

“What was a Family?”: Politics, Sexuality and Social Change in Colm Tóibín’s *The Heather Blazing* and his early-1990s journalism

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Abstract

Published in the context of the legal reformations and the public debates about the separation between Church and State in the early 1990s Ireland, Colm Tóibín’s *The Heather Blazing* (1992) centers round the personal and professional life of Eamon Redmond, a conservative judge in a changing society. This essay will focus on an episode where a pregnant schoolgirl denounces her Catholic school authorities for their decision to expel her. My analysis will also draw on the unpublished version of the same episode, which features the actual case of Eileen Flynn, a teacher who was dismissed because she was an unmarried mother living with her baby’s father, a married man himself. Significantly, whereas in the earlier version Tóibín engages with the issue of divorce, in the published text he further develops his criticism over society’s punitive treatment of unmarried mothers. As will be argued, while exploring the tensions between the personal and the political, Tóibín offers in *The Heather Blazing* a subversive rewriting of the centrality of the Catholic family as a unit of social cohesion and control in Ireland. This essay will also situate Tóibín’s novel through his journalism, as well as through an account of the shifting sexual, social and religious realities and pressures of twentieth century Ireland.

Key words: Catholic Church, Colm Tóibín, Eileen Flynn, *The Heather Blazing*, Ireland, politics, sexuality

1. Introduction

Published in 1992, Colm Tóibín’s *The Heather Blazing* requires to be read within the context of the legal reformations and the public debates about the separation between the Catholic Church and State that were taking place in the early 1990s Ireland. Tóibín displays in *The Heather Blazing* a strong political engagement in his representations of social change, calling attention to the contradictions attached to the strict moral codes which have historically regulated Irish identity, gender politics and the values of the “Catholic” family. My discussion of the novel focuses on the judicial case of a pregnant schoolgirl who sued her Catholic school authorities for their decision to expel her. In my analysis, I will also draw on the unpublished version of the same episode (the manuscripts of *The Heather Blazing* can be found in a special collection of the National Library of Ireland, the *Colm Tóibín Papers*). Tóibín’s earlier text describes the case of Eileen Flynn, a teacher

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in a Catholic school who, in 1982, was dismissed because she was an unmarried mother living with her baby's father, a separated married man. Until 1995, divorce was not a possibility in Ireland.

Prior to my analysis of *The Heather Blazing*, I will situate Tóibín's novel through his early-1990s journalism, specifically through some of his articles which discuss issues related to individual rights and sexual morality in Ireland. Moreover, in order to provide a background for Tóibín as a dissenting intellectual writing from an Irish context, I find it convenient to offer a brief overview of the cultural centrality of the Catholic Church in twentieth century Ireland.

2. Politics, Catholicism and national identity in Ireland (1922-1990s): An overview

In Ireland, the establishment of the Free State in 1922 was followed by the development of a deeply conservative notion of national identity, since, as Declan Kiberd notes, "Ireland produced more than its fair share of conservative rebels, and very few revolutionaries imbued with a vision of an alternative society" (1996: 391). The question of national identity became central to political and religious authorities, and those who came into power became reactionary and sought to impose a sense of unity in a post-revolutionary Ireland. In fact, the State reinforced and propagated a monolithic sense of nationhood, envisaging Ireland as essentially anti-English, rural and Catholic. Catholicism had also been the language of patriotism in the years of revolution and, once peace was restored, the Church came to be seen as "the upholder of Catholic Ireland's moral integrity" (Ferriter, 2005: 332).

Therefore, after independence, Ireland saw the institutionalisation of Catholic doctrine through legislation. In a nation that defined itself as Catholic, many Protestants found themselves being treated as though they were "strangers in their own land" (Brown, 2004:96). Eminent cultural figures such as W.B. Yeats soon denounced the State's religious bigotry and sectarianism. In his speech against the anti-divorce law enacted by W.T. Cosgrave's government in 1925, Yeats spoke on behalf of Protestant Ireland and denounced the measure as being "grossly oppressive" (Brown, 119).

Furthermore, independence did not bring gender equality, as women's place within a free Ireland was constructed on domestic terms solely. In "Power, Gender and Identity in the Irish Free State" (1995), Maryann Gialanella Valiulis explains how many women –the Daughters of Erin, for instance– actively participated in the revolutionary struggle in the hope that the new state would treat them as full citizens. Instead, women were prevented from sitting on juries under the 1927 Juries Act, and the introduction of a series of bills between 1925 and 1935 seriously restricted female employment. Irish feminists felt betrayed, but their protests could make no headway in a nation where political and religious leaders continually portrayed women as "dependent and childlike, incapable of assuming responsibility, of making decisions –the antithesis of the ideal of the Irish male

citizen and, ironically, similar to the stereotypes that the British had used to describe the Irish" (Valiulis, 124).

