

Mourning Mothers: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Parental Relationships in Colm Tóibín's *Mothers and Sons*

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Abstract

Modern Irish literary criticism is routinely concerned with representations of gender and power, and the multitudinous forms that they assume within Irish literature. This paper examines Colm Tóibín's *Mothers and Sons* (2006) and its negotiation with traditional representations of the Irish mother and son, and how it challenges key assumptions about their role and function in Irish literature. In doing so, this paper argues for the primacy of a psychoanalytic reading, one which employs the theoretical framework of mourning and melancholy, as formulated, first by Sigmund Freud and, more recently, by Julia Kristeva. The paper proceeds to illustrate that the maternal and filial relationships, as represented in *Mothers and Sons*, exist as elaborations of repression, desire, and mourning, and thus can be understood as processes and metaphorical representations of the unconscious imaginary. The paper concludes that Tóibín circumvents the traditional paradigm of Irish notions regarding domesticity, gender, and power, by proffering an alternative representation of mothers and sons, one which ultimately engages with concerns that are most commonly associated with the territory of the unconscious.

Key Words: Colm Tóibín, *Mothers and Sons*, Irish literature, mourning, melancholia, Freud, Kristeva, psychoanalytic theory

Introduction

Traditional representations of women in Ireland are key concerns in modern Irish literary criticism, with many feminist critics decrying the conventional stereotypes of women in both their representation and function. Irish literature, according to Claire Connolly, has been saturated with images of “Mother Ireland, wild Irish girl, gentle colleen, old hag, [and] wise woman” (Connolly 2003: 3), which marginalises women as static, one-dimensional caricatures. These relatively codified representations of Irish women have been typically aligned with anti-British sentiments or Irish political ambitions, helping incite young Irishmen into action to protect their *motherland*. Commenting on the impoverishing effect that these historic traditional representations have had, John McCourt summarises:

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At best the mother's role [was] to facilitate the development (more usually, the lack of development) of the relationship between father and son, or to offer compensation to the son for the omissions or the sins of the father. While embodying whatever emotional core exists in the home, mothers and sons are always placed in a subordinate role and are rarely afforded the space necessary to understand—much less fulfill—their individual needs. (McCourt 2008: 151)

Against this backdrop, Colm Tóibín's collection of short fiction *Mothers and Sons* may be viewed as negotiating with traditional representations of the Irish mother and established conceptualisations of the Irish domestic sphere. By removing fathers from their superimposed positions within the family, *Mothers and Sons* not only accentuates the primacy of the relationship alluded to by the title, but also thereby galvanises new potentialities for the role of both mother and son. Furthermore, as Kathleen Costello-Sullivan states: "mothers are not so much lost as made present through the aching absence of their representation, or alternatively, by the aching representation of their absence" (Costello-Sullivan 2009: 123).¹ Tóibín's *Mothers and Sons* thus problematises traditional representations of the Irish mother by essentially proposing a different modality, one in which the mothers' presence invokes their simultaneous absence: a somewhat paradoxical notion, but one which gains mounting significance when examining the representation and function of mothers, and their influence on their sons in Tóibín's fiction.

Granted that Tóibín's *Mothers and Sons* does anticipate, and present scenes that hinge upon the Irish mother or son achieving individual freedom, usually from overtly patriarchal social structures in Irish society, many of the stories refuse to conform to such reduced and simplistic expectations (Iyer 2006). The concluding story "A Long Winter," for instance, not only depicts a recalcitrant alcoholic mother who freezes to death in the winter snow, but afterwards also foreshadows her corpse as being ostensibly devoured by vultures: a consequence for her hasty decision to abandon her family. Of equal importance however, the sons represented in the collection refuse to fully recognise or acknowledge their mothers, but rather they engage in psychological contestations: attempts to navigate, undermine, or surmount the overbearing motherly presence. Consequently, *Mothers and Sons* not

¹ Although made with specific reference to *The Heather Blazing*, this quotation may equally be said true of *Mothers and Sons*.

only mediates between traditional and modern expectations concerning Irish representations of mothers and sons, but in its ambivalence, it also reformulates questions regarding the complex function and role of mother and son relationships in Tóibín's oeuvre.

Having briefly positioned *Mothers and Sons* in the cultural milieu of Irish representations of domesticity, it is equally constructive to situate the collection within Tóibín's oeuvre as a constituent of an organic whole. Reflecting on the writing and publication of *Mothers and Sons*, Tóibín states:

You think, anything except that last book, you need to wash it out of yourself completely, and one of the really useful things here, I suppose, is that I was able to go back for *The Heather Blazing*, for *The Blackwater Lightship*, and for the book of stories, *Mothers and Sons*, to a strange sort of subterranean Irish tradition [. . .]. It's a sort of melancholy tradition. (qtd in O'Toole 2008: 200)

Following this statement however, Tóibín is increasingly ambiguous in defining what constitutes the "subterranean Irish tradition" of "melancholy." His closest attempt is to assert that it exists in the work of various Irish writers and that it incorporates "the business of the rural, just being brought up somewhere so remote, with a family all around you" (qtd in O'Toole 2008: 200). The ambiguity in Tóibín's definition may be complemented when juxtaposing it with his collection of essays, *Love in a Dark Time*, specifically where he states: "The strongest images in Irish fiction, drama and poetry are of brokenness, death, destruction. The plays are full of shouting, the poetry is full of elegy, the novels are full of funerals" (Tóibín 2002: 26).² This not only provides a convincing backdrop for the "melancholic tradition" and the "business of the rural [. . .] with a family all around you," but also for *Mothers and Sons* as a collection: these stories are not concerned with families marked by tenuous terms of contentment, but rather by the certainty of "brokenness," "death" and "funerals."

