

Brooklyn (novel) Study Guide

Brooklyn (novel) by Colm Tóibín

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Plot Summary

NOTE: Due to the structure of this novel, this study guide references page numbers rather than paragraph numbers. This study guide specifically refers to the September 2015 Scribner Trade Paperback Edition of “Brooklyn” by Colm Toibin.

“Brooklyn” is a historical romance novel by Colm Toibin that follows young Irish immigrant Eilis Lacey’s settling in, and romantic experiences in Brooklyn. When the novel begins, World War II has not been over for long. Work is hard to come by in Ireland, especially in small towns like Enniscorthy where Eilis has been born and raised. In her late teens or early twenties, Eilis is studying bookkeeping and only hopes to one day have steady work, like her older, beautiful sister, Rose. Rose works for the offices in Davis’s Mills, while their three brothers have gone to England to find work with their father dead and their mother in poor health. Eilis fully expects to soon be married and raising a family in her hometown.

When Father Flood, a native Irishman who has moved to Brooklyn to head up a local parish there comes back to visit Enniscorthy, Rose invites him over for dinner. Knowing that Eilis’s prospects are grim, Father Flood and Rose both encourage Eilis to allow Father Flood to sponsor her in Brooklyn, where she may take on work at Bartocci’s department store while continuing her education. Eilis agrees after her mother gives her blessing upon learning that Father Flood’s parish is safe and friendly. A few months later, Eilis sets sail for New York.

Eilis takes up a room at Miss Kehoe’s boarding house, where Miss Kehoe becomes something of a second mother to her, and where Father Flood continues to check up on her. Eilis begins work as a salesgirl at Bartocci’s, knowing that the possibility for advancement is great. She is anxious to work hard and make something of herself. Although Eilis does go through a period of homesickness, she quickly falls in love with Brooklyn and with the idea of being an American. She assists Father Flood at the local Church, such as during Christmas dinner. She begins attending night classes to continue her education, as her tuition is fully paid for by a fellow Catholic parishioner seeking to do a good deed.

While attending a Church charity dance, Eilis meets a young American man named Tony Fiorello, born and raised in Brooklyn while his parents immigrated from Italy. Eilis and Tony quickly hit things off. Eilis is impressed by how hard Tony works as a plumber with his brothers, while Tony is impressed that Eilis is so serious about her education. The two ultimately fall in love with one another, and begin speaking of marriage. At first, this worries Eilis because everything seems to have happened so fast, but she ultimately comes to realize that she truly does want to marry Tony and raise a family with him. Tony explains that ultimately, he and his brothers want to move out to Long Island where they will buy a plot of land and build their houses beside one another. They will also begin a construction business that Eilis could benefit with her bookkeeping skills. Eilis ends up thrilled with this idea.



Word suddenly comes, however, that Rose has died in her sleep of a bad heart. Eilis must return to Ireland to visit her mother and pay her respects. Tony worries that Eilis may not return, so he asks her to marry him before she leaves. She agrees. Back in Ireland, Eilis at first does not consider the place to be home anymore, but upon spending time with her mother and her old friends, she begins to feel at home and begins to wonder if her marriage was a mistake. She even begins going around with a local guy named Jim, because no one know she is married. At last, Miss Kelly, who owns the local grocery store, gets word from friends in New York that Eilis is married. She confronts Eilis with this fact, which sets Eilis straight. Eilis quickly returns to Brooklyn, knowing that her heart is truly with Tony in America.



Part One

Summary

Eilis Lacey attends Vocational School where she studies bookkeeping. Her older sister, Rose, is gorgeous and popular in town. Eilis watches with a little envy as Rose gets home from work, freshens up, and heads out to a party at the golf club. Eilis is requested at the home of Miss Kelly, who owns Kelly's Grocery. Miss Kelly wishes to hire Eilis to work at the shop on Sundays after 7 a.m. Mass, the busiest day of the week. Eilis accepts. On the way home, she stops to visit her best friend, Nancy Byrne, and their mutual friend Annette O'Brien. Nancy reveals she danced four times with George Sheridan at the dance in the Athenaeum on Sunday night. Nancy and Annette are stunned to learn that Eilis will be working for Miss Kelly since they all consider her strict and unfriendly, but Eilis explains it means she will have a little spending money and might be able to attend dances.

Miss Kelly helps Eilis acquaint herself with the Grocery, its products, when they are most commonly sold, and their prices. Eilis is also made to familiarize herself with packing groceries, such as sugar and loaves of bread. Eilis is happy to be making money since money is tight. Eilis's three older brothers, Jack, Pat, and Martin have moved to Birmingham to find work, while Rose's wages in the office of Davis's Mills provide for her, Eilis, and their mother apart from their mother's small pension. Rose, at 30, is still single, which is unusual for a girl in their town of Enniscorthy, Ireland. Most of Rose's friends are married with children. Eilis is proud of Rose, and admires Rose because she takes such care in her appearance, independence, and reputation.

Eilis works hard her first Sunday, but enjoys the challenge of dealing with dozens of people. That night, Eilis attends the dance at the Athenaeum with Nancy. There, Nancy is dismayed to see George, Jim Farrell, and a number of their buddies with a group of girls. Nancy is relieved when George asks her to dance. As time passes, Miss Kelly has Eilis help out at the Grocery on days other than Sundays. Eilis is happy for the extra work and the extra pay. A few days later, a priest named Father Flood returns from America to visit. Father Flood knew Eilis's father years before, and her mother when she was younger. Rose invites him over for tea. Her mother wonders what an American priest would like to eat.

Father Flood arrives for tea. He is tall, thin, very kind, and speaks with a mixed Irish-American accent. Father Flood is impressed by Eilis's studies and work ethic, and says there is plenty of work in the United States for someone like Eilis. Father Flood explains his parish is in Brooklyn, that it is safe, warm, and full of friendly people. This intrigues Eilis, but worries her mother. Eilis realizes that Rose has arranged for Father Flood to visit to lay the groundwork for a new life and new opportunity for Eilis. Eilis thinks about how everyone she knows who has gone to America does not miss home, and how they are proud of becoming Americans.



Weeks later, after Father Flood returns to Brooklyn, he writes to Eilis's mother to let her know that an Italian American parishioner and business owner will soon have a position available that Eilis may fill. It will be a shop floor position to begin with, but the potential for advancing in the company is great. Flood also explains that suitable residences are available near the local Church and not far from work. Within a few weeks, Rose helps Eilis to organize everything for the trip, including the paperwork. Father Flood formally sponsors Eilis, who is in turn formally hired at Bartocci & Company on Fulton Street in Brooklyn by a woman named Laura Fortini. Eilis's brothers willingly agree to pay for Eilis's passage and survival in New York until she earns enough to provide for herself. When Miss Kelly learns that Eilis is to depart in a month, she fires Eilis.

Eilis is both nervous and excited about traveling to Brooklyn, for she never expected to live anywhere other than her hometown. She is also moved by the fact that Rose gives her some of her jewelry for the trip, and with the knowledge that Rose will probably never be able to get married since Rose will now have to devote herself to caring for their mother. Eilis is humbled by this, especially, so she does her best to keep a smile on her face all the time so they see how much Eilis appreciates what they are doing for her. Eilis and Rose travel to Dublin for a farewell dinner with their brother Jack, during which time Jack explains he has met a nice English girl.

Eilis boards a ship bound for New York, where she takes a third-class room with an English woman named Georgina. Georgina is outgoing and friendly and helps take care of Eilis when Eilis becomes seasick. As the ship approaches Ellis Island, Georgina helps Eilis to appear older and more confident, so she will look like she knows exactly what she is doing and where she is going. Georgina also helps Eilis to appear less Irish to lessen the chance she'll be held up and have her papers examined. Eilis thinks she looks pretty, and wonders if she'll always dress so well each day in Brooklyn.

Analysis

"Brooklyn" is a historical romance novel by Colm Toibin which follows young Irish immigrant Eilis Lacey's settling in, and romantic experiences in Brooklyn. As the novel opens, the theme of immigration is immediately clear. Eilis lives in a small town in Ireland called Enniscorthy where work is so scarce that her three brothers have had to emigrate to England to find jobs. Eilis herself has gone on to study in college in order to make herself more valuable in terms of employability, hoping it will give her an edge in finding a job. However, the only work she can find is very part-time at a local grocer's, Miss Kelly's. Eilis believes that, like her parents and grandparents, she will live simply and humbly and raise a family in the same town in which she herself grew up (note here the theme of community). Still, she has the longing for something more.

