive power of the sea not only challenges his protagonists to face difficult times but also brings acceptance of unavoidable situations for conflicted souls in both novels. In a so changing landscape as the Irish one is, the sea appears as the only eternal presence, the only continuous force that remains compared with land, family and history, which are fading by the passing of time. The final scene of *The Heather Blazing* where Eamon takes his grandson Michael on his shoulders into the sea can be interpreted as a sign of renewal that will probably improve their interpersonal relationships. To Helen, the powerful sea makes her regretfully reflect upon the futility of life and the ephemeral nature of human existence. Neither suffering nor prejudices nor the memories of her past that echo in her mind while staying in Cush seem to have any value if compared with the omnipotent power of the sea to destroy everything that came in its way. Likewise, death shares with the sea the same power to destroy life and happiness, creating in Helen a similar sense of desolation and loneliness. She feels it would have been better if human beings had never existed, “without anyone feeling, or remembering, or dying, or trying to love” (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 260).

These material or physical transformations of the natural and the urban landscape are also used by Tóibín as creative metaphors that also reflect radical changes in cultural attitudes and lived experience. Ireland has socially and culturally changed by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is portrayed by the author through the image of the collapsing pillars of traditional Irish nationality: family, state and Church. Like Tóibín’s protagonists, Irish traditional values are also slowly accommodating to the new challenges of late 20<sup>th</sup> century. As regards *The Blackwater Lightship*, the novel also evolves from intolerance and resentment towards more flexible positions and understanding on the part of all the protagonists, as Declan expects to happen from the very beginning. Thus, Helen and Lily eventually manage to open their hearts to each other and understand the real motives behind their long time separation. In addition, Helen and Dora reach an understanding and Dora’s open mind widens even to accept homosexuality without any kind of moralistic traditional perspective, as would be expected for a lady of her age. Last, Lily’s homophobic attitude towards Declan’s friends -mainly Paul- softens by the end of the novel. Through her improved relationship with Helen, Lily ends up accepting her responsibility in Declan’s finding a family in his friends instead of in his blood relatives, since she distanced herself from her children after her husband’s death. In this way, once

characters realise the nature of the conflict afflicting them, they try to find a way out by facing it and establishing connections with the past.

Bakhtin argues that the fact that in chronotopes time becomes visible facilitates the representability of events because time markers become concrete through the time of human life and the historical time in well-defined spatial areas (Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination* 250). In Tóibín's novels, the advance of time is signalled by some natural and man-made elements. In *The Blackwater Lightship* time passing is mainly made visible through the descriptions of a modern and sometimes luxurious urban architecture that aesthetically denotes Ireland's belonging to the global world. However, in opposition to the chronotope of the *threshold* –signalled by crisis and change– there is a minor type of chronotope, that of the *town*, which denotes stagnation and lack of change but that serves as “the locus for cyclical everyday time” where “there are no events, only ‘doings’ that constantly repeat themselves” (Bakhtin, 247). In this chronotope, temporal changes can not be perceived as dramatic since it moves in narrow circles: that of the day, the week, the month or even of a person's life (248). Sometimes, they remain unnoticed by individuals until they take some distance from them before coming back, as in Helen's case. Tóibín's emphasis on material affluence and modernity may be understood as a way of reinforcing the image of a different emerging Ireland in the 1990s, where new values and lifestyles are appropriated by Irish people, although the heavy burden of the past struggles not to disappear and creates ambivalence and tensions within individuals.

In *The Heather Blazing*, time becomes concrete in two ways that represent the fusion of the spatial and temporal axes in the novel's chronotope: firstly, the weather, the constant grayish days and secondly, the increasing devastating effects of erosion caused by the sea on the coast of Cush, more specifically at the strand of Ballyconnigar. Given that both images are closely related to change and anticipate a break in the former course of life for protagonists, they can be interpreted as part of the chronotope of the *threshold*, being the weather one a minor chronotope in comparison with that of the coast. Tóibín uses these two images to show the evolution of time in two levels: to represent day-after-day progression or short-time duration, and to symbolise the passing of the years, respectively. On the one hand, Tóibín indicates the advance of daily time through weather related images all along this novel: “It had begun to rain, although the day was still bright and warm” (Tóibín, *The Heather* 9), “He walked south towards Ballyconnigar. The drizzle had become mild and warm with patches of blue in the sky” (33), “After a few days of drizzle the weather improved” (35), “The sky was now overcast and grey” (36), “Some days the

rain never lifted. It began as a dense drizzle in the mornings and cleared up for an hour or two in the afternoon before coming down again in heavy showers” (37). This unchanging weather bears a close relation to Eamon’s emotional state and his childhood memories, since the narrator claims about the protagonist: “He hated days like this, when you could never tell whether the rain would come or not, but this, in the end, was what he remembered most about Cush: watching the sky over the sea, searching for a sign that it would brighten up, sitting there in the long afternoons as shower followed shower” (9). Constant grayish days create a feeling of uncertainty in Eamon as it seems it is going to change and bring light, but in the end it does not.

The repetition of this weather image supports the idea of the passing of time waiting for a change that never occurs. In fact, several socio-political changes have taken place in Ireland along the last decades, but Eamon has a great difficulty in accommodating to them as his mind seems to be deeply stuck in the past. It is only in contact with the eroding coast that present time becomes concrete for him and he realizes that the past has gone and many things with it. Besides, the author occasionally expresses the passing of time in a more explicit way, as at the beginning of part two: “Another last day of term; another year gone by” (86), or in part three, when the omniscient narrator says “Carmel had died in the winter” (185), as Eamon was driving to Cush alone for the first time after that sad event. Dramatic transformations in the natural landscape also denote that years have gone by in this novel. The coastal places he tours around in summer provide him with a real perception of time. Therefore, where the landscape appears as static or with little change, time seems to have stopped for the protagonist. Thus, almost unchanging urban landscapes in Dublin or in Enniscorthy make Eamon less aware of the passing of time. As Carmel and Eamon stop at Blackwater during one of their journeys to Cush, the omniscient narrator comments on the protagonist’s observation:

in all the years there had been hardly any changes in the view from here up the hill. Each building was a separate entity, put up at a different time. Each roof was different, ran at a different angle, was made of different material . . . He felt that he could be any age watching this scene, and experienced a sudden illusion that nothing in him had changed since he first saw these buildings (Tóibín, *The Heather* 96-97).

In addition, houses also remain unchanged for Eamon: when Eamon sits drinking coffee one summer morning watching the sky from the porch window and his memories of summers in Cush with his father invade him, he thinks: “hardly anything had changed in all the years” (55) in this place, probably the reason why it awakes in him remembrances of his childhood days. However, Eamon becomes conscious of the process of aging

whenever he faces the natural destruction of the coast caused by the sea erosion, something that is more noticeable each summer: “they [Carmel and Eamon] were close to the soft edge of the cliff, the damp, marly soil which was eaten away each year” (13).

The highly metaphorical and symbolic nature of the chronotope of the threshold allows the author to represent Ireland’s state of affairs in the 1990s in both novels. Considered within this context, it could be said that through the metaphor of the eroded coast Tóibín is also alluding to the transitional and ambiguous condition of Ireland by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when both novels were written and published. That decade was marked by years of political, socio-cultural and economic transformations for Ireland, where the basic institutions of the state were being questioned and the process of modernization that a postnationalist and globalized nation required was starting. By then, old fossilised ideologies were being subverted and the national identity reconstructed in the light of many transformations.

Therefore, in *The Heather Blazing* there is an analogy between the gradual destruction of the cliff due to the erosion and Eamon’s perception of the collapse of traditional values and social customs in Ireland. Irish national identity is changing, too, and requires to be reconstructed in the light of the process of modernization it is undergoing in every aspect of life. This metaphor could also be understood as Eamon’s own spiritual and ideological crisis, as an image of the emptiness and inner fragmentation experienced by the protagonist when he feels his own world is also collapsing. As a result, becoming conscious of all these social and natural transformations around him lets Eamon see that time will not come back, in the same way that the effects of the coastal erosion cannot be stopped, and the only thing that remains of the former landscape of Cush are his remembrances: “‘I remember when there was as much land in front of Mike’s house as there is now in front of ours’, he said. ‘I remember a big field that sloped down to the cliff’” (Tóibín, *The Heather* 31).

The natural phenomenon of the coast erosion could as well be understood in *The Blackwater Lightship* as a metaphor for the corrosion of family relationships, worn out year after year by prejudices about the other’s behaviour, anger, distance, silence and pride. For Helen, distorted memories of her childhood and certain moments of tension with her mother and grandmother about Helen’s plans for the future during her adolescence have fed resentment and separation among the three women.

All in all, the marine imagery can be interpreted as an example of how Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope acquires relevance in the structure of the novel: space becomes a

center for concretizing representation since it functions as the primary means for materializing time (Bakhtin 250). In these two novels seascapes open ways for the protagonists in crisis to undergo moments of clarity, revelation, and change, the main features enclosed in Bakhtin's chronotope of the *threshold*. Geographically speaking, Cush is situated on the coast of Ireland, in the "lonely liminality of the shoreline" (Harte, "The Endless Mutation" 338), between two powerful and recurrent elements in the Irish literary imagery of all times: the sea and the land.

Tóibín's main characters feel the irresistible temptation to approach the enigmatic, ineffable but also destructive sea as the proper place for deep meditation, perhaps because "the sea embodies a vast, sedimented history" (Harte 338); it is mysterious and widely symbolic, and it has been repeatedly used in literature to mean origin, transition, dissolution, metamorphosis and purification.

A threshold is a space of transition, characterised by uncertainty and which implicitly carries the potential for a radical change. Thus, the protagonists of both novels are standing on a threshold of their life, facing a stage of maturity which unavoidably involves "crossing the bridge" and finding points of transition that will lead them to new forms of identity and relations. These material or physical transformations of the natural and the urban landscape are also used by Tóibín as creative metaphors that also reflect radical changes in cultural attitudes and lived experience. Ireland has socially and culturally changed by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is portrayed by the author through the image of the collapsing of one of the pillars of traditional Irish nationality: namely, the family.

There are three other important chronotopes present in both novels. One of them is that of the *road*, which is associated to that of the *encounter*. A repeated image in these two novels is that of travelling within Ireland, from Dublin to Cush and viceversa, which can be associated with Bakhtin's chronotope of the *road*, where time and space fuse, as the visual contact with a familiar landscape sets main characters' mind in the past. Although Bakhtin concedes the former chronotope a greater scope than to the latter, the chronotope of the *road* contains less emotional degree than the *encounter* one. But unlike Bakhtin's analysis of this chronotope in the classical novel (the Greek Romance in its different varieties), encounters do not take place precisely "on the road" in Tóibín's novels, not even random encounters. In fact, by adapting Bakhtin's theory of the chronotopes to the characteristics of the contemporary novel, the image of the road could be seen in Tóibín's

as a prelude, as an anticipation of the encounter that the main characters are going to have with other family members whose bonds have been broken lately.