Acknowledging both the cultural and literary context of *Mothers and Sons*, this essay argues that the collection exists both as a reactionary text against traditional Irish representations of mothers and sons, and as a

² McCourt also highlights this particular passage from *Love in a Dark Time*, and argues that "*Mothers and Sons* writes to the agenda Tóibín perceives as being common to boy gay literature and Irish writing" (McCourt 2008: 149).

metaphorical elaboration of the unconscious interplay of mourning that constitutes strains within the mother-son relationship. When approaching *Mothers and Sons* through the lens of psychoanalytic criticism, it reveals how parental relationships function within a matrix of grief, symbolically transfiguring the mother into an object of loss, which, in turn, threatens the hitherto tenuous autonomy of the son's ego. Facing the possible threat of trammelled psychological development, the son, out of necessity, must repudiate the mother and disavow her stranglehold that threatens to pull him into melancholia: back into the womb of asymbolia existence. Therefore, rather than existing simply as idolised surrogates of Mother Ireland, in *Mothers and Sons* the mothers are foremost represented through their disembodied duality as a haunting presence/absence: a function with which the son must not only cope with, but eventually overcome, in his own tortuous psychological development. When privileging the unconscious undercurrents that exist between mother and son, both their representation and function in Tóibín's fiction may be convincingly interpreted within the framework of the psychoanalytic tradition, vis-à-vis mourning and melancholia.

Approaching Mourning in Mothers and Sons

In Tóibín's fiction parental relationships are often represented in terms of the psychological dissension that exists between mother and child: fissures, which frequently structure the protagonists' internal motivation, culminating in, and helping force them into, moments of subtle self-realisation. Mother and child relationships, as characterised above, are clearly privileged thematically in Tóibín's *The South* (1992a), *The Heather Blazing* (1992b), *The Story of the Night* (1996), *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), and *Mothers and Sons* (2006). In addition, Tóibín makes candid reference to his ongoing engagement with this particular theme, both in the entitling of numerous literary works,³ as well as his own admission "that the mothers and sons are there all the time" (Wiesenfarth 2009: 9). It is therefore surprising that within the literary criticism available, very little focuses on the singular importance of

³ Note the thematically related titles of Tóibín's published work: "New Ways of Killing Your Father" (1993), *Mothers and Sons* (2006), *The Empty Family* (2011), *New Ways to Kill Your Mother* (2012a), and *The Testament of Mary* (2012b).

parental relationships in Tóibín's work, or when it does, it projects their meaning into the socio-political realm of Irish historiography, nationalism, or gender roles.

In one of the more focused essays on the representation and function of mothers in Tóibín's fiction, Kathleen Costello-Sullivan examines the "continual dialogue with the figure of the lost mother" (109), and attempts to explain how this dialogue places within a larger pattern in Tóibín's fiction. Importantly, in *The Heather Blazing*, Costello-Sullivan does identify "Eamon's painful and repressed childhood" (Costello-Sullivan: 2009: 109), as well as the fact "that [the] mother is not consistently posited as a lack, but rather as a shadowy but concealed presence troubling the visible narrative of Eamon's life" (112). Ultimately however, Costello-Sullivan maintains that the function of the mother should be viewed primarily as a metaphor for the socio-historical exclusion of women in Ireland, and concludes by stating that:

Tóibín specifically engages with the figure of the lost mother to challenge representations of Irish history that exclude Ireland's foremothers—the women from past and present generations who have contributed to the experiences and shaping of the nation. (122)

In a separate reading and interpretation of the representation of mothers in Tóibín's fiction, John McCourt emphasises the antagonistic aspects between the mother and son, and their individual need to "[maintain] an independent personal space in which to live and to develop" (McCourt 2008: 154). McCourt's further suggestion, that "[t]he son's achievement of personal affirmation seems always to come at the cost of sacrifice of the mother," particularly resonates with the argument of this essay, specifically in how it will be shown that the son's normative psychological maturation is contingent upon the necessary repudiation of the mother. Indeed, McCourt does explore the various dimensions of power and contestations of space between mother and son, and provides a convincing conclusion when stating that:

The book's final lines underline the need to move beyond the mother figure and to overcome the huge maternal inheritance a son is born into—to render the mother part of the son's emotional past, to render her "no use" to him in the present. (165)

Yet, although McCourt alludes to the psychological dimension, it is again left at the margins of the argument, remaining unexamined or transposed by any meaningful application or theoretical framework.