This desire for more – to do more and to be more – is emblematic of the immigrant experience. The old world of Europe is not where the future is. America is where the future is. Rose sees this clearly, and believes Eilis will have a better life and better opportunity in Brooklyn. It is why she arranges tea with Father Flood so that Father Flood may make the case for immigration. Interestingly enough, though Father Flood is



Irish-born, the locals no longer consider him Irish because he lives in America, now. The reader should note how Eilis's mother refers to Father Flood as an American priest. Likewise, his Irish accent has faded. Father Flood himself loves living in America, and loves his parish in Brooklyn. It is a friendly, safe, and welcoming place which Father Flood believes Eilis would fit right into.

Flood makes the case for immigration by way of community. As the reader has already surmised, the community of Enniscorthy is truly a community in which people spend their lives, private and public, home and work, among each other. Flood explains that Brooklyn is much the same way, but even more so because of the strength and importance of Catholicism among the immigrants and American-born residents of Brooklyn. Flood explains that his entire community revolves around the Church parish. Catholicism will here become an important thematic element both in terms of Eilis's decision to immigrate, and how her future romance will play out.

Eilis considers all of this, including the fact that no one who she knows of who has ever gone to America has ever wanted to come back. She also thinks on how those who move to America end up proud to call themselves American rather than Irish or anything else. While she very much wants a family one day, Eilis also wants to earn something for herself in her own life. Here, the groundwork is being laid not only for immigration, but for Eilis's journey of self-discovery. Until now, she has lived in a small town and has had to depend on the charity of her mother, her sister, and her brothers in order to survive. Likewise, her greatest prospect in Enniscorthy is to marry and have children. But Brooklyn will be different.

Eilis boards a ship bound for New York. It is the beginning of her literal and metaphorical journey, as she has never been away from home like this before and has never traveled on her own in such a fashion. The ship voyage is difficult due to seasickness, but she manages to overcome this through Georgina's friendship and her own resolve. The immigrant experience also becomes a part of the journey, as the vestiges of anti-Irish sentiment still exist peripherally at Ellis Island, but have largely disappeared as Irish immigrants have demonstrated their desire to truly become Americans. Already, Eilis feels like an American as Georgina helps Eilis to style her hair in a more modern, American fashion, and to dress in a much more American fashion as well. Eilis finds herself to look pretty, something she has never before experienced, but which is consistent with her journey of self-discovery.

Discussion Question 1

What is Eilis's life like in Enniscorthy? What does she believe her life will be like? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Rose arrange for Father Flood to visit for tea? What does his visit ultimately result in? Why does this matter so much to Rose, to Eilis, and to their mother?



Discussion Question 3

How does Father Flood describe his parish in Brooklyn? How does this compare to Enniscorthy? Why does Father Flood believe this makes the case for immigration?

Vocabulary

hindrance, gawking, forbearance, evil incarnate, dowdy, imperiously, emigrate, ascertain



Part Two

Summary

Eilis has arrived in Brooklyn at the end of the summer, the hottest time of the year in New York. Eilis's room in Mrs. Kehoe's building is cozy but very hot. Mrs. Kehoe only boards girls, and does not encourage talk of boys. She does, however, encourage talk of feminine things, such as women's fashion. Eilis gets along well enough with all the other girls, including the prim Miss McAdam from Belfast, man-crazy Patty McGuire from upstate New York, half-Irish half-Italian American Diana Montini, the quiet but politically-minded Miss Keegan from Galway, and Sheila Heffernan who works as a secretary. As the youngest girl in the house, Eilis is sometimes annoyed to be criticized and commented upon so much. Still, she finds the house and Father Flood's parish to be warm and inviting.

Eilis gets along well at work as a salesgirl at Bartocci's department store, which is overseen on a daily basis by Miss Fortini and Miss Elisabetta Bartocci, daughter of the owner. Miss Bartocci encourages Eilis to give all customers a big Irish smile, to make them feel at home and like a friend. Father Flood, meanwhile, seeks to help Eilis continue her education in bookkeeping. Miss Bartocci explains that if Eilis decides to do so, the company will pay for part of the tuition. Four weeks in, Bartocci's has a surprise sale on nylon products. Eilis purchases four pairs, including one for Miss Kehoe, one for her mother, one for Rose, and one for herself. Letters arrive for Eilis from her mother, Rose, and Jack. These letters make her realize she has not really thought about home, and that she misses her family. She suddenly feels as if she is a ghost, and feels homesick.

On the way to work, Eilis stops in a diner for breakfast. The waiter notices she is sad and urges her to smile, but this does not work. Eilis quickly leaves when she feels she is about to cry. Eilis is sad throughout the day and through the evening. It is then she notices the heat of the summer has worn off. At work the next day, Miss Fortini speaks with Eilis about what is bothering her. Miss Fortini assures her the sadness will wear off in time, and decides to reach out to Father Flood. Father Flood arrives to speak with Eilis, telling her that everyone gets homesick and that it will pass sooner or later. Father Flood encourages her to keep busy, and offers to pull strings to get Eilis into a night class. That night, Father Flood reports he has been able to get Eilis into Brooklyn College, the best in the borough, and has paid her tuition for the first semester. He explains he is doing the Lord's work, and that there need to be nice Irish girls in Brooklyn.

Eilis attends classes three nights a week at Brooklyn College. Most of the other students are Russian, Jewish, and Italian. The autumn and the winter come on. Eilis's homesickness slowly fades as she begins to fall in love with different things about America, such as having the heating on all night in cold weather. Christmas approaches. Eilis begins to purchase presents for her family. For Christmas, Eilis



assists Father Flood with the serving of meals and the celebration of Christmas at the parish hall. Father Flood explains that hundreds, especially the Irish, come in from all over the region to celebrate. The dinners are a community effort for those seeking a Christmas meal for whatever reason, as people from all over the parish donate and prepare foods. Among those in attendance that evening is a man who reminds Eilis of her father.

The Christmas Day celebration and meal is a success as all those who attend are able to forget their worries and enjoy community. Father Flood publicly thanks Eilis and the other volunteers for their help, and they are given a round of applause. Father Flood then calls for singing and music, and the young man who had reminded Eilis of her father gets up to sing. It is pointed out to Eilis that the man has made LPs (records). The man's voice is beautiful and captivates everyone in the hall. Eilis ends up enjoying her Christmas Day very much.

Analysis

Eilis arrives in Brooklyn. True to Father Flood's word, his Brooklyn parish is warm, friendly, and welcoming. While primarily Irish, the community is also made up of Americans, Italians, Russians, Jews, and some blacks. The entire community truly does function around, and look to the Catholic Church for community guidance and leadership. Father Flood is well-loved and well-respected, which enables him not only to be a pillar of the community in times of need, but to celebrate good times with, and do good deeds for the residents. Just as Father Flood explained, the faithfulness of American Catholics is unmatched. This is among the things which helps Eilis to feel at home, for the sense of Catholic community she grew up with in Enniscorthy is only stronger in Brooklyn.

It is because of Flood's position and respect in the community that he is able to ensure Eilis has work at Bartocci's, and it is because of Flood's position and respect in the community that he is able to secure tuition for Eilis at Brooklyn College, the best school in the borough. Eilis commits to continuing her education as a way not only of improving herself, but in battling homesickness. It is part of the classic immigrant experience. Eilis's first few weeks in Brooklyn are full of wonder and excitement, leaving her little time to reflect on Ireland. She has already fallen in love with America. However, letters from home awaken a homesickness in her that only work, study, and the friendship of Father Flood, Miss Kehoe, and a few others helps Eilis to overcome.

Eilis's experiences with homesickness and immigration are also consistent with her journey of self-discovery. She is experiencing new things and learning to rely on herself more and more. This makes her more courageous and independent as she adapts to the recognition that she is no longer in Ireland. As a result, she invests herself in her new community not only as a show of respect and gratitude to Father Flood, but because Eilis is genuinely coming to consider Brooklyn her home, and her parish her community. This is exemplified in Eilis's decision to spend all of Christmas Day catering to, and feeding the poor and lonely at the parish hall. The meal on Christmas Day is a



community affair itself, not only in tending to those who are in need but on the part of those who donate and prepare food.

Eilis's commitment to her community is also a part of her self-discovery. Her decision to assist is wholly voluntary. No one is expecting it of her, so it is something she does willingly. In Enniscorthy, the expectations of the tight-knit community seemed more an obligation than an opportunity to participate. In America, in Brooklyn, the ability to participate is indeed an opportunity that strengthens the individual as well as the community as a whole. The decision to participate is in turn well-received, well-appreciated, and well-respected. The reader should note that Eilis and her fellow volunteers receive a round of applause for their efforts on Christmas Day – something which not only makes Eilis feel welcome, but proud of her decision to help out.

Discussion Question 1

Early on in Brooklyn, Eilis isn't troubled at all by homesickness. Why? Why only later is Eilis troubled by homesickness? How does she manage to get over it?