Until the 1970s, family law statutes were, in fact, extremely repressive for women. A married woman, for example, could not share the ownership of her home, and she could be in serious danger of destitution if she became a widow or a deserted wife. Wives could not be granted a barring order against a brutal husband, nor could they refuse to have sex with their partner. In *Women in Ireland* (1986), Jenny Beale explains that domestic oppression against women was consistently silenced until the 1970s, and that this silence was first broken by Irish feminists, who campaigned for better pensions for deserted wives, the opening of refuges for battered wives and the legalisation of contraceptives for the control of fertility. Beale highlights that, because of feminist activism, "the public was forced to accept that women were battered, that rape within marriage was a reality" (64). In their campaigns, feminists stressed the idea that the "Catholic" family in Ireland was based on unequal power relations that perpetuated male privilege. As was also the case in many other Western countries, the middle decades of the twentieth century became a golden era for the conjugal and patriarchal family. Nonetheless, as Ferriter astutely observes, what makes the Irish case different is that "a sexual liberalism based on individual rights experienced elsewhere in the West in the 1960s and 1970s was delayed in coming to Ireland" (2012: 10).

The decade of the 1980s saw the reawakening of conservative ideologies in the face of increasing secularism and social protest. Those who advocated for legal reforms were often confronted with the stiff opposition of nationalists, who exalted Ireland's special place as a Catholic country: "The Catholic Right in Ireland [...] portrayed feminism and human rights discourse not only as a threat to Ireland's 'pro-life' and 'pro-family' traditions, but also as a threat to Ireland's sovereignty" (Mullaly, 2005: 83). Divorce, abortion and homosexuality, for example, were regarded as sources of evil motivated by the "pernicious" effects of individualism, modern life and foreign tendencies. During those years, the electorate was asked to vote in two different referenda in which the Church was deeply involved. In 1983, a ban on abortion was reasserted, equating the rights of life of the mother and the unborn. Later, in 1986, another referendum proposed to remove the ban on divorce. The majority voted against it, but the dismay of those who hoped for social change became notorious. Even if the 1980s was a decade of political conservatism, the controversies and strong divisions in opinion in Ireland epitomised the heterogeneity of its society.

In the 1990s, Ireland experienced the emergence of a much more liberal society that no longer defined itself as essentially Catholic and traditional. In fact, this decade became a turning point in the recent history of Ireland, when the country experienced the creation of the so-called Celtic Tiger², characterised by very high

² The Celtic Tiger spans the period between 1994 and 2008, 2008 being the year when the Irish economy contracted for the first time since 1983. During the Celtic Tiger years, the implementation of neo-liberal and free-market policies facilitated foreign investment, but created a very fragile and unstable economy. As Gerry Smyth appropriately puts it, "the emphasis on foreign investment has seriously undermined

levels of economic growth. In many ways, Ireland became a more open-minded country and, as a result of the economic boom, Irish society became much more confident and outward looking. Nonetheless, one should also note that this patina of national success also obscured the fact that the liberal policies of this period were creating a growing inequality in access to housing, education and healthcare³.

The rapid transformations in 1990s Ireland had a remarkable impact on the country's cultural life. In her study on the contemporary Irish novel, Eve Patten develops the following idea:

With a confidence bolstered by the 1990 election to the Irish presidency of a female reformist lawyer, Mary Robinson, the Irish began to face up to their position as modern Europeans [...] Where political culture led, writers followed, and in the publishing boom of the 1990s, the Irish novel repeatedly highlighted the institutional and ideological failings of the country, tracing the halting progress of Ireland's cultural, sexual and economic evolution, and foregrounding voices of dissent (2006: 259).

Patten thus suggests that the 1990s Irish novel became characterised by its political re-articulation of the nation's self- image. In fact, the fiction of the new decade exhibited an unprecedented political engagement through its denunciation of the silences and omissions of an Irish nationalist tradition that promoted essentialist notions of citizenship. If the moral conservatism of the past had provoked the silencing and marginalisation of certain groups and individuals, based on matters such as sexual behaviour, religion or social class, now the Irish novel will obsessively concentrate on the representations of the repressed and marginalised aspects of Irish life, both past and present. As I shall demonstrate in what follows, Tóibín's writing is obviously indebted to this new cultural climate, when the old conceptions of Ireland as a conservative and piously Catholic country were becoming something of the past.