Anne Fogarty's essay, "After Oedipus? Mothers and Sons in the Fiction of Colm Tóibín," is, as the title suggests, one of the few essays on Tóibín that does, at least in part, acknowledge psychoanalytic theory. Fogarty firstly identifies the primacy of "troubled interrelations between mothers and sons" in Tóibín's writing (Fogarty 2008: 167), then continues to investigate the "space of the maternal and the voided" (168), and the ways in which the "[u]nvoiced intimacy with the mother shades into a desolate insight into absence, loss and the unfathomable nature of individual existence" (170). Fogarty concludes her essay by analysing Tóibín's "articulated erotics of loss" (171), while ultimately rejecting the quintessential paradigm of Freudian theory by stating: "Tóibín's plots insistently expose the failing of the Oedipus complex even as they cleave to narratives of family life" (174). Fogarty's assertion that Tóibín's fiction needs to be interpreted beyond the limiting scope of the Oedipus complex, particularly resonates when juxtaposed with Tóibín's own reflection on the fiction in *Mothers and Sons*:

There are times when you feel that Foucault, not Freud, is the presiding spirit [. . .]. The search for power and space is dramatised between the two and I wanted to 'de-Freudianise' the relationship between mothers and sons—the son is created by the mother but now he wants to wrestle power from her and she tries to keep it, and so on. (qtd in McDowell 2006)

Compounding Fogarty's critical assessment with Tóibín's own admission, it does become increasingly appropriate to eschew the Freudian theoretical framework of the Oedipus complex. However, this current essay argues that it is not Foucault but rather Freud who remains as "the presiding spirit" of *Mothers and Sons*, and specifically with the later elaboration of Freud's theory by Julia Kristeva. Although Tóibín may have consciously attempted to "de-Freudianise" the stories collected in *Mothers and Sons*, it will be argued that his fiction reveals that this is not so much *de-Freuding* as it is *de-Oedipusing*.

In its attempt to evade the overarching Freudian formulation of the Oedipus complex, Tóibín's *Mothers and Sons* inversely resonates with an equally sophisticated Freudian theoretical framework: mourning and melancholia. The processes of mourning are consistently present in

Mothers and Sons, albeit in varying degrees of intricacy and potency in each story. The sons then are represented not as secretly desiring their mother to the exclusion of the father, but rather in grief, they view their mother symbolically as an object of loss, which serves to impede and threaten the tenuous but imperative autonomy of their ego. *Mothers and Sons* frequently represents both the mother and son as existing in a relationship hinged upon repressed friction: friction that foremost may be understood as atavistic engagements with the psychoanalytic imaginary of the unconscious.

Freud's essay "On Mourning and Melancholia" begins with specifying that processes of mourning are induced by the "loss of a loved person," or "some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, [or] an ideal" (Freud 2001: 243). Furthermore, the psychological states of mourning and melancholia mirror one another in that they are signified by "profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-reviling" (244). Most importantly however, relying heavily on earlier theoretical work on narcissism, Freud posits that in the process of mourning the ego has narcissistically identified with, and been capitulated by, the lost object.

In her own study on depression and melancholia in *Black Sun* (1989), Julia Kristeva simultaneously advances Freud's notions of mourning and melancholy while also reconceptualising certain key dynamics. For Kristeva, the ultimate lost object is the mother/breast that is first incepted during the pre-symbolic separation of the infant-child dyad. Aligned with Freud's theorisation of the narcissistic identification with the lost object, for Kristeva, "matricide [becomes] our vital necessity" (Kristeva 1989: 27), with the alternative being the "putting to death the self" (28). In addition to her articulation that the mourning of the pre-symbolic mother elides in all mourning, Kristeva also proposes that all mourning encompasses the mourning of the lost-self. Ineffable, this lost-self, according to Kristeva, is located in the semiotic realm, an unsymbolised "Thing" to be approached only through "melody, rhythm, [and] semantic polyvalency" (14). Tóibín's fiction particularly echoes this notion, specifically in how it frequently "[posits] parallel worlds that may or may not be of the same essence" (Hagan 2012: 33), by employing

sentences during key climactic moments that actively foster possibilities of semantic multifariousness.

Representations of Mourning the Mother

The opening story in *Mothers and Sons*, “The Use of Reason,” revolves around an unnamed professional thief who recently stole various pieces of renowned artwork, including a treasured Rembrandt painting: *A Portrait of an Old Woman*. Throughout the story, the protagonist strives primarily to be rid of the paintings, while also manoeuvring between personal dilemmas relating to his alcoholic mother and previously murdered younger brother. The story begins, significantly, with the lone man surveying the “wide waste ground” of Dublin (Tóibín 2006: 3). Developing this imagistic scene through repetition of the word “empty”—a word repeated no less than nine occasions in the first paragraph—Tóibín hints toward the fulcrum of the collection as a whole. As Pico Iyer notes: “the word ‘emptiness’ tolls with mounting force as it recurs throughout the story [. . .] [until] we feel something like epiphany when it comes back with new resonance in the second half of the final piece” (Iyer 2006). The entire collection is markedly engulfed by tonalities of silence and emptiness, which arguably evoke emotive states of mourning and loss.

