

UNIVERSIDADE DE SÃO PAULO

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Let the Great World Spin by Colum McCann: A working through trauma?

(VERSÃO CORRIGIDA)

São Paulo

2015

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Dissertação apresentada à Faculdade de
Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas da
Universidade de São Paulo para obtenção
do título de Mestre em Letras

Área de Concentração:
Estudos Linguísticos e Literários em
Inglês

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São Paulo

2015

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Título: *Let the Great World Spin* by Colum McCann: A working through trauma?

Dissertação apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Linguísticos e Literários em Inglês, do Departamento de Letras Modernas da Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas da Universidade de São Paulo, para obtenção do título de Mestre em Letras.

Aprovada em:

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Julgamento: _____ Assinatura: _____

Prof. Dr. _____ Instituição: _____

Julgamento: _____ Assinatura: _____

Prof. Dr. _____ Instituição: _____

Julgamento: _____ Assinatura: _____

For Gerson, Guilherme and Ana Luisa

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Laura Patrícia de Zuntini Izarra for her generous and kind support throughout the period we worked together, and also for making me believe in my potential as a researcher.

I am deeply grateful to Professor Tina O'Toole for her invaluable contribution to this work providing me a great opportunity for learning and developing my research during the Fall of 2014, at University of Limerick.

I would like to thank Professor Munira Haddad Mutran for introducing me to the Irish Studies and for her caring advice.

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Shaun Richards and his wife, Lucette Richards, for their kind and generous support, since the very beginning of this research.

I would like to thank all colleagues from the group of studies for their endless support and invaluable academic discussions, especially to Mariana Bolfarine, Thiago Moyano and Camila Batista.

I would like to thank my friend Dr. Cacilda Vilela de Lima for her endless willingness to help me with criticism, ideas, suggestions, and for her numerous readings of this work.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Marilúcia Melo Meireles for having helped me to find the necessary balance to achieve my goals.

I would like to thank Silvana Cosentino (*in memoriam*) for having introduced me to the teaching world.

I would like to especially thank Jaime and Maria da Paixão, my parents, for their encouragement and remarkable example of strength and optimism.

This dissertation would never have been completed without the loving support of my siblings Maria Angela and José Homero.

I would like to thank Guilherme and Ana Luisa, my children, for their unconditional love and support.

Finally, I thank Gerson, my life companion, for his constant love and friendship.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is concerned with the representation of trauma in the award-winning celebrated Irish writer Colum McCann's novel, *Let the Great World Spin* (2009). The novel was written about the terrorist attacks of 9/11, in New York. Although the event is never directly mentioned within the text. My analysis took account of some statements made by the author to the effect that no matter what he writes about, he is always talking about Ireland. This creates the need to find common traumas between Ireland and the United States. For this reason, the topics of 'migration' and 'family' are part of this dissertation, as emigration impacted enormously on the composition of the Irish family. Moreover, setting the novel in New York, on 7 August, 1974, suggests a temporal distancing in which commonalities between 1974 and 2001 are highlighted in the novel. The presence of the French artist, Philippe Petit, who walked in a tightrope between the Twin Towers, as a reference to the biggest artistic crime of the 20th Century, establishes the metaphorical link to what may be understood as the most savage terrorist act of the 21st Century. Scholars such as Sztompka, Versluys, Smelser and Gibbs were highly useful to the development of the analysis of the trauma portrayed in Colum McCann's text. The novel provides a polyphony of narrative voices, which assist the author to avoid stereotyping the characters.

Keywords: Colum McCann; 9/11; cultural trauma; family; migration; women.

ABSTRACT IN PORTUGUESE

A presente dissertação tem por objetivo compreender de que maneira se dá a representação do trauma em *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), do premiado autor irlandês, Colum McCann. O romance foi escrito para falar sobre os ataques terroristas de 11 de Setembro de 2001, Nova Iorque, muito embora o evento não tenha sido diretamente mencionado no romance. A análise levou em conta declarações do próprio autor, de que não importa sobre o que escreva, é sempre sobre a Irlanda que fala e com isso houve a necessidade de se encontrar traumas comuns a Irlanda e aos Estados Unidos. Sendo essa a razão pela qual os aspectos 'imigração' e 'família' fazem parte deste estudo, pois a emigração repercutiu enormemente na configuração da família irlandesa. Ao ambientar o romance na Nova Iorque de 7 de Agosto de 1974, o autor já estabelece um distanciamento temporal e um recorte específico em que semelhanças entre 1974 e 2001 são realçadas no romance. A presença do artista francês Philippe Petit, que andou em um cabo de aço estendido entre as torres gêmeas, no que ficou conhecido como o maior crime artístico do século XX, estabelece a metáfora com o que em 2001 ficou conhecido como o maior ato terrorista do século XXI. Autores como Sztompka, Versluys, Smelser e Gibbs foram norteadores para a evolução da análise do trauma retratado no texto de Colum McCann. O romance opera com um grande número de vozes narrativas, provocando uma polifonia que atende ao objetivo do autor de dificultar ao máximo a estereotipia de suas personagens.

Palavras-chave: Colum McCann; 9/11; trauma cultural; família; imigração; mulheres

Let the Great World Spin by Colum McCann:

A working through trauma?

Does the experience of literature inevitably or even lead us to a compassionate response to the sufferings of others? Is literature the best means by which we can educate ourselves into an appropriately full engagement with the deaths of others?"

David Simpson¹

INTRODUCTION

Is literature a space for healing our wounds in contemporary world? Colum McCann has stated that *Let the Great World Spin*² (2009) was his “personal response to 9/11, not a measured intellectual response” (McCANN, 2009, 363). According to Laura Izarra, “Literature is the space of memory and imagination that reveals suspended narratives which are linked to the past and the present, to subjectivity and to cosmopolitan forms of human experience” (IZARRA, 2012, p.79). Psychoanalysis claims that traumatic events must be narrated in order to be emotionally processed.

Relating the role of literature and trauma's portrayal, in the Introduction of *Literature after 9/11* Ann Keniston and Jeanne F. Quinn (2008) stated, that such texts as a whole “examine the ways that literature has participated in the larger cultural process of representing and interpreting the events of September 11, 2001, while also revealing the difficulties of doing so when cataclysmic events are still so recent” (KENISTON and QUINN, 2008, p. 2). In this way, *LTGWS* (2009) engages with the traumatic event, without directly mentioning it.

This dissertation is concerned with various types of traumas represented along with the responses to them portrayed in the novel. McCann does not talk only of collective trauma. He also

¹ David Simpson (apud FLANNERY, 2011, p. 201)

² The name of the novel from now on will appear in the abbreviated form – *LTGWS*.

talks of ordinary people living and dealing with their own dramas. It is my assertion that Colum McCann is concerned with characters on the move and representing the differences within immigrant and other peripheral communities in New York. My central arguments are based on the diverse characteristics within his female characters, such as race, religion, social, academic and cultural background.

My hypothesis is that 9/11's cultural trauma is represented in the novel in a metaphorical way via the representation of historical and social dramas in two different levels: individual and collective. As a way of recovering from these individual traumas McCann proposes the possibility of working through cultural traumas such as 9/11 and the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland which he claims are embedded in his mind. What does it mean to recover from trauma? Is literature a means of recovering or working through it? Does literature provide any comfort to such traumas? The author proposes opportunities for understanding through group work.

This text is divided into two main parts, with Part I focusing on Migration and Part II focusing on Trauma. The first part discusses migration on both individual and collective levels. On the individual level a degree on theoretical and historical background is presented, while in the collective level, I analyse how Irish families were affected by migration in the subsection *'The role of the family'*. The interrelation between *migration* and *family* confirms that mass migration had a considerable role in the disruption of many Irish families. Part II, "Trauma", discusses the specific kinds of traumas that Irish and Americans arguably share. I will start the section examining the concepts of trauma and cultural trauma that can be applied to the analyses of *LTGWS* (2009), as I claim that trauma is the main axis which connects the characters in the novel. This part is divided into two subsections. Here the kinds of trauma portrayed in the novel are discussed in the first subsection entitled *'Let trauma spin the protagonists' grief*, and in the second subsection entitled *'The strength of women at home and abroad'*, I will discuss the relevant role women played in Irish history. The second subsection also provides some information about women in Ireland in 1950s

and 1970s and women in the United States in 1970s as there are some female characters related to the two settings. Furthermore, Colum McCann has stated that “history has been written by men, so I tend to write about the anonymous”³. This may explain why his female characters are so prominent not only in *LTGWS* (2009), but in his work as a whole. I have researched and retrieved specific aspects of Irish women's history in order to illustrate how their importance for the country related to the national economy, and was thus strongly linked to the mass emigrations during the hardest economic and political periods.

Colum McCann believes that *LTGWS* (2009) “is an Irish and American novel at the same time”⁴. As such I looked for Irish traumas that could be addressed in the novel and have opted to highlight one topic which is portrayed in the novel that haunted Ireland in both the far and recent past: *migration*. McCann often refers to the topic of migration, of its adverse effects on families, and on the role of women during the periods of Irish emigration. Migration is relevant for both Ireland and the United States, as it is made manifest by the huge number of Americans who claim Irish ancestry. Furthermore, Irish women had such an important role in the maintenance of their families, not only during the *famine* but in other serious financially deprived times, as many single women also emigrated en masse to work abroad and send their earnings home to their impoverished families in Ireland. The acceptance of young single women leaving the country alone to make money was not a common feature among other European societies, even in a context of poverty and lack of opportunities in their homeland. The common element within the three topics of migration, family and women, is related to trauma as migration certainly represents a traumatic event for Ireland as nation, for Irish families, and especially for the Irish women, who have consistently outnumbered Irish male emigrants, over the centuries. Not only Ireland was affected by the emigration of its citizens but the United States too, due to the vast numbers of Irish who came to

³ Colum McCann said this in a Creative Writing class, at University of Limerick, Ireland, on 6/11/2014. All quotes directly than McCann, unless otherwise stated, are drawn from this seminar.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAd7Uy0DD1M&list=PL310786C5CAEA667E&index=3>. Engaging Colum McCann. A conversation with the Irish poet Theo Dorgan.

live in America.

Colum McCann was personally affected by the 9/11's attacks as his father-in-law was in one of the Twin Towers during the attacks and fortunately escaped unscathed. Perhaps more to the point, the author has been living in New York since 1986 and considers himself an Irish-New Yorker. Most significantly of all, he was actually in New York on September 11 2001, and witnessed first-hand not only the very day, but also its immediate aftermath and the distressing public demonstrations of suffering, pain and despair among the New York population and the nation as a whole at the formal memorials⁵. In an interview with the New York Times⁶, McCann revealed that on the day of the attacks, having seen his four year-old daughter reacting to her grandfather's smell of smoke and saying that he was "burning from the inside", McCann knew he was going to write about it one day. However, his worries were how to write about something like that. In the same interview he confessed it was impossible to determine whether the events of 9/11 had more influence on the arts than the 'Troubles'⁷ in Northern Ireland or "any sort of spectacular sadness or spectacular incident in history". After all, McCann was also personally affected by the 'Troubles'. His mother was born in Derry⁸ and because of the ongoing violence during the 'Troubles' he frequently saw her sadly watching the tv news coverage of the conflict in her hometown⁹. As a writer Colum McCann wanted to engage with both the sadness of 9/11 and the potential for recovery. His personal reaction to 9/11 was to write the novel, and in my opinion, this desire was compounded by the fact that his family had been directly affected by the two traumatic events. *LTGWS (2009)* builds a narrative structure to embrace those tragic stories.

The conflict in Northern Ireland during the late 20th century (1968 - 1998) is known as the

⁵ Pictures of the disappeared were spread all over the city. These places soon became memorials where people put some flowers and lit candles.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VC-9HZbn5XU&index=2&list=PL310786C5CAEA667E>. Artists reflect on September 11: Colum McCann. The New York Times.

⁷ It is a reference to the violent conflict between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (1968 – 1998) which killed about 3,600 people whose objective was to free Northern Ireland from the British government and to unite Ireland in one only nation independent from the United Kingdom. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/histories/troubles>

⁸ Derry or Londonderry is the second largest city in Northern Ireland and the fourth on the island of Ireland. The start of the 'Troubles' was in Derry as well as the 'Bloody Sunday' episode.

⁹ Not only British authorities were the victims of the IRA attacks, several Irish civilians not involved in politics were killed during the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland.

'Troubles'. Over 3,600 people were killed and thousands more injured during this time. The reasons for the conflict were the opposing agendas of unionists and nationalists. The goal of the unionist and overwhelmingly Protestant majority was to remain part of the United Kingdom. The goal of the nationalist and republican, almost exclusively Roman Catholic, minority was to become absorbed into the Republic of Ireland¹⁰.

McCann not only writes about empathy and tolerance; he practices what he preaches. The author is engaged with other artists in *Narrative 4*, (*N4*), a global educational organisation which is “led by globally influential artists, educators, students and community advocates, *N4* is developing the next generation of empathetic leaders and citizens”¹¹. The manifesto of this group is to foster empathy through storytelling, with the motto: “If you step into my shoes, I will step into yours”¹². The project encourages people, mainly students, from different parts of the world to exchange their stories. “The core methodology behind *N4* is the **story exchange**, an exercise in which individuals are randomly paired off and each shares a story that in some way defines him or her. Afterwards, each is responsible for telling the other’s story, taking on the persona of his or her partner and telling the story in the first person”¹³. McCann’s interest in listening to other stories is not new. In 1986 when he first moved to the United States, he crossed the country on a bicycle and worked in several different places, aiming to listen to new stories.

McCann espoused the ideas of tolerance, empathy, and group communication as tools for improving human relations which he portrayed in *LTGWS* (2009), prior to the 2012 founding of the *N4* project. It is therefore possible to see this venture as the realization of his ideas and beliefs expressed in his literary work. Moreover, he ascribes in the democracy of storytelling as a tool to enhance empathy, tolerance, and solidarity. For these reasons, *N4* is the answer to my question regarding the literature as a means of healing. For it is clear that Colum McCann's literature can

¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/histories/troubles>

¹¹ <http://www.narrative4.com/who-we-are/history/>

¹² <http://www.narrative4.com/mission-vision/vision/>

¹³ <http://www.narrative4.com/mission-vision/core-methodology/>

represent understanding and acceptance. Throughout the novel, the author touches upon such the precarious topics of death, prostitution, racism, discrimination, prejudice, and his tone is always sensitive and kind.

In an interview with Marcia Franklin¹⁴, McCann was asked how he creates characters. Focusing on *LTGWS* (2009), he explained that he used to tell his Creative Writing students at Hunter College, New York, they should write about what they do not know, and “understand the darkness before trying to understand the light”. This novel was his attempt to understand what was behind the attacks. In many of his stories the protagonists, as those of *LTGWS* (2009), belong to the less privileged groups of society, such as prostitutes, black or poor people, artists, those whose voices are not usually heard. He used to write about people and situations different from his own. McCann brings so many very different people into the novel, a Noah's Ark in its depiction of such a wide range of people, families and women. The resonance of the rescuing Ark becomes even more potent if we consider the redemptive role of Colum McCann's work. As Eóin Flannery¹⁵ claims, McCann redeems those who come from the margins of society by giving them an audible voice. It seems that he spares few individuals to create a new humankind, starting from scratch with no stereotyping, no discrimination. He does not point out a right or wrong behaviour. With respect to stereotyping, Colum McCann echoes the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie who is always alert to the “dangers of the single story”¹⁶. When speaking of her childhood and how all children are vulnerable to the dangers of a single-sided story and thus growing up with preconceived ideas that they believe are true and unchangeable.

LTGWS (2009) belongs to a post-Celtic Tiger publishing generation which has witnessed significant changes in Irish society. During this period, dramatic changes in economy, labour, urbanization, the numerous scandals involving the Catholic Church, and the reversal of the

¹⁴ <http://video.idahoptv.org/video/2174106970/>. Colum McCann on dialogue. Idaho Public Television.

¹⁵ FLANNERY, E. *Colum McCann and the Aesthetics of Redemption*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011.

¹⁶ A lecture given by Chimamanda Adichie for TED talks, in 2009.

http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=pt-br

immigration trend. Irish society was deeply affected by all these changes to the extent that the artists of this generation were left trying to map their own identity (BROWN, 2004). The changes were comprehensive and sudden as Ireland was in an economic crisis throughout the previous decade. Within the migrants many were in fact, Irish emigrants who, due to the Irish economic upswing, decided to come home. All this movement of people either returning or arriving, or from other countries suggested some negotiation or adaptation had to be made. Joe Cleary (2006) asserts that contemporary Irish culture does not look back to its own past, in order to “become more liberal and secular, more multicultural and confidently European in its outlook, contemporary Irish culture – the account runs – gives imaginative expression to this emergent new reality” (CLEARY, 2006, p.76). With this mind, it is just not possible to talk about contemporary Ireland without referring to the Celtic Tiger. It was a period of time (1990 - 2008) that had also shaken Irish economy and culture. During the period, Ireland was facing a sudden increase in the number of immigrants. For a nation more accustomed to being left by its citizens, through emigration, the favourable economic climate brought about an unprecedented influx of immigrants from all over the world. Terence Brown (2004) explains the relation between the changes occurred in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger and the Irish identity:

Cultural and intellectual life in the Republic in the 1990s had in fact engaged in various ways with the issue of Irish identity, to a degree that suggests a creative struggle was indeed in progress to respond to the changes that had been set in motion in the late 1950s and which are accelerating rapidly in the last decade of the century” (BROWN, 2004, p. 398).

Derek Hand (2011) contends that due to the “sheer size” of the novel, it is possible to find in it “the difference in terms of native and visitor, Gaelic and Anglo-Irish, Catholic and Protestant, aristocrat and peasant. Thus the pages of the Irish novel are where issues concerning identity are played out repeatedly” (HAND, 2011, p. 5). The Irish economic *boom* gave rise to the massive presence of immigrants in Ireland. This change in the composition of the population affected the question of an Irish identity which was a concern present in arts in general and particularly in literary works. The changes happening on Irish society were far too important and according to

Brown (2004):

What kind of country was Ireland, moving as it was from economic crisis to sudden affluence in the European Union and the global economy? How should it relate to its past and commemorate that past, what is the role of woman in the national story, and what of the Irish language and the cultural traditions associated with it in a period of multiculturalism, what of the role of the plastic arts, and how could technology science sustain the newly rich Ireland that had so amazingly come into existence? – these were some of the questions asked and answered in various ways in the 1990s and at turn of century (BROWN, 2004, p. 399).

It was a time of great change, and Ireland was being inserted into the logic of capitalism which allows the transformation of almost everything in a marketable item. In 1996, Frank McCourt's book *Angela's Ashes*, depicted a grim Limerick, but was a huge success. Yet according to Brown (2004), “Limerick, initially affronted by a deeply unflattering version of its past, quickly saw how tourism might be boosted through opportunistic exploitation of what might otherwise have meant only notoriety” (BROWN, 2004, p.404). Understandably, Irish literature, whether produced on the island or abroad, included questions related to identity, as within a very short period of time the international context of country changed position from that of a country in an economical crisis to one of the richest economies in Europe. Many questions were inevitably posed relating to the rising multiculturalism of the country, the use of Irish language, and issues of Irish culture and traditions. To complicate matters further Irish identity has long been defined in opposition to the Northern Irish (BROWN, 2004, p. 397). As it happened in the past, Irish people were exactly defined as opposed to the British.

Since W. B. Yeats' time¹⁷ Irish artists had been concerned with the creation of a specifically Irish identity in the field of arts. The literature of Synge¹⁸ and Lady Gregory¹⁹ were heralded by Yeats as a perfect locus for this achievement. For this literary movement Irish identity was seen to exist in direct relation to the British. Thus being Irish meant not being British. As Declan Kiberd

¹⁷ William Butler Yeats (1865 – 1939), awarded the Nobel Prize of Literature, in 1923. Co-founder of the Abbey Theatre.

¹⁸ Edmund John Millington Synge (1871 – 1909), playwright, poet, prose writer. Co-founder of the Abbey Theatre.

¹⁹ Isabella Augusta Persse, Lady Gregory (1852 – 1932), dramatist, folklorist. Co-founder of the Abbey Theatre.