Discussion Question 2

Eilis chooses to spend Christmas Day with Father Flood and other volunteers at the parish hall to prepare food for those less fortunate. Why? What is the experience like for Eilis, especially with respect to the sense of community in Brooklyn?

Discussion Question 3

In the few months she has so far spent in Brooklyn, Eilis has grown as a person in several important ways. Select three ways that Eilis has grown and discovered more about herself, and explain why.

Vocabulary

revulsion, elegantly, inconsolable, dignified, litigation, studious, LP



Part Three (Section 1: Pages 97 - 153)

Summary

In January, the cold weather truly sets in. Miss Kehoe takes Eilis into her confidence, explaining that Miss Keegan will be moving out, and that her rooms – the best in the building – are to be taken by Eilis. While the other boarders will be unhappy about this, Miss Kehoe doesn't care. She is giving Eilis the room because Eilis is kind and has manners. The next day, the girls speak about Miss Keegan's departure, saying she has gone to Long Island to live with family after having been followed home several nights by a man who exposed himself to her. The girls explain they wouldn't take the room for any reason after Miss Kehoe's experiences, for the room can be seen from the sidewalk through the windows.

Word comes that Father Flood is planning to begin dances to raise money for charities. The girls are all excited about this, but Miss Kehoe worries about how forward some Italian men can be at dances. Eilis and the others all attend the first dance. They are excited and nervous. The hall steadily fills up with people, young and old. Diana and Patty quickly begin dancing, while Miss McAdams holds back, nervous. Nevertheless, the girls have a good time and decide to attend more dances in the future.

At Bartocci's, it is announced that as more black people are moving into Brooklyn, the store will begin selling dark-colored stockings, and that the store will welcome coloured women as customers. Eilis is among those girls selected to specifically sell these stockings. Eilis is awed by the beauty of the first two black, middle-aged women who purchase from her. She notices that few of the black women who shop there speak or make eye contact with her. While some of the girls at Miss Kehoe's are not exactly thrilled about this, Miss Kehoe reminds them that black men fought and died alongside white men in the war. Eilis adds that they are very nice people, but Miss McAdams and Sheila remain unmoved. Eilis continues attending Brooklyn College three nights a week, but worries whether or not she'll pass the exam. She asks her teacher, Mr. Rosenblum, for more reading material in corporate law. He recommends titles available from a law book store on West 23rd Street in Manhattan. Eilis travels there and is amazed by the size and number of books in the store. She purchases the suggested titles, and heads home.

A new girl named Dolores Grace, from Cavan, arrives at Miss Kehoe's. She is bookish, timid, and quiet. None of the girls want her there because they think she will make the rest of them look bad in the eyes of men. Eilis doesn't mind Dolores, but worries about being seen in public with her. When Miss Kehoe asks Eilis to bring Dolores to a church dance as a special favor, Eilis hesitatingly agrees. She is stunned to discover that Dolores dresses very hipsterishly for the dance, including a leather jacket and long skirt. At the dance, Eilis meets a young man named Tony with blonde hair and blue eyes, only a little taller than her. She allows Tony to buy her a soda, knowing he will want to dance with her again and hoping that Dolores will find someone to dance with. Eilis ends up



enjoying herself with Tony, liking that he is clean cut and polite. Tony explains he has seen her before and has wanted to meet her since. She agrees to allow him to walk her home.

Tony explains that he is not Irish, that he has been born and raised in Brooklyn, and that his parents are both from Italy. Tony asks her to the dance the following week, and asks to get her something to eat first. Eilis agrees. It is all she can think about all week. When Tony arrives at 8:30 p.m. on Friday to pick up Eilis, Mrs. Kehoe interrogates him to make sure he is respectable. Tony explains he is a plumber, and that his full name is Antonio Giuseppe Fiorello. He also explains that his mother cautioned him not to try to be funny since Irish girls are more serious than Italian girls. Their second evening goes very well together, so Tony asks Eilis out to a movie. Eilis agrees. Tony is impressed to learn that Eilis is studying in college, while Eilis is impressed with how hard Tony works. Tony says he has a thing for Irish girls, but has a thing for Eilis especially. Eilis tells Tony he makes her happy. Tony begins walking Eilis home from college as well, so that he can see her without interrupting her from her studies.

Eilis finally writes home about Tony. This prompts Rose to write to Father Flood for an objective opinion about Tony. Father Flood writes back approvingly, finding Tony decent and respectable. Eilis finds it amusing that Tony and Father Flood can speak so casually and passionately about baseball. Eilis also befriends Miss Fortini, who warns Eilis that all men talk about during baseball season, especially Italians, is baseball. Her own Italian boyfriend is the same way. Miss Fortini tells Eilis to hold onto Tony because Tony seems like such a good guy.

Eilis already begins to think about what it would be like to marry Tony when Tony casually suggests that their children will be Dodgers fans. Eilis considers whether or not she intends to be very serious with Tony, and worries she might lose him if she doesn't show enough interest. Eilis realizes she is in love with Tony, and that Tony is in love with her. They finally kiss, and tell one another of their love for each other, but Eilis asks Tony not to push marriage and kids just yet. Tony agrees. Eilis agrees to come over to Tony's house for dinner. Tony warns Eilis about his kid brother, Frank, who is eight and very outgoing. Eilis is happy to meet Frank and Tony's two other brothers, Laurence and Maurice.

At dinner, Frank declares he hates Irish people since some Irish kids beat up Maurice once. Frank's parents tell him to shut up and be polite. Tony and his brothers must duck out of dinner for a short time to fix a clogged drain. While he is gone, Frank wants to know if Tony has taken Eilis to Coney Island yet, since Tony's last girlfriend threw up all over herself after going on a rollercoaster. Frank's father tells Frank to get out. Eilis ends up enjoying the evening. As warm weather nears, Tony suggests Coney Island Beach. Miss Fortini tells Eilis she'll need a bathing suit, will need to watch her figure, and will need to carefully shave certain parts of her body.



Analysis

As the winter comes on, Eilis's feelings of home increase as she is given a larger, warmer, and more comfortable room – as well as greater freedom through having a separate entrance – at Miss Kehoe's. She is feeling less and less an immigrant than truly an American member of Brooklyn's parish. This also comes through Eilis's continuing to participate not only in the community of boarders at Miss Kehoe's house, but in her attending of community events such as the new Church hall charity dances. It is while Eilis is attending the Church dances that she first meets Tony, and that the theme of love comes into play.

Tony is the American-born son of Italian immigrants, who considers himself more American than anything else – which is typical of the immigrant experience. Tony is polite, clean cut, and friendly. He is impressed that Eilis is so committed to bettering herself through education, while Eilis is in turn impressed with how hard Tony works as a plumber. The two very quickly hit things off. Their romance is slow but steady, and decidedly old-fashioned. This is reflective not only of the era in which they live (the late 1940s/early 1950s), but is indicative of the importance of their Catholic faith in both their lives and their community. The slow, respectful nature of their romance – which turns to love – allows them to truly get to know one another, making their romance that much more solid. Catholicism, which advocates for sex only after marriage, does so in large part not merely as a matter of faith, but of respect for the individual person and encouraging people to get to know one another on a spiritual, emotional, and personal level.

The love that Tony and Eilis quickly develop for one another helps Eilis to more truly feel as if she belongs in Brooklyn. The acceptance and belonging one finds in love is a kind of home unparalleled by where one physically lives. Just as Eilis once expected that she would live, marry, and raise a family in Enniscorthy, Eilis now considers that she will marry and raise a family with Tony. While Eilis can see herself marrying Tony, she isn't ready to do it just yet. Nevertheless, she remains fully committed to Tony, going to the important step of meeting his family.

Eilis only feels closer to the community through meeting and befriending Tony's family. Miss Kehoe and Father Flood, likewise, serve as surrogate parents for Eilis, ensuring that Tony is a decent and respectable young man. This is likewise in keeping with the standard practices of dating of that era in America, as well as being reflective of the importance of the Catholic faith in the lives of American, Italian, and Irish families. The community itself, interestingly enough, is changing as well as more black families are moving into Brooklyn. This is reflected in the decision of Bartocci's to begin to diversify their products to attract more business from black customers. While most people don't care about the arrival of blacks, others – especially (and ironically) some of the immigrants – see blacks as immigrants in their own rights that, while they should not be disparaged or harassed, should not be welcomed in, either. Eilis and Miss Kehoe, however, flatly reject anything other than friendship towards these new arrivals.



Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Eilis come to feel more at home in Brooklyn in this section of the novel? What especially helps to put her at ease and make her feel at home? Why?