In “The Use of Reason,” the rendered emptiness of the physical environment mirrors the psychological interiority of the protagonist. Throughout the story it becomes increasingly evident that the protagonist is on the verge of being drawn into a melancholic state, as revealed through his admissions of feeling “love for no one” (Tóibín 2006: 24), and that “he would be happy if everything were dark and empty [. . .] no sound at all and no one living to make any sound” (40). This repeated desire for erasure and the emptying of signs, the summoning of pre-symbolic existence, harkens Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic and the pre-objectal “Thing,” the part of the self that is simultaneously mourned in all mourning.

The catalyst of the protagonist’s initial entry into mourning appears to be associated with his murdered younger brother, Billy, but is intrinsically tied to the presence of the mother. When his brother was alive “the only way he could see Billy was by seeing her” (40), and although the protagonist “supposed that he did not really feel much about

Billy anymore” (24), at the story’s conclusion the opposite is revealed to be true. After learning that his mother had disparaged Billy during one of her regular bouts at a pub, he declares, in one of the more memorable pieces of dialogue in the story: “I will take action against you if I hear another word” (42). The imprecise meaning of the word “action” elicits a moment and need for interpretation. Clearly although the protagonist himself is unable to vocalise his own desire and intent, a typical problem vis-à-vis the unconscious and the nature of repression, it increasingly becomes evident that the “action” is in reference to some violent outcome, if not outright matricide, as supported by the protagonist’s decisive fantasy of burning the paintings at the closing of the story:

He would find a special place for them, the emptiest place [. . .]. He would stick to the barren emptiness which lay south of Dublin. He would bring fire-lighters, rather than petrol so that he could burn each one slowly, letting the canvases shrivel up in the flame, leaving Rembrandt’s sour old woman until last until it was a heap of ash. It would make a vivid emptiness in the space where it had once hung. (44)

The Rembrandt painting, *A Portrait of an Old Woman*, therefore evolves as the chief symbol in the story and is employed on different metaphorical levels. The protagonist, admitting his inability to understand the worth of the painting, observes that the picture “was done in some dark colour,” with the woman “[appearing] as though she needed some cheering up” (8). In the protagonist’s unconscious, it is important to note the way in which “the stolen painting and his mother merge” (McCourt 2008: 154), and by extension reveals an attribute of his own inability to mourn. His need for erasure, and the burning of the maternal image from out of the symbolic order, equates with Anne-Marie Smith’s observation that “in Kristeva’s model of melancholia, ‘energy is displaced from the social code’ and meaning is shifted to ‘the semiotic realm of sounds, colours, rhythms, tone and modulation’” (qtd in Blakeman 2006: 207). In addition, it evokes Kristeva’s notion whereby matricide serves as “the first step on the way to becoming autonomous” (Kristeva 1989: 27), through the processes of normative mourning.

The mother thus represented, refuses to abide by the traditional framework set for the Irish mother, one which would have her provide unconditional love for her miscreant sons, as if nothing were more

excusable in an Ireland coming to terms with itself as a nation.⁴ In parallel fashion, the protagonist elides the traditional representation of the Irish son; for although offering his mother ostensible immunity against her neighbours' rebukes, this overture is not only noncommittal, but also infused by a murderous desire to be completely rid of her, in a likewise manner as the painting itself.

When viewed as a part of an organic whole, "The Use of Reason" informs the stories that follow in both its representation of displacement and undertones of matricide. In the second story of the collection, "A Song," the protagonist Noel engages with a process that may convincingly be understood through its resemblance of mourning. Activated by an unexpected meeting with his mother at a bar, Noel appears to relive the abandonment that occurred years earlier, when she absconded with a lover to pursue a music career in England. Similarly to "The Use of Reason," the intricacies of the mother-son relationship are shifted into the realm of the semiotic, although this time through the rhythm and sound of the mother's song.

The song, a lament of unrequited love that evolves into "a song of treachery" (Tóibín 2006: 53), serves as an implicit testament of the mother's regret, while simultaneously repudiating Noel's successful mourning work as a child, and by extension, his integration with the "father, form, [and] schema" (Kristeva 1989: 32). This is strongly evinced through Noel's unexplained resolve to "go and see [his father] when he got back to Dublin" (Tóibín 2006: 50), a decision significantly made only after immediately becoming cognisant of the unexpected presence of his mother. Following thereafter, Noel becomes transfixed by his mother's song, with his sense of selfhood threatened by the sudden appearance of the mother, indicated in that "[Noel] found that he had come closer to her and stood alone between her group and the bar," and yet, "he had not intended to shift from where he stood" (53). This unconscious drawing back into the fold of the mother aligns with the way in which the lost object of mourning assimilates portions of the ego into itself, and necessitates the "killing off the trace of the other in the self as a means to reestablish psychic health" (Clewell 2004: 60).