(1996) explains:

With the mission to impose a central administration went the attempt to define a unitary Irish character. Since the first wave of invaders was little more than an uneasy coalition of factions, its members had no very secure identity of their own, in whose name they might justify the incursion. Many Norman settlers gradually became “more Irish than the Irish themselves”: many others became hybrids, who partook fully in Irish cultural life, while giving political allegiance to London (KIBERD, 1996, p. 9).

Colum McCann belongs to an impressive generation of Irish writers which include Colm Tóibín, Hugo Hamilton, Roddy Doyle, Anne Enright, Claire Keegan, Éilís Ni Dhuibhne, Joseph O'Connor, to cite just a few. These authors share a sustained interest in questions which affect Irish people and identity such as emigration, the socio-political influence of the Catholic Church, divorce, abortion, sexuality, and women's rights. It was not possible to approach those topics in literature during the periods of the Censorship of Publications, 1929, 1946, 1967, when the Catholic Church was sole arbiter of what could and could not be read by the general population. Prior to that time, intrusive censorship was an obstacle for the work of writers such as Sean O'Faoláin, Frank O'Connor, Kate O'Brien and Mary Lavin (BROWN, 2010, p. 225).

The work of John McGahern, for example, ranges across family, religion and premature death, to function as the work “of the realist writer as a social commentator” (BROWN, 2010, p. 226). In the work of John Banville we see repeated treatments of the historically Irish topics of family matters and religion which are seldom omitted from the themes explored in contemporary literary texts. Roddy Doyle challenges the stage Irishness out of obsolete literary stereotypes. By portraying characters from the margins of society for instance, he deconstructed the image of the heroes of the Easter Rising and the War of Independence. In *A Star Called Henry* (1999) his protagonist is an anti-hero, the son of an assassin and a poor adolescent who actually fights for money²⁰. Hugo Hamilton's memoirs, *The Speckled People* and *The Sailor in the Wardrobe* are a reflection of his concerns with his own German-Irish identity. Colm Tóibín explores different types of emigration, such as a young woman heading to New York, and a young man who relocates to

²⁰ Interview conducted with Camila Batista, MA student, whose dissertation is on Roddy Doyle. São Paulo, 14/04/2015.

Argentina. Gender identity issues are present in the work of authors such as Anne Enright, Colm Tóibín, Claire Keegan and Edna O'Brien. According to Patricia Prudente (2014), Kevin Barry, Anne Enright and Colm Tóibín's works coincide with Dermot Bolger's concept of deconstructing the image of homogeneity present in the conventional nationalist ideology in order to portray a wider range of cultural and sexual identities of Ireland (PRUDENTE, 2014, p. 15).

But how can this help us examine McCann's decision to set his 9/11 novel in a 1974 time frame? In a conversation with Nathan Englander, in the end of the book, McCann explained that he chose 1974, New York as a setting because "I wanted to know how I felt about war, and art, and liberation theology, and issues of technology, all these things that were on our minds back in '74 and are on our minds today also" (McCANN, 2009, p. 363). The author went on to say that he also detected some similarities between the early 1970s and 2001. When he thought about what was happening at that time, such as Philippe Petit's²¹ performance in the World Trade Center, or the soldiers returning from Vietnam, he immediately made the thirty year connection between that time and the contemporary movement of the American soldiers who were either going to or coming from Iraq. And all of these issues are certainly addressed in the novel; the Vietnam war, alternative spaces for art exhibition, a priest working under the principles of liberation theology, and the beginning of the computing boom which is portrayed by the presence of hackers in the novel. Various aspects of Irish recent history are also represented in the novel, such as Dublin shown as a rich city, full of opportunities to work and live at the peak of the *Celtic Tiger*.

When asked about his inspiration to write *LTGWS* (2009) McCann's replied "it was that the angel in the sky", Philippe Petit walking on the tightrope, whose act became known as 'the art crime of the century', and his own major interest in the anonymous were his inspiration. Petit's performance is related to the uncertainties of life. One false step and everything is finished. In one moment we have everything and in the next we have absolutely nothing, life is like a tightrope

²¹ Philippe Petit is the French tightrope man who walked, seated and danced on a wire between the Twin Towers, New York, on 7 August, 1974.

walk. Similarly, the attacks that in one moment changed forever the life of thousands of people. The novel is a metaphor for a proposal of recovering from the national trauma – 9/11. The story of the Twin Towers is portrayed in the novel in two moments: in 1974 and in 2006, in the memory of one of the characters – Jaslyn²² – when she is looking at a picture of Petit in the air, between the buildings and a plane in the background. At that moment there is an implicit reference to 9/11 made by the narrator.

Concerning the structure of the novel there are technical peculiarities which demonstrate the relation between the funambulist and the characters. The text is divided into four books, but before Book One, and between Book One and Two, and Book Two and Three there is an inter-chapter in which the narrator describes the tightrope man, his actions and his thoughts. In Book One there are three chapters which allow the narrators and their spatial and temporal location to vary between Ciaran, the Irish priest's brother, living in 1950s Dublin, Claire, the Jewish mother, mourning her child on New York, August 7, 1974, and Lara, a New York painter, on the same day. In Book Two all the narrators are set in New York, on August 7, 1974. They comprise the secondary character, photographer, Fernando Marcano, a group of anonymous Californian hackers, and Tillie, one of the prostitutes. In Book Three the narratives are derived from Solomon, Claire's husband, Adelita, the Guatemalan nurse, and Gloria, the mourning African-American mother, with all three set in New York, on August 7, 1974. The fourth and final book consists of a single chapter focusing on Jaslyn, one of the two orphan girls adopted by Gloria. It is set in New York and Dublin in 2006.

In all chapters there are subtle changes of narrator which require the reader to pay close attention to the textual movement between the character and the third person narrator. Colum McCann also demands that his readers be alert to the dangers of stereotyping. The sudden change of narrator breaks the flow of the reading and reminds the reader to concentrate on the details. At the University of Limerick Colum McCann recently said that the reader has to pay attention, otherwise he or she will never notice the change of the narrative voice. The importance of identifying who is

²² In the Appendix section there is a list of the characters mentioned in this work with a brief biodata of each one.

speaking in the novel is that the voice helps the reader to fill in the empty spaces left on purpose by the author, what enriches the story with different points of view: the character's, narrator's, and the reader's. As an example I selected one fragment to show how McCann subtly changes the narrative voices. Claire was alone in her apartment and went up to the roof to smoke as her husband did not like the smell of cigarettes. She was observing the movement of the street, feeling the heat of the summer, when all of a sudden there was a change in the narrator's voice:

She pulls again on the cigarette and looks over the wall. A momentary vertigo. The creek of yellow taxis along the street, the crawl of green in the median of the avenue, the saplings just planted.

Nothing much happening on Park. Everyone gone to their summer homes. Solomon, dead against. City boy. Likes his late hours. Even in summertime. His kiss this morning made **me** feel good (McCann, 2009, p. 81, my emphasis).

In the fragment above, there is the obvious signal of the change with the use of the pronouns *she* and *me*. The difficulty is to identify the precise moment of the change of the narrative voice. It seems that it happens in the change of paragraph, so it was Claire who called Solomon a *city boy*. This kind of information is essential to contextualise the relationship between the couple.

The characters are built in a way that makes it difficult to categorise them as they change their behaviour according to the situation. Sometime they had a reprehensible attitude followed by a sensitive and sensible one. Corrigan is an example of someone who does not judge other people no matter what they do, such as the prostitutes or the homeless addict whom he cared without trying to change. McCann portrays the shades of human personalities. At the same time, he focuses on their ambivalent attitudes. Colum McCann humanises and redeems the prostitutes by depicting personal stories and dramas through two beautiful women. Many scholars said that McCann's work has a redemptive aspect. I agree with them but in my opinion the author goes beyond redemption as, he brings up issues such as the risks of stereotyping people and classifying them. The themes of war and religion, both very sensitive topics in Ireland, are combined with the innovative aspect and social relevance of technology and the start of democratisation of arts, for are also emphasised within the novel.

The Vietnam War precipitated a huge trauma on both public and private levels. As a nation, the United States were at war with a known and common enemy. Not only the families and friends of those who lost their lives or returned as wounded or damaged veterans, but the society as a whole were devastated by the war, if we understand – families functioning as individuals and the society as a collective. The manner in which the American President Lyndon Johnson conducted the military operations in Vietnam was severely criticised by the American public. In 1968, only thirty five percent of the American population approved Johnson's policy regarding the Vietnam War, while fifty percent disapproved it. There were many anti-war protests at that time which included the participation of the veterans who publicly threw away the medals earned in Vietnam²³.

Another topic approached in the novel, religion is often featured in McCann's oeuvre. Religiosity is part of the identity as it has a particular meaning in Ireland, according to Tom Inglis (CLEARY and CONNOLLY, 2005):

Being Catholic or Protestant. . .has been central to family life, education, health care and social welfare and has influenced the schools people attended, the friends they had and who they married. . .Religious identity in modern Ireland has been as socially significant as gender, class, ethnicity or sexual orientation. . .What made Ireland exceptional throughout the twentieth century was that while the rest of Western Europe became increasingly secularised, religious affiliation remained a strong social marker for the Irish (CLEARY and CONNOLLY, 2005, p. 59).

Religion is a sensitive topic for Irish people due to the recent scandals involving the systemic sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests and the numerous female bodies found buried in unmarked graves in the convent grounds of some Irish convent Magdalene Laundries²⁴. The Catholic religion is represented in *LTGWS* (2009) by Corrigan, the Irish priest. The religious order he belonged to was never mentioned in the novel though he was closer to the liberation theology which “began as a movement within the Catholic Church that grew up in Latin America in the 1950s – 1960s as a moral response to the poverty caused by social injustice in that region”²⁵.

²³ <http://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-protests>

²⁴ Usually run by Catholic Church were institutions where *fallen women* were sent to. These women worked for the nuns in the laundries of the convents in unhealthy conditions, as slaves. The ones who were pregnant had their babies given to adoption. The last laundry in Ireland was shut down in 1996.

²⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology

In order to provide a temporal context Colum McCann introduces some Californian hackers, illegally calling New York with news on the tightrope man. The first emails were being sent in 1974 with the beginning of a new technological era. This new era revolutionized not only the way people dealt with information, but their perception of facts as well. We can see the extent of this, in 2001, by the high speed with which the images of the attacks to the Twin Towers went to public. That 9/11 was the first terrorist event to be seen live worldwide is a relevant and revealing fact for both perpetrator and victim, Al-Qaeda and the American society. In the turn of the new millennium developing technologies promoted a real revolution in means of communication and in people's lives, as well.

According to Colum McCann, questions of faith, of belonging, and arts were as important in 1974 as they still were in 2001. During the 1970s, there was a new trend aiming to bring arts to alternative spaces, in order to make it easier for the less privileged in society to attend music concerts, exhibitions, etc. There was a movement among artists to democratise the access to their work, and in New York low-rent areas such as Soho and the Lower East Side were able to attract both, artists and audience. Downtown New York City attracted painters, filmmakers, sculptors, photographers, musicians and writers.²⁶

Trauma is present in Irish literature but what Colum McCann suggested in *LTGWS* (2009) was the possibility of putting together two nations with their own traumas so that they could learn from each other's experience. Being familiar with both contexts allows McCann to make meaningful and vital comparisons to achieve the great accomplishment of a discussion of Irish and American trauma. In terms of traumatic events such as the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, Maria Beville and Sara McQuaid have both posed the question: "who is authorised to speak about it? Is it a sacrosanct event, too personal to be narrated by anyone other than the victims themselves?" (BEVILLE and McQUAID, 2012, p.15). In both cases 9/11 and the 'Troubles' McCann is authorized to speak about both due to his personal experiences of the events. However it is

²⁶ <https://www.nyu.edu/greyart/exhibits/downtown/dthome.htm>

necessary to use a great deal of care and tact when engaging with such traumatic events, particularly when it is so recent and victims and their families are still alive. For this reason McCann chose to set the novel in a different time frame from the attacks, and no direct allusion to the fact was made throughout the whole novel. At the very end there is a tangential allusion to 9/11. My final questions are: is there a possibility of understanding the effects of trauma? Does Colum McCann manage to find it for the biggest cultural trauma through the representation of different kinds of social traumas, such as prostitution, the loss of a son? Or does *LTGWS* (2009) show the effects of traumas in which there can be no forgetting or forgiveness?

PART I

MIGRATION

This section aims to discuss how Colum McCann treats the topic of migration in *Let the Great World Spin* (2009). Some historical background will be introduced, in order to provide theoretical elements to proceed to the analysis of the literary text.

Irish people has been consistently emigrating to the United States since the seventeenth century but this trend accelerated in mid nineteenth century during the crisis of the *Great Famine*. According to Linda Dowling Almeida (2001), following the famine exodus, the Irish population in New York was about 600,000 immigrants. In 1890 population of New York was about 1.5 million in total, “so the Irish was a significant presence” (ALMEIDA, 2001, p. 12). While emigration trends have changed over the centuries as along with the emigrant's profile, emigration remains part of contemporary Irish society.

When discussing migration we engage with some concepts that have a variety of meanings and uses, such as identity, diaspora, community, citizenship, emigration and exile. When the topic being analysed is Irish migration, additional issues regarding concepts Catholicism and Protestantism are indispensable as religion is profoundly embedded in Irish identity. Marion Whelan explains:

Since the nineteenth century the popular assumption has been that the terms “Irish” and “Catholic” are virtually synonymous, if not organic. Yet the character of the “Irish” imprint in eighteenth-century North America was very largely a Protestant one, to the extent, in fact, that the pioneers of three of the country's great religious traditions – Presbyterians, Methodists, and Quakers – could all claim Ireland as their mother country. In a recent US census, over forty million citizens claimed Irish ancestry, but a majority of this number claimed a Protestant rather than a Catholic heritage (LEE and CASEY, 2006, p. 271).

According to Whelan Catholics and Protestants had a different perspective of emigration,

The key to the intensity of the Irish Catholic identity in the New World is to be found in the world they left behind. In the period immediately preceding the arrival of the first wave of Catholic immigration from Ireland in the 1820s and 1830s, the countries of the English-

speaking North Atlantic were swept by a counterrevolutionary tide that was expressed through a revival of Protestant fundamentalism, which refashioned the civic and political landscape according to the moral principles of evangelical Christianity (LEE and CASEY, 2006, p. 271).

Having lost their homes, country, and community, it is common practice among émigrés to cling to their old ways, which can create familiar habits. Religion bonds and provides the feeling of belonging, something that immigrants certainly need. According to their destination, their religion may be “official” or “marginal” and this too changes the way the new immigrants will profess their religion. Whelan refers to the Protestants:

The Protestant Irish also had the additional problem of nomenclature when it came to identity and ethnic origins. The stereotyping and demonizing of the Catholic Irish by the exponents of the anti-Catholic crusade meant that “Irish” was an ethnic appellation not desirable to Protestants. Hence the hyphenated Protestant, a process whereby a people who were proud (sometimes exaggeratedly so) to be known as “Irish” in the eighteenth century (when their Catholic countrymen were “natives” or “papists”) became the Anglo-Irish in Ireland and the Scots-Irish in America in the nineteenth. On the surface of American culture, the equation of Irish and Catholic is a standing testimony to the success of religious division in effecting the destruction of the inclusive ideal of subsuming denominational differences under the common name of Irishman (LEE and CASEY, 2006, p. 283).

The topic of migration has generated a whole set of theoretical approaches in Human Sciences which all aim to understand and explain the individual and collective changes embedded in the process. Kearney (1988) points out that the Irish emigration post nineteen-sixties is different from that of the past as the possibility of return may be considered (KEARNEY, 1988, p.186). Prior to this Irish emigrants rarely returned to Ireland as they were unlikely to find the same opportunities to earn the same money on offer in the host countries and some had no longer family ties in Ireland. For this reason Irish emigration is considered a diaspora; no possibility of return is implied. The American historian Kerby A. Miller (2008) explains the kinds of Irish people who emigrated to the United States:

the vast majority of the Irish who crossed the Atlantic were not political exiles in a political sense. To be sure, large numbers were farmers, craftsmen, and rural labourers who left Ireland under severe duress, particularly during the Great Famine and in other subsistence

crises, as in 1816-17, the mid 1820s, and 1879-82 (MILLER, 2008, p. 12).

Ambiguity relating to the term 'migration' can arise as it is commonly used and across the field of sociology there are numerous definitions. The concept of identity I am using is related to who you are or what your name is; that is, the qualities that make someone or something what they are and differ from other people. According to the British scholar Paul Gilroy (2001) identity is a complex concept which involves political and cultural placements, as affective and emotional links. Therefore, communities are fundamental for the identity's formation. (GILROY, 2001, p. 101) In terms of Irish identity it is clear that it was profoundly affected by the massive emigration, and the political situation of the island, as it was by a huge number of hybrid Irish and their relation with the country of origin. In his latest novel, *TransAtlantic* (2013), Colum McCann directly engages with the problematic nature of the Irish identity. In it, one of the central protagonists, the anti-slavery campaigner Frederick Douglass who was active during the worst times of the Great Famine (1845 – 1846) reflects:

The politics still confounded him: who was Irish, who was British, who was Catholic, who was Protestant, who owned the land, whose child stood rheumy-eyed with hunger, whose house was burned to the ground, whose soil belonged to whom, and why? The simple way to see it was that the British were Protestant, the Irish were Catholic. One ruled, the other lay underfoot (McCANN, 2013, 85).

The term *community* makes reference to the people who live in an area; a group of people in a larger society who are the same in some way; a group of people who live together in the same place, often people who keep themselves separate from society²⁷. In the field of postcolonial studies and cultural criticism is also where the term *diaspora* is embedded. According to Laura Izarra (2011) the term makes reference to the Jewish traumatic experience of exile and to other peoples who have suffered enforced or voluntary exile from their homeland, such as Armenian, African, Irish, Palestinian and Indian. Currently, the term refers to any people with no territory and is used as an alternative to discuss the concepts of race, nation, and culture. In Izarra's words:

The concept of diaspora also allows the discussions among the existent tensions in the

²⁷ cf. MacMillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners.

process of building hybrid identities caused by the dual feelings of belonging and reorganising global and local that create centripetal and centrifugal forces in the physical, psychic, and emotional spaces of the subject²⁸ (Izarra, 2011, p. 31, my translation).

When referring to massive emigration as it happened in Ireland, the word *Diaspora*, has different meanings. According to the sociologist Mary J. Hickman (2012): “it refers to a hybrid, historical social formation in process that has been produced by migration. Diasporas are historical formations in process because they change over time, as part of political, social, and economic developments in and between various places of settlement (including the homeland)” (HICKMAN, 2012, p. 22). McCann would appear to agree with Hickman's concept of diaspora in the groups of mothers portrayed in the short story “Fishing the Sloe-Black River” (1994) and in *LTGWS* (2009). In both texts he created two groups of women with just one common feature: they are all mothers who have lost their sons to emigration (*FTSBR*) and to the war (*LTGWS*). In the two stories the groups of mothers constitute a new community with a purpose that is the bond that connects all of them. They also have their own rituals and rules.

Irishness is also an ambiguous concept. As Eve Walsh Stoddard (2012) explains: “given the extensive connections between emigrants, exiles, and those at home in the island of Ireland, including, in recent years, immigrants of non-Irish ancestry” (STODDARD, 2012, p. 148). Her work also focuses on the returning Irish migrants and she points out that from the economic boom of the 1990s onwards there was an increasing number of immigrants in Ireland as well as returning Irishmen. This, configures her third definition of Irishness: “cosmopolitan and multicultural, one that embraces migration and difference through an inclusive and unfixed sense of home and belonging, one that allows for movement and flexible citizenship” (STODDARD, 2012, p. 149). She stresses that this view accepts a new kind of Irishness, one that diminishes the importance of an “essential Irishness”.

Many nations have faced migration and its consequences throughout history. For Ireland

²⁸ El concepto de diáspora permite también problematizar las tensiones existentes en los procesos de construcción de identidades híbridas, provocadas por los sentimientos duales de pertenencia y de reconfiguración de lo global y lo local que ejerce fuerzas centrípetas y centrífugas en los espacios físicos, psíquicos y emocionales del sujeto (IZARRA, 2011, p. 31).

emigration has been an undeniable scar of displacement, loss, and loneliness. Clearly, these displacements have affected Irish society. Throughout the severest peaks of emigration, entire generations lived abroad, while for those who stayed behind lost their friends and companions. The Irish movement of migration was continuous, according to the Irish economist and scholar P. J. Drudy (1985): “During the second half of the nineteenth century Ireland gained the dubious distinction of being the only country in Western Europe to experience substantial and consistent population loss” (DRUDY, 1985, p. 63).