3. Public debates and legal reformations in early-1990s Ireland: Colm Tóibín's journalism and the divorce debate

As a journalist in the early 1990s, Tóibín often wrote newspaper articles decrying the ways in which politics and public morality impacted on the lives of individuals and their privacy. Male homosexuality, for example, remained criminal until 1993. By then, many intellectuals like Tóibín had emphasised the need to combat discrimination based on sexual behaviour, proclaiming that "it is really important for the health of our society and its citizens that the fear and guilt surrounding sexuality be removed" ("The thin gay line", 1992). Tóibín's own homosexuality –

domestic entrepreneurship: this is what happens when foreign-owned companies account for over 90% of a small country's exports" (2012: 133).

³ As Peadar Kirby had already warned in the early 2000s, "the high economic growth rates of the 1990s have been accompanied by growing relative poverty, inequality and occupational stratification, and by a declining welfare effort [...] Ireland's embrace of globalisation has resulted in a more divided society" (2002: 30-31).

being an "offence" against society– was a topic that he did not address publicly in those years, but he did express his hope for a more liberal Ireland that would resemble the other European countries in issues such as individual rights and sexual freedom.

When Tóibín joined the contraceptive debate, he openly criticised the powerful Catholic Church for hampering legal reformations: "The Church is now opposing the further liberalisation of the laws governing the sale of condoms, just as it opposed the availability of contraceptives to married couples [in the 1970s]" ("Keeping faith with their intolerance", 1991). Here, Tóibín was referring to the legal restrictions not allowing minors to buy condoms without a medical prescription, a prohibition that was lifted in 1992 for fear of an HIV epidemic in Ireland⁴.

On the issue of HIV, Tóibín himself wrote an article decrying the ways in which the Irish mass media dealt with this sexually-transmissible disease, with TV panelists exaggerating the danger and giving the impression that they did not want to be touched by people with the AIDS virus. Tóibín critiques this limited understanding of the epidemic whilst pointing out that "it is essential for everyone to understand that those who are HIV positives should be surrounded with a general air of normality" ("Time to be positive about AIDS", 1991).

As a journalist, Tóibín has also been involved in public debates surrounding abortion. In one of his articles, Tóibín denounces Ireland's restrictive abortion laws, openly resenting the limited scope of the "right to information and travel" amendment that was passed in 1992, which only served as a legal permission for Irish women to terminate their pregnancy abroad⁵. In his article, Tóibín attacks the taboo of abortion and its exportation to foreign lands: "Abortion now seems to be acceptable to many as long as it happens in England [...] Surround [abortion] with silence and exile. Keep Ireland safe for abject hypocrisy ("A vintage week for hypocrisy", 1992).

For Tóibín in those years, another issue worthy of public attention was the plight of unmarried mothers and the entrenchment of gender inequalities⁶. The stigma

⁴ Historian Terence Brown links the beginnings of the Irish Church's loss of political authority with the liberalisation of the sale of contraceptives, underlining that the bill, which the Hierarchy opposed, "was passed without much contention" (367).

⁵ In 1992, the social debate on abortion was sparked by the notorious case of a 14 year old girl who became pregnant as a result of rape. The case became well-known in Ireland when the teenage girl – known as "X" to protect her identity– was stopped from travelling to England with her parents to undergo an abortion. The Supreme Court eventually ruled that the girl had a right to abortion on the grounds that she was suicidal. As Sinead O'Carroll relates, this was a very public case which "drove thousands of people to demonstrations across the country –for both pro-life and pro-choice campaigns" ("Twenty years on: a timeline of the X Case", 2012).

⁶ Most times, the pregnancy of these women was surrounded by an aura of secrecy and personal disgrace. Young pregnant women who were disowned by their families could end up interned in convent homes, where, in many cases, they "became enslaved, often unable to leave, forced to work without pay in the laundries, and subjected to brutal treatment and abuse from the nuns in charge" (Bacik, 2013: 25). This institutional form of abuse had been silenced for long and, when unveiled in the 1990s, triggered public indignation.

placed upon unmarried mothers, Tóibín argues, contradicts the language of Catholic religion, which fosters values such as charity and compassion. In one of his articles, Tóibín dissects Pope John Paul II's discourse of solidarity, seeing it as empty and meaningless:

[The Pope] is full of clichés and solemnity [...] In Ireland a teacher in a Catholic school got pregnant and was fired from her job. It was a very public case, and hardly an example of radical solidarity. The Pope writes of the need to become 'courageously pro woman'. I'll believe him when they give the teacher back her job. ("What does he say when he prays", 1994)