⁴ Early twentieth century Irish literature is replete with mothers excusing the unethical and violent nature of the sons' actions, usually by privileging the sons' expedience for the Irish Free State.

In Tóibínesque fashion, the story ends rather anti-climatically with Noel hastily leaving the bar and “[waiting] in the darkness for the others to come” (Tóibín 2006: 55). Yet, it is precisely by escaping direct confrontation with his mother that Noel effectively defuses the possibility of regressing back into the remoteness of mourning her absence. This simultaneously reaffirms his identification with the phallic-symbolic “universe of signs and creation” (Kristeva 1989: 23), indicated by the foreshadowing of Noel and his friends departing the bar, only to resume their night by playing music away from the presence of the mother. Being comprised as it is of generally hinted at metaphysical realities, “A Song” features a brief window into the unconscious interplay involved in the need to forsake the mother, in order to maintain normative autonomy of the ego.

Most clairvoyant in its representation of the mourning son, the story “Three Friends” begins with the protagonist, Fergus, sitting alone at a funeral parlor attending his mother’s corpse. The story proceeds with Fergus attending a beach rave, which culminates in two separate homosexual encounters with his friend Mick. On a psychoanalytic level the story resonates as it traces the unconscious framework of mourning. The story may clearly be read as consisting of three stages: the first, an introduction of the mourned object; the second, the need to successfully separate one’s ego from the lost object; and the third, the redirection of libidinal energy from the lost object to a new object of desire.

As Fergus sits alone with his mother’s corpse at the onset of the story, the scene promptly signals the metaphysical interaction and processes of mourning. Fergus first realises that his mother “was beyond knowing” (Tóibín 2006: 186), and as a result of this realisation that “he was going to cry” (186). Afterward, a mysterious unnamed figure enters the scene, and although engaging in small talk he ultimately remains aloof from Fergus. After dialoguing about the state of the family and past events pertaining to the funeral parlour, Fergus dwells again on the fact that “if someone were to whisper that this man had come to take away his mother’s spirit, it would not have seemed strange” (188). Repeatedly, the stranger is likened to Death, an anthropomorphism of which Fergus may clearly be understood to be interacting with, and absorbed by, and something that “had left its mark” (189), alluding to Fergus’s descent into mourning.

The second stage of mourning commences with Fergus returning to Dublin with a “gnawing guilt at [his mother’s] death [. . .] as though he were implicated in its cause” (191), coupled with an instinctive desire to sleep. Fergus’s inability to cope, his self-identification with the lost maternal object, and the consequential blunting of libido energy, promises to overwhelm him if he fails to progress in the following stages of mourning. This progression ultimately requires that all “memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object [be] brought up and hyper-cathected” (Freud 2001: 245), which in this story takes form in an invitation from Fergus’s friend Mick to attend a beach rave. Although Fergus at first rejects the invitation, an implicit signalling of the narcissistic tendency in mourning to keep the lost object alive, at the peril of the ego, Fergus does eventually concede to attend the party.

In order to reach the secluded beach where the rave will occur, Fergus and his three friends must traverse unmaintained and rarely travelled roads. In a particularly acute analysis of “Three Friends,” Robinson Murphy maintains that this journey symbolically serves to explicate Fergus’s unconscious state, noting that:

The friends’ initial passage into the rave landscape demands a reading faithful to the book’s stated focus [. . .]. The movement here is one of inverted birth, a return to the womb-like cave, the entrance to which requires ascent back into the mother. One notes the violent, unnatural trajectory; Mick, the driver, cannot navigate the lane without stopping and exiting the vehicle to track their progress. This is a seldom-trod route, but for Fergus a route that must be broached to pass again into the world of the living. (Murphy 2009: 488)

Murphy’s interpretation is further reinforced by the party occurring in a “sheltered cove” (Tóibín 2006: 195), and the music’s “almost imperceptible variants” (197), in addition to Fergus’s sentiment of being in a “cocoon of energy” that “could enclose him and keep him safe” (198), all of which invoke the metaphorical aspects of the womb.

This subsequent stage of mourning precipitates in Fergus the need to reject the allure of further self-identification with the mother. However, as Freud notes, when the libido is withdrawn from a lost object it “arouses understandable opposition [. . .] people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning him” (Freud 2001: 244). In “Three Friends,” these substitutes literally beckon Fergus in the form of his three friends waiting for him in the ocean, imploring him to come forward:

This, he thought, as he wrapped his arms around his body to keep warm, and allowed his teeth to chatter, was going to be an ordeal, but he could not return to the strand and dress himself now; he would have to be brave and join the others, who showed no sign of coming back to dry land as they beckoned him not to be a baby. (Tóibín 2006: 200)

Again, in his essay, Murphy outlines a similar schism occurring in “Three Friends,” the divide between the engulfing mother and the freedom made possible by joining his friends in the ocean. Yet, his essay diverges from the psychoanalytic approach, by attributing this freedom to the socio-political realm with “Fergus’s reclamation of the non-normative family” (Murphy 2009: 489). Murphy also associates the ocean with a re-appropriation of the baptismal rites of the Catholic Church, which he suggests Tóibín employs in order to reformulate possibilities to “coexist in [a] space, rendered ‘queer’” (489).