Since the Pre-Famine period in Ireland, “mass transatlantic migration” was a reality as “From the early 1700s through the 1920s, at least seven million people emigrated from Ireland to North America” (MILLER, 2008, p. 7). In the Post-Famine Ireland, emigration was simply part of Irish life, and “between 1856 and 1929 perhaps as many as five million people left the island, some four million of them for the United States” (MILLER, 2008, p. 7). As emigration trend persisted in Ireland for such a long time, it has undergone many changes in terms of the emigrants' profiles: age, gender, schooling, profession, and destination. Drudy (1985) claims that because of the new American immigration policies²⁹, the main destination for Irish “throughout the 1930s and until the end of the War” was Britain (DRUDY, 1985, p. 63). Drudy explains this by the fact that “especially during the War and post-War era when there was an acute shortage of labour in a number of key low-paid industries, not easily filled by native labour” (DRUDY, 1985, p.74). Britain, as many other European countries, was devastated after the World War II and in urgent need of people to work in less specialized jobs. Despite remaining neutral during WWII, Ireland was also suffering the consequences of its aftermath. As English speakers, the Irish preferred to emigrate to other English speaking countries. Britain and the United States were the most common destinations for Irish emigrants, as along with Canada and Australia. The prejudice against Irish immigrants in Britain

²⁹ Due to the huge number of Irish immigrants to the United States, in the early 1930s, the American government created the system of quotas in an attempt to control the immigration to the country. Not only Irish immigrants were affected by the system, Polish and Italians as well. The Immigration Act of 1924 ruled the numbers and nation origins of the immigrants allowed in the United States.

and in the United States during the periods of increased Irish emigration made assimilation more difficult. In the United States, Irish were labelled 'negroes' and sent to live in black communities³⁰.

Colum McCann is one voice among many other Irish writers who examines migration, and in keeping with many of his famous predecessors, such as Joyce, Beckett, and Wilde, he himself writes out of a position of Irish exile. When interviewed ³¹, about the difference between emigration and exile, particularly from a writer's point of view, McCann summed up:

For a long time emigration was one of the most important defining characteristics of Irish society and the Irish imagination, but emigration no longer exists for Ireland in the same way. Fifty years ago, if you left Ireland you were leaving Ireland for good. It's a different sort of leaving now. These changing boundaries form a new cartography, and, in relation, emigration is completely different. Exile also used to be very important for Irish writers, but as Ireland shifts and changes politically, socially, and sexually, so these notions of exile and emigration have to change. Beckett, Joyce, and Wilde were bucking the system, the Catholic Church, small mindedness- basically, they were escaping a very contained culture that they needed to get away from to write about. But Ireland is much more broad-minded now and the Catholic Church has lost its hold. Ireland has become a more open society- and it's difficult to exile yourself from a benevolent place (BOLAND, 2007, p. 290).

McCann also sees himself as an Irish-New Yorker, and an example of hybridity which underscores the eternal connections between homeland and the place where one lives. Joseph O'Connor summarises the idea of migration from an Irish perspective in his words about the collection edited by Bolger (1993): “being an emigrant isn't just an address. You realise that it's actually a way of thinking about Ireland” (FLANNERY, 2011, p. 22).

Migration is a subject dear to Colum McCann's heart and it has been present in his books since the very beginning of his career. “Fishing the Sloe-Black River” (1994) is about twenty-six mothers dealing with the emigration of their children. Another important aspect to be taken into account when talking about migration in Colum McCann's work is the destination. The characters are not going only to the traditional English speaking countries of the past, such as Britain, the United States, Australia, but also France and Germany. In other words, McCann is talking about the

³⁰ Ignatiev, N. *When the Irish became White?* (2009).

³¹ Colum McCann's interview to Katie Bolick is on *Irish Writers on Writing*, edited by Eavan Boland.

contemporary Irish emigration whose destinations have been expanded beyond the English speaking countries. In the short story “Fishing The Sloe-Black River” the mothers lamenting the emigration of their sons are metaphorically fishing for their sons in the Sloe-Black river, with number of mothers used as a clear reference to the twenty-six counties in the Republic of Ireland, each equally affected by the emigration. This structure of the group of mothers is reiterated in *LTGWS* (2009) and it is notable that only the mothers deal with the pain of not having their children around. The fathers in “Fishing the Sloe-Black River” were playing Gaelic Football nearby, while the mothers lamented the river, and the father is also absent in *LTGWS* (2009). As Claire explains, Solomon is unable to talk about Joshua or the war.

The Irish scholar Eóin Flannery (2011) described McCann's work as: “a literary meditation on travel and displacement, both within Ireland and from Ireland” (FLANNERY, 2011, p. 25) but it is also concerned with the identity of the migrants and the ways in which migration affects Irish identity. O'Kane and Bach (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012) review of short-story collection noted that despite many of the stories being “set internationally, [they] maintain connection to Ireland, but to an Irish identity that has changed”, and conclude that McCann’s texts “represent a new Irish identity, an identity that toggles between the need to care for people or be cared for, and the need to move on, sometimes through migration” (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012, p. 9).

In *LTGWS* (2009), Colum McCann explores the different waves of emigration by portraying one Irish character who returns to Ireland and another one who does not. One interesting exception to the general condition of poverty for the Irish immigrants is Ciaran's and Corrigan's father. As Ciaran remembers:

Our father, a **physicist**, had left us years before. A check, postmarked in **London**, arrived through the letter box **once a week**. Never a note, just a check, drawn on a bank in **Oxford**. It spun in the air as it fell. We ran to bring it to our mother. She slipped the envelope under a flowerpot on the kitchen windowsill and the next day it was gone. Nothing more was ever said (McCANN, 2009, p. 12, my emphasis).

In the fragment above we see that the emigrant was highly educated a physicist who

commuted between London and Oxford. This man was clearly in a comfortable financial situation as he could afford to send his former wife a weekly cheque. Though dates are not given but we can calculate that this man left Ireland to Britain in the 1950s, a time “when 50,000 people left a year”.³² The other Irish emigrants in *LTGWS* (2009) are Corrigan, Ciaran, and Sheila, a secondary character. The former and his family epitomized the trauma of migration which has deeply affected Ireland throughout the last two centuries. Corrigan emigrated to the United States following his mother's death and Ciaran, his brother, also went to New York after being hit by a shrapnel of a 1974 IRA bombing in Dublin. Ciaran returns to Ireland after his brother's death; McCann's single example of the Irish returnee of the twentieth century. But Ciaran does not belong to the same group of Irish immigrants who went to the United States in search of better life opportunities. He went to New York because he was so disturbed by the bombing attack in Dublin. Moreover, he had nobody else to keep him in Ireland. Sheila, the Irish old lady, from Galway, had had a stroke and her movements restricted, “She had the **emigrant's sadness** – she would never go back to her old country – it was gone in more senses than one – but she was forever gazing homewards anyway” (McCANN, 2009, p. 46, my emphasis). McCann's description of the character always limited with only few words, but the image created by the choice of the words is very potent. Regarding the emigrant view of home, Stoddard (2012) says: “for the emigrants there are two homes, the original one and the adopted one, or it may mean that belonging and familiarity are forever estranged” (STODDARD, 2012, p.165).

In *LTGWS* (2009), McCann created the group of mourning mothers living in New York as a metaphor of the process of formation of a migrant community. The women all come from different neighbourhoods, have different social, economic and cultural backgrounds, and only one common objective. Despite their diversity they manage to become a coherent group, in a microcosm of the diversity typical of a cosmopolitan city which reflects the plurality of the whole world with Claire, Gloria, Jaqueline, Janet and Marcia. The meetings were important enough for them to make their differences became tolerable. The new “migrant” community may be a possible mix of their own

³² <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-11815001>

culture, that will be limited by that of the host country, that of the city, and even by that of the neighbourhood where they are. The new communities will not be the same all over the world as they are influenced by this set of circumstances. In *LTGWS* (2009), the group of mourning mothers represents a new community. They are originally from different areas of New York City, but, such as different in many ways such as skin colour, religion, educational background, social and economic status. Despite these differences they constituted a community. These mothers were not friends, they had almost nothing in common, but the one they had was the necessary bond to maintain the sense of community, at least, for a while. McCann mixes African-American and Jewish, poor and rich, high academic background and less educated women in the same group. He does not disregard the differences among the women or pretend they do not exist. In fact, the palpable discomfort among them is caused precisely by all these differences, as is clearly portrayed by Claire's narration when they arrive at her house for coffee:

The faint mumble of voices. All of them together. They must have met up beforehand. Prearranged. Hadn't thought of that. Hadn't let it cross my mind. Wish they hadn't. Talked about me, maybe. **Needs a doctor. Awful gray streak in her hair. Husband's a judge. Wears implausible sneakers. Struggles to smile. Lives in a penthouse but call it upstairs. Is terribly nervous. Thinks she's one of the gals, but she's really a snob.** Is likely to break down. How to greet? Handshake? Air kiss? Smile? (McCANN, 2009, p. 85, my emphasis).

As an insecure person who does not feel comfortable in the situation, Claire creates an imaginary discourse for the other women which criticises her. She also imagines that the women have met before going to her apartment as if they were planning to humiliate her. She continues to feel insecure after the other women's arrival as she is aware of the huge social gap between her and the rest of the group and fears being expelled from it. In other words, she wants to be part of the group and is afraid of not being accepted. This fear relates to the benefit she recognises in being included in this 'community' as she had no other possible interlocutors when the topic was Joshua. For all of them, the group was beneficial; a safe space to talk about their sons, to cry, and most importantly, to put their pain into words. The key element to achieve this degree of harmony in such

a disparate group of women is to ensure they share a purpose which can effectively blur their differences. The question I pose is: is this enough? Is it feasible to overcome all differences and increase tolerance by establishing common goals?

Reflecting on the significance of the theme of migration in Colum McCann's work, Sylvie Mikowski (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012) suggests that his “work embodies the type of dialectic between Irishness and cosmopolitanism that Joyce's work pioneered”, and she adds: “From his first collection of short stories *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* in 1994, up to *Zoli*, released in 2007, the foci of Colum McCann's writings have been emigration; nomadism; the diasporic condition; the crossing of frontiers; and the blending of cultures and languages” (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012, p. 129). Mikowski also points out that because of Irish history in which, “eviction, displacement and forced emigration” were experienced on such a wide scale, McCann is sensitive to situations of “exile, to the pains of dispossession and to the effects of nostalgia” (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012, p. 129). The nostalgia cited by Mikowski is portrayed in *LTGWS* (2009) when Corrigan with Ciaran's help brought the elders, immigrants from the nursing home, to the beach and the two brothers talked about Ireland:

“We should make a visit back, Corr.”

“Yeah,” he said absently.

“I mean to Sandymount. Just for a week or two.”

“Isn't the house sold?”

“Yeah, but we could find somewhere to stay.”

“The palm trees,” he said, half smiling. “Strangest sight in Dublin. I try to tell people about them, but they just don't believe me.”

“Would you go back?”

“Sometime, maybe. I might bring some people with me,” he said (McCANN, 2009, p. 45)

The history of Irish immigrants in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries portrays them being poor comparing them with the American slaves. By the early nineteenth century, the assimilation of Irish-Americans, that is, the immigrants and their US-born children, was complete for most of them. Kerby A. Miller (2008) states that very few Irish immigrants return home which indicates that most of them achieved “material comfort and

contentment in the New World” (MILLER, 2008, p. 101). During the 1950s, Ireland was facing drastic social changes. A crisis in the countryside prompted a rural exodus, which in turn led to the modernisation of the cities for an increasingly urban population. The external economy was in difficulties and Ireland was not expressing any sign of reaction at that time. The rural exodus, because of the crisis in the countryside, led the cities to be modernised for an increasing urban population. This pushed the state debt. According to Terence Brown (2004) the crisis had been worsening during the 1950s. He explained that “In 1957 there were 78,000 unemployed in a year when emigration was responsible for a net loss population of 54,000” (BROWN, 2004, p. 200). Ireland was also facing the emigration problem and at that time the first destination was England. According to Myrtle Hill (2003) it was only in the 1960s that emigration began to decrease. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s there were some improvements in Ireland in successful attempts to attract foreign investment and immigrants. This was also a way of trying to increase the number of people coming to Ireland. During this period “a large number of foreign firms” came to Ireland and new jobs were created making the return possible (HILL, 2003, p. 134).

Due to the lack of suitable jobs at this time, Irish women were forced to emigrate in particular higher number than men. They went abroad at a young age to work and send money home. There were reasons for the difference in numbers of male and female emigration in Ireland as the Irish sociologist Breda Gray (2004) explains: “Rural Irish women's lives until the 1970s were associated with unremitting hard work, subordination to men on small farms and oppression by the Catholic Church so that emigration was seen as holding the promise of liberation from a sterile country” (GRAY, 2004, p. 24). She also explains how inheritance systems pushed such large numbers of women toward emigration: “with one son inheriting the entire farm, meant that other family members, particularly single daughters, were forced to emigrate” (McCullagh 1991: 206)” (GRAY, 2004, p. 25). But there were some positive aspects in the migration for Irish women. Once out of Ireland they could have more freedom, and at the same time as Gray points out: “the act of

migration itself was also constructed as a form of family loyalty because women saw themselves as being able to support their families (of origin) better from America” (GRAY, 2004, p. 2). The pivotal role McCann gives to his female characters has roots in an Irish history that registers the efforts made by Irish women to support their families wherever they were. Referring to migration of the characters within McCann's fiction, Anne Fogarty (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012) goes further, saying: “McCann's characters are inveterately restless and nomadic. They are, in sum, inherently transnational and refuse to be defined by fixed boundaries or to be held in by the regulatory regimes of the modern state”(CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012, p. 104).

The economic transformations Ireland has been through affected the Irish society as a whole. The Irish sociologist Alice Feldman (2008) reminds us that Ireland has undergone a transition “from a monocultural society to a multiethnic one, which has been accelerated by recent and rapid immigration”(FARAGÓ and SULLIVAN, 2008, p. 259). She also points out to the need to shift from binarisms such as Catholic-Protestant, British-Irish, West-East, to the “multi-levelled notions of selfhood, ethnicity and otherness” (FARAGÓ and SULLIVAN, 2008, p. 259). Since the Celtic Tiger, Ireland has become a destiny for Europeans who are struggling to overcome economic, and sometimes political crises. This has dramatically changed the Irish perception of their own nation. For the first time in history, Ireland is a host country and receives thousands of immigrants with the different purposes of labouring, studying, asylum seeking, and so on. If in the past, Irish people were leaving Ireland, it seems clear that this reality has radically changed. In spite of all the problems that massive immigration can bring to the host country, such as overwhelming the health, educational, housing, and transportation systems, it is also a source of pride. Ireland is being chosen as a place where immigrants expect to find better opportunities for themselves and their children. In these globalized times, concepts such as identity, and citizenship have to be rethought in order to make them meaningful to contemporary societies.³³ Breda Gray (2004) makes reference to the Irish

³³ In contemporary Ireland, the concept of citizenship has gone through some changes, as Breda Gray points out: the state borders continue to operate as a “hard shell” and symbol of social closure in relation to the status of citizenship as revealed by Ireland's immigration policies, withdrawal of birthright citizenship, and repeated emphasis on ancestry. It is

migrants of the second half of the twentieth century and states the Irish were apparently safe from prejudice against migrants as: “for the most part, they looked 'white' and spoke English, many corridors of geographic mobility were open to Irish migrants” (GRAY, 2004, p. 30). Prior to the Celtic Tiger boom, Ireland classified the Irish abroad and the diaspora “as potential investors in the homeland, as agents of Irish globalisation and symbolic of persistence of Irish patriotism and kinship” (GRAY, 2004, p. 151). In other words, the bonds between the Irish emigrants and Ireland were claimed once again to help the economy of the country. During the economic boom, or Celtic Tiger, there was a reverse in the numbers of immigrants in Ireland. According to O’Connell and Winston (2006), in 2001 of the 41,600 people who migrated into Ireland 43 per cent ”were from the UK or the USA and it seems likely that many of these were Irish nationals returning to live in Ireland because of its strong economic performance at that time” (GARRY; HARDIMAN; PAYNE, 2006, p. 4). The authors also claim that Irish people responded to the entrance of immigrants into the country with racism, violence and xenophobia. In their research, O'Connell and Winston (GARRY; HARDIMAN; PAYNE, 2006) asked people to answer what they considered to be the most important aspects of the Irish identity, or in other words, what a person should have to be considered an Irish. Within seven items the respondents chose in first place to have Irish citizenship; in second place they said it was important to feel Irish; in third to be born in Ireland; the fourth option was the person should have lived most of life in Ireland; fifth the person should respect Irish Laws and Institutions; sixth should be Catholic and the last option was to be able to speak Irish (GARRY; HARDIMAN; PAYNE, 2006, p. 9). In the same study, the authors argue that education is a relevant aspect to reduce prejudice. In their study, they concluded that among an Irish sample, tolerance clearly increases with the level of education (GARRY; HARDIMAN; PAYNE, 2006, p. 15).

important, therefore, that in considering the state diaspora-engagement strategies, the dynamics that these strategies produce relating to the work of the state itself, state borders, membership, and political community are examined. For as “ethnic commerce” globalizes, it also “sharpens the lines of division between enrichment and exclusion...[and] everywhere underwrites new divisions and inequities“(Gray, 2012, 270).

Meaney, O'Dowd, and Whelan (2013) explain the importance of the *émigrés* not only for their families but for the Irish economy:

In 1933, US Consul Balch estimated that American remittances amounted to approximately \$ 15 million, and five years later he calculated that Ireland received annually from the USA approximately \$11,150,000 in emigrants remittances, \$2,250,000 expenditure by American tourists and more than \$30 million paid to the Irish Hospital Sweepstakes Trust (MEANEY; O'DOWD; WHELAN, 2013, p. 116).

The *returnees* also had an impact on Irish society, as being used to higher living standards they prompted modernizations in rural households.

In “Fishing the Sloe-Black River” McCann focuses on the group of mothers who stayed in Ireland when their sons left for good, to highlight issues of emigration in the Republic of Ireland. There is a short movie based on this short story which is directed by Brendan Bourke, an Irish photographer and film-maker. In the movie³⁴ the allusion to Irish emigration to the United States is explicit as one of the mothers shows her husband a picture she received with the mail of her grandsons wearing American football uniforms and he shows his unhappiness about that. For someone who is portrayed as a traditional Irishman leaving Ireland and adopting a 'yankee' way of life is inconceivable. The picture shows his son settled in America, living a comfortable life, with the family happy far away from Ireland. There is no sign that they want to come back. It portrays the Irish emigrant who went to the United States and succeeded. In the same collection there is another short story called “Sisters” in which Irish emigration to the United States is depicted, as well as a deportation.

In McCann's first novel, *Songdogs* (1995), migration is one of the central issues presented. The movement of the protagonists is from Ireland to Mexico, then to the United States, and finally back to Ireland. The circular movement is explained by McCann in a conversation with Theo Dorgan. He claims that most Irish writers tend to expand the Irish novel's limits going out of Ireland and then going back home³⁵. Eóin Flannery (2011) sees the novel as “a family history that is equally

³⁴ <http://vimeo.com/26135598>

³⁵ Engaging Colum McCann Interview - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAd7Uy0DD1M>

marked by migration, but that also embraces multiculturalism and references the heterogeneity of the Irish diaspora” (FLANNERY, 2011, p. 55). In the novel McCann depicts the international marriage of , a Mexican woman and an Irishman who met in Mexico, lived in the United States, and went to Ireland. It was not only the geographical differences within the countries which were depicted in the novel but the cultural ones as well. As Breda Gray (2013) explains, there was “the view that 'the only place that Irish people should live is in Ireland', which means that, once gone, emigrants are attributed a different status to those who remain” (GRAY, 2013, p.21).

In his next novel, *This Side of Brightness* (1998), McCann goes to the tunnels of New York that were built in the 1850s by Irish immigrants, among others. The Irish critic Derek Hand (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012) commends McCann's work saying: “In the specifically Irish context, he investigates the boundaries between Ireland and the rest of the world, dealing in a number of his works specifically with the problem of emigration and immigration” (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012, p. 49).

