

## **Trauma and Irish Female Migration through Literature and Ethnography**

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### **Abstract**

Irish migration has been predominantly female, despite its underrepresentation in popular imagery and reports. Although this phenomenon has been documented in manuscript material, interviews and audio records, the study and interpretation of this massive and extended experience has been neglected for long. This oblivion contrasts with the success of contemporary works of fiction that re-create past experiences of female migration. This chapter delves into ethnographic and literary life narratives of diaspora. Using theories of trauma associated with mobility, the strategies displayed by their protagonists and society are analysed, and results indicate that Irish female migration has been a traumatic experience that still needs to find closure in the Irish psyche.

### **Ethnography and Literature to Understand Irish Female Migration**

Irish migration dates back to even before the Great Famine, between 1845 and 1851 when almost 1 million people died of starvation and disease and more than 1 million others emigrated (Magray 5). Although this haemorrhage abated slightly in the following decades, by 1870 more than half of the Irish native population already lived outside of Ireland, divided between the United States, Great Britain, Australia and Canada (in order of importance) (Fitzpatrick 213). Between then and 1961, Ireland experienced continuous population decline (Barrett 1), confirming Irish migration as a persistent trend. As Irish migration has been a chain process, it has become “embedded in folk memory” (Duffy 22) and become a form of “inherited migration” (Barros-del Río “Translocational” 1500).

The gendered nature of these migratory flows has not gone unnoticed and, in

recent decades, several studies have analysed through a gender lens the patterns of origin, preferred destinations and labour opportunities of those who emigrated (Martin; Walter “Irish Women”). The enormity of this phenomenon became more evident in the period between the Act of Union of 1800 and the independence of southern Ireland in 1922, during which about 4 million women, most of them young and unmarried, left the island (Akenson 159). The USA was the preferred destination during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, particularly between the 1940s and the 1950s (Almeida 23), although in general terms, Britain took over especially between the 1950s and the 1980s, as a destination that offered female employment, mainly in domestic services (Walter “Irish Women”).

To this day, Irish society has shown a marked ambivalence between encouragement to go and encouragement to return (Fitzgerald and Lambkin 66). On the one hand, for an island unable to retain large families within its households, emigration acted as a social safety valve by reducing poverty, unemployment and class conflict, particularly between 1870 and 1914. On the other hand, emigration, and especially women’s exodus, was felt as a betrayal to the country (Nash) and entailed some sort of personal and collective failure. This veiled feeling has its roots in the resurgence of the cult of the Virgin Mary that had begun in the nineteenth century. As religion gradually became a fundamental pillar of nationalist distinction against the Protestant invader, the characterization of women with Marian ideals of passivity and purity was reinforced. From the 1920s, this complex imagery was echoed from the pulpit and by the press which, together with legal, political and economic structures (the 1937 Constitution and particularly Article 41 being well-known examples), ensured that Irish women were given a prominent role in the Irish nationalist discourse, but always in a subordinate position. As a result, the mass emigration of Irish women reached its peak between 1926 and 1936

(Daly “Women” 111).

The deep contradictions between the large number of women leaving Ireland and the discourse of ideological identification with the land in an attempt to secure a national project suggest that this migratory phenomenon was not the result of free choice. More importantly, the conflict between staying and leaving may have had a traumatic essence associated with its process and different stages. Also, the emotional and ideological factors inherent to mobility may have played a key role in perpetuating its problematic nature.

Given that emigration is so common in Ireland, it is not surprising that the topic has been the object of attention in literature. Its relevance for this study is not only warranted by its abundance in the work of authors such as Patrick MacGill, Liam O’Flaherty, Sean O’Faoláin, Brian Friel, J. B. Keane, Colum McCann and Patrick Kavanagh, but also by its critical insights and emotional implications that go beyond statistics and census, as Patrick Duffy has rightly noted: “Because the process of emigration is such an emotional experience for most people, creative literature often captures and expresses the critical elements in what might be called a crisis for many individuals and families” (21).