Although Murphy argues for a progressing acceptance of homosexuality in a post-Catholic Ireland, primarily, by associating baptismal rites with the emergence of a new normative domestic sphere, a psychoanalytic approach would suggest that the Catholic rite of baptism may in itself exist as a metaphorical appropriation of the amniotic fluid of the womb, an invocation of the semiotic existence that occurs before the pre-symbolic stage of individualisation. Like Murphy, this current essay argues that Fergus’s eventual decision to join his three friends in the ocean is significant as it “signals an ascent to selfhood, a departure from [his] ‘baby’ status” (Murphy 2009: 488). This consequently also signals Fergus’s emergence into the third stage of mourning, the stage in which mourning effectively ends, as signalled by Fergus’s successful homosexual advancement with his friend Mick, and its presumed consummation at the conclusion of the story.

Expounding on aspects that feature in the previously examined stories, “A Long Winter” concludes *Mothers and Sons* by providing its morbid closure for the collection as a whole. Set in a sparse, mountainous region in northern Spain, the story is singularly removed from Ireland, yet its common theme “throws a retrospective shadow over the rest of the stories” (McCourt 2008: 163), and develops into the apogee of the collection. “A Long Winter” presents at once a site of “intersection between affectivity and the familial” (Fogarty 2008: 167), resulting in a confluence of maternal loss, mourning, and an eventual restoration of autonomy and reconfiguration into community.

The story revolves around a rural household composed of a father, mother, and two sons, the youngest of which is promptly dispatched for obligatory military duty. Miquel, the eldest son, remains on the farm working with his father, while his mother tends to the domestic duties. Again, silence and emptiness immediately become common fixtures in the story, depicted through the youngest son “leaving an empty bed behind” (Tóibín 2006: 229), and the “the heavy silence which had gathered,” because of the family’s isolation from the rest of the village due to “the row about the water” (238). Against this backdrop Miquel gradually becomes cognisant of a “great sporadic restlessness” aroused in his mother, one that evolves into her “inability to settle” (229). The framed setting is thus juxtaposed with the mother’s refusal to be complacent within it, to abide by the isolating silence, and ultimately forced into becoming “like a strange, hungry animal” (230), a direct foreshadowing of the vultures engorging on the carcass of the dog at the story’s end.

Only after Miquel witnesses his mother drinking at a bar, does he realise that the reason for her uncharacteristic behaviour is due to alcoholism. Showing subtle awareness by secretly acknowledging that she had “nothing except hostile neighbours and a long winter” (234), Miquel is ultimately represented by his inaction, especially after his father attempts to cure the mother by throwing away the newly bought wine. It is this moment that is the catalyst for the further alienation of the mother, spurring her decision to renounce her family and reject her position in the home and to embark on a perilous journey toward her brother’s house in the nearby village.

The mother’s hasty departure from the home dooms her for the rest of story to an ethereal frozen existence, a result of the blizzard that occurs promptly thereafter. Consequently, “A Long Winter” hinges on the loss and mourning of the maternal, with the plot essentially unravelled by—and upon—the dead and decomposing body of the mother. The death of the mother lends itself once again to an “absent space [. . .] in which crucial aspects of male identity are negotiated and reconceived” (Fogarty 2008: 170), while first allowing for the reconfiguration of the ego and desire. As well, and in a strikingly similar vein as found in “Three Friends,” the mother’s death creates the possibility of personal fulfillment, obliquely signalled first by the

blizzard itself, in its turning the dry barren winter from brown to its natural fecundity of white.

The rest of the story follows likewise, chronicling the now unhindered possibilities afforded to Miquel through his mother's death. The most noticeable potential is for an all-male presence allowed to replace the now voided maternal space. This is signalled in Miquel "[realising] that in all his life he had seldom seen other men in this kitchen [. . .] they were always somehow in the shadows" (Tóibín 2006: 257), which then is juxtaposed by the overcrowding of men in the kitchen afterward, and more specifically with the arrival of two police officers, the youngest of whom precipitates the first stirrings of Miquel's sexuality:

He took in the young policeman's face in the shadowy light of the kitchen, the full redness of the lips, the square, hard stubbornness of his jaw and chin and then the softness of his eyes, the eyelashes like a girl's. The young policeman, in turn, watched only Miquel's eyes, his gaze cold, expressionless, as though he were sullenly blaming him for something. When Miquel looked down at the policeman's crotch, he too glanced down at himself and he briefly smiled, opening his lips, before resuming his former expression, but more intense now, almost feral, staking out an object within his grasp. (260)

The kitchen, previously existing as an exclusively maternal space, is gradually eroded by a definitive queer space, capable of engendering homoerotic desire. This process is ultimately consummated by the arrival of Manolo, the young man hired by the father to fulfill the mother's domestic duties.