In 2003 he published *Dancer*, based on Rudolf Nureyev's life. Nureyev himself left Russia and sought political asylum in France and so once again, the theme of displacement is present. In this novel, along with the question of migration, there is also an exploration of identity issue. While living in Russia, Nureyev was a citizen of the communist Russia, and extolled as one icon of its many cultural treasures. When he left Russia to go to France, his identity was definitively altered. According to Breda Gray (2013), the question of citizenship in Ireland has changed since the Citizenship Referendum of 2004 which “revoked the automatic right to citizenship by territorial birth (*jus soli*) and thereby reinforced notions of Irish identity as white and ethnically Irish” (GRAY, 2013, p. 24).

In his next novel *Zoli* (2006) the protagonist who belongs to a gypsy community from Eastern Europe, is a Roma poet who was banished from her group, crossed many European countries during World War II, and survived. The book approaches issues such as the persecution

of the Jews, the gypsy settlements and their strict rules, the refugee camps and all the strangeness societies may impose on those who seem different.

TransAtlantic, McCann's latest book published in 2013, also concerns migration. It focuses on the movement at different times during the past; in 1845 during the Great Famine, and in 1998. The protagonists are four generations of strong women Lilly Dungass, Emily, Lottie and Hannah, and yet again the theme of displacement is pronounced.

In *LTGWS* the theme of migration is portrayed by characters already settled in their new spaces. The setting is changed throughout the novel from a brief narrative in Ireland in the 1950s, to a long one-day narrative in 1974 New York, and a brief one again in New York and Dublin, in 2006, to rehearse the circularity McCann mentioned that of the novel is mainly set in New York City, “exile and mobility remain prominent” (FLANNERY, 2011, p. 209). New York is an icon of modern, multicultural metropolis, the city that never sleeps, where everything happens, and the destination for thousands of migrants. Anne Fogarty (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012) explains: “McCann's view of New York as a community of immigrants and as a world city to which everyone belongs is key to his portrayal of this setting in the novel” (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012, p. 119).

Beside the Irish characters the other migrant characters in *LTGWS* are Adelita and Lara. Adelita is a Guatemalan nurse, a widow with two small children, who emigrated to the United States seeking for better opportunities. She would like to be a doctor which would not have been possible in Guatemala due to her financial situation. She is a loving mother who struggles to give her children better life opportunities than she had. Lara is a half-Norwegian painter who emigrates to Ireland to live with Ciaran. She is married to Blaine, a famous film director who lost his career, money, and friends, to drugs. On the very day of the narrative, she and Blaine are involved in a fatal car accident provoked by him.

As Anne Fogarty (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012) sums up: “All of the protagonists of *Let*

the Great World Spin share a kinship in being outsiders and migrants or otherwise dislocated” (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012, p. 126). The mourning mothers were not friends; grief was all they shared.

When McCann engages with traumatic themes such as September, 11, or the Irish migration, his view of these matters seems ultimately positive. As Eóin Flannery (2011) states:

For McCann, it is this differential texture of urban space that can alienate, but that ultimately can offer opportunities for solidarity and mutual empathy. Difference, as we see throughout his fiction, is not the basis for cultural hermeticism, but is potentially redemptive and mutually empowering through the sharing of stories (FLANNERY, 2011, p. 86).

During an interview given to Joseph Lennon, in September 2008, about *LTGWS*, (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012) when asked about 'empathy' as a key element in his work and whether he used it as “a tool for developing empathy McCann responded that : “If it isn't about empathy, then I don't know what it's about”. He went on to say, “I feel we must fight against the absolute despair. Of course, all of this leads us into the sketchy area of situation ethics and morals, spiritual entropy and lack of meaning. But fighting it off has meaning. Isn't this what all the great fiction has been about?” (CAHILL and FLANNERY, 2012, p.166).

In *LTGWS* (2009), Colum McCann is not specifically talking about migration in Ireland or the United States but any country facing immigration problems.

The role of the family

The issue of migration affects the concept of family portrayed in Colum McCann's *LTGWS* (2009). Any analysis on families should take into account the fact that family is a social construct and therefore is defined differently according to the society to which they belong. The analysis proposed in this work is to find common elements used by Colum McCann to discuss both Ireland

and the United States. For such task *family* is an important concept to be taken into account. As former colonies of the British Empire the two countries have more than the English language in common, especially after so many years with a huge influx of Irish immigrants since the mid nineteenth century. According to the Irish sociologist Gabriel Kiely (1995) there is no unanimity between different fields of study to define *family* properly. The difficulty to define the term is that it is changing rapidly as a response to “the impact of social change on the family”(McCARTHY, 1995, p.12).

Family is a fruitful *locus* to analyse the transformations a society is facing, as these transformations originate in the family's environment. According to the British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1994), family and house are key concepts for any analysis of the cultural revolution³⁶. The social institution of family has undergone several changes since last century, particularly with the erosion of patriarchy. However, these changes took place differently from place to place. Among other factors the decline of patriarchy promoted the development of the work of agencies like the UN (United Nations) to help eliminate discrimination against women. The changes which occurred in families and gender relations in the last two decades in Ireland are explored by the Irish sociologist, Betty Hilliard (2006) who claims that the Irish family has been changing for the last fifty years, mainly regarding the numbers of “long-term cohabitation, non-marital births, later age at marriage, smaller family size and an increase in the number of mothers entering or remaining in the paid workforce” (GARRY; HARDIMAN; PAYNE, 2006, p. 33). Hilliard argues that it was only in the 1960s and 1970s that the image of what was considered a ‘normal’ family was challenged “by historical scholarship and by the theoretical and empirical advances of feminist research” (GARRY; HARDIMAN; PAYNE, 2006, p. 33).

According to the Swedish sociologist, Göran Therborn (2006): “In the beginning of our history all important societies were patriarchal. There was no exception”³⁷. And he clarifies that:

³⁶ “A melhor abordagem dessa revolução cultural é portanto através da família e da casa, isto é, através da estrutura de relações entre os sexos e as gerações” (HOBSBAWM, 1994, 314, My translation).

³⁷ “No começo de nossa história, todas as sociedades importantes eram patriarcais. Não havia exceção”(THERBORN,

“Although the world was no equally patriarchal. The power of fathers, brothers, husbands and mature sons. . .differed among social classes and cultures”³⁸. Therborn (2006) also claims that likewise in the West Europe, the American law of the 1960s was extremely patriarchal, as “In 1971 that the American Supreme Court ended the last bastion of the legal patriarchy, the Napoleonic Louisiana”³⁹. Comparing key social institutions, Declan Kiberd (1996) claims “that the family is the one social institution with which the people can fully identify. The law, the state apparatus, the civil service, and even the official churches, are in some sense alien” (KIBERD, 1996, p.380). Therefore the Irish family is of foremost importance in any study on the Irish society. In Ireland farm families in particular, have been more studied than urban ones, as stated by the Irish sociologist Gabriel Kiely (1995). There is a lack of studies on the family from both, the Government and scholars (McCARTHY, 1995, p. 14).

The Irish sociologist Breda Gray (2013) claims that the Irish state manages “the population through practices of classification, categorisation and the promotion of particular forms of family life that the state reproduces itself as a specifically Irish state” (GRAY, 2013, p. 24), and illustrates this by explaining that “restrictions regarding adoption and guardianship of children in the Civil Partnership Act (2010) reinscribe a heteronormative reproductive logic at the heart of the Irish family and the project of social reproduction” (GRAY, 2013, p. 24). A study of families tells us much about the societies where they are situated. There is no 'family' as such, but several kinds of them and in fact, most family studies recognize this to analyze and observe their inherent plurality. This is what Colum McCann presents in his work as a whole and certainly does in *LTGWS* (2009) despite all the conceptual difficulties to defining family. As Kiely (1995) explains, 'family' is an “elusive social institution” (McCARTHY, 1995, p. 11), and highlights the different approaches to the theme seen in the United States and Europe. In the United States, there was an 1980 White

2006, p.33, My translation).

³⁸ “O mundo, porém, não era igualmente patriarcal. O poder dos pais, irmãos, maridos e filhos adultos, embora virtualmente predominando em toda parte, de fato diferia entre as classes e culturas” (THERBORN, 2006, p. 34, My translation).

³⁹ “Em 1971, a Suprema Corte americana derrubou o último bastião do patriarcado legal, a Louisiana napoleônica”(THERBORN, 2006, p. 153, My translation) .

House Conference on families, whereas in Europe, there was neither definition nor attempts to define 'family'. The American debate resulted in the replacement of the term 'the family' for 'families', in order to include various types of families whereas the Europeans referred to the family as a 'household' and as a 'person-supporting group' in their deliberations” (McCARTHY, 1995, p. 11). Colum McCann's work draws the reader's attention to the various nuances of family types.

McCann said that when he arrived in the United States, in 1986, he had already decided to write a book and six months afterwards he had not a single page written. He soon realised that he had an ordinary life, with a loving and normal family, and was therefore left with nothing to write about. It was then when he decided to travel and meet different people with different stories.⁴⁰ As the American Nobel prize-winning economics professor Gary S. Becker (1989) states:

It is well-known in the social sciences that the underlying causes of changes are usually most easily seen from behaviour that deviates far from the norm. In the past, Irish family patterns attracted the attention of many sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists precisely because they were so different (KENNEDY, 1989, p. xv).

Many of McCann's characters have incomplete families whose children emigrated, in or where one of the parents is dead or severely sick and confined to a single room in the house. His fictional families have problems, but McCann consistently uses his writing to show the many ways people find to overcome adversity. Throughout his work he portrays alternatives to families than the traditional nuclear one based on a married man and woman with children of their own. In *LTGWS* (2009), Colum McCann explores issues of adoption, depicts prostitutes who do not know who their children's fathers are, touches upon matters of inter-religious marriages and abandoned wives left with children, and migrants from peripheral countries to seek better life opportunities in the United States. In this way his fiction is colouring the family canvas with new tones of formats and possibilities. Stoddard (2012) states that all the perspectives on cosmopolitanism “emphasize the psychological and epistemological distancing from one's birthplace and primordial ties, an ability to be at home in more than one place, a recognition that one's native ways of being in the world are not

⁴⁰ UL 16/11/2014

the only way or possible the best way”(STODDARD, 2012, p.152).

Family is relevant to the development of this work as it is affected by the transformations that any society faces. I contend that Colum McCann is portraying the extent to which the trauma of migration in Ireland, impacted on the organisation of the Irish society, as well as of the host countries, and ultimately affected families. In order to intensify the scope of this study I have chosen to focus on the Irish emigration to the United States. As shown in the previous section, the massive Irish migration to the United States continues to be reflected in contemporary American society due to the huge number of Irish-American citizens making the ties between the two nations even stronger. As an example of the interrelation between the two nations I need only refer to the list of American Presidents who are proud to claim Irish ancestry; namely, Barack Obama, George Bush, Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan and John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

McCann usually presents several configurations of families in his stories. Therefore there is no 'a family' model. Rather he portrays alternative kinds of families with their own brand of problems and misfortunes, and the ways in which they deal with their difficulties challenge the reader's expectations as they do not easily fit in any stereotypes.

In *LTGWS* (2009) Adelita, the Guatemalan nurse, and Corrigan, the Irish priest, work in a nursing home for elders where most of the patients are immigrants with no relatives to take care of them. Corrigan helps out on a volunteer basis. According to Gabriel Kiely and Valerie Richardson (1995) neither the government nor the Church gets involved with the family. “In Ireland the voluntary sector makes a major contribution to all aspects of social services, in an Irish context, refers to the voluntary sector rather than private, for profit, organisations” (KIELY and RICHARDSON, 1995, p. 27).

What is portrayed in the novel depicts not a past change of a standard behaviour, in which extended families used to take care of their babies and elders at home. This is no longer the case. In contemporary times most of the adult family members work and are not available to take care of

children or elders. The Irish family in *LTGWS* (2009) is portrayed through Ciaran's narrative voice. He describes how at an early age Corrigan became interested in less privileged people, the homeless, drunk, and drug addicted. "Some days he came home not wearing any socks. Other times he was shirtless and ran up the stairs before our mother caught him" (McCANN, 2009, p.16). When Corrigan was asked about what had he been doing, his answer was, "God's work"(McCANN, 2009, p. 16). Corrigan was not only portrayed as the good Samaritan and an extremely generous human being, he experiences his own sufferings and doubts. He falls in love with Adelita and goes through the anguish of deciding between his love and his religious vows, which he eventually breaks. What McCann shows is that there are no right/wrong, good/bad binarisms. We merely embed these elements and accordingly allow them to emerge.

There are many female characters in the novel, and some of them are mothers who raised their children alone. The only Irish family in the novel is portrayed by an absent father who emigrated to Britain in the 1950s leaving behind a wife and two sons who later also migrate thus effectively eradicating out the Irish family back home. Breda Gray (2013) comments on a section of "*The Irish Times* 'Generation Emigration' (GE), launched in 2011, a conversation" with Irish emigrants wherever they were. Gray (2013) could see many similarities between the 2011 GE's and those who took part in her 1990's study regarding émigré contact with the family left behind. According to Gray, many of the emigrants, women and men, "described an emotional and practical struggle to keep in touch with family across long distances. In the case of men who took on the breadwinner role and migrated for work leaving wives/partners and children in Ireland, the pain of separation is palpably described" (GRAY, 2013, p. 27).

McCann also portrays a Latin American immigrant to the United States, Adelita, a Guatemalan woman who went to the United States with her two little sons when her husband was killed in the Guatemalan Civil War (1960 – 1996). She tried to go to Medical School in Guatemala, but she could not afford dedicating her time to study, she had to work to support her children. She

had a very conventional idea of family and of her responsibilities to provide them opportunities for a better life. Despite an unhappy experience of marriage, Adelita provided her children with a positive image of their deceased father and kept a framed picture of him in her living room in homage to him. As Hilliard states, “In contemporary Ireland, parenting seems to be more highly valued than marriage” (GARRY; HARDIMAN; PAYNE, 2006, p. 35). Moreover, the Irish sociologist claims that still in 2002, 81 per cent of the people interviewed for her study said that staying at home to watch children grow up was one of the most fulfilling tasks mothers could wish. Within the *LTGWS* (2009) group of prostitute characters, Tillie, her mother and her daughter, Jazzlyn, have all raised her daughters alone. Despite Tillie's efforts to provide an ordinary life to her daughter she could not prevent Jazzlyn from following her path. Tillie left little Jazzlyn with her mother for three years and went to make 'good money' in New York⁴¹, thinking that it would be the solution for her problems. In another attempt to do the right thing for her daughter, Tillie decided to change her life completely. She found a job, and rented a house for Jazzlyn and herself. With Jazzlyn going to school, Tillie seemed to have settled in her new life but it did not last. She ultimately came back to prostitution and the plans for a better future for Jazzlyn just vanished. Despite missing an ordinary family for herself, Tillie was not able to provide one for Jazzlyn. For some time, she had a Persian lover who gave her one book of poetry from the thirteenth century Persian poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi. It was her first time having a loving relation with a man. In a way she associated poetry with things she never had; happiness. She narrates:

I began to read Rumi all the time. I liked it because he had the details. He had nice lines. I began saying shit to my tricks. I told folks I liked the lines because of my father and how he studied Persian poetry. Sometimes I said it was my husband.

I never had a father or a husband. Not one I knew of, anyways. I ain't whinning. That's just a fact (McCANN, 2009, p. 214).

This excerpt shows how Tillie daydreamed about having a different kind of man in her life, one who would not hurt or exploit her or her daughter.

In Catholic societies, religion used to rule social behaviour and in *LTGWS* (2009) it is

⁴¹ Tillie went to New York to work as a prostitute as she had the news that in New York she could make more money.

depicted with Corrigan, an Irish priest, representing the Catholic Church. Judaism is represented by Solomon and Claire, and Protestantism by Gloria. There are only two brief references to Jewish symbols in the novel. The first is when Claire was preparing her apartment to receive the other mothers, she saw the *mezuzah* on the door and the idea of removing it from the door frame crossed her mind. She kept it and her guests never even noticed it. Claire's thoughts about it are:

Oh. **The mezuzah on the door.** Oh. Forgot about that. . . **Why the shame?** But it's not shame, not really, is it? **What is there possibly to be ashamed of? Solomon insisted on it** years ago. That's all. For his own mother. To make her comfortable when she visited. To make her happy. And what's wrong with that? **It did make her happy. Isn't that enough? I have nothing to apologize for** (McCANN, 2009, p. 86, my emphasis).

The second was when Solomon said good bye to his son, Joshua, who was leaving for Vietnam: “Solomon pressed a Star of David into his hands and turned away and said: *Be brave*” (McCANN, 2009, p. 84). In the two fragments above, the Judaism is being confirmed in different levels. Solomon comes from a Jewish family, Claire came from a Protestant family and converted into Judaism for her wedding. “Solomon insisted” suggests that initially she probably disagreed, but in the end she was convinced that the *mezuzah* was a good thing to make her mother-in-law happy. So, her reasons were different from Solomon's; for him it was natural, for her it was something learned. As Hasia Diner (2006) explains, inter-faith marriages were accepted as in America the mixing was a common fact. The religious precepts were more observed by the converted by wedding than the ones born Jews (DINER, 2006, p. 314). According to Tom Inglis (2005): “Symbols and rituals generate and maintain the collective consciousness of the community – the intuitive, taken-for-granted way in which members of the community live and interpret their lives”(CLEARY and CONNOLLY, 2005, p.60). McCann depicted the inner connection between the idea of belonging to a community with religiosity as “a major feature of modern Irish social life” (CLEARY and CONNOLLY, 2005, p. 74). Corrigan's work in New York was to help prostitutes and elderly immigrants, so he clearly plays a good Samaritan role. On the other hand, McCann depicted Corrigan's flaws. Corrigan expressed his religiosity in a particular way. When he was young and

lived in Dublin he used to spend some time with homeless people. Some days he drank with them and arrived at home completely drunk. Many years later, already living in New York, the Irish priest fell in love with the Guatemalan widow and ultimately made love to her. Corrigan's interpretation of the work he did was so peculiar that even other members of his religious order did not understand his work with the prostitutes as is made clear when Brother Norbert, a Swiss priest, comes to New York and stayed two days at Corrigan's. Brother Norbert saw where Corrigan lived and what kind of work he did. The priest did not say a word but disapproved Corrigan's work. Eventually, he went back to Geneva after having spent two days in Corrigan's apartment. Corrigan was different from his Order's brothers and he knew it. A scene in Corrigan's apartment during Brother Norbert visit illustrates the differences between him and Corrigan, and shows Brother Norbert's discomfort with the presence of the prostitutes:

A few days later a **gentle knock** sounded on the door. An older man with a **single suitcase**. **Another monk** from the Order. **Corrigan rushed to embrace him**. "Brother Norbert." He had come from Switzerland. Norbert's sad brown eyes gladdened me. **He looked around** the apartment, **swallowed deeply**, said something about the Lord Jesus and a place of deep shelter. On his second day Norbert was robbed in the lift at gunpoint. He said he had gladly given them everything, even his passport. There was a shine like pride in his eyes. **The Swiss man sat in serious prayer for two solid days, not leaving the apartment**. Corrigan stayed down on the streets most of the time. **Norbert was too formal and correct for him**. . **Norbert refused the couch, lay on the floor. He balked each time the door opened and the hookers came in**. Jazzlyn sat in his lap, ran her fingers on the rim of his ear, messed with his orthopedic shoes, hid them behind the couch. She told him that she could be his princess. He blushed until he almost wept. Later, **when she was gone, his prayers became highpitched and frantic**. "The Beloved Life was spared, but not the pain, the Beloved Life was spared but not the pain." **He broke down in tears**. (McCann, 2009, p. 36, my emphasis).

In this long passage it is possible to see the differences between the two priests. Despite belonging to the same Order, Corrigan and Norbert had too little in common. The phrases in bold show how the narrator builds the character's personality and highlights the differences between them. Norbert is gentle, discreet, and completely disapproved of the way Corrigan lived. As the main character he does not verbalize his judgements. Rather is through the narrator that we learn

how different Brother Norbert and Corrigan were. Once again McCann says things which silence the voices of the characters. After Brother Norbert's departure, Corrigan remarks to Ciaran: "I don't know who these people are," he said. "They're my brothers, but I don't really know who they are. **I've failed them**" (McCann, 2009, p. 36, my emphasis). This was not the first time Corrigan had felt guilty for not following exact Church precepts as in the attraction to Adelita, he had many doubts and also questioned his faith and his strength. As we can see, McCann builds the characters with many sides, making it impossible to categorise them in a single dimension. McCann is reminding us of the dangers of stereotyping by ensuring his characters are resistant to it.

