

Brooklyn



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF COLM TÓIBÍN

One of five children, Colm Tóibín was born in Enniscorthy in County Wexford, Ireland in 1955. He couldn't read until he was nine years old, at which point he developed a stutter. When he was 15, he attended St Peter's College, where for two years he was a boarding student who fell in love with poetry. When he left secondary school, he took a job as a bartender for the summer and read large amounts of Ernest Hemingway. Inspired by Hemingway's writing, he lived for a short stretch of time in Barcelona, though he first attended University College Dublin. His first novel, *The South*, was informed by his time in Barcelona, as was *Homage to Barcelona*. After returning to Ireland and working for a time toward a master's degree, he left school to pursue a career in journalism. During the 1980s, he served as editor of the Irish magazine *Magill*. Tóibín's most famous novel, *Brooklyn*, appeared in 2009 and was a bestseller. His writing—which includes novels, plays, essays, and short stories—has won numerous awards, and he has published nine novels.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The history of Irish immigration to the United States is quite rich, beginning as early as colonial times, though the initial Irish inhabitants of the Thirteen Colonies were indentured servants. By the 1700s, though, large numbers of Irish migrants came to the Thirteen Colonies, and roughly 400,000 Irish people were living in the United States by 1790. When the Great Irish Famine struck in the mid-1800s, Irish migration to America once again increased substantially, though many of these migrants died aboard transatlantic ships before actually reaching the United States. At the turn of the 20th Century, still more Irish people came to the country, this time looking for economic opportunity. In particular, workers flocked to New York City, where they helped build the first subway tunnels. However, by the mid-1900s (the time during which Eilis Lacey migrates to Brooklyn), immigration from Ireland had greatly slowed down. All the same, the long history of Irish immigration to the United States remained intact, which is why Eilis finds such a cohesive Irish community when she comes to Brooklyn.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Given that *Brooklyn* tells the story of Eilis's decision to emigrate from Ireland, it vaguely recalls James Joyce's famous short story "The Dead," which is about—among other things—a young man's desire to leave Ireland. In another sense, *Brooklyn* is

similar to Irish-American author Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes*, which is about McCourt's experience growing up in Brooklyn in the mid-20th Century. Furthermore, *Brooklyn* can be compared to Colum McCann's novel *This Side of Brightness*, which is about the Irish immigrants who came to America in the early 1900s to dig New York City's first subway tunnels. In *Brooklyn*, Father Flood tells Eilis that many of the men who come to the church looking for dinner on Christmas are the people who dug these tunnels and never returned to Ireland.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Brooklyn
- **When Published:** 2009
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realism
- **Setting:** Brooklyn and Enniscorthy, Ireland
- **Climax:** Father Flood summons Eilis and tells her that her sister has died unexpectedly.
- **Antagonist:** Homesickness and the inability to express emotion

EXTRA CREDIT

The Big Screen. The writer Nick Hornby adapted *Brooklyn* as a film in 2015. It starred Saoirse Ronan and was nominated for three Academy Awards.

Lending Inspiration. The author Don DeLillo once stated in an interview with *The Paris Review* that he often finds inspiration in a photograph of Jorge Luis Borges that Colm Tóibín sent him. The picture hangs in his office, peering at him with intensity.



PLOT SUMMARY

Eilis Lacey, a young woman living in Enniscorthy, Ireland, has never left home. She lives with her mother and her older sister, Rose, who is a well-liked and confident woman. Unlike Rose, who works in an office in town, Eilis doesn't have a job, though she's studying to become a bookkeeper. Unfortunately, though, there are no positions available, so she accepts a job working at a grocery store owned by a pompous social climber named Miss Kelly. Each Sunday, she works at the cash register while Miss Kelly talks to her customers, treating each person differently depending upon their social status. Over dinner, Eilis tells her mother and Rose about her day, impersonating Miss Kelly and making them laugh. Her mother and Rose find

these impressions especially funny because they dislike Miss Kelly, since she once snubbed Rose when she came into the store. For this reason, Rose dislikes that Eilis is working in the shop, so she arranges with a priest named Father Flood—who is Irish but lives in Brooklyn, New York—to give Eilis an opportunity to migrate to America.

Father Flood and Rose work together to help Eilis prepare for her move to Brooklyn, where she'll live and work in Father Flood's parish. In the days leading up to her departure, she spends time with her friend Nancy, who is in the beginning stages of a relationship with the town's most sought-after bachelor, George Sheridan. Eilis even accompanies Nancy to a local dance so that Nancy can see George. As Nancy and George dance, Eilis stands awkwardly next to George's friend Jim Farrell, who snubs her. Fortunately, none of this really matters to Eilis when she starts preparing to leave for America. At the same time, though, she has reservations about her departure. One night, Rose helps her pack and insists upon giving her jewelry, and Eilis realizes that Rose should be the one leaving, not her. After all, Rose would do very well in America. Worse, Eilis suddenly understands that Rose is making a sacrifice by arranging for her to go to Brooklyn, since this means that Rose herself will have to continue living with their mother and therefore won't ever marry. Understanding the significance of her departure, then, Eilis wishes she could admit that she doesn't even want to go, but she realizes this will only upset both Rose and her mother, who have decided to do everything they can to give her this opportunity. Accordingly, she decides not to say anything at all about her misgivings.

Eilis leaves Enniscorthy and meets her brother, Jack, in Liverpool, England, where they spend the day together before she boards an ocean liner bound for America. As they catch up, Jack admits that he felt quite sad when he first left home to work in Birmingham, though he never mentioned this in any of his letters. Thankfully, though, this feeling soon passed. Eilis considers this later when she settles into her third-class cabin on the ocean liner, realizing that she will have nobody to help her through any homesickness in Brooklyn. As she considers this, a woman named Georgina enters the cabin. Elegant but brash, Georgina has been on multiple transatlantic voyages and knows how to sneak into the first-class lounge, but Eilis politely says she'd prefer to stay in the third-class quarters.

That night, Eilis gets seasick while Georgina remains in first class. Worse, she can't access the bathroom that her room shares with another room, since her neighbors locked it, so she throws up all over the cabin and in the hallway. The next day, Georgina returns and informs Eilis that everyone on the boat is sick. The boat, she says, is moving through a terrible storm that will last for several more days. She says there's nothing they can do to keep themselves from vomiting, but she promises the discomfort will eventually subside. All Eilis has to do is wait it out.

In Brooklyn, Eilis moves into a house owned by an Irish woman in Father Flood's parish named Mrs. Kehoe. Her roommates include two older Irish women named Miss McAdam and Sheila Heffernan, along with two younger women named Diana and Patty. There is also a woman named Miss Keegan, who lives in the basement and rarely speaks. At first, Eilis is too busy to think very much about Ireland, especially since Father Flood gets her a job at a department store called Bartocci's, where she works on the sales floor and has to make a constant effort to look happy, lest her supervisor, Miss Fortini, reprimand her for not having the right attitude. Eventually, though, she receives letters from her mother, Rose, and Jack, all of which come at the same time. She reads them one by one and suddenly feels a staggering sense of homesickness, recalling what Jack said about feeling sad when he first left home, and she contemplates writing to him but ultimately determines that he's too far away to help. In fact, she decides not to say anything about her sadness to any of her family members, not wanting to worry them.

Feeling alone and detached from the world, Eilis tries to hide her sorrow at work, but Miss Fortini notices and tells her to follow her downstairs. Miss Fortini gathers that Eilis misses her family and home, since she's never been out of Ireland before. She then calls Father Flood and Miss Bartocci, the owner's daughter. In turn, Miss Bartocci talks to Mr. Bartocci, who says that Eilis can go home for the day. Shortly thereafter, Father Flood comes to Bartocci's and talks to Eilis, telling her that he should have checked in on her and that it's understandable for her to be sad. Everyone, he says, experiences homesickness, but he assures her it will pass, especially if she distracts herself. He then enrolls her in night classes at Brooklyn College, where she takes the courses necessary to become a certified bookkeeper.

As Eilis focuses on her studies in the ensuing months, her homesickness subsides. Around this time, Father Flood starts hosting dances at the church, and Eilis has no choice but to go. After attending the first one with Miss McAdam and Sheila, she pretends to be sick for the second one. On the night of the third dance, Mrs. Kehoe asks Eilis to take Dolores, a new tenant whom everyone in the house dislikes because she pays part of her rent by cleaning for Mrs. Kehoe. Unsure of how she could possibly decline, Eilis agrees to take Dolores, but she abandons her when a young man asks her to dance. His name is Tony, and it becomes quite obvious that he's interested in Eilis, as he admits that he looked for her the previous week but couldn't find her. They dance the entire night—getting close for the slow songs—and then he walks her home, admitting that he's not actually Irish, but Italian. Before they part, they make plans to meet for dinner before the dance the following week.

Slowly but surely, Eilis and Tony's relationship develops. Unlike Eilis, he is open and willing to express his feelings, eagerly telling her how much he likes her. As their relationship

progresses, Eilis writes private letters to Rose about him, responding to her sister's questions, though she dislikes having to tell her that Tony is a plumber. Meanwhile, she keeps the news of her relationship a secret from her mother. One night, Father Flood goes out of his way to introduce himself to Tony, and Eilis can tell that Rose has asked him to do this. Thankfully, though, Father Flood takes an immediate liking to him, and Eilis reflects upon the fact that it's not always possible to judge a person's character based on their profession—something she thinks Rose should learn. Despite how smitten she is with Tony, though, she's quite alarmed when he starts saying that he loves her and casually mentions having children with her someday. At first, she doesn't respond, but she eventually tells him that she loves him too, though she isn't ready to talk about having children.

As Eilis nears the end of her second year in Brooklyn, she receives news that Rose has died in her sleep. When she calls home, her mother explains that Rose had a heart condition that she kept secret. In the coming days, Eilis feels at a loss, knowing that she should return home to keep her mother company but not wanting to leave her life in Brooklyn. Around this time, she sneaks Tony into her basement bedroom because she's too sad to be alone, and they end up having sex. Afterwards, she can tell that Mrs. Kehoe heard them and that she must have told Father Flood, who starts avoiding her. To make things right, then, she visits Father Flood and—because she doesn't know what to talk about—tells him that she wants to go home to visit her mother. Apparently deciding to forgive her, he helps her convince Miss Fortini to give her a month off from work.

When Eilis tells Tony that she's returning to Ireland, he asks her to marry him, insisting that they can do it secretly and then have an actual ceremony when she returns. Hesitant at first, she agrees, and they go through with the plan just before she departs. When she arrives in Ireland, though, she fails to tell her mother about Tony. Instead, she focuses on helping her write **thank-you cards** to the many people who paid their respects after Rose died. Later, she sees her friend Nancy, who tells her that she's getting married to George in several weeks and that Eilis's mother said that Eilis would be attending. Thinking there will be no harm in delaying her return to Brooklyn, Eilis agrees to go to the wedding.

As the wedding approaches, Eilis starts spending time with Nancy, George, and Jim, who has taken an interest in her. At first, their rapport is friendly and innocent, but they soon develop a relationship, and Eilis even kisses Jim after a dance one night. Consequently, everyone in town gets excited about the prospect of Eilis marrying Jim, since nobody knows that she's already married to Tony, to whom she has stopped writing letters. The wedding comes and goes, and still Eilis puts off buying a ticket back to America. Finally, though, Miss Kelly calls her to her store and tells her that Mrs. Kehoe is her cousin and that they stay in touch, passing news back and forth. She

explains that she told Mrs. Kehoe that Eilis has started seeing Jim. She then implies that Mrs. Kehoe told her about Tony, so Eilis rushes out of the grocery store, buys a return ticket to Brooklyn, and tells her mother that she's married. The next morning, she drops a letter at Jim's door explaining that she had to leave, and sets off for America once again.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Eilis Lacey – A young woman from Enniscorthy, Ireland, Eilis is the protagonist of *Brooklyn*. At the beginning of the novel, Eilis lives with her mother and her sister, Rose, in her childhood home. An intelligent but passive person, Eilis studies bookkeeping and hopes to someday secure an office job, though this is difficult because there simply aren't many available positions open in Enniscorthy. To help support herself and her mother (since her father died years ago), Eilis accepts a job at a grocery store owned by Miss Kelly, a stern social climber who needs help on Sundays. After working for only a little while at the register, though, Eilis is granted an opportunity to migrate to the United States. Although she isn't quite sure she wants to leave Ireland, she says nothing as Rose arranges with Father Flood (an Irish priest who lives in America) for her to live in Flood's parish in Brooklyn. When Eilis first arrives in America, she's unspeakably homesick but focuses on her job at a department store called Bartocci's, where she hopes to someday work in the accounting office. To help her stay busy, Father Flood gets her into bookkeeping and corporate law classes at Brooklyn College, and she soon begins to enjoy living in Brooklyn, even if her landlady, Mrs. Kehoe is often overbearing. Before long, she meets an Italian man named Tony and begins to see him each week. Their relationship develops slowly but surely, and it becomes clear to her that Tony wants to get married. Despite her relative contentment, though, her life changes drastically one day when she learns that Rose has died in her sleep, forcing her to return to Ireland to visit her mother. Before she leaves, she secretly marries Tony, who's afraid she won't otherwise come back. Upon reaching Ireland, Eilis becomes used to living at home once again and delays her return to Brooklyn. She even begins a relationship with a young man named Jim Farrell, though she eventually abandons him when Miss Kelly discovers her marriage to Tony, at which point she finally returns to America.

Rose Lacey – Rose is Eilis's older sister. At 30 years old, Rose is beautiful, stylish, and confident. She works as a bookkeeper in an office in Enniscorthy, has an active social life, and frequently plays golf at the nearby golf club. Despite her popularity, though, she has never married, even if she has had several serious relationships with men. She's also a very principled person, a fact that emerges when Eilis worries that Rose will disapprove of her decision to accept a job at Miss Kelly's

grocery store. This kind of work, Rose believes, is beneath her younger sister. This is why she arranges with Father Flood—a priest visiting from Brooklyn—for Eilis to migrate to the United States, where she'll have more economic opportunities. As Eilis prepares for this journey, she realizes that her departure will ensure that Rose will never get married, since Rose will have to continue to live in their mother's house to take care of her. Nonetheless, this doesn't seem to bother Rose, who has apparently decided to sacrifice her future for Eilis. After Eilis arrives in America, she and Rose write letters back and forth, and though Rose doesn't directly say that she disapproves of Eilis's relationship with Tony, she makes it clear that she thinks Eilis should wait a little while before committing herself to him, since he's a plumber and not an office worker. For the most part, their letters contain little else of note—something Eilis laments when Rose unexpectedly dies in her sleep. In the aftermath of her death, Rose's doctor informs her mother and Eilis that she had a heart condition that she kept secret, not wanting to worry her loved ones. This leaves both Eilis and her mother distraught, as they wish Rose had told them what was going on.

Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey) – Mrs. Lacey is a woman who lives in Enniscorthy, Ireland with her two daughters, Eilis and Rose. A widow, she is a principled woman who, despite her rather modest behavior, can still laugh and have a good time with her daughters. This is evident when she makes fun of Miss Kelly when Eilis starts working in the woman's shop, finding Eilis's impressions of Miss Kelly hilarious. Like both Rose and Eilis, though, Mrs. Lacey tends to hide her emotions, refusing to talk openly about her feelings and trying to avoid conversations about her three boys, all of whom have left Ireland to work in England. When Rose and Father Flood arrange for Eilis to go to the United States, Mrs. Lacey tries to conceal how sad she is to see her daughter leave, though she ultimately fails when she has to step out of the room to cry after one of her neighbors remarks how much Eilis will be missed. Later, when Eilis returns to Ireland in the aftermath of Rose's unexpected death, her mother asks her almost nothing about her life in Brooklyn, instead focusing on getting Eilis to help her write thank-you cards to people who sent their condolences. Because of this, Eilis fails to tell her mother that she married Tony before leaving Brooklyn. As time passes, it becomes clear that Mrs. Lacey is doing everything she can to make sure that Eilis gets used to living in Ireland again, not wanting her to return to America—a plan that ultimately works, at least until Eilis is forced to finally tell her mother about Tony, at which point Mrs. Lacey comforts her daughter and tells her that she should return to her husband.

Tony – A young Italian man who lives with his family in Brooklyn, Tony is Eilis's first real love. Because he likes Irish women, he attends the dance that Father Flood hosts at the church, where he initially lays eyes on Eilis, though he doesn't

approach her at first. Instead, he waits until two weeks later, when he sees her again and asks her to dance. Assuming that he's Irish, she accepts, eager to have an excuse to stop sitting awkwardly with Dolores. They continue to dance throughout the night, and Tony tells her that he looked for her the previous week and noticed she wasn't there. When the night is over, he walks her home and then invites her to dinner before the following week's dance. Happy to have someone to go with who doesn't live in Mrs. Kehoe's house, Eilis accepts, and thus begins their relationship. Eventually, she learns that he is Italian, but this doesn't bother her, though she does keep the information from Mrs. Kehoe. She also fails to mention Tony's existence to her mother when she writes letters home, though she privately tells Rose about him, reluctantly informing her that Tony is a plumber. Unlike Eilis, Tony is open and honest about his feelings, which is why he has no trouble expressing his love for her long before she's ready to tell him how she feels about him. Similarly, he speaks unreservedly about how he wants to have children with her in the future, eagerly planning their lives. Eventually, he invites her to the small two-room apartment in which he lives with his parents and three brothers, easily incorporating her into his everyday life. When he learns that she needs to visit Ireland in the aftermath of Rose's death, he worries that she won't return to him, so he pleads with her to marry him. Hesitantly, she agrees, and they secretly get married before she leaves. Despite this commitment, Eilis cheats on Tony with Jim Farrell while she's in Ireland, though she eventually returns to Brooklyn to resume her life with him.

Father Flood – An Irish priest who now lives in Brooklyn, Father Flood meets and plays golf with Rose while visiting Enniscorthy on vacation. A kind and temperate man, he insists that he knows Mrs. Lacey, so Rose invites him over for tea the following day, though her mother doesn't remember having met him. Nonetheless, he's gracious when he arrives and eventually insists that Eilis should be making more money than she makes at Miss Lacey's grocery store. Going on, he says that he could help her migrate to Brooklyn, where she could work in his parish and enjoy more economic opportunities. As this conversation continues, Eilis comes to realize that this is why her sister invited Father Flood to the house in the first place. In the coming weeks, Father Flood makes good on his promise to help Eilis move to Brooklyn, assisting her with the various paperwork and documents she needs to complete in order to obtain a visa. He also secures a job for her at a department store called Bartocci's and finds her a room in a house owned by an Irish woman in his parish named Mrs. Kehoe. When Eilis finally arrives in America, Father Flood even helps her overcome her homesickness by enrolling her in night classes at Brooklyn College, where she studies bookkeeping and corporate law. A deeply empathetic man, Father Flood later has to tell Eilis that Rose has died in her sleep, and he helps her arrange her return to Ireland.

Miss Kelly – Miss Kelly is the owner of a grocery store in Enniscorthy. Eilis’s family doesn’t shop at Miss Kelly’s store because it’s too expensive, but Eilis decides to work there once a week when Miss Kelly offers her the position. Eilis decides to not tell her sister about this job because she knows she would disapprove, since Rose sees that Miss Kelly is a social climber who only cares about people if they’re wealthy or widely respected in society. Eilis observes this dynamic for herself when she sees that Miss Kelly reserves the best products for certain customers and lets rich people skip the line despite what the other shoppers say in protest. To that end, Miss Kelly completely changes the way she addresses different customers, depending on who she’s talking to. She also openly disparages her helper, Mary, insulting her in front of people and speaking mean-spiritedly about her abilities. When Eilis returns to Ireland after living in Brooklyn for two years, Miss Kelly calls her to her store and tells her that she’s cousins with Mrs. Kehoe, Eilis’s American landlady. She then proceeds to inform her that she recently called Mrs. Kehoe to tell her that Eilis has been seeing Jim Farrell, insinuating that Mrs. Kehoe told her about Eilis’s relationship with Tony. Hearing this is ultimately what pushes Eilis to finally return to Brooklyn.

Nancy Byrne – One of Eilis’s good friends in Enniscorthy, Nancy is focused on finding a suitable husband. Shortly before Eilis leaves for America, Nancy dances with George Sheridan, one of the most sought-after bachelors in town. Because of this, she asks Eilis to accompany her to the following week’s dance, hoping that George will be there and ask her to dance again. When they first arrive, George isn’t there, and Nancy begins to regret her decision to come, no doubt remembering that her previous boyfriend abandoned her for another woman just one year earlier. However, George and his friends soon come to the dance, and he eventually approaches her. Two years later, Eilis returns to Ireland to discover that Nancy and George have gotten engaged. Eilis starts spending more time with Nancy and their friend Annette, though Nancy soon stops inviting Annette so that she can go on double dates with George, Eilis, and George’s friend Jim Farrell. Before long, this group starts meeting quite frequently, and Nancy—not knowing that Eilis is married to Tony—urges Eilis to pursue her relationship with Jim. Later, at Nancy’s wedding, Eilis realizes that she wishes she could get married to Jim in the very same church.

Jack Lacey – Jack is Eilis’s brother, who, along with their brothers Pat and Martin, has left Ireland to work in Birmingham. When Eilis also leaves home to travel to America, she takes a boat to Liverpool, where Jack meets her and spends the day with her before she boards the ocean liner that will bring her to New York. A sensitive young man, Jack tells Eilis that he was incredibly homesick when he first came to England, though he notes that this feeling eventually passed. Still, Eilis remembers this because she wonders what it will be like her

when she goes to America, since—unlike Jack—she won’t have any family members in the area to whom she might turn for help. Later, in the aftermath of Rose’s death, Jack writes to Eilis and is honest with her about the fact that their mother is extremely sad—a letter that greatly factors into her decision to go home for a visit.

George Sheridan – George Sheridan is a well-respected young man in Enniscorthy whose family owns a popular store. Eilis’s friend Nancy becomes excited when George asks her to dance one week, which is why she forces Eilis to accompany her to the following week’s dance, hoping that George will notice her again. Sure enough, George asks Nancy to dance once more, and their relationship develops while Eilis is away in America. By the time Eilis returns to Ireland two years later, George and Nancy are engaged.

Jim Farrell – A good friend of George Sheridan’s, Jim Farrell is a shy but initially abrasive young man who owns a pub in Enniscorthy. One of Eilis’s first encounters with Jim comes when she accompanies Nancy to the weekly dance so that Nancy can spend time with George Sheridan. Eilis stands awkwardly next to Jim while their two friends dance, and although she thinks he’s going to ask her to dance, he takes a step backward and merely looks at her, causing her to think that he disapproves of both her and Nancy. When she later returns to Ireland after two years in America, though, she realizes that Jim doesn’t dislike her. In fact, he finds her quite appealing, especially now that she has grown up and dresses in American styles. Not knowing that she’s married to Tony, he takes an interest in her and starts urging George and Nancy to set up double dates between the four of them. At first, Eilis resents having to spend time with Jim, but she soon begins to enjoy his presence, finding him kind and mannered. Soon enough, they develop a romantic relationship, and he even asks if she would entertain the idea of getting engaged before she returns to Brooklyn, though she avoids answering this question by kissing him. When she finally decides to go back to Brooklyn, she doesn’t say goodbye to Jim, instead slipping a note through his door and telling herself that he’ll soon not care so much about what they could have had.

Miss Fortini – Eilis’s supervisor at Bartocci’s in Brooklyn, Miss Fortini is a hawk-eyed and attentive woman with an uncanny ability to tell whether or not her saleswomen are unhappy. For this reason, she notices right away when Eilis comes to work in the throes of homesickness. Accordingly, she asks Eilis to follow her downstairs, where she asks what’s wrong and, when Eilis doesn’t say anything, guesses that she misses her family and her home. She then alerts Miss Bartocci, her boss, and arranges for Father Flood to come talk to Eilis. She also makes it possible for Eilis to take the day off, though she warns her that she has “crossed” Mr. Bartocci by coming to the department store in this state of mind. Later, Miss Fortini takes a liking to Eilis and enjoys talking to her about Tony, since she too has an Italian

boyfriend. Developing something like a friendship, she tells Eilis that Italian men are very particular about what their girlfriends look like in bathing suits. She even orders several bathing suits for Eilis to try on, though she makes Eilis quite uncomfortable when the suits arrive, insisting that she change in front of her as she stares at her naked body. She also slides her fingers under the waist bands and tells Eilis that she will have to shave her bikini line.