The teacher to whom Tóibín refers here is Eileen Flynn, whose case he fictionalises in an earlier version of *The Heather Blazing* (I will return to this later). As Tóibín suggests in the previous quote, the Catholic Church in Ireland remained powerful in the 1990s due to its involvement in education and healthcare, which he views as a damaging interference in civil life. Thus, in a 1997 article, he expressed his concern over the fact that many publicly-funded hospitals in Ireland were still run by the Catholic Church. In Catholic hospitals, Tóibín denounces, doctors always have to counsel against abortion, and "promotion is refused to doctors [...] who support the free availability of contraceptives" ("He'll have brought it into himself", 10).

Even though Tóibín is eloquent in his condemnation of the Church's institutional power, he is not an advocate of secularism and is not critical of Catholics who attend Mass or show their allegiance to the Church. He is not derisive or dismissive of Catholic faith and rituals either, as Tóibín –having grown up a Catholic– readily acknowledges his attraction to Catholic imagery and symbols⁷. However, as a gay man and a lapsed Catholic, Tóibín is firmly opposed to the Church's self-serving vision of Ireland as a moral community where people should uncritically accept the authority of the Hierarchy. He is adamant that religiosity should be kept as a personal matter to be experienced privately by individuals. In 1995, several months before the divorce referendum, Tóibín wrote:

I like to think that there is a new awareness among most Catholics in Ireland that their faith is all the more precious and secure for being private, that it no longer needs to reach out into the public world and control legislation and state policy. ("Dublin's epiphany")

As Tóibín makes clear in his discussion, Catholic morality should never inform legislation or become a limitation to individual rights. Therefore, rather than being supportive of a liberalism that rejects tradition and religion, Tóibín attempts to position Ireland as a mature and pluralist society where no particular ethos should prevail.

⁷ In *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe*, Tóibín recalls his wonder when he visited the shrine of Lourdes in 1987: "I had felt something of the power of the place, the amount of hope and spirit which had been let loose within these walls over all the years. I was confused by this mixture of hatred and fear of the Church's authority with my susceptibility to its rituals and sheer force" (1994: 13).

Because it is against the indissolubility of marriage on which the idea of the Catholic family rests, divorce became a highly contentious issue where notions of tradition, Catholic values and individual rights were discussed. Despite the social idealisation of the family, many marriages failed, and separated spouses encountered numerous legal impediments. A spokesman for the Divorce Action Group in Ireland, Vicent Durac, denounced that “the thousands of people who live together outside marriage in ‘second relationships’ have virtually no legal or constitutional rights vis a vis each other” (1986: 12). In his support of divorce in the 1995 referendum campaign, journalist Fintan O’Toole further argued that marital breakdown in Ireland was more common than generally believed, as “the 1991 census shows 55,143 adults describing themselves as separated from their spouses” (1994: 170). For this reason, O’Toole maintained that Irish society needed to find “legal and social structures” that could grant separated people the personal freedom to remake their life and start anew (170). Marital separation –with all its painful consequences for children– would continue to happen whether or not divorce was legalised; the main difference, for O’Toole, lay in the fact that families could be more easily remade if, as result of divorce legislation, re-marriage with a new partner was allowed.

On the contrary, as Carol Coulter discusses in “Women, Gender and the Divorce Debate” (1997), the anti-divorce campaigners fuelled the fears of the sixty percent of married women who, by the mid-1990s, did not work outside the home. Their message was that divorce largely devalues the family-centred role of the stay-at-home wife and mother, causing her economic insecurity and increasing her chances of being abandoned. It was further argued that divorce could only benefit family destroyers, namely the unfaithful husband who neglects his familial responsibilities and the “predator female” – stereotyped as a working woman who prioritises her personal desires and her career over marriage and motherhood (Coulter, 286). In a country where a majority of married women depended on a male breadwinner, the anti-divorce argument struck a chord with the electorate. Divorce was passed by a very slim majority (50.5%) and its legalisation saw “wild claims as to the demise of the [Catholic] family” (Conroy, 76).