Recently, the topic has gained momentum with a particular focus on the female experience. Authors such as Edna O’Brien in her novel *The Light of Evening* (2006), Mary Costello in *Academy Street* (2014), Sebastian Barry in *On Canaan’s Side* (2011) and Colm Tóibín in *Brooklyn* (2009), have explored the diasporic experiences of women who left Ireland and emigrated to America in the early twentieth century. This thematic novelty, “largely under-explored in literature” (Sheridan 193), has rapidly attracted the interest of scholars (Barros-del Rio “On Both Sides”; Harte; Ingman; McWilliams; Morales Ladrón “Demistifying” and “(M)Others”; Stoddard) whose academic approaches have not

ventured beyond the limits of literary analysis and criticism. The relationship between literature and other disciplines, however, such as anthropology and ethnography, has been the object of scholarly attention (De Angelis; Poyatos). These studies consider literature as a cultural artefact situated within a social and cultural milieu. Thus, in quest to better understand the traumatic process that migration entailed and its representation in the aforementioned contemporary Irish novels, the use of relevant ethnographic material can provide insightful information and support a broader analysis. To illuminate the literary analysis of the selected novels, I have turned to the Questionnaire on Emigration to America (QEA), conducted in 1955, and the Audio and Video Collection (T for “tape”), recorded in the 1990s, both of which can be found at the National Folklore Collection (NFC) in Dublin, revealing sources where informants give accounts of their first-hand experiences.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these sources, other published collections of oral histories are used to understand the migratory process from the point of view of the protagonists. Undoubtedly, they all make a substantial contribution to our understanding of the stories that Irish literature has recently produced.

Considering that migration is at the core of the appropriate theoretical framework to tackle the issue at hand, it cannot be reduced simply to “the physical process of moving from one geographical area to another” (Ventriglio and Bhugra 70). In most cases, migration is a life event that comprises three stages: pre-migration, the actual process of migration and settlement or post-migration (Ventriglio and Bhugra 69).<sup>2</sup> Complementarily, transnational perspectives emphasize the agency of individuals and groups from a bottom-up perspective (Gray “Thinking” 36), and aim to understand the

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this collection of audio records on emigration is known as the Holyoke Collection because many of the informants were Irish men and women who went to live in Holyoke, Massachusetts, a long-standing Irish community in the USA.

<sup>2</sup> This division of migration into three main stages can be broken down into more detailed phases that would comprise leaving, the journey, entrance, settlement, return, and remigration and onward migration (Erdal and Oeppen). However, for the scope of this study, the simpler version is more suitable.

relations that migrants establish between their experience of mobility and their concept of home both in their places of origin and in the places to which they move. But in the particular context of Ireland, first as a former British colony, and later as an independent nation, the intimate relation between the land and a constructed sense of identity was undoubtedly disrupted by migratory flows. Furthermore, in the case of women emigrants, migration offered an opportunity to obtain the independence and autonomy that they lacked in their homeland (Gray “Gendering”). As a consequence, the problematic nature of this phenomenon, which entailed a certain amount of distress in each of its different stages, is detectable both in the life narratives of émigrés and in the above literary recreations to the point that Irish female migration may be considered a traumatic experience.

If we understand trauma not as a disorder but “a reaction to a kind of wound, ... a reaction to profoundly injurious events and situations in the real world and, indeed, to a world in which people are routinely wounded” (Burstow), the three-stage process of the journey, namely leaving, crossing and arriving (Fitzgerald and Lambkin), and the conditioning factors that make it a traumatic life event, can be scrutinized with the aim of shedding light upon the gendered reality of this phenomenon, and its causes and effects.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in accordance with theories of trauma (Pedersen), the main stressors, coping mechanisms and sources of resilience that explain the relative success of many migratory experiences will be highlighted at each stage of the process. With the aid of ethnographic and literary examples, the following dissection of the phenomenon will set out the thin line that separates facts and fiction in the history of Irish female migration.

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<sup>3</sup> Due to space restrictions, a more extended study of pre-migration and post-migration factors has been left aside for consideration elsewhere.

## **“There Was Nothing Here”: A Simple Reason to Leave Ireland**

The ways individuals express and deal with distress is very much determined by the culture they live in (Ventriglio and Bhugra). In the Irish context, the social, moral and religious pressure placed upon women to identify with the land they inhabited, together with the gendered discourse of marriage and motherhood directed towards them and the economic depression that substantively invalidated that ideological project, can be considered as contradictory forces that affected the emotional and psychological state of Irish women and drove them to emigrate.

