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Colm Tóibín as Short Story Writer

Maurice Fitzpatrick

1.

James Joyce once wrote in a dejected letter that he might not be the Jesus Christ he thought he was but maybe he had a talent for journalism. He was, as readers a century later know, a talented fiction writer but journalism did provide him — while living in Trieste — a lifeline while his publishers dallied over giving his great stories to the world.

Events in the career of Colm Tóibín seem to have happened in the reverse order. Tóibín, who has long since made his name as an investigative journalist has, over the past few years, evinced something of Joyce's talent for short-story writing. His former *Magill* magazine colleague, John Waters, has written of Tóibín seeing the journalistic form as no lesser than the fictional. Tóibín would speak to Waters of famous writers who had started out as journalists. Moreover, in his foreword to *Hadji Murat*¹, Tóibín stresses the tension in Tolstoy's mind between the need to preach reform and to tell stories. If Tóibín's period as a journalist eased his passage to take up the more aesthetic form of writing of fiction, then the rewards have certainly been bountiful.

This paper will treat of his progress in the genre of short fiction writing.

2.

There is a scene in V.S. Pritchett's story, *Handsome is as Handsome does*²⁾, when Julia, a leading character aged forty, is alone with a handsome Jewish boy in his bedroom. She likes men of spirit and she tells Alex, the boy, how much she admired his bravery in rescuing a drowning man at the beach. She waits; he is impassive. She cannot face him while doing what she intends to do, so she sends him to close the door. When he comes back, her frock is off and her bra strap has fallen over her arm. She says to Alex: "I am old enough to be your mother, aren't I?"

It is a feeble but deeply-felt come-on line. It comes at a pivotal moment in the story. Julia's frustrations with her husband, Tom, are counterbalanced by the hope she invests in the boy Alex. She does all she can to show him the way but he baulks, bewildered by her twenty years of embittered adult experience.

Something of the same probing of sexualities, generations, mother language loss and gain, separation of self and separation of mothers from sons vein is found in Colm Tóibín's short stories making Tóibín's collection³⁾ a welcome addition to the works of the IMPAC prize winning author.

*Famous Blue Raincoat*⁴⁾ follows the fortunes of a rock band that achieves modest success in Ireland and England but break-up sourly. Tóibín's technical knowledge of music is in most evidence in this story, but it is also the most tangential story to the theme of the book.

A Journey takes us to back to the family unit — where most of Tóibín's stories are centred. A depressed young man is driven home from hospital by his mother who longs for him to talk. His mother had him, her only child, late in life. Now she is doubly bound in duty to her sick husband and her dependent child. Towards the end, she has a "glimpse of a future in which

she would need to muster every ounce of selfishness she had”. Coinciding with the realisation that there is little hope for her family is the thought that she should stop dying her hair blond: “It was time, she thought, to let the grey appear”. Tóibín manages to shunt the story from its mother and son axis to wife and husband. The child, who should have sealed their union, has not brought happiness and she is left with the gnawing presentiment that loneliness may be the only reality.

Tóibín manages to bring us through the gamut of human emotion in his short stories — often beginning a story with a death and ending with the prospect of a new life or vice versa. His narrative style never remains on one subject for long. Although many scenes are saturnine, his brio for storytelling carries the reader along, never allowing the darkness of his scenes to diminish his flair for scene-setting . He effortlessly flicks the reader’s mind into another perspective.

In *The Name of the Game*, the imperceptible growth of complacency in a shopkeeper’s aged customers and the assumption of duty among the town merchants to the business a woman has married into leads to pressure accumulating on her shoulders.

The story obliquely comes to the theme of mother and son after a long focus on the struggle of the mother. The opening scene depicts the widow descending the stairs, wondering if it would be right to take down a photograph of her deceased husband and his mother. She is living a life that is moulded by her husband’s family, strong shopkeepers in a little Irish town. She knows, however, that the shop does not make money, that her husband died leaving the business crippled by debts.

Her struggles lead her to the bank manager. She has to explain her failure to make repayments. The confrontation is told in captivating and original detail — she (Nancy) vents her contempt for the bank manager by spelling

profanities on her skirt with her finger.

Many transitions in Tóibín's stories read like cuts in a film. In one non sequitur, we are told that the tights of Nancy's friend had no colour; they were sheer. It is a device that tantalises the reader — leaving so many directions unexplored that one feels the work is multi-faceted without losing its charge in lengthy digression.