Mrs. Kehoe – Mrs. Kehoe is the owner of the house that Eilis lives in when she comes to Brooklyn. An Irish woman herself, Mrs. Kehoe takes a liking to Eilis because she’s polite and well-behaved. Because of this, she treats Eilis as her favorite resident, giving her the best room in the house when Miss Keegan abruptly moves out. This, however, causes tension between Eilis and the other boarders, so Eilis comes to resent Mrs. Kehoe for putting her in such an uncomfortable position. In turn, this situation also puts a strain on her relationship with Mrs. Kehoe, who thinks that Eilis is ungrateful. A stern woman, Mrs. Kehoe doesn’t allow any of her residents to bring male visitors to the house, so she’s surprised when Tony comes to fetch Eilis one night. However, she uses this opportunity to ask him as many questions as she can before Eilis arrives at the front door and ushers Tony into the street. Later, when Tony and Eilis have sex in the basement room, it’s clear that Mrs. Kehoe has heard them, considering that she decides to put a lock on the basement, forcing Eilis to enter through the front door instead of the separate entrance. Despite this tension, though, Eilis manages to patch up her relationship with Mrs. Kehoe by simply showing her that she’s willing to put aside their differences. However, Mrs. Kehoe later poses a problem for Eilis when she tells Miss Kelly (who is apparently her cousin) that Eilis is in a relationship with Tony—information that Miss Kelly wields against her, since she knows that Eilis has been seeing Jim Farrell during her extended visit to Ireland.

Georgina – Georgina is an elegant British woman who bunks with Eilis on the ocean liner to America. When she first arrives, she forces Eilis to take the top bunk instead of the bottom. She then sneaks into the first class lounge and somehow spends the night in first class while Eilis throws up from seasickness. The next morning, however, she tells Eilis that she has been kicked out of first class and will have to spend the night in their small cabin—a night, she says, that they will both spend vomiting, since they’re in the middle of a storm that won’t pass for at least another day and night. Thankfully, though, she helps Eilis pick the lock of the bathroom that they’re forced to share with another cabin (a bathroom that the other passengers locked the previous night). She also assures Eilis that, though her seasickness will continue, it will stop when the boat reaches calm waters. She knows this because she travels on ocean liners once a year to visit her mother in England. For the rest of the voyage, she teaches Eilis how to pass immigration customs when they arrive in America.

Miss Bartocci (Elisabetta Bartocci) – Miss Bartocci is the daughter of Mr. Bartocci, the owner of the department store where Eilis works when she comes to Brooklyn. When Eilis first starts, Miss Bartocci tells her that Bartocci values their customers and doesn’t care who these customers are or where they come from. In keeping with this philosophy, the store starts selling nylons to black women shortly after Eilis starts working, and Miss Bartocci tells Eilis that she will be one of the first two employees to sell these specific nylons. She says that some people might not like this new development but reminds Eilis that all paying customers are equal.

Mr. Bartocci – Mr. Bartocci is the owner of Bartocci’s, the department store where Eilis works when she comes to Brooklyn. Mr. Bartocci is a friend of Father Flood’s, which is how Eilis gets the job in the first place. For the most part, he is a nice man, though Miss Fortini warns Eilis that she shouldn’t “cross” him twice, saying this after Eilis has to go home one day because she’s too homesick to concentrate on work.

Miss McAdam – Miss McAdam is one of Eilis’s fellow residents at Mrs. Kehoe’s house. Originally from Belfast, Ireland, she works in an office and is older than most of the other boarders and is also rather old fashioned, frequently judging people like Diana and Patty and making comments about how they conduct their lives. To Eilis’s chagrin, she ends up accidentally aligning herself with Miss McAdam and Sheila Heffernan (another older resident) when she first arrives, unintentionally forcing herself to lead a boring existence instead of going out with Diana and Patty and having fun. When she eventually breaks away from Miss McAdam and Sheila, they both hold it against her.

Miss Keegan – Miss Keegan is one of Eilis’s fellow residents at Mrs. Kehoe’s house. A quiet woman, she lives in the basement and doesn’t say much at the house dinners. When she abruptly moves out, Mrs. Kehoe gives Eilis her room, telling her that it’s the best one in the house and that she shouldn’t worry about what the other boarders will think. However, Eilis worries that this development will upset her housemates, though she sees no way of turning down the room. Later, Miss McAdam tells her that Miss Keegan left because a man was following her home to the separate basement entrance. This man, according to Miss McAdam, exposed himself to Miss Keegan, so she moved to Long Island. Hearing this, Eilis wonders if Miss McAdam is telling her this story as a way of punishing her for taking the best room, and for several nights she worries about the matter until she finally decides to stop thinking about it altogether.

Diana – One of Eilis’s fellow residents in Mrs. Kehoe’s house, Diana is a young woman whose mother is Irish, though she herself has an American accent. Like Patty, Diana is “man-mad,” which annoys Miss McAdam, Sheila Heffernan, and Mrs. Kehoe. At first, Diana and Patty try to make friends with Eilis, but Eilis chooses not to go out with them and their friends—a decision she eventually regrets because it aligns her with Miss

McAdam and Sheila.

Patty – One of Eilis’s fellow residents in Mrs. Kehoe’s house, Patty is from upstate New York and, like Eilis, works in a department store in Brooklyn. Along with Diana, she is what Eilis thinks of as “man-mad,” which greatly irritates Miss McAdam, Sheila Heffernan, and Mrs. Kehoe. When Eilis first moves in, Patty and Diana make an effort to befriend her, but Eilis chooses not to go out with them and their friends. However, she later regrets this decision when she finds herself stuck with Miss McAdam and Sheila Heffernan instead, though Patty continues to make an effort to introduce her to her friends.

Dolores – Dolores is a young Irish woman who moves into Mrs. Kehoe’s house after Miss Keegan leaves. Unlike the other boarders, Dolores pays part of her rent by cleaning the house. Miss McAdam and Diana dislike this, both worrying that this will tarnish the entire household’s reputation. Forging an unlikely alliance, Miss McAdam and Diana approach Eilis and implore her to join them in refusing to eat dinner with Dolores, but Eilis finds this idea elitist and cruel, so she refuses. Perhaps because of this, Mrs. Kehoe asks her to take Dolores to that week’s dance, and though she desperately wants to say no, she agrees. When she gets to the dance, though, she quickly abandons Dolores to dance with Tony for the first time, glad to have an excuse to stop spending time with Dolores.

Frank – Frank is Tony’s youngest brother, and one of the cutest little boys Eilis has ever seen. Despite his appearance, though, Frank is quite devilish, which is why Tony warns Eilis that he might say something rude when she first meets his family. Sure enough, Frank tells her that he and his family don’t like Irish people, at which point his parents and brothers tell him to be quiet. However, Eilis manages to endear herself to Frank, who appreciates her willingness to pay attention to him.

Annette O’Brien – Along with Nancy, Annette is one of Eilis’s good friends in Enniscorthy. Even though the three girls are close, though, Eilis and Nancy eventually start spending time without Annette to go on double dates with George Sheridan and Jim Farrell when Eilis returns to Ireland after two years in America.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sheila Heffernan – Sheila Heffernan lives in Mrs. Kehoe’s house. Like Miss McAdam, she is judgmental and prude, often saying critical things about Eilis’s behavior and her relationship with Tony. As a result, Eilis finds herself frequently insulting Sheila as a way of defending herself.

Maurice – One of Tony’s brothers, Maurice is a mechanic. Along with Laurence and Tony, Maurice buys a plot of land in Long Island that the three brothers plan to develop.

Laurence – One of Tony’s brothers, Laurence is studying to be a carpenter. Along with Maurice and Tony, Laurence buys a plot

of land in Long Island that the brothers plan to develop.

Mary – Mary works in Miss Kelly’s grocery store. Unlike Eilis, she works full-time, though this is to her great disadvantage, since Miss Kelly constantly disparages her in front of customers and insults her whenever the opportunity arises.

Professor Rosenblum – Professor Rosenblum teaches a law course at Brooklyn College that Eilis takes as one of her night classes. Eilis finds Professor Rosenblum fascinating but has trouble applying his lectures to the pertinent material, though she ultimately passes his exams.

Pat Lacey – Pat is one of Eilis’s older brothers, who lives and works in Birmingham with Jack and Martin.

Martin Lacey – Martin is one of Eilis’s older brothers, who lives and works in Birmingham with Jack and Pat.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



TIME AND ADAPTABILITY

In *Brooklyn*, a novel that charts a young woman’s journey from Ireland to Brooklyn, Colm Tóibín illustrates the human capacity to gradually embrace new circumstances. Eilis Lacey reluctantly leaves her small hometown of Enniscorthy to live and work in Brooklyn, and though she’s overwhelmingly homesick at first and struggles to fit in amongst her new surroundings, she eventually comes to love her life in the United States. This, as her pastor Father Flood suggests, is because homesickness always passes. In fact, Eilis becomes so accustomed to her new existence that she even begins to dislike the idea of returning to Ireland. Before long, though, she’s forced to go home after the unexpected death of her sister, Rose. And though she’s eager to quickly return to Brooklyn when she first arrives in Ireland, she soon gets swept up in the everyday life of Enniscorthy, making it that much harder to tear herself away once more. By drawing attention to Eilis’s ability to slowly but surely accustom herself to her surroundings, Tóibín suggests that humans have an innate tendency to familiarize themselves with new patterns of life, even if those patterns seem strange and disagreeable at first.

Eilis’s initial decision to leave Ireland isn’t particularly proactive, since she lets Rose and her mother make the arrangements with the help of Father Flood. In the days before her departure, she begins to fret about what her new life will be like, but she doesn’t do anything to delay her journey. In fact, it isn’t until

she's aboard the transatlantic ocean liner that she seems to fully grasp how monumental her move to the United States will be, but even this realization is overshadowed by the intense seasickness she feels for the first few days of the trip. In many ways, her bout of seasickness is a critical turning point in the novel because it underscores the value of understanding that it's possible to simply wait out hardship. To that end, Eilis's bunkmate, Georgina, tells her after her first night of vomiting that she should expect to feel this way for at least another day and night. Having made the passage from Ireland to America before, Georgina can confidently tell Eilis that she will have to accept feeling sick for a while longer; there is, she insists, nothing to be done to prevent this. However, she also urges Eilis to consider that once this is over, the ship will be in "calm waters." By saying this, she frames Eilis's discomfort as temporary, even if it feels intense and never-ending in the moment. In turn, this mentality proves useful when Eilis later experiences a different kind of sickness—namely, homesickness, which is also seemingly unavoidable but impermanent.

Eilis's initial days in the United States go well because she's too busy to reflect upon the fact that her life has undergone such significant changes. As soon as she gets the time to read the first letters from her mother and sister, though, she suddenly finds herself wallowing in lonely despair. The only time she's ever experienced something similar was when her father died, which made her feel as if nothing in life had any meaning at all. Feeling this way once more, she goes to work at the department store, but her boss, Miss Fortini, takes her off the sales floor because she looks unhappy. Eilis then calls Father Flood, who speaks sympathetically to her about what she's experiencing. He tells her that everyone experiences homesickness and that for some people it goes away faster than for others. All the same, he stresses that it *will* pass, regardless of what she feels now. He then enrolls her in night classes at Brooklyn College to take her mind off how she feels. Sure enough, between work, school, and the development of her eventual romantic relationship with Tony, Eilis's intense longing for home soon subsides, suggesting that simply committing oneself to a routine can help allay strong feelings of depression.

Eilis has occasion to learn this lesson—that time and routine often cure emotional difficulties—once more when she visits Ireland in the aftermath of her sister's death. At first, she's unhappy to be home because she had to leave Tony, whom she secretly married before coming back to Ireland. Soon enough, though, she falls into the pleasant and reassuring patterns of her old life. Failing to tell her mother or anyone else about her marriage, she becomes more and more entrenched in Enniscorthy and indefinitely extends her stay. She even begins dating Jim Farrell, telling herself at first that this is only temporary. Once again, then, she gives herself over to the

simple passage of time, letting her life at home soothe her in much the same way that she let her day-to-day existence in Brooklyn distract her until she no longer missed Ireland. In this way, Tóibín suggests that people can get used to many different ways of life. And though this is often a good thing because it means people like Eilis are capable of overcoming homesickness and sorrow, Tóibín also hints at the fact that people ought to be *aware* of just how common it is to simply relax into a lifestyle even when that lifestyle might cause problems. After all, Eilis begins to imagine a future with Jim Farrell instead of Tony, cheating on her husband until she finally realizes that she can't simply ignore the life she built in Brooklyn. Consequently, readers see that people should proactively choose what kind of lives they'd like to pursue, since humans are so adaptable that it's possible to passively accept even undesirable circumstances.



IMMIGRATION, SOCIAL STATUS, AND REPUTATION

Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* is a novel that examines the effects of immigration on a person's life. A lower-middleclass woman, Eilis uproots her life in Ireland to travel to the United States in the hopes of gaining economic opportunity. In her small hometown of Enniscorthy, she has been trying to work as a bookkeeper for quite some time, but even her sister's employer won't hire her. As a result, she takes a job in a grocery store, a position that her mother insists should be temporary. She has this mentality because Eilis's community is fixated on social status and reputation—if Eilis isn't going to get married right away, she must find a good and respectable job. Unfortunately for her, working in a grocery store doesn't qualify as this kind of job, so she goes to the United States. And though she never does more than work on a sales floor in America, she's pleasantly surprised to find when she returns to Ireland that her reputation has vastly improved. In fact, her life begins to drastically change just because she has lived in the United States. In this way, Tóibín gives readers an interesting perspective on the process of immigration, illustrating not necessarily that Eilis's life in the United States is better than her life in Ireland, but rather that the mere act of migrating to a nation her community respects has the power to completely transform her social standing at home.

Although her mother and sister have grand plans for her, Eilis has never particularly thought she'll attain much upward mobility. Instead, she has always assumed she'll stay in Enniscorthy for her entire life, briefly working a job until quitting to get married and have children. This is why she's surprised when Rose invites Father Flood over to talk to her about the possibility of migrating to the United States. Suddenly, she feels as if she's about to begin a life for which she may not be ready. At the same time, though, she's delighted by the sense that everyone around her seems to know she's going

to the United States. She likes that her fellow townspeople look at her “with light in their eyes,” picking up on just how much her community values her decision to travel to America, even if they didn’t previously give her much thought. With this in mind, Eilis fights back any feelings of hesitancy about her decision to migrate, thereby revealing that she cares more about pleasing others than about doing what she actually wants.

Despite the excitement surrounding her departure, Eilis’s life in Brooklyn is no more glamorous than her life in Enniscorthy. Shortly after she arrives, Father Flood takes her to a department store called Bartocci’s and helps her secure a job as a salesperson. Meanwhile, she lives in a boarding house with five other women, where she’s not even allowed to have male visitors. Accordingly, it’s fair to say that her home life is less comfortable than it was in Ireland, and her professional life is no better than it was when she lived in Enniscorthy. The difference, however, is that she can enjoy the prospect of upward mobility in the United States in a way that she couldn’t in Ireland. To that end, Father Flood enrolls her in night classes at Brooklyn College so that she can become a certified bookkeeper, and the owner of Bartocci’s promises to give her a job in their accounting office once a position opens up. This sense of potential, it seems, is why Eilis’s family members and community think so highly of the United States, a place they respect for the chances it gives a person to advance in life.

When Eilis returns to Ireland for an extended visit, she finds that her life in Enniscorthy has completely changed by mere virtue of the fact that she has lived in the United States. What’s most interesting about this is that she hasn’t yet actually made any tangible improvements to her life since she first arrived in America. Although she has earned her bookkeeping certificate, a job hasn’t opened in Bartocci’s accounting office, and she’s still living in the same humble accommodations as when she first immigrated. All the same, living in the United States for two years has transformed the way people treat Eilis in Enniscorthy. She reflects upon this as she settles into her new, altered existence, thinking about the fact that Jim Farrell is suddenly interested in her even though he was “openly rude to her” before she left for America. Now, though, she thinks that she “carrie[s] something with her, something close to glamour, which ma[kes] all the difference to her [...]” It’s worth noting the language Tóibín uses in this moment, since he says that the changes Eilis has undergone now suddenly make a difference *to her*, not just to her peers—a sign that she has internalized her community members’ belief that living in the United States is something worthy of profound respect. After all, she hasn’t actually attained upward mobility quite yet, but she still relishes her new status in Ireland, and she chooses to celebrate her elevated station instead of being cynical about her community members’ rather superficial change of heart about her. By showcasing the transformative power of Eilis’s immigration, then, Tóibín reveals the shallow thinking that

sometimes underlies matters of status and reputation. And yet, at the same time, he also illustrates the understandable fact that people often deeply respect even just the *idea* of upward mobility, which is why Eilis’s immigration earns her so much positive attention.



COMMUNICATION, HIDDEN EMOTION, AND SECRECY

In *Brooklyn*, Colm Tóibín spotlights the difficulties associated with ineffective communication. To do this, he presents the Lacey family as uncommunicative when it comes to their feelings; Eilis, her sister Rose, and her mother never talk about their emotions. When Eilis goes to the United States, this emotional barrier helps her ease into a life of relative solitude, since she’s so used to keeping her feelings to herself. However, it also prevents her from being forthright with her eventual boyfriend, Tony, who’s incredibly transparent about the way he feels. Furthermore, when Rose dies because of a heart condition she neglected to tell anyone about, Eilis experiences the harsh consequences of establishing such unforthcoming relationships. And yet, she continues to keep her own secrets, failing to inform her mother, new boyfriend, and community that she married Tony before returning to Ireland. As a result, she ends up hurting people and putting an unnecessary strain on herself by maintaining this secret. Through the lives of Eilis and her family members, Tóibín suggests that a failure to express oneself can lead to undue misery.

Eilis’s inability to talk about her feelings aligns with her family’s nature. This is made evident by the fact that her mother and sister—who live in the same house as her—hardly talk about their emotions, purposefully avoiding difficult topics. In the days before Eilis leaves for the United States, she begins to think she’s the wrong person to be taking this opportunity. Instead, she thinks, Rose should be the one traveling to America. She also realizes that she doesn’t even *want* to go, and she suspects that both Rose and her mother also know that it would make more sense for Rose to take her place. The only reason they don’t say this, Eilis suspects, is that they’ve both decided—separately—that Rose should make a sacrifice for Eilis, who has her entire life ahead of her. For this reason, they focus on helping Eilis prepare for her journey to America, using this task to distract themselves from addressing the facts that Eilis might not want to go and that Rose would be a better candidate. Sensing their unwillingness to speak these thoughts, Eilis decides once and for all that she won’t give even “the smallest hint of how” she really feels. In turn, readers see that this uncommunicative approach to life is something that perpetuates itself, as Eilis takes cues from her loved ones to keep quiet about her feelings and, in turn, all three women go through with something that they’re not sure is good idea.

When Eilis first reaches the United States, her tendency to

avoid emotional expression plays to her favor, since she doesn't have anyone in whom she might confide in the first place. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she continues to withhold her thoughts from Rose and her mother, too, choosing not to write to them about experiences she thinks might worry them. Instead, she processes her initial impressions of America by reviewing the events of each day in her head at night. Given this emotionally reclusive approach to life, then, she's surprised by Tony's openness when they start dating. Unlike her, he's not afraid to say what he means or express how he feels. When, for example, he casually tells her that he wants their children to be Dodgers fans, she's utterly taken aback by his willingness to reveal that he wants to have children with her. She, on the other hand, feels incapable of even responding to this pronouncement, wishing instantly that she were alone so she could think in solitude about what he's just said. Unfortunately for her, though, this isn't the way relationships unfold, and her failure to respond to Tony's excited ideas about the future lead him to think that she has tacitly agreed to marry him—an idea to which she ultimately acquiesces, though her inability to express her reservations unfairly leads him to believe that their relationship is stronger than it really is.

Later, when she receives news of her sister's death, Eilis experiences what it's like to discover that a loved one has been keeping an important secret. Rose, she learns, knew that she had a deadly heart condition but didn't tell anyone. Instead of confiding in her mother or Eilis, she kept them in the dark about her health because she didn't want to upset them. This ultimately puts them through unnecessary turmoil, as they try in the aftermath of her unexpected death to process what has happened. When Eilis calls home, her mother says she wishes Rose had told her what was happening, lamenting the fact that Rose didn't want to worry her. "I don't know what to think," she says, indicating that Rose's secrecy has only led to confusion and sorrow. In this sense, Eilis's mother clearly feels bad that her own daughter felt uncomfortable telling her the truth because she thought she had to protect her. In this moment, Tóibín intimates that even well-intentioned secrecy can do emotional damage to loved ones.

Although Eilis witnesses the emotional fallout of Rose's secret, she herself continues to conceal certain important aspects of her life, such as the fact that she and Tony got married. In fact, she doesn't tell anyone in Ireland that Tony even exists, instead letting herself begin a relationship with Jim Farrell that excites her mother, who relishes the idea of Eilis marrying Jim and staying in Ireland. Eventually, it gets out that Eilis has a lover in Brooklyn, and she's forced to return to Tony, disappointing both her mother and Jim—two people she cares about very much. That she experienced firsthand what it's like for a loved one to keep secrets and *still* kept her marriage a secret underlines not only that an inability (or unwillingness) to communicate openly leads to heartache and regret, but also that it's difficult for

people to be open and honest if they've spent a lifetime concealing their emotions. This, Tóibín indicates, is why it's important for loved ones to cultivate open, communicative relationships with each other.



COMING OF AGE AND PASSIVITY

In the broadest sense, *Brooklyn* is a simple coming-of-age tale. Charting the end of Eilis's adolescence and the beginning of her adulthood, Tóibín creates a portrait of a young woman as she enters the adult world while navigating a life abroad. Interestingly enough, though, Eilis remains passive throughout the novel, despite her many advancements. Although she gains various forms of success and ultimately begins to actively work toward new opportunities, the major decisions she makes along the way are profoundly influenced by other people. In fact, it's not so much that the people around Eilis inform her decisions, but rather that they effectively make them *for* her. For instance, she only migrates to the United States because Rose and her mother want her to, and she only starts attending night classes at Brooklyn College upon Father Flood's suggestion. Furthermore, she returns to Ireland not because she wants to, but because her sister has died, and she only goes *back* to Brooklyn when news of her marriage to Tony ruins her chances of further pursuing her relationship with Jim Farrell. Accordingly, it becomes clear that Eilis rarely makes decisions for herself. And yet, she *does* still make her way into young adulthood with a number of promising prospects for the future—a sign that growing up is sometimes an uneven process of moving from passivity to a more active sense of agency.

When Eilis goes to the United States, she does so simply because the entire journey has been arranged for her by Rose and Father Flood. Not wanting to let them down, she agrees to live in Brooklyn and work at a department store, despite the fact that she has strong misgivings about the idea and wishes she could call the whole thing off. Of course, it makes sense that she would go along with her family's plans for her, since she is—at the time—still rather young and inexperienced. Indeed, her willingness to accept other people's decisions about her life is reasonable, since she has (like all children) spent her entire childhood and adolescence letting her family members help decide what's best for her.

Because she's so used to letting other people inform or even *make* her decisions, it's not particularly surprising that Eilis ends up enrolling in night classes at Brooklyn College not because she has actively sought out an education, but because Father Flood suggests it. Although she has taken bookkeeping classes in the past and likes the idea of becoming an official bookkeeper in America, she doesn't go out of her way to make this happen. Instead, she waits until Father Flood offers to help her attend Brooklyn College—a fact that emphasizes once again that she's fairly passive when it comes to making

decisions about her own life. However, it's also worth noting that some of Eilis's passivity (especially when it comes to her career) is most likely informed by how few opportunities were actually available to women in the mid-1900s. In Ireland at that time, many women weren't allowed to work after getting married, while women in the United States constituted less than 35% of the nation's workforce. Bearing these facts in mind, it makes an unfortunate kind of sense that Eilis wouldn't seek out opportunities for herself, since she simply doesn't know these opportunities are even available to her.

Although it's important to understand the broader context of Eilis's professional passivity, it's also notable that she isn't particularly proactive in other areas of her life, either. This is made evident when she returns to Ireland after Rose's death and slowly falls into a relationship with Jim Farrell even though she initially has no interest in him. She doesn't find anything appealing about Jim, but she keeps allowing her friend Nancy to plan double dates with her fiancé George, Jim, and Eilis. Of course, Eilis has already married Tony, but she still becomes involved with Jim, acting as if she can't control her own romantic life (which, to be fair, could also be an indication that women at that time had little say in their personal lives, too). Once she develops a legitimate relationship with Jim, though, Miss Kelly (her former employer) tells her that her cousin is Mrs. Kehoe, her landlord in Brooklyn. Mrs. Kehoe, it appears, has told Miss Kelly that Eilis is in a relationship with Tony, thereby forcing Eilis to return to Tony, since she realizes that everyone in town will soon know that she has a husband waiting for her in Brooklyn. In other words, her decision to return to Brooklyn isn't actually much of a decision, but just one more example of her passive nature giving in to outside circumstances. Rather than actively making plans, Eilis simply lets life wash over her. This, it seems, is because she's still learning how to be an independent young woman, though it's also most likely a byproduct of the lack of agency that mid-20th-century society taught women to embody.