Discussion Question 2

How do the moral values and importance of the Catholic faith shape the way that Eilis and Tony conduct their romance? Is this to their benefit or their detriment? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

In what ways do Father Flood and Mrs. Kehoe step in to serve as surrogate parents for Eilis when she begins dating Tony? Why does this matter so much to Eilis that they do this, and to Eilis's actual family back in Ireland?

Vocabulary

deliberate, precedents, peculiarities, rudiments, jurisprudence, inevitable, eminently, inundated, allude, invariably



Part Three (Section 2: Pages 154 - 208)

Summary

Miss Fortini helps Eilis pick out a good bathing suit. Eilis is later thrilled to learn that she has passed her first year exams for Brooklyn College. Eilis happily tells Father Flood about her success. Father Flood congratulates her, and says how rare it is that he receives only good news from a visitor. Father Flood tells Eilis that an anonymous parishioner will be paying for Eilis's second year as a good deed. Eilis asks the parishioner be thanked on her behalf. Eilis then goes to tell Tony about passing her exams. Tony is thrilled and takes her to Coney Island on Sunday to celebrate. Coney Island is packed, but Eilis is happy to be with Tony. She goes swimming with him. They kiss and continue swimming for most of the day.

The heat of the summer returns in full blast. The air conditioners are turned on at work. As the summer wears on, Eilis notices that all that Tony and the other men around her talk about is baseball. Tony explains it will be a perfect year for him if Eilis is with him and his brothers when the Dodgers win the World Series. Eilis attends the game with Tony and his brothers at Ebbets Field, where they do their best to help Eilis understand the game. Eilis is happy to see how much Tony is enjoying himself, and how different he is from her in good ways. The Dodgers do not win, but Tony is still happy to have been out with his girl and his brothers.

Eilis has Thanksgiving with Tony and his family, but gently turns down Christmas dinner only because she wants to help out at Church again. Eilis has come to love Tony's family as they have come to love her, so the decision is not an easy one. Eilis learns that Tony and his brothers have purchased a plot of land out on Long Island with enough room for five houses and gardens, and that this is where they will all one day live. They will build the houses themselves, and then go on to start their own housing company. Tony brings this up as an indirect way of proposing marriage to Eilis. Eilis, who wants to think it through even though she wants to marry Tony, instead says that this is a good idea.

A few weeks later, Eilis receives the terrible news that her sister, Rose, has died in her sleep. Eilis is stunned. Father Flood has been informed of the tragedy by Father Quaid in Enniscorthy. Eilis is stunned and heartbroken, wondering why she ever came to America. Although Eilis is comforted by the fact that Rose is now in Heaven with God, she is still horribly upset that she will never see Rose again. Eilis speaks on the phone with her mother that night. Her mother explains that Rose had secretly been meeting with Dr. Cudigan for a long time over her heart, which was weak. Eilis's mother explains that family and friends have flooded in, but when they all leave, she'll have no one. This deeply troubles Eilis.

Father Flood, Mrs. Kehoe, and Tony keep Eilis company to comfort her. She sleeps quickly and deeply that night. Over time, Tony, Mrs. Kehoe, Father Flood, Miss Fortini,



and others help Eilis to stay strong and keep moving. Eventually, the pain lessens. But a letter from Jack arrives in which Jack describes the funeral and how he and the other brothers must return to England to work, noting they cannot stay with their mother. Eilis wants to rush home to be with her mother. She goes to visit Tony. She explains the letter and allows him to read it while they go out and eat at a diner. She then invites Tony back to her room, urging him to keep quiet. They make love twice.

The next day, Eilis insists both she and Tony must now go to Confession. Tony agrees. The girls, meanwhile, all heard Eilis and Tony having sex. Miss McAdams has told Mrs. Kehoe, who is now keeping a sharp eye on Eilis. Eilis decides to go back to Enniscorthy for a month to visit her mother. Father Flood tells Eilis that he'll arrange for it with Bartocci if Eilis makes peace with Mrs. Kehoe. Eilis agrees and does so. Tony, however, is terrified that Eilis will go back to Ireland and never come back to Brooklyn. He asks her to marry him before she goes, promising that they can be married secretly if she wants no one to know, and that they can be married in public upon her return. Otherwise, he repeats, he worries she will never come back. Eilis agrees. She has lunch with Tony's family before the wedding. When she sees they are all dressed up, she secretly hopes that Tony has told them about the wedding. They then take the train into New York to get married. Eilis is happy to talk about their future children, then.

Analysis

Eilis's relationship with Tony continues to bring them closer together in this section of the novel. Tony becomes one of the three core parts of Eilis's life, in addition to her work and studies. Amusingly, one of the areas in which both American-born citizens and immigrant-Americans become one in the same is through their love of baseball through the summer. As Eilis has been warned, all that men in America will talk about through the summer is baseball. Baseball is truly a community event. Eilis herself gains a mild interest in baseball, but only so much as it makes Tony happy, and because it is something which interests Tony. This is a staple hallmark of relationships of this era, in which those in love do their best to take an interest in the things which captivate their significant others.

As Eilis and Tony grow closer together, Eilis begins spending holidays with Tony's family. She quickly comes to view them as her own family, which in turn helps her to understand that she is truly welcome among them and important to Tony. When Tony indirectly asks Eilis to marry him by way of speaking of future plans for home and business, Eilis is only too thrilled to consent. The reader should note that, in keeping with the ethics of romance and the individual respect prized by the Catholic Church, Tony has avoided talk of marriage at Eilis's mere request. What is also interesting to know is that Tony, while he wants kids, has no expectations that Eilis will only be a stay-at-home mom and wife. Eilis herself can easily envision a place for herself in the family company. This means that her education and her desire to do something productive in her life are things which will not go to waste.



The reader should also note that, although the common practice of the era is to wait until marriage for sexual relations, Eilis and Tony have sex before they are married at Eilis's leading. But in keeping with the ethics influenced by Catholicism that both Eilis and Tony adhere to, they seek forgiveness at Confession. Rather than condemning or shaming, however, both the Catholic priest and Miss Kehoe merely advocate better future behavior and responsibility. Eilis and Tony do not have sex again until they are married. Their marriage itself comes as a rush decision following Rose's death and Eilis's decision to return to Ireland to visit, because Tony worries that Eilis may not ever come back to Brooklyn at all otherwise. Eilis cannot imagine life without Tony, and knows that if she is married to him, she will not lose him and will have a reason to come back. She readily consents to the marriage and even hopes that Tony will have told his parents about it even though she has asked him to keep it secret.

Indeed, the cause for Eilis's need to return to her hometown however briefly, is tragic. Rose has died in her sleep of a weak heart. While Eilis's brothers have been able to stay with their mother for several weeks, they must return to work. Eilis feels horribly that her mother is currently living alone, and feels a strong – and understandable – desire to head home to see about her mother. This underscores Tony's concerns that Eilis may not come back. Eilis feels horrible for ever having immigrated to Brooklyn at all, which the reader recognizes as an ominous sign that undermines her insistence that she will not be staying in Ireland. Whether or not Tony's fears prove to be well-founded remains to be seen.

Discussion Question 1

How do Eilis's thoughts about marriage with Tony change over time? Why? How do these thoughts themselves change, and why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Eilis agree to marry Tony before she returns to Ireland? What does Tony hope that this will accomplish?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Tony fear that Eilis may not come back from Ireland? Do you believe his fears are well-founded? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

nonchalantly, exasperation, vied, despondent, intricate, evading, adamant, tacitly, faltering, instantaneous, abject



Part Four

Summary

Eilis returns home and is surprised to find the home does not feel strange to her. Eilis's mother explains that she sometimes forgets Rose is gone. Eilis wonders how her mother will react if she tells her mother she is married. She writes to Tony every chance she gets, for she misses him and Brooklyn terribly. She feels as if her old room is very empty of life, and cannot wait to return to her husband. Eilis's mother shows Eilis all the cards, letters, and mementos sent to her since Rose's death. As Eilis moves through the streets of her hometown, she realizes she is drawing looks because she now looks more American than Irish, and less rustic than the traditional way of dressing in the area.

Eilis and her mother bring a wreath when they visit Rose's grave. Eilis then visits with Nancy and Annette. Nancy is now engaged to George Sheridan. The two will be married on June 23. Eilis is annoyed to learn that her mother has accepted a wedding invitation for both of them for that date, especially because Eilis has planned to be back in Brooklyn by then. Eilis decides to go since it will mean staying in Ireland only a few weeks longer than expected. She dreads writing home about this. Nancy and Annette, meanwhile, are thrilled with Eilis's suntan and classy style, and catch Eilis up on all the village gossip.