Here it is not a “social or spatial distance” (Bakhtin 243) what shortens - since there are not encounters of people from different social backgrounds but the span between present and future. It is on the road where the past that has been tightly repressed in the protagonists’ mind flows spontaneously; it is here where the memory of a well-known place intersects with time, allowing the main characters to see their life in perspective. In Bakhtin’s own words, “time, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road); this is the source of the rich metaphorical expansion on the image of the road as a course: ‘the course of a life’, ‘to set out on a new course’, ‘the course of history’ and so on; varied and multi-leveled are the ways in which road is turned into a metaphor, but its fundamental pivot is the flow of time” (Bakhtin 244).

This chronotope could be analysed as another minor type in these two novels, since it is less developed than others because journeys are not as relevant as encounters in Tóibín’s novels. As “the chronotope of the road is both a point of new departures and a place for events

to find their denouement” (Bakhtin 243-244), the protagonists of *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship* experience the drive between Dublin and Wexford or Cush as a transition with plenty of anxiety, nostalgia and sometimes with a strong wish to go back home to Dublin, where they feel security and emotional stability. Examples of this are found in the first chapters of both novels. In *The Heather Blazing* Eamon displays mixed feelings about going to Cush. As the last day in Court comes, the judge is anxious about leaving and getting away from work, and apprehension takes over him at the idea of going back to the place of his childhood: “suddenly, he had no desire to go. He wanted to stand at the window and clear his mind of the day, without the pressure of the journey south to Cush on the Wexford coast” (Tóibín, *The Heather* 9).

Helen experiences the drive to Wexford as a disconnection from what is real in her life: “at times, she felt she was driving in a dream” (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 43). The turning at the ball-alley, a place with no houses before turning into the forest, makes her feel she is entering a new realm. Sadness begins to overwhelm her and she feels she cannot deal with it, thinking that Declan -like his father- would never walk those lanes again: “they would only be a memory, and that too would fade with time” (46). As Helen is on the road, she becomes aware of the bitter resentment she still feels against her mother, which has clouded her life. Helen also has mixed feelings at the prospect of going to the coast

because it would mean spending some days under the same roof with her family, and she realises that for the first time in ten years she was back as a member of the family she had so determinedly tried to leave. Like Eamon, Helen wants to avoid the spatial and temporal dislocation this trip produces in her, but in her case because she is afraid of the encounter with her mother, which she has avoided for several years, so she lets her imagination take over her mind: “when she began to picture the time they would spend together, whether in Wexford or Dublin, she realised she would do anything to avoid it” (43).

Besides, in both novels the movement of characters from Dublin to smaller towns or villages on the coast resembles the movement of the sea eroding the land on the coast. It is on the coast where they realise that the transformations they can notice in the spatial context echo their own processes of change along their lives. In this physical displacement some natural elements such as the sea, the eroded coast and the weather, as well as some man-made elements -like family houses, the Tuskar Rock lighthouse or the strand of Cush- become recurrent symbolic images in the mind of the reader associated to loss and change. The road in Tóibín’s novels shares the same important feature Bakhtin sees in it: it is always one that passes through familiar territory making “the journey home” more significant for his protagonists and facilitating communication and truth to be revealed.

In addition, another significant chronotope developed by Tóibín in these two novels is that of the *encounter*. This chronotope is marked by a high degree of emotional and evaluative intensity (Bakhtin 243) in which the temporal element predominates and is particularly revealing in these two stories because it sets the protagonists’ mind in the past and eventually opens their hearts towards understanding. The chronotopic image of *encounter* is related to one of the most universal motifs in literature: that of meeting, which -according to Bakhtin- can fulfil different structural functions in a novel: it can serve as an opening, as a culmination or as a denouement of the plot (98). In *The Heather Blazing*, encounters mainly take place at the end of the novel, both as a culmination and denouement and in a rather implicit way as they are supported by actions that facilitate communication between characters, such as Niam and her baby moving to the summer house in Cush with Eamon after her mother’s death or when Eamon finds a way to start a good relationship with his grandson through water. Contrastively, in *The Blackwater Lightship*, after some instances of failed “encounters” and arguments between Helen and Lily or between Lily and Paul along the main body of the novel, finally both women are able to understand the reasons behind certain circumstances in their lives and real dialogical encounters occur in the last chapters of the novel.



In both novels encounters in Cush are feared by the protagonists because they make them aware of a crisis in their lives (chronotope of the *threshold*) that requires an action to be solved and that cannot go on being postponed any more. This situation makes Eamon and Helen realize that they have to face their inner contradictions and the ghosts that have been haunting them for many years. Helen is not able to make an attempt to approach her mother until the very end, since she finds her irritating, selfish and intolerant. It is when Lily openly expresses her biases against Paul -and even jealousy for his fatherly relationship with Declan and the fact that both Helen and Dora trust him- that Helen reproaches Lily for her intolerance, although her words carry the weight of Lily's state of absence in many stages of Declan and Helen's life: "It was funny, and you weren't here for it and you missed it and there's no point in making moralistic comments about it" (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 208). Then, Helen adds: "You'll just have to learn to tolerate people. And it seems really odd to me that you can talk about what sort of daughter you'd like to have had in front of me". It is then that past and present conflicts start to be clarified for both women. As Lily claims that she only wished Helen had taken some interest in her life, Helen cannot avoid noticing how vulnerable and desolate her mother looked. Helen seems to understand her mother for the first time: "Mammy, I will do that. When all this is over, I will do that, but you'll have to stop wishing I was somebody else" (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 208).

Thus, the presence of Declan's friend in Dora's house is very significant as it acts as a binding event that greatly contribute to facilitate communication in the family and tolerance towards a different and plural Ireland. It is Paul mainly, an outsider, who makes Helen think about her mother's reasons behind her behaviour towards her after Helen's father's death, and it also makes Lily rethink her relationship with her two children in the last two decades. This awareness on the part of both women is the starting point for a first sincere conversation between mother and daughter.

Last, Bakhtin's chronotope of the *castle* could be replaced in contemporary novels like Tóibín's by the "chronotope of the *house*", where real instances of dialogue take place allowing interpersonal encounters that had been avoided for years. This will be developed in the following chapter due to the associations that can be established between place and home in these novels.

In conclusion, the three chronotopes analysed above interrelate to support Tóibín's stories narratively: the chronotope of the *road* creates anxiety, mental time fragmentation and serves readers as a prelude of what is coming in the life of the protagonists. Then, the

chronotope of the *encounter* takes tensions to a climatic point and makes characters face a past they had tried to forget but which revives while they meet people they do not have a good relation with in a specific setting their minds associate with their past. Finally, the chronotope of the *threshold* forces Tóibín's protagonists to face the past and overcome it, as a result of another crisis they undergo in their present life, all of which produces understanding, tolerance and awakens hope for a better future. However, this revelation only takes place when Tóibín's protagonists are able to balance good and bad things in their lives and accept them.

All in all, beyond the type of chronotope that predominates in a novel, the importance of Bakhtin's concept lies in the capacity it has to represent the main events that form the structure of a novel in terms of space-time relations. This allows readers to see the growth of characters in their relation to the modifications places undergo with time and the effect both elements of the chronotope have on the mental state and identity of the main characters.

## CHAPTER III

### Re-constructing identity in contemporary Ireland

#### 3.1 Place in Tóibín's novels

There is nothing like home. But what is *home*? Home is more than the place of everyday life or a place we once lived in. It is a locus of emotional support, a physical connection to one's past and a symbol of continuity. Tuan uses the term "topophilia" to refer to the affective bond between people and places. This tie is not only built through the visual impact places have on individuals, since "we can know a place subconsciously, through touch and remembered fragrances" (Tuan, *Humanistic Perspective* 411). For him, place is an organized world of meaning (Tuan, *The Perspective of Experience* 179), a testimonial of who we are.

Spaces become places when they are invested with practices, beliefs, and meaning. Similarly, houses become homes when people invest them with furniture, decorations, pictures, photographs, all things that are part of their personal identity and sense of self. Because family houses are full of well-known objects easily associated to their members, they become rich sources of memories and anecdotes that gather together different generations.

The longing for home is one of the most recurrent themes in Tóibín's novels. However, this ideal is not easily achieved by his characters because their need of spiritual safety and affect is usually distorted by memories of a sad past or by human relations characterised by estrangement and distance. Tóibín's narratives are simple in linguistic terms, but semantically complex due to the several emotions they evoke. His characters usually live far from the Irish towns where they were brought up and, as they return, they live in a state of ambivalence where memory, reality and nostalgia seem to intertwine creating different visions of home for them.

In *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship* houses are powerful images since they are constant reminders of a past life for Eamon and Helen. But they also function as an emotional refuge where the protagonists go back once and again in specific moments of crisis. Both stories take place in two or three houses, and although they seem to be haunted by sadness and a melancholic atmosphere, Tóibín's characters go back to their childhood home almost with a motherly need. Most of the houses mentioned in both novels are old, crumbling or on the verge of falling down due to erosion or deterioration.

They have survived the passing of time, but they lack the emotional warmth that family houses are supposed to have. Since houses are usually associated with family, their depiction in both novels could be understood as the collapse of the traditional conception of family, one of the basic pillars on which nationalist Ireland was built.

As place is permanent and meaningful for individuals, it provides security to human beings in a constantly changing world (Tuan, *The Perspective* 3). In *The Blackwater Lightship* houses are portrayed as a shelter for the wretchedness of afflicted souls. On the one hand, as Declan realises he is dying, he asks Helen to arrange that he, Helen and Lily can stay in Dora's house because he does not think of Lily's house as home. Instead, Dora's old dwelling is where *home* is for Declan, so he decides to spend this final period of his life in his grandmother's former guest house. It is there where he wants to reunite the three women of his family and help them reconcile with one another, and where he also wishes to stay in the company of his two friends, Paul and Larry. Declan's attachment to this place is previously shown in the novel when he learns about his illness and he visits the strand in order to think. In contrast to Declan's attachment to the old place, Lily comments on her mother's house "God, that house in Cush is depressing" (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 113), coinciding with Helen's perception of the lodging: "The lino in the room was torn, some of the wallpaper had peeled, the paint on the ceiling was flaking, and the presence of the shiny modern radiator made the room seem even more dingy and depressing. When she pulled the old candlewick bedspread back, she found that the blankets were stained" (55-56).

Houses have an emotional impact on Helen's mind. As she thinks about Lily's new house, she remembers how angry she had become with her mother for having sold their old family house. She felt there were things in her room that belonged to her and that her mother had no right to sell their former abode. Helen later realizes that "she could not put the sale of her family house out of her mind because she believed that she would some day go back there, that it would be her refuge, and that her mother, despite everything, would be there for her and would take her in and shelter her and protect her" (119-120). This need for security can be related to Helen's unexplored fears and unresolved childhood conflicts with Lily, which make her almost unconsciously believe that the life she has made with Hugh would fail her; "she would some day or night appear at her mother's door asking to be taken in and forgiven and her mother would tell her that her room was always there for her, and that she could stay as long as she liked" (120). Although Helen realises it is a

fantasy and tells herself repeatedly that she would never have to do this, thoughts about her childhood house continue to trouble her for some time.