4. “What was a family?”: The tensions between the personal and the political in Colm Tóibín’s *The Heather Blazing*

Published in the context of the legal reformations of the early 1990s in Ireland, Colm Tóibín’s *The Heather Blazing* (1992) centers round Dublin High Court judge Eamon Redmond. He is one of the figures who must protect and dispense law, which primarily stems from one of the foundational texts of the Irish Republic, the 1937 Constitution. The present time of the novel is set in 1980s/early 1990s Ireland, but, in order to develop the character’s depth and complexity, Tóibín’s narrative alternates between different periods of the protagonist’s life. Thus, readers have meaningful insights into Eamon’s upbringing in a highly nationalist and Catholic family during the 1930s. In his novel, Tóibín produces “a compelling depiction of

the forces which tie [Eamon] to his historical moment in postrevolutionary Ireland" (Corcoran, 1997: 98).

In *The Heather Blazing*, Tóibín also takes pains to recreate the social life of mid-twentieth century Ireland. In this Ireland, figures of the Virgin Mary decorate windowsills, women pray the Rosary incessantly and townspeople often gather in the church. In the novel, the powerful presence of Catholic morality pervades all aspects of life and has a strong influence on the psychology of individuals. Catholic teachings on the body and sexuality, for instance, terrify teenage Eamon, who goes to confession because he feels deeply ashamed of his urges to masturbate⁸: "It made [Eamon] uneasy that God should not be able to lift the burden of guilt from him" (144). Hence, Tóibín fully exposes the entanglement of Catholicism and public morality in mid-twentieth century Ireland, a historical period in which "the newly created Irish Free State adopted Catholicism and its moral values as a vehicle for nationalist goals" (Pelan, 2005: 14).

The issue of social change is one of the topics that Tóibín addresses in this novel, precisely through the characterisation of Eamon⁹. Although Tóibín's protagonist maintains his public role as a reactionary judge, he also personifies, to some degree, the country's social transition, as he eventually loses all faith in religion and in the political values that had sustained him during his formative years. An early reviewer rightly notes that "in Eamon Redmond, Mr Tóibín shows the Irish national psyche [...] painfully coming to terms with a new social order" (McDiarmid, 1992: 9). As I will explain, the protagonist's greatest change is linked to a moment of personal crisis, which takes place in the final part of the novel.

Coming as he does from a line of rebels aligned with the nationalist party Fianna Fáil, Tóibín's Eamon Redmond is expected to continue with the legacy of his father, uncles and grandfather. In Enniscorthy, his patrilineal lineage is what gives him a sense of identity and privileged social class position. Nowhere is this clearer than in the passage where the sixteen year-old Eamon gives a speech for the 1951 Fianna

⁸ Masturbation was considered sinful in Catholic Ireland. Until the 1970s, a common belief was that, "if not controlled, [masturbation] could lead to homosexuality" (Maher, 2012: 54).

⁹ Social change is also powerfully evoked by the coastal erosion in Cush, the place Eamon returns to every summer since childhood. In one of his solitary walks, Tóibín's protagonist observes the cliff above the beach: "It had been so gradual, this erosion, a matter of time, lumps of clay, small boulders studded with stones becoming loose and falling away, the sea gnawing at the land. It was all so strange, year after year, the slow disappearance of the one contour being replaced by another" (32). Eamon's appreciation of the cliff—its vividness and continual transformation—has attracted the attention of critics such as Ray Ryan, who views coastal erosion as "the novel's key trope" (2002: 270). Interestingly, as Ryan argues, this erosion not only signifies erasure, but also renovation. Seen in this light, the natural elements in the novel seem to acquire a strong symbolism. Nevertheless, one should also note that Tóibín himself holds an ambivalent opinion with respect to marine landscape as a metaphor in his own fiction: "The most important thing about the sea in that book [*The Heather Blazing*] and others is that it is just the sea [...] I don't place it there as symbol or metaphor, but I am alert to its symbolic and metaphorical power" (Wiesenfarth, 2009: 16).

Fail Election rally, with Eamon de Valera¹⁰ at his back. As a politicised individual, young Eamon mimics the creeds of the party when he asserts that Fianna Fáil will respect the clergy and protect the country from outside influences. Reviving sectarian politics, Tóibín’s protagonist also talks of Fine Gael and how “they want to bring Communism into this country and hunt the priests from house to house, like the English before them” (168). In the course of the narrative, Eamon’s allegiance to Fianna Fáil will also facilitate his admission into the High Court, becoming a judge who serves the interests of the political party.