It is true that Eilis is passive throughout the novel, but the very end of the book implies that she has begun to realize that her decisions can directly impact her life. On her way back to Brooklyn, she feels strangely happy that she's returning to America, thinking that this moment—her decision to leave Ireland—will someday mean “more and more” to her. This suggests that she sees her return to Brooklyn as something that will inform the rest of her life, and her happiness in response to this realization suggests that, although this particular decision was somewhat forced, she finally understands that she can make her own choices and that making these choices will help her navigate her way through life. Simply put, then, readers sense that Eilis will perhaps strive to become more intentional about her decisions, having learned that manifesting this kind of self-possession is a crucial part of growing up.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE THANK-YOU CARDS

The thank-you cards that Eilis helps her mother write to people who sent their condolences after Rose's death represent the kind of emotional expression that Eilis—and her entire family—find so difficult to practice. Uncomfortable talking about her feelings, Eilis hates having to sit down with her mother and write detailed notes about how she and her mother are doing in the wake of Rose's passing. Worse, her mother wants every card to be meticulously written, paying close attention to how she and Eilis are presenting themselves. In this regard, the notes also reflect the family's obsession with reputation, as Mrs. Lacey tries to maintain her public image by writing gracious and heartfelt notes that make herself and her daughter look respectable and dignified. In turn, the notes themselves come to stand for the odd relationship that the Lacey's have with both emotional articulation and social standing.



THE BEACH PICTURES

Because Eilis eventually sees the pictures of her and Jim on the beach as the only part of their relationship that she'll be able to keep, the pictures themselves symbolize her attempt to hold on to certain parts of her past. When she finally decides to return to Brooklyn to be with Tony, she finds these photographs in her bedroom and almost rips them up. Before doing so, though, she decides to slip them into her luggage, knowing that one day she will look at these pictures and recall what she now knows will seem like little more than “a strange, hazy dream.” This suggests that Eilis struggles with the idea of leaving behind her life in Ireland, which she fears will someday feel distant and unreal. Consequently, she does everything she can to preserve this time period in her mind, wishing that she could live out two existences at once: one with Tony and one with Jim. Because this is impossible, though, she clings to these small mementos, which she treasures as permanent reminders of a fleeting moment in her life.



QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *Brooklyn* published in 2010.

Part One Quotes

“Your mother’ll be pleased that you have something. And your sister,” Miss Kelly said. “I hear she’s great at the golf. So go home now like a good girl. You can let yourself out.”

Miss Kelly turned and began to walk slowly up the stairs. Eilis knew as she made her way home that her mother would indeed be happy that she had found some way of making money of her own, but that Rose would think working behind the counter of a grocery shop was not good enough for her. She wondered if Rose would say this to her directly.

Related Characters: Miss Kelly (speaker), Eilis’s Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears after Eilis accepts a job offer from Miss Kelly, agreeing to work at the grocery store each Sunday after mass. When Miss Kelly says that her mother will be “pleased” by the fact that she has found a job, she underhandedly—but perhaps not so subtly—suggests that Eilis’s family is in need of money. She makes this snide comment because Rose and Eilis’s mother doesn’t shop at her store. Because Miss Kelly is such a social climber, she notices exactly who avoids her store, assuming that anyone who doesn’t give her their business is poor. And though it’s not necessarily the case that Eilis’s family is poor, Eilis herself recognizes that her household could certainly use the money, which is why her mother will be happy that she’s found a job. Rose, on the other hand, has a somewhat elitist way of looking at the world. For this reason, Eilis doesn’t think that Rose will like the idea of her working a cash register, which Rose thinks is beneath Eilis. And yet, Eilis thinks Rose probably won’t say anything to her about this, thereby revealing to readers the blocked channels of communication that run between her family members and herself.

“Rose, at thirty, Eilis thought, was more glamorous every year, and, while she had had several boyfriends, she remained single; she often remarked that she had a much better life than many of her former schoolmates who were to be seen pushing prams through the streets. Eilis was proud of her sister, of how much care she took with her appearance and how much care she put into whom she mixed with in the town and the golf club. She knew that Rose had tried to find her work in an office, and Rose was paying for her books now that she was studying bookkeeping and rudimentary accountancy, but she knew also that there was, at least for the moment, no work for anyone in Enniscorthy, no matter what their qualifications.

Related Characters: Eilis’s Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Miss Kelly, Rose Lacey, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

After Eilis accepts a job at Miss Kelly’s grocery store, she decides to keep it a secret from Rose. She makes this decision because she knows Rose will disapprove of her working at a cash register, and since she respects Rose so much, she doesn’t want to witness her disappointment. Here, Eilis thinks admiringly about her sister, considering her many virtues. It’s worth noting that Rose is well-respected in the community, since she has apparently secured this social status by presenting herself as a charming and self-sufficient woman. Rather than marrying and settling down, she has chosen to focus on her professional life, and though this is an uncommon choice amongst young women in Enniscorthy, she has still managed to earn the respect of her fellow townspeople. Unfortunately, though, there is only so much opportunity for people like Rose in Enniscorthy, since mid 20th-century society still largely expects women to focus on raising families instead of pursuing careers. This, in turn, is why Eilis has so much trouble finding decent work at home, and ultimately why she ends up migrating to the United States.

●● She did not know if the other two also realized that this was the first time they had laughed at this table since Jack had followed the others to Birmingham. She would have loved to say something about him, but she knew that it would make her mother too sad. Even when a letter came from him it was passed around in silence. So she continued mocking Miss Kelly, stopping only when someone called for Rose to take her to play golf, leaving Eilis and her mother to clear the table and wash the dishes.

Related Characters: Jack Lacey, Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Miss Kelly, Rose Lacey, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes: 


Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

When Eilis first starts working at Miss Kelly's grocery store, she's hesitant to talk about it in front of Rose, knowing that her sister disapproves of her job. Nonetheless, she's eventually unable to stop herself from telling Rose and her mother about her experiences in the store, and she even begins doing impersonations of Miss Kelly over dinner. To Eilis's surprise, these impersonations don't upset Rose, but instead send both her and her mother into fits of laughter. As Eilis laughs along with them, she wonders if either of them realize that they haven't been in such good spirits since her youngest brother, Jack, left home. That she can't bring herself to ask this question is significant, since it highlights just how unwilling she is to talk about anything she thinks might make her mother sad. Wanting to protect Mrs. Lacey, Eilis bottles up her own feelings about Jack's departure, eschewing open communication because she thinks her mother is too emotionally fragile to speak honestly about the fact that all of her sons have left home. In this section, then, readers see one of the first instances in which Eilis intentionally stops herself from fully connecting with her loved ones.

●● Although she knew friends who regularly received presents of dollars or clothes from America, it was always from their aunts and uncles, people who had emigrated long before the war. She could not remember any of these people ever appearing in the town on holidays. It was a long journey across the Atlantic, she knew, at least a week on a ship, and it must be expensive. She had a sense too, she did not know from where, that, while the boys and girls from the town who had gone to England did ordinary work for ordinary money, people who went to America could become rich. She tried to work out how she had come to believe also that, while people from the town who lived in England missed Enniscorthy, no one who went to America missed home. Instead, they were happy there and proud. She wondered if that could be true.

Related Characters: Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Rose Lacey, Father Flood, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Eilis has these thoughts shortly after realizing that Rose and Father Flood have arranged to send her to the United States. Although she goes along with the idea, she has a number of reservations, so she thinks about what the experience of migrating will actually be like. To her, the United States is little more than a place from which people in Enniscorthy receive presents. This, in turn, gives her the sense that America is a nation of prosperity and wealth. Furthermore, she also sees the country as a place from which people rarely return. Although some people in town have relatives who live in America, those relatives journeyed there "long before the war." Eilis is most likely referring to World War II in this passage, and though her story takes place not long after the war, Eilis herself is still a young woman, which is why the period before World War II feels so long ago. Consequently, she views the Irish migrants who traveled to America before the war as having lived there for an extremely long time, making it seem like they will never come home—a fate she no doubt wonders if she'll experience once she sets off for Brooklyn. And yet, her conception of America as a nation full of opportunity tempers this dynamic, making it easier to wrap her head around the idea of leaving home for such a long time, though she also most likely fears that this allure is precisely the reason most people never return to Ireland after emigrating.

●● Until now, Eilis had always presumed that she would live in the town all her life, as her mother had done, knowing everyone, having the same friends and neighbours, the same routines in the same streets. She had expected that she would find a job in the town, and then marry someone and give up the job and have children. Now, she felt that she was being singled out for something for which she was not in any way prepared, and this, despite the fear it carried with it, gave her a feeling, or more a set of feelings, she thought she might experience in the days before her wedding, days in which everyone looked at her in the rush of arrangements with light in their eyes, days in which she herself was fizzy with excitement but careful not to think too precisely about what the next few weeks would be like in case she lost her nerve.

Related Characters: Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Rose Lacey, Father Flood, Miss Kelly, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Eilis considers the new direction her life has taken now that it has become clear that she'll be migrating to the United States. This, Tóibín suggests, is a surprising development for Eilis, since she has always thought that her entire life would play out in Enniscorthy. Although she thought that she would most likely get a job and work for a stretch of time, she figured that this would only last until she got married and had children. Accordingly, readers see that her aspirations aren't necessarily aimed toward obtaining a career—instead, she is focused on someday securing a peaceful domestic life. Going to the United States, however, is something that people do in order to attain upward mobility and to find economic opportunity. In other words, her plan to stop working when she gets married shifts when she sees that she'll be going halfway across the world in pursuit of a better job. This sense of imminent opportunity is emphasized by the way people look at her in the days leading up to her departure, as they regard her “with light in their eyes.” And though she always thought that she would only receive these looks on her wedding day, she now realizes that her community members respect her simply because she's moving to Brooklyn, thereby revealing the extent to which people in Enniscorthy revere anyone who pursues upward mobility by traveling to America.

●● She would prefer to stay at home, sleep in this room, live in this house, do without the clothes and shoes. The arrangements being made, all the bustle and talk, would be better if they were for someone else, she thought, someone like her, someone the same age and size, who maybe even looked the same as she did, as long as she, the person who was thinking now, could wake in this bed every morning and move as the day went on in these familiar streets and come home to the kitchen, to her mother and Rose.

Related Characters: Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Rose Lacey, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In the days leading up to Eilis's journey to Brooklyn, she regrets having agreed to leave home. When Tóibín writes, “The arrangements being made, all the bustle and talk, would be better if they were for someone else,” he reveals that Eilis understands the overall value of what she's doing but still doesn't actually want to do it. That is, she recognizes that the “bustle and talk” surrounding her upcoming migration is indeed exciting, but she has trouble appreciating it because she has decided that she'd rather stay home. That she would prefer to stay in her childhood home with her mother and sister and enjoy her “familiar” surroundings underlines just how deeply invested she is in the patterns of her everyday life. After all, she's used to walking through the same streets every day and coming home to the same kitchen and the same people. The idea of leaving all of this behind is daunting and undesirable to Eilis, even if she knows that she has been given a fantastic opportunity to advance in life. In turn, Tóibín shows readers just how tightly people often hold to a sense of familiarity, even when they know it will be good for them to undergo new experiences.

●● She wondered if her mother too believed that the wrong sister was leaving, and understood what Rose's motives were. She imagined that her mother knew everything. They knew so much, each one of them, she thought, that they could do everything except say out loud what it was they were thinking. She resolved as she went back to her room that she would do everything she could for them by pretending at all times that she was filled with excitement at the great adventure on which she was ready to embark. She would make them believe, if she could, that she was looking forward to America and leaving home for the first time. She promised herself that not for one moment would she give them the smallest hint of how she felt, and she would keep it from herself if she had to until she was away from them.

Related Characters: Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Rose Lacey, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes: 


Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

While packing for her journey to Brooklyn one night, Eilis goes into Rose's room to pick out jewelry. As she does so, she thinks about how Rose should be going to America instead of her, since it's obvious that Rose—a confident, self-possessed woman who has already enjoyed professional success—would thrive in Brooklyn. As she thinks about this, Eilis wonders if her mother would agree that Rose should be the one leaving home, and then she begins to feel as if both Rose and her mother know this but have decided not to say anything about it. "They knew so much, each one of them, [...] that they could do everything except say out loud what it was they were thinking," Eilis believes, once again calling attention to the ways in which her family refuses to speak honestly about their inner thoughts and emotions. Furthermore, Eilis decides to let neither Rose nor her mother know that she has reservations about leaving home, thinking that this is the only way to respond to their determination to keep quiet about the fact that Rose should be the one emigrating. In turn, *Tóibín* shows readers that the practice of hiding emotion perpetuates itself, as Eilis takes cues from her family members to stay silent about her feelings..

●● As her stomach began dry heaves, she realized that she would never be able to tell anyone how sick she felt. She pictured her mother standing at the door waving as the car took her and Rose to the railway station, the expression on her mother's face strained and worried, managing a final smile when the car turned down Friary Hill. What was happening now, she hoped, was something that her mother had never even imagined. If it had been somehow easier, just rocking back and forth, then she might have been able to convince herself that it was a dream, or it would not last, but every moment of it was absolutely real, totally solid and part of her waking life, as was the foul taste in her mouth and the grinding of the engines and the heat that seemed to be increasing as the night wore on.

Related Characters: Georgina, Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46



Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of the seasickness Eilis experiences on the first night of her transatlantic journey. As she lies in her bunk feeling wretched, she thinks about how she'll "never be able to tell anyone how sick" she feels. This, of course, isn't true, since she *could* tell her loved ones about this experience if she truly wanted. However, Eilis is too fixated on not worrying her mother to ever tell her about what she undergoes on the ocean liner. After all, she thinks that this sort of misery is something that her mother has "never even imagined," hoping that Mrs. Lacey only has positive thoughts about sending Eilis to America. In this sense, Eilis wants her mother to think that it was the right choice for her to migrate, and anything that might make Mrs. Lacey think that Eilis is miserable might threaten this frame of mind. Accordingly, Eilis decides never to repeat the story about how sick she feels on the ocean liner. By making this decision, though, she feels even more alone in this harrowing moment, effectively isolating herself from her loved ones and forcing herself to endure discomfort on her own. Thankfully, Georgina will soon help her understand that this seasickness will—like all things—eventually pass, but this conversation doesn't happen until the following morning. For the moment, then, Eilis can't convince herself that this terrible feeling will ever go away, and this outlook is exacerbated by her resolution to never tell anyone about the experience.

Part Two Quotes

☛☛ She was nobody here. It was not just that she had no friends and family; it was rather that she was a ghost in this room, in the streets on the way to work, on the shop floor. Nothing meant anything. The rooms in the house on Friary Street belonged to her, she thought; when she moved in them she was really there. In the town, if she walked to the shop or to the Vocational School, the air, the light, the ground, it was all solid and part of her, even if she met no one familiar. Nothing here was part of her. It was false, empty, she thought. She closed her eyes and tried to think, as she had done so many times in her life, of something she was looking forward to, but there was nothing. Not the slightest thing.

Related Characters: Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Rose Lacey, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

When Eilis first arrives in Brooklyn, she is too distracted to think very much about Ireland. However, this suddenly changes when she receives her first letters from home. Upon reading them, she feels homesick and alone, realizing that she has nobody in America to turn to. All of a sudden, Brooklyn feels unspeakably foreign to her, and she begins to sense that everything is “false” and “empty.” Enniscorthy, on the other hand, is familiar and, because of that familiarity, full of meaning. After all, there she can walk down the street and recognize the landmarks because they have always been part of the backdrop to her life. In turn, she relates to her surroundings in Ireland, imbuing them with meaning in ways that would be impossible in Brooklyn because she has yet to establish a pattern or routine. In this way, readers see that Eilis draws meaning out of a sense of familiarity, and because she finds Brooklyn unfamiliar, she feels as if there is “nothing” for her in America. In turn, it becomes clear that part of adapting to new environments is finding ways to establish a connection to otherwise insignificant and foreign surroundings.

☛☛ None of them could help her. She had lost all of them. They would not find out about this; she would not put it into a letter. And because of this she understood that they would never know her now. Maybe, she thought, they had never known her, any of them, because if they had, then they would have had to realize what this would be like for her.

Related Characters: Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Rose Lacey, Jack Lacey, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

After Eilis plunges into a desperate feeling of homesickness, she thinks about her brother Jack, remembering that he too experienced this feeling when he first moved to England. Upon recalling this, she considers reaching out to him to ask questions about how he got through such a lonely and devastating period, but she decides against writing to him because she thinks he's too far away to help her. Moreover, she comes to believe that *all* of her family members are too far away to help. In fact, she even feels that she has “lost all of them” by moving to America, a thought that underscores just how isolated and alone this experience has made her feel. Indeed, she acts as if she has been completely estranged from her family. Worse, she begins to resent people like Rose and her mother for encouraging her to come to Brooklyn in the first place, bitterly feeling as if they must not know her at all, since if they did, they would have known that this experience would be too overwhelming for her to bear. As she thinks these unfair and resentful thoughts, Tóibín illustrates the profound effect that loneliness can have on a person. What's more, he intimates that Eilis's unwillingness to speak openly about her emotions with her family members leaves her feeling even more alone than she actually is, since she could simply write to her family members if she really wanted to.

☛☛ It was only when he came to the chorus, however, that she understood the words—“*Má bhíonn tú liom, a stóirín mo chroí*”—and he glanced at her proudly, almost possessively, as he sang these lines. All the people in the hall watched him silently. [...] And then each time he came to the chorus he looked at her, letting the melody become sweeter by slowing down the pace, putting his head down then, managing to suggest even more that he had not merely learned the song but that he meant it. Eilis knew how sorry this man was going to be, and how sorry she would be, when the song had ended, when the last chorus had to be sung and the singer would have to bow to the crowd and go back to his place and give way to another singer as Eilis too went back and sat in her chair.

Related Characters: Father Flood, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 94



Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Eilis stands next to a singing man at Father Flood's church on Christmas night. She has just spent the entire day serving Christmas meals to homeless men from all over Brooklyn, and now she watches as a man she originally thought looked like her dead father sings an old Irish song. The translated lyrics read, "And if you are with me be with me, oh love of my heart," a phrase that captures the importance of being present. This is something that Eilis has had to learn while living abroad, since the only way she has been able to combat her homesickness is by throwing herself into her everyday life in Brooklyn rather than letting her mind and heart wander back to memories of Ireland. Furthermore, these lyrics foreshadow the eventual decision she will have to make between Tony and Jim Farrell when she returns to Ireland for an extended visit. Although she marries Tony before leaving for that visit, she finds it difficult to keep him fresh in her memory while spending time with Jim Farrell. And yet, she also isn't quite as present as she could be with Jim, since she's constantly thinking about the fact that she's married to Tony. This song, then, hints at the way that Eilis will later have to choose one of her lovers instead of being only partially present for both.

thinks that she must be looking forward to returning to Enniscorthy, but then she remembers that she isn't actually going home anytime soon. At this point, she realizes that she has conflated her excitement for her date with Tony with her ever-present desire to go home. And though this might give the impression that she desperately wants to leave America, it actually suggests that she is slowly becoming invested enough in her new life to start feeling legitimately happy and excited about the future—something that would have seemed impossible to her only a few months before meeting Tony. As a result, it's evident that her relationship with Tony helps her find happiness in Brooklyn because it gives her something to focus on instead of constantly thinking about home.

☞ Rose, she knew, would have an idea in her head of what a plumber looked like and how he spoke. She would imagine him to be somewhat rough and awkward and use bad grammar. Eilis decided that she would write to her to say that he was not like that and that in Brooklyn it was not always as easy to guess someone's character by their job as it was in Enniscorthy.

Related Characters: Father Flood, Rose Lacey, Tony, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 145



Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Eilis tells Rose about her developing relationship with Tony, Rose asks Father Flood to introduce himself to the young man and then report back to her, wanting to know the kind of person her younger sister is dating. This, Eilis knows, is largely because Rose is uncomfortable with the fact that Tony is a plumber. After all, Rose thought that Eilis was too good to work at a grocery store, so it's not altogether that surprising that she would be critical about her dating a manual laborer, clearly wanting her sister to be with somebody who works in an office. However, Tony and Father Flood end up getting along quite well, causing Eilis to reflect upon the unfair inaccuracy of Rose's idea of what a plumber must be like. In Enniscorthy, Eilis thinks, it's possible to judge people based on what they do. In the United States, however, a person's profession isn't always an accurate indication of character. As a result, Eilis cultivates a mindset that is less rigid than Rose's when it comes to matters of social status and reputation. Rather than writing Tony off simply because he

Part Three Quotes

☞ She had been keeping the thought of home out of her mind, letting it come to her only when she wrote or received letters or when she woke from a dream in which her mother or father or Rose or the rooms of the house on Friary Street or the streets of the town had appeared. She thought it was strange that the mere sensation of savouring the prospect of something could make her think for a while that it must be the prospect of home.

Related Characters: Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Rose Lacey, Tony, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Eilis dissects her excitement about her upcoming date with Tony, which will be their first. As she walks down the street and feels a strange sense of possibility and happiness, she forgets for a moment what, exactly, she's looking forward to. Because of this, she briefly

doesn't work in an office, she gives him a chance because she recognizes that he is a kind, smart, and empathetic young man. In this way, then, she adopts a more mature and unpretentious worldview than Rose's.

☝ “You know what I really want?” he asked. “I want our kids to be Dodgers fans.”

He was so pleased and excited at the idea, she thought, that he did not notice her face freezing. She could not wait to be alone, away from him, so she could contemplate what he had just said. Later, as she lay on the bed and thought about it, she realized that it fitted in with everything else, that recently he had been planning the summer and how much time they would spend together. Recently too he had begun to tell her after he kissed her that he loved her and she knew that he was waiting for a response, a response that, so far, she had not given.

Related Characters: Tony (speaker), Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tony reveals to Eilis just how intensely committed he is to their relationship by casually talking about someday having children with her. Because she keeps her own internal thoughts and emotions so private, this comes as a severe shock to her, as she struggles to figure out how, exactly, to respond to his unbridled honesty. However, she finds herself more or less incapable of responding at all, which is why she wishes she could be “away from him” as soon as he starts talking about their future children, thinking that the only way she'll be able to understand what he's saying is if she isolates herself from him—something she has been doing in one way or another for her entire life, since she and her family members never talk about their emotions. At the same time, though, her lack of response still sends a certain message to Tony. Failing to stop him from talking enthusiastically about their future, she inadvertently lets him assume that their respective approaches to their relationship align with one another when, in reality, she isn't ready to commit to their bond quite as fully as he is.

☝ I wish she had told me, or let me know something was wrong. She didn't want to worry me. [...] Maybe I couldn't have done much but I would have watched out for her. I don't know what to think.

Related Characters: Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey) (speaker), Rose Lacey, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 148



Explanation and Analysis


Mrs. Lacey says this to Eilis in the aftermath of Rose's death. Although Rose knew she had a fatal heart condition, she neglected to tell her mother or Eilis, keeping the news to herself because she didn't want to worry them. In particular, she didn't want to put undue stress on her mother. This is something of a trend in the Lacey family, as Eilis also goes out of her way to spare her mother from ever having to face difficult realities. Now, though, Eilis sees the negative consequences of keeping the truth from family members, realizing suddenly that Rose's intentions to protect her mother ultimately backfire when Mrs. Lacey finds her dead body, an experience that undoubtedly rattles her more than necessary because it comes as such a shock. “I don't know what to think,” Mrs. Lacey says, indicating that such secrecy can lead to utter confusion in moments of hardship. Although it's true that she wouldn't have been able to do anything to save Rose, she would at least have known what was coming and thus been able to prepare herself in one way or another. As it stands, she's forced to cope with both the loss of her daughter *and* the fact that Rose didn't feel like she could confide in her.

Part Four Quotes

☝ Eilis marvelled at the different ways each person had expressed condolences once they had gone beyond the first one or two sentences. Her mother tried too, in how she replied, to vary the tone and the content, to write something suitable in response to each person. But it was slow and by the end of the first day Eilis had still not gone out into the street or had any time alone. And less than half the work was done.

Related Characters: Rose Lacey, Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 215


Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Eilis sits with her mother and writes thank-you cards to the many people who paid their respects in the aftermath of Rose's death. As she tries to satisfy her mother by helping her with this task, Eilis recognizes how strange this particular job is, since the act of writing these thank-you notes is one of emotional expression *and* of social posturing. To that end, her mother wants to keep up appearances, trying hard to think of the perfect way to respond to the people who have reached out. This requires using a certain "tone" and finding a "suitable" thing to say to each recipient. And though Eilis and her family members are certainly used to trying to maintain their social status and reputation, they aren't particularly accustomed to thinking of genuine things to say about their emotions. Because of this, the job feels especially difficult and slow-moving, and Eilis comes to dread the fact that she must continue to work on such an arduous and unfamiliar task.

●● Eilis worked out in her head that the wedding was four days after the planned date of her departure; she also remembered that the travel agent in Brooklyn had said she could change the date as long as she notified the shipping company in advance. She decided there and then that she would stay an extra week and hoped that no one in Bartocci's would object too strongly. It would be easy to explain to Tony that her mother had misunderstood her date of departure, even though Eilis did not believe that her mother had misunderstood anything.

Related Characters: Tony, Nancy Byrne, Eilis's Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Eilis decides for the first time that she will postpone her return trip to Brooklyn. She does this because she has just found out that her mother RSVP'd on her behalf to Nancy's wedding. Of course, it makes sense that she wouldn't want to insult her friend by reversing this decision and informing Nancy that, contrary to what her mother said, she won't be attending the ceremony. At the same time, though, Eilis has plenty of reasons to do just that. Indeed, she not only promised Tony—whom she recently married—that she would come back to Brooklyn, she also

has a job at Bartocci's waiting for her. Nevertheless, she extends her stay in Ireland, hoping that nobody at work will "object too strongly." This is an important moment in the novel because although this seems like a rather harmless change of plans, in reality it is the first of many compromises Eilis makes with herself regarding her return to Brooklyn, effectively opening the floodgates for all the other excuses she makes for staying in Ireland.