In addition, what brings Helen's thoughts back in time is her stay at her grandmother's old house. In this isolated place by the coast, two elements evoke old times for her: the lighthouse flashing from Tuskar Rock, flitting across her room, and a smell of must and damp in it: "She didn't feel tired or sleepy. She shivered. The smell seemed sharper now, and sour, and it was the smell more than anything which brought her back to the time she and Declan had lived in this house" (56). These sensations make her think about her father's death, an event that had ended her childhood, as she realised years afterwards.

Other houses, like Lily's new dwelling, are modern, ample and illuminated, but so cold that they do not transmit a sense of home. As Helen enters her mother's house for the first time she exclaims: "What an amazing house! . . . it [the room on the left] was, she thought, more than thirty feet long, like an art gallery. . . with white walls and pale parquet floors and high ceilings with roof windows . . . it resembled her mother's offices on the top floor of the building in Wexford" (112). But in spite of its opulence and its glass walls that offer a fantastic sea view, Helen cannot avoid noticing the emptiness in the big room: there are no familiar objects there for Helen to feel that she belongs to it.

In the case of *The Heather Blazing*, Eamon's grandparents' house can be seen as an emblem of the traditional Irish family and the locus of the nationalist ideology. The whole family reunites there to celebrate Christmas or to attend funerals in the coldness of that big house. The old house also embodies the typical Irish patriarchal atmosphere where roles are separated: "His grandmother was in the kitchen with his Aunt Margaret and his Auntie Molly" (Tóibín, *The Heather* 69). Traditions are strongly guarded there: "After the trifle and the plum pudding the men went to Benediction in the Cathedral. 'Come straight home, now,' his grandmother said. 'No going into pubs'. 'It's the power of religion' Stephen said and laughed" (71). However, it is the summer house in Cush Eamon used to go to with his father where home is for him, the place where Eamon disconnects himself from routine, and where he can remember episodes of his past life that have marked him emotionally. It is also the place that signals a before and an after in Eamon's adult life, the place where he starts a close relationship with his little grandson, Michael, after an uncomfortable beginning for both in which Eamon did not know how to approach the baby without causing his crying. Besides, the summer house is also the place where Eamon begins to face the changes that surround his life after his wife's death.

Thus, the family house, like the recurrent image of shifting liminal landscapes, is full of ambiguity for Tóibín's protagonists. Having grown up with little motherly affection or none, they long for home in family houses but they seldom feel at home there. As Harte describes them, they are places "consistently figured as bare, unwelcoming emblems of motherless absence" ("The Endless Mutation" 343). In *The Blackwater Lightship*, Dora's old guest house and Eamon's summer house in *The Heather Blazing* are also set in geographically marginal places, in the periphery of cultural and political systems, and seem to have been forgotten by governments that did not pay attention to the effects of erosion when there was still time to prevent their imminent disappearance. Both literary works mention recent measures introduced by authorities in order to stop the continuous advances of the sea, measures whose efficacy cannot be predicted.

Contrastively, while urban architecture in *The Blackwater Lightship* has been remodeled or modernised in order to keep pace with the trends of a modern world, houses and towns in *The Heather Blazing* seem to have remained almost untouched by time. The characters' attitudes towards the houses are vague in both novels: they feel the urge to depart from, but at the same time to come back to those familiar houses in an unconscious attempt to get answers and to feel loved. Similarly, as Ireland itself is undergoing its biggest transition along its history from a republican to a modern global nation, it is not odd that these same ambivalent feelings are socially perceived and a tension between modernization and traditions emerge creating for the characters an environment of anguish and nostalgia. This is noticeable in the relationship Eamon has with the Law in the light of the latest cases he deals with at court or in the account Paul gives Helen of life for homosexuals in modern Ireland and abroad.

Another house in a marginal location calls both Eamon and Helen to reflection. One of the most striking effects of the non-stoppable advancing erosion for Eamon is marked by the falling of the front of Mike Redmond's house in both novels, which had taken place just a few months before. This remarkable event makes Eamon tell Carmel that their own house would be next. As Eamon visits the remains of his cousin's house, he becomes aware of time once more:

He saw Mike's house . . . the entire front of the house was missing . . . He went to the edge and looked down. The collapse of the cliff here had made a new pass down to the strand . . . It had been so gradual, this erosion, a matter of time . . . It was all so strange, year after year, the slow disappearance of the one contour to be replaced by another, it was hard to notice that anything had happened until something substantial, like Mike's house, fell down on the strand. There had been other such dramas in the past, other ways to mark and remember the way this coast was being eaten into . . . winter by winter, the hill itself began to disappear until now there was no sign of it . . . (Tóibín, *The Heather* 32-3).

Interestingly, the same image is used in *The Blackwater Lightship* to describe the sight in front of Helen's eyes when she walks down the strand after having talked to her grandmother about Declan's illness: "From here as far as Keatings' the erosion had stopped or slowed down. No one knew why. Years earlier, it had seemed just a matter of time before her grandmother's house would fall into the sea, just as Mike Redmond's white house itself falling, but there was still one house between her grandmother's and the sea" (51). In both novels Eamon and Helen feel the need to walk inside the remains of Mike's house, though each of them fixes their attention on different elements there, and experience different reactions to this scene. While Eamon explores what is left of his cousin's house with nostalgia, Helen just inspects the place with curiosity: "Helen walked through the ruin of the house, the front wall having long since fallen into the sea. She looked at the old chimney and the back wall still in place, and then stood at the edge waiting for the next flash from Tuskar" (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 52). In *The Heather Blazing*, the narrator describes Eamon's visit in this way:

He turned now into this shell of a house and walked into the bedroom which was damp and dark. There was no furniture, but Mike had left a stack of books behind. He looked at them half tempted to take one as a souvenir. They were old novels, a collection of classics . . . Some memories stirred in him, as though he was about to remember the dream he had had . . . When he turned he was shocked by the missing wall, by the bare raw light from the sea. He felt he was trespassing now, and he began to walk down the strand (Tóibín, *The Heather* 33).

The recurrent image of the fall of Mike Redmond's and the Keatings' houses as a direct consequence of the sea erosion in that coastal area near Enniscorthy can be seen as a powerful metaphor for an unavoidable change in Ireland, whose ultimate meaning must be found beyond nature.

In these two novels by Tóibín, some places are often associated by the characters with the world of the past, which is usually nostalgic and regressive. The loss of places that sustain identity, like houses, awake feelings of nostalgia and frustration in human beings, probably because of the emotional impact sites have on people and due to the irrecoverable nature of the past. Usually, the condition of being nostalgic does not have to do with a past as really experienced, but with a past that has been idealized through memory, which makes individuals see it as ordered or harmonious in contrast with the present, often constructed as complicated or difficult.

The contact with a familial place makes the main characters in both novels long for that past that looks better or at least more comprehensible than the present. *The Blackwater Lightship* is deeply nostalgic since its very title. At the beginning of the novel only one

lighthouse -Tuskar Rock- is mentioned, as its light enters through Helen's window while she is staying at her granny's house. But later, when talking to Helen by the strand, Lily tells her daughter that some years before there used to be two lighthouses in that coast:

There used to be two lighthouses here. I don't know what they needed the other for . . . It was taken out of commission by Irish Lights. I don't know exactly when. It was called the Blackwater Lightship. It was weaker than Tuskar. Tuskar was built on rock to last, I suppose. Still, I loved there being two . . . The Blackwater Lightship. I thought it would always be there (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 191-192).

In Lily's frame of mind lighthouses are important since she associates them with loss and past time. As a young woman she used to think about them as the two components of a couple: "I used to think that Tuskar was a man and the Blackwater Lightship was a woman and they were both sending signals to each other and to other lighthouses, like mating calls. He was forceful and strong and she was weaker but more constant, and sometimes she began to shine her light before darkness had really fallen" (192). This memory makes Lily open her heart to her daughter for the first time about how much she had also suffered with her husband's death and say: "You know, I thought your father would live for ever. So I learned things very bitterly" (192).

Lily's comment has a great relevance in the understanding of the title of the novel, which until this conversation remains a mystery. The former existence of the two lightships can be analysed as a representation of 1990s Ireland where past and present coexisted, sometimes trying to find an equilibrium, sometimes clashing. Thus, the missing Blackwater lightship that gives its name to Tóibín's novel can also be understood as a metaphor for what has been lost. Both mother and daughter have been distanced for more than twenty years due to misinterpretations of a painful past that has been idealized. Both women have lost one of the pillars of their lives but have been able to survive, finding within themselves a strength they ignored they had but they still feel incomplete. Ireland has also lost the pillars over which Republican Ireland had been built after independence and although changes were emerging by the early 1990s, many Irish people still felt overcome by them.

In addition, the removal of the Blackwater lightship from the coast could equally be interpreted as Tóibín's vision of 1990s Ireland: Tuskar -which was built on a hard rock so as to last- may represent the essence of Irish tradition and identity and it is this lightship the one that remains on the coast of Cush. The Blackwater Lightship may be understood as a representation of modern Ireland, of what has changed and apparently, disappeared through the modernization of the nation, but in fact, it remains in Irish national identity and memory. The disappearance of The Blackwater Lightship may represent the possibility of



development for Ireland far from the myths of nationalism, although the tension between past and present values continues creating ambivalence and controversy. The image of the two lightships could be thought as Tóibín's criticism of modern Ireland because, as the narrator reveals in the conversations between Paul and Helen, despite some gradual transformations that had started to take place, the socio-political situation of late 1980s-early 1990s Ireland was still ambiguous because the nation's attachment to the myths of the past and discourses of nationalism prevented it from achieving a complete modernization. As the novel exemplifies, changes in religious terms had not been enough to satisfy people's new needs. Besides, homosexuality was still negated or rejected by Catholic families, one of the main critiques Tóibín makes to Ireland in this novel. As he feels it, tradition continues dominating many aspects of Irish people's lives and some more reforms are necessary for Ireland to become effectively pluralistic, open-minded and modern.

*Although *The Blackwater Lightship* is in no sense a historical novel, it is not hard to see in Helen's argument with Lily something of the vexed relation between past and present in contemporary Ireland. When Lily tries to comfort her dying son, she sings an old Gaelic song to him, representing the power of tradition once more.*

For Eamon, that nostalgic distance heals because it makes his past feel complete and coherent, safe from the unexpected -in contrast with the present-, which is chaotic and confusing, as is life in Ireland in the 1990s. Radical transformations at a social and cultural level, such as new family patterns, different values, a more liberal attitude to patriarchal roles and to global identities, the advance of technology and new jobs have all resulted in new modes of Irishness that need to be assimilated in the construction of a new identity. Eventually, Eamon sees that the present is not worse than the past; it is just different, unstable in many aspects, and requires an open questioning mind to accept it and to adapt to it in order to survive. In contrast, for Helen, that look back into her past deepens the separation between her mother and herself. Helen has rejected that painful part of her life by separating herself from her family, especially from her mother, for a decade.