The last point of dissent between Corrigan and the Catholic Church analysed here is related to the cremation of his body⁴². Whilst there are explicit funeral instructions in Corrigan's will, Ciaran would never have done it if Corrigan had it stated otherwise. At Jazzlyn's funeral, Father Marek discusses this with Lara:

- Do you have any influence? the priest asked.
- Influence? I asked.
- Well, his brother has insisted on getting him cremated before he goes back to Ireland. Tomorrow. And I was wondering if you could talk him out of it.
- Why?
- It's against our faith, he said. (McCANN, 2009, p. 142)

Colum McCann engineered controversial situation in which the body of a Catholic priest will be cremated, in complete contravention of religious dogma. Yet again the character goes beyond the binary paradigm of right/wrong. Both Corrigan's cremation and the breaking of his celibacy vows were the rupture with the Catholic Church portrayed in the novel and represent the break with the stereotype which Colum McCann used more than once in the novel. It is impossible to criticise Corrigan or any other character because McCann conceives all his characters as fallible trope. According to Declan Kiberd (1996) many famous Irish writers "lost their fathers at an early

⁴² The reason for Catholics being against the cremation is that they believe in the resurrection of the deceased, likewise happened with Jesus Christ. Nowadays, the Catholic Church does not forbid the cremation, unless it is performed to attack the catholic precepts. In cases of public hygiene or other social reasons, the Church is not against it. The custom of cremate the bodies of the dead is common in Buddhism and Hinduism. "Only Orthodox Judaism, Eastern Orthodox Church, and Islam, most religions accept cremation". <http://www.cremationresource.org/cremation/how-to-decide-whether-to-cremate-or-bury.html>

age (Synge, O'Casey), or had ineffectual fathers (Joyce, Shaw, O'Connor), or fathers who could be described as gifted failures (Yeats, Wilde)" (KIBERD, 1996, p. 382). Moreover, Irish fathers often worked with the colonizer in order to keep jobs which disempowered them for their families and communities, or were simply trapped in a cycle of alcoholism and unemployment (KIBERD, 1996, p. 380). These were reasons enough to ensure the paternal image was either absent or blurred in their children's lives.

Besides the portrayal of families with absent fathers, in his work as a whole Colum McCann also depicts families who have lost their sons, another recurrent allegory of Irish society in the last century literature. In the short story "Sisters"⁴³, the father did not talk to his daughters and ignored the problems both were facing; one was suffering from severe anorexia and the other was prostituting herself. In a different model, "Everything in This Country Must" (2000), is a short story concerning the family formed of only a father tortured by the absence of his wife and son killed in a car accident, and a teenage daughter. There is no dialogue between father and daughter as he could not move on from the trauma accidentally caused by the British soldiers. His latest novel, *TransAtlantic* (2013) portrays four generations of women who have raised their children alone, facing emigration, poverty, the deaths of husband, children, and land dispossession. Families who lost one of the parents or children are highly frequent in his stories. The recurrence of an absent father in McCann's literature is explained in Declan Kiberd (1996): "The Irish father was often a defeated man, whose wife frequently won the bread and usurped his domestic power, while the priest usurped his spiritual authority" (KIBERD, 1996, p. 380). The silence portrayed mainly by the male characters is associated to the silence the author felt in relation to the artists following 9/11. According to Maria Beville and Sara McQuaid (2012):

Much Irish literature, particularly in the twentieth century, embodies an awareness of the need to move away from dominant discourses and to demarcate alternative strategies for the representation of Irish identity and history. As such, texts often rely upon silence in an important way wherein silence in Irish literature becomes less the thing that one is unable

⁴³ *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994).

to speak of, and more the thing that one decides not to say. In dealing with such literature we are presented not with the limitations of the silence and language, but instead the power of silence and language (BEVILLE and McQUAID, 2012, p. 3).

McCann portrays different family types in his stories. There are similar character types present in more than one of his stories that, while not exactly mirroring each other, nevertheless share some common experiences. The group of mothers whose sons emigrated in “Fishing the Sloe-Black River” (1994) are the prototype for the mourning mothers in *LTGWS* (2009). The idea of creating three generations of prostitutes in the same family, in *LTGWS* (2009) is used in *TransAtlantic* (2013) for the protagonists whose stories are narrated in the novel. Specifically in *LTGWS* (2009) some of the families are bound together by their shared trauma of losing their sons, mothers raising their children alone, or prostitutes trying to raise their daughters far away from the streets. McCann tends to include an Irish character or an Irish family in many of his texts.

For the purposes of this section, two of the mourning mothers, Claire and Gloria, present a useful case study. Both women were raised in the south; Claire was a granddaughter of a farm owner who had used slaves, while Gloria was a slave's granddaughter. Such a family lineage background could represent an obstacle for their friendship, but in fact, never did. Claire grew up in Florida, in an affluent Protestant family, was concerned with racism and sent donations for the campaign to free Martin Luther King. She graduated in Mathematics from Yale, which was highly unusual at that time. She married Solomon, a Jewish judge whom she met at Yale with whom had a good relationship. Following Joshua's death she became depressed, laying in bed for two months. Claire needed to speak about Joshua and the war, but Solomon could not. His way of dealing with Joshua's death was by not speaking about it. Before meeting the group of mothers who also lost their sons in Vietnam, Claire was lonely and miserable. When she saw the advertisement on a magazine she was so desperate to get some help to overcome the depression, she did not think twice, but answered the advert and started to attend the gatherings.

Gloria was born in Missouri, between the late 1920s and early 1930s. Both of her parents worked. She describes her mother's work: “She had other jobs too, but mostly she worked as a

cleaner in the newspaper office in the center of town” (McCANN, 2009, p. 287). She graduated with honours. “I was one of the first colored women at Syracuse to do so” (McCANN, 2009, p. 303). Even holding her degree she could not find a compatible job, and worked as a clerk in a racehorse betting shop. Despite the traditional marriage model she saw at home, she did not follow her parents' path. Gloria married twice; she left the first husband and was left by the second. After the divorce she never came back to her parents' house as she was anxious about telling them she had failed. There were no children from the first marriage, but in the second she had had three boys. The way she describes her two marriages is neither romantic nor resentful. In recalling the first marriage, she thinks about her wedding party: “I looked across at him and smiled and he smiled back, and we both knew instantly that we'd made a mistake” (McCANN, 2009, p. 304). Regarding the second marriage she only says: “My second and last marriage was the one that left me eleven floors up in the Bronx projects with my three boys – and I suppose, in a way, with those two baby girls⁴⁴” (McCANN, 2009, p. 306). When Gloria returned home from Claire's she saw the social service staff taking the two little girls into custody. If it were not with Gloria they would probably be sent to a foster home or to a state facility for orphans and most likely follow their mothers' path to prostitution. Gloria courageously intervened in these girls' lives and changed hers as well. She said that the loss of two husbands and three children had broken her heart. Her adoption of the two baby girls changed hers and the girls' future.

By the end of the novel we learn that Gloria and the girls went to live in a house in Poughkeepsie, a small city, seventy miles north of New York. This was a more suitable place to raise children than the Bronx projects where Gloria was living when the little girls first came to her. The narrator says about Jaslyn in the last chapter: “She hadn't been in the neighborhood⁴⁵ since she was five” (McCANN, 2009, p. 346). In her memories, Jaslyn recalls Claire's visits to their house and the long conversations between Claire and Gloria, signalling they were good friends. In the last

⁴⁴ The baby girls are the ones she adopted after their mother's death.

⁴⁵ She is referring to the Bronx.

chapter, there is also the information about the development of the friendship between the two women. When Jaslyn went to New York to visit Claire who had had a stroke and was in her final days of life, she described the room of someone who was going to die soon, and as a sign of their intimacy: “She lies on the bed beside Claire” (McCANN, 2009, p. 349).

Looking at the families depicted in *LTGWS* (2009) it is possible to say that there are some similarities between Ciaran and Corrigan's mother who lived in Dublin in the 1950s, and Adelita, the Guatemalan widow who is also a nurse living in New York in 1974. Both had abusive husbands and raised their children alone. They both chose not to complain about their lives with their husbands to their children. Adelita explains why when was thinking about the presence of Corrigan in her house, as soon as they started their passionate relationship:

My heart shudders every time he sits near the portrait of my dead husband. He has never asked me to move the photo. He never will. He knows the reason it is there. **No matter my husband was a brute who died in the war in the mountains near Quezaltenango** – it makes no difference – **all children need a father** (McCANN, 2009, p. 280, my emphasis).

McCann imbues Adelita's voice a genuine mother's concern with her children. She would never tell her children anything negative about their father, no matter how badly he had treated her. Likewise, the unnamed Irish mother never mentioned why she had her wrist repeatedly broken, or why Tillie, the prostitute, never told her daughter that she did not know her father's identity. Instead, she deliberately lied to Jazzlyn: “I was on the drugstore phone on Fiftieth and Lex when Jazzlyn said: “Who's my real Daddy?” I told her that her Daddy was a nice guy but he went out for a pack of cigarettes. That's what you tell a kid” (McCANN, 2009, p. 215). All these mothers were doing was what caring mothers usually do: taking care of their children. Regardless of their nationality, their economic, social and cultural background, they all strive to protect their children. Adelita and Corrigan's mother also share the experience of migration. The first is a Guatemalan migrant who lived a humble life with her children. Even though going back was not an option, she had nothing left in Guatemala. The latter had faced Corrigan's father emigration to Britain during the 1950s. The couple never spoke to each other again; we can say that their rupture was traumatic

mainly for the boys but also for the parents as well. The father only came back to Ireland for his former's wife funeral. He realised that something was wrong in Ireland when his latest cheque had not been cashed.

The fact that McCann juxtaposed an Irish woman from the 1950s and a Guatemalan woman from the 1970s to show affinity raised my curiosity about possible resemblances between the history of the two countries, and in fact, Ireland's and Guatemala's histories do have some similarities. In terms of religion, Guatemala is a divided country. With the remaining and 10 percent comprised Jews, Muslims, and Evangelical Churches. Its official language is Spanish; however twenty-one Mayan and two non-Mayan languages are also in use. Despite the fact that Spanish is the official language it is not universally spoken by the indigenous population⁴⁶. In Ireland, the Irish language, or *Gaelic* is a compulsory subject in schools, so all children learn to speak Irish. However, the daily routine of people demands the use of English for normal communicative interactions. Guatemala has an ancient history they were founded by the Mayas and colonized by the Spanish. The country underwent a Revolution which lasted ten years, 1944 – 1954. There was also a long Civil War from 1960 to 1996, with the interference of both the United States and the former USSR forcing many Guatemalans into emigration. Likewise Irish, whose primary destination was the United States. Since 1996 Guatemala has been trying to come to terms with its history by bringing civil rights violators to justice. In Ireland the Catholic Church is facing many scandals and is being called to publicly take the responsibility for the sexual abuse of thousands of boys and girls. When McCann connects the two characters of Adelita and the Irish mother, who are living with the same kind of problems, he is showing that Ireland and Guatemala are not as different as their geographical location and cultural inheritance may suggest. Both countries have a history of colonization, civil war, massive emigration to the United States, poverty, and the adoption of the colonizer's language as the official tongue.

McCann portrays the mourning mothers, the prostitutes of Bronx, and the Guatemalan nurse,

⁴⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guatemala>

good mothers, or at least, the best they could be. His depiction of the prostitutes suggests two apparently incompatible things: being a good mother and a prostitute at the same time. The dichotomy between saint and prostitute is a common trope in Irish literature. According to Gabriella Novati (2009) "the symbolic Irish equation 'woman equals mother'" still traps the contemporary woman in Ireland. Moreover, she makes clear the reason for this dichotomy, quoting Freud's predicate that men are responsible for the dichotomy of being unable to love and desire the same "object". She also explains the meaning of this dichotomy for the nation:

In Ireland this psychological split occurred as a direct consequence of the idealization and idolization of womanhood that originates in the notion of woman as spiritual creature, mother-Éire. This was the post-Independence model adapted from republican propaganda that the Irish government, working hand in glove with the church hierarchy, used to define the image of Mother Nation (NOVATTI, 2009, p. 183).

If there is an association between the images of mother and nation, in *LTGWS* (2009), we see that mothers could not always provide a comfortable life for their children. As happened to many Irishmen who left their own country because living in Ireland was very difficult during certain periods.

When Jazzlyn was born she swore her baby girl would not work on the streets. So she worked to avoid the prospect that Jazzlyn would have to be a prostitute as well. When Jazzlyn started using drugs and Tillie was worried about Jazzlyn having an overdose, she once helped Jazzlyn to inject it in an attempt to prevent it. Only the fear of losing her only child could make Tillie give Jazzlyn the drugs. We see again, it is not possible to categorise the characters according any stereotype, Tillie only acted the way she did because she truly loved her daughter. In the court of law, when Tillie turned herself in on Jazzlyn's behalf, Solomon, the judge of Tillie's case, observed them while Jazzlyn said her mother goodbye. She was going back home and Tillie was to be sentenced:

The younger hooker turned to her mother, kissed her square on the eyebrow. Strange place. The mother, beaten down and tired, accepted the kiss, stroked the side of her daughter's face, pulled her close. Soderberg watched as they embraced. What sort of deep cruelty, he

wondered, allows a family like that? (McCANN, 2009, p. 268).

Here McCann depicted a different sort of family bond and love. Tillie's relationship with her daughter portrays affection and love that may be disconnected from the sense of protection which parents usually dedicate to their children. Tillie could not protect Jazzlyn from working the streets but protected her daughter and granddaughters when turned herself in on Jazzlyn's behalf and ended up in jail. But all the female characters in *LTGWS* (2009) are mothers. Lara a painter was married to Blaine who, in the 1960s, had been a famous art-film director. They had lost everything thanks to their lifestyle. She describes it:

The phone rang incessantly. Parties were thrown. Art dealers tried to doorstep us. *Vogue* profiled him. Their photographer had him dress in nothing but a long strategic scarf. He got a Guggenheim but after a while most of the money was going toward our habits. Coke, speed, Valium, black beauties, sensimilla, 'ludes, Tuinals, Benzedrine: whatever we could find. (McCANN , 2009, p.123)

McCann uses short sentences to give an overview on Lara and Blaine's lives. This technique of removing the linkages between one fact and the next speeds up the description. It is as if he was describing the characters' lifestyle at the same speed things happened in their lives. Lara was ruining herself but she never thought of divorcing Blaine. When the car accident happened, despite being fully aware of their responsibility towards the victims, she decided they should run away. However, she could not pretend that nothing happened as he could. Moreover, she could not be in good terms with her decision and never had peace of mind again following the car accident. She realised she had her own morality affected by the decision of leaving the victims to their fates. At that moment she took the decision of leaving them, she faced a strong internal conflict situation which led her to behave selfishly. But she could not cope with the guilt for not helping at least Corrigan, who was still alive when they took off.

* * *

In *LTGWS* (2009) Colum McCann portrays a wide range of family types and goes against

the stereotypes that only accept one way of behaving. Throughout his work McCann shows that other possibilities of seeing the world can be great opportunities for human beings to share and empathize. Tolerance is a key concept portrayed in the novel. In the gathering at Claire's when they are all leaving, Claire asks Gloria to stay but Gloria gives an excuse. Claire insists and says: "You know, I'd be happy to pay you, Gloria" (McCANN, 2009, p. 299). Gloria gets really offended by Claire's words and leaves. After a while walking she came to her senses and realised that Claire had just made a mistake. However she still liked her and concluded: "People are good or half good or a quarter good, and it changes all the time – but even on the best day nobody's perfect" (McCANN, 2009, p. 301). By the end of the gathering, Claire's words to her guests explain why the group is so important for them:

Come, ladies. Come. Let us while away our morning now. Let it slide. Let us forget walking men. Let us leave them high in the air. Let us sip our coffee and be thankful. Simple as that. Let's pull back the curtains and allow light through. Let this be the first of many more. Even here. On Park Avenue. **We hurt, and have one another for the healing** (McCANN, 2009, p. 114, my emphasis).

This is the real reason for being together; healing. In fact, there is no complete healing for such a loss but they were trying to work through it. As Colum McCann has said *LTGWS* (2009) is about empathy. The author therefore uses the female characters to portray a real community, where the differences are not seen as obstacles but peculiarities which enable individuals to live together accepting that they all have something in common: their humanity.

PART II
TRAUMA

Colum McCann has claimed he is always referring to Ireland, no matter what he writes about. In this section I will explore how he treats the topic of trauma in *LTGWS* (2009), and which specific Irish traumas are alluded to in his novel. What connections he saw between Irish and American contexts that could be possibly addressed in the novel. In order to give some parameters to develop the analysis I will introduce relevant concepts from trauma theories. Thus, I will focus on some characters such as Claire and Gloria, from the group of mourning mothers, Lara from the car accident scene, Ciaran from the IRA car bombing in Dublin, and Jaslyn and Janice, the orphan girls adopted by Gloria. This choice of the characters relates to their own path throughout the narrative in which they undergo some traumatic experiences. As each one of them found his/her own way through, the contention that Colum McCann is using their experiences to portray possible ways of dealing with trauma is key to my hypothesis.

Many historical ordeals are objects of study of trauma theory: wars, genocides, sexual abuse and domestic violence, torture, diaspora and famine among them. Trauma was developed as an academic subject long before September 11. Indeed Freud first mentioned the phenomenon on observing the World War I veterans' battlefield nightmares, and the Holocaust Studies had also been long established. It was my choice to restrict the use of the theory only to September 11, as Colum McCann wrote *LTGWS* (2009), to explore the event. There has been considerable debate regarding the validity of the concepts and positionality⁴⁷. Talking about September 11 is a very delicate and difficult task as it is a historical recent event and continues to be a sensitive topic for those who lost relatives and friends in the attacks to the World Trade Center. Kristiaan Versluys (2009) of trauma theory discusses the issue giving the example of the Jewish-American writer Thane Rosenbaum,

⁴⁷ Alan Gibbs questions the concept of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and points out that as it comes from the American Vietnam veterans, the "Holocaust scholars are much more reluctant to countenance the traumatic experience of the perpetrator" (GIBBS, 2014, p. 19).

who questioned the role of the novelist, at that time in the article “Art and Atrocity in a Post-9/11 World”: “Can we make art in a time of atrocity? Does the imagination have anything to say when it has to compete with the actual horror of collapsing skyscrapers? (130)” (VERSLUYS, 2009, p.11). These questions immediately remind us of Theodor Adorno, among others, who had previously addressed the trauma of the Holocaust. Rosenbaum answers his own question, saying: “As a novelist. . . I wouldn't touch the World Trade Center, and the looming tragedy around it, as a centerpiece for a new book. . . . I'm not ready to write, or talk about it yet' (135)” (VERSLUYS 2009, p. 11). Likewise Colum McCann whose motivation to write *LTGWS* (2009) was September 11, never directly mentioned it. Versluys (2009) also notes that at the 2006 New York première of the Oliver Stone movie, *World Trade Center*, the theatres were half empty as the public were uncomfortable with the idea of seeing such a recent tragedy transformed into a product to be consumed (VERSLUYS, 2009, p. 1). The reaction of the public was understandable; they did not like to see such a recent traumatic event commercialized. Unlike the repetition of the actual scenes on television on the very day of the attacks, to watch a movie that was shot simulating the reactions of the people who were really there, could be seen as morbid and for those still trying to forget acting might seem disrespectful, to say the least.