●● And two years ago, Eilis remembered, when Jim Farrell had been openly rude to her, she thought it was because she came from a family that did not own anything in the town. Now that she was back from America, she believed, she carried something with her, something close to glamour, which made all the difference to her as she sat with Nancy watching the men talk.

Related Characters: Tony, George Sheridan, Nancy Byrne, Jim Farrell, Eilis Lacey

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Eilis reflects upon the fact that her reputation in Enniscorthy has vastly improved since returning from the United States. This is made most evident by the fact that Jim Farrell now wants to date her, even though he treated her rather rudely before she left for Brooklyn. Of course, Eilis later learns that his rudeness was largely the result of his shyness, since he has trouble speaking to strangers, but his complete and obvious desire for her after she comes back from Brooklyn suggests that he's especially interested in her now because of her new social status. Accordingly, Eilis begins to feel that she possesses something in Enniscorthy that is "close to glamour," something that has completely altered the way people see her. What's funny about this, though, is that she hasn't actually done very much in the time since she left home. While her community members exalt her for having moved to America and attained upward mobility, she still has yet to secure an office job, though it is true that she has become a certified bookkeeper. Still, though, it's obvious that her newfound influence in town isn't the result of what she's actually accomplished, but rather what her move to the United States stands for in the minds of her peers: status, upward mobility, and success.

Upstairs on the bed Eilis found two letters from Tony and she realized, almost with a start, that she had not written to him as she had intended. She looked at the two envelopes, at his handwriting, and she stood in the room with the door closed wondering how strange it was that everything about him seemed remote. And not only that, but everything else that had happened in Brooklyn seemed as though it had almost dissolved and was no longer richly present for her—her room in Mrs. Kehoe's, for example, or her exams, or the trolley-car from Brooklyn College back home, or the dancehall, or the apartment where Tony lived with his parents and his three brothers, or the shop floor at Bartocci's. She went through all of it as though she were trying to recover what had seemed so filled with detail, so solid, just a few weeks before.

Related Characters: Tony, Mrs. Kehoe, Jim Farrell, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

As Eilis continues to postpone her return trip to Brooklyn, she once more immerses herself in everyday life in Enniscorthy. In doing so, she manages to put Tony almost completely out of her mind, since this is ultimately the only way to keep herself from feeling bad about not returning to him. It also helps her avoid feeling guilty about her burgeoning relationship with Jim Farrell. In this regard, she tries to distract herself from such matters in the same way that she tried to distract herself from missing home when she lived in Brooklyn. Despite her efforts, though, Tony's letters still reach her and bring her crashing back to reality, reminding her that she married him and that she has an entire life abroad that she can't make simply disappear. And yet, she feels too estranged from that existence in Brooklyn to recapture what, exactly, she liked about it. Indeed, she knows that Tony is a good partner and that she experienced happiness while living in America, but she has become so entrenched in the patterns of life in Enniscorthy that it's nearly impossible to prioritize her past over her present. In turn, Tóibín shows readers that people are so capable of adapting to their current circumstances that they should be mindful of what they're choosing to leave behind, even when doing so feels completely natural.

She could not stop herself from wondering, however, what would happen if she were to write to Tony to say that their marriage was a mistake. How easy would it be to divorce someone? Could she possibly tell Jim what she had done such a short while earlier in Brooklyn? The only divorced people anyone in the town knew were Elizabeth Taylor and perhaps some other film stars. It might be possible to explain to Jim how she had come to be married, but he was someone who had never lived outside the town. His innocence and his politeness, both of which made him nice to be with, would actually be, she thought, limitations, especially if something as unheard of and out of the question, as far from his experience as divorce, were raised. The best thing to do, she thought, was to put the whole thing out of her mind [...].

Related Characters: Nancy Byrne, George Sheridan, Jim Farrell, Tony, Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:    



Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

At Nancy and George's wedding, Eilis sits in the church and fantasizes about what it would be like to stay in Enniscorthy and get married to Jim. This leads her to wonder how she could possibly break off her marriage with Tony, thinking about the process of divorce and considering the negative connotations surrounding it. She knows that divorce is frowned upon in Enniscorthy, a deeply Catholic town, and it doesn't help that the only people she can think of who have separated from their spouses are movie stars and, thus, hardly the kind of people that her community members would view as role models for someone like her. Once again, then, Eilis invests herself not in what she wants, but in what other people expect of her. Instead of refraining from divorcing Tony because she genuinely wants to be with him, she tries to "put the whole thing out of her mind" because she thinks that making this decision would ruin her reputation. Furthermore, her belief that Jim would look down upon her if he knew she were married only makes her feel even more intensely that she must keep her private life a secret, guarding herself from the scrutiny and scorn of even those who are closest to her.

“She has gone back to Brooklyn,” her mother would say. And, as the train rolled past Macmine Bridge on its way towards Wexford, Eilis imagined the years ahead, when these words would come to mean less and less to the man who heard them and would come to mean more and more to herself. She almost smiled at the thought of it, then closed her eyes and tried to imagine nothing more.

Related Characters: Miss Kelly, Tony, Jim Farrell, Eilis’s Mother (Mrs. Lacey), Eilis Lacey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

This is the final paragraph of *Brooklyn*, which appears shortly after Eilis drops a letter at Jim’s door explaining that she has to leave Enniscorthy once more. Miss Kelly has recently revealed to her that she knows about her relationship with Tony, forcing her to finally make a decision between Jim and

Tony. And yet, this isn’t necessarily a genuine decision, since she has almost no choice but to return to Tony because he’s her husband. After all, if she didn’t do this, Miss Kelly would most likely make it widely known that she has a husband in Brooklyn, thereby ruining her life in Enniscorthy and diminishing her chances of continuing her relationship with Jim. As she rides a train out of Enniscorthy, Eilis imagines Jim running to her house and hearing from her mother that she has gone back to Brooklyn. And though one would think that this thought would make her sad, she smiles as she departs because she understands that she has finally made a decision about her future. She knows that this decision will upset Jim, but she’s also confident that he will soon recover. She, on the other hand, will go forth and live the life that comes out of this decision. That she is happy in this moment implies that she’s relieved to simply have made any decision at all, perhaps indicating that in the coming years of her life she will abandon the kind of passivity that characterized her young adulthood and put her in such difficult positions.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART ONE

Eilis Lacey sits in the living room of her childhood home in Enniscorthy, Ireland with a textbook in her lap. She will soon finish the bookkeeping classes she's been taking, but right now she gazes out the window and sees her sister, Rose, walking down the street carrying a beautiful new handbag. When Rose enters the house, she quickly puts on lipstick and prepares to go to the local golf club. While she readies herself, her mother compliments her looks and says she'll be the prettiest woman at the club. When she's ready to leave, Rose turns to Eilis and gives her money to go to the movies, joking with her mother by saying that she won't pay for her to accompany Eilis, who can tell her the plot of the film when she returns. The three women laugh, and then Rose hears her ride arrive and leaves.

Shortly after Rose leaves, a young woman comes to the Lacey household and tells Eilis that Miss Kelly, the owner of a nearby grocery store, wants to see her. Eilis can't fathom why Miss Kelly would want to speak to her, but she quickly prepares herself to pay a visit because she doesn't feel like going to the movies or continuing to study for her bookkeeping class. On her way to the store, she thinks about how her mother doesn't shop in Miss Kelly's store because it's too expensive. She also senses that her mother dislikes Miss Kelly, though she doesn't know why. All she truly knows about Miss Kelly is that everyone says she sells the best, highest quality food in town.

When Eilis arrives at the grocery store, Miss Kelly looks at her in what Eilis thinks is a disapproving way, but Miss Kelly then informs her that she needs help in the store. She says she has heard that Eilis has no job but is good with numbers, and when Eilis asks how she knows this, she tells her that "anyone who is anyone" comes into her store and that she hears everything. Because the shop is overrun each Sunday after mass, she needs someone to work the register, especially since Mary, her only employee, is incapable of working with numbers. As she speaks, Eilis decides that she can't refuse the offer, since working in Miss Kelly's store will be better than not having a job at all. Accordingly, she agrees to come in the next day to learn the prices.

At the outset of the novel, Eilis leads a relatively sheltered life. As she looks out the window, she sees her sister as an active and beautiful person—someone she admires. Unlike Rose, though, Eilis hasn't yet grown up quite enough to enjoy a professionally or socially rewarding life. After all, she's still studying to become a bookkeeper, so she can't have a job like her sister yet. Consequently, she stays home with her mother while her sister presents herself proudly to the world. This, in turn, establishes Eilis's relative passivity in comparison to Rose's proactive, motivated nature.



As Eilis walks to Miss Kelly's store, her awareness of socioeconomic status brings itself to the forefront of the novel. Although her sister is a well-respected young woman who belongs to the local golf club, her family isn't wealthy enough to shop at Miss Kelly's store—something Eilis apparently knows all too well. As a result, readers see that Eilis is attuned to matters of class and, to a certain extent, reputation.



When Miss Kelly goes out of her way to say that "anyone who is anyone" shops in her store, she establishes that Eilis isn't the only person who pays attention to social status in Enniscorthy. Unfortunately for Eilis, though, this comment also emphasizes the fact that Miss Kelly doesn't see her family as noteworthy, since they don't shop at her store. Despite this insensitive comment, though, Eilis decides to accept Miss Kelly's job offer—a sign that she's eager to find employment so that she can lead a life that resembles her sister's.



Eilis assures Miss Kelly that she will tie her hair back when she works and that she'll make sure to buy a suitable outfit for work. Before she leaves, Miss Kelly says that Eilis's mother will be happy that she has a job, as will Rose, who Miss Kelly has heard is quite good at golf. On her way home, Eilis thinks about what her family will really think about her working in a grocery store. She knows that her mother will be happy that she's making money, even if she dislikes Miss Kelly. Rose, on the other hand, will most likely think that working at a cash register is beneath Eilis, but Eilis doesn't think she'll actually say this out loud.

On her way home, Eilis goes to her friend Nancy's house. Her other friend, Annette, is there too, and the three girls go outside so that Nancy can avoid her family in order to tell Eilis her big news. The news is that Nancy danced with a wealthy and desirable young man named George Sheridan the previous weekend. She excitedly tells her that she danced the final four songs with George and that George walked her home. Everyone, she says, saw this happen, so she's somewhat surprised that Eilis hasn't already heard about it.

Eilis tells Nancy and Annette that Miss Kelly offered her a job. In response, Nancy scoffs at the idea of Eilis accepting such a position, but Eilis tells her that she accepted it because she wants the money. This, she points out, will enable her to accompany Nancy and Annette to the dances at the Athenaeum on Sunday nights, so Nancy asks if she'll come with her that weekend, since Annette can't make it. Although George might not be there, she says, she still wants moral support. At first, Eilis is skeptical, saying that she doesn't like the men who attend the dances because all they're interested in is getting drunk and becoming physical with the women. But because Nancy insists that George isn't like that, she agrees to come with her to the dance.

Oddly enough, both Miss Kelly and Rose seem to think that they are superior to one another. Although Eilis's family doesn't shop at Miss Kelly's because it's too expensive, Rose still sees herself and her sister as better than someone like Miss Kelly. That she won't want Eilis to work at a cash register hints that Rose thinks her sister is destined for great things, even if their family's current social status doesn't provide her with many opportunities at the moment. What's more, Eilis's hypothesis that Rose won't actually articulate any of this suggests that they don't always openly express their feelings to one another.



Nancy's excitement about dancing with George Sheridan only further underlines just how much people in Enniscorthy care about status and social class. An eligible bachelor, George stands for everything that someone like Eilis is supposed to want: an opportunity to advance up the social ladder. However, it's worth noting the difference between the ways in which Eilis and Nancy are trying to attain upward mobility. Whereas Nancy sees her possible relationship with George as a chance to secure the life she wants, Eilis is focused on how getting a job might affect her ability to lead a better life.



When Nancy disparages Eilis's decision to work in Miss Kelly's shop, she embodies an elitist mindset, the very same one that Rose seems to have cultivated. The difference, though, is that Rose will most likely disapprove of her sister's new job not just because she's elitist, but because she simply wants the best for Eilis. Nancy, on the other hand, inconsiderately discredits the value of making money, acting as if meeting an eligible bachelor like George Sheridan is the only acceptable way to attain stability and happiness in life.



When Eilis goes to the grocery store to be trained, she notices that Miss Kelly changes the way she greets customers based on whether or not she sees them as important figures in society. To some, she says nothing at all. To others, she simply smiles. But to a select few, she kindly greets them, calls them by name, and gives them whatever they want without taking any money, instead noting down the transaction in a small ledger. As she trains Eilis, she makes disparaging comments about Mary's intelligence and abilities, even though Mary can hear her saying these things. She even speaks this way before customers, and even they don't seem to be bothered by her mean-spirited treatment of Mary. In fact, one woman agrees with her when she condescendingly suggests that "the Lord makes all types." "Sure," the customer says, "don't we need people to sweep the streets?"

On Saturday night, Eilis sets her alarm for work the next day. She now sleeps in her brothers' old room, since all three of them have gone to Birmingham to work, leaving the house with just Eilis, Rose, and their mother. For the most part, the family depends financially on Rose, who works in a local office and is widely respected as a fashionable dresser and admirable golfer. She's already 30, but Eilis thinks she grows better looking every year. Despite this, she only has temporary boyfriends, and she sometimes talks about how she has a better life than her many friends who got married early and had children. Eilis respects her sister's independence and appreciates that Rose tries to advocate for her, even if this doesn't always work out. For example, Rose tried to get her a job in her office, but the boss was uninterested in hiring Eilis.

Eilis doesn't tell Rose that she accepted a job at the grocery store, though she does tell her mother, who speaks critically about Miss Kelly. According to her, Miss Kelly is "evil incarnate" and only cares about wealthy people. Eilis's mother also reveals that she told Rose about her new position, but she advises her daughter not to pay Rose any mind if she criticizes her decision.

Once again, the snobbery of Miss Kelly's grocery store brings itself to bear on Eilis, who is already well aware that her family is unable to shop at the store. As Miss Kelly tries to posture as an important woman with admirable connections in society, she goes out of her way to demean Mary. That nobody seems to be bothered by this suggests that the people in Eilis's society are used to this kind of stratification between classes. In fact, the customer who says that society needs people to "sweep the streets" underscores this idea, clearly implying that it's perfectly acceptable for a community to privilege to certain people over others.



Eilis's respect for Rose is apparent as she considers just how admirable her sister is. What's most interesting about Rose's popularity is that she and her family are still unable to shop in Miss Kelly's store. This suggests that social status and wealth don't necessarily always accord with one another, since it's clear that Eilis's family is well-respected even though they don't have as much money as other families. This, it seems, places extra importance on how people like Eilis and Rose present themselves, as they maintain their social standing not by earning large amounts of money, but by cultivating a respected image.



Again, it's obvious that Eilis cares deeply about what her sister thinks. Sensing this, her mother tells her not to pay attention to Rose if she expresses her disappointment regarding the fact that she took a job at Miss Kelly's store. Strangely enough, though, even Eilis's mother seems to somewhat disapprove of Eilis working with Miss Kelly, though she doesn't try to stop Eilis from doing so—a sign that she doesn't want to turn away the money. In addition, it's worth noting that Eilis initially plans to keep her employment a secret from Rose, thereby demonstrating her willingness to hide certain details about her life from her loved ones.



Part of the deal that Eilis worked out with Miss Kelly is that she'll accompany her to mass on Sunday mornings before going to the shop. As she sits through the church service, she reflects upon the fact that she hasn't been to morning mass since a long ago Christmas, when her father was still alive and her brothers still lived at home. When the service ends, she, Miss Kelly, and Mary go to the shop, at which point Mary begins to unpack loaves of bread and move them to the front of the store. As she does so, Eilis is surprised to find that these loaves are a day old, since there are no deliveries on Sunday. As she makes this discovery, Miss Kelly tells her that this bread is only for "special customers." Other customers, she says, should be content to eat even older bread.

Throughout the day, Miss Kelly gives preference to certain customers, often allowing them to cut the line even when this frustrates the other shoppers. That evening, Eilis can't help but talk about her first day over dinner, despite her original plan to not say anything about her new job in front of Rose. In response, Rose says that she once went to the store and Miss Kelly served someone else before her, at which point she left without buying anything. Hearing this, Eilis's mother says again that Miss Kelly is "evil incarnate," revealing that she and her friends used to call her "Nettles Kelly" in school because her full name is Nelly Kelly. And though Eilis and Rose feel bad upon hearing this, Eilis can't help but start to imitate Miss Kelly, which makes all three of them laugh.

Eilis wonders as she, her sister, and her mother laugh if anyone else realizes that this is the first time they've laughed at the dinner table since her brother Jack followed her other two brothers to Birmingham. As she thinks this, she wishes she could bring her brother up in conversation, but she fears that this will make her mother sad, so she simply continues imitating Miss Kelly.

That night, Eilis meets Nancy at her house and walks with her to the dance. She feels self-conscious because she can tell that she didn't put enough effort into her appearance, especially compared to Nancy, who has clearly gone out of her way to look especially beautiful. This, she knows, is because she wants George Sheridan to notice her again, though Nancy tells Eilis that she doesn't want George to know that she has returned to the Athenaeum just for him. This is why she needs Eilis to make it look like they're in constant conversation, hoping that she'll seem preoccupied but still available if George wants to ask her to dance. As they enter the dance hall, Eilis senses Nancy's anxiety, knowing that her friend must be thinking about how she was abandoned by her former boyfriend just one year ago.

That Miss Kelly saves the best food for certain customers is relatively unsurprising, considering her desire to endear herself to the wealthiest and most respected members of the community. And though Eilis also comes from a family that is quite cognizant of social status, she is still unsettled that she has to help Miss Kelly perpetuate this brand of favoritism, which is so blatantly shallow. Nonetheless, she doesn't let this stop her from following Miss Kelly's instructions and doing her job, a fact that indicates that she's willing to simply do what people tell her to do.



When Eilis, Rose, and her mother laugh about Miss Kelly, readers see that Miss Kelly's elitist behavior actively invites scorn. This makes sense, since Rose herself has experienced Miss Kelly's snobbery. At the same time, though, readers get the sense that Rose and her mother perpetuate the same kind of elitism as Miss Kelly, since they ultimately view working in a grocery store as beneath Eilis. Consequently, they effectively play into the very worldview that they criticize.



For the first time, readers sense the extent to which Eilis and her family members are emotionally estranged from one another. Even in this moment of levity, Eilis can't bring herself to mention her brothers' departure, fearing that this will only upset her mother. In this way, she tries to protect her mother by ignoring her own emotions and refusing to articulate what she's actually thinking.



While Nancy focuses on establishing a relationship with George, Eilis seems completely uninterested in finding a boyfriend. The only reason she's going to the dance is to give her friend moral support, and she doesn't think even briefly about the possibility of meeting somebody with whom she might dance. This, it seems, is either because she's not yet interested in pursuing romantic relationships or because she's more focused on attaining upward mobility through her professional life than on doing so through her love life.



Eilis thinks about George Sheridan, who is handsome and has a car. He also owns a successful store in town, making him the perfect catch. When Eilis and Nancy arrive at the dance, though, George is nowhere to be seen, so they stand to the side and try to make themselves look unavailable to the men who are there. These people, Eilis and Nancy think, look like country bumpkins, and Nancy suddenly wishes that she had made herself look purposefully ugly so that nobody would approach her. Before long, though, George bounds into the hall with his friend Jim Farrell and a group of their rugby teammates, and Nancy suddenly becomes overwhelmingly nervous.

Just when it seems that George won't pay Nancy any attention, he asks her to dance. After the first song, he and Nancy invite Eilis to have a lemonade with them, at which point they migrate to the bar on the side of the room, where they meet up with Jim Farrell. As they drink the lemonade, Eilis gets the distinct feeling that Jim dislikes both her and Nancy, since he refuses to say anything to them. To her horror, George and Nancy begin to dance again. As they do so, Jim steps forward and Eilis prepares herself, thinking that he's going to ask her to dance and deciding to accept when he does, since she has no other choice. Instead, though, he pauses, steps back once more, and looks around the room, avoiding Eilis's gaze. He then ignores her for the rest of the set, so she leaves.

The next day, Eilis tells her mother and Rose about what happened at the dance. They both advise her not to pay too much attention to the way Jim Farrell treated her, even though her mother also says a few nice things about Jim's parents. Eilis suggests that perhaps Jim thinks Nancy isn't good enough for George, and when her mother says that this would be ridiculous because Nancy is one of the prettiest girls in town, Rose points out that George's mother might not agree. In response, Eilis's mother says that some of the shopkeepers in town think they're better than everyone else just because they get to sit behind a counter. Later, she says that she's hoping Eilis will soon find a "proper job" that will enable her to leave Miss Kelly's grocery store.

Once again, Eilis judges people based on their social status, deciding that the men at the dance are undesirable because they don't live up to a certain standard—a standard that Rose would most likely want her sister to implement in her selection of a potential boyfriend.



After Eilis has spent the entire night judging everyone and deciding that she's above them, she suddenly finds herself feeling as if she isn't good enough for Jim Farrell. What's interesting, though, is that she resolves to accept Jim Farrell's invitation to dance when she thinks he's about to ask, thinking that this is her only choice. That she thinks this implies that she tends to go along with whatever comes her way, failing to see that she has the ability to choose what she wants to do. At the same time, though, it's worth noting that this passive way of moving through the world is most likely informed by the outdated view that men should have more power than women.



Eilis's mother's comment about shopkeepers once more highlights the condescending attitude she has toward people who work in stores. Knowing that people like George Sheridan's mother and Miss Kelly think they're extremely important, Eilis's mother resents the idea that such people would look down on individuals like herself. This resentment then causes her to speak with a similar kind of condescension, thereby perpetuating the elitism that apparently sows so much division in her community.



One evening, Rose mentions at dinner that she played golf with an Irish priest named Father Flood who lives in America. She tells her mother that Father Flood remembers her from a long time ago, and though her mother can't recall him, Rose informs her that she invited him for tea. When he arrives the following day, her mother still doesn't remember him, but this doesn't stop her from welcoming him into the house. As the conversation develops, Eilis realizes that Father Flood knows about her job at Miss Kelly's, since he says she could have a better job if she moved to Brooklyn, where he now lives. At first, Eilis's mother doesn't like this idea, but Father Flood assures her that it's safe and that there are plenty of Irish people in his parish. As they talk, Eilis understands that this is why Rose invited the priest over.

As Father Flood discusses the possibility of helping Eilis move to Brooklyn, Eilis starts trying to commit her surroundings to memory, sensing that she'll soon be leaving everything she knows behind. She then wonders if her mother and sister would be so supportive of this idea if she hadn't recently started working at a grocery store, and she regrets telling them so much about her job. Although they had many laughs over dinner about Miss Kelly, Eilis now sees that Rose doesn't actually think it's funny that she's working in a grocery store.

In the days after Father Flood's visit, nobody says anything about the idea of Eilis moving to Brooklyn. This silence, Eilis knows, confirms that her mother and sister have both agreed that she should go. As she reflects upon the prospect of leaving, she thinks about the fact that people can become wealthy in the United States. She also wonders why she has the distinct feeling that people who go to America don't end up missing home as much as people who go to England.

Eventually, Eilis receives a letter from Father Flood outlining the details of her possible migration to America. He informs her that he has found her a sales floor position at department store in Brooklyn, adding that there will be "plenty of opportunity for promotion and very good prospects" if she accepts the job. He doesn't mention how much she would be paid, nor how she'll pay for the transatlantic voyage. Instead, he gives her directions about how to obtain a visa. While Eilis reads this letter, she waits for her mother to say something, but Mrs. Lacey only speaks up to say that she should keep the letter to show to Rose when she gets home from work.

Rose doesn't like that her sister works at Miss Kelly's grocery store, since she thinks Eilis is destined for better things. For this reason, it seems, she has gone out of her way to give Eilis a new opportunity—namely, the chance to migrate to the United States in search of more economic opportunities. As this plan first takes hold, it's worth pointing out that Eilis doesn't seem to participate in the conversation very much, instead simply watching this important decision unfold before her.



As Eilis regrets telling her mother and sister so much about her job at Miss Kelly's, it becomes clear that she doesn't like the idea of moving to the United States. Instead of speaking up and expressing this sentiment, though, she merely wishes she had realized earlier that Rose might try to push her toward new opportunities—opportunities she's too sheepish to refuse.



That Eilis takes her mother and sister's silence as a sign that they've decided her future for her suggests that she's used to a lack of communication in her family. Rather than speaking openly about this opportunity and letting Eilis decide for herself, her mother and sister remain quiet, demonstrating their reticence to share their feelings. Indeed, their silence tacitly implies that Eilis would be crazy not to take this opportunity—a viewpoint that Eilis apparently understands, as she sees going to America as something nobody ever regrets.