Memory, one of the most common themes in contemporary Irish literature, plays a key role in Tóibín's protagonists' identity. In some cases central characters are paralysed by it to such an extent that neither of them feel free enough so as to act differently from the way they have been behaving for a long time. Eamon has been brought up upon the collective memory that pervaded the construction of the nation under the nationalist period of Irish history in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Besides, he has carried the burden of that strict ideology all

his life which, in changing political years as the 1990s were, make him unable to read the Constitution critically, as a social process rather than as an unquestionable truth. In his adult life he tries to leave his memories aside and avoids talking about them, although they are constantly haunting him and blurring his family bonds. Nevertheless, nice personal memories of his daughter's childhood come to his mind by the end of the novel, allowing him to initiate a promising relationship with his grandson.

The house that has fallen down the beach as a result of erosion, the crumbling land and the removal of one of the traditional lightships on this part of the Irish coast are all symbolic images of collapsing relationships in *The Blackwater Lightship*. The sea, in contrast, is the only constant element in the landscape of Cush, though one that is indifferent to human needs and feelings. Helen separated from Lily since her father's death because she thought her mother had taken him from them, and as she returned for the funeral, Helen received no comfort from her. At the same time, Lily felt that a part of herself had died with her husband and was not able to re-establish a close relationship with neither of her children. The future of the family relationships in this story depends on the capacity of its members to accept each other the way they are and on their maturity to overcome the past. The fact that at the end of the story, after having left Declan at the hospital, Lily returns with Helen to Dublin to meet her daughter's family for the first time suggests the beginning of a mutual understanding and acceptance between both women, the last of Declan's wishes.

In a professional level, Eamon eventually understands that the Irish Constitution is not suitable to solve problems of current times and that it requires some adjustments. This is shown by the fact that he studies American verdicts when analysing his new cases in search of answers the old Irish Constitution can not give him and in that he feels he is not prepared to decide on moral questions that are not explicit in the old Letter. At a personal level, Eamon's life proves to be a cycle of painful deaths he must learn to overcome: first, his mother's eternal absence; then, his father's illness and death, with which he deals with the help of his girlfriend, Carmel.

Although both novels close with an open ending, Helen as well as Eamon eventually seem to understand that certainty erodes with the passing of time in the same way as the Irish coast does. However, it is a destruction that also means a renewal. This awareness opens them to a multiplicity of opportunities, in the same way as contemporary global Ireland has provided new opportunities to Irish people: social and geographical mobility, better job opportunities, openness to the outside world, freedom for choosing and other

possibilities that came from the hand of more democratic and progressive political agendas.

### **3.2 Time in *The Blackwater Lightship***

Space and time are foundational concepts for almost everything we think and do, and as “economic change informs cultural practices” (Harvey, *The Condition* 207), a change in any order of a state politics necessarily leads to a transformation in the constructed conceptions of space and time, in order to accommodate to new social practices that shape new ways of assigning value to them in a certain context.

Hall claims that modern societies are in constant change, which is the main difference between “traditional” and “modern” societies. Anthony Giddens makes a clear distinction between both types: “in traditional societies, the past is honoured and symbols are valued because they contain and perpetuate the knowledge and skills of generations. Tradition is a means of handling time and space, which inserts any particular activity or experience within the continuity of past, present and future, these in turn being structured by recurrent social practices” (qtd in Hall, *Modernity* 599).

Giddens characterises present day societies as not only defined by constant change but also as a highly reflexive form of life in which “social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices” (Giddens, 37-38 qtd in Hall, *Modernity* 599). Therefore, identity or identification can only be understood as “a construction, a process never completed” (Hall, *Modernity* 599). Thinking about uncontaminated “local cultures” is no longer possible since in the late modernity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most of the world countries have become global and identities are being negotiated each day. Today, a multiplicity of identities is at work in Ireland as a result of being in-between of traditional and new values, past and present, the local and the global. Therefore, a fully unified, complete, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy (Hall, *Modernity* 598). Tóibín’s protagonists have difficulty in accepting this idea of identity as a process, as an everchanging condition of human beings. As they realise that the past has gone and that a new future is awaiting them, they begin to accept the ambiguities of Ireland as a changing society on its way to modernization and attempt to accommodate to them and negotiate meanings.

Inasmuch as societies change and develop, they are inevitably transformed from within while they adapt themselves to influences from without. As Ireland entered the capitalist world and started its process of modernization in the 1980s, transformations of this kind emerged. Ireland is arguably not the only state that underwent radical transformations in the last century. But what differentiates Ireland from many other modern nations is the speed at which most of these socio-cultural transformations have taken place. The expression “time-space compression” is used by Harvey (*The Condition* 284) to refer to that sense of overwhelming change in space-time dimensionality, which affects all aspects of cultural and political life: “the experience of it forces all of us to adjust our notions of space and time and to rethink the prospects for social action” (Harvey, *Justice, Nature* 243). He describes this situation as follows:

accelerating turnover time in production entails parallel accelerations in exchange and consumption. Improved systems of communications and information flow, coupled with rationalizations in techniques of distribution . . . , made it possible to circulate commodities through the market system with great speed. Electronic banking and plastic money were some of the innovations that improved the speed of the inverse flow of money (285).

In this context, the important thing is how changes in the modes of production that emphasize the values of disposability and instantaneity affect society in broader terms leading to what Toffler (qtd in Harvey 1990) calls a “throwaway society”; i.e. a society that not only throws away goods but mainly values, life-styles, stable relationships, attachment to things, buildings, places, people, and received ways of doing and being. This makes individuals perceive the dimension of time as shattered, and their thoughts and life experiences as if in fragments of time. Feelings of uncertainty, fragmented identities and reversion to images of a lost past can be mentioned among the main side-effects of such “cultural dislocation” suffered by Irish people as a consequence of so many transformations in a relatively short period of time (Harvey 286).

Advertising and media images that entered Ireland as a result of its incorporation into the global market had a key role in the weakening of patriarchal values and the development of new tastes and desires directly related to the dynamics of capitalism. Harvey argues that such an acceleration in turnover times in production, exchange and consumption produces the loss of a sense of the future since “volatility and ephemerality . . . make it hard to maintain any firm sense of continuity. Therefore, past experience gets compressed into some overwhelming present” (Harvey, *The Condition* 291). The flow of new experiences brought into existence at great speed by progress and technology leads to a profound transformation in human psyche: “this transience creates a temporariness in the structure of both public and personal value systems which in turn provides a context for

the “crack-up of consensus” and the diversification of values within a fragmenting society” (Harvey 286).

Such a portrayal of how the “time-space compression” works summarises some of the several changes that took place in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger years, as exposed in *The Blackwater Lightship*. Transformations have not only shaken Ireland socially and economically since the end of the previous century. They have equally taken place in the Irish landscape, sometimes naturally and other times because of human influence. The economic improvement of the 1990s, for instance, disposed Ireland of some of its landmarks and of many of its former romanticised green hills in the name of progress and modernization. Along the novel only the Tuskar Rock lighthouse is mentioned, but readers later know of the existence of a second one, the Blackwater Lightshipsome years before.

In addition, when Helen enters her mother’s offices on the quays overlooking the old harbour in Wexford in order to communicate her that Declan is in hospital, she can not avoid admiring the luxurious and modern building: “She was surprised when she saw the lift in the hallway of the Wexford Computers building, and surprised, too, by the lighting and tiling and paintwork, which were all modern and cool, as though from a magazine, and not like anything she expected to find on the quayfront in Wexford” (93). Here again Helen is surprised as she has not paid attention to the changes in the architecture of certain areas in Dublin, but faced to it now, she becomes aware of the passing of time, as when she observes the eroding coast. Lily, on her part, has sold her old house and has attempted to bury the painful side of her life through work. She has also lived according to the new times in globalising Ireland, preparing herself for what was coming and then, making use of all her training and skills. However, she has remained psychologically trapped in her past, becoming unable to approach her daughter and to communicate with her son, as she ignores many things related to Declan, too.

The economic boom and a massive access to technology and information undergone by Irish people in the last three decades, can be traced in this novel through the progressive incorporation of modern devices into everyday life and a more comfortable lifestyle enjoyed by the characters. Despite the peripheral location of Dora’s old house, Helen notices that her grandmother lives with some extra comfort now: “in the corner of the kitchen sat a huge television; her grandmother has access to all the English channels as well as the Irish ones” (47), that’s why she is well-informed about current issues around the world, such as AIDS. She has also had the central heating installed in all the rooms of the former guest-house, and she bought a deep-freeze, too. In addition, Lily has given her

mother a mobile phone to keep in touch, which -ironically- Mrs Devereux always keeps turned off as a form of resistance towards Lily's attempt to manage her mother's life. In this way, Dora's age is not an impediment for her to open her mind and accept socio-cultural changes as she seems to receive them with a certain relief because they give her more independence and comfort.

Elderly Mrs Devereux is a tough old lady, sometimes a bit bad-tempered, but very independent, absolutely forthright and never afraid of telling exactly what she thinks. In spite of her advanced age, this woman lives alone in her former guest-house near the cliff in Cush. Along the novel she proves to be very sensible and helpful, always ready to be of use to others. In fact, she is the one who tries to make peace between Helen and Lily, and between herself and her own daughter, sometimes by means of humour or irony. Mrs Devereux defends her independence fiercely when she refuses to move to Wexford, as her daughter wanted. Similarly, she feels very proud of having sold three sites for a very profitable price, without consulting her daughter Lily before making the deal. Dora is also always ready to learn new things and, to Lily's astonishment, she asks Larry -a friend of Declan's- to teach her how to drive.

The ideological and socio-cultural transformations started in the early 1980s in the Irish society, which are exposed along *The Blackwater Lightship*, are a constant reminder of the flow of time for Tóibín's characters and readers. The author does not only portray an ambiguous Ireland on its way to modernization, but he also reinforces this idea of change as he contrasts the old and new values in the way different characters sense them. Firstly, when Helen evokes her days with Declan in their grandparents' house during their father's illness, she remembers watching a TV programme with her grandparents on Saturdays in which different current affairs of life in Ireland along the last three decades were being discussed for the first time. Among them, contraception and divorce as well as women's rights, sexual matters or politics. Secondly, the modernization of Ireland is also portrayed as alternative forms of Irishness for women more actively involved in the productive world. A different social role is assigned to the Irish woman, from a passive, submissive one as a housewife, mother and employee to a more active role in the working forces of the country as a career-woman. All the women in *The Blackwater Lightship* are utterly independent and live complex lives full of responsibility and choice. They are modern, determined, independent and self-sufficient. They are able to provide a comfortable living for themselves and their families.