Eilis is further annoyed when her mother arranges work for Eilis at Rose's old job at Davis's Mills. She is also annoyed when her mother tries to push her toward Jim Farrell. A letter arrives from Tony, which makes everything better for Eilis. Eilis comes to enjoy her work at Davis's, but realizes that as a wife, she will not have to work. She wonders if she might be able to do the bookkeeping for Tony's future family company. As Eilis goes around with her friends, she continues to encounter Jim. Nancy explains that Jim likes her. Eilis tries to imagine what Tony would think of her going around with another guy, knowing that she wouldn't like it if Tony was going around with another girl while she was gone. While at the sea, George takes pictures of Jim with his arms around Eilis.

At the Athenaeum, Eilis ends up dancing with Jim all night. After the dance, Jim and Eilis kiss. At home, Eilis has received two more letters from Tony, and realizes that she has not yet written him back. Jim comes to pick up Eilis and her mother for Nancy's wedding. Eilis enjoys her time with Jim, and begins to wonder if her marriage with Tony was a mistake. She wonders how easy divorce might be. She can't help but wonder what it might be like to be married and to settle down in her hometown. After the wedding and reception, Eilis's mother finds a different ride home so that Eilis can travel with Jim, alone. On the way back, Jim speaks of getting engaged before Eilis leaves for America. They end up kissing.

Eilis visits with Miss Kelly at Miss Kelly's insistence. Miss Kelly lectures Eilis on running around with Jim. While she doesn't come out and say it, she hints that she knows the



truth about Eilis being married based on contacts she has in New York. Eilis then heads to the post office to write Father Flood, Miss Kehoe, and Tony to apologize for not writing more, and for her delayed return. She sends her love to Tony, and tells him she will see him soon. Eilis then returns home and immediately tells her mother that she is married to Tony. She explains Tony is an American from Brooklyn. Eilis's mother is glad to learn that Tony is such a good man, and tells Eilis her place is with her husband. She is sad that Eilis will not be staying in Enniscorthy, and goes to bed. Eilis packs to leave, and leaves a note behind for Jim explaining things. She imagines that her mother will tell Jim that Eilis has already left for Brooklyn, and thinks about how little those words will come to mean to Jim in the future, and how much they will come to mean to her.

Analysis

As the novel concludes, it becomes apparent that Tony's fears that Eilis may not return from Ireland are well-founded. This comes because Eilis, at first feeling as if she is no longer at home in Enniscorthy, ends up fitting back in easily, and as though she had never left. This comfort with what was once familiar and has now become familiar again brings her closer to Jim Farrell, with whom she begins running around with. Despite Eilis's roots in Ireland, her appearance, mannerisms, and style have become distinctly American – something not lost on the members of the village who all come to regard Eilis with fascination.

In Enniscorthy, however, Brooklyn – and Tony – seem a world away. Eilis's desire to keep the marriage a secret is coming back to haunt not only her, but Tony as well. No one in Enniscorthy is aware that Eilis is married until Miss Kelly learns about it from contacts in New York. Miss Kelly is the one who sets Eilis straight, and helps her to truly find where her heart lies. It is because of this that Eilis ultimately admits to her mother that she is married, which meets her mother's approval in the end.

Apart from her original desire to keep her marriage a secret, Eilis's return to the community where she was born and raised proves to be utterly seductive in its familiarity. Time spent with her mother, with her old friends, and in the places where she grew up condition her to fall back into her old ways and ideas. She begins to wonder if she has made a mistake by going to Brooklyn and marrying Tony because she knows she would be content in Enniscorthy for the rest of her life. However, contentedness is not happiness. Eilis is only truly happy with Tony, for it is through Tony that Eilis is truly able to realize herself after her journey of self-discovery. Apart from family, Tony's hopes for the future include, for example, Eilis putting her education to good use if she so wishes. While Eilis may have a wonderful job at Davis's Mills, and while she might end up not working outside the home in America, Eilis comes to recognize that she will not have Tony and she will not have her new life in Brooklyn. Eilis's decision to return to Brooklyn is primarily a decision based on her love and marriage to Tony.



Discussion Question 1

What is it like for Eilis to be back in Enniscorthy after being away in Brooklyn for two years? How does she readjust to life in Enniscorthy? Why? What effect does this have on Eilis in terms of her consideration of her marriage to Tony? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Eilis begin to run around with Jim Farrell even though she is married to Tony? Why does she continue to see Jim even when she consciously reminds herself that she is a married woman?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Eilis's decision to return to Brooklyn primarily as a question of loving Tony is the right choice? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

glamorous, sophisticated, impeccably, conspiratorial, inaugurate, conservative



Characters

Eilis

Eilis Lacey is the main character of the novel “Brooklyn” by Colm Toibin. With red hair and freckles, Eilis is either in her late teens or early twenties, is beautiful and very intelligent. As the youngest member of her family, Eilis is studying bookkeeping in school and hopes to one day have a good job and a good family in her hometown of Enniscorthy. She looks up to and admires her sister, Rose, who has a good job and is well-respected. When Rose and Father Flood arrange for Eilis to immigrate to Brooklyn, Eilis leaps at the chance. There, she works at Bartocci’s department store as a salesgirl, continues her education at Brooklyn College, helps out with Church functions, and battles a period of homesickness. Her time in New York exposes her to a world she never before imagined possible in her hometown, and instills in her the love of being American and independent.

It is while in Brooklyn that Eilis meets and falls in love with a local American of Italian descent named Tony. When Eilis learns that Rose has died, she marries Tony before leaving to visit home so she has a reason to come back, and so that she does not lose Tony while she is gone. Back in Ireland, Eilis falls into her old ways and spends time with her old friends, none of whom know she is married. Eilis nearly forgets this herself as she begins to run around with Jim Farrell. Only when Miss Kelly reminds Eilis of being married does Eilis realize what she is doing, and that her heart truly belongs to Tony. It is then that Eilis decides to return to Brooklyn to be with the love of her life.

Tony

Antonio “Tony” Giuseppe Fiorello is a young American man of Italian descent born and raised in Brooklyn, and who seems to be in his early or mid-twenties. Tony works as a plumber with his brothers, and one day dreams of moving out to Long Island with his entire family to live and work his own construction business. Tony has a thing for Irish girls, so when he meets Eilis, he is blown away by her beauty and her intelligence. He quickly falls in love with her, and is ready to marry her early on. But being respectful and moral, he does not push the issue until Eilis is ready. When Tony learns that Eilis is set to return briefly to Ireland after Rose’s death, he worries that Eilis might not come back. It is then that he pushes for marriage, to which she consents. Tony sadly remains behind in Brooklyn while Eilis is away in Ireland, writing to her frequently. He is thrilled to learn that she is coming back after all.

Father Flood

Father Flood is a good-natured, friendly, and devout Irish-American Catholic priest originally from Enniscorthy who now lives and serves in Brooklyn, New York. While visiting Enniscorthy, Father Flood is invited to tea by Rose with the hopes that Father



Flood will sponsor Eilis in America. Father Flood readily agrees, and makes it possible. Father Flood becomes a father-like and mentor figure to Eilis, helping to secure her work and a place at Brooklyn College. He also stands in for Eilis's father when meeting Tony and sending back an objective opinion of Tony to Rose. When Rose dies, it is Father Flood who helps arrange Eilis's passage back to Ireland.

Mrs. Kehoe

Mrs. Kehoe is the owner and operator of Mrs. Kehoe's Boarding House where Eilis lives. Mrs. Kehoe is a strict but kind and motherly woman whose husband ran off out West, leaving her alone and with shared debt. Mrs. Kehoe warms up to Eilis very quickly, finding in her something of a daughter, and finding in her a sweet and gentle soul. Because of this, Miss Kehoe gives Eilis the best room in the house, and interrogates Tony when he begins dating Eilis to ensure he is a good man.

Jim Farrell

Jim Farrell is a local in Enniscorthy, Ireland, who begins a brief-lived romance with Eilis following Rose's death and Eilis's return to the town. Jim is a kind, gentle, and reserved soul who comes from a good family, and who quickly develops feelings for Eilis upon her return. The two end up kissing and very nearly stumble into romance until Eilis remembers herself and her marriage, and returns to Brooklyn.

Rose

Rose Lacey is the older sister of Eilis. At 30, Rose is sweet, beautiful, well-liked, and well-respected both at work and in the community. She is a role model for Eilis, and helps to arrange for Eilis to emigrate to Brooklyn with Father Flood's sponsorship. Rose, despite her outgoing nature and seeming good spirits, is secretly ill with a bad heart. This ultimately claims her life in her sleep the second year that Eilis is away in America.