Before starting the discussion on possible ways of dealing with trauma, the term has to be defined, as along with the concept of *cultural trauma*. According to the Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka (2000, p. 450), the use of the term “trauma” dislocated from “hospitals and psychiatric wards” context is relatively new. “A new discourse is born, the *discourse of trauma*”. In his words: “Trauma is a *collective phenomenon*, a condition experienced by a group, community, or a society, as a result of disruptive events culturally interpreted as traumatizing. Trauma affects the collectivity and therefore cannot be treated as an individual psychological predicament (as it is treated in the rich psychoanalytic literature)” (SZTOMPKA, 200, p. 458). He also considers: “The question 'trauma for whom?' opens an important area of contingency” (SZTOMPKA, 2000, p. 460). But the

relation between trauma and a social context is not immediate as Neil J. Smelser (2004, p. 36) explains, “we are normally accustomed to think of some events – catastrophic natural disasters, massive population depletion, and genocide, for example – as in, by, and of themselves traumatic. They are nearly certain candidates for trauma, to be sure, but even they do not qualify automatically”. Context is fundamental for trauma's concept as the perception of trauma is closely connected with it. As Smelser claims: “A given historical event or situation may qualify as a trauma at one moment in society's history but not in another” (SMELSER, 2004, p. 36). If there is not a consensus on a definition of 'trauma', the same happens with 'cultural trauma'. “No discrete historical event or situation automatically or necessarily qualifies in itself as a cultural trauma, and the range of events or situations that may become cultural traumas is enormous” (SMELSER, 2004, p. 35).

In relation to cultural trauma, Sztompka firmly states his opinion:

I believe cultural trauma is most threatening, because like all cultural phenomena it has the strongest inertia; it persists and lingers considerably longer than other kinds of trauma, sometimes over several generations, preserved in collective memory or hibernating in collective subconsciousness, and occasionally gaining salience when conducive circumstances arise” (SZTOMPKA, 2000, p. 458).

Based on Sztompka's definitions I consider 9/11 as a cultural trauma due to the long term effects not only on American society, but Western societies as a whole. It is an unprecedented event that has left its scars wide open.

According to Cathy Caruth (1996): “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (CARUTH, 1996, p. 11). In McCann's novel, Claire has one moment of daydreaming which is recognised by her guests:

- Are you okay, dear? Says Gloria.
- Oh, I'm fine, she says, just a little daydreamy.
- I know the feeling.

- I get that way too sometimes, says Jacqueline.
- Me too, says Janet.
- First thing every morning, says Gloria, I start to dream. Can't do it at night. I used to dream all the time. Now I can only dream in daytime (McCANN, 2009, p. 108).

After Pearl Harbour, 9/11 was the second attack suffered by the Americans in their own soil. It was devastating to the American society not only for the savagery of the attacks but for exposing their vulnerability to this kind of terrorism. Despite fighting in the two world wars Americans had never seen, their own cities, neighbourhoods, even houses destroyed by war as the Europeans had. This alone changes the perception of the American society related to the horrors of war. According to Piotr Sztompka, “On the one hand, the higher their level of education, the more perceptive and more sensitive to cultural traumas people become. And at the same time, they are better equipped to express trauma” (SZTOMPKA, 2000, p. 460).

The shock produced by 9/11 was also expressed by the reaction of some intellectuals who exposed their opinion in the heat of the moment. Soon after the attacks, the American writer, Susan Sontag (2007) wrote a series of articles under the title, *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*, which claimed the American government was responsible for the event. Needless to say, she received a lot of criticism for these articles, but was concerned with taking the context into account in her analyses. Context is so relevant for the studies of trauma that there are two groups who are opposed regarding its use or not in the analyses of traumatic facts. Among some critics, Alan Gibbs (2014) explains the differences between the two groups: the historicists and those who defend decontextualising tendencies on the commentaries after the event:

The historicist position envisions 9/11 as one event in a geopolitical narrative, even an unremarkable event compared to the suffering endured in many other parts of the world. The decontextualising position, by contrast, understands 9/11 as a major world event, something indeed 'outside the range of human experience' and a cause of widespread and lasting trauma (GIBBS, 2014, p. 120).

The American philosopher Judith Butler (2006), likewise Susan Sontag but in a clearer way, expressed herself saying “The cry that “there is no excuse for September 11” has become a means

by which to stifle any serious public discussion of how United States foreign policy has helped to create a world in which such acts of terror are possible” (BUTLER, 2006, p. 3). In fact, it took some time for many people to be able to say something in response to the event. As Richard Gray (2011), Professor of Literature from University of Essex states: “If there was one thing writers agreed about in response to 9/11, it was the failure of language; the terrorist attacks made the tools of their trade seem absurd” (GRAY, 2011, p. 1). He also points out another relevant difference between 9/11 and two other traumatic events in recent United States history, such as the assassinations of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King: 9/11 was broadcast in real time to the whole world, and the repetition of the images of people jumping from the buildings and the fall of the Twin Towers were an attempt to make sense of it. After the assassination of Kennedy there was a “period of national (and international) mourning that followed his death provided, at least, some measure of release, an appropriate catharsis”(GRAY, 2011, p. 8). Comparing it to the 9/11 Gray (2011) highlights that there was a series of events post 9/11 such as public ceremonies, memorials every kind of event to honour the victims, “tied to it in rhetoric if not necessarily in reality” (GRAY, 2011, p. 8). The British scholar also quotes David Simpson⁴⁸: “The time of memory and commemoration evolved from the start alongside the time of revenge” (GRAY, 2011, p. 8). The lack of words to explain the indignation, fear, and rage of the American people was a sign of the brutality of the attacks out of the context of an explicit war. In Gray's words: “'Nothing to say' became a refrain, a recurrent theme with writers, as they struggled to cope with something that seemed to be, quite literally, beyond words” (GRAY, 2011, p. 15).

In New York on September 11, 2001, approximately 3,500 people died while the whole world watched in total shock. Another aspect taken into account when talking about big traumatic events is the far-reaching repercussion they have. To mention only a few, the Armenian genocide (1915 - 1923) in which about one and a half million people were killed⁴⁹, in Rwanda about 800,000

⁴⁸ Simpson, David. 2006. *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 4.

⁴⁹ <http://www.newsweek.com/souls-vanished-armenian-genocide-1915-and-so-did-stories-323851>

killed people were massacred (1984)⁵⁰, and during the Irish 'Troubles' there were more than three thousand, six hundred deaths. Despite the appalling number of casualties, some even greater than those of 9/11's, no other comparable event had the media coverage that 9/11 had. The technological conditions before 2001 were hugely different, and therefore the power of media was not as immediate as it is nowadays. As 9/11 was connected to the whole world in the very moment it was happening 9/11 seems more real than other genocides. The other ones were more circumscribed to their own territory.

In the field of Trauma Studies, 'memory' is sometimes the only evidence of what has happened and as memory is subjective many times it is belittled. Peter Gray and Kendrick Oliver (2004) stated:

As Nancy Wood has observed, 'Memory is decidedly in fashion.' Just as contemporary culture is reportedly fixated upon catastrophe, so, too, does it appear 'addicted' to memory. This is not confined to the West. 'Over the last twenty or twenty-five years,' asserts Pierre Nora, 'every country, every social, ethnic or family group, has undergone a profound change in the relationship it traditionally enjoyed with the past.' Responsible in part is what Nora terms 'the acceleration of history' – the increasing velocity with which life circumstances, for individuals and for groups, are formed and transformed in the modern world. As a consequence, we lose traction both upon our place in historical time and upon who we really are; in communing with the past, we seek to address this deficit of identity by reconstruction a memory of ourselves (GRAY and OLIVER, 2004, p.2).

Ireland suffered no more devastating trauma than the *Great Famine* of 1845, also called *Irish Potato Famine*. Its relevance for the country is still nowadays understood as one of the most important events of Irish history.⁵¹ It deeply affected the country's economy and precipitated the massive emigration crisis during the period⁵². It is estimated that one million people died in consequence of the Famine, between 1846 and 1851 and a further one and a half million left Ireland in the same decade.⁵³ Peter Gray (2004) claims that, "The memory of the Famine has always been a misnomer. Plural 'memories', or, perhaps more accurately, memorial traditions, reflecting the

⁵⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26875506>

⁵¹ <http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/ireland-1845-to-1922/the-great-famine-of-1845/>

⁵² In other periods of Irish history the rate of emigration was also high due to economic reasons as lack of opportunities and jobs, but not similar to the period of the *great famine*.

⁵³ http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/famine_01.shtml

differing social experiences and interpretations of the 1845-50 disaster, were evident from its immediate aftermath” (GRAY and OLIVER, 2004, p. 47).

In a context of trauma, the affected collective suffer changes in their own identity. There is a direct connection between trauma and identity. Stephanie Li (2008), the American scholar, quoting Arthur G. Neal explains the extent to which identity of a community is affected by traumatic events:

In *National Trauma and Collective Memory*, Arthur G. Neal argues that collective social identities emerge most prominently from moments of catastrophe. He writes: “Notions about 'who we are' and 'what we are to become' are shaped to a large degree from the shared identities that grow out of both extraordinary difficulties and extraordinary accomplishments in the social realm (KENISTON and QUINN, 2008. p. 21).

Thus new identities are built in response to the new roles and responsibilities arising in moments of crisis, when changes are demanded. Regarding specifically 9/11, Li observes:

The events of September 11, 2001 certainly marked a national crisis as Americans, and New Yorkers in particular, struggled to understand the reasons for the attacks and the changes wrought upon their own sense of collective identity. In the aftermath of their destruction, the Twin Towers, already fraught icons of Americanness, became heightened symbols of capitalism, freedom, democracy, and other founding ideals (KENISTON and QUINN, 2008. p. 82).

Grieving and mourning are presented in the *LTGWS* (2009), as consequence of such traumatic events as war. According to Freud (2007), at the individual level: “Mourning is a reaction to the loss of a loved person or an equivalent abstraction like the home country, freedom, an ideal, etc”.⁵⁴ To deal with their grief, Claire and Gloria, who lost their sons in Vietnam, found a way of working through their mourning by meeting once every two months in one of the members' homes. Each one's house was the space where they could talk freely about their sons, their childhood, adolescence, enlistment, and eventually their deaths. They felt comfortable enough to show the others some mementoes of their sons. These women found in the group some relief for their losses. In other words, the group gave these mothers the opportunity to overcome their individual trauma by transforming it into a collective one, and to find some comfort in sharing their pain. A cure for

⁵⁴ “El duelo es, por regla general, la reacción frente a la pérdida de una persona amada o de una abstracción que haga sus veces, como la patria, la libertad, un ideal, etc” (FREUD, 2007, p. 2091, My translation).

this trauma is arguably impossible to find, but they did however achieve some freedom to question even the meaning of their own lives after having lost their sons. The group could not provide a solution for these mothers, but they became stronger through the group and develop their own personal ways of dealing with the trauma.

There is no unanimity regarding the idea of successful mourning. The American philosopher, Judith Butler (2006) does not agree with Freud on a definition of successful mourning which “suggested that successful mourning meant being able to exchange one object for another” (BUTLER, 2006, p. 20). She argues “I do not think that successful grieving implies that one has forgotten another person or that something else has come along to take its place, as if full substitutability were something for which we might strive”, and she adds: “one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever” (BUTLER, 2006, p. 21). I agree that Freud's hypothesis may be the first reaction of the mourners and is often the first step in the whole process of recovery of a loss. However, this interchangeability of objects proves to be unsatisfactory. For Gloria and Claire, the two little girls were not substitutes for their own sons but certainly were part of their healing. They were trying to give a new meaning to their own lives by transforming their paralysis, a consequence of the trauma of having lost their sons, into the positive agency of raising the two girls. In fact, the adoption of the two little girls epitomizes the change theorized by Judith Butler.

According to Alan Gibbs (2014) many American writers represent trauma by using “postmodernist techniques such as fragmentation” or, “what Roger Luckhurst denotes as 'an implicit aesthetic for the trauma novel' (87)” (GIBBS, 2014, p. 118). As a method of enforcing the content of the novel, McCann uses fragmentation as an element of trauma narratives. The mourning mothers' meetings represent an opportunity to remember their sons without being judged. As Dominick LaCapra (2009) says: “Trauma is a shattering experience that distorts memory in the “ordinary” sense and may render it particularly vulnerable and fallible events. . . Giving testimony

involves the attempt to address or give an account of the experience one has had oneself and through which one has lived” (LaCAPRA, 2009, p. 61). Thus the main goal of the group and their meetings is to give their testimony of a shared traumatic experience and to be able to create a narrative for their loss.

Let the trauma spin the protagonists' grief

The traumatic events portrayed in *LTGWS* (2009) involve the loss of sons or of a mother, terrorist attacks, racism, immigration, and a fatal car accident. The author portrays the struggle of ordinary people to keep on living after their traumatic experiences. According to McCann one reason for writing stories of overcoming adversities⁵⁵, is that writing exclusively about trauma is a kind of voyeurism. He likes to find for the characters strategies for them to deal with their own traumas. Besides which, he strongly believes in group work and advocates people joining support groups in order to heal their wounds as we see in the group of mothers, or adopting the orphans, or getting married as Lara and Ciaran. In this way, Colum McCann is making his contribution according to his own idea of a writer's role, in which, “the writer should be socially engaged. She/he should have things to say or contribute”⁵⁶. As the American scholar and literary critic Michael Rothberg (2008) claims:

The aesthetic is neither an apolitical zone closed off from violence nor a realm that can simply be subsumed under the seemingly more urgent activity of politics, even in a moment of perpetual emergency. Rather, the aesthetic constitutes a bridging realm that connects subjective experience to larger collectivities (KENISTON and QUINN, 2008, p.123 – 124).

The author depicts fragments of individual traumatic life experiences; disrupted families, killed sons, prostitution, racism, and poverty, are among the dramas portrayed in the novel. And all of these affect not only the individual but entire communities, such as mothers who lost their sons in

⁵⁵ UL, 06/11/2014.

⁵⁶ UL, 06/11/2014.

the Vietnam War; prostitution which affects mainly poor, young women and girls, racism affects not only black people but foreigners who come from peripheral countries, and drug addiction which indiscriminately affects poor, rich, young and adults alike. In fact, all of these problems affect societies as a whole, and according to Sztompka (2000), this is precisely what allows us to name them *trauma*. In *LTGWS* (2009), the various textual traumas are connected throughout the narrative by the omnipresence of the tightrope man who is in the air being observed by thousands of ordinary New York people as they come and go, in their daily routine.

Throughout the novel the tightrope man acts as a 'memory' of the future collective trauma with the metaphor – “the biggest artistic crime of the twentieth century” (Philippe Petit) and one of the worst terrorist crimes ever committed in the twenty first century history, (9/11). By the conclusion of the novel, which takes place in 2006, Jaslyn is looking at the picture of the tightrope man in the air with a plane in the background,

SHE OFTEN WONDERS WHAT IT is that holds the man so high in the air. What sort of ontological glue? Up there in his **haunted** silhouette, a **dark** thing **against** the sky, a **small stick figure** in the **vast expanse**. The plane on the horizon. The **tiny thread** of rope between the **edges** of the buildings. The bar in his hands. The **great spread of space**. The photo was taken on the same day her mother died – it was one of the reasons she was attracted to it in the first place: the sheer fact that such beauty had occurred at the same time. (McCANN, 2009, p. 325, my emphasis).

The omniscient third person narrator explores that aspect of the expectation and memory which triggers collective memory by the act of a 2006 Jaslyn looking at a 1974 picture which had become iconic in 2001. In his choice of words (in bold), Colum McCann denotes the idea of a conflict established by the use of the preposition *against*, which evokes a threat – *haunted* and *dark* – and the vulnerability of a tiny figure compared to the vastness of the sky. In other words, the message expressed in the fragment is that when compared to the target the threat was tiny but hugely destructive. The image created in the scene activates the reader's memory of the tragedy:

A man in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building. One small scrap of history meeting a larger one. As if the walking man were somehow anticipating what would come later. The intrusion of time and history. The collision point of stories. We

wait for the explosion but it never occurs. The plane passes, the tightrope walker gets to the end of the wire. Things don't fall apart (McCann, 2009, p. 325).

This is a tangential way found by McCann to talk about 9/11, in a distinct time of 2006. It shows that we will never forget what happened and that one image will forever trigger the traumatic event stored in our memory. Nonetheless, he concludes the memory of the tragedy with a happy ending “Things don't fall apart” (McCANN, 2009, p. 325). He juxtaposes the image Jaslyn is looking at with one of the images of the attacks, when the second plane is flying to one of the towers while the first one had already already hit the other tower. In this second picture we can already anticipate what is going to happen, as one of the towers is with its higher floors on fire and there was too much black smoke. In the fragment above, the choice of the words and images created by them allude to 9/11, and along with the image of Petit play the role of an individual story. In the same way, the plane evokes the attacks to the Twin Towers and as the narrator, the photo prompts the idea of coincidence between the two events. The photograph Jaslyn was looking at, clearly, functions as a sign of the cultural trauma of 9/11. From 9/11/2001 onwards, any image of the World Trade Center would effectively become a fact of remembrance of the tragedy.

To reiterate a point made in the Migration section, the loss of a child is portrayed in many of McCann's stories, such as: “Fishing the Sloe-Black River” (1994) also portrays mothers whose sons emigrated and his most recent novel, in *TransAtlantic* (2013) there is a mother who lost her nineteen-year old son in an accidental shooting during the civil war. The boy was shot three times at his family's home by an Irish paramilitary group, but whether IRA (Irish Republican Army), UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), or UFF (Ulster Freedom Fighters) it is not made clear in the novel. Again the boy who was killed was an innocent casualty as he was a civilian at home. Similarly in *LTGWS* (2009) Joshua, Claire's son, was in a café in Saigon with some other officers when there was an explosion in the bar. That he was not in combat made it even more difficult for his parents to accept his death; it seemed to them that Joshua's death was in vain. The grieving mothers of *LTGWS* (2009) used to gather to mourn their sons but the work of mourning was not only to cry and lament

the absences, but to chat, to speak about their sons' lives, and laugh about at funny exploits of their boys' childhood. According to Freud (2007) and the social psychology⁵⁷, “the collective psychology considers the individual as a member of a tribe, of a village, of a caste, of a social class or of an institution, or as an element of a human crowd, that **in a certain moment and with a certain goal organises him/herself into a mass of people or a collectivity**”⁵⁸. Thus this group of mothers works in a similar way of other therapeutic groups as Alcoholic Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), groups of victims of natural disasters, and many other groups who decide to share their experiences in order to get the support which can help them to face their difficult situation. In the mothers' gatherings, they speak about their sons in non-linear sequences. While the mothers talk about their sons' childhood, they jump to the tightrope man, and then to bagels and diets, with no logical sequence.

The importance of the group of mourning mothers is reinforced by Beville and McQuaid's:

In general, trauma theory has much to contribute to the issue of silence in response to such events. Much writing on the topic promotes the idea of the necessity of narrative as a means of recovery. We must speak in order to accept. Every event needs a narrative in order to register a closure and an end of the story before the point at which one can move on (BEVILLE and McQUAID, 2012, p.15).

The key idea for the group of mothers is for them to organise their traumatic experience and transform it into a narrative. Assessing the effectiveness of groups like the mourning mothers' in the novel, Kristiaan Versluys (2009) explains:

Trauma must be given a place within one's recollection in order to be (se)cured. In other words, as the French psychiatrist Pierre Janet puts it, traumatic memory must be turned into narrative memory (*Médecine*, 23-24). Trauma makes time come to a standstill as the victim cannot shed his or her remembrance and is caught in a ceaseless imaginative reiteration of the traumatic experience. Narrativizing the event amounts to an uncoiling of the trauma, an undoing of its never-ending circularity: springing the time trap. The discursive responses to 9/11 prove, over and beyond their inevitability, that the individual is not only made but also healed – made whole – by the necessary mechanisms of narrative and semiosis

⁵⁷ “An interdisciplinary domain that bridges the gap between the areas of psychology and sociology”.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_psychology

⁵⁸ “la psicología colectiva considera al individuo como miembro de una tribu, de un pueblo, de una casta, de una clase social o de una institución, o como elemento de una multitud humana, que en un momento dado y con un determinado fin se organiza en una masa o colectividad” (FREUD, Tomo III, 2007, p.2563 – 2564, my translation, my emphasis).

(VERSLUYS, 2009, p. 3 – 4).

The importance of the group of mourning mothers is that by talking about their loss, they are able to go back in time or in flashbacks. By remembering the time their sons were alive they can find some comfort for themselves. Through the stories of their sons, their enlistment, and eventually their deaths, each mother created a narrative for their deceased son. None of these are linear, but rather keep moving back and forth in a non logical and non-temporal sequence. Versluys (2009) explains the mechanisms of the process of healing trauma through narratives, in his words:

if trauma is the collapse of the network of significations, a narrative is needed to restore the broken link. Even if according to some theories trauma is unrepresentable, there is the need on the part of the traumatized to relieve anxiety through telling, a feeling on the part of the victims that they have the duty to testify and the desire on the part of the listener to learn more about trauma in order to reintroduce it into a network of signification (VERSLUYS, 2009, p. 4).