Thus, Helen is the principal of a comprehensive school; “the youngest principal in the country” (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 11), in fact. She is not only very busy attending meetings in the Department of Education and interviewing prospective teachers, but also as a school headmistress with lots of responsibilities, and as a dedicated mother, wife and housewife. However, although she appears comfortable with her social status, Helen is a very solitary woman as shown in the passage describing a party her husband organises at home: “There would be no friends of hers at the party, nobody from the comprehensive school of which she was principal . . . She had one or two women she knew and liked and saw sometimes, but no close friends” (11). Helen is a clear example of the effects of acceleration in time and rapid transformations of current world in Irish people’s mind: she is busy with her family and demanding job, but she has not equally developed interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the heavy burden of her childhood past has produced a fragmentation of her self that she has not been able to overcome along the following years. Since people in her life have made her feel they would sooner or later leave her, Helen has avoided any other personal attachments apart from her husband, her children and her brother.

Lily, on her part, is an independent, solitary and prosperous business woman, who has achieved her position and recognition due to effort and tenacity. Two years after Helen’s father died, Lily went back to teaching and got a job in the vocational school, with the help of the Fianna Fáil. Soon afterwards, “she began to give commercial courses in the school in the evening, until the designing of these courses to suit the needs of the students and the finding of jobs for those who took part became an obsession with her” (92). Tóibín depicts the progressive Ireland of the 1990s where change and modernity are reflected in work and in the incorporation of technology, all of which had a central role in the economy of the country. Lily coaches young people and adults who need to incorporate the new technologies at work in order to supply the demands of the market. Her successful job is an example of the effects of globalisation in Ireland, made evident since the installation of multinational corporations, especially those dedicated to the production and exportation of software: “then, with the arrival of computers, her mother began to talk to business groups and others about the need to computerise” (92).

The modernization of Irish society is also perceived in different aspects of the lifestyle of Tóibín’s male characters. Young Irish men like Declan and his friends are portrayed in this novel as having great mobility among different European countries. Paul lives in Brussels with his French boyfriend, François. Declan used to visit them regularly and

stayed with them for several weeks, not having an apartment of his own, until his health started to deteriorate in the last two years. In political terms, after the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993, a greater freedom was gained by certain groups considered until then as a minority, such as homosexuals. This is explicitly shown when Larry tells Helen and Dora about his life: “After I qualified, I was involved in a gay group in Dublin, and we organised fund-raising and we started a news sheet, and we had meetings all the time . . . I was around a lot, so the time Mary Robinson<sup>10</sup> invited gay men and lesbians to *Áras an Uachtaráin*, I was on the list and I couldn’t say no” (144).

Contrastively, the novel portrays how within the context of Irish families things have not always been so easy for them. Ireland has been quickly open to economic and working modernization, but as regards socio-cultural changes, especially those related to sexuality - which clash with Catholic values so deeply rooted in Irish society-, it has taken more time to be socially accepted. Thus, *The Blackwater Lightship* portrays how homosexuality had not been fully accepted by the late 1990s in Ireland as some of Tóibín’s characters show their reluctance to transformations of this kind. This is one of the most powerful criticisms the author makes to the way in which Ireland has entered global world, incorporating certain traits

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<sup>10</sup>The first woman President of Ireland (1990-1997).

of modern life but still remaining very attached to old traditions and values.

Tóibín’s novel exposes that even though Irish mothers are said to have a more tolerant attitude to homosexuality in the family in spite of their Catholic faith, Larry, Paul and also Declan have found it very difficult to tell their families about their sexuality. Paul knew he was gay in his teens, but he never told his family about it. When he met François again in his twenties, he brought him home and reintroduced him to all his family, including his brothers, as his partner and lover. He tells Helen: “Only my sister knew I was gay before that, and it was all difficult and emotional” (170). Larry also refers to old taboos in Catholic Ireland with irony: “You know, in my family my brothers and sisters -even the married ones- still haven’t told my parents that they are heterosexual. We don’t talk about sex” (146).

Curiously, of the three women in Declan’s family it is Dora who best understands the situation of homosexuals in a conservative society such as the Irish: “It’s difficult for them, Helen, and it always will be” (142). Television and experience have given the old lady a more tolerant perspective of life and of individuals, and -like Helen- Dora manifests an open-minded attitude towards Declan and his gay friends’ sexuality. She is neither



horrified nor disrespectful but rather friendly with Larry and Paul, in contrast to her daughter Lily who displays a very intolerant attitude, especially towards Paul. Even if Dora refers to Declan's friends as "here's another of them now" (141) -meaning homosexuals- neither Paul nor Larry take it as offensive. And as they were making arrangements for Declan's friends to stay in the old house sharing a room, she exclaims: "I suppose we're all modern now . . . and I'm as modern as anyone, but I would just like to know" (130).

In addition, some other families like François's are depicted as totally open-minded regarding their son's sexual life, as Paul remembers: "His parents were young and he [François] was an only child and they treated us like adults. They had a lot of time for us and they were so polite . . . I loved how straightforward they all were" (166). This passage shows the contrastive attitude towards homosexuality held by societies such as the French or the Belgian ones and that still prevailing in Ireland, something Tóibín emphasizes along the second half of this novel when he gives voice to Declan's friends in order to let them talk about their reality. As for Declan, he had never been able to tell his family about his homosexuality, although Helen had known it for some years and Dora was suspicious about it when Declan had last visited her for Christmas. Lily is the only one who had no idea about Declan's life at first. When she knows about it, she gets angry partly with herself but also with Paul, who dares tell her several painful truths that clearly explain why Paul and François had become for Declan the family he had chosen as an adult. Undoubtedly, it is through Larry and Paul's voices that Tóibín attempts to erase biases against homosexuals in the more tolerant social atmosphere of the 1990s.

*The Blackwater Lightship* is a clear example of the clash between new and old values in contemporary Ireland, showing that although transformations in technology and family life have been rapidly incorporated into Irish life, changes related to religion or sexuality were not so easily accepted and have taken a long time to be assimilated by the majority of its people. Thus, religion is another controversial issue that appears in contemporary Irish literature. Thirty years before, Ireland used to be a homogeneous country in which over 90 per cent of the population were not only born in Ireland, but also white, Catholic and English-speaking. However, globalisation has introduced several modifications in the way religion is professed today. Particularly in this novel, Tóibín lets readers see that Catholic religion is still important for many Irish people but that new forms of approaching it are emerging and gradually being accepted in the new Irish state that claims to be open, tolerant and global in many aspects of life. Traditions seem to be more tightly held in small places than in cities:

Helen had not been to Mass in Blackwater for well over ten years . . . She had forgotten the scene at eleven o'clock Mass: the women in headscarves or mantillas or fancy hats on one side of the church, the men on the other side in suits . . . The respect and the conformity was only broken by visitors, people from Dublin or from towns who walked up the church and sat together as a family . . . Her grandmother, her mother and Paul went to communion, but she sat back and watched as each communicant walked down the church in bowed, concentrated prayer (Tóibín, *The Blackwater* 237).

A clear contrast is presented in this novel between Ireland and other modern societies as regards contemporary religious practices. Paul tells Helen that he and François were part of a group of Catholic gay men in Brussels who met once a week. One of his friends from this group was an ex-priest who knew another priest who could give Paul and François a sort of marriage blessing. He also describes how he finally accepted to do this under three conditions: that they made good confessions before the ceremony, that they went to Mass and Communion every Sunday for a year; and that they told no one about that. This description is once again used by Tóibín as another piece of criticism to religious strictness in his country, which far from including homosexuals into its community, has contributed to separate them from the Church. In my opinion, it can be inferred that by including Paul's comments about how other truly modern nations feel about homosexuality, Tóibín makes his desires for a really tolerant and open Ireland in moral issues quite explicit. Without this, the author does not see Ireland's socio-cultural transformations as complete yet.

So as Helen asks Paul whether the Pope knew about him, Paul tells her this is exactly the sort of things Declan says, and adds: "that's why I left this country, remarks like that. French people, even Belgian people, never talk like that" (176). Helen's words denote the same ambiguities that Ireland itself was undergoing during that decade: eager for a socio-cultural change, but pulled by traditional values and ideologies that require time for a deep transformation to take place. As it can be noticed, the tension between tradition and modernity

is always present in Tóibín's works. The author represents liberal modernity in *The Blackwater Lightship*, reworking the concepts of family and Catholicism, expressing his hope for a "modern reformation of the family around homosexual relationships" but within the moral frame of Catholicism (Ryan 28).

Finally, another important cultural transformation portrayed in *The Blackwater Lightship* is related to language. At the beginning of Tóibín's novel, we are told that Helen's husband, Hugh, who is from Donegal (one of the three counties in Ulster which does not belong to Northern Ireland), had invited the teachers from his "all-Irish school", and other friends and neighbours, to attend an informal party at home, in order to celebrate

“the school’s first year in existence” (10). Hugh is the head of a recently opened school in Dublin where individuals are only taught in Irish instead of English. This sort of schools have been developing in big cities in Ireland along the last decades so as to preserve and revive the Irish language for future generations. The novel depicts how in a few regions of Ireland the vernacular language is still the language of the home. However, the majority of the Irish population have long adopted the English language as their own:

Hugh spoke Irish to the boys, to his mother and his brothers and sisters, and to at least half of his friends. He insisted that Helen understood more than she pretended to understand, but it was not true. She found his Donegal accent in Irish too difficult, and she made out very little of what he said (10).

Helen gets irritated when two or three of Hugh’s friends continue to speak to her in Irish, “indifferent to the fact that she could not follow, but it was an irritation which would fade easily” (11). At the party, Hugh and his friend talked in Irish and there was a female singer Hugh admired a lot, who was also from Donegal and had a pure Donegal accent. In this way, the author makes a short reflection on the topic of the Irish language, another important parameter of Irish identity for old nationalists: in spite of recent efforts to revive the native language, just a few people in Ireland still speak Irish today, and if they do, they usually reserve it for familiar conversations, as an attempt to avoid the loss of their original language.

Finally, *The Blackwater Lightship* shows how language, Catholicism and traditional family models seem to enter into a clash with new models of Irishness that try to reconcile Irish traditional values with alternative forms adapted to current customs and lifestyles. In Tóibín’s post-nationalist and liberal reconstruction of Irish identity, individuals open spaces for ideological and cultural freedom against the nationalist frame that kept Irish individuals subjected to old values for such a long time. Thus, Tóibín seems to portray a late 1990s Irish society where past and present live in a constant tension that demands a day-to-day negotiation of meanings and values on the part of individuals and institutions. In this way, time-place connections take shape in the emergence of new models of families and marital relationships that are shown as part of Ireland becoming global and modern, and also in urban architectural improvement that contrasts with isolated and eroding areas by the sea, which seem to have been forgotten by state and individuals, but which are the real places in which the passing of time becomes clear for Tóibín’s characters. In addition, the socio-cultural transformations which have given Irish women the opportunity to have a life of their own beyond domestic duties, the mobility of people within and outside Ireland

are all examples of Ireland's recent transformations that have been possible thanks to the application of progressive politics.