As a journalist, Tóibín has also written about Irish nationalism and Fianna Fáil, commenting how:

In the town where I was brought up, you didn’t just vote Fianna Fáil as a matter of choice, you were Fianna Fáil: it was part of your identity. Fianna Fáil politicians were fond of evoking a utopian Ireland, united and rural [...] Fianna Fáil had always sided with the Church, and its members were uneasy with the onset of change in Irish society, the growth of the women’s movement, and the relaxing of sexual mores. The Party had indirectly opposed an unsuccessful referendum to legalize divorce in 1986. It strongly opposed abortion. (“Dublin’s Epiphany”)

In mid-twentieth century Ireland, Fianna Fáil became more than just a political party; it was, in Tóibín’s own words, an “identity”. This kind of identification is what Tóibín captures in the novel, since Eamon Redmond seems to embrace the ethos of Fianna Fáil, as he maintains his public role as a reactionary judge who clings to the norms and ideals of the past. In the figure of the judge, Tóibín also traces the social climate in which a large number of people of older generations were raised, whilst also depicting the mechanisms of power and the affiliations needed to reach prominent social spheres. Such an exercise of historical memory becomes crucial in times when rapid and drastic social changes are taking place, as was happening in the early 1990s, when the novel was published. As Claudia Luppino observes, in *The Heather Blazing* Tóibín explores the cultural legacies of Irish nationalism, “unmask[ing] pathological aspects of the late-twentieth-century Southern state, such as its imprisonment in an idealized past, its silences, the inability of its laws to keep pace with cultural change” (2015: 141).

Set in the present time of the novel, Eamon, as a senior judge, is immersed in a highly controversial case wherein a pregnant schoolgirl sued her school authorities for their decision to expel her, thus overriding her aspirations for a university education. Such a harsh decision is based on the assumption that her pregnancy violates the Catholic ethos of the school, setting a negative example for her classmates. As indicated in the opening paragraph, the unpublished version of *The Heather Blazing* features Eileen Flynn’s case, but, as Tóibín intimates in an

¹⁰ De Valera was one of the most prominent and influential politicians in twentieth century Ireland. He became the Fianna Fail Prime Minister from 1937 until 1948; from 1951 to 1954, and from 1957 to 1959.

interview, the chapter “had to be rewritten overnight for legal reasons”¹¹ (O’Toole, 2008: 192). That is how, in the revision process, Tóibín’s account of Flynn’s trial became replaced by the fictional case of a teenage student.

Both versions posit similar questions with regard to public morality and the separation between the Catholic Church and State in Ireland. But, whereas in the earlier version Tóibín engages with the issue of divorce, in the published text he avoids the divorce debate and further develops his criticism over society’s punitive treatment of unmarried mothers. In the “schoolgirl version”, the writer denounces Ireland’s public attitudes towards unmarried pregnant women who, because of the stigma of their situation, may have felt induced to seek an abortion. At the trial, the schoolgirl’s mother contends that “it would have been easier for everyone [...] if her daughter had had an abortion. But because they decided to have the child and bring it up in the town, her daughter was being made to suffer” (88). Ironically, though abortion is a criminal act in Ireland, the girl’s mother explains that the interruption of her pregnancy would have prevented the schoolgirl from being exposed to social marginalisation. This episode functions as a reminder of the paradox that, despite the country’s modernisation in the early 1990s, being an unmarried pregnant woman in Ireland was too often judged as an “immoral” act which was either punished or kept in secrecy. The same chapter also highlights the sexism endorsed by the Catholic school, since “no one wanted to expel the boy [...] although some people knew who he was” (89). In Catholic Ireland, thus, the weight of social control fell on women, not on men: “It was women who were most often the targets of reproach and discipline by the church” (Crowley and Kitchin, 2008: 363).

In the two versions, Tóibín raises awareness of the tensions between legal and moral justice, as he effectively shows in his novel that, though the Constitution constructs its own world of order, it can never encompass the complexities of life and human relations: “What was there beyond the law? [...] 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” (85). In the earlier text, Eamon reflects on that point for a while, just to realise that “there was no argument about facts or truth, guilt or innocence. In the end, he was not the legal arbiter, because there were no legal issues at stake” [MS 44,465/ 3]. As he works on the case, the protagonist realises that the decision of the Catholic school authorities ignores values that belong to the language of religion, such as “charity, mercy, forgiveness” – but these values, as he recognises, have “no legal status” (91). It is thus significant that, in spite of his conservatism and Catholic upbringing, Eamon becomes skeptical of the moral righteousness of the Catholic institution, and this skepticism is further revealed by his recognition that “he had no strong moral views, he had ceased to believe in anything” (90).