She sees in the swagger of her son the same dominance his father had emerging, which will lord over her when, as tradition dictates, she hands over the family enterprise to him. This coincides with the quiet renaissance of her *amour propre*. She takes a stand by opting to move. Doubtless, small-town judgment is against her 'selling out the family jewels', as the phrase goes. She stands in front of the reflecting windows. Often in these stories mirrors and windows appear, altering surfaces, illuminating the spaces of human consciousnesses. She is steeled, with a faint satisfaction, in her resolve.

The old rules of primogeniture, apart from their masculine element, still exist in the generation to generation upheavals and affronts to tradition. Even people long since departed manage to speak out through their descendants in Tóibín's stories. Here the dead are not quite dead and, in many stories, a character momentarily lapses into a false consciousness that the dead are nearby: "she thought to ask George ... forgetting that the was dead".

In *A Priest in the Family*, Tóibín returns to his native county, Wexford. His journalistic career and storytelling overlap in his choosing the topical subject of clerical child abuse. Tóibín carefully levers the axis of the story onto the mother and son motif. The main protagonist is a priest who has sexually abused a child. Few could not empathise with a mother whose son brings disgrace to the family in such a manner. The story can be read as an allegory for the fate of the clergy in Ireland: their status has been degraded,

their institution defamed. But Tóibín restores to the priest the almost indestructible love of a mother. *A Priest in the Family* demonstrates that, while the crimes and scandal belong to an earlier time, it is only now that writers can write from the perspective of a guilty clergy. With the publication of the Fern's report in 2005, which pertained to the same areas as where this story is set, the writer is somehow vindicated in his approach.

All that is not to say that Tóibín is outmoded. *Three Friends* brings us firmly up to 2006, with a story of drugs and a rave on the beach and skinny-dipping. The backdrop to this is the death of a mother. Fergus's friends want to cheer him up after his mother's death, so they go to the party together. The narrative has left the mother/son theme behind almost completely, when it comes back in a most surprising way. Fergus is having sex in the water. Here, a gay story is conflated with the recent death of a mother. Through the persona of his lover's advance, he "senses the skull behind the skin and the flesh, the eye sockets... the tongue that would dry up and rot so easily, the dead hair". It is no accident that the front cover of this book features Magritte Renee's picture of lovers with their faces covered.

Another story, *The Use of Reason*, harkens to Tóibín's reporting days when he interviewed 'The General', Martin Cahill, a gangster who was a household name in Ireland in the 1980's. Several of these stories are set, one feels, a decade or so ago. *The Use of Reason*, Tóibín admitted in an interview, derives from his meeting Cahill.

In *A Summer Job*, a grandmother's daughter seeks to foist the responsibility of being with her mother onto her teenage son's shoulders. He is a hurling prodigy and has dreams of being a star at the national sport. However, one summer, duty to live with his grandmother and his hurling clash. The mother gets her way but the victory is pyrrhic.

From a window the mother sees: "the expression on his face was serious

and formal like an adult's. She had no idea what he was thinking or feeling". Epiphanies like this one roots Tóibín's work resolutely in the tradition of James Joyce.

Just as, conversely, in *A Priest in the Family*, a grown man almost becomes a child again in the presence of his mother. The priest has sinned grievously by molesting children. (Tóibín himself went to a school that has since been defamed for clerical child abuse). The mother assures her son that the family will not go away and they'll do their best for him. Again, this story closes with a shot of the mother looking out from her window. She wonders if he will be permitted to say mass when he is in prison.

A quirk in Tóibín's stories is quite how focused the stories are on mothers and sons — with fathers, if not dead, at least taken, in many cases, completely out of the equation. An exception, *A Song*, is a superbly crafted story that tells of a man who is faced with his mother who was absent for his entire childhood. He decides, among other things, that he should reconcile himself with his father, who he had a petty dispute with, after the trauma of seeing his mother after so long.

In *A Song*, many of Tóibín's concerns as a writer are outlined. Part of the attraction of this story is that very little sociological pin-pointing is needed to appreciate it. Unlike, say, George Moore's *The Homecoming* where we must remain conscious of the divide which existed in southern Ireland between Protestants and Catholics, Tóibín's story is written recently and set in recent times.

From the first sentence — "Noel was the driver that weekend in Clare" — we feel the writer has an intimate awareness of modern Ireland. Because drink-driving laws have finally caught up with the rest of Europe, there must be a nominated driver on a weekend like this.