### **3.3 Time in *The Heather Blazing***

Old conceptions of identity that considered the individual as a unified subject were useful to maintain a stable social order. However, they have been in decline in the last decades, leading to the emergence of new forms of identity as well as the fragmentation of the modern individual as a unified subject (Hall, *Modernity* 597). This process results from the structural change modern societies have been undergoing since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which has provoked a fragmentation of our cultural landscape and the consequent dislocation of individuals. One could argue that this loss of "the sense of self" (Hall, 598) we are experiencing has not only displaced us from our comfort zone as individuals but also as society, producing ambiguities and instability in the social order. Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing* constitutes an exploration of the tensions and ambivalences that emerged during the transitional period of the 1990s, when the Irish writer started his literary career. Tóibín's revisionist critique can be traced to the three pillars over which the republican nationalist discourse was built along a great part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: family, nation and catholicism and it shows the controversial relationship between the republican ideology, the constitutional discourse, history and social reality in modern Ireland.

The historical atmosphere that impregnates this novel can be grasped from its very title, taken from "*Boolavogue*"<sup>11</sup>, a celebrated ballad associated with the Irish Rebellion of 1798<sup>12</sup> and which takes its name from a small village near Enniscorthy. Enniscorthy has unquestionably a great resonance in Tóibín's mind, not only because his childhood's remembrances are tied to this town but also because of its role in the history of the nation.

Tóibín's family history informs the context of this novel. In a 2009 interview Tóibín claimed that Eamon's childhood had been narratively constructed with some autobiographic elements, others based on Tóibín's father's childhood mixed in with that of the author, and some merely fictional elements. Thus, Eamon's childhood also develops in Enniscorthy Co. Wexford. Besides, Eamon's father's name was Michael and he was a teacher of Irish and History in a secondary school of the Christian Brothers. He was an active supporter of the Fianna Fáil and founded the Museum of the Castle in that town - "the headquarters of the English down all the years" (Tóibín, *The Heather* 18). In Harte's

words, this event represents “a strategic attempt to memorialize the past by fixing its meaning to accord with a triumphalist

contemporary nationalist agenda . . . The imposition of a nationalist interpretation on the

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<sup>11</sup> Also known as the “Wexford Anthem”. An Irish rebel song written by Patrick Joseph McCall in 1898, commemorating the Irish Rebellion of 1798, when Father John Murphy from Boolavogue, led his parishioners in routing the Camolin Cavalry on May 26, 1798. The Wexford insurgents were eventually defeated at the Battle of Vinegar Hill. Father Murphy and the other rebel leaders were executed. The name of Tóibín’s second novel is taken from its lyrics : “A Boolavogue as the sun was setting, O’er the bright May meadow of Shelmalier, A rebel hand set **the heather blazing**, and brought the neighbours from far and near, The Father Murphy from old Kilcormack spurred up the rock like a warning cry, Arm, arm, he cried, for I’ve come to lead you, for Ireland’s freedom we fight or die”. Sources: <http://www.irish-folk-songs.com/boolavogue-lyrics-and-chords.html> / <http://worldmusic.about.com/od/irishsonglyrics/p/Boolavogue-Lyrics-And-History.htm>

<sup>12</sup> The 1798 Rebellion was the most widespread of all the Irish Rebellions. Eleven counties in Ulster, Leinster and Connacht rose against English rulers over six months in that year. ‘The United Irishmen’, which included Protestant, Catholic and Dissenters in its aim to remove English control from Irish affairs, wanted to secure a reform of the Irish parliament. The Crown forces attacked Vinegar Hill, overlooking Enniscorthy, which was then occupied by several rebels and camp followers. It was the last major attempt by the rebels to defend ground against the crown forces. County Wexford saw widespread atrocities by the rebels during the rebellion. Massacres of loyalist prisoners took place at the Vinegar Hill camp and on Wexford bridge. After the defeat of the Irish, the Scullabogue Barn Massacre occurred, where about 200 mostly Protestant men, women, and children were imprisoned in a barn which was then set alight. Their bloody rebellion of 1798 resulted in the 1801 Act of Union, which brought Ireland tighter still under British control. Sources: <http://homepage.tinet.ie/~tipperaryfame/rebel798.htm/> and <http://www.britannica.com/event/Irish-Rebellion-Irish-history-1798>

events of 1798 was a crucial part of his father’s mission, especially since the meaning of the rebellion was hotly contested by subsequent generations” (“History, Text” 58). Harte alludes to the fact that during De Valera’s dispensation, Eamon’s father dedicated himself to the transmission of a strongly nationalist interpretation of Wexford’s revolutionary past through his work, and was a writer of historical articles for the local newspaper.

The setting of *The Heather Blazing* is a place of particular interest for Tóibín since an essential part of Irish history took place there. Enniscorthy is a 1505 year-old town that has witnessed some of the most important historical facts that took place in Ireland in the last centuries, which have played a pivotal role in its way to emancipation from the British Crown. Enniscorthy was the battlefield of the famous 1798 Vinegar Hill battle. Therefore, this place is

not just a name for a revisionist like Tóibín. It turns out to be significant in a post-nationalist novel that shows the ideological development of a man (Eamon Redmond) who grew up among strong members of the Fianna Fáil, like his father, uncles and his grandfather, “the last of the Fenians”<sup>13</sup> (Tóibín, *The Heather* 76), who had an active participation in the 1916 Easter Rising<sup>14</sup>.

In religious terms, Enniscorthy also has a central place in Ireland, since it became the Episcopal Centre of the Diocese of Ferns in County Wexford in 1904. In *The Heather Blazing*

Enniscorthy's gothic Cathedral of Saint Aidan's plays an essential role in Eamon's childhood, since he usually attended Mass with his father and he also served the 8 o'clock Mass in that church every morning for several years as a child. The cathedral is also the place where Eamon's father has his first stroke, an event that deeply affects the main character. It not only marks the passage from his childhood to adolescence for him but also initiates his transformation from a devote boy into an adult man who feels that he has completely lost his faith in God.

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<sup>13</sup> The Fenians were members of the so-called Fenian movement in Ireland, America and England. They had only one desire for Ireland: independence from British rule. Some people in Ireland believed that the government in London had deliberately not aided Irish people during the Great famine (a form of genocide), so the only hoped for Ireland was a complete separation from Great Britain. The name 'Fenians' became an umbrella term to cover all the groups associated with wanting independence for Ireland. By the very nature of what they wanted, those elements within the Fenian movement who were prepared to use violence to advance their cause, had to remain secret. Source: <http://laohtrinity4.tripod.com/id27.html>

<sup>14</sup> Irish republican insurrection against British government in Ireland, which began on Easter Monday, April 24, 1916, in Dublin. It was planned by seven leaders of the revolutionary society called Irish Republican Brotherhood, who were executed after the rising. Eamon De Valera, who later became a prominent figure in Irish politics, also participated in the Rising but the fact that he was an American citizen saved him from being executed with his brothers in arms  
Sources: <http://www.irishcentral.com/roots/history/50-facts-about-the-easter-rising-which-began-99-years-ago-today-photos>  
and <https://www.britannica.com/event/Easter-Rising>

As Hall claims, "national identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to representation" (Hall 612). Thus, Eamon's personality is built through an interconnected set of theological, historical and constitutional discourses: "He is an almost identikit product of Irish Catholic nationalism, being born into a family with a history of republican activism stretching back through the 1916 Easter Rising to the nineteenth-century Fenian movement", claims Harte ("The Endless Mutation" 341). Eamon's identity is mainly developed through reading and writing: "destined from birth to uphold traditional republican values, Eamon is taught to read history as a closed text comprising a stable narrative of reliable truths" (Harte, "History, Text" 58). In this sense, Hall argues that a nation is not only a political entity but also "a system of cultural representation" (612). In this way, until Eamon becomes an old man, the only form of Irishness he knew was that which came to be represented by Irish national culture along most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Educated to guard the collective memory of Ireland, Eamon himself has been a Fianna Fáil

supporter all his life, but in his middle-age he becomes aware of his family's participation in the bloody events on behalf of nationalism that took place in Dublin during his childhood and before his birth. He realises his grandfather and uncles' participation in the revolutionary events before the formation of the new State, including the burning of houses

in Cork (1919-1923). Eamon's father had not been part of these facts, but he knew the names of those involved in those crimes, as Eamon realises later in life. This is a shocking fact for the Irish judge that leaves him with more doubts than certainties about the meaning of Irish nationalism and his own family's revolutionary ideas. And although he has many questions about those days that could be answered by Aunt Margaret, he decides to bury the past instead of deepening it as it would not change what had happened.

In his professional life, Eamon's success lies in his power of argumentation. It is first portrayed in the speech he wrote for De Valera in his youth, which opens for him a number of possibilities for his future ascending career and later, in the verdicts he writes at Court. Contrastively, he is not good at communicating with other people verbally or at expressing his real feelings to those close to him, a trait of his personality that has accompanied him since his early childhood: as a boy he "learned to wait, to be quiet, to sit still," (Tóibín, *The Heather* 14) while his father was teaching, as he took Eamon to school because there was nobody to take care of him. Eamon cannot speak of love, loss or loneliness: "It's really hard for me to talk" (227).

Starting from the public sphere of Eamon's life, Tóibín moves into his private realm by showing how socio-cultural issues and laws have affected Irish subjects at a personal level. Through the professional life of his central character as a judge of the Four Courts in Dublin Tóibín portrays the consequences of tightly held traditional ideologies on a society that in times of change is still attached to institutional rigidities and constitutional imperatives instead of responding reflectively to the new rights and demands of a pluralistic citizenry. *The Heather Blazing* shows that whereas traditional institutions - family, Church and State- have suffered deep modifications in the last decades in Ireland, the Judicial system has not been modernised accordingly. Consequently, Eamon is forced to study the laws of other countries due to the lack of legal antecedents that would let him give a suitable verdict. At the same time, he is fully aware of the political implications that many of his decisions may have in the future, in the still on-going reorganization of the new Ireland: "This judgement, too, would appear in the Irish Reports and would be cited when the rights of the citizen to state services were being dicussed" (Tóibín, *The Heather* 4).

At the beginning of the first two chapters, Eamon is portrayed in his office before going to Court to solve a case, the last one before his summer recess. In the first case at Court, Eamon faces the dilemma "State duties" vs "individual rights". He must make a decision about a little handicapped boy who will need constant care for the rest of his life.