¹¹ Flynn is not mentioned in this earlier version of the chapter, but Tóibín uses the details of her case here

As has been pointed out, Tóibín’s original intention was to address some of the problems stemming from the absence of divorce legislation in Ireland. In the earlier version, the nuns dismiss the teacher because her personal life was “in breach of the school’s ethos” and “the parents of children under her care had complained” [MS 44,465/ 3]. Tellingly, it is her living with a married man –himself separated and with children of his own– that provokes the outrage of her neighbours and school authorities: “Her having a child outside wedlock was not the issue, counsel had maintained, but her continuing to live openly with a married man” [MS 44,465/ 3]. As he works on his verdict, Eamon considers the rights of individuals over institutions, coming to the conclusion that:

She was not acting according to the Christian principles outlined in the preamble to the Constitution, nor was she offered the protection which the Constitution offered to any member of a family. No judgement thus far in the history of the Constitution and the courts had called what she was involved in “a family”. It was, instead, a broken family. Her child would be illegitimate in the eyes of the state. [MS 44,465/ 3]

Tóibín also suggests in his text how, due to the lack of divorce legislation, the couple could not marry, so their family would always be regarded as “illegitimate”, both legally and socially. In spite of the “illegitimacy” of her situation, the teacher decided to move in with the father of her baby. The judge knows that “living with a married man did not constitute grounds for dismissal”, but he is also acutely aware that “the nuns ran a school which was dedicated to the spread of Christian principles” [MS 44,465/ 3]. Eamon is thus forced to make a decision basing it on his own moral principles, since the legal arguments do not suffice: “Most of the issues raised in the case were moral issues: the right of a certain ethos to prevail against the right of an individual not to be dismissed from her job” [MS 44,465/ 3].

Thus, in *The Heather Blazing*, Tóibín shows judge Redmond painfully working on his verdict as he discovers that the Constitution, instead of being a source of absolute truth and closed meanings, proves to be ambiguous and contradictory. In the two versions, he seriously reconsiders the matter of what constitutes a family:

What was a family? The Constitution did not define a family, and at the time it was written in 1937 the term was perfectly understood: a man, his wife and their children. But the Constitution was written in the present tense, it was not his job to decide what certain terms [...] such as ‘the family’ had meant in the past. It was his job to define and redefine these terms now. Could not a girl and her child be a family? (91)
... It was his job to know what these terms meant now. This woman was living with a man in a permanent relationship, they were bringing up children. Did not a man, a woman and their children constitute a family? In what way were they not a family? They were not married. But there was no mention of marriage in the Constitution [MS 44,465/ 3]

In both texts, Eamon judges in favour of the school authorities, thus denying the schoolgirl/teacher and her child a legal status as a family –the rights of a family being greater than the rights of the school as an institution. In this sense, Tóibín exposes the inconsistency of stable and rigid meanings when applied to words and

concepts, and hence illustrates how such rigidity creates subaltern versions of family, which are relegated to social marginality. Additionally, in the two texts, Tóibín not only demonstrates that the concept of family is not as "natural" or "evident" as it may appear, but it is also a political idea regulated by external discourses.

Once the trial is finished, the judge notices that the teacher's partner had been supporting her all along: "He saw that she had a man beside her who was holding her, and both were looking up at him, as though afraid" [MS 44,465/ 3]. He now admits to himself that, because she has been stigmatised, "it would be hard for her to find another job" [MS 44,465/ 3]. In the case of the pregnant schoolgirl, having decided not to seek an abortion and have the baby without the help of the father, she receives no support but is subjected to legal punishment instead. Ultimately, Tóibín shows in *The Heather Blazing* that the legal and religious institutions which venerate the notion of the family can become detrimental to the values that they are supposed to protect.

In spite of his apparent coldness, Eamon does not remain emotionally untouched by the case; his daughter, Niamh, is an unmarried mother herself who has long ago felt estranged from him: "He did not believe that [Niamh] had felt any affection for him since she was in her early teens" (95). Ironically, Tóibín makes the public and private realms collide here, with Eamon's uneasiness concerning the schoolgirl/teacher mirroring his own troubled relationship with his daughter. Like the pregnant schoolgirl in the published text, Niamh had considered having an abortion in England but finally decided to bring up her child without the father. It comes as no surprise, then, that Niamh feels deeply dismayed by her father's resolution of the case. Bitterly critical of his decision, Niamh confronts him and asserts the validity of her own judgment basing it on her own life experiences: "I know what is like to be a woman in this country, and I know what it's like to have a child here" (99). However, the judge recoils from arguing and this point of friction remains relegated to silence and distance between father and daughter. Eamon and Carmel, his wife, also receive the visit of their son Donal –a barrister and an active member of the Irish Council for Liberties– who also challenges his father's uncompromising conservatism.