Despite the evident normalization of emigration across generations in Ireland (Gray “Gendering”; Martin; Walter “Irish Women”), the testimonies consulted at the NFC indicate that **the** major reasons for leaving were the lack of economic and social prospects. However, the main cause of migration seems to vary according to the sex of the informant, which indicates a gender-biased perception. Male informants tend to address the issue of marriage as the main cause of female migration, as the following testimony explains: “Many young women finding themselves without prospects of marriage in this country, arriving to their getting beyond the matrimonial state, girls without a dowry or having other problems militating against marriage, sought a new life and career beyond the **way**” (QEA vol. 1410: 114). Another male informant insists on the ideal of marriage for young Irish women. When that didn’t occur, migration would become an option **“A** girl who was approaching thirty years of age and who did not see any prospect of getting married at home might decide to go to America. That sometimes happened” (QEA vol. 1409: 216). In contrast, female informants tend to identify the depressed economic context and the lack of opportunities for them as the main reasons for leaving. For instance, Nora Murphy recalls her hard life before emigrating:

I went out before 1900 at the age of 16 ... Before that I was working at home with my

mother like any young girl, and doing some work on the farm, weeding, etc. ... I was employed for a while at a mental asylum, doing kitchen work, and later at general housework. (QEA vol. 1409: 72–73)

Indeed, the prospect of a life of domestic work was not appealing to young women, as an interviewee's recount of her mother's life attests:

During the day, she kept the fire going constantly, baked bread, prepared meals, washed and mended clothes, drew water from the well, cleaned the house, fed and milked the cows twice daily, churned milk to make butter, raised fowl, bore and raised children, helped at harvest time with hay and turf, and so forth. (O'Carroll 26–27)

Other sources confirm the absence of employment options for most Irish girls. Emigrant Bridget Kenney recalls her hopelessness in Ireland due to the lack of prospects: "I was 19. There was nothing here. What would you do with yourself?" (T 196). Helen Flatley, a nanny who migrated to America in 1928, admitted: "I came out here because there was really nothing to do" in Ireland (quoted in Lynch-Brennan 31). These divergent though complementary points of view on the matter indicate that a gender-biased perception remained in force in the recollections of émigrés long after their journey has taken place. They also suggest a qualitative difference between the type of stressors men and women had to endure at the time, the former pointing to poor economic performance at a structural level, a measurable and fluctuating factor, and the latter referring to cultural and ideological expectations, which are much more stable and inapprehensible.

All these aspects of the pre-migration stage are reflected in the contemporary novels of migration. In *The Light of Evening*, for example, migration is unavoidable for Dilly, the young protagonist who exemplifies how normal migration had become with the following words: "Maybe I decided then, maybe not. There was always so much talk about America, every young person with the itch to go" (O'Brien 29). It is only logical to

conclude that such a generalized practice required the use of normalizing devices to lessen the trauma and make emigration a silenced gendered phenomenon. To prevent an open debate surrounding this inconsistency, several strategies were set in motion to cover for the legal, cultural and emotional domains.

Ireland's economic failure in the nineteenth century had affected both industrial and agricultural employment. During the first decades of the twentieth century, the socioeconomic vision of Irish nationalism stressed the ideal of the Irish peasant as "the true Irishman" (Daly *Industrial* 9) and favoured rural society and its values in opposition to industrial development, which was rooted in ideas of materialism and sin. Since the 1870s, Irish families had tended to pass their holdings to the eldest son, which meant that all other siblings had to find an alternative means of subsistence. This transformation of a land tenure system into one of peasant proprietorship did not result in an improvement of economic production (Giblin, Kennedy and McHugh). In any case, the inheritance laws should be highlighted as a structural hindrance for the female half of the population, who were forced to play a secondary role in the farming system, when they were not excluded altogether. As Erdal and Oeppen have noted, "the decision to leave might be more or less forced depending on how we interpret available alternatives" (989). In light of the legal system of land ownership, it is evident that Irish women stood little or no chance of pursuing a living in agriculture. This situation is firmly supported by the ethnographic questionnaires held by the NFC, as the following record illustrates:

It often happened too that the oldest of a big family went to America and as the rest of the family grew up they went away, one after the other. Then when they were all gone, the father and mother would write for the eldest boy to come home again and take over the place and look after them in their old age. (QEA vol. 1411: 256)

It is relevant here to note that behind women's decision to leave lay the certainty



of a predetermined future in Ireland. Tess, the protagonist of *Academy Street*, could only have imagined herself as a nun had she not emigrated to America: “In another life she might have been a nun. A bride of Christ, her whole being turned over to praying and reflection, a dissolution of her corporeal self” (Costello 117). The problematization of the female body is intimately related with its reproductive capacity because in Irish society at that time, the inability to become a wife and a mother reduced the woman’s performativity to a religious vocation and reclusion. In this situation, emigration was the only way out. This feeling of entrapment is quite graphically portrayed by Sebastian Barry. Lilly, the protagonist of *On Canaan’s Side*, voices the emotional wounds in the feminine psyche that can be articulated only after emigration: “Ireland nearly devoured me, but she was my devotion, at least in the foggy present, when the past is less distinct and threatening. When the terrors associated with being Irish have been endured and outlived” (Barry 127).

Although women were legally barred from the farm business, that did not mean that they were uninterested. No ethnographic records have been found on the matter, but contemporary literature has filled this void. In *Academy Street*, Mary Costello portrays little Tess as a girl for whom the farm means the world:

She is amazed at how happy she is. In her bed, in this house. With the lawn and the barn and the fields around her. There is nowhere else she wants to be. In her most secret heart she knows there is nowhere she loves more. (32)

Together with the girl’s yearning for the farm, the author suggests that her emotional attachment to the land is somehow inappropriate, a secret she must keep for herself, because despite her love for the family farm, she cannot earn her living there, as the following conversation with her Latin teacher, Mr Brown, attests: “And your father farms the land? Livestock?” “Yes, sir.” “And you have brothers and sisters? A brother, who will

inherit the place perhaps?” “Yes, sir. Denis, my older brother” (43). Similarly, Colm Tóibín, in *Brooklyn*, explores the female bond with the familiar environment: “She would prefer to stay at home, sleep in this room, live in this house, do without the clothes and shoes” (29). But in both cases, these feelings are confined to the inner world of the protagonists and, thus, the trauma of lacking a future on the island is silenced. In the absence of contestation, migration became a natural process which was, in Colm Tóibín’s words, “part of the life of the town” (25). Indeed, the legal apparatus and the moral code can be highlighted as two stressors that conditioned women’s decision to emigrate, for which the connivance of the population was also needed. As Mikowski has pointed out quite accurately, Eilis’s departure in *Brooklyn* could only happen thanks to the scheme her mother and sister engineered with the help of Father Flood, a metaphor of “the only plan the nationalist state was able to elaborate to meet its people’s needs” (240).

Apart from personal perception, traumatic events have been reported to be influenced by the broader collective meaning and social response (Pedersen 9). So, once the decision was taken, rituals and traditions, particularly the so-called “American wakes” or farewell parties for the departing, were displayed as social practices of normalization of the migratory exodus. Pedersen and Rytter reformulate Inger Sjørslev’s definition of ritual performances as “condensed forms of sociality that provide us with an insight into ... norms, ideals and conflicts” (3). In this regard, the role of these coping mechanisms may be interpreted as a way to soften the unvoiced trauma of leaving by means of celebration. Ethnographic sources talk very naturally about this tradition in festive terms: “The ‘American Wake’ started about 10 o’clock at night, with dancing, singing and feasting and also liquor (mostly whiskey) which cost only two pence a glass in the year 1884” (QEA vol. 1408: 2). This celebratory event served to transfer a private decision to the public domain, with the blessing of neighbours and acquaintances, so that

the choice was sealed. The ritual also provided the normalization of a collective failure, namely the lack of future opportunities, and it softened the shock of the traumatic separation. This ritual is also present in Edna O'Brien's work:

The night before I left home, there was a wake in the kitchen, as was the custom for anyone going so far away. The kitchen was full of people ... Boys danced with me, said they'd miss me, boys that had never thrown two words to me before over a ditch. The older men sat on the settle bed with their bottles of porter and the one bottle of whiskey that they passed around, and when they got up to dance, they staggered and had to sit down again. The women were by the fire consoling my mother, consoling themselves, fearing that I would never come back. (30)

In the realm of feelings, the emotional bonds to relatives and friends overseas should not be overlooked. This source of resilience served as an emotional anchor for those who had to leave Ireland, a vital resource for the newcomers. According to the brothers Patrick and Michael Silke, these transatlantic connections were essential both in providing the economic means to purchase the fare: "Elder brothers and sisters already there would bring out younger members of the family, pay their passage and send them money for clothes and travelling expenses. Sometimes they paid the passage money in America and sent home a voucher" (QEA vol. 1409: 214). They also welcomed and housed newcomers: "Emigrants from the same village or district usually settled in the same city or town in the States where their relatives or friends or neighbours had preceded them, thus forming little colonies" (QEA vol. 1409: 61–62). This recurrent pattern is also present in literature. For example, in both *Academy Street* and *Brooklyn* older relatives act as connectors between Ireland and America. Among them, priests and landladies played an important role in the transnational connections between the United States and Ireland (Clark *Irish*), and their literary representations (Barros-del Rio "On Both Sides").

## Alone on the Boat

Even though it may have been the shortest stage in the migratory process, the journey to America involved a high level of stress and fear for the young women who tended to emigrate on their own. Most were young and single, a profile quite unusual when considering other migratory groups in Europe. These characteristics paint a picture of the journey to America as a strongly gender-biased performance that must have caused the travellers much distress, as oral records confirm. In the protagonists' narration, loneliness and fear seem to be the most common feelings émigrés recall about this stage: "I was very lonesome in the beginning. Everyone here. You'd be thinking of home. I landed in New York. The other girl too" (T 1393). These testimonies are mirrored by contemporary literature. Edna O'Brien writes: "Again she recalls setting out lonesome for America, the ship ploughing the main, waves high as a house, crashing in" (22). Both ethnographic and literary materials identify the odyssey across the Atlantic as a definitive stressing phase of the process of migration, particularly since Irish women tended to travel alone. Nora Joyce, who arrived at Ellis Island in 1929, described it as follows: "On the ships you'd be sick, you know, with the waves. I was travelling alone. Of course there was other people on [board], but I didn't know anybody" (O'Carroll 41). This peculiarity frequently compelled them to join other travelling women, which must be considered a coping mechanism to overcome the ordeal, as Bridget Kenney recalls: "I met a girl there, on the boat. We kept together" (T 196).

But this strategy, also fictionalized by Tóibín in his novel *Brooklyn*, hides a much less explored issue: sexual intimidation during the crossing. As Walter has noted, trouble-free movement during the migratory process has been taken for granted ("Old Mobilities" 57). However, Maguire (339) points to molestation and violence as the most recurrent

types of assault committed against single young women during their journey. In fact, they happened so often that the Act of 1860 was passed to prevent them with quite ineffectual results.<sup>4</sup> Yet no reference to this felony can be found in the ethnographic materials consulted. This void in oral testimonies can only be attributed to shame and an earnest desire to forget. If trauma is a reaction to a kind of wound (Burstow), silence and oblivion seem to be the only healing strategies to be found among the sources consulted. The literary works discussed here similarly avoid the subject. Although literature is usually a medium which digs into the psychological aspects of shame, none of the selected authors mentions any sign of abuse of female travellers on board. Apart from Tóibín's display of a strategic alliance between Eilis and Georgina on the boat in *Brooklyn*, only Edna O'Brien ventures to tackle the subject of abuse, in the harsh fate of young single women who arrived in the USA with no connections:

When Annie'd got off the boat aged sixteen there was no one to meet her; ... a well-dressed woman came across to her and offered to give her shelter ... So she went with her, thinking she was going to a convent. Instead she was brought to a big house with a madam where she was made a prisoner and groomed to be a prostitute. (2006: 46)

This passage suggests that sexual abuse was present throughout the migratory process and hints at a permanent need of self-protection. Equally, it can also be surmised that female alliances on the boat might have lessened the vulnerability of the individual