The hospital wants to release the child legally, which would leave the boy's quality of life depending upon the economic possibilities of his family. Eamon's detachment becomes evident in the coolness with which he applies the law. As Eamon reads his verdict aloud, summarizing all the arguments exposed by each part and citing antecedents of similar American cases, he explains that "there was nothing in the Constitution which either stated or implied that the citizen had an unalienable right to free hospital treatment . . . the state had freedoms and rights as well as the citizen" (7). The result of Eamon's judgement is clear: the hospital would be able to discharge the boy and the parents would have the responsibility of looking after a handicapped son with the few resources they had. Eamon does not hesitate in the exposition of his arguments. However, in order to justify their consistency, he adds a clause to his judgement recommending that "the Health Board should ensure, in every possible way, that the child's welfare be secured once he was discharged from the hospital" (8).

In addition, as he looks at the boy's mother and realises that she would have almost no chance if she appealed to the Supreme Court, Eamon decides to put a stay on costs and tells the lawyers that he will consider the matter in the new term. Eamon's ambiguity in his judicial decision has to do with the new paradigms emerging in Ireland in the 1990s: many laws were becoming obsolete and unable to fulfil people's current needs. Undoubtedly, the Constitution written in 1937 needed a revision to be able to provide answers as the ones Eamon was not able to find in the application of the laws he knew in depth to new situations. Time has passed and brought certain social changes in Ireland but Irish laws have not been modified accordingly, producing this sort of conflicts and contradictions.

In Eamon's second case, Tóibín approaches the 1937 Irish Constitution, as Eamon reflects about the concept of family. A sixteen-year-old girl who goes to a Catholic school is expelled from the institution when she becomes pregnant, and she will not be admitted after giving birth to her baby in order to finish her last year at the secondary school. Both the girl and her mother seek a court order instructing the school to take her back, pleading discrimination and stigmatization. The school principal exposes her reasons for that decision as well as the divided opinions among parents. Eamon observes: "neither of the protagonists in the case had broken the law. And that was all he knew: the law, its letter, its traditions, its ambiguities, its codes. Here, however, he was being asked to decide on something more fundamental and now he realized that he had failed and he felt afraid" (85). After listening carefully to all the testimonies, Eamon understands that this case is all about moral questions: "the right of an ethos to prevail over the right of an individual.



Basically, he was being asked to decide how life should be conducted in a small town” (90). As Harte observes, “each of these cases reflects the shifting moral, social, and political landscape of contemporary Ireland, highlights a fundamental disjunction between the imagined version of Irishness posited in the constitution and the changing identity of the citizens who make up the nation state” (“History, Text” 59). From his point of view, *The Heather Blazing* constitutes a critical yet moderate exploration of the tensions and anxieties which emerge in a state “preoccupied with being rather than becoming”, in which the values of an imagined nation predominate over those of a complex, changing society (55-56).

While working on his judgement, “Eamon realized more than ever that he had no strong moral views, that he had ceased to believe in anything” (Tóibín, *The Heather* 90). As a consequence of his loss of faith in all sorts of things, all his beliefs collapse and his whole identity faces a crisis. Eamon reflects on what is beyond the law and natural justice:

And beyond that again there was the notion of right and wrong, the two principles that governed everything and came from God . . . the idea of God seemed more clearly absurd to him than ever before; the idea of a being whose mind put order on the universe, who watched over things, and whose presence gave the world a morality which was not based on self-interest, seemed beyond belief (85-86).

In this second case, the idea of family is approached as a cultural institution regulated by moral and political discourses through the voice of the school authorities and some parents, all of whom represent a conservative conception of family restricted to marriage between a man and a woman, and including their children born in wedlock. The 1937 Irish Free State Constitution, still effective in the early 1990s, conceives the family as “the basic unit in society” (Tóibín, *The Heather* 91), but it does not define what a family is. It claims that “The State guarantees to protect the 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” (Article 41, Paragraph 1).

Reality, however, proves that the concept of family is more complex than what laws can coldly determine, but appropriate words for a case, such as “charity, mercy, forgiveness” (91), had no legal status for the Court. Eamon realises that beyond the nature of the case and the questions it raises about society and morality, it is “the world in which these things happened which left him uneasy, a world in which opposite values lived so close to each other” (90). While revising “the sacred text” (90) of the Irish Constitution (*Bunreacht na hEireann*) Judge Redmond wonders what a family is today. The 1937 Constitution understood the term as a man, his wife and their children. But that was what the family had meant in the past. Now it is Eamon’s job to re-define that concept: “could

not a girl and her child be a family?" (91). At the same time, Eamon is worried about the public consequences of his decision: "he thought about the consternation it would cause among his colleagues, a broadening of the concept of the family" (91). Another dilemma for him is that according to the Constitution, the family is a "moral institution possessing unalienable rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law" (91). So, "did the girl have rights arising from her becoming a mother, thus creating a family, greater than the rights of any institution?" (91). On the other hand, the novel shows that moral discourses are less strict for men since no one wanted to expel the boy. In this way, by making all these contradictions visible "Tóibín de-stabilizes canonical definitions through his revisionist agenda and his inscription of alternative forms of family" (Carregal-Romero 1).

Eamon's reflections make him aware of not being prepared to deal with some cases that require more than the application of law: "he was still unhappy about the case because he had been asked to interpret more than the law, and he was not equipped to be a moral arbiter" (Tóibín, *The Heather* 92). Eamon is not certain about right and wrong but he does not want to let the court know about it. He is divided between what the obsolete Constitution prescribes and new realities that do not fit any law contained in it. In Harte's words, Eamon is troubled by cases that expose profound discrepancies between the authorized narratives of moral and constitutional meaning laid down by Church and state and the growing liberalism of a society from which he feels increasingly alienated ("History, Text" 56). Unable to negotiate old and new values in the new socio-cultural context of the 1990s, he tries to conceal his fear of change by making conservative judgements, although he can not avoid feeling he is not acting right. Eamon eventually decides in favour of the school authorities, denying the pregnant girl 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 way, the girl who has decided to have her baby alone is punished instead of supported.

Past and present, old and new values coexisting in contemporary Ireland are represented in Eamon's relationship with his daughter, Niamh. She resents his father's position fiercely, as she herself is a single mother, so she asks him if he thought she should have been expelled as well. Niamh is angry with him as she realises her father thinks that unmarried mothers shouldn't be allowed to go to school because she knows what it is like to be a single mother in Ireland. As usual, Eamon becomes paralysed by situations like this which shake his knowledge of the law and ends up acting in the way tradition expects him

to do. This is not the first time that Eamon's fear of change moves him to consider the law over the current reality of Ireland in order to preserve the sociopolitical status quo.

Tóibín's fiction unveils the inconsistencies and contradictions prevailing by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in what is supposed to be a source of absolute truth: the constitutional text, which has suffered a number of Amendments since 1992 to the present in order to adapt to political and social transformations in modern Ireland predicting, in some way, the changes that would occur after that year, in which this novel was published. *The Heather Blazing* also exposes the paradox that the legal and religious institutions which are believed to defend family act in opposition to the values they are supposed to protect.

At the beginning of the third part of the novel, Tóibín's protagonist faces History. The chapter initiates with Eamon being interviewed by a historian he had known for some years, who was doing research now on the response of the Irish government to the violence in Northern Ireland (Tóibín, *The Heather* 177). The historian wants certain facts to be confirmed, though Eamon tells him very little. Eamon had written a number of confidential reports for the Irish government early in 1972 advising it on how to "respond to a concerted campaign by the IRA" (177). Eamon's recommendations were pragmatically partitionist (Harte 63), as he had warned the government never to allow public opinion to become inflamed in the Republic by events within its own borders. For him, the north had to be considered as a place apart (Tóibín, *The Heather* 178). Such a piece of advice puts an end to the claims of northern nationalists to be part of that same nation, for which it was technically unconstitutional in that it contravened the republic's territorial claim to the whole island as expressed in the constitution (Harte, "History, Text" 64).

While Eamon talks to the historian about Enniscorthy and his family's participation in the events of 1916 and the War of Independence, the man tries to obtain information about the judge's father and the Civil War. Without providing detailed explanations, Eamon says he was not sure his father had been in the civil war as it was never talked about. Eamon's father knew who had done some of the killings in Enniscorthy, but he had never told anyone (Tóibín, *The Heather* 180). For a long time, Eamon had been tempted to ask his elderly Aunt Margaret about a distant echoe in his mind: "There was a great deal he wanted to know, of which he possessed only snatches now, things which would disappear with her death . . . He realized that he would never know fully what went on" (Tóibín, *The Heather*, 61). But after listening to some stories the historian tells him, Eamon decides it is better to be silent about certain things that have been buried in the past, as his father had done.

This event shows Tóibín's protagonist's inner growth from an inheritor of traditional Republican values into a man able to see the fragmentations and absences surrounding the nationalist version of Irish history that he had been taught as a child as if it were a stable narrative of immutable truths. But now, he realises that the more he tries to get to the essence of this venerated Irish past, the more he finds himself unable to achieve the truth. He feels frustrated in his attempts to find out definite meanings, which leads him to the unspoken conclusion that the nationalist text of History and the text of the Constitution are open to multiple interpretations.

*The Heather Blazing* is essentially an exploration of the dilemma of how to run a society and it expresses the contradictions that converge in Eamon's mind, whose origins lay in the fact that this protagonist belongs to the first generation of rulers of a new state when its institutions were still being formed. This situation provokes uncertainty about what should be considered as morally correct and acceptable and what should not now.

The rapid transformations that took place in the Ireland of the 1990s have had a remarkable impact on the country's cultural and social life, as it is represented in the so called "post-nationalist" literature. Socio-cultural and political changes of the magnitude that have shaken the Irish foundations in the last three decades do not take place all of a sudden. Ideologies so strongly rooted in a nation's identity are not replaced or modified without an accompanying transformation of the political culture. The story in *The Heather Blazing* represents what could happen when ideology falls apart. Eventually, Eamon understands that the Fiánna Fail ideology he has been brought up with is just one possible way of telling the Irish history, but not the only way to understand society. There is no longer one truth in modern Ireland but a multiplicity of truths coexisting both in society and in individuals. Tóibín portrays how a national culture is a discourse that functions as a system of representation and how national identities that used to be coherent, unified and homogeneous are now being dislocated and fragmented by the processes of globalization, as Stuart Hall states (613).

## CONCLUSION

As I was planning my project of thesis, I decided to deepen the knowledge I had achieved after my first approach to the Irish literature through a comparative analysis of two novels written by the Irish writer Colm Tóibín. I decided to explore the characteristics that seem to define the contemporary Irish novel of the last twenty years, as well as the way in which the categories of identity and time-space work hand in hand in social change. Considering the nature of my research, I decided to follow a Socio-critical approach as well as to include the valuable input of Cultural Studies, since they appeared as the most valid methodologies for my purpose. My selection of Tóibín's novels obeyed to the fact that he is one of the main representatives of this generation of contemporary Irish writers

The two novels I chose for this research work, *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship*, are different in terms of plot and structure. However, both of them deal with life today in Ireland and reveal in what ways the whole range of socio-cultural, political and economical transformations having taken place in that insular country in the last two decades have affected the lives of people living in South Ireland. Naturally, so many changes in such a short time demand a process of adaptation on the part of its inhabitants, resulting in the reconstruction of their identity, not only at a personal but also at a national level.