Father Flood's letter emphasizes that moving to Brooklyn will give Eilis the chance to attain upward mobility. In fact, he even takes it for granted that this is in itself a reason to migrate, considering that he doesn't even say how much money she'll be making. In this way, readers sense that the mere idea of advancement is enough to convince people like Eilis and her family members that she should move away from home. Although she will be working a job that isn't much better than her current position at Miss Kelly's store, the fact that she might be able to enjoy professional growth makes the prospect seem alluring and worthwhile.



In the ensuing weeks, Eilis gathers the necessary documents for her migration to the United States. Father Flood gives her a sponsorship letter and gets her officially hired at Bartocci & Company, the department store in Brooklyn that he mentioned in his first letter. Meanwhile, her three brothers agree to pay for her transatlantic voyage, and Rose says she'll give Eilis money to survive when she first reaches New York. Because she can tell that the news of her departure will soon spread through the town (especially since her mother won't be able to keep herself from talking about it), she goes directly to Miss Kelly and informs her that she'll be leaving in a month.

Miss Kelly tells Eilis that she no longer needs her help. Eilis tries to say that she *wants* to work until she leaves, but Miss Kelly says that people will talk too much about her imminent departure and that this will be too distracting. However, she says that Eilis can work in the shop during the holidays, and Eilis realizes that Miss Kelly is the first person to even mention that she might come back to Ireland for Christmas or other holidays. This causes her to think about how she has always assumed she would spend her entire life in Enniscorthy. She would perhaps work until she got married and had children, she used to think, and then she would simply live in town with her husband and family. Now, though, she suddenly feels like she will have a different existence—one for which she feels unprepared.

After telling Miss Kelly about her departure, Eilis begins to fear her departure. The kind of fear she feels, though, is the kind that she always thought she would feel right before her wedding, since this would be a time period during which people would look at her “with light in their eyes,” which is how people have been regarding her in the past few days. Instead of dwelling on this thought, she chooses not to think about what her final weeks in Enniscorthy will be like, worrying that she'll lose her resolve and find herself unable to leave.

One day, Eilis comes to understand that both her mother and Rose are also hiding their feelings about her departure. In a conversation with their neighbor, her mother is forced to admit that she'll be distraught when Eilis leaves, and she even has to leave the room to contain her emotions. Still, Eilis doesn't let herself think about the fact that she doesn't truly want to go to Brooklyn. Instead of dwelling on this, she focuses on practical matters, like what kind of clothing she should pack.

That Eilis's mother won't be able to stop herself from telling everyone that her daughter is going to America is noteworthy, since it once again underlines how much she cares about social status and reputation. It also suggests that migrating to the United States has a certain social currency amongst people in Enniscorthy, since Mrs. Lacey clearly wants to brag about Eilis and her new opportunity to attain upward mobility.



In this scene, Miss Kelly passive aggressively punishes Eilis for pursuing her opportunity to go to the United States. Given that Miss Kelly is such a social climber, it's likely that she resents Eilis for getting to do something that is so widely respected in Enniscorthy—something that Miss Kelly herself never got the chance to do. However, their conversation doesn't give Eilis a sense of vindication or pride. Instead, it forces her to realize that she is about to make a significant life change, one that she never envisioned for herself. Because she is relatively passive when it comes to making decisions about her own life, it comes as a shock to her when she realizes that she's about to do something that is actually quite active, since migrating across the Atlantic ocean is something that requires resolve and determination.



The fact that people look reverently at Eilis because she's about to migrate to the United States confirms the notion that her community deeply respects anyone who is upwardly mobile. It also confirms that people conflate the very act of migrating with advancement, associating immigration with opportunity and success. This is disorienting to Eilis, who has never actually pursued something so widely respected. And though she has misgivings, she decides not to say anything, once again proving that she has a tendency to hide her emotions.



In this section, it becomes clear that Eilis isn't the only one in her family to conceal her emotions. To that end, she takes cues from her mother, who appears unwilling to let her daughters see her sadness. Meanwhile, Eilis tries hard to avoid saying anything that might worry or bother her mother, meaning that they both try to protect each other from emotional hardship. This, in turn, causes them both to suffer their misgivings in solitude.



While Eilis is busy packing, Rose calls her into her room to offer her some pieces of jewelry to take to America. As she shows her the collection, Eilis has the disconcerting realization that by sending Eilis to America, Rose is effectively ensuring that she'll never get married or move out of the house. This is because it's obvious that their mother doesn't want to live alone, and since nobody else will be there to take care of her, this duty will fall to Rose when Eilis leaves. As she tries on a necklace, Eilis senses that Rose is aware that she won't be able to get married or lead her own life if Eilis goes to America. This causes her to think about how Rose would be better suited to a life in Brooklyn, and she feels bad that her sister is sacrificing herself for her.

Still trying on Rose's jewelry, Eilis wonders if her mother also thinks that "the wrong sister" is going to Brooklyn. She then considers the fact that both Rose and her mother must be aware of all of these dynamics, thinking that they both know so much but can't bring themselves to actually speak their thoughts. In turn, she decides to not say anything about the misgivings she has about migrating to America, resolving to trick her mother and Rose into thinking that she's excited for this new adventure. After all, she feels as if their family already has enough sadness in it, so she doesn't want to add even more sorrow.

When it comes time for her to leave, Eilis goes with Rose to Dublin, where they eat lunch at a hotel and wait for her to board a boat bound for Liverpool, where Jack will meet her and pass the time with her until she gets on an ocean liner bound for America. While Eilis eats lunch with Rose, she thinks about the allure of moving to America, sensing that what she's doing is quite exciting and respectable even if she's destined for an unremarkable job. She also reflects on the way Rose behaves in public, admiring her sister for her confidence, poise, and ability to convince the ticket collector at the docks to let her board the boat and stay with Eilis until just before it leaves.

In Liverpool, Eilis is overjoyed to see Jack, but he doesn't want her to hug him because he worries that people will think they're in a relationship. Smiling, he and Eilis deposit her luggage and go out for the day. Jack tells her about his life in England, though he's not very forthcoming and she has to pry for details. When she asks if he would ever consider returning to Ireland, he says that there isn't anything calling him back, though this isn't how he felt in the first months after he moved to England. During this time, he says, he desperately wanted to go home, but he's finally used to life in a different country. As Eilis presses him for more details about his life, she learns that he has a girlfriend, but he refuses to tell Eilis anything about her.

As Eilis's departure nears, she feels less and less ready to leave home. She even starts suspecting that she's unfit to live in America, once again looking up to her sister and thinking that Rose is better than her. And though it might be true that Rose is more independent and self-sufficient, this doesn't necessarily mean that Eilis herself isn't also capable of succeeding abroad. Either way, Eilis says nothing about what she's thinking, failing to reach out to Rose because she's so used to hiding her feelings.



When Eilis decides not to voice her misgivings about moving to Brooklyn, readers see that her family's tendency to hide their emotions perpetuates itself. Rather than speaking openly with her mother and sister, Eilis thinks that she owes it to them to remain silent, thinking that it's her job to protect them from sadness. In turn, she merely estranges herself from her loved ones before she even leaves for the United States.



Although she's hesitant to move to Brooklyn, Eilis understands that this adventure will improve her social capital at home, regardless of what happens when she reaches her destination. With this in mind, she once again admires her sister's ability to cultivate an enviable public image, and readers get the sense that she herself will try to establish this kind of elegant self-confidence when she lives in America.



Jack's relative unwillingness to tell Eilis many details about his life in England aligns with their family's tendency to avoid sharing too much about themselves. Still, though, he gives her an important piece of information when he tells her that his first months in England were especially hard. This is relevant to Eilis's life because she's about to move to a new country and will likely experience the same feeling of homesickness. The fact that Jack has grown accustomed to his new life is also worth remembering as the novel progresses, since it suggests that people are capable of adapting to new circumstances.



When Eilis finally boards the ocean liner, she makes her way to her cabin, which is in third class and therefore deep in the ship. As she situates herself in the bottom bunk of her tiny cabin, she thinks about Jack's comment about missing home when he first went to England. She remembers that he said nothing about this in his letters home, and she suspects that he has never told anyone about how he felt. This causes her to wonder if perhaps all of her brothers experienced these feelings and were able to help each other. She, on the other hand, will be alone in America, and will have nobody to help her through such difficulties.

The cabin door opens and a woman enters with a very large suitcase, ignoring Eilis as she drags it into the tiny room. Once inside, she turns to Eilis and says that she's in her bunk, claiming that her ticket states that the bottom bed should be hers. As Eilis moves to the top bunk, the woman introduces herself as Georgina and then says that she'll never travel in third class again. She then invites Eilis to have a cigarette with her above deck, but Eilis declines because she doesn't smoke. Later, Georgina returns to the cabin when the engines of the ship fire on, and she invites Eilis to come on-deck with her to watch the lights of Liverpool recede as the boat pulls away. As they go up, she says they might be able to meet someone who will get them into the first-class lounge.

Eilis accompanies Georgina out of the cabin and up to the deck, observing her stylish haircut and confident way of moving. Once they're on-deck, Georgina tells Eilis to follow her because she knows how to get into the first-class lounge, but Eilis politely declines. In response, Georgina turns and looks at her, saying, "Suit yourself. But, by the look of it and from what I've heard, it's going to be one of those nights, one of the worst." Not knowing what this means, Eilis says farewell and makes her way to the third-class dining room, which is mostly empty. After eating a bowl of soup and some meat and potatoes, she returns to her cabin to sleep, wondering if Georgina was really able to get into the first-class lounge.

As Eilis settles into her cabin, the magnitude of what she's doing by migrating to America dawns on her. Although it was easy to passively let Rose and Father Flood plan her travels, she now must rise to the occasion by actually going through with the plan. Unsurprisingly, then, she begins to feel daunted not only by the fact that she'll soon be on her own for the first time in her life, but that this will take place in a foreign country. Although Jack's experience in England suggests that homesickness passes, it's hard to apply his words to Eilis's situation, since he was surrounded by his brothers, whereas Eilis will have no family members to help her.



It's worth remembering that Eilis is from a small town. As a result, her interaction with Georgina just might be one of the first times she has ever had an extended conversation with somebody from a different country. To add to this, Georgina is a rather brazen and unique person, somebody who is clearly well-traveled and who has been on ocean liners before. In this regard, then, Eilis's interaction with Georgina is the first new experience of her journey.



Unlike Georgina, Eilis doesn't want to break the rules. This is because she's never been away from home and therefore she is hesitant to do anything that might get her in trouble. Indeed, simply going to the third-class lounge and eating dinner is a new experience for her, to say nothing of what it would be like to break into first-class. Already, then, it's clear that her journey to America will be full of adventurous new experiences.



Alone in her cabin, Eilis tries to open the door to the bathroom that she and Georgina will be sharing with the people next door, each room having its own entrance to the toilet. When she tries the door, though, she finds that it's locked, and nobody responds when she knocks, though she keeps trying. Before long, she gets worried that the door will never open—a particularly upsetting thought, since she suddenly realizes that she has to defecate. As this need becomes more urgent, she leaves the cabin and searches for a bathroom somewhere else on the ship, but she's unsuccessful. During her search, the ship lurches forward as it pulls away from the harbor. Before long, Eilis becomes so desperate that she finds a mop bucket into which she relieves herself, using the mop itself to clean herself after she's finished.

After putting the soiled bucket in a secluded corner, Eilis sheepishly makes her way back to the cabin, gets into bed, and falls asleep. Soon, though, she awakes to find herself filmed in sweat, and she intuits that she's about to vomit. As she frantically gets off the top bunk, she accidentally spews some of her dinner all over the cabin. Because the bathroom is still locked, she bursts into the hallway, throwing up as she goes. Then, because the ship is rocking back and forth so violently, she gets on all fours and continues to void herself onto the floor, wanting to finish as quickly as possible so that nobody catches her making such a mess. Every time she tries to stand, though, she becomes nauseous and throws up again.

Once Eilis returns to her cabin, she hears someone retching on the other side of the bathroom door and understands that this is why it's locked—her neighbors knew that the waters would be choppy, so they locked her out of the bathroom to avoid having to share it. She then remembers that Georgina said it was going to be a rough night. Trying to clean up the vomit in her cabin with a mop, she soon sees that the task is impossible and returns the mop to the hallway, at which point she vomits again. All the while, the ship feels as if it's not making any progress at all, and she wonders just how far her cabin is below the water line. Back in bed, she tries to melt into the swaying motion and thinks about her mother and her life in Enniscorthy.

Although Eilis is eager to follow the ship's rules because it's her first time away from home, she finds herself in a precarious situation in which she has to fend for herself, regardless of what she is or isn't supposed to do. When she's forced to relieve herself in a bucket in the ship's hallway, she demonstrates her resourcefulness, proving that she's capable of handling whatever life throws at her, though defecating into an empty pail on her first night away from Enniscorthy certainly isn't what she had in mind when she thought about migrating to America.



In this moment, Eilis has no choice but to succumb to seasickness. No matter how much Rose and Father Flood have planned for her to have a smooth journey to America, there's no changing that the ocean liner is rocking nauseatingly with the waves. In turn, Tóibín suggests that sometimes there's simply nothing a person can do to avoid hardship and discomfort in life.



Even though there's nothing anyone can do to stop themselves from getting seasick, Eilis's neighbors have slightly improved their predicament by ensuring that they won't have to share the bathroom. This, unfortunately, puts Eilis in an even worse situation, ultimately forcing her to endure an even more harrowing night than she otherwise would have.



The next morning, Eilis wakes up when Georgina—who was gone all night—puts her hand on her forehead. Eilis tells her that their neighbors locked the bathroom door, and Georgina sympathizes with her, saying that people always do that. As she says this, she takes a nail file from her bag and uses it to unlatch the lock. She and Eilis then block the other door so that their neighbors will no longer have access to the bathroom. When Eilis asks if she made a huge mess in the hallway, Georgina says that she did, but she also says the entire ship is covered in vomit, including first class. She then informs Eilis that they're in the middle of a terrible storm, instructing her to not eat anything and to simply drink lots of water.

Georgina tells Eilis that she was caught in first-class and sent back to her cabin, which means they'll be spending the night together. She also says that the ship will be going through sickening waves for the next day or two, meaning that they will both be vomiting quite a lot. After that, though, they will be in "calm waters." When Eilis asks if she looks bad, Georgina responds, "Oh, yes, and so does every person on this boat."

Georgina stresses the importance of eating nothing and drinking water, telling Eilis to vomit whenever she wants and promising that she'll feel better the following day. She knows this, she says, because she takes transatlantic voyages every year to see her mother, enduring the agony for a week but relishing the chance to see her family.

Once the storm passes, Georgina meets the neighbors with whom she agrees to share the bathroom. Eilis has been throwing up for two nights in a row, and she can't believe that she has to be on the boat for four more nights, but she slowly begins to feel like herself again when they reach calmer waters. Shortly before they arrive in America, Georgina gives her advice about how best to pass through customs at Ellis Island, helping her choose what outfit to wear and how to wear her hair. She also helps her put on make-up and instructs her not to cough in front of any officials, since they might think she has tuberculosis and bar her from entering the country. Other than that, though, Eilis has little to worry about because the visa Father Flood helped her obtain is quite hard to get.

Georgina's comment that the entire ocean liner—including the first-class cabin—is covered in vomit highlights the superficial nature of social status and class disparity. No matter how much money the people in first-class spend to have their own comfortable quarters, they can't avoid the same fate as everyone else on the ship. This, in turn, underscores that there's nothing anyone can do to avoid the pitfalls of the human condition, no matter how hard people work to feel superior to others.



Georgina assures Eilis that, though they will continue to feel bad for a couple of days, this hellish experience will eventually pass. This is an important message, since it shows Eilis that sometimes in life the only thing a person can do is wait out hardship or discomfort. This, in turn, becomes a central metaphor for the entire novel, as Eilis later experiences emotional difficulties that she discovers will recede as long as she is patient and doesn't try to change things over which she has no control.



Again, Georgina tries to show Eilis that even her most intense discomfort will eventually pass—a valuable life lesson as Eilis makes her way toward a new existence in Brooklyn.



Although she was perhaps a bit rude at first, Georgina proves to be a fantastic guide for Eilis, teaching her not only how to wait out hardship, but also how to present herself so that she won't have any trouble when they reach New York. All in all, the entire voyage has been a good learning experience for Eilis, though her true adventure—the one in which she must actually establish a new life in a foreign country—has yet to begin.



PART TWO

Eilis's room in Brooklyn is in a house owned by an Irish woman named Mrs. Kehoe, who is from a town not far from Enniscorthy. The room is small and hot, and there are five other boarders at the house, all of them women. Each night, Mrs. Kehoe cooks dinner for the tenants, though she doesn't do this on Sunday, since she goes to mass and then plays poker in the evenings. On the other evenings, though, everyone eats together, and Mrs. Kehoe discourages the women from talking about their boyfriends, instead wanting to talk about fashion and clothing.

Eilis's room is near Miss McAdam's. Miss McAdam is older, works as a secretary, is uninterested in fashion, and is from Belfast. Another girl, Patty, lives on the floor above Eilis. She was born in upstate New York and, like Eilis, works in a department store in Brooklyn. There is also Diana, who lives in the basement and is Irish but speaks with an American accent. Both Diana and Patty are obsessed with boys and complain about Mrs. Kehoe's cooking. On the weekends, they often go out—a fact that annoys people like Miss McAdam and Sheila Heffernan, a slightly older woman from Ireland who lives on the top floor with Patty. Like Miss McAdam, Sheila is a secretary, and they both find many reasons to become annoyed with Diana and Patty. The final resident is Miss Keegan from Galway, who doesn't talk much.

On her first two weekends in Brooklyn, Patty and Diana invite Eilis to go out with them, but she refuses because she hasn't been paid yet. Instead, she goes on walks with Miss McAdam, regretting that she can't simply walk alone, since Miss McAdam complains about the other residents and speaks disparagingly about any Italian or Jewish people who pass them on the street.

By her third week, Eilis has written several letters home but hasn't yet received anything from Rose or her mother. One morning, she gets up early for work, wanting to avoid the other women in the kitchen, since she's already tired of Diana and Patty giving her advice about living in America. As she walks to work, she thinks about how each day feels like an entire lifetime, knowing that she'll have so much to think about when she comes home and lies in her bed to review the events of her day. On her first day at Bartocci's, Father Flood went with her to the main office and introduced her to Miss Bartocci, the owner's daughter, and Miss Fortini, the store's supervisor. Miss Bartocci explained that Brooklyn is constantly attracting new people and that the store's goal is to welcome all kinds of customers, treating everyone the same.

Tóibín presents Mrs. Kehoe as a principled woman with rather modest views, considering the fact that she doesn't let her tenants discuss men at the dinner table. She also goes to church every week and likes talking about fashion, suggesting that she cares about how people view her. In this sense, then, she is similar to people like Eilis's mother, sister, and former employer, Miss Kelly.



Even though Eilis has migrated to a foreign country, she is surrounded by fellow Irish people. This, of course, is because she allowed Father Flood to arrange the details of her move, so he made sure to put her in a house in his Brooklyn parish, which is full of Irish expatriates. As a result, she's thrown into an entirely new context but is able to maintain a slight sense of familiarity.



Now that Eilis is trying to build her life in a new country, she struggles to align herself with the kind of people she wants to be around. Unable to accompany Diana and Patty on their outings because of her financial limitations, she's forced to spend time with Miss McAdam, whose judgmental attitude recalls Miss Kelly's unappealing sensibilities.



Unlike Enniscorthy, Brooklyn is an incredibly diverse place. Some people, like Miss McAdam, find this unsettling, but Miss Bartocci urges Eilis to embrace the multicultural nature of her new surroundings. This is just one example of the many adjustments Eilis must make as she eases into life in the United States, attempting to make sense of the glaring differences between her sheltered life in Ireland and her new existence as a young woman living in an American city.



On her first day at Bartocci's, Father Flood tells Eilis that many of the people working in the office started on the sales floor but worked their way up by attending night classes. Eilis tells him that she has studied bookkeeping, and he says he'll see if there are any classes she could take nearby, though he tells her not to mention this to Miss Bartocci for the time being, since Eilis should seem focused solely on her new job at first. When he departs, he leaves her with Miss Fortini, who teaches her the shop's system for keeping track of sales. Although Eilis is familiar with how to do this, she lets Miss Fortini teach her and then concentrates on the practice attempts Miss Fortini asks her to complete.

Eilis finds her job at Bartocci's easy, even though Miss Fortini is constantly watching her and all the other floor workers. As long as she looks happy and concentrated, she knows Miss Fortini won't correct her. One morning, she comes to work and discovers that the store is having a surprise sale on nylon stockings. For the entire day, she's swamped with customers, and she's so tired by the time she gets home that she doesn't even notice until after dinner that there are three letters waiting for her. Excited, she goes to her room and opens them. They're from Rose, her mother, and Jack. None of the letters contain much information, though Rose does propose that Eilis can write to her work address if she ever wants to include something that she might not want her mother to know.

Although the letters aren't very personal, Eilis reads them multiple times and suddenly plunges into sadness, wishing she were home with her family. As she lies on her bed, she realizes that she hasn't thought about Ireland for the past few weeks. Now, though, Enniscorthy is all she can think about, and this makes her want to cry, though she doesn't let herself shed a tear. Instead, she tries to figure out what, exactly, is making her suddenly so sad, and though she has no answer for this question, she remembers that the last time she felt this way was after her father died, when she watched his coffin close and understood that he was truly gone and that she'd never be able to have a conversation with him again.

That night, Eilis has trouble sleeping, thinking all the while that she feels like "nobody" in America. Nothing, she thinks, means anything to her in this country. When she wakes up the next morning, she isn't sure she actually got any sleep, but she gets up early to avoid the other boarders and goes to eat breakfast at a diner on her way to work. Feeling terrible, she sits at the counter until the waiter asks if she's all right, pointing out that she looks sad. In response, she gets up and runs out of the diner, sensing that she's about to start crying.

Eilis's new job isn't all that different from her position at Miss Kelly's, as evidenced by the fact that she already knows how to handle money. However, the primary distinction between her professional life in Ireland and her professional life in the United States is that living in Brooklyn contains a hint of possibility. For example, when Father Flood promises to look into whether or not Eilis could take classes at a nearby school, he gives her something to latch onto, something to look forward to as she spends her time at Bartocci's.



That Eilis doesn't notice the three letters waiting for her when she first comes is worth noting, since it suggests that her life in Brooklyn has already started to take hold and distract her from thinking about home. However, it's clear that she's not quite fully settled into and distracted by this new existence, since she immediately drops everything as soon as she finds the letters. Furthermore, Rose's suggestion that she write to her private address underscores how secretive their family can be with one another. To Rose's credit, though, she at least tries to show Eilis that she can tell her whatever she wants.



Eilis hasn't thought about Enniscorthy since she arrived in Brooklyn, but now she realizes how much she misses home. This is an important dynamic to grasp, since it demonstrates how helpful it is for people to not dwell on things that make them sad. To that end, Eilis's daily existence in Brooklyn has kept her from thinking nostalgically about home, but as soon as she takes the time to truly consider how she feels, she falls into despair. That she thinks of her father's death in this moment indicates that she equates her departure from Enniscorthy with a sense of loss.



One of Eilis's main problems in this period is that she doesn't have anyone to turn to as she grapples with homesickness. Even if she did, though, it's likely that she would hide her emotions, since this is what she's so accustomed to doing. Unsurprisingly, then, she literally runs away when someone asks her if she's all right, dreading the idea of exposing her sadness.



While working on the sales floor, Eilis struggles to look happy, and she can sense Miss Fortini's gaze. Nonetheless, she manages to hypnotically go through the motions of the day, eventually making it home without Miss Fortini taking her off the sales floor. At dinner that night she remains quiet and sneaks away at the soonest possible moment, at which point she goes upstairs and stays in her room, spending one of the worst nights of her life in torment as she thinks about how much she hates her room and Mrs. Kehoe's house. Just before morning, though, she remembers what Jack said to her in England about how miserable he was when he first left home. She wishes she could write to him to ask him to elaborate on this, but she decides that he's too far away to help her.

Not only is Jack too far away to help her, Eilis thinks, but *everyone* she loves is too removed from her current life to rescue her from her feelings. Furthermore, she decides to not say anything about her misery in her letters home, not wanting to worry her mother or Rose. As a result, she knows that her family will never really know what she's going through, and this causes her to wonder if they perhaps never knew her in the first place, since if they did, they would have understood that coming to America would be too much for her.

After a tumultuous night, Eilis is almost late for work. When she arrives, Miss Fortini approaches her on the sales floor and says that she looks unwell. She then tells Eilis to meet her downstairs. Eilis worries that she's about to get fired, but once they're both downstairs, Miss Fortini simply asks her to tell her what's wrong, and when Eilis is unable to do so, Miss Fortini guesses that she's sad and misses her family. Slowly gathering that Eilis has never left Ireland before and that she has no family in America, she says that she's going to talk to Miss Bartocci and Father Flood, and when Eilis asks her not to do this, she says that they won't create any problems, though she points out that Eilis can't work at Bartocci's if she's sad. At the same time, though, she adds that her sadness is understandable.