Mrs. Lacey

Mrs. Lacey is the mother of Eilis, Rose, and their three brothers. Mrs. Lacey is a widow who is in ill-health, and survives on her pension and the income that Rose and her sons provide for the household. Mrs. Lacey hopes that Eilis will find and marry a nice local man, but recognizes her daughter has a chance for a better life in Brooklyn and so gives her blessing for Eilis to travel. When Rose dies, Mrs. Lacey hopes that Eilis will return permanently to Ireland, so she begins pushing Eilis to spend time with Jim. When Mrs. Lacey learns that Eilis is married to a good man in America, Mrs. Lacey insists Eilis return to be with her husband.



Miss Kelly

Miss Kelly is the owner and operator of Kelly's Grocery Shop. An elderly spinster, Miss Kelly is known as being strict and unpleasant, though morally upright. When Eilis comes back to Ireland late in the novel, Miss Kelly learns from her friends in Brooklyn that Eilis has been secretly married. She indirectly confronts Eilis with this information, giving Eilis a wakeup call and encouraging Eilis to return to Brooklyn.

Nancy Byrne

Nancy Byrne is Eilis's best friend in Enniscorthy. Nancy is a pretty, kind, and aspires to marry and raise a family locally. She is delighted that Eilis has the chance to go to Brooklyn, but even more delighted to think that Eilis might return to live in Ireland permanently. She encourages the time Eilis spends with Jim in the hopes that this will convince Eilis.

Miss Fortini

Miss Laura Fortini is the daily work supervisor at Bartocci's & Company in Brooklyn. Miss Fortini is a gentle and kind, but no-nonsense young woman who cares deeply about the welfare of the young women who work under her. Miss Fortini is dating a young man who is obsessed with baseball, and helps Eilis to navigate the new experience of dating an American man.



Symbols and Symbolism

Sponsor letter

A sponsor letter is written by Father Flood on Eilis's behalf to U.S. Immigration to provide for Eilis's emigration to Brooklyn from Ireland. The sponsor letter notes that Eilis is a young woman of strong character who already has employment with Bartocci's. The sponsor letter is accepted, and Eilis is cleared for entrance to the United States through Ellis Island.

Job offer

A job offer in the form of a written letter from Bartocci's is written to Eilis from Miss Fortini at Father Flood's introduction. The job offer gives Eilis a promise of employment in a sales position at Bartocci's in Brooklyn. This job offer ensures that Eilis will have employ, and helps make possible her immigration to Brooklyn.

Letters

Letters are the primary form of communication used by Eilis and her family to stay in touch while Eilis is in Brooklyn. The letters at first make Eilis homesick and plunge her into depression since she misses her family and her home so much. The letters later serve to boost Eilis's spirits, and help her to keep her family informed about her life and the things she is doing.

Textbooks

Accounting textbooks are purchased for and by Eilis throughout the novel. The accounting textbooks are critical for Eilis's studies of accounting and bookkeeping at Brooklyn College. Eilis purchases additional textbooks throughout her time at college in order to make sure she is very well-versed in the subjects she takes so that she will graduate and excel in her work in those fields.

American fashion

American fashions, including contemporary hairstyles, warm colored clothing, and cardigans, are worn by Americans and immigrants to America in the novel. When Eilis comes to Brooklyn, she quickly sheds her muted-colored, rustic-styled clothing for sleek, contemporary American fashions and truly begins to fit in among the masses in Brooklyn. When Eilis returns to Ireland at the end of the novel for a visit, she stands out sharply in her American style among the local Irish flavor.



Wedding papers

Wedding papers are filled out and signed by Eilis and Tony when they secretly get married in Manhattan. The wedding papers denote that they are now legally husband and wife. Eilis is thrilled to have the papers make things official even though she wants to keep the marriage a secret for the time being.

Wedding ring

A wedding ring is given to Eilis by Tony when they are secretly married in New York. Eilis wears the wedding ring as a reminder of her love and commitment to Tony until she travels to Ireland. Then, she removes the ring. Without it as a physical reminder, Eilis both questions and forgets her marriage to Tony, until she is reminded of this by Miss Kelly.

Baseball

Baseball is an American sport that captivates the attention of most men and some women in the summer and autumn each year. Baseball is a unifying cultural American hallmark that brings together men regardless as to whether they are American-born or are immigrants, whether they are rich or poor, white or black, Jewish or Catholic, and so on. Tony and Father Flood are both obsessed with baseball, and greatly look forward to the baseball season each year.

Photographs

Photographs are taken of Eilis and Jim together while Eilis is in Ireland. Photographs are intended to be physical reminders of good times and good memories for years in the future. Eilis allows the photos to be taken at first as a matter of grudging annoyance, and then as a question of considering that perhaps she has made a mistake in marrying Tony –and that these photographs could be the start of a different life. The photographs end up being ironic, as they portray something which will never be.

Note for Jim

A note for Jim is written and left behind by Eilis which explains she is married and is traveling back to New York. The note for Jim will be delivered after Eilis has already left. This means Eilis's mother will be there to tell Jim that she has already gone back to Brooklyn.



Settings

Brooklyn

Brooklyn is one of the five boroughs of New York City, and is the borough to which Eilis emigrates from Ireland in the novel. Brooklyn is one of the safest boroughs, and Father Flood's particular parish in Brooklyn is especially friendly and safe. It is full of residential homes, buildings, and shops. Despite its very city-like nature, it retains a small-town community feel which Eilis loves. Although Father Flood's parish is heavily Irish, there are also American-born, Italian, Jewish, Russian, and black American residents. The community in which Eilis lives in Brooklyn is heavily Catholic and centers its existences around the Church. Brooklyn is where Miss Kehoe keeps her boarding house, and where Eilis stays during her time in Brooklyn. Brooklyn is also home to Brooklyn College, where Eilis attends bookkeeping courses, and Bartocci's & Company, where Eilis works. It is in Brooklyn at Father Flood's Church hall that Eilis first meets and begins seeing Tony. Tony worries that when Eilis leaves Brooklyn following the death of Rose, she will never come back – but Eilis does.

Enniscorthy

Enniscorthy is the small, Irish town where Eilis is born and raised along with her siblings and generations of her family. Enniscorthy is a very close-knit community, both in terms of everyone knowing everyone and everyone being related to everyone in some way, shape, or form. Enniscorthy has been hit hard in the post-World War II recession, leading to high unemployment and many of its men leaving for England to find work to send money home. Eilis herself believes that she will soon be married and have a family in Enniscorthy, for her job prospects are dim. Father Flood, a native of Enniscorthy, meets with Eilis to encourage her to leave Enniscorthy for Brooklyn as he has. Eilis ultimately agrees to do this, but returns to visit after Rose dies. Eilis nearly falls back into her old life in Enniscorthy, but ultimately decides to return to Brooklyn to be with her true love, Tony.

Mrs. Kehoe's Boarding House

Mrs. Kehoe's boarding house is located in a residential block of Father Flood's parish in Brooklyn. Mrs. Kehoe's boarding house is a large house with several rooms, including one in the basement which is given to Eilis. Eilis feels at home at Miss Kehoe's, where Mrs. Kehoe becomes something of a second mother to her. It is Father Flood who first arranges for Eilis to stay at Mrs. Kehoe's following Eilis's arrival from Ireland. Eilis remains on at Mrs. Kehoe's house for her first two years living in Brooklyn.



Bartocci's & Company

Bartocci's & Company is a family-owned and operated department store in Father Flood's parish in Brooklyn. Begun by Mr. Bartocci and his family, the department store primarily specializes in women's clothing and products, and is famous for their surprise nylon sales. The store is immensely popular with the locals. It is through Father Flood that Eilis secures work at Bartocci's as a salesgirl. Eilis comes to enjoy her work at Bartocci's even though it isn't very demanding of her. Nevertheless, she is happy to have the job because it has good promise for advancement. Bartocci's also becomes the first department store in the area to begin selling dark-colored stockings for newly arriving black residents in the area –something for which the store is both complimented and criticized.

Coney Island

Coney Island is an amusement park, beach, and residential area of New York about an hour's train ride from Brooklyn. Coney Island is a favorite nearby destination of New Yorkers across the city, and is one of Tony's favorite places to go. He invites Eilis to accompany him to the beach. It is the first time that Eilis goes to the shore in New York, and ends up loving it. She spends most of the day swimming with, and kissing Tony in the surf. It demonstrates the seriousness of their relationship in that Tony only brings girls he is serious about to Coney Island.



Themes and Motifs

Self-Discovery

Self-discovery is an important theme in the novel “Brooklyn” by Colm Toibin. Self-discovery, thematically, includes the process and progress of an individual not only in becoming a stronger and better person emotionally, spiritually, and morally, but of the individual learning more about himself or herself through life experiences. In the novel, it is Eilis who experiences tremendous self-discovery through her time in Brooklyn.