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<sup>4</sup> Maguire refers to an Act to repeal the third section of an Act entitled "An Act to Regulate the Carriage of Passengers in Steamships and Other Vessels", approved 3 March, 1855, for the better protection of female passengers and other purposes, and more particularly to the following lines: "Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That every master or other officer, seaman or other person employed on board of any ship or vessel of the United States, who shall, during the voyage of such ship or vessel, under promise of marriage, or by threats, or by the exercise of his authority, or by solicitation, or the making of gifts or presents, seduce and have illicit connection with any female passenger, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction, shall be punished by imprisonment for a term not exceeding twelve months, or by a fine not exceeding one thousand dollars: *Provided*, That the subsequent intermarriage of the parties seducing and seduced may be pleaded in bar of a conviction" (1860, pp. 3). This amendment was passed in 1860 and can be consulted at the Library of Congress web page (Library of Congress).

travelling on her own.

### **Arrival in the USA: “Everything Was Set Up for Us”**

Undoubtedly, arrival in the USA entailed a great deal of personal stress caused by detachment from the familiar realm and adjustment to the new environment. Among the different stressors identified in the sources consulted, two stand out: passing through the doors of the immigration station and the initial settling in the new land.

Until the early 1900s, immigrants at Ellis Island had to wait to have a physical examination, a procedure that sometimes took hours or even days, during which they remained on board ship. By 1921, immigrants also had to pass a literacy test. Although these conditions were softened in the middle of the twentieth century, immigrants still had to queue, frequently for hours, at the immigrant inspection station. After the expense and ordeal of the journey, fear of detention or deportation must have been a source of great anxiety. Nora Joyce remembered this moment: “There was one girl coming with me ... She didn’t pass the council [US consulate’s health test]. In six months time [*sic*] she tried it again and she passed” (O’Carroll 41). The uncertainty of this moment is also reflected in Tóibín’s *Brooklyn*. Before entering the new country, Georgina, a fellow traveller, warns Eilis: “The only thing they can stop you for is if they think you have TB, so don’t cough whatever you do, or if they think you have some funny eye disease, I can’t remember the name of it” (50). As time passed, all these operations were simplified and, according to emigrant Bridget Kenney, after 1926 most procedures could be arranged in Ireland before departure (T 196).

Once immigrants were allowed into the United States, an adjustment period began. Although most testimonies show positive memories of this stage, the first months in the new land must have been tough, with a high level of stress and uncertainty, as one

informant recalls:

They all spoke of the terrible loneliness they felt during their first year away, say that they would have come home again they could have afforded it, but after a twelvemonth they began to feel at home and like the place. (QEA vol. 1409: 56)

The deep sense of loneliness these women must have felt during the first months of their arrival in America has received a more critical treatment in the literary accounts. Mary Costello identifies America with “a feeling of exile and eternal loneliness” (50), and Edna O’Brien’s characters declare dramatically: “Mary Kate was crying buckets, for Annie, for herself. Seeing that she had softened a bit, I said, ‘Mary Kate, I want to go home’. ‘You can’t go home’, she said solemnly, and it was like a death sentence” (47). For his part, Colm Tóibín delves further into the feeling of detachment: “All this came to her like a terrible weight and she felt for a second she was going to cry ... She was nobody here ... Nothing meant anything ... Nothing here was part of her. It was false, empty, she thought” (67). Similarly, references to unsuccessful settlement can only be found in fiction, as illustrated by Edna O’Brien’s tale of Annie, who ended up in a brothel, and Mary Costello’s narration of motherhood outside of wedlock. This asymmetry between first-hand memories and fiction has also been noted by trauma studies. It has been observed that memories of traumatic experiences are sometimes reclassified or outlined (Pedersen 16). According to Creet and Kitsmann, who affirm that “memory is where we have arrived rather than where we have left” (6), memory is conditioned by migration, more particularly by the post-migration stage which seems to be very influential in the subjective perception of the whole process. Furthermore, McDowell affirms that memories “are also constructed within dominant discourses and official hegemonic histories” (156). In this case, selective memory may have been displayed, as the exclusion of inappropriate events contributes to build a positive image of the self and to reconstruct

the retelling of the migratory experience in accordance with personal and social expectations (Lacroix and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh).