Miss Fortini goes to speak with Miss Bartocci. When she returns, she tells Eilis that Miss Bartocci called Mr. Bartocci, who said that Eilis should be given a sandwich while he calls Father Flood. Miss Fortini says that Eilis is lucky, adding that Mr. Bartocci is often nice "the first time" but that she "wouldn't cross him twice." When Eilis argues that she didn't cross him, Miss Fortini says that she truly did, ensuring her that Mr. Bartocci will never forget that she came to work unready to face the sales floor.

Although Eilis was more or less content when she initially arrived in Brooklyn, she now lets her homesickness spawn a sense of resentment deep within her, and she begins to hate her surroundings. Rather than trying to simply focus on her everyday life, she resists that life by deciding that she dislikes every aspect of it. And though she recalls that Jack went through a similar phase when he moved away from home, she can't bring herself to reach out to him—yet another manifestation of her inability to communicate with her loved ones about her emotions.



Again, Eilis cuts herself off from any kind of support, emotionally estranging herself from her loved ones because she doesn't want to worry them. Worse, in the same way that her homesickness has caused her to hate her surroundings, it now causes her to resent Rose and her mother for thinking that it would be a good idea for her to come to America in the first place. Because she herself was so passive when it came to planning her migration to Brooklyn, she is ultimately able to blame her unhappiness on her family members instead of taking responsibility for her own life.



Eilis is normally a master at hiding her emotions, but in this context, she's unable to mask her unhappiness. This is a problem because Bartocci's requires its salespeople to be cheery and presentable. Fortunately for her, though, Miss Fortini takes pity on her and reaches out to Father Flood on her behalf. If she didn't do this, it seems, Eilis might never have asked anyone for help. In this way, then, Miss Fortini comes to Eilis's rescue, though Eilis doesn't recognize this in the moment.



Although Miss Fortini helps Eilis by reaching out to Father Flood and Mr. Bartocci on her behalf, she makes it clear that this episode will count against her in her boss's eyes. In turn, readers see that Eilis's unwillingness to write home about her sadness has only caused her trouble, since she was ultimately unable to bottle up her emotions and has unwittingly brought them into her professional life.



When Father Flood arrives, he says that Eilis's sadness is *his* fault because he hasn't been checking on her. This, he says, is because everyone said she was doing so well. He even reveals that Mrs. Kehoe said she's the nicest resident she's ever hosted. He then asks Eilis if she knows what's wrong with her, and when Eilis shows confusion, he tells her that there's a term for what she's feeling: homesickness. Going on, he explains that everyone experiences this feeling and that it always passes, though some cases take longer to subside than others. In general, he says, it's best to keep busy and have someone to talk to. To that end, he says he'd like to enroll her in night classes, saying that he thinks he'll be able to convince a professor to let her join a bookkeeping class even though the semester has already started.

When Eilis goes home for the day, Mrs. Kehoe greets her and invites her into her private portion of the house for tea. As she sits there waiting for the tea, Eilis admires the room and thinks about how much her mother would love the way it's decorated. It then occurs to her once more that she won't be able to tell her mother or Rose anything about how she's feeling, and she understands that the only thing she can do is simply move forward with her daily life. Later that night, Father Flood visits and tells her that he enrolled her in bookkeeping classes at Brooklyn College. The courses, he says, will meet in the evenings on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

Eilis applies herself to her studies. She particularly likes her law professor, Professor Rosenblum, who speaks wildly in class and tells long, winding stories about various cases—stories that Eilis enjoys, though she has trouble understanding how what Rosenblum says relates to what's in the textbook. Before long, she realizes she isn't alone in this insecurity, since another student asks her which book Rosenblum is reading from. In response, she says that she doesn't think he's reading from any book at all.

As winter approaches, Eilis agrees to work at Father Flood's church for the annual Christmas dinner, when the church invites people (many of them homeless) to feast and make merry. When the day comes, she makes her way to the church and starts helping prepare for the many visitors. Father Flood says that 200 people attended last year, most of whom were Irish. For the most part, he says, they are older men who helped build the bridges and tunnels in New York but have never managed to make it back to Ireland. Each year, he goes around during the meal and asks people if they want him to reach out to their families in Ireland for them, though he never succeeds in reconnecting them to their relatives.

In the same way that Eilis had to simply endure seasickness in order to get better, she now has to wait out her homesickness. The only thing that will help her, Father Flood suggests, is focusing on her everyday life. This is because distracting herself from her own sadness will ultimately help her adapt to her new environment. Once she's fully accustomed to her new life, then, she won't miss home so desperately. By tracking this process, Tóibín shows readers that certain forms of hardship are simply unavoidable, though this doesn't mean they're also unbearable.



As Eilis looks at Mrs. Kehoe's sitting room, she thinks about how much her mother would like the room. This is a clear sign that she hasn't yet internalized Father Flood's advice to focus first and foremost on her immediate surroundings and to throw herself into her current life instead of thinking about what she left behind in Ireland. Continuing to think of her mother, Eilis once again commits herself to keeping secrets from her family, though this time it is perhaps good that she doesn't want to tell her mother about what's happening to her, since this would only cause her to fixate even more on her sadness.



Eilis's experience in Professor Rosenblum's class is noteworthy because it gives readers a glimpse of her gradual attempt to immerse herself in her life in Brooklyn. Rather than thinking about home, she's forced to pay attention to her night classes. That Professor Rosenblum's lectures are hard to follow makes this task even more difficult, which in turn makes it easier for Eilis to avoid thinking about Ireland.



Although Eilis is trying to concentrate on her life in Brooklyn instead of thinking about home, she still has plenty of opportunities to engage with Irish culture. Like Eilis, the majority of the people who come to the church for Christmas are people who migrated from Ireland to America in search of economic opportunity. That they never returned after coming to New York is significant, as it suggests that life abroad can consume people and keep them from going home.



When people begin to arrive at the church, the two women working with Eilis ask her to organize them at a single table so there's room for others when they come. As she goes to do this, she sees a man step into the church who looks exactly like her father. For a moment, Eilis forgets that her father is dead and is astonished, but then remembers that it can't be him. When he turns his head so that she can see his face, she sees that he doesn't actually look like her father, but she's so rattled that she quickly returns to the kitchen to collect herself.

The church becomes merry and loud as everyone enjoys themselves. Many of the guests are drunk, but Father Flood doesn't mind because it's Christmas. At one point, he gets up and announces that they will continue their yearly tradition of listening to a bit of music after dinner, at which point the man Eilis thought was her father stands and gestures for Eilis to come toward him. At first, she's afraid that he wants her to sing with him, but he simply holds her hand and begins an old Irish song in a beautiful voice, intoning, "Má bhíonn tú liom, a stóirín mo chroí." As he sings, Eilis wishes the song would never end.

PART THREE

One night in January, Eilis comes home and finds Mrs. Kehoe standing in the doorway of the sitting room. Whispering, Mrs. Kehoe tells Eilis that what she's about to say cannot be repeated. She then informs her that Miss Keegan is leaving, though she won't say why. She only says that, as far as she's concerned, Miss Keegan couldn't leave sooner. She then says that she wants Eilis to take Miss Keegan's room, which is in the basement and has its own entrance. It is, she claims, the best room in the house, as it's very large and warm. Eilis doesn't know what to say, but Mrs. Kehoe simply tells her to pack her things so that she (Mrs. Kehoe) can furtively fetch them and move them to the basement while Eilis is at work on Monday.

Eilis worries aloud that the other girls in the house will be upset that she's getting the best room, but Mrs. Kehoe urges her to ignore them. When Mrs. Kehoe dismisses her, she goes upstairs and begins to worry that perhaps the basement room isn't all that desirable. After all, perhaps Mrs. Kehoe is pawing the room off on Eilis because she's the only one who doesn't know any better. Unfortunately, though, there's nothing she can do even if this is the case, so she reluctantly packs her bags on Sunday and leaves them by her bed, resenting the fact that Mrs. Kehoe has made this decision for her.

Surrounded by people from her home country, Eilis projects the image of her father onto a stranger. She has now been in Brooklyn for several months, and though she has gotten used to the daily rhythms of living abroad, she still associates the idea of Ireland with a sense of loss, which is why she momentarily thinks that this man is her dead father.



Eilis's experience at the church on Christmas shows her that she can remain connected to her culture while living abroad. Although it's important that she immerse herself in American life in order to prevent homesickness, this doesn't mean she can't also congregate with her fellow expatriates and celebrate their culture. Indeed, when she stands next to this man while he sings, she feels a sense of communal longing for Ireland that soothes her.



Just when Eilis is fully accustomed to life in Brooklyn, Mrs. Kehoe changes her everyday existence by offering her a new bedroom. Although this might not seem like such a big deal, it's worth keeping in mind that Eilis has only recently gotten used to living abroad, meaning that even relatively minor changes to her routine might feel to her like major disturbances.



Eilis is upset to have to move to a new bedroom, but she says nothing to stop Mrs. Kehoe from putting the plan in action. Once again, then, she responds passively to a change in her life. When she first decided to come to Brooklyn, it was simply because she didn't want to tell Rose and her mother that she would rather stay in Ireland. Later, she started going to night classes because Father Flood suggested it. Every new development in her life, then, is the result of something that somebody else has pushed her to do, and this bedroom incident is yet another iteration of this dynamic.



On Monday, Eilis sets out to work. Brooklyn has become so cold that she can't even imagine a time when it felt comfortable to be outside, and she knows nobody in Ireland would believe her if she told them how frigid America can get. That night, she goes home and Mrs. Kehoe meets her at the door before escorting her silently to the basement bedroom. Inside the room, Eilis finds velvet curtains, a nice bedspread, and beautiful rugs. Overall, the setup is very nice and appealing, and it's two times larger than her old room, with a desk at which she will be able to sit and do her schoolwork. There is even a fireplace. Seeing how beautiful the room is, Eilis once more worries that the other boarders will be angry with her, but Mrs. Kehoe dismisses this idea, urging her to forget about the matter.

Eilis realizes that Mrs. Kehoe sees her as her ally, clearly thinking that the two of them are separate from everyone else in the house. She finds this assumption disconcerting and resents that Mrs. Kehoe would think such a thing, so she tells her landlady she would prefer to be honest with the others about why she has been placed in this room. In response, Mrs. Kehoe says that honesty isn't always a good way to handle things. Hearing this, Eilis stares contemptuously at Mrs. Kehoe. Frustrated, Mrs. Kehoe reminds Eilis that there's a bathroom down the hall before turning and slamming the door on her way out.

Eilis doesn't think her housemates will ever believe that she had nothing to do with her room change. Several days after she moves into the basement, Miss McAdam pulls her aside and asks if she heard what happened. When Eilis looks confused, she says that Miss Keegan left because she was followed home several times by a man. Going on, she says that this man exposed himself to Miss Keegan, and she emphasizes the fact that he used to follow her home at night, walking all the way to the basement's private entrance. She also says that Mrs. Kehoe wanted Miss McAdam herself to take the room but that she refused. She then claims that Mrs. Kehoe put Eilis in the basement because nobody else would take it. As she says this, though, Eilis begins to suspect that this is Miss McAdam's way of punishing her for getting the best room.

Eilis resents Miss McAdam for trying to scare her, if that is indeed what she's doing. In the following days, she tries to discern whether or not her fellow lodgers have coordinated against her, but she can't tell. This keeps her up for several nights, as she fluctuates between blaming Mrs. Kehoe, the other women, and even herself. Eventually, though, she decides to stop thinking about the matter at all.

It's understandable that Eilis would worry about upsetting her housemates, since she doesn't want to make any of them jealous. At the same time, though, her concern about what they'll think underlines her tendency to think a bit too much about reputation—a preoccupation she undoubtedly acquired from her mother and Rose. Rather than letting herself enjoy this new room, she frets about what other people will think, thereby robbing herself of any pleasure that might come out of this otherwise fortunate turn of events.



By worrying what her housemates will think of her, Eilis squanders the kindness Mrs. Kehoe is so eager to show her. Instead of thanking her landlady, she resents her for making an effort to be nice. Alienating herself from Mrs. Kehoe, she does herself a disservice, effectively isolating herself from one of the few people who has gone out her way to make her feel comfortable in America.



The story Miss McAdam tells is certainly unsettling, but Eilis is shrewd enough to sense that the older woman is simply trying to get back at her for getting the best room in the house. As this dynamic emerges, readers see that the tenants in Mrs. Kehoe's house have a certain social hierarchy with its own complications and competitive nature. By getting the largest room in the house, Eilis effectively rises to a prominent social status—one that Miss McAdam clearly feels she does not deserve.



That Eilis decides to stop thinking about this conflict altogether is yet another sign that it's possible to adapt to situations that initially feel untenable. Having overcome seasickness and homesickness, Eilis is now well-equipped to slowly habituate herself to circumstances that would otherwise have fully consumed her.



Around this time, Father Flood organizes a weekly dance at the church, saying that it will be open to everyone. This excites Diana and Patty, but Mrs. Kehoe worries that too many Italian men will start attending the dances. On the day of the first dance, Patty and Diana invite Eilis to come to a bar with them and some friends before going to the dance. Miss McAdam and Sheila Heffernan, on the other hand, want her to go with them, suggesting that they leave directly from the house. In the end, Eilis decides to go with Miss McAdam and Sheila, though what she really wishes is that she could stay home. As she and the other two women make their way toward the church, she finds herself wishing that she had gone with Patty and Diana, since she can sense Miss McAdam and Sheila's anxiety.

At first, the church is empty, but Patty and Diana soon arrive with their friends and the music begins to pick up. When they enter, Eilis wishes that she were with them and that she could dress like the people in their group. When Diana starts dancing and whirls by Eilis and the older boarders, she closes her eyes and pretends to be too immersed in her contact with a man to notice them. At this point, Miss McAdam declares that they should leave, and Eilis goes with her and Sheila. On the walk back, Miss McAdam says that Diana ought to be "ashamed" of herself, but Eilis says that the man she was dancing with is attractive and good at dancing. She says this because she wants to set herself apart from their judgment, and the comment has the intended effect, as Miss McAdam quickly walks away from her.

That Monday, Miss Fortini brings Eilis to Miss Bartocci's office, and Miss Bartocci tells her that Bartocci's will now be allowing people of color to shop in the store. This change, she says, reflects the changes that are happening in Brooklyn, since large numbers of black people are moving to the borough. She then says that they will be selling darker colored nylon stockings and that she wants Eilis to be one of the two saleswomen at the counter where these colors will be sold. Later, Eilis wonders aloud why she was chosen for this job, and the other girl who will be selling the darker nylons says that it's probably because she's Irish and, therefore, "different."

Again, the social dynamics of Mrs. Kehoe's household bring themselves to bear on Eilis, as she tries to navigate the rift between the younger and older women. Interestingly enough, though, both factions apparently want to claim her as their own, meaning that they must no longer be angry at her for taking the basement room. Once more, then, Tóibín illustrates that the simple passage of time often resolves a person's problems.



When Eilis goes to the dance with Miss McAdam and Sheila Heffernan, she feels as if she has chosen the wrong housemates, suddenly wishing that she were with Diana and Patty instead. Unhappy with her status in the hierarchy of the house, then, she purposefully upsets Miss McAdam, effectively sabotaging their relationship so that she can build her own reputation amongst the boarders, though it's worth noting that she hasn't (until now) shown much interest in spending time with Patty and Diana. Indeed, it isn't until she sees that Patty and Diana are well-liked in the community that she wishes she were like them.



In certain ways, Brooklyn is a novel that explores not only Eilis's adaptability, but the adaptability of society at large. When Eilis comes to the United States, she enters a country with fraught racial dynamics, and though the Civil Rights Movement is yet to gain momentum, cities like Brooklyn are already undergoing certain cultural shifts. To that end, Miss Bartocci's willingness to embrace racial integration serves as a model for what it might look like to accept change.



As the second semester progresses, Eilis gets nervous that she won't pass Professor Rosenblum's test, so she works up the courage to ask him after class if he could recommend any books to help her study. A flustered man, he asks if he's going through the material too quickly, but Eilis says she just wants something to help her study for the final exam, so he writes down the name of a bookstore in Manhattan and the titles of several law books. When she ventures to this store—her first time in Manhattan—she asks the man working there to help her find the books, and he says that he knows Professor Rosenblum. He surprises her by asking, "Can you imagine a country that would want to kill him?" Confused, she asks if he's referring to World War II, and he says that he's talking specifically about the Holocaust.

After buying her new law books, Eilis immerses herself in them until dinnertime, at which point she realizes that Miss McAdam and Sheila Heffernan aren't speaking to her. She wishes she could ask Patty and Diana if she could go to the dance with them, but they don't invite her and she's unwilling to bring it up. More than anything, though, she simply wants to skip the dance altogether, but she can't do this because she pretended to be sick the previous week so she didn't have to go.

Eilis also learns at dinner that there's a new boarder living in her old room. Her name is Dolores, and Diana and Miss McAdam come to Eilis's door that night to talk about her. Though Eilis is surprised to see these two women associating with one another, they tell her that they dislike Dolores because she works as a cleaner and is paying a portion of her rent by cleaning the house. Because Miss McAdam and Diana don't want people to associate them with such a person, they've decided to refuse to eat with her. This is why they've come to Eilis, asking her if she'll join them in their strike. When they say this, Eilis wonders if they once talked about her in a similar way, since they both work office jobs and she doesn't. With this in mind, she closes the door without answering them.

The next day, Mrs. Kehoe catches Eilis on her way out and asks her to take Dolores to the dance that night. Not knowing what to say, Eilis agrees, regretting her decision all day. That evening, everyone avoids talking about the dance at dinner, and Eilis worries that everyone thinks she offered to take Dolores, wishing that there was some way to tell her housemates that Mrs. Kehoe asked her to do it. Later, she's surprised by Dolores's choice to wear a leather jacket—"like a man's"—to the dance. However, she says nothing, simply smiling and walking out the door with her, dreading what it will be like at the dance with nobody to pass the time with except Dolores.

This scene calls attention to Eilis's naivety. Having had a rather sheltered upbringing, she has trouble putting together that Professor Rosenblum is Jewish and that this bookseller is talking about the Holocaust. It's no wonder, then, that she originally had such trouble easing into life in Brooklyn, considering how little she knows about the outside world and the various cultural touchstones about which everyone around her seems so knowledgeable.



In this scene, Eilis deals with the consequences of purposefully estranging herself from Miss McAdam and Sheila Heffernan. By aligning herself with Patty and Diana, she offends the older women but ultimately fails to cement her bond with the younger two women, leaving her on her own.



Although Eilis comes from a rather elitist family, she resents Diana and Miss McAdam's behavior toward Dolores, finding it offensive that they're so angry about having to live with someone who cleans for a living. Frustrated, she once more puts herself at odds with her fellow residents, this time by standing up for Dolores.



Eilis went out of her way to defend Dolores against Diana and Miss McAdam's elitist plan to shun her, but now she's unhappy that she has to spend time with her. This is because she still cares about her own reputation, even if she finds her housemates' obsession with social status upsetting. In this moment, then, readers see that Eilis isn't quite ready to practice what she preaches, though she does—to her credit—agree to take Dolores to the dance.



At the dance, Eilis barely responds to Dolores's many questions and comments. While standing in the church, she feels awkward as Dolores talks to her about how much she'd like to meet an American man. At one point, Eilis makes eye contact with Patty, who waves her over. Responding to this, she walks over to Patty and Diana's group, and she and Patty go to the bathroom together. Patty tells her that she looked quite unhappy, so she decided to save her from Dolores's presence. They then reemerge and join Patty's group of friends, which includes a young man with an American accent who teaches Eilis how to dance to the band's swing music.

As Eilis learns new dance steps with Patty's group of friends, she realizes that another young man is watching her. When she looks at him, she sees that he's unembarrassed to have been caught looking at her. He isn't tall, but he's muscular and handsome. It becomes obvious to Eilis that he isn't part of Patty's group of friends, since his clothes aren't flashy enough. Soon enough, the young man approaches and asks if Eilis is with the man who was showing her how to dance to swing music, and when she says no, he asks her to dance. She says she doesn't know the steps, but he assures her that nobody actually knows and that the most important thing is to look confident on the dance floor. Going along with this attitude, she agrees, and they dance for the rest of the set.

At the end of the set, the young man introduces himself to Eilis as Tony and offers to buy her a soda. Because she knows that accepting this drink will mean she'll have to stay with him for the next set, she says yes, thinking that this will be a good way of freeing herself from Dolores, whom she refuses to look at. When they start dancing again, the songs are slow, and though she's worried about drawing too close to Tony, she realizes that he's also aware of the distance between them, and she wonders if this is because he's trying to be respectful or because he doesn't like her. By the last song of the set, though, he moves closer, and they sway to the music while fully interlocked in one another's arms.

Tony tells Eilis that he saw her at the church's first dance but noticed that she wasn't there the following weekend. When she asks how he knows this, he says, "I looked for you and didn't see you." They then dance along to traditional Irish songs even though neither of them know the steps. Afterwards, she agrees to let him walk her home, and he admits to her that he isn't Irish. He tells her that he's from Brooklyn but that his family is Italian. Just before Eilis leaves him to enter Mrs. Kehoe's house, he asks if he can pick her up the following week to get dinner before the dance, and she accepts, liking that this will allow her to go to the dance without having to choose which of her roommates to accompany.

Despite her initial attempt to treat Dolores kindly, Eilis ends up acting just like her other housemates, ultimately abandoning Dolores because she doesn't want to be associated with someone with such a low social status. Once again, then, readers see that her own reputation still means quite a lot to Eilis, regardless of how much she pretends to not care about such considerations.



Now that Eilis has finally ventured out of her comfort zone and joined Patty and her friends on the dance floor, she has her first dance with a man in America. In this way, Tóibín—and, in turn, readers—charts her process of maturation, following her as she slowly undergoes new experiences and meets people she might never have encountered if she'd stayed in Enniscorthy, where the only eligible bachelors were people like George Sheridan and Jim Farrell.



Eilis's interest in Tony is somewhat superficial at first, since she mainly agrees to spend more time with him because doing so helps her avoid sitting with Dolores. Like many things in her life, then, this formative experience—her first dance with a man in America—is informed not by an active desire on her part, but by a circumstantial turn of events that doesn't require her to make any big decisions.



When Tony tells Eilis that he looked for her the following week, he makes it quite obvious that he's interested in her. In contrast to Eilis's tendency to hide her emotions, this honesty is quite notable, as Tony clearly has no problem with speaking honestly about how he feels.



That week, Eilis realizes that she's actively looking forward to her date with Tony. Although she hasn't stopped thinking about Ireland, she now only considers it when letters from Rose or her mother arrive. Still, she momentarily forgets what, exactly, she's looking forward to, and she instinctually assumes that she's looking forward to going home. When she realizes that what she's actually excited about is seeing Tony, she finds it odd that she would conflate this feeling with the idea of returning to Ireland.

Over the week, Eilis's housemates can't stop talking about Tony, wanting to know who he is and what he does. The fact that Eilis abandoned Dolores has endeared her to the other lodgers once again, and even Dolores doesn't seem to mind because she understands Eilis's desire to dance with a handsome man. All of the women say that Tony is good-looking, even if he could be taller or have better shoes. More importantly, they all assume he's Irish, and Eilis doesn't say anything to correct them.

When Tony picks up Eilis on Friday evening, he comes to the front door, accidentally subjecting himself to Mrs. Kehoe's quick barrage of questions. As fast as she can, Eilis comes to the door, but not before Mrs. Kehoe asks him his name, address, and profession. As he and Eilis walk to the church, Eilis makes him repeat his answers, so he tells her that his full name is Antonio Giuseppe Fiorello, though he told Mrs. Kehoe that his name is Tony McGrath. He also reveals that he's a plumber. After hearing all of this, Eilis instructs him to come to the basement door if she ever allows him to take her on a date again. By the end of the night, she can't deny that she likes dancing with him and finds him funny.

In the aftermath of Eilis's date with Tony, her housemates speak constantly about him. At one point, Mrs. Kehoe goes into another room and Eilis tells the rest of the women that Tony is Italian, trying to sooth Patty and Diana's discomfort with the fact that none of their friends have heard of him. Hearing this, Miss McAdam declares that she hopes the dances aren't going to be "inundated with Italians" now that Tony has proven that it's possible to find available Irish girls at the church. Agreeing, Sheila says that they all should be careful about letting men they don't know attend their dances, to which Eilis says, "Maybe if we got rid of some of the wallflowers, Sheila, with the sour look on their faces." In response, Sheila stands up and leaves the room as Diana laughs out loud.

Eilis's excitement surrounding her date with Tony eclipses her residual homesickness. This illustrates that Father Flood was right when he said that she simply needed to invest herself in her everyday life in Brooklyn in order to overcome her sadness. Now that she has done that, she's astounded to find just how entrenched she has become in her current existence.



That Eilis fails to correct her housemates when they assume that Tony is Irish suggests that she is uncomfortable with the idea of dating an Italian man. Of course, this makes sense, given that Mrs. Kehoe previously said that she hoped the church dances wouldn't be overrun by Italian men—a disparaging comment that cast Italians as undesirable. Not wanting to spoil the fact that her housemates finally like her again, Eilis lets them believe that Tony is Irish.