When the novel begins, Eilis is a kind but shy girl who believes her entire life will be spent in Enniscorthy. Eilis has little self-confidence and feels as if she lives in the shadow of her older, gorgeous sister Rose, whom she deeply loves. While Eilis is studying bookkeeping and hopes to be able to work, she expects that her life will primarily consist of getting married and having children. She expects little real excitement, and expects to have a quiet, contented life. However, this does not make Eilis happy. She wants something more out of life, and wants to earn something for herself rather than merely being dependent on those around her.

The chance to do something different with her life is presented courtesy of Rose and Father Flood, who arrange for Eilis to go and live in New York. From the very start of her physical journey to New York, Eilis’s journey of self-discovery is underway. This begins with being away from home for the first time on her own and having to rely on herself for the first time in a different country, let alone a different town or place within Ireland. Eilis has a place to stay and a place to work, which gives her a sense of purpose and self-reliance in that she must work in order to survive; and her work to survive soon becomes work that allows her to thrive and earn a comfortable living in Brooklyn. Eilis in turn commits herself to being a part of the community in Brooklyn, helping out at Church and coming to realize that she truly does matter.

Her romance and marriage to Tony transforms her in ways that independence and self-reliance cannot. She comes to realize she is indeed beautiful and worth loving, and comes to realize that she matters to someone else in his life in ways she has never mattered before. Her return to Ireland reminds her of the life that she could have had, and just as she is about to slip back into it and begins to reconsider her marriage to Tony, she is reminded by Miss Kelly that she is married. This causes Eilis to objectively consider her situation, that her life is in her own hands, and that her heart truly belongs to Tony. As a result of this rediscovery, Eilis returns to Brooklyn to be with the man that she loves.

Immigration

Immigration is an important theme in the novel “Brooklyn” by Colm Toibin. Immigration, both legally and illegally accomplished, involves the moving of one or more individuals



from country to another. In the novel, it is Eilis's immigration to Brooklyn from Ireland that is primarily dealt with.

There is little opportunity in Eilis's hometown of Enniscorthy, Ireland – a situation faced by countless immigrants throughout all of history. Seeking a better life and better opportunity, they move elsewhere – most often to the United States. Rose hopes for a better life for Eilis, so working with Father Flood, the two arrange for Eilis to immigrate to Brooklyn. Father Flood explains that the community of his parish is very similar to Enniscorthy, except more Church-centered. The community itself is composed of Americans and immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Russia, as well as some Jews and some blacks. All have a better life in America than they would have had elsewhere. With work and a residence lined up, Eilis is cleared to immigrate to America.

When Eilis travels to Brooklyn, the immigrant experience is very clear. The vestiges of anti-Irish sentiment still exist only faintly at Ellis Island, but have nearly completely disappeared as Irish immigrants have demonstrated their desire to truly become Americans. Already, Eilis feels like an American as Georgina helps Eilis to style her hair in a more modern, American fashion, and to dress in a much more American fashion as well. Eilis's first days in Brooklyn are full of bright-eyed wonder and hope, for she quickly falls in love with America. Only when Eilis receives her first letters from her family back home does she become homesick – which in turn passes with the encouragement and support of Father Flood and others, and Eilis's decision to keep herself busy and occupied.

When Eilis travels back to Ireland, she experiences the life of an immigrant in reverse. At first, though her hometown is familiar, she feels as if it is not truly hers anymore. Although she fits back in eventually, she will never be truly Irish again, as the locals explain. Father Flood, though born and raised in Enniscorthy, is now considered an American priest. Eilis, who dresses very American, is now considered American herself. In addition to Eilis's love of America, she is in love with her husband, Tony, which ultimately proves to be the primary reason why she can never permanently return to Enniscorthy again.

Love

Love is an important theme in the novel "Brooklyn" by Colm Toibin. Love in the novel exists primarily in two forms –familial love, and romantic love. Both are utterly important and utterly consequential to Eilis's life and the plot of the novel.

Eilis is very close with her family. She loves and admires her sister, Rose, especially. Eilis longs to be strong, independent, and beautiful like Rose. Rose in turn deeply loves Eilis, and so wants a better life for Eilis than Enniscorthy can provide. She works with Father Flood to enable Eilis to emigrate to the United States from Ireland. Eilis's brothers financially support Eilis until Eilis is able to provide for herself. In Brooklyn, Eilis misses her family greatly, and rushes home the first chance she can following Rose's



passing. Had it not been for Rose's kindness and the support of her family, Eilis could never have gone to New York, met, and fallen in love with Tony.

Romantic love is therein present between Eilis and Tony. Given the era in which they are falling in love – the late 1940s/early 1950s – and given the influence of the Catholic Church in the community and in culture, their relationship is classic and emblematic of a traditional relationship. Tony is questioned and considered by both Mrs. Kehoe and Father Flood on behalf of Eilis's family to make sure that Tony is a good man; and Tony and Eilis have a slow but steady romance which ultimately leads to love. This slow but steady romance – again informed by American Catholic culture based on respect for the individual human being as a person rather than a sex object – enables Eilis and Tony to get to know one another as human beings before jumping into bed with each other,

While Eilis and Tony have sex before they are married, they are ultimately determined to be married before Eilis travels back to Ireland. Although Eilis keeps her marriage a secret out of concern for her mother and the recent death of Rose, Eilis cannot wait to return home to Tony. Her time in Ireland, however, causes her to reconsider her marriage as she grows closer to Jim before being reminded of her place by Miss Kelly. Only when Eilis is able to separate herself from the situation, thanks to Miss Kelly, is she able to objectively realize that she truly does love Tony – and so returns to Brooklyn to be with him.

Catholicism

Catholicism is an important theme in the novel "Brooklyn" by Colm Toibin. Catholicism is the world's oldest and largest Christian religion, professing belief in God and in Jesus Christ. It is widely practiced throughout the world, but especially in Brooklyn in the novel. Catholicism has a tremendous influence on the novel, both in terms of community, plot, and characterization.

Father Flood is the representative of the Catholic Church in the novel, as he is a priest of the Catholic faith serving at a local parish in Brooklyn. Father Flood is a shining example of the goodness of the Catholic Church and the priests who serve the Church. Father Flood serves not only as a priest to the community, but a source of emotional and community support for those in need or in trouble. It is Father Flood who, through the great respect and friendship he has in the community, is able to secure a sponsorship, job, and place of residence for Eilis to move to Brooklyn. And indeed, Catholicism is the dominant faith in Father Flood's community for the Americans, and Irish and Italian immigrants.

The church where Father Flood serves is truly the focal point of the community, from everything from Mass to charity dances on the weekends. The Catholics of Brooklyn are far more devout and faithful than the Catholics are in Enniscorthy as Eilis comes to learn. The shared Catholicism in the parish creates a true sense of community as nationalities and races are ignored in favor of Catholics helping out their fellow man. The Italian, Catholic Bartoccis are happy to assist the Irish-American Father Flood with



hiring the Irish, Catholic Eilis to work at their department store, for example. Eilis herself is thrilled to help Father Flood serve a community-created Christmas Day dinner to the needy in the community.

Catholicism also deeply influences even everyday culture in the community. The traditional, slow, and respectful romance that Eilis and Tony have is emblematic of this. This slow, respectful nature of their romance – which turns to love – allows them to truly get to know one another, making their romance that much more solid. Catholicism, which advocates for sex only after marriage occurs, does so in large part not only as a matter of faith and belief, but of respect for the individual person and encouraging people to get to know one another on a spiritual, emotional, and personal level before they transcend to the physical. To the Catholic Church, human beings are truly human beings rather than sex objects as is often portrayed in popular culture. This mutual respect creates mutual love between Eilis and Tony that ultimately saves their marriage as Eilis realizes she is truly in love with Tony, and so goes home to Brooklyn.

Community

Community is an important theme in the novel “Brooklyn” by Colm Toibin. Thematically, community involves a group of people who live in and around a particular location, and their coming together to unite and care for one another and the place in which they live. Community exists for Eilis in both Enniscorthy and Brooklyn, but it is in Brooklyn that Eilis truly comes into her own in community.

Enniscorthy is a small town in Ireland in which everyone knows everyone, and in which everyone is somehow related to everyone else in some way, shape, or form. Eilis and her best friends have all been born and raised in Enniscorthy, as have their parents and grandparents before them. They have deep roots in the community, and expect that they themselves will marry, have children, grow old, and die in Enniscorthy as well. Old friends and family friends watch out for one another and their children, as is the case when Miss Kelly hires on Eilis to work in her shop part-time. When Nancy marries George later in the novel, the entire community turns out for the wedding not merely as a sign of respect, but because everyone knows everyone and everyone has a vested interest in seeing Nancy and George happy.