To overcome these and other stressful circumstances that surrounded migration, two main coping mechanisms were set in motion. The first was the important role of networks of settled Irish immigrants. These social and familial networks were a solid and effective resource, helping to ease newcomers' transition, as several studies confirm (Fitzgerald and Lambkin; Nolan; Ryan), and oral records testify: "When we came we had someone at the stations. There were piles of Kerry people here. I lived with my aunt, Mrs Joyce. When I first arrived here I got a job right away. And a pay per meal" (T 1393).

Furthermore, relatives and acquaintances would not only welcome the newcomers and provide them with initial lodgings,<sup>5</sup> they also passed on useful information and gave references for jobs (Fitzgerald and Lambkin 30):

We arrived in New York city and my sister in law, my cousin and an uncle of mine met me and we came by car to Holyoke. Everything was set up for us. My wife found a job on the second day because she was a dress maker. It took me 2 weeks. (T 1437)

As scholar Louise Ryan affirms, **kinship** connections were a major asset the Irish counted on in the USA. Neighbourhoods played an important role in keeping alive an Irish identity through education, faith and recreation (Almeida 6). For example, Waters recalls from her own experience as a daughter of Irish immigrants in the USA that family and friends were essential in the Irish community overseas: "They were usually quick to find their way around the Irish-American network, acquiring jobs and apartments and a host of irrefutable opinions ... they were frequent and welcome visitors; our parents had few friends outside the family" (37–38). In other cases, these networks effectively acted as an

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<sup>5</sup> They would reunite at the "Kissing Post", so named for the frequent greetings between newcomers and their relatives witnessed there.



extended family and relationships and marriages among the members of these communities were frequent. These informal relationships sustained and perpetuated the transnational nature of Irish migration (Delaney 431).

America was a land in need of a large labour force and that provided pathways to resilience for those women not constrained by family duties on arrival. The belief in and aspiration for a better future were definitely an internal process of coping that can be equated as a coping mechanism according to Goodman et al. (312). Domestic service and the management of boarding houses were the most frequent occupations for these young Irish girls (Clark). To earn a living in their new land, single women were mostly employed as “living-out girls” –servants, maids and cooks in the houses of well-to-do families (Clark *Erin's* 14), as was the case of Bridget Kenny: “I was cook at Mr. Walker’s. He was a banker. I got up early, breakfast, lunch, house chores ... They were great people to work for. They were so friendly and nice to you” (T 196). Others sought better positions as governesses or salespeople, which were more respectable (Kelly 41–57). As employment trends changed over time, single Irish women tended to join stores and factories. This option would ultimately allow them to achieve economic independence along with the opportunity to work in a public domain, extend their circle of friends and connections, and offered the eventual chance of promotion. Despite these good prospects, this context may not always have resulted in emancipation, as the selected Irish novels highlight. In *Brooklyn*, Tóibín has young Eilis working in a store and obtaining a degree in accounting just before she gets married and foreseeing her future as the housewife of an Italian entrepreneur. Conversely, Tess, the protagonist of *Academy Street*, remains single and independent and orientates her motivation towards the upbringing of her son. In *The Light of Evening*, Edna O’Brien expresses some negative reflections on the real lives the immigrants were leading:

I could not write back and tell her how strange and false everything was ... My cousin pretending she was a nurse when it turned out that she washed patients and dressed them, her hands pink and raw-looking from all the washing. (49)

Mary Costello also refers to a forced normalization of American life in the following passage of *Academy Street*: “They looked at each other now. In the look there was an acknowledgement, a declaration, an affirmation that everything was finally settled, and the lives being lived here were the right ones, the ideal lives” (59). All in all, an asymmetric perception of the post-migration adjustment stage is notable between personal testimonies and literary works. However, it remains uncertain whether émigrés tended to soften their remembrance of bad experiences in view of the unspoken desire to achieve a successful migratory experience and live the American dream.

## Conclusions

Irish migration has been a constant for centuries with a higher incidence amongst the female population. However, the sources and the testimonies consulted indicate that in the case of Irish women emigration was, to some degree, an involuntary decision, a “reluctant exile” (Duffy 22). The analysis carried out here sheds light on the different elements that made female migration to America a generalized option for young single women in the nineteenth century and more particularly during the first half of the twentieth century. Amongst other contributory factors, the absence of opportunities, a restricted model of womanhood orientated to motherhood and supported by religious beliefs, a familiarity with the phenomenon of emigration and the existence of solid networks of Irish emigrants overseas can be underlined.