The group of musicians are Clare-bound to play music, but any *fleadh*

(Festival) in Ireland has its share of hangers-on. Noel's friend, George, tells him: "Most visitors were...the sort of people who would blissfully spill pints over your uilleann pipes". Noel is there for the music. That is why it is important for him to assemble a group of like-minded people in a private home. His attitude towards the pub is one of dubiety. For a start, he does not drink. He is of a serious cast of mind, withdrawn in crowds and impatient with idle banter. Noel is not content to suffer tipsy people and the nonsense they spout. He has learned the hard way the difficulty of human relationships and he will not dissipate any energy on fleeting conversation; nor can he be drawn when his friend mentions that his mother is in the pub. James Joyce once said "sentimentality is unearned emotion". Noel tends to associate the pub with shoddy music-playing, tedious encounters and embarrassing attacks on his integrity. Tóibín writes: "His friends know that his parents had separated but none of them knew the bitterness of the split and the years of silence which had ensued". This division between consciousnesses epitomises the whole form of this story's narrative. On the surface we have well-intended but ill-informed suggestions for conduct from a range of characters. In Noel's interior monologue and in his constrained speech and gestures, we have a glimpse of his hard childhood. He has earned the price of his reserve.

At the age of twenty-eight, he is moving closer to his estranged father. In his own heart Noel is a stubborn, unforgiving Irishman. With age, he is beginning to see that he might have acted as his father did if he were in his shoes. In severing all ties — even with the mother's extended family — the father ensured that the mother would not have even indirect contact with Noel. This is exactly the course that Noel now takes. The mother, we can only assume, would like to talk to her son but he blocks her out.

In several of his plays — Macbeth and Hamlet for example — Shakespeare deliberately draws attention to the said characters while not introducing them until later, as a way of mounting tension. So it is with the encounter in *A Song*; tension is created and we are drawn to it. Tóibín is aiming at creating an ambiance that will last beyond the last word of his story. As with many Ozu and Chekhov characters, we are meant to live the experience of Noel and his mother beyond the last scene.

In O’Casey’s plays — particularly *The Plough and the Stars* — the pub is a backdrop for nationalism and jingoistic sentiment. A grand release from the despair of life is given in the mythologising that takes place in the pub. This, to some extent, remains the case in Ireland. Brit-bashing mythology can still be found in the pubs. However, it is more likely today that there will be British tourists on site (particularly at *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*) and only minor differences between the behaviours of the two peoples is what separates them. Tóibín subtly highlights one or two of these differences. He uses England as a register to gauge how Ireland has developed. When Noel’s mother fled to England in the late seventies, England was seen as a godless place of licence and commerce. It was the sort of place where mothers who abandoned their children went. It was the sort of place where people flogged Irish music to any horse-dealer willing to pay a good price. Today, Ireland is awash with money; musicians, like Noel’s mother, would find it more congenial to their profession to live in Ireland, benefiting from the tax-free status of artists.

On a superficial level, there are marked differences between Noel’s “make sure you grab Jimmy up at the bar” — which is a rough and ready Irish speech pattern — and that of his mother, who has “a faint English edge to her accent”. There are all sorts of cultural, economic and generational divisions implied in the gap between them both. More deeply, though, the

mother's Irish roots are shown in her language: "it was her first language, as it must have been his, but was half-forgotten now". Disconnection from his mother also meant disconnection from his mother tongue. This brilliant correlation is brought out in the song — both bloodlines and language meet.

Family life gone awry is a major theme of this story. Noel's mother gave birth to him when she was in her early twenties. There was a rupture between she and Noel's father. But this was an Ireland where legal separation, still less divorce, was disallowed. England was often a haven from emotional wreckage back in Ireland and Tóibín's story is an exposé of such wreckage. Noel may always feel bitterness that his mother abandoned him, but he is also a young man in a much more liberal Ireland. The repressions of the past, though he is indirectly a victim of them, were not his to endure directly.

The mother is not given her voice in this story but, in her climatic rendering of the song, it is suggested that she speaks out through the words, speaks of her own heart trials: "she lowered her head and almost spoke the last words, her love had taken God from her". The song is reminiscent of one of sang by Christy Moore, depicting the era of the eighties, when the Irish economic slump was at its worst: "you stripped me of my dignity and pride".

The song, of the Gaelic lament tradition, has a peculiarly unsettling effect on Noel: a man of modern, secular Ireland. Nationalism has diminished but an awareness of the historical background of the nation remains. Similarly, the mother can sing in a religious idiom and yet be understood to be singing of her own emotional trauma.

Readers of Tóibín will be aware of the ease with which he moves between forms — from the scholarly to the historical to the novelistic. With his recent excursion into the genre of short story writing, he shows himself to be

a master of this form too. His stories are original in content and beautifully told.

References

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- 3) *Mothers and Sons*, Picador, 2006 (All stories referred to come from this publication unless otherwise stated).
- 4) Famous Blue Raincoat, London Review of Books, 25/6/05