Brooklyn, Father Flood explains early on in the novel, is very similar to Enniscorthy, though Brooklyn is more religiously devout with the parish church being the true center of the community there. Catholicism proves to be a true uniting force in the area, creating a sense of unity and community wherein, for example, the Italian, Catholic Bartoccis are happy to assist the Irish-American Father Flood in hiring the Irish, Catholic Eilis for a position in their family department store. Likewise, Father Flood and the church host a Christmas Day dinner for all of those in need in the community –with the food being provided by the rest of the community.

Eilis quickly feels at home in such a community, as the people there are friendly, warm, and always looking out for one another. When Eilis succumbs to homesickness, it is



Miss Fortini, Father Flood, and Miss Kehoe who rally together to cheer her up and keep her optimistic. It is Father Flood and an anonymous parishioner who provide tuition and book money for Eilis to continue her education by attending Brooklyn College – merely out of the goodness of their hearts and for the love of community. And it is Eilis who makes it a point to serve the community’s needy dinner every year with Father Flood at Christmastime. For Eilis, it is a way to give back to the community that has given her so much.

Styles

Point of View

Colm Toibin tells his novel “Brooklyn” in the third-person omniscient perspective from the point of view of an unidentified narrator – most clearly someone familiar with the story of Eilis. The third-person perspective allows Toibin to tell not only the story of Eilis, but to provide important contextual information about the world, Brooklyn, Ireland, and other characters that Eilis and the characters themselves might not know about one or another. This creates a greater depth and complexity to the novel and its plot. For example, the reader learns about the great economic difficulties in which Ireland finds itself after World War II, which explains why so many men in Enniscorthy are unable to find work locally, and so much leave the country – and helps compel Eilis to move to the United States. This enriches Eilis’s character, giving her concrete motivation to immigrate to Brooklyn. The third-person omniscient narrator also later helps to explain, for example, how Miss Kelly learns of Eilis’s marriage in New York, and sets her straight.

Language and Meaning

Colm Toibin tells his novel “Brooklyn” in language that is gentle and simple. This is done for at least two reasons. First, Toibin’s novel is a simple, quiet, and old-fashioned love story that is utterly powerful in its simplicity. It is only fitting that the language – gentle and simple – be reflective of not only the romance in the novel, but of the nature and soul of Eilis, who is herself gentle and simple. This simple and gentle language means the story is easily accessible to – and relatable to – all readers. Furthermore, the reader will note a surprising and refreshing lack of foul language – emblematic of the time in which the novel is set, and reflective of the primacy of romance and humanity in the novel. Secondly, the novel was originally published in 2009, so the language employed by Coibin is reflective of the time in which the novel was written, in which casual, simple language was common.

Structure

Colm Toibin divides his novel “Brooklyn” into four primary parts, with the third part being the longest at 111 pages. Each part of the novel deals with a specific sequence of events relating to the overall plot. The first part deals with Eilis’s life in Enniscorthy, and leads up to her departure for Brooklyn. The second part deals with Eilis’s early days in Brooklyn. The third part, which comprises the core of the novel, deals with Eilis’s romance and marriage with Tony. The fourth part relates Eilis’s return to Ireland, and her ultimate decision to go home to Brooklyn. This classic, simple, and straightforward approach to the novel is not only reflective of the simple and gentle nature of the

language employed in telling the story of a classic, old-fashioned romance, but allows the reader to remain primarily focused on the plot and the story being told.



Quotes

Eilis was proud of her sister, of how much care she took with her appearance and how much care she put into whom she mixed with in the town and the golf club.

-- Narrator (Part One)

Importance: Eilis looks up to her older sister, Rose, who takes great pride in both her appearance and her reputation. Rose is a gorgeous young woman who is also intensely bright and independent. These are things which Eilis wishes for herself. Rose will be an influential role model to Eilis in the coming months when Eilis travels to Brooklyn.

In the United States, there would be plenty of work for someone like you and with good pay.

-- Father Flood (Part One)

Importance: Father Flood, an old family friend, is invited over to tea by Rose. Flood, an Irish native who has moved to Brooklyn, New York, to serve a parish for the Church tells Eilis that she would easily find work there. He explains his parish is warm, friendly, and full of good people. Someone like Eilis could easily fit in.

It would be a great opportunity, especially if you were young.

-- Father Flood (Part One)

Importance: Father Flood continues to build his case which will ultimately lead to his sponsoring Eilis in America. Flood explains that America is the place where a good future is possible for a young person. He explains that there are incredible opportunities for those willing to work hard. Eilis wants a better life, and has no worries about working hard. Each one of Flood's words further encourages her to want to go to New York.

Until now, Eilis had always presumed that she would live in the town all her life, as her mother had done, knowing everyone, having the same friends and neighbours, the same routines in the same streets.

-- Narrator (Part One)

Importance: Eilis formally accepts work and the sponsorship in New York. She is both excited and nervous, having never expected to move beyond her hometown. Her life will change in immeasurable ways by her journey to Brooklyn, and by the people she meets there. America is a place unlike anything Eilis will ever experience again.

She was nobody here. It was not just that she had no friends and family; it was rather that she was a ghost in this room, in the streets on the way to work, on the shop floor. Nothing meant anything.

-- Narrator (Part Two)

Importance: Early in her stay in Brooklyn, Eilis feels homesick after receiving her first letters from her family. Eilis realizes that, until now, she has not really thought about



home. Now that she does, she feels as though she is not at home in Brooklyn. She feels as if she merely exists in Brooklyn, whereas back in Enniscorthy, she was truly a part of the townscape.

What she loved most about America, Eilis thought on these mornings, was how the heating was kept on all night.

-- Narrator (Part Two)

Importance: As Eilis's homesickness fades, and as she begins to more thoroughly adjust to life in America, she begins to fall in love with different things about the place. Among them is how heating is kept on all night. This demonstrates how simple luxuries such as heating are taken for granted by many, and how much something so simple can mean to someone like Eilis who has not had them before.

Later, during the week, as she was making her way from Bartocci's to Brooklyn College, she forgot what she was looking forward to... the feeling she had was only about Friday night and being collected from the house by a man she had met and going to the dance with him in the hall, knowing that he would be walking her back to Mrs. Kehoe's afterwards.

-- Narrator (Part Three, Section 1)

Importance: At one of the church hall dances, Eilis meets a young man named Tony, a native of Brooklyn whose parents are both from Italy. Eilis dances with him and agrees to see him again. She quickly realizes she is smitten with him, unable to think of anything else except Friday and the chance to see him again. This signals a new part of Eilis's life, and a new part of her life in America.

No, if you weren't there, I would walk home all sad looking at the ground.

-- Tony (Part Three, Section 1)

Importance: As Tony and Eilis hit things off, Eilis wonders why he has been coming to heavily Irish dances. He explains he has a thing for Irish girls, and for Eilis in particular. She asks if any Irish girl would do, but Tony responds that it wouldn't. This makes Eilis very happy. It also demonstrates the gentle, traditional romance consistent with mid-Twentieth Century America, especially in Catholic-centric communities.

She died in her sleep, Eilis.

-- Father Flood (Part Three, Section 2)

Importance: Father Flood brings bad news to Eilis, letting her know that her sister, Rose, has died overnight of a weak heart. Eilis is stunned by this, and is troubled to know that her mother, who is not in great health herself, will be living alone. This alters the trajectory of Eilis's life to which she will agree to marry Tony before returning to visit Ireland.

In the good cheer that followed the dessert she almost began to hope that he had told them that he and she were getting married.



-- Narrator (Part Three, Section 2)

Importance: As Eilis agrees to marry Tony before leaving to visit Ireland for a month, she has a meal with his family. While Eilis has requested the wedding be kept secret until it can be publicly celebrated upon her return from Ireland, she secretly hopes that the well-dressed nature of Tony's family for the meal means they know about the wedding. She has come to love Tony's family, and wants them to know she has married their son.

Mammy, there's something I should have told you when I came back first but I have to tell you now. I got married in Brooklyn before I came home. I am married. I should have told you the minute I got back.

-- Eilis (Part Four)

Importance: When Miss Kelly learns that Eilis is married, she confronts Eilis about running around with Jim Farrell. Eilis is startled and set straight. She commits to writing to Tony at once to assure him of her love, and to let him know she'll be back soon. She also immediately moves to tell her mother that she is a married woman. Eilis's mother is both happy and sad about this, because it means her daughter is married but also that her daughter will once again be leaving for Brooklyn.

She has gone back to Brooklyn.

-- Mrs. Lacey (Part Four)

Importance: Here, Eilis imagines what her mother will say to Jim when he comes around to ask after her after she has left to return to Brooklyn. Eilis knows the words will come to mean little to Jim in the future years, as he moves on and finds his own life in Enniscorthy. Yet, for Eilis, these words will become defining as the path to her new life in America with Tony.