It makes sense that Eilis doesn't want Tony to talk to Mrs. Kehoe for too long. After all, she is a very private person who keeps her emotions hidden and guards secrets even from her own family. Consequently, the idea of Mrs. Kehoe grilling Tony for information unsettles her, though she doesn't let this ruin her night, as she clearly begins to enjoy spending time with him.



Again, Eilis finds herself at odds with some of her housemates, this time retaliating after Miss McAdam and Sheila try to make her feel bad about dating an Italian man. Although both Miss McAdam and Sheila are immigrants, they hold prejudices against other people who have traveled to America. Frustrated by this hypocrisy and trying to defend herself, then, Eilis insults Sheila's prudishness.



As time passes, Eilis grows closer to Tony, who admits that the reason he came to the church dance in the first place was because he likes Irish girls. Laughing, Eilis asks him if any Irish girl would do, but he says that he would be sad if she hadn't been there. She then tells him about how homesick she was when she first came to America, explaining that this is why she started taking classes at Brooklyn College. Her studies, she says, actually make her feel happy—a statement that prompts him to ask if *he* makes her happy. When he asks this, she sees that he's very serious, and she tells him that he does indeed make her happy, though she changes the subject before he can continue to ask her such sincere questions, fearing that her answers might disappoint him.

Tony begins meeting Eilis after her classes on Thursdays to walk her home, and they also start going to the movies together on Saturdays, in addition to their standing date at the Friday night dances. Whenever he drops her off at home, he kisses her just before Mrs. Kehoe's house comes into view, and she likes this. She even writes to Rose about him, sending the letter to her office so their mother won't find out. However, she leaves out that Tony's a plumber, but this is the first question Rose asks in her return letter, so she's forced to reveal this bit of information, though she tries to hide it in a long paragraph brimming with other details.

Around this time, Father Flood makes a point of introducing himself to Tony at one of the dances, and Eilis senses that Rose asked him to do this. Although she's nervous about this encounter at first, it soon becomes clear that Tony is comfortable talking to people like Father Flood, whom he wins over with his polite reverence. Before long, the two men are talking about baseball, having discovered that they're both Dodgers fans. As their conversation unfolds, Eilis wishes she could show Rose that it's not always possible in Brooklyn to judge people based on their jobs.

At work, Eilis notices that she's quickly becoming one of the most experienced saleswoman at the department store, since many of the other employees leave or are fired. She also starts having lunch with Miss Fortini rather frequently, and learns that, like her, Miss Fortini has an Italian boyfriend. Consequently, Miss Fortini tells her what to expect from Italian men and their families, and is impressed when Eilis reveals that Tony—unlike Miss Fortini's boyfriend—doesn't take her drinking with his friends and ignore her. For this reason, she tells her to keep him around.

Unlike Eilis, Tony is unafraid of speaking his mind. This includes talking openly about his feelings for Eilis, something that makes her uncomfortable because she's so guarded when it comes to discussing such matters. And though she tells him that he makes her happy, she actively tries to change the subject because she fears where it might lead. This, in turn, indicates that she isn't prepared to advance their relationship at the same rate that Tony apparently wants to advance it.



That Rose's first question about Tony is about what he does for a living once more confirms that she's fixated on class and social status. Having sent her younger sister to America so she could attain upward mobility, Rose wants to make sure that Eilis is with someone who will help her advance through society. Eilis, on the other hand, is simply interested in Tony for who he is.



Eilis has always looked up to Rose because she is knowledgeable and more experienced than her. Now, though, she realizes that Rose hasn't experienced some of the formative things that Eilis herself has encountered as a result of migrating to the United States. For instance, she now knows that judging people based on their profession isn't always a good way to discern their character. Rose, on the other hand, thinks that this is one of the only ways to decide whether or not a person is worth engaging. In this small way, then, Eilis has become more mature than her older sister.



As time progresses, Eilis becomes not only more experienced, but more comfortable in role at Bartocci's. This is made especially apparent by the fact that she starts to talk to Miss Fortini as a friend, as the two women bond over their relationships with Italian men. In this way, Tóibín marks Eilis's growing maturity.



In the weeks leading up to Eilis's exams, she begins to get stressed about whether or not she'll pass Professor Rosenblum's class, so she stops going to the movies with Tony on Saturdays in order to study. However, she still sees him, and he eagerly talks about all the things they're going to do in the summer, including going to Dodgers games. One night, he says that he wants their future children to be Dodgers fans, and he's so excited by this idea that he doesn't even notice that his comment has terrified Eilis, who suddenly wants to be alone so she can process what he's just said. Later that night, she thinks about this statement and understands that it's not all that surprising, since Tony has started telling her that he loves her.

By this point, Tony and Eilis have been dating for five months, so Eilis thinks he has a right to start thinking about marriage. However, she still finds it terrifying that he would assume they'll be together forever and have children. Still, she knows that their relationship is good, and whenever she has seen an attractive man in public, she only finds herself mildly interested for a moment before the attraction passes. On the Friday night after Tony talks about having children, Eilis quickly thanks him for walking her home and goes inside without kissing him. Instantly, she feels sorry for abandoning him, knowing that he'll tear himself apart until he sees her the following Thursday. All the same, though, she wishes she could tell him that she doesn't want to talk about having kids yet, though she fears he'll think this means she isn't serious about their relationship.

The following Thursday, Tony comes as usual to walk Eilis home from class. For a moment, she hesitates, having spotted him before he sees her. Not knowing what she's going to say to him, she sneaks over to a balcony, and she watches him as he waits patiently for her. As she looks at him, she senses that he is "delighted" to be picking her up, and she thinks that what's so remarkable about him is his willingness to present himself exactly as he is. Thinking this, she rushes downstairs and greets him, and he speaks enthusiastically as they walk back to Mrs. Kehoe's house—so enthusiastically that Eilis understands that he's still nervous about their last encounter.

Once again, Eilis is taken aback by how open Tony is about his emotions. For someone who is hesitant to express the way she feels, she finds it astonishing that Tony could unabashedly admit that he wants to have children with her someday. Instead of telling him that this seems a bit overbearing, though, she says nothing, once again revealing her passive nature, since it would be perfectly reasonable to let him know that he's getting ahead of himself.



The dilemma Eilis faces in this section—whether or not to tell Tony that he's moving too fast—arises from her inability to decide what, exactly, she wants out of their relationship. On the one hand, she likes Tony and is happy when she's with him. On the other hand, she's disarmed by his honesty and doesn't know if she's ready to commit to him as intensely as he's ready to commit to her. And yet, if she articulates this feeling, she risks possibly damaging their relationship by making him unsure of their bond. For the first time in her life, then, her hesitancy to voice her emotions has to do with more than her natural tendency to keep such matters to herself.



Again, Eilis can't believe how open Tony is when it comes to the way he presents his feelings. Instead of hiding his thoughts or emotions, he embodies them, and though she herself is apparently unwilling or unable to do this, she clearly admires this trait, since she rushes to meet him as soon as she recognizes just how genuine he is.



Before Tony and Eilis reach Mrs. Kehoe's house, Eilis turns to him and admits that she doesn't know what to say when he says he loves her. She says she thinks about him a lot and that she likes him, adding, "I care for you and maybe I love you too." The next time he says that he loves her, she says, she might say it back. When he asks if she's sure, she says yes, and he jumps in the air, yelling, "Holy shit!" and then apologizing for his language. He explains that he thought she was about to break up with him, and he continues to celebrate this good news. Eilis, for her part, asks if she can go home, but he says no, saying that he wants to jump up and down a bit more. Laughing, she tells him to do so quietly.

Eilis finds her exams easy and is relieved to be finished with them. Shortly after she finishes, Tony takes her to dinner at his house to meet his family, warning her that his little brother, Frank, will most likely say something rude or awkward to about their relationship. Eilis asks what he'll say, but Tony doesn't know, which is exactly what makes him nervous. Before they arrive, Tony also tells Eilis that the rest of his family members are all much darker skinned than him, but she's still surprised to see that this is true when they enter the apartment and meet his brothers, Laurence, Maurice, and Frank, along with his parents. Right away, though, Eilis knows she shouldn't say anything about how different Tony looks, sensing that this is what everyone always talks about when they first meet the family.

Tony's family lives in a small apartment made up of two rooms. The front room is where they eat dinner with Eilis when she visits, and Frank explains—to the chagrin of his family members—that the room also serves as his parents' bedroom. At one point, Frank turns to her and says, "We don't like Irish people," going on to say that a group of Irish boys once beat up Maurice. The rest of the family yells at him, and his father takes him into the hall to have a stern conversation. Shortly after they sit down to eat, Tony is called away on an emergency plumbing request, and his brothers explain that everyone in the neighborhood calls him when their drains get clogged.

While Tony is gone, Frank whispers to Eilis, asking if Tony has taken her to Coney Island yet. When she says he hasn't, Frank tells her that Tony took his previous girlfriend to Coney Island but doesn't like to talk about it because she vomited on the Ferris wheel and broke up with him as a result. Eilis listens with amusement, thinking that Frank is the cutest little boy she's ever seen. When Tony's father asks what Frank is saying, Eilis claims that he's simply telling her about Coney Island in the summer. Pleased that Eilis would cover for him like this, Frank smiles and tells her that he hopes Tony takes her to Coney Island because he thinks she'll like it.

When Eilis tells Tony that she loves him, she does so sheepishly and in a convoluted way. This is because she's so unused to articulating her feelings. To that end, it almost seems as if she didn't even plan to say that she loves Tony, or perhaps that she didn't even know she loved him before she started talking. This, in turn, leads readers to wonder if she truly loves him, or if she simply got swept up in the moment and found herself saying something she doesn't really mean, though her willingness to laugh when Tony jumps up and down indicates that she feels more or less comfortable about what she has just told him.



When Eilis decides not to comment on how different Tony looks from the rest of his family, she demonstrates her shrewd social intuition. Indeed, although she doesn't like talking about herself, she's quite good at reading other people. In all likelihood, she developed this ability because she constantly had to gauge what her family members were thinking and feeling at home, since nobody in her family ever talks about their emotions.



When Frank tells Eilis that he and his family don't like Irish people, he tries to make her uncomfortable by pointing out what he perceives as the thing that makes her different than the rest of them. This is rather ironic, since some of Eilis's housemates feel the same way about Italian people. On another note, although people like Rose might look down upon Tony for being a plumber, it becomes clear in this scene that he actually fills a very important role in his community and, as a result, has a sterling reputation.



In this moment, Eilis learns that Tony actually does have secrets of his own. After all, he has never mentioned this previous girlfriend. And though this is a rather harmless, insignificant detail, the fact that he has certain things that he doesn't want Eilis to know most likely endears him to her, since she can relate to his desire to keep certain information hidden.



At work that week, Eilis tells Miss Fortini that Tony is taking her to the beach in Coney Island, and Miss Fortini says that Italian men care what their girlfriends look like in bathing suits. Several days later, Miss Fortini obtains several suits for Eilis, and the two women go to the fitting rooms after work so she can try them on. She feels odd in the outfits, especially when Miss Fortini touches her behind and slides her fingers beneath the elastic, commenting that Eilis will need to shave her bikini line. This scenario repeats itself each time she puts on a new suit, and Miss Fortini positions herself so that Eilis can't close the curtain when she changes. Feeling Miss Fortini's searching eyes, Eilis makes a quick decision about the suits and ignores Miss Fortini's request to try them on a second time.

Eilis receives a letter saying that she passed her exams. Armed with this news, she goes for a walk and feels that everything is overwhelmingly beautiful, noting that she's never felt so happy in Brooklyn. Tony helps her celebrate by promising to bring her to Coney Island on the subway, which is crowded with other people headed to the beach. When they arrive, there's hardly any space on the sand, but Eilis and Tony stake out a spot and begin to take off their clothes. Thankfully, Diana has already informed Eilis that people in America don't change on the beach like they do in Ireland, so she wore her suit under her clothes. Still, she feels vulnerable as she peels off the layers, and she's grateful that Tony averts his eyes as she does so.

In the water, Eilis swims out into the waves before looping back to Tony, who remains standing in the shallows. He explains to her that he can't swim, and it soon becomes clear to her what he has in mind: he wants to stand in the waves with the water coming up to his neck while he holds her close. At first, this feels too intimate to her, especially since she can feel his erection straining against her through his swimsuit. Before long, though, she relaxes into this stance, and they spend the afternoon interlocked like this as the waves break over them.

As summer turns to fall and fall turns to winter, Eilis sees more of Tony and his family. She is once again going to night classes, but this doesn't interfere with her blossoming relationship with Tony, and she even goes to his house for Thanksgiving. When Christmas rolls around, though, she works at the church like the previous year. In the period after this, she spends every day with Tony, and he tells her that he and his brothers have bought a plot of land on Long Island. There is no electricity or plumbing in the area yet, he explains, but all of that is soon to come. He and his brothers plan to build five houses on the land, some of which they'll rent out. One house, though, could be Eilis and Tony's if they want it. Although Eilis feels nervous about these plans, she simply smiles and nods.

Eilis has never been in a romantic relationship, but she has now hurtled into the mature world of adult sexuality. Left to parse Miss Fortini's mixture of attraction, friendship, and authority, she finds herself confused and unprepared to respond to the woman's sudden interest in her body—an understandable reaction, considering that she's never had any sexual experiences, to say nothing of sexual encounters in the workplace.



As time progresses, Eilis undergoes a number of new experiences. She has now not only completed a year of college courses in America, but she has a boyfriend in front of whom she takes off her clothes to reveal a bathing suit. Though this might sound rather modest, it's worth remembering that Eilis has never had a significant other, nor has she had any sexual encounters. Consequently, this moment on the beach is an informative one as she comes of age and participates in an adult relationship.



Again, Eilis has a formative experience with Tony, this time becoming physically intimate with him, letting him get closer than she's ever let anyone before. As she does this, readers sense that she's not only growing up and becoming more adult, but also getting more and more comfortable with the idea of having a serious relationship.



Once more, Tony demonstrates just how invested he is in his relationship with Eilis by making extravagant plans for the future. And though it's understandable that this attitude slightly alarms Eilis, it's also worth noting that they've been together for the better part of a year. In addition, Eilis herself has become increasingly committed to her relationship with Tony, so her unexpressed hesitancy to continue advancing their bond most likely has to do with her tendency to build emotional barriers than with anything else. Still, she characteristically fails to voice her reservations, thereby giving Tony the impression that she is just as invested in their future as he is.



Eilis writes to Rose and tries to explain just how serious her relationship with Tony is, attempting to convince her sister that she's not just staying with him because he's her first boyfriend. In her letters to her mother, though, she continues to say nothing about him. Rose's response is terse but polite, and she cautions Eilis against making any big decisions, telling her to focus on earning her bookkeeping certificate and finding a job in an office.

Father Flood visits Eilis at work one day and informs her that Rose died in her sleep the night before. As she tries to understand what he's saying, he tells her that Rose was in seemingly perfect health just yesterday, but that her mother tried to wake her up this morning and was unable. The funeral, he tells her, will take place in two days, though her mother will call her tonight from a nearby parish. Unable to contain her grief, Eilis bursts into tears, saying, "Why did I ever come over here?" and repeating this question over and over as Father Flood reminds her that Rose wanted the best for her. Still, she says that she wishes she never came to America.

When her mother calls that night, she tells Eilis what it was like to find Rose that morning. According to the doctor, she says, Rose died in her sleep. Apparently, she had been seeing this doctor secretly and neglecting to tell anyone that she had a critical heart condition. The doctor informed Eilis's mother that there was nothing that could have been done to help her. For this reason, Rose lived her life like there was nothing wrong, though the doctor often told her to "take it easy"—advice she largely ignored. Eilis's mother then talks about how lonely the house feels, despite the fact that neighbors and family members have been visiting all day. She also promises Eilis that she'll say goodbye to Rose for her at the funeral the next day.

Eilis's mother says she wishes Rose had told her that something was wrong with her heart. She knows that Rose simply didn't want to worry her, but she still wishes she told her, even if it wouldn't have changed anything. "I don't know what to think," she tells Eilis before promising again to say goodbye to Rose for her the following day. When they hang up, Eilis descends into a fit of tears.

Finally, Eilis tries to be as honest as possible about the nature of her relationship with Tony, at least in her correspondence with Rose, though it's clear that this does little to convince her sister that Tony—who doesn't have the kind of social status that pleases Rose—is good enough for her. And though she's honest with Rose, she has yet to tell her mother anything at all about Tony, thereby continuing her pattern of secrecy.



Responding to the news of Rose's death, Eilis's first reaction is to say that she wished she never came to America. This is because she feels guilty that Rose—who she always thought would have been better suited than her for a life abroad—sacrificed herself in order to make it possible for Eilis to have new opportunities. This is why it doesn't help when Father Flood reminds her that Rose only wanted the best for her, since she can't forget that Rose put Eilis's happiness before her own, thereby giving up her final days. Worst of all, Eilis hardly got the chance to thank her sister for what she did, since they rarely spoke about their emotions.



Rose's decision to keep the news of her heart condition a secret aligns with her family's tendency to avoid telling each other things that might cause worry. Now, though, Eilis and her mother see how devastating it can be when loved ones finally find out a secret that has been kept from them. Rather than sparing her mother and sister, Rose simply made it worse for them when they finally discovered what she'd been hiding, ultimately giving them an even worse shock than necessary.



In this moment, Eilis's mother says that she would rather have known about Rose's heart condition than have remained in the dark about the matter. Although she might not have been able to do anything, simply knowing would have helped her eventually cope with Rose's death. When she says, "I don't know what to think," she demonstrates that this kind of secrecy only leads to confusion, disorientation, and despair.



The next day, Eilis goes to a mass that Father Flood holds for Rose. All the while, she thinks about how she'll never see her sister again and contemplates the fact that anyone she sees on the streets could have died instead of Rose. After the mass, though, she decides to go to work, craving the distraction of the sales floor. She also goes to work the following day, after which she goes to dinner with Tony and talks about her sister's death, saying that she wishes Rose had told her or her mother about her heart condition.

Each day, Eilis goes to work and then walks home with Tony. Eventually, she receives a letter from Jack updating her on what things are like at home. He and his brothers have returned to Enniscorthy for the funeral, and because he knows nobody else will be able to write to Eilis, he has taken it upon himself. He notes that he has tried multiple times to draft this letter but keeps ripping it up, which is why he's decided not to reread what he's written when he finishes this version. He tells Eilis that their mother is beside herself and lonely, hoping that one of her sons will stay in the house with her even though none of them can leave their jobs. Jack acknowledges that his mother would want him to say that everyone is doing all right, but he can't bring himself to say this.

Upon reading Jack's letter, Eilis understands that she has to go home. She even considers taking the subway directly to the harbor and buying a ticket that instant for a transatlantic voyage, but she decides against this. Feeling at a loss, she goes to Tony's house even though it's late, and he takes her to a diner, where she shows him the letter. For a while, he simply studies it before saying that he wishes she could have been at Rose's funeral. His face is so sad, though, that Eilis realizes that showing him the letter was a mistake, because now there's nothing she'll be able to do to convince him that she isn't going to leave him to return to Ireland.

Tony insists upon walking Eilis home. When they arrive at the basement door, they embrace, and she wishes she could promise him that she won't leave, but then she senses that Tony thinks she *should* visit Ireland. Not wanting to go inside alone, she silently leads him into her room, where they kiss passionately before moving toward the bed. When he lifts her skirt, she can tell he's waiting for a sign from her, so she takes off her underwear. When she lets Tony enter her, she's astounded by how much it hurts and by how he seems to suddenly forget that she's there, straining deeper and deeper even as she tenses in pain. When they finish, they lie next to each other beneath the covers for a while before having sex again, and though time it's even more painful this time, Eilis finds herself loving Tony more than ever.

Naturally, Eilis is distraught by her sister's death, which causes her to reevaluate the very way she sees the world. As she walks on the streets, she has a new way of looking at the people who pass her by, and she thinks sadly about what she has lost. At the same time, though, her decision to return to work signals her newfound ability to use everyday life as a coping mechanism, throwing herself into various distractions in the same way that she did when she was homesick.



Jack's honesty in his letter is uncharacteristic for members of the Lacey family, who normally avoid telling each other things that might cause worry. Rather than telling Eilis that her mother is doing well, he admits that she's distraught and lonely. In doing so, he no doubt makes Eilis feel as if she should come home.



A sensitive and kind man, Tony thinks about how Eilis must be feeling after reading Jack's letter. However, Eilis senses that he is worried she'll leave him—a reasonable concern, considering that she almost went straight to the harbor when she first read the letter.



Despite the many emotional barriers Eilis puts up between her and her loved ones, she now transcends anything that might stand between her and Tony. Of course, her sister's death seems somewhat related to her willingness to become so intimate with Tony, perhaps because she has realized that she'll have to return to Ireland and, in turn, that this will mean leaving Tony (at least for a short period). Thinking about this, she comes to understand just how much she cares about him.



The next day, Eilis is certain that Mrs. Kehoe knows she had Tony over and heard them having sex, since she doesn't speak when Eilis enters the kitchen. After Mrs. Kehoe leaves, Patty wonders why she's in a bad mood, and Diana mischievously says that she thinks she knows, though she adds that she "heard nothing." When Patty asks what she's talking about, Diana replies, "Nothing. But it sounded lovely." The next morning, Eilis wakes up and begins to worry how she'll know if she's pregnant. She then decides that both she and Tony must go to confession, though she knows she can't go to Father Flood. Accordingly, Tony suggests that she see an Italian priest, and she agrees to do this as long as the priest understands English.

During confession, the Italian priest asks Eilis if she wants to marry Tony, and though she hesitates, she says that she does but isn't ready yet. Seeing that she's deeply sorry for having had sex out of wedlock, the priest takes pity on her and tells her to say only one Hail Mary and to come back in a month. When she returns from confession, there's a new lock on the basement, so she has to enter through the front door. Once inside, she hears Mrs. Kehoe loudly telling Miss McAdam that she's going to keep the basement locked, saying, "You wouldn't know who would be going down there." That night at dinner, both she and Miss McAdam ignore Eilis.

Shortly thereafter, Eilis receives a letter from her mother, in which her mother talks about how lonely she is in the empty house. And although Eilis continues to keep Tony a secret from her mother in her return letters, she wonders if her mother has found the letters she sent Rose and thus discovered that she's in a relationship, though nothing her mother has said indicates that this has happened. Meanwhile, she feels as if her relationship with Tony is becoming better and better, as she feels closer to him after the night they spent together. Thankfully, she soon learns that she isn't pregnant, so this also helps her begin to feel better about having had sex with him; she even thinks back to the experience with fondness.

After mass one Sunday, Eilis notices that Father Flood is avoiding her, so she visits him later that day. When she greets him, it becomes immediately clear that he has spoken with Mrs. Kehoe about her suspicions regarding what went on that night in the basement between Eilis and Tony. Needing something to talk about, Eilis finds herself telling Father Flood that she wants a month off from work so she can visit her mother in Ireland. Hearing this, Father Flood agrees to talk to Mr. Bartocci, at which point Eilis asks him to also talk to Mrs. Kehoe, since she is having problems with her. However, he urges her to talk to Mrs. Kehoe herself, saying that she should simply be kind to her. In return, he says, he will talk to Mr. Bartocci.

Although Eilis worries that her night with Tony has jeopardized her living arrangements and that she might be pregnant, there's no denying that this entire matter has given her something to think about other than Rose's death. Once again, then, she finds that distraction is often helpful when it comes to dealing with hardship, though this particular distraction isn't ideal.



That the priest is so forgiving of Eilis while Mrs. Kehoe and Miss McAdam ostracize her for having sex with Tony underscores just how judgmental and strict the two women can be. To them, inviting a man into the house at night and having unmarried sex is something that could ruin the entire household's reputation. The priest, on the other hand, isn't concerned about social matters, which is why he is more lenient than Mrs. Kehoe and Miss McAdam.



Even though she now knows what it feels like to discover that a loved one is keeping a secret, Eilis continues to hide her relationship with Tony from her mother. Meanwhile, her and Tony's bond becomes stronger, since they've now reached a new level of intimacy and, thus, connection.



Although Father Flood clearly disapproves of the fact that Eilis brought Tony to her bedroom, he still agrees to help her. What's significant about this moment, though, is that Eilis's decision to return to Ireland has less to do with her actual desire to do so than with the fact that she feels awkward and needs something to talk about while facing Father Flood. In turn, she makes a major decision based on fairly arbitrary social circumstances, once again moving through her life rather passively.



The following Friday, Eilis receives a letter from Father Flood telling her that Mr. Bartocci has agreed to give her a month of unpaid time off and that—assuming she passes her upcoming final exams—they will try to find an office position for her when she returns. That same day, Mrs. Kehoe invites her to have tea, and Eilis graciously accepts. As they sit together, Mrs. Kehoe asks if she would mind if she took off the lock she put on the basement, explaining that she asked a friend’s husband (who is a police officer) to keep an eye on the house, meaning that they won’t need the lock anymore. Eilis tells her that this is a fantastic idea and tells her to thank her friend’s husband.