They even compared their reaction to the army officer's visit to give the official news about their sons' deaths. It was how they found out that for some of them, a smiling was their first shocking reaction to the terrible news. During the gathering at Claire's, McCann renders the reality of traumatized people when they are unable to talk about some facts or describe some moments, importantly showing that the group had made it possible for the mothers to talk about their most traumatic experiences. Claire describes the scene:

- And I opened the door. It was a sergeant. He was very deferent. I mean, nice to me. **I knew right away, just from the look on his face. Like frozen inside it.** Hard brown eyes and a broad mustache. I said, Come in. And he took off his hat...
- And then he just said, **Your son is passed, ma'am.** And I was thinking, Passed? What do you mean, Sergeant, he's passed? **He didn't tell me of any exam...**
- **I was smiling at him. I couldn't make my face do anything else...**
- I felt like there was rushing steam going up inside me, right up my spine. I could feel it hissing in my brain...
- And then **I just said, Yes. That's all I said. Smiling still.** The steam hissing and burning. **I said, Yes, Sergeant. And thank you...**
- **He finished his tea...**
- And **I brought him to the door.** And that was it...
- And **Solomon took him down in the elevator.** And I've never told anyone that story. **Afterward my face hurt, I smiled so much.** Isn't that terrible?

- **I just can't believe that I smiled** (McCANN, 2009, p. 110 – 111, my emphasis).

Claire was raised to behave with social graces in any situation. The way she and Solomon treated the officer on that day was as if it had been a social visit. Their smile and good manners were merely part of the obligations of a good and polite host. It was exactly what Claire was doing; she was being polite. Her emotions were stifled by the shock, she did not know what to do, she could not help herself from behaving like a robot; emotionless. It was really difficult and embarrassing for the mothers to realise that they were trained to be polite and smile to everybody even then when they received the worst news of their lives. The fragment also portrays her disbelief when the sergeant told them Joshua had “passed”; he did not even complete the phrase, “passed away”. He was trying to express it in a less shocking or abrupt way to give Claire the time she needed to get used to the feared words.

The mothers were horrified to realise that they had all received the soldiers who came to their homes with the bad news as visitors and gave them a warm reception with a smile. Their reaction at the time is comparable to the typical reaction of many people when the movie, “World Trade Center” (2006) was released. In the aftermath of such a painful situation there is no possibility of thinking of it as a public entertainment. In their minds the movie is an entertainment and a movie about 9/11 could never be seen like this. The scene Claire relates depicts the difficulties of talking about certain events; her fluency is compromised as the logic of her discourse. She alternates from the facts to her impressions of the sergeant’s hairstyle, his physical posture denoting his discomfort at being there, and things that crossed her mind at the moment she was receiving the news. All thoughts are welling up together, at the same time that she talks about what happened that evening, how she behaved, how she felt, and Solomon's immediate response.

The relationship of the mourning mothers is based on this common feeling of grief and the need to express their loss. Therefore they are pushed into this group as a place to do the therapeutic work of mourning. They represent both the opportunity and need to overcome all kinds of differences: racial, social, religious. This is key to McCann's idea of purging intolerant behaviour.

Nonetheless, they portray the fragility of this bond. When they attend the meeting at Claire's, they behave like schoolgirls making comments, criticizing the size of the apartment, or the decoration. While Claire was talking about Joshua, in his room, and was opening her heart to show her suffering, one of the ladies started looking at her watch in a clear sign that she was not paying much attention to what Claire was saying. When the others realised what she was doing, she said she was worried about the time as she would not want to take the subway in the peak hour. To further emphasize the differences among them, McCann depicts Claire's impression of Gloria's apartment. She was shocked by the poverty, the lack of security of the building, so many images to describe a poor and decadent place. "She had never seen anything like it before. Scorch marks on the doorways. The smell of boric acid in the hall. Needles in the elevator. She was terrified. She went up to the eleventh floor. A metal door with five locks. When she rapped, the door vibrated on its hinges" (McCANN, 2009, p. 76).

When Claire was preparing herself and the apartment to receive the guests she called her porter to be sure that he would put them in the 'right' lift. As there would be some African-Americans, she was worried about her social status embarrassing her in front of the other women. On the contrary, Claire thought twice before choosing her clothes or the cutlery for the gathering, and searching the whole apartment for anything that could be interpreted as a sign of snobbery arrogance. She was not comfortable receiving them at home. This time McCann describes many items to create the impression of a luxurious apartment. Despite all the differences between Claire and the other mothers of the group, they represented a way of dealing with her mourning in a healthier way. Claire, the hostess on the day that the action takes place, wonders about finding a new group with women of the same social background, but she reflects upon the other women's behaviour in her house. She was completely aware of the differences between her and the other mothers, and some of these differences bothered her. However, she concluded that the group was good for her and the need of belonging was superseded her discomfort of being with such different

women. As she reflected:

They did not notice the mezuzah on the door, the painting of Solomon, didn't mention a single thing about the apartment, just launched right in and began. They even walked up to the rooftop without asking. Maybe that's just the way they do it, or maybe they're blinded by the paintings, the silverware, the carpets. **Surely there were other well-heeled boys packed off to war. Not all of them had flat feet.** Maybe she should meet other **women, more of her own. But more of her own what? Death, the greatest democracy of them all.** The world's oldest complaint. **Happens to us all. Rich and poor. Fat and thin. Fathers and daughters. Mothers and sons** (McCANN, 2009, p. 107, my emphasis).

In the fragment above, Claire reflects on the social differences between her and the other mothers and concludes that she was not that different from the others; she understands that death is equally felt by everybody no matter how rich or educated they may be. She mourns her son Joshua, who was sent to Vietnam in order to improve the software to tally the dead. As the war was harshly criticized by society, the government was trying to present the numbers as accurately as possible to avoid even more negative publicity. He was killed with other officers, in a grenade attack on a Saigon café. That they believed that Joshua did not kill anyone, and was part of the army intelligence rather than a combatant exacerbates Claire's and Solomon's anger at his death.

These mothers' perception of life and death had been completely altered to the extent that it prevents them from finding any enjoyment in the funambulist's performance. Claire heard the news about him with disbelief and compared the funambulist performance to Joshua's death by questioning why someone would do such a meaningless act. In her words:

But death by tightrope?

Death by performance?

That's what it amounted to. So flagrant with his body. Making it cheap. The puppetry of it all. His little Charlie Chaplin walk, coming in like a hack on her morning. **How dare he do that with his own body? Throwing his life in everyone's face? Making her own son's so cheap?** (McCANN, 2009, p. 113, my emphasis).

Claire could not understand why the funambulist could risk his life in that way when her son lost his life in a war. For her, the performance by the tightrope man was a stupid act, he was playing with his life and she was lamenting the death of her son. From her point of view if the artist did not care about his own life he could have died in Joshua's place.

Claire discourse is continuously fragmented; she switched from the moment she was living to her past moments with Joshua, to when he was a child. While she was getting dressed to receive the other mothers in her house, she was thinking about things she had to do whilst simultaneously she remembered the necklace Joshua made for her when he was a child, and she thought about his letters from Vietnam. It seems she had two separate minds; – one exclusively for Joshua memories. The same is true of Gloria, whose thoughts were interrupted by her sons' voices.

Gloria lost her three sons in the war. She expresses her feelings towards it: “It was Vietnam that brought me to my knees. In she came and took all three of my boys from right under my nose. She picked them up out of their beds, shook the sheets, and said, ‘These ones are mine’” (McCANN, 2009, p.313). The trauma of losing all her sons in the war tore her apart. She reflects upon their reasons for going there and explains that they enlisted because they were bored. Gloria remembers: “I asked Clarence one day why he was going and he said one or two things about liberty, but mostly he was doing it because he was bored. Brandon and Jason said about the same thing too when their draft cards were dropped in our mailbox” (McCANN, 2009, p. 313). A social problem it is clearly expressed in this fragment. At that time, poor young African-American, were felt disenchanting and could not foresee a better future. Boredom seemed a good enough option to enlist. For any mother this decision would be difficult to support. In Gloria's case the adoption of the two orphans seemed to be the right thing to do; she was being given a second chance in life, as were the girls. When Gloria arrived home from Claire's, she saw her neighbours, Jaslyn and Janice, Jazzlyn's baby daughters being taken into care by the Social Service as had no one to take care of them; their mother was dead and their grandmother was in jail. Adopting the two little girls was Gloria's way of dealing with the loss of her three sons. As a mother missing her children and two children missing their mother, all three of them were rescued by the adoption. Eventually, Gloria and the girls left the Bronx and went to live in a house in Poughkeepsie, in upstate New York. Gloria adopted the two girls with Claire's total support, while Claire considered Jaslyn and Janice to be her nieces. As an

indirect consequence of the war then, Gloria adopted the two little girls taking the opportunity to help them and herself.

In 2006 Jaslyn's sister, Janice, was working as a soldier in the American Embassy in Baghdad. This year is remembered as a year of war in Iraq and the year when Saddam Hussein was finally hanged. The two sisters, Jaslyn and Janice, had overcome the shame of having a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother who worked as prostitutes. Jaslyn worked as a social assistant helping the victims of natural disasters to deal with paperwork and bureaucracy, and liaise with the IRS⁵⁹. Ironically, McCann created the characters Jaslyn and Janice living in an opposite way their mother and grandmother lived. As opposed to their female ancestors who worked illegally, the two grown girls pursued legal employment, working to protect people, as a soldier and as a social worker.

Along with the Vietnam War, trauma is depicted in the novel through a fatal car accident, an event which traumatized seven characters, and left two other deceased. Lara was in shock, she tried to help the victims, but Blaine was more concerned with the damages to his car and would take no responsibility, even though the moment of the accident he was driving and smoking marijuana. He hit Corrigan's van killing both Jazzlyn the prostitute, and Corrigan the Irish priest. Lara narrates the accident and her husband's refusal to take any responsibility for the event:

The moment he turned to check the front of the car I recall thinking that **we'd never survive it**, not so much the crash, or even the death of the young girl – she was so obviously dead, in a bloodied heap on the road – or the man who was slapped against the steering wheel, almost certainly ruined, his chest jammed up against the dashboard, but the fact that Blaine went around to check on the damage that was done to our car, the smashed headlight, the crumpled fender, **like our years together, something broken**, while behind us we could hear the sirens already on their way, and **he let out a little groan of despair, and I knew it was for the car**, and our unsold canvases, and what would happen to us shortly, **and I said to him: Come on, let's go, quick**, get in, Blaine, quick, **get a move on** (McCANN, 2009, p. 118, my emphasis).

Lara describes this as the exact moment she realises her marriage came to the end. Her

⁵⁹ Internal Revenue Service is the American government agency responsible for tax collection and tax law enforcement. <http://www.irs.gov/>

disappointment with Blaine was huge. She herself was deeply worried about the dead girl and the driver. On the other hand, she knew that there was a difficult decision to be taken: to leave or stay. They were under the risk of being caught with drugs in the car but at the same time she had a paradoxical attitude towards the victims. Despite her anxiety for them she was the one who ultimately decided to leave the scene of the accident. McCann built the narrative of the scene by involving the reader in following the train of Lara thoughts; her struggle against acting her first impulse to help the victims, – and her survival instinct of wanting to flee immediately. While car accident was a watershed moment in Lara's marriage it was also was the central traumatic event of the novel, affecting all the other main characters' lives, including, Jaslyn and Janice, Tillie, Gloria, Claire, Ciaran and Adelita, and obviously, Corrigan and Jazzlyn who were killed. People respond to situations differently. In the novel, the car accident is an example of something terrible for Tillie, Jazzlyn's mother, to lose her only daughter and have their granddaughters left alone. On the other hand, for Gloria this accident represented an opportunity to be a mother again, to give a better life to the two girls, – Jaslyn and Janice, indirectly Claire had the same benefit. For the girls, it was tragic to lose their mother so abruptly, but again, because of it they had the chance of having the kind of life that helped them to be successfully re-absorbed into society; the kind life that was beyond their mother's reach. For Adelita the car accident was devastating as she was in love with Corrigan. She was waiting for him to decide whether to leave the religious order to start a new life with her and her children. She speculates on his last minutes, “In my worst moments I am convinced that he was rushing home to say good-bye, that he was driving too fast because he made up his mind, and it was finished, but in my best, my very best, he comes up on the doorstep, smiling, with his arms spread wide, in order to stay” (McCANN 2009, p. 284). Death is perceived differently. For Adelita her husband's death was not traumatic. On contrary, she came to New York with her children and started again because of it. She mentioned he was abusive and they did not have a loving relationship anymore, making his death a kind of release of a difficult and unhappy matrimonial life.

The novel ends with the imminent death of Claire. Jaslyn is alone with her, anticipating a discreet and tranquil death, in the intimacy of Claire's bedroom, with only herself as witness. It makes a counterpoint with the presence of the funambulist in the novel and emphasises the risk of sensationalizing a traumatic event, as occurs nowadays with tireless repetition of the scenes on television, and almost exhaustion of meaning through constant exposure.

Colum McCann's portrayal of the traumatic accident which killed the Irish priest, and the young prostitute, was narrated by Lara, within the scene. It is already accepted that the language has an important role in the narration of trauma. It is a language permeated by memory which does not obey a chronological order or whole units, but rather works with fragments as the view of the whole would be unbearable. The use of the language is compromised by the content of what is going to be said and in the trauma studies field it is commonly accepted that there are many narratives which cannot be articulated in a linear and logical way, so that the memory of the events emerge in bits and pieces. Lara, who was inside the car at the moment of the accident, begins her narrative with the words: "BEING INSIDE THE CAR, when it clipped the back of the van, was like being in a body we didn't know. The picture we refuse to see of ourselves. That is not me, that must be somebody else" (McCANN, 2009, p. 115). She also provides the reader a context for what was happening with Blaine and herself moments before the accident. The narrative is in flashes and fragments of scenes. She kept veering from what was happening inside the car, the view she had of Corrigan's physical appearance and his van, Jazzlyn's face, and Blaine's past life. The traumatic experience which affected Lara so badly did not seem to impact Blaine at all. He insisted they should forget what happened as it was not their fault. They were in the road back to their cottage away from New York and Blaine was smoking marijuana while driving. He hit the van. Corrigan lost the control of the vehicle and spun into the middle of the highway. He was hit by another car and a newspaper truck. The narrator describes the sensation of living through a traumatic situation:

There is something that happens to the mind in the moments of terror. Perhaps we figure it's the last we'll ever have and we record it for the rest of our long journey. We take perfect

snapshots, an **album** to despair over. We **trim the edges** and place them in **plastic**. We tuck the **scrapbook** away to take out in our ruined times (McCANN, 2009, p. 116, my emphasis).

McCann relates Lara's words shown above in bold in the fragment to her profession as a painter. In the fragment she describes the movements of her mind during the accident and the need of retrieving the scene as the brain understands it as the last image it will ever see. Following the accident, Lara makes Blaine to stop the car to help the victims. She knew that the woman, Jazzlyn, was dead, she was not certain about the driver, Corrigan. At the same time she knew that they should not be there, as the police were about to arrive and they would have problems explaining that they caused the accident. As Blaine was using drugs, there would be criminal consequences if they stayed. She decided to leave the place and go home as quickly as they could. This was a crucial moment for her, the moment of moral dilemma between saving someone else or saving herself from the police. That was the moment that she faced the inherent human ambivalence and this was too much for her. She tried hard to make amends with herself for not staying and helping the victims. From this time onwards, what we can see is that she never forgave herself for leaving the victims alone on the road. Moreover, she realised the insurmountable distance between her and Blaine. He refused to take any responsibility for the accident; he kept saying that she should forget about it. They were having a disconnected conversation, Blaine was trying to find an excuse for himself and Lara was in shock, she knew the passenger, Jazzlyn, was dead:

- **Wasn't our fault**, babe, he said.
- She was so young.
- **Not our fault, sweetie**, you hear me?
- Did you see her on the ground?
- I'm telling you, said Blaine, **the idiot hit his brakes**. Did you see him? I mean, his brake lights weren't even working. **Nothing I could do**. I mean, shit, what was I supposed to do? **He was driving like an idiot** (McCANN, 2009, p. 119, my emphasis).

Blaine was trying to blame Corrigan for the accident and exempt himself. Lara did not have the opportunity to have an honest conversation about the accident with him; he never agreed he was responsible for it. Two days later, they were in a restaurant and Lara reliving the images of the

accident. This time the dead woman was talking to her as she narrates:

I saw the girl from the crash again, her face appearing over his shoulder. It was not the whites of her feet this time. She was full and pretty. No eye shadow, no makeup, no pretense. She was smiling at me and asking me why I had driven away, did I not want to talk to her, **why didn't I stop**, come, come, please, did I not want to see the piece of metal that had ripped open her spine, and how about the pavement she had caressed at fifty miles per hour? (McCANN, 2009, p. 130, my emphasis).

Her way of dealing with the guilt was to try to help the victim she thought might be alive. The next day she managed to find the hospital Corrigan was sent to and went there but he was already dead when she arrived. Lara could never cope with her decision to leave the scene of the accident, so she tried to erase it by going a little further. She met Ciaran, Corrigan's brother and with him she went to Jazzlyn's funeral. Trying to repair the damage was her way of dealing with the trauma of being involved in the death of two people. She was not driving, but she had decided to leave them alone on the road which made her feel equally responsible.

Another character who lived through a traumatic situation is Ciaran, an Irishman who was living a simple life, working in an office, in Dublin. He lived alone following his mother's death and his brother, Corrigan's emigration to the USA. He did not follow the political situation of the north of Ireland, the 'Troubles', until he was caught by the blast of a car bombing attack, on May 17, 1974, when twenty three people were killed and more than one hundred were injured. Just after he had gone out to buy some marijuana, there was the explosion which he describes:

I was walking along South Leinster Street into Kildare Street when **the air shook. Everything went yellow for an instant**, a perfect flash, **then white. I was knocked through the air**, against a fence. **I woke, panic all around. Shards of glass.** An exhaust pipe. A steering wheel rolling in the street. **The wheel flopped**, exhausted, and all was strangely still until the sirens rang out, as if already mourning. . . **I was stumbling around the corner** towards Molesworth Street when a Garda stopped me and pointed to a few spots of blood on my shirt. I fainted. When **I woke in hospital** they told me I'd lost a little flesh at the lobe of my right ear when I'd been slammed back against the spear of a railing. A fleur-de-lis. Such fine irony. The **tip of my ear left behind** on the street. The rest of me was intact, even my hearing (McCANN, 2009, p. 22, my emphasis).

Ciaran's description of the events is also non-linear and fragmentary; it presents the sense of

disorientation that permeates his memory of the event. He remembers parts of it as a flashback. His description is better organised than Lara's for he is not describing the scene at the moment that it takes place as Lara is. Time distancing is essential for altering the perception of traumatic events. As LaCapra defines it: "What has been called traumatic memory refers to symptoms of the traumatic experience such as nightmares, flashbacks, startled reactions, and compulsive behaviour" (LaCapra, 2009, p. 61). This also happened when Claire was narrating the moment she was told about her son's death. Her narration became fragmented. As Marcio Seligmann-Silva (2005), a Brazilian scholar, explains, despite the difficulty, and in some cases the impossibility, of constructing the narrative of a traumatic event, there is a need of translating into words horrific things one has witnessed (SELLIGMANN-SILVA, 2005, p. 70). Both Claire and Ciaran were unable to describe their traumatic experience through a linear discourse. Marija Cetinic (2010) explains:

Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth argue that traumatic narrative (the telling of trauma), must be spoken in a language that permits for temporal disruption, fragmentation, violence, and the breakdown of any mastery or unity: "testimony [of trauma] seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference" (CETINIC, 2010, p. 286 - 287).

Ciaran's way of dealing with the trauma of being a victim of a terrorist attack was to leave it behind and moving on. To this end he went to New York to stay with his brother Corrigan, in the Bronx. Through Jaslyn's narration at the end of the novel, we learn that Ciaran came back to Ireland with Lara where they both enjoyed a good life; she resumed painting and was quite a successful artist, and he became the CEO of a Dublin internet company.