The contradictory nature of Irish female emigration suggests an association of traumatic experience with mobility that demands further study. For this purpose, both

literary and ethnographic sources have been examined here. The most recent literary recreations of Irish migration can be interpreted as a way of dealing with the traumatic aspects that the Irish can begin to deal with now. Authors such as Edna O'Brien, Sebastian Barry, Colm Tóibín and Mary Costello have fictionalized the lives of Irish women travelling to America in the first decades of the twentieth century, bringing to the fore the multiple and complex stressors inherent in the migratory experience, as a means to heal a national wound that is still felt in Ireland today. Furthermore, oral and written ethnographic materials, particularly those held at the NFC, bring to light conflictive aspects of female migration that ultimately make sense of this personal and collective traumatic experience.

Following theories of migration and trauma (Goodman et al.; Pedersen; Ventriglio and Bhugra), and applying a cross-cutting gender lens, I have analysed the three main stages of the migratory experience and identified a set of stressors and processes of coping (Goodman et al.). In light of this analysis, the complex nature of human mobility becomes clearer, as do the intersections of the stages of the migration process and the overlapping experiences of supports and barriers. Stressors and coping mechanisms sometimes function simultaneously and give way to both similar and divergent outcomes in female migration.

Firstly, during the pre-migration stage, inheritance laws have been classified as a structural hindrance that deprived young women of access to property, and this fact might have encouraged them to emigrate. In this respect, the analysis shows that contemporary literature has filled the void found in ethnographic records and some novels have explored the female bond with Ireland's familiar environment and their grief at their emotional detachment from the land. Another example can be found in marriage and motherhood. As the sole destiny for women in Ireland, they must be considered as a motivation for

leaving. But, at the same time, during the pre-migration stage, rituals and traditions such as the American wakes can be classified as coping mechanisms thanks to their socializing function, an issue well documented in both ethnography and literature. The social nature of these meetings, even their mixed essence, somewhere in between sorrow and joy, played an important role in normalizing an undesired departure.

Secondly, the journey on the boat to America has also been identified as a stressor, especially due to its gendered nature, which in the Irish context was largely performed by young single women. The perils they faced had to be counteracted by a coping mechanism in the form of temporary alliances among travelling girls, a means to lessen their vulnerability seen in both ethnographic records and the selected novels. Nonetheless, only the literary sources dare address sexual intimidation and abuse to which women travelling alone were exposed, an issue to which legal records bear witness. As noted in the analysis, while direct testimonies avoid this subject, literature digs into the psychological aspects of shame.

Finally, a major source of resilience, both in the pre-migration and settlement or post-migration stages were the emotional bonds established between the prospective migrant and those who had already emigrated. These transnational links have been clearly identified in the form of Irish immigrant networks that welcomed new immigrants and provide them with food, lodgings, connections and emotional support. Concurrently, they would also play a relevant role in the perpetuation of the island's morals and customs, thus hindering young women's chances of emancipation. Notably, the inconsistent approaches of ethnographic sources and literary works to the post-migration stage indicate that adjustment to the new land may have entailed a kind of conflict between the American dream and the actual lives of the female immigrants. While the oral materials tend to minimize the loneliness suffered by those newly arrived in America, O'Brien and

Costello openly refer to failed examples in the post-migration stage, an asymmetry that trauma studies attributes to unconscious memory selection. Ultimately, this calls into question the validity of both memory and literary work as unbiased sources for analysis.

In conclusion, Irish female migration can be identified as a form of chain migration that entails a certain degree of unwanted mobility and encompasses a conflict between the emotional and ideological spheres. According to trauma theories, Irish female migration presents stressors and coping mechanisms in the distinct stages of the process. As this study demonstrates, the intersection of literature and ethnography as complementary disciplines for the study of this phenomenon sheds light on crucial aspects that would otherwise have gone unnoticed and offers a broader horizon for the understanding of Irish female migration.

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