In general terms it can be said that considered separately, each novel reflects different aspects of life in the New Irish State. However, considered together, as part of the same reality, it could be thought that these two novels offer quite a complete panorama of current Ireland. Tóibín seems to have captured in these literary works snapshots of the Irish society of

the nineties in a wide range of aspects, including the institutional, religious, historical, technological and even the moral one. But, above everything else, a substantial change in values and traditions in Ireland can also be inferred through the reading Tóibín makes of the changes in his own country, which has clearly produced a sense of confusion and uncertainty in many people, as reflected through the main characters of those novels.

On the one hand, *The Heather Blazing*, published in 1992, focuses mainly in the portrayal of the new Irish State, still under development. Therefore, neither the political nor the judicial or social institutions of the State have been able to solve the ambivalences and contradictions that still persist in a nation that has been shaken from its very basis by recent socio-political transformations. Ireland is trying to establish a new worldwide image

as a nation, one that fits in the globalized world it is part and parcel of now. The task is not easy. It requires an open mind, tolerance, time and common sense on the part of its inhabitants who, as social actors of the New State, have been forced to rebuild their former identity in order to adapt to the new social order.

Modernization, globalization, a stable democracy with a not so conservative government as De Valera's have certainly produced huge changes in their lifestyles. The economic boom Ireland has been undergoing since the so called "Celtic Tiger", has help spread the technology of information and communication along the whole nation, with the consequent changes in other aspects of life, such as family ties, religion and morality. Tóibín's novels reflect that change has also brought several advantages for Irish citizens: different working and professional opportunities, higher incomes, high levels of consumerism, more prosperity, freedom for groups considered until that moment as "minorities", equal rights for women and other social groups, and an urban modernization that produced a clearly cut separation between the urban and the natural landscapes. However, all these transformations have also led to an uncritical analysis of globalization and its effects on Ireland, together with an unequal distribution of wealth for some social classes.

No doubt the architectural modernization was not only material; it was accompanied by the emergence of new urban cultural forms and different lifestyles, which did not expand into marginal areas near de coast of Wexford, where both stories are set. Life in those remote places goes on being as the protagonists remember, almost unchangeable. This is why people and places look the same for Eamon in *The Heather Blazing*, as he drives from Dublin to the coast watching the surrounding landscape, giving him the impression that time seems not to have passed in those far away regions. However, life in the cities has abruptly changed in two decades' time, producing a sort of dislocation and instability among middle-aged and elderly Irishmen and Irishwomen mainly, since the pillars over which their nationhood and personal lives had been built for years had started to collapse or at least to show many fissures. In other words, characters experience a sort of dislocation in the vastness of the urban space, a personal alienation; this is why they need to appeal to nature. But natural spaces do not only have a healing role for human beings. In fact,

landscapes in literature are signifying systems that help characters in their evolution, contributing in this way to their identity construction. Characters like Tóibín's are able to reconstruct their identity at the end of the novels because they are rooted in a place: the

space of childhood; that is, the space of mind that functions as a container of memories and to which we assign a set of values (Tuan's notion of topophilia).

For Tóibín, the most meaningful relationship with buildings seems to be placed in the domestic space, which he associates with feelings of support, happiness, sadness or abandonment. Houses in Tóibín's novels are also places of ambivalence and mixed feelings: they arise in characters a strong desire for returning, as well as a longing for escaping. The old familial house of his grandmother is the place Declan chooses to spend his last days; but it is also the space where all the characters feel inclined to confidences, to revealing aspects of their lives that until that moment had remained in the private sphere, thus contributing to the improvement of human relationships and the formation of new bonds that lead to mutual understanding and tolerance.

In addition, for many centuries Ireland was a strongly patriarchal and rural nation, enclosed in its own idiosyncrasy, with scarce contact with the outside world. The familial institution, the property of the land and their Catholic faith were some of its greater values and sources of Irish national and personal pride. But with the economic progress, things started to change. The urban family is different from the rural family: there have been substantial transformations with regard to feelings and familial organization. Ireland's opening to the rest of the world in the late eighties has been accompanied by a rather massive immigration wave entering this friendly country, attracted by better working opportunities, especially for foreign investment and industrial development. Therefore, factors such as globalization and the consequent contact of Ireland with other countries and cultures have also contributed to its "contamination" in terms of values, traditions, customs, lifestyles and even language. In a word, they have modified its national identity. This was the price Ireland had to pay in order to become progressive, prosperous and modern, as many of its European neighbours.

Thus, Colm Tóibín reflects on the consequent feelings of frustration, anxiety and the sense of social chaos resulting from all this situation through the behaviour of the protagonist of *The Heather Blazing*, Eamon Redmond, who is deeply affected by many of those transformations, both as a man and as a judge. And this is when he is faced to situations where the existence of opposite values and ideologies in the postmodern Irish society comes to light, with little chance of solving ambivalences, that he realizes how much everything has changed, and feels he is not prepared to judge situations that require more than the mere application of the law. He has stopped to believe in everything (even God and morality, right or wrong), because in a postmodern society there is no longer a

unique truth as he had been taught, but many truths, different possibilities and opposing but equally valid points of view, in which elements from the past and the present can coexist rather harmoniously in the new society.

On the other hand, in *The Blackwater Lightship*, Tóibín seems to focus on representations of socio-cultural and economic transformations as those taking place in Ireland since the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a more intimate and touching way, dealing with controversial topics such as fragmented relationships within the family, sickness and even homosexuality in the contemporary Ireland of the nineties. But despite these differences, in the two stories the author is involving readers in the reflection of how those changes have modified Irish people's lives.

Both novels have psychologically complex main characters, endowed with deep interior lives, that makes it sometimes difficult to comprehend them. Both stories show the frailty of life and human relationships; they are full of death, loss, pain, family secrets, intense emotion and sympathy, symbolism, clear as well as distorted memories and nostalgia for past times, all of which become alive as the protagonists go near the sea and observe the eroded coast. Only then they realize the destructive effect time has on the natural landscape, in the same way it has on human beings. As the past and present of these characters are confronted through self-reflection and remembrances in that contact with the beautiful Irish geography, they realize that neither familiar places to which their childhood memory is attached to nor the life they once had can last forever. They must forget and forgive, or at least accept the past the way it was and look for a hopeful future.

Tóibín's novels tend to be stories dealing with universal topics that are part of all human beings' life experience, but surrounded by the rich Irish landscape which really has a fascinating effect on contemporary Irish writers, since its description occupies a great deal of many contemporary fictions, and is always associated with the emotional state of the characters. Tóibín's are stories of Irish people of recent generations, set both in his native Ireland and abroad, and are always written in a very transparent but deeply meaningful language. And they are all connected with the idea of home, family relationships, human suffering and an ambivalent desire on the part of his protagonists to return to their homeland, the place where their inner self inhabits. In addition, the Ireland Tóibín writes about in his novels is always the same: Enniscorthy, County Wexford -his birthplace-, where all his main characters are psychologically tied, too.



Conversely, it can be said that as social practice the novel reflects, more than any other literary genre, the socio-historical context where it is born and at the same time, it is better understood through it. Particularly in the case of Irish literature, Nicholas Allen (1995) claims that there is neither Irish literature without history nor Irish history without literature, because our understanding of twentieth-century Ireland is cultural. This is so because in the Bakhtinian conception, novels have a dialogical nature and are never neutral, but composed of a number of ideological discourses that represent diverse visions of the world. And it is through the voice of the characters and the narrator that a wide range of even opposing perspectives representing different social groups become tangible. This explains why there is no longer a unique meaning but a multiplicity of meanings that can be created around a piece of literature today, as there is neither a definite universal truth nor grand narratives in postmodern times. The contemporary novel also reflects that philosophical reality.

Besides, as Tóibín himself argues, “Irish fiction is full of dislocations and displacement” (Foster, 1999:1), partly because the nation where it emerges is still in the process of formation, as it is seen in *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship*, or because the history of Ireland itself is full of discontinuities. All these factors provide the contemporary Irish fiction with a unique style: it is not about classical romantic stories ending in a wedding or with a closed happy ending. That is not the purpose of Irish literature today. Tóibín believes that Irish writers’ approach to fiction nowadays is the way it is because it has been shaped by a desire to explain “the national mood” and that Irishness is, for a writer from his country, the condition of being involved in the Irish situation, something Irish writers of any genre undoubtedly do. In his inclusive mind, Irish novels are not only those written by Irish people wherever they live and work -if they are concerned with Ireland-, but also those by non-Irish people resident in Ireland but dealing with Irish matters, too.

Moreover, one of the most important characteristics of modern and postmodern narrative, is the exploration of characters’ subjectivity and states of consciousness. However, there is an essential difference between both periods. While modernist literature considers fragmentation and subjectivity as an existential crisis, as an internal conflict or as a problem to be solved by the author, for postmodernists the artist cannot solve this chaos, so the only solution is to play within it. Thus, Tóibín exploits this characteristic in his two novels, where main characters are involved in traumatic situations that seem not to have a solution. The only possibility of freeing themselves is through a retrospective process in

which they are able to face their past and come to terms with painful facts from their childhood and early youth, that have been confusing and also interpreted by them in a distorted way. Consequently, Tóibín's characters have grown up as isolated, distant people even from their closest affections and unable to express love. Forgiveness is the only way to overcome their crises of identity and look into a hopeful future. And here again we find another feature of contemporary Irish fiction: it is a writing about the past and the present, containing even opposing elements of both, but with a clear look into the future.

Furthermore, even the conception of "nationalism" has changed in the new Irish state. Neither the state nor liberalism have any interest in recovering the "revolutionary" element of Irish nationalism. The new conception of nationalism as a movement, and the vision of the nation that emerges from this, is one that gives priority to identity and diversity, at the expense of other notions like those of class and class struggle. Being so, the greater freedom won by the lesbian and gay communities has become an important element in the liberal conception of Ireland as a tolerant, progressive and modern society.

Finally, the two novels are stories of the loss of a beloved one, of characters trying to reconstruct their lives without them, to smooth differences that affect mutual understanding, to complete their sometimes unsuccessful search for emotional fulfillment. They are stories dealing with universal topics such as love, loss, life and death, right or wrong; narratives about people trying to fit in a sometimes hostile and fragmented society. They are characters who are concerned with questions of identity, an identity that must be reconstructed day after day in contemporary Ireland, represented by Tóibín as the place where the universal and paradoxical contradictions of the human being manifest themselves.

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