Yet, it is precisely through the process of mourning that Miquel is enabled to channel his libidinal energy away from his dead mother, as hinted at in various places throughout the text. This may first be seen in Miquel's flashback of playing hide-and-seek with his mother during childhood, and its influence on his present psychological state:

He did not know how it had started, but, with her in the room, he used to hide under the table, or under the bed, or behind a chair, and she then would pretend that she could not find him, and they would both let it continue until the moment before he became scared [. . .]. As Miquel moved around the house now, he was acutely alert to the shadowy places, becoming darker in the twilight, the places where you could hide and then appear, as though his mother might mysteriously arrive and position herself where she could not be instantly found. (261)

The mother, fastened in mourning, is represented here as existing in tenuous flux. Miquel's subconscious attempt to recover her from her deadening absence is under threat by his simultaneous unconscious desire to have her permanently displaced. This is observed again in one of the more significant scenes in the story, wherein Miquel needs to provide an article of his mother's clothing for the tracking dogs to scent:

Below this was some of her underwear which he took and held, and then, checking that no one was behind him, he lifted to his nose. He buried his face in the intimate smell of her, which was clear despite the days that had passed since she had worn this underwear. It carried a sharp hint of her into this cold room and, for a moment, he imagined the dogs moving blindly through the landscape, living only with this smell, seeking its loving source under the snow or in the undergrowth. (265)

Miquel's attempt to recover his mother, to reconstitute her presence and be brought back into contact with the womb, is similar to that experienced by Fergus in "Three Friends." Equally similar is the prominence of water in both stories and how it gestures toward the restoration of autonomy and normative desire. Murphy argues that in "A Long Winter" the water symbolism chiefly materialises in how the "overtly sexualized figure enabled by bath night signals for Miquel an awakening of desire," which, "slowly usurps grief for his dead mother" (Murphy 2009: 493), a characteristic incepted by successful mourning.

Essentially, the dilemma that exists in Miquel's unconsciousness is defined by either holding onto the mother at the peril of drifting into melancholia, or of allowing Manolo to fill her absence with the result of unseating her permanently. This dilemma is patently indicated by Miquel's fantasy of becoming his mother's father: his imaginary meeting with his mother upon the road, and having her "run towards him waiting to be lifted, and he would kiss her and lift her up, the girl who had been lost" (Tóibín 2006: 305), and eventually returning her to her parents' house in the nearby village of Pallosa. Significantly, this formulated scene concludes with Miquel stumbling upon the all-important realisation that "Manolo [being] there too, wearing an apron, preparing a hot drink [. . .] did not belong to the scene" (306). Miquel acknowledges that his mother and Manolo cannot coexist in the same sphere; the mother must be repudiated in order for the latter to be established.

The precedent of matricide that precedes development and reintegration is induced twofold by the final scene, composed of the injured vulture:

The vulture saw them, and all its sullen hatred for them, its savage gaze, its fierce panic, caught Miquel, as though it were directed at him and him only, as though his secret spirit had been waiting all of its life for such recognition. The dying bird was beyond human in its grief and its injury, screeching still in pain. Miquel did not know why he began to edge towards it, but he quickly found that Manolo was holding him from behind, preventing him moving further as his father lifted the gun again. (310)

This scene closes *Mothers and Sons*, and it is intricate both in its brutality of the primal nature of metaphysical existence, but also in its insistence of being vague of what exactly is being said. With specific reference to the passage above, Edward Hagan notes that “the careful reader must pause just to get the pronoun references right” (Hagan 2012: 31), not only creating a moment for an interpretively open landscape, but also a suggestiveness into the inner-workings of Miquel’s unconscious. Applying accepted grammatical rules, the reader on second glance realises it is, indeed, the vulture that retains the role of the subject of the sentence. This gains significance when considering how “the image of the dying vulture and the carcass of an old dog merge with that of Miquel’s mother” (McCourt 2008: 164), and moreover, how it invokes a metaphorical representation of Miquel’s own ego, trammelled by the last duress of mourning.

It becomes increasingly significant then, that it is Manolo who prevents Miquel from venturing toward the vulture and carcass, and likewise, that Miquel “leaned backward towards Manolo, seeking the warmth of him” (Tóibín 2006: 310). This final scene invokes the way in which Miquel has proceeded through the stages of mourning. In channelling his libidinal energy away from the maternal object and into his new homosexual relationship with Manolo, Miquel arrives toward the end of mourning, resolutely putting an end to the maternal object’s fatal seduction: “half torn asunder now, and no use to anyone” (310). Interpreted in this way, Tóibín’s own reflection about the way that Miquel and his mother “are almost sexually locked into each other” (Wiesenfarth 2009: 9), helps reveal that the fulfillment and consummation of Miquel’s homosexual desire depends upon the death and repudiation of the mother’s presence.

Ultimately then the representation of the mother and her death in “A Long Winter,” must be interpreted by its employment in the son’s unconsciousness, with each informing the other in their distinct function. This does not exclude an interpretation wherein the mother’s alcoholism, and her fleeing from the household, may be construed as an attempt to abscond her traditional role of mother—transfixed as she were in a life of silent and stagnating isolation. Rather, the implication is that this particular story privileges the representation of the son’s mourning, at the sheer expense of the mother’s emancipation. As will be seen, the last story to be examined sharply contrasts with the preceding stories, in providing an antithetical representation which nevertheless features both the mother and the unequivocal nature of the melancholic son.