As exams approach, Eilis tells Tony her plan to visit Ireland for a month. For a long time, he remains silent, but just before dropping her off at Mrs. Kehoe’s house, he asks her to walk around the block. Sitting on an empty stoop, he asks her to marry him before she returns to Ireland. He tells her that it can be a secret and that they can have a ceremony later, when she returns. All he wants, he says, is to be legally married. He tells her that he knows how difficult it will be for her to come back to Brooklyn after she goes home, which is why he’s afraid he’ll lose her. And although Eilis promises that she won’t abandon him, he still wants to get married. After a moment of consideration, then, she agrees.

Eilis and Tony agree to keep their upcoming marriage a secret. However, when she visits his parents’ house for lunch one day, she senses that his family knows, since they’re dressed in nice clothes and acting more formal than usual, though nobody says anything. Still, the family doesn’t allow Frank to speak, quickly cutting him off whenever he opens his mouth. Finally, though, Eilis says she’d like to hear what he has to say, and he simply asks if he can stay in Tony and Eilis’s house in Long Island if the rest of his family is bothering him. As Tony stares into his lap, Eilis tells Frank that he will always be welcome, conspiratorially telling him that she’ll help him “deal” with his family. By the end of lunch, Eilis privately hopes that Tony’s family truly does know about their marriage.

The week before Eilis leaves, she and Tony get legally married and then go to Coney Island. As they look out at the sea, she wonders aloud if they’ll ever tell their children about their initial, secretive marriage, and Tony says that perhaps they’ll tell them on a special anniversary.

In the aftermath of her conversation with Father Flood, Eilis’s sudden decision to return to Ireland takes hold. Although she made this decision simply because she wanted to have something to ask Father Flood when she visited him (feeling awkward confronting him about what happened between her and Tony), she now has to go through with the plan, once again passively resigning herself to her fate. Meanwhile, she patches up her relationship with Mrs. Kehoe simply by having tea with her—a sign that Mrs. Kehoe appreciates small pleasantries and the kind of behavior practiced by respectable, high-class people.



Like most of her major life decisions, Eilis agrees to marry Tony not necessarily because she wants to, but because it’s easier to simply go along with the idea than to refuse his offer. Of course, this is not to say that she desperately wishes she didn’t have to marry him. In fact, it’s quite likely that she does take pleasure in this idea, but it’s obvious that she wouldn’t be pursuing this option at the moment if she could avoid it. Nonetheless, refusing would mean being honest about her feelings—something she’s unwilling to do. Consequently, she goes along with his plan.



Even though Eilis wants her and Tony’s marriage to remain a secret for the time being, she comes to like that his family most likely knows about it. After all, this would mean Tony was so excited that he couldn’t keep himself from telling them. This, of course, stands in stark contrast to the relational dynamic Eilis has with her own family, considering that she hasn’t even told her mother that Tony exists. In turn, Tony’s emotional openness both surprises and pleases Eilis.



It’s worth pointing out that Eilis makes a reference to her and Tony’s future children, since she was originally so taken aback when Tony did the very same thing. Now, though, she has warmed up to the idea of spending the rest of her life with him—a good thing, too, since she just married him.



PART FOUR

Back in Ireland, Eilis's mother shows her Rose's room, talking all the while about how they'll need to sort through Rose's clothing. Eilis's initial impression of her childhood home doesn't disconcert her like she thought it might. Rather, it just seems familiar, though she dislikes how quiet Rose's room feels and is unsettled by the fact that she feels nothing when she enters it. As they eat breakfast on her first full day home, her mother talks about how she ordered a wreath for Eilis to place on Rose's grave, but all Eilis can think about is how her mother would respond if she interrupted and said that she's married. Convinced that her mother would pretend not to hear this, she keeps quiet, neglecting to tell her anything at all about her life, like that she received word just before leaving Brooklyn that she passed her exams.

Eilis spent the journey to Ireland planning how she would tell her mother about Tony and her life in America, but her mother doesn't ask any questions about what it's like to live in Brooklyn. Instead, she focuses on various details regarding Rose's death, talking about how she needs Eilis's help writing **thank-you cards** to the many people who sent notes or visited the house to pay their respects. Instead of telling her mother about Tony, then, Eilis goes upstairs on the false pretense that she's tired from her travels.

Together, Eilis and her mother write thank-you cards to the people who sent condolences. Eilis's mother has even memorized some of the things people said either in person or in letters, though she also criticizes how some of the visitors in the aftermath of Rose's death either stayed too long or talked too much. Because of these anecdotes, this process takes multiple days, boring Eilis even as she tries to get her mother to work faster. Eventually, she starts trying to make plans with Nancy and Annette, but her mother makes it hard for her to do this, saying that they will need to clean out Rose's room after finishing the **thank-you cards**. This overwhelms Eilis, but she doesn't want to let her mother do this task on her own because she wants to make sure that she keeps the stash of letters she sent to Rose about Tony hidden.

Eilis continues to keep secrets about her life in Brooklyn. Even though she has experienced so much while living abroad, she can't bring herself to tell her mother about important developments in her life. That she fails to say these things when she first comes home suggests that she won't manage to ever tell her mother that she's married, since doing so will only become harder and harder as time goes on.



The longer Eilis puts off telling her mother about Tony, the less likely it is that she will ever come clean about the fact that she's married. Her mother, for her part, doesn't seem to want to know anything about her life in Brooklyn, perhaps because she hopes Eilis will focus on her existence in Ireland and ultimately end up staying at home instead of returning to America.



Eilis's mother's obsession with writing these thank-you cards is interesting, since writing these notes is partly an act of emotional expression and partly an act of social posturing. After all, these cards are perhaps the only form in which she talks openly about her sadness, but her determination to write them also has to do with her desire to fulfill certain social expectations, wanting to look like a well-respected and polite person. Eilis, on the other hand, doesn't want to write the notes because she doesn't care as much about impressing her former community members, nor does she feel like thinking about Rose's death.



Eilis wonders if perhaps she *should* let her mother find her letters about Tony, whom she's only written to a couple of times since reaching Ireland. Putting this matter out of her mind, though, she finally goes to Nancy's house and invites her and Annette to come over when they have a chance. The following day, she and her mother visit Rose's grave, and the entire experience depresses Eilis. On their way home, her mother suggests that they take a secluded and direct route, and Eilis realizes that she doesn't want to risk anyone seeing Eilis and inviting her out, clearly hating the idea of spending time alone in the house.

That night, Nancy and Annette come over and talk with Eilis about Nancy's wedding to George Sheridan, which is taking place soon. At one point, Nancy says she's happy Eilis will be in attendance, surprising Eilis because the wedding is taking place after she'll already have left for America again. When she says this, though, Nancy tells her that her mother RSVP'd for her, writing to accept the invitation for both herself and for Eilis. As Nancy says this, Eilis's mother enters the room and serves the girls tea, making a comment about how stylishly she and her daughter will dress for Nancy's wedding, since this is "what Rose would want." When she leaves, Nancy turns to Eilis and says that she has no choice but to come to her wedding now.

Thinking about Nancy's wedding, Eilis remembers that she was told when she bought her return tickets that she could change her travel dates as long as she told the shipping company ahead of time. As she sits with Nancy and Annette, she decides to postpone her return to Brooklyn by one week. When Annette asks if she has somebody waiting for her in America who might be upset that she won't be coming home as planned, she simply replies by joking that Mrs. Kehoe is the only person who will care. She tells herself that she has formulated this lie because she can't tell her friends about Tony before she tells her mother. Changing the subject, Nancy and Annette tell her about what's been happening in town, saying that Jim Farrell was recently dumped.

As time passes in Enniscorthy, Eilis remains unable to tell her mother about Tony. This is why she thinks that maybe it would be a good thing if her mother found the letters she sent to Rose about him, since this would at least save her from having to tell her herself. Meanwhile, it becomes clear that her mother wants her to stay in Ireland, trying to keep her busy and focused on everyday life in Enniscorthy because she doesn't want her to leave.



As Eilis's mother manipulatively makes it harder for her to leave Ireland, readers begin to sense that Eilis might never go back to Brooklyn. After all, she is passive when it comes to making big decisions in her life. If, therefore, her mother makes it hard for her to leave, she might acquiesce to the circumstances, becoming used to life in Enniscorthy even though Tony is waiting for her in Brooklyn.



Eilis decides to put off her return trip to the United States because this is the easiest choice available to her, since she's unwilling to be honest about her relationship with Tony and therefore can't explain why she has to go home. Once again, she passively responds to her circumstances instead of making her own decision. At the same time, though, readers will perhaps get the sense that some part of her likes the idea of staying in Ireland, where everything is familiar. And if this is the case, then Eilis is once more slowly getting used to another way of life, this time reacclimating to the patterns of her childhood home. In turn, Tóibín illustrates yet again that people tend to become accustomed to their environments, though Eilis's decision to postpone her return to America demonstrates that it's important for people to be aware of their own ability to acclimate, since there should be a difference between actively adapting and passively acquiescing to new circumstances.



In the following days, Eilis runs errands with her mother and finds that people can't stop complimenting her on her tan skin and her stylish American clothing. She also makes plans to go to the beach with Nancy, Annette, and George, looking forward to an opportunity to get out of her mother's house. In the meantime, she finally helps her mother sort through Rose's clothes, and when she insists that she doesn't have any room to take home her sister's coat, her mother acts as if she hasn't heard her.

Eilis writes to tell Tony that she'll be staying an extra week, then packs her bag for the beach. When Nancy and George pick her up, though, she's surprised to see that Annette isn't coming with them. Instead, Jim Farrell gets out of the car and opens the door for her. Throughout the day, he makes shy attempts to talk to her, extending his sympathy about Rose's death and asking about her life in America. That evening, they all go for tea in the hotel where Nancy and George will be getting married. They then return to Enniscorthy and visit the pub that Jim and his parents own. Before they part for the night, they all agree to go to the dance the following weekend.

When Eilis comes home, her mother tells her that Rose's former office called and asked if she could come in. It's their busy season, Rose's boss explained, and they need somebody to process the overtime payments that their workers have accrued. Eilis's mother promised to send her, so Eilis plans to work the following morning, surprised to find that she's no longer uncomfortable about being home and actually even looks forward to working in the office. When she goes upstairs, she finds a letter on her bed from Tony. The writing is stilted, but she finds his words very touching, and she wishes she could show the note to her mother but ultimately keeps herself from doing so. Suddenly, she wishes she hadn't married Tony, because keeping their marriage a secret only adds to the feeling that her life in Brooklyn is nothing more than a remote fantasy.

The next day, Eilis works diligently at the office, impressing Rose's former boss and finishing the allotted work quite efficiently. She reflects upon the fact that this is exactly the kind of work she has always dreamed of doing. She then thinks about how she never told Tony that she wants to keep working even after getting married, and she wonders if perhaps she could be the bookkeeper for the company that he wants to start with his brothers when they move to Long Island. Thinking this way, she realizes that she hasn't yet responded to his last letter even though she intended to do so that morning.

Given that Eilis is already a rather passive person, it doesn't help that her mother is actively trying to get her to stay home by bribing her with Rose's clothing and pretending not to hear her when she talks about returning to America. Indeed, the combination of her own acquiescence and her mother's subtle manipulations makes it exceedingly unlikely that she'll manage to rip herself away from Enniscorthy to resume her life in Brooklyn.



As Eilis goes out with her friends, it becomes more and more clear that she is acclimating to life in Enniscorthy. And though she most likely has negative feelings about Jim because he treated her rudely before she left for America, these reservations don't seem to be quite enough to stop her from making plans for the following week—a sign that she has no intention of extricating herself from the group.



Slowly but surely, Eilis sinks into the everyday patterns of life in Enniscorthy. More importantly, she suddenly seems to have everything she wanted but couldn't have before she left for America—an active social life and the chance to work in an office. The only thing holding her back from fully recommitting herself to a life in Ireland, it seems, is her marriage to Tony, and even this seems to have a fairly small impact on her, since she can't quite recapture the feeling of immediacy that once surrounded their relationship.



As time slips by, Eilis starts comparing her life in Enniscorthy and her life in Brooklyn. Although she doesn't necessarily allow herself to admit that she's enjoying her current existence more than she enjoyed her time in Brooklyn, it's obvious that she's getting used to living in Enniscorthy again, as evidenced by the fact that she has forgotten to write to Tony. In turn, readers sense that she's losing touch with her ties to America.



On Eilis's second outing with Nancy, George, and Jim, Eilis finds herself enjoying Jim's company more than she would have expected. Throughout the day, Jim is well-mannered and attentive, and it becomes clear that he's interested in her. While Nancy and George swim together, Jim and Eilis pass the time talking while sitting on the group's blankets. Before long, they decide to join the others in the water, and Eilis slowly begins to understand that George and Jim have planned this day as a double date. Instead of getting upset about this, though, she decides to "go along" with it, though she purposefully swims away from Jim. However, he swims after her, and she wonders what she would think if she knew Tony were at Coney Island right now swimming with another woman, but this thought evaporates when she realizes that Tony would never do such a thing.

At one point, George takes out a camera and takes **pictures** of everyone. Jim poses with Eilis, and then the entire group poses when a stranger walks by on the beach and agrees to take their picture. Eilis can feel Jim's body behind her, but she can tell that he's being mindful about how close he gets, and she appreciates his careful consideration.

That night, the group goes to the local dance, though not before first having a fancy dinner at an upscale hotel. During the meal, Jim is gentlemanly and mild-mannered. Later, Eilis dances with him for the entire night, getting close for the slow songs that play at the end of the set. Before getting in the car to go home, she and Jim linger behind Nancy and George. Alone, they kiss with passion before joining Nancy and George in the car. On the way home, they continue to do this, trying to hide their activity until finally Nancy and George openly laugh at them.

On Monday morning, Eilis receives word that Rose's former boss would like to see her. When she goes to the office, he tells her that he'd like to hire her when something opens up, having heard that she's a certified bookkeeper. The work she did the previous week, he explains, was very impressive. When she tries to tell him that she'll soon be returning to America, he waves this off and tells her that she doesn't have to make any final decisions right now. Going along with this, she tells him that she'll consider the offer.

That Eilis goes in the water with Jim is significant because swimming has already been presented in the novel as an intimate, sexually charged activity. Consequently, her decision to "go along" with Jim as he gets in the water signals her willingness to test the boundaries of her loyalty to Tony even though she knows he would never do the same thing to her.



As Eilis relaxes into the idea of spending time with Jim, she feels a current of intimacy running between them. In the same way that she was acutely aware of Tony's proximity to her when they first danced together, she now pays close attention to the ways in which Jim draws near her.



It's worth remembering that nobody in Enniscorthy knows that Eilis is married. Having kept this a secret, then, she's free to do whatever she wants, at least insofar as nobody will stop her. When she finally kisses Jim, readers see that she has been easing herself into this relationship, slowly getting used to the idea of being with Jim instead of Tony, though she has done nothing to end her relationship with Tony. Rather, she passively allows her bond with Jim to unfold.



Once again, Eilis responds to developments in her life with passivity. Instead of making it clear to Rose's boss that she won't be able to accept the job, she lets him think that she'll consider it. And though she believes she's tricking him into thinking this, in reality she's the one tricking herself, since it's obvious that she actually is entertaining the idea of staying in Enniscorthy.



Later that day, Eilis helps Nancy with the seating arrangement for the wedding. As they work on this, they talk about how Jim wasn't interested in her before she went to America, and Nancy points out that Eilis seems different now, referring to her new clothes and newfound confidence. When Eilis goes home and has tea with her mother, they discuss the Farrells, her mother explaining that the house Jim will soon inherit is one of the nicest ones in town. After this conversation, Eilis goes upstairs and finds two letters from Tony on her bed, realizing that she hasn't even responded to his last one. As she stares at the letters, she feels as if her entire life in Brooklyn no longer seems real. She decides to read Tony's letters later.

One day, Jim Farrell meets Eilis after she finishes working in Rose's former office, and they go on a date. When he asks when she's leaving, she says she has yet to arrange the date. He then tells her that she will be sorely missed by her mother, and she agrees. Going on, he invites her to have tea with his parents, who desperately want to meet her. In response, she tells them that they can arrange a time to do this after Nancy's wedding.

On the day of Nancy's wedding, Eilis's mother is exceedingly proud that Jim will be picking them up in his car. When he arrives, she exits the house and relishes that all her neighbors come outside to compliment her and Eilis's clothing. At the wedding, Eilis imagines what it would be like to marry Jim in the very same church, and she wonders how she could possibly call off her marriage with Tony. She also wonders what Jim would do if he knew she had to get a divorce in order to marry him. As she thinks this way, she tries to banish such thoughts from her mind, but she finds it difficult to stop fantasizing about living in Jim Farrell's large house, which is so close to her mother's home.

During the celebrations proceeding the wedding, Nancy's drunk mother approaches Jim and Eilis and says that Jim will inevitably be the next young man to get married in town. She then laughs too much when Eilis says, "Jim and I promised my mother we'd make sure she knows where the car is," cackling at the phrase "Jim and I." After finally escaping her, they drive away from the wedding on their own, at which point Jim tells her that his mother is going to help set up a prize at the golf club in Rose's honor.

Eilis discovers when she talks to Nancy that she now has a certain amount of social capital that she didn't have before she went to the United States. This is because her community worships the mere idea of upward mobility and associates living in America with success. Of course, it's true that Eilis has advanced somewhat by earning her bookkeeping certification, but she hasn't yet worked in an office or done anything in the United States that she couldn't do in Enniscorthy. Nonetheless, her townspeople admire her. Similarly, her mother speaks positively about Jim Farrell because he could further improve Eilis's social standing.



The fact that Eilis tells Jim that they can decide upon a time to have tea after Nancy's wedding illustrates just how unmotivated she is to return to Brooklyn. After all, she originally intended upon postponing her return trip until right after the wedding, but now she clearly plans to stay longer. Once again, then, readers see that she is passively becoming used to her life in Enniscorthy, indefinitely putting off her trip back to Brooklyn and working as hard as she can not to think about this decision.



Again, Eilis's mother's obsession with social status comes to the forefront of the novel, as she takes pleasure in the idea of her neighbors seeing her riding in a fancy car with Jim Farrell, who is now the town's most eligible bachelor. Similarly, Eilis's fantasy about marrying Jim in the same church in which Nancy marries George signifies her own interest in climbing the social ladder in Enniscorthy. The longer she stays in Ireland, it seems, the more appealing this possibility becomes, even if following through with this fantasy would mean abandoning Tony.



Eilis's refusal to tell Jim (or anyone else) about her marriage to Tony makes it easy for her to fall into a relationship with Jim, but so does the way everyone else celebrates the idea of them getting married. Although Eilis doesn't particularly like what Nancy's mother says because it makes her feel awkward, there's no denying that the old woman is simply saying what's on everyone's mind—including Eilis's.



Jim parks the car at the beach, and they walk out onto the sand and talk about the wedding. Opening up about his childhood, Jim talks about what it was like to be an only child, saying that he's often quite shy as a result. This, he says, is why he was rude to Eilis at the dance two years ago. He says that he felt terrible about this and was quite upset when Eilis left shortly thereafter. When he saw that she had returned, he says, he was desperate to spend time with her again. He then embraces her as they sit on the beach, wrapping his arms around her and placing his hands on her breasts. After a moment, he asks if she would consider getting engaged to him before she goes back to Brooklyn.

Eilis tells Jim that they can "talk about [getting engaged] soon," and then she turns around and kisses him. They stay on the beach until the sun begins to set, at which point they walk back to the car and return to town.

Eilis and her mother receive a letter from Jim's mother inviting them to a ceremony celebrating the prize that the golf club has established in Rose's honor. Eilis's mother says she doesn't want to go, so Eilis decides to represent the family. Going up stairs, she looks at Tony's unopened letters and realizes that she'll never be able to tell him about Jim. This, she knows, means that she will have to return. Thinking this way, she decides to book her return trip after the event at the golf club.

The day before the event at the golf club, Eilis visits Rose's grave again but feels unable to speak to her sister. On her way home, Mary chases her down and tells her that Miss Kelly wants to see her, so she goes to the grocery store, where Miss Kelly invites her upstairs. After some small talk, Miss Kelly tells her that Mrs. Kehoe is her cousin and that they stay in touch. Going on, she says that she recently heard from a customer that he took a **picture** of Eilis with Jim, George, and Nancy on the beach, so she decided to call Mrs. Kehoe to tell her that Eilis has been seeing Jim. Having heard this, Mrs. Kehoe soon called her back with "news of her own." When Eilis asks what this news was, Miss Kelly says that Eilis surely already knows.

Unlike Tony, who is open and sincere about his emotions, Jim is insecure, so he often misrepresents the way he feels. In this way, he is similar to Eilis, who also doesn't like to show people how she really feels. When he asks her to marry him before she returns to Brooklyn, Eilis once again finds herself in a position in which a man worries that he's going to lose her. And though this may seem possessive, it's worth pointing out that Eilis's passive nature does mean that she's likely to accidentally abandon a lover, which is more or less what she has done to Tony.



By kissing Jim, Eilis avoids having to talk about their future. Instead of telling him that she's already married, she postpones the conversation, forever unwilling to speak frankly about the secrets she's keeping.



Although Eilis decides to book a return trip, this doesn't mean that she will actually do so. After all, she has been telling herself the same thing for her entire stay in Enniscorthy, constantly promising to buy return tickets but failing to do so when the time comes. Accordingly, it seems unlikely that she will actually follow through with this plan, regardless of her intentions.



Although Eilis has kept her personal life a secret since she's returned to Enniscorthy, she now realizes that her privacy has been compromised. The implication, of course, is that Mrs. Kehoe told Miss Kelly that she's already in a relationship with Tony. As a result, she will have to choose between Tony and Jim, forcing her to make an actual decision rather than simply resigning herself to the tides of life.



Eilis pretends she doesn't know what Miss Kelly is talking about, but Miss Kelly tells her not to lie, adding that the world is "a very small place." Unable to think of response, Eilis stands up and says farewell. Once she leaves Miss Kelly's store, she immediately goes to purchase return tickets to Brooklyn. She then writes to Father Flood, Mrs. Kehoe, and Miss Fortini and tells them the date of her return, apologizing for the delay. When she gets home, she tells her mother that she's married, but her mother doesn't seem all that surprised. She asks a few questions about Tony before telling her daughter that she should be with her husband if she is indeed married. She also says that Tony must be nice if Eilis married him in the first place.

Eilis's mother asks if she married Tony because she was pregnant, and Eilis assures her that this isn't the case. She also asks if she'd be going back to America if she wasn't married, and Eilis says she doesn't know. Nonetheless, she's leaving early the next morning, so her mother calls a neighbor and asks him to drive her to the train station. After helping her in this way, though, she announces that she's tired and that she won't be getting up in the morning, so they must say goodbye now, since she only wants to bid her daughter farewell once. As Eilis begins to cry, she tells her to stop, reminding her that Tony must be a nice man if she decided to marry him in the first place.

When her mother leaves, Eilis contemplates visiting Jim and telling him that she'll be leaving. Instead, she decides to write him a note that she'll drop at his door on her way out the next morning. Accordingly, she writes this letter in her room before packing her things. She puts Tony's unopened letters in her bags, thinking that she'll read them on the boat. Upon finding the **pictures** from the day at the beach with Jim, Nancy, and George, she is about to rip them up when she thinks twice and puts them under her clothes in her suitcase, sensing that she will someday gaze at them and remember this period of her life, which will feel like nothing more than a dream.

The next morning, Eilis leaves her mother's house, drops off the letter at Jim's door, and goes to the train station. On the train, she imagines Jim reading the note and running to her house, where her mother will say, "She has gone back to Brooklyn." The importance of these words, she knows, will eventually fade for Jim, but for her they will "come to mean more and more." Thinking this, she shuts her eyes and smiles.

Eilis has spent the past several weeks dreading what her mother would say if she told her about her marriage to Tony, but now Mrs. Lacey's response is quite understanding. Although she's most likely disappointed, she tries to assure her daughter that she's making the right decision by returning to Tony, perhaps sensing that what Eilis needs most is support.



When Mrs. Lacey tells Eilis that Tony must be a nice man if she decided to marry him, she tries to soothe her daughter while also emphasizing the importance of committing to her decisions. Because Eilis isn't used to making choices for herself, though, she finds it hard to follow through with her decision to marry Tony. After all, the only reason she's returning to Brooklyn is because she has once again found herself in a situation in which the choice has been more or less made for her, since staying in Enniscorthy would have actually been the more difficult option, considering that everyone will soon know that she's married to Tony, making it impossible for her to continue her relationship with Jim.



Eilis's unwillingness to face Jim aligns with her inability to show her emotions. Rather than confronting him and telling him that she's married, she takes the easy way out by writing him a letter. And though she is effectively running away from their relationship, she clearly has trouble with the thought of actually moving on from their time together, which is why she decides to pack the pictures of them at the beach instead of ripping them up.



That the phrase, "She has gone back to Brooklyn" will hold more and more significance for Eilis as time passes suggests that she has come to appreciate the fact that her decision—regardless of how she made it—to go back to America will impact her entire life. In turn, Tóibín intimates that she has finally grasped that she can actively determine how her life progresses. In this sense, although this particular choice was forced upon her by Miss Kelly, it has helped her recognize her own agency.





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