Through these family conflicts Tóibín makes a statement about the unresolved tensions between the "old" and "new" Ireland in the context of the early 1990s. Aware of the hostility against him, Eamon finds himself at a loss, utterly disconnected from his children. But, since Tóibín's narrative delves into the psychological intricacies of his protagonist, "we, as readers, know much more of Redmond than his wife or children. We are given, in stark detail, Redmond's grim and disease-hunted childhood, invested as it was with a powerful sense of history" (McCarthy, 2005: 221). Hence, rather than offering a simplistic rendition of the judge, Tóibín humanises his central character and produces a somewhat sympathetic portrait of him, even if the novel denounces the conservative values that he espouses.

Eamon transcends his emotional impermeability when Carmel suffers a stroke. In the wake of her death, Eamon isolates himself, leaving Dublin in order to remain alone in Cush, at the family's summerhouse. Memories and reminiscences of Carmel fill his days now: "He knew that he could not face the house [...] She was dead. Carmel is dead, he whispered to himself, but still he imagined them wandering in Wexford" (212). Worried about Eamon's solitary confinement, Niamh comes to Cush with her one-year-old child, Michael, to help her father through his state of mourning.

As they spend time together, Eamon's relationship with Niamh is gradually remade and they both find human connectedness in the face of bereavement. Tóibín dramatises how, where there was resentment and hostility between father and daughter, now there is companionship and peacefulness: "Every night before going to bed Eamon and Niamh had a cup of tea together. At times he found her strangely like her mother in the way she spoke and responded" (242). Likewise, through Eamon's recognition of Carmel's features in Niamh, Tóibín's text seems to speak metaphorically for the recuperation of familiarity and closeness between father and daughter. Furthermore, Eamon's engagement with Niamh's baby signals an important evolution in his own character, as he starts to adopt a closer and much more affectionate attitude towards his grandson. This is illustrated by the final scene of the novel, in which Eamon bathes in the sea with the baby, holding him gently and jumping at each wave, "until Michael began to watch for waves and laugh as each one approached" (245). No longer distant and alienated from others, Eamon slowly heals himself in the company of his daughter and grandson.

In the final pages of the story, Eamon's personal change becomes meaningful insofar as he begins to transcend the emotional limitations and entrenched conservative values that had alienated him from his family. The final gestures of familial communion stand as a stark contrast to the central character's earlier rejection of his daughter's lone motherhood, aggravated by his legal condemnation of the pregnant schoolgirl/teacher. Therefore, Tóibín charts here Eamon's gradual acceptance of –and inclusion within– the alternative family represented by his daughter and his grandson Michael. But, most crucially, since the conflicts within the Redmond family came to function as an allegorical representation of the tensions between the "old" and the "new" Ireland, the familial union at the end calls for an ethics of reconciliation and acceptance of alternative ways of life, away from those cultural restrictions that separate rather than unite individuals.

5. Concluding remarks

In summary, in this article I have attempted to shed light on Tóibín's politics of representation with regard to the cultural tensions taking place in the early 1990s Ireland, a time of important legal reformations in the area of individual rights and sexuality. In his novel Tóibín displays a strong political engagement in his representations of the family at a time when the moral teachings and political authority of the Catholic Church were being openly questioned in Ireland. As a

journalist too, he became involved in public debates on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, divorce, contraception and the discrimination against unmarried mothers.

Bound as he is to his Catholic and nationalist upbringing in mid-twentieth century Ireland, Tóibín's Eamon Redmond embodies the personal and political restrictions that shaped him both as an individual and a conservative judge whose verdicts clash with the values of a more liberal society. As was discussed, one of the key episodes of the novel concerns the judicial case of the schoolgirl (originally, a fictional rendition of Eileen Flynn's trial, where Tóibín tackles some of the problems originating from the absence of divorce legislation in Ireland). In both texts, judge Redmond contemplates expanding the definition of the family in order to protect the rights of the mother and her "illegitimate" child: "It was not his job to decide what certain terms [...] such as 'the family' had meant in the past. It was his job to define and redefine these terms now" (91). The text exposes judge Redmond's dilemma as he considers what constitutes a family, precisely at a time when there was a growing awareness about the cruelty that had been inflicted upon unmarried mothers on the grounds of social respectability. In this way, Tóibín strongly problematises how the ideology which sustains the traditional model of family is often linked to other considerations on sexuality and public morality. Ultimately, Tóibín explores the tensions between the personal and the political, while offering a subversive rewriting of the centrality of the Catholic family as a unit of social cohesion and control in Ireland.

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