Composed more like a sketched scenario than a conventionally plotted short story, “A Journey” is worth commenting on in its illustration of a more definitive melancholic state, an “impoverishment of [the] ego on a grand scale” (Freud 2001: 246), as well as its notably contrasting representation of the mother against the presiding inhibitions and silences of the melancholic son. The story consists of a mother returning home with her son David, after retrieving him from a mental health institution, where he was committed ostensibly on account of severe depression. According to the mother, David “[suffers] from silence” (Tóibín 2006: 174), and that it was “something David would not give up, a special dark gift he had been offered” (177). In each scene, the story exudes the melancholic state, beginning with the opening paragraph, composed of a flashback of David as a child displaying his morbid curiosity about death: “‘Mammy, how do people die?’” (173). This scene synthesises into the chief imagery later in the story with David’s determined, but silent, chain-smoking in the darkening back seat of the car.

Yet, for the mother, what waits at home is not reprieve but rather a compounding of the situation, existing in the form of an invalid husband and his waning interest in the world, as evinced by the fact that “even when she read the newspaper to him, Seamus did not seem interested” (176). David’s psychological state is thus mirrored in the husband’s physical paralysis, leaving the mother/wife in crisis, and culminating in her realisation that “she would have to muster every ounce of selfishness she had” (181). Composed as it is as vignette of grief, the story is unique in both its direct engagement with the mourning and melancholic son, as

well as its negotiation with—and reversal of—traditional Irish representations of the mother figure. Imperative in the mother's need for individualisation, as expressed in her concluding resistance against the entrapment and paralysis of both husband and son, Tóibín empowers the mother from the mourning or melancholic psyche, essentially disentangling her from her role as an object of loss: the primordial effigy that men unconsciously mourn for but never obtain. In terms of the father and son, the mother's resistance functions then as a "form of power which constrains them [. . .] and leaves her in control" (McCourt 2008: 162), thus ultimately inverting the traditional Irish domestic roles. Although many stories in *Mothers and Sons* do focus on mother protagonists that defy the patriarchal structures imposed upon them, "A Journey" is significant with both its treatment of the mourning son *and* the mother's escape from being solely represented as an unconscious attribute of his stunted psychological development.

Conclusion

In response to the repercussions of historically entrenched and inflexible notions concerning the Irish state, nation and family, Tóibín asserts that "ambiguity is what is needed in Ireland now [. . .] words ambiguous enough to make [the Irish] feel at home" (Tóibín 1993: 6). *Mothers and Sons* may be framed and viewed ultimately as a literary production that helps to expedite and facilitate that aim. *Mothers and Sons* negotiates with traditional representations of the Irish mother and son, but refuses to reduce the relationship to modern utopias of absolute emancipation. In contrast, Tóibín's fiction plants itself in the turbulent terrain of the unconscious, functioning primarily as elaborations of mourning, repression and desire: the primordial basis that constitutes the mother and son relationship.

This paper has argued for a psychoanalytic interpretation of the representation of both mother and son, as they frequently are evinced in Tóibín's fiction. Subsuming Freud's own theories on loss, specifically in his understanding of the way in which the subject reveals a deep-seated hatred toward the lost object, Kristeva reconfigures the framework of mourning, and reemphasises that all loss punctuates the schism of the pre-Oedipal separation between child and mother: what is mourned is the lost object, as understood as existing as the archaic memory of the

separation from the pre-symbolic mother. Tóibín's fiction thus presents the son as existing in a state of mourning, with the filial relationship represented in unconscious metaphorical terms, and the death or absence of the mother required, prior to securing him into the symbolic order: the world of symbols, creation, and more often than not, sexuality. Melancholia, rather than existing at centre stage, remains in the margins of Tóibín's *Mothers and Sons*: a fatal attraction that the mourning son is encumbered with, by his desire to preserve his mother, but which he often eventually resists.

Mourning, when realised in the full extent of its possible permutations, is the leitmotif which informs the stories in *Mothers and Sons*. As such, it helps define one of the many modes and directions of Tóibín's fiction, by privileging the unsaid and unconscious undercurrents that force characters into climactic moments of subtle self-awareness. In varying degrees, the sons in *Mothers and Sons* must approach the work of mourning and successfully advance through stages of grief, in an attempt to prevent the fragmentation of their ego, and to reclaim a state of tenuous sovereignty over its vacillating autonomy. In proportion to the needs of the sons, the mothers often counteract to ensure their own survival from existing solely as a "death-bearing maternal image" (Kristeva 1989: 29), as particularly witnessed in "A Journey" and to a lesser degree, "A Long Winter." Tóibín's fiction thus engages with psychoanalytic processes of mourning, and exists as metaphorical illustrations of grief, whereby following the stages of mourning, *Mothers and Sons* steers a path for its protagonists that is paved toward possibilities of restoration and renewal.

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