According to Peter Gray:

The application of the language of psychoanalysis to national history – advocating the therapeutic and healing power of 'recovering' and 'remembering' a traumatic past – has made some inroads into Irish popular culture, and has unquestionably been widely used in the language of commemoration, usually in such constructions as 'breaking the silence'. As an analytical concept, this is, however, deeply flawed, drawing on Freudian concepts that might be applicable to individual psyches but which pose profound difficulties when

applied to the transgenerational imagined community of the 'nation'. Recent studies of the folklore relating to the Famine have revealed not silence, but a deeply textured and complex web of traditions that largely ignore the national narrative, while drawing together the specificities of locality and the interpretative structure of folk beliefs and practices. Ó Ciosáin suggests that it was the great increase in academic historical writing about the Famine, especially from the early 1980s, that gave rise to the idea of a 'silence' being broken" (GRAY and OLIVER 2004, p. 48)

Jaslyn and Janice, the orphans, are Jazzlyn's daughters. Jaslyn, originally named Jazzlyn like her mother, changed her name as she did not want to be linked to her mother's past. Gloria told her that there was no reason to be ashamed but she had her moments of mortification:

It used to bother her terribly, as a teenager, that **her mother and grandmother had worked the streets**. She thought **it might rebound on her someday**, that she would find herself too much in love with love. Or **that might be dirty**. Or **that her friends would find out**. Or, worse, that **she might ask a boy to pay for it** (McCANN, 2009, p. 333, my emphasis).

For her, being a daughter and a granddaughter of prostitutes was a very real burden, and she was ashamed and angry with them because of their past despite being removed from this kind of life. She had attended the theatre department of Yale but she failed. She now worked as a sort of an accountant in a small foundation helping victims of natural disasters with tax preparation or retrieving their personal documentation. Her work was similar to Corrigan's, as both provided a kind of social service work helping underprivileged people. She went to Dublin to meet Ciaran as she wanted to know about Corrigan and her mother and discover whether she and Corrigan had had an intimate relationship. In this way, she was searching for some kind of normality in her mother's life, something that they could possibly have shared, or whether they could have been friends. When she finished college, she went to the bar where her mother and grandmother worked. She only wanted to see the place; to look at the past seeking some answers. She never forgot. This was not the case with her sister; Janice did not have any interest in the past. Instead she chose to join the army and went to Baghdad. Despite having a better standard of education than their mother and grandmother they still suffered from racism, both in the United States, and when Janice worked in Ireland. "They were spat on in the streets of Galway when they were leaving a restaurant. *Fucken*

Yanks go home. It wasn't as bad as being called a nigger, which happened when they rented a car and ended up on the wrong side of the road” (McCANN, 2009, p. 341).

As McCann claimed that no matter what he writes about he is talking about Ireland, it is inevitable that his fiction evokes the traumatic Irish experience of decolonisation. According to Joe Cleary (2006):

from the early modern period, when other Western European countries such as Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, England, France, Belgium and eventually Germany became, each for a time at least, successive centres of capitalist and imperial expansion, Ireland was the only country in that geographical area to be subjected to a sustained, thoroughgoing and culturally traumatic experience of colonization (CLEARY, 2006, p. 78).

The experience of achieving independence from the United Kingdom and the division of the country which ultimately led to a Civil War, was definitely traumatic for the Irish society. Families being apart simply because of their addresses, some in the new Republic and others in new Northern Ireland; was something that generated sadness, suffering and dissatisfaction to both sides of the border.

As shown in this section Colum McCann portrayed different kinds of trauma and diverse ways of dealing with it in *LTGWS* (2009). Once again the author demonstrates his belief in community formation as a strategy to heal wounds and as a way of overcoming the consequences of traumatic events. As he said in the Reader's Guide, in the end of the book: “At the heart of all this is the possibility, or desire, to create a piece of art that talks to the human instinct for recovery and joy” (McCANN, 2009, p. 359).

Colum McCann also depicted traumatic events in his other works. For example, *Everything in this Country Must* (2000) is a collection of two short stories and a novella which address Northern Ireland. According to the author, the collection was his response to those who accused him of not being an Irish writer because he does not write about Ireland. The short story that names the book is about a never-forgotten trauma, in which a man has his horse saved by the same British soldiers who accidentally killed his wife and son in a car accident. His surviving daughter becomes

caught in the middle of the expected gratitude for the soldiers and her father's irrational hatred. The novella, "Hunger Strike", portrays the life of a young boy whose imprisoned uncle starts a hunger strike that eventually kills him. The boy followed the daily news on his uncle and the suffering and pain the family was being through. Moreover, he tried to replicate his uncle's experience outside of prison. In his latest novel, *TransAtlantic* (2013), one of the female protagonists has not only lost her only son, but absolutely all her material possessions in the wake of the Celtic Tiger. McCann depicts a grieving mother having to cope with mortgages, banks, and her struggle for keeping the home that she ultimately loses. This is a clear engagement to the traumatic situation for many people in Ireland, with the fall of the Celtic Tiger just five or six years ago. *Zoli* (2006) is another example of McCann's concerns with traumatic events as the author depicts the story of a gypsy woman who had lost almost all her family and relatives in an attack to her group when she was a child. Raised by her grandfather, the only member of her family who escaped from the attack, she had endured an extremely difficult life due to the prejudice against her ethnicity during the Second World War. She was forced to keep moving countries alone, on foot, during the war, in a truly heroic way. Trauma in contemporary arts also implies other issues, as Marija Cetinic (2010) claims:

The fascination with and circulation around the wound of trauma in contemporary art is further addressed by Mark Seltzer as a cultural phenomenon, what he calls 'wound culture': 'The convening of the public around scenes of violence – the rushing to the scene of the accident, the milling around the point of impact – has come to make up a *wound culture*. . . . In other words, when the correct distance between internal and external, private and public break down, trauma becomes a "generalization," and for Seltzer, "the generalization of the category of trauma, such that it becomes coterminous with the category of the subject tout court, registers on one level the failure, the incoherence or wearing out, of this model of the subject." According to Seltzer, the generalization of trauma, in and as trauma "theory," is itself a symptom of wound culture (CETINIC, 2010, p. 288).

LTGWS (2009) is concerned with the major traumatic events which happened in Ireland and in the United States, in an apparently silenced way. They are never directly addressed in the novel because McCann respects the necessary temporal distance in order to write about 9/11 choosing the strategy of not openly referring to the event. Instead he went back to 1974 as he found some

parallels with current time. But is clear that this approach only cannot actually help the work of mourning or the dealing with the effects of traumatic events. As Adelita, the Guatemalan nurse replied when asked by Ciaran if she missed her dead husband: “Time doesn't cure everything,” she said, looking away along the strand, “but it cures a lot” (McCANN 2009, p. 68).

The strength of women at home and abroad

The main focus of this section is to analyse the author's technique of giving the female characters such an important role in the narrative. In order to achieve this goal it is vital to fully understand these women's worlds, and: their political and social context. Most importantly, who are they? Colum McCann recognises the oppression and disempowering situation women have been through worldwide, in general, and particularly in Ireland, where the patriarchy of Catholic has ruled citizens' social life until recent times. For this reason he tries to redeem women giving to the female characters such central roles in his stories. I also claim that he though portraying Irish women, all of his characters are immigrants from various nationalities, not only in the past, but at the present time. Around the time period McCann published his novel Ireland experienced a high influx of immigrants, some of whom were Irish emigrants returning home because of the upturn in the Irish economy, especially during the Celtic Tiger period.

In order to proceed with an analysis of the female characters portrayed in *LTGWS* (2009) I will concentrate my focus on six of them and their families, as their roles in the plot are far more relevant. They are the unnamed Irish mother who lives in Dublin in the 1950s, Adelita, a Guatemalan widow and mother of two children who has immigrated to the United States, Claire and Gloria, two mourning mothers from the South, Tillie, a Bronx prostitute of Bronx originally from Ohio; and Lara, a painter. With the exception of the Irish mother, the women are all in New

York, in 1974.

LTGWS (2009) suggests a possibility of a more peaceful society by breaking with intolerant behaviour and emphasizing the value of empathy and solidarity. Its female characters are the ones who embrace this process. This is not the first time Colum McCann creates such type of characters. In his earlier works, including *Songdogs*, *Zoli*, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, and the latest, *TransAtlantic*, women are always the ones who go further to deal with emotionally difficult situations. To achieve a degree of healing the women portrayed in the novel work in groups. The characters who look for help in an open way are women. In McCann's work men usually do not discuss the traumatic events, seeming to ignore the events. On the contrary, McCann's female characters, need to talk about the traumatic events; to feel comfortable to speak and to share suffering, pain and loss. The need to remember and retrieve the events in their memory and sharing it with equals is also part of the healing process. There are multiple characters in the novel, most from the periphery or the margins of society like prostitutes, immigrants, African-Americans, artists, and housewives. Of all the female characters, there is only one not living in New York in 1974. She lived in Dublin, Ireland, during the 1950s; an abandoned wife and mother of two boys, whose name we never learn. As all the others analysed in this chapter were set in New York, in 1974, the social, cultural, economic, and political elements of these two different contexts requires some analysis.

Women's battles, unlike those of men, were not to defend the land or the riches but to protect themselves in a man-dominated world. Women have been undergone the process of emancipation from oppression; something that finds no parallel in the masculine universe. They learned to organise themselves in groups and achieve their objectives collectively as opposed to individually. Moreover, their central positioning provides a counterpoint to the lack of tolerance that ultimately culminated in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. As demonstrated in this work, McCann's female characters arguably represent real extraordinary women in their strength to overcome male

domination and move towards building a better society. The field of women's battles is not the same as men's; neither is their behaviour in the face of difficulties. Women fight in groups and history has demonstrated that this is their most powerful weapon.

Ireland has always been allegorically associated with feminine symbolism. The 'old lady' was a representation of the nation. W. B. Yeats had a theory "that the Irish were a feminine race with masculine imaginations, and the English a masculine race with feminine imaginations" (KIBERD, 1996, p. 84). According to Jason Knirck (2006), during the Free State, the Irish stereotypes associated with Republicans were "irresponsible, emotional, wild, hysterical and irrational" and "Free Staters ascribed to themselves all the 'English' characteristics of sobriety, prosperity, reason, level-headedness and a strong work ethic" (KNIRCK, 2006, p. 157). This already gendered language was being also used to discredit women as they were associated to the Irish characteristics. Referring to a period prior to the European Enlightenment Siobhán Kilfeather (CLEARY and CONNOLLY, 2005) stated that there were "speculations on the possibility that women might constitute a class of people who suffer, and may demand rights, but there was no systematic attempt to theorise the position of women in Irish society – with a view to bringing about a change in that position – before the mid-eighteenth century" (CLEARY and CONNOLLY, 2005, p. 96). Irish women's emigration trends were an important issue during the *Great Famine* and at other periods, as well. Many families saw their children emigrating due to the lack of jobs and opportunities in Ireland. The girls were an important source of money for their families as due to their good level of education they could find jobs easily in the English speaking countries, mainly in Britain and the United States. The higher number of Irish women who emigrated was a reality which according to Patrick O'Sullivan: "Ann Rossiter (Patrick O'Sullivan, 1997) citing Hasia Diner, speaks of 'a mass female movement without parallel...' and 'a "defeminization" of the Irish countryside' "(O'SULLIVAN, 1997, p.1).

In the 1950s, the time frame during which one of the characters lived in Dublin, Ireland was

facing drastic changes. The rural exodus because of the crisis in the countryside led the cities to be modernised for an increasing urban population. This led the state into debts, while the external economy was also in difficulty. The emigration crisis had been worsening during the 1950s: “In 1957 there were 78,000 unemployed in a year when emigration was responsible for a net loss population of 54,000” (BROWN, 2004, p. 200). Ireland was also facing the problem that the first destination was England at the time. Women were still attached to their marriages; the divorce was only legalized in Ireland in 1995, and then only after a five-year period of separation (KENNEDY, 2012).

The social transformations that made it possible for married women to join the workforce were occurring in both countries, Ireland and the United States. In the American context, Theresa Amott and Julie Matthaei (1996) claim that, “The transformation of women's jobs must be viewed within the larger framework of the growth of the American economy. Through a combination of immigration and childbearing, the total US population grew more than seven-fold between 1870 and 1980, from almost 40 million to over 225 million” (Amott and Matthaei, 1996, p. 315). In *LTGWS* (2009) women were portrayed in a contemporary way; they worked outside the home, got divorced, changed family religion. Although the mourning mothers, Claire, Gloria, and the others, do not have formal full-time jobs, as they were all in their mid-fifties, they are possibly retired and probably receive a pension for their sons from the army. Gabriel Kiely and Valerie Richardson (1995) point out one reason for the changes in the numbers of women working outside their homes, claiming that, “Ireland has traditionally had a low participation of women in the labour force” (KIELY and RICHARDSON, 1995, p. 40). There have been changes in the types of women who worked with the most significant coincided with the removal of the marriage bar in civil service and semi-state organizations, the equal pay legislation, and the creation of Working Group on Childcare Facilities for Working Parents (KIELY and RICHARDSON, 1995, p. 40).

The first woman portrayed in McCann's narrative is Corrigan and Ciaran's mother, whose

name is never mentioned. She is an Irish woman whose husband, a physicist, left her and the boys to work in England. At the outset of the narrative Ciaran gives us a glimpse of his Dublin childhood with his brother and their mother. He says that his mother was a “fine musician” and she had a Steinway at home. “Our mother played with a natural touch, even though she suffered from a hand which she had broken many times. We never knew the origin of the break: it was something left in silence ” (McCANN, 2009, p. 11). The next glimpse the narrator provides is that every week his father sent them a cheque, “drawn on a bank in Oxford”, but never a note. All of his father's clothes were hanging in the cupboard; his mother never got rid of them. The mother also had to deal with the neighbours' whispers and the attentions of local widowers. When she learned that Corrigan had given his blankets to homeless people or when he started to drink she seemed to be an understanding mother. She just talked to him and asked him not to do it again. As on his fourteenth birthday, when she baked him a cake and he never came back home so she sent Ciaran to find him. He was drunk:

“You won't drink again, will you, love?”

He shook his head no.

“A curfew on Fridays. Home by five. You hear me?”

“Fair enough.”

“Promise me now.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

His eyes were bloodshot.

She kissed his hair and held him close. “There's a cake downstairs for you, love”

(McCANN, 2009, p. 17).

The mother's reaction defies expectation. She had spent some time baking him a cake and Corrigan never showed up at home. When he arrived brought by his brother, he was drunk. Nevertheless, she was gentle and sweet to him; not the reaction many mothers would have. Not only in the above scene, but throughout the novel, Corrigan's mother seemed to be more tolerant than usual towards some of Corrigan's failings. When she died, her ex-husband came to the hospital; Ciaran was civil to him but Corrigan would not shake his father's hand. He only asked his father how he knew about her death, and the father explained as she had not cashed the cheques he knew

something was wrong. From this scene it is possible to see that she was the obstacle between the father and the boys. Probably she never forgave him for leaving her alone with two sons in a Catholic and patriarchal society where women should be under the protection of a man albeit father, husband or brother.

Despite the control the Catholic Church exerted over the position occupied by women in society, Irish women emigrated to get jobs and send money home. There were some restrictions that made women's lives even more difficult; especially those who were married. According to Declan Kiberd (1996), in 1925 there was a ban on divorce, and married women had no right to remain in the civil service (KIBERD, 1996, p. 361). The Irish historian, Ide O'Carrol (1990) states, "In the nineteenth century three main waves of emigration from Ireland to the US took place – before, during and after the Great Famine of the 1840s" (O'CARROL, 1990, p. 11). In the twentieth century there were also three waves with impressive increasing numbers of Irish women emigrating to the United States, 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s. O'Carrol reflects upon the conditions that forced waves of Irish women to emigrate. The role of these women should be analyzed through socio-economic, political and religious aspects in Ireland at the time. She also states that these Irish emigrant women either consciously or unconsciously decided "to reject a society oppressive to women" and moved to the United States, where they could have more freedom (O'CARROL, 1990, p. 12). There was a need of a stronger woman in the house during the harsh periods of conflicts such as the 'Troubles' as their partners, brothers, or fathers were being arrested or running away from the police. Therefore, women should take their partners' place as householders. According to the Irish sociologist, Breda Gray (2013), Irish women are currently emigrating less, and this is probably related to their "overrepresentation in public-sector employment, which has been relatively protected" (GRAY, 2013, p. 20). In *LTGWS* (2009), in the 1950s, the Irish character portrayed was already a mother of two children. According to the dates provided by Ciaran's account of her, she was probably raised in a more conservative society in relation to women's rights. There were certainly fewer options to an

Irish mother of two little boys abandoned by her husband at that time.

Declan Kiberd (1996) highlights the woman's strength by showing the man's weakness: "The Irish father was often a defeated man, whose wife frequently won the bread and usurped his domestic power, while the priest usurped his spiritual authority" (KIBERD, 1996, p. 380). He also explains that women from countries in process of decolonization who are really involved in this process are more willing to fight for her rights than the ones who did not face it (KIBERD, 1996, p. 394). This should be an explanation to justify the strength of Irish women. But is not what happens with the Irish mother and father in *LTGWS* (2009). This mother raises Corrigan and Ciaran alone, although with the financial support of her former husband. In this case, neither parent was disempowered they did not live together and had no ongoing interaction except the weekly cheque sent to the family home, in Dublin.

Despite the increasing number of women who work outside the home in contemporary Ireland, according to Hilliard (2006), they are still expected to "bear the major responsibility for all household tasks, except small repair jobs in the home. In the absence of a commensurate change in the household role of men, women in long-term relationships are, in fact, working harder than they have ever done" (GARRY; HARDIMAN; PAYNE, 2006, p. 41).

The seventies were a time of great turmoil with many momentous events happening around the world. In terms of politics and culture there was the Watergate scandal followed by Nixon's resignation, a huge anti-war movement, the first gay pride march, the Arab oil embargo and in 1975, the United Nations declared the International Year of the Women. (GILLIS, 2012). By 1974 women were also starting to attain senior posts in politics. Isabel Peron was elected President of Argentina, the first woman to achieve this goal. In Israel, Golda Meir was elected Prime Minister in 1969 after a long and successful career in international politics. And in Britain, Margaret Thatcher, an important emerging voice in the politics, was elected Prime Minister just five years later.

In the area of popular culture the TV series were also giving more space and power to

women. There were many shows broadcast, in the period, that starred women, such as *Wonder Woman*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Policewoman*, *Bionic Woman*, to name only a few. Contraception was also a key factor to the social changes that happened after World War II, agreed and largely discussed by human sciences in general. From the late 1950s the hormonal contraceptive and the IUD (Intra Uterine Device), and in 1960 the first oral contraceptive pill marketed were tools which gave women the biological autonomy to assist their success in the workforce. Those empowered working women returned home when they became mothers, with breastfeeding being the main reason for this trend. In Ireland, the proportion of women who stayed in the workforce after marriage or who returned to work after childbearing grew from 32 per cent in 1926, to 35 per cent in 1987, and to an impressive 54 per cent in 1999 as stated by Hilliard (GARRY; HARDIMAN; PAYNE, 2006, p. 36). However, the Irish sociologist also notes the major concerns during the 1970s, when there was an increase in the numbers of mothers who stayed in or returned to the workforce, in relation to the impact of these numbers on children and on women's role in the family (GARRY; HARDIMAN; PAYNE, 2006, p. 36). Women were expected to perform domestic duties at home regardless of their workload outside the house. According to Nadine Lefaucheur (DUBY and PERROT, 1991) the Welfare State changed the house work which was traditionally done by women (DUBY and PERROT, 1991, p. 479). The innovation of home appliances as vacuum cleaner, washing machine, electric iron, and sewing machine are examples of tools that revolutionized the housekeeping for the independence provided to housewives who could then get a job and whose income was, in many cases, more than welcome. Women started to change their position in the family and consequently in the society; they were helping their husbands and in some cases were supporting their families. Many other changes happened in the Western societies to facilitate women's entrance in the workforce. Kindergarten and nursery schools, for example, provided an immediate solution for the working mothers of newborn babies and pre-school infants, while these facilities also preferred to employ women.

On the other hand, in the United States in 1969, as an illustration of the subjugation suffered by women, thirty two American states still determined that a wife's home legally belonged to her husband. The Swedish sociologist Göran Therborn (2006) explains the American Supreme Court was fundamental to the process of openness as it was actually the place where the decisions were made, despite the fact that the Equal Rights Amendment to the American Constitution was first introduced to the Congress in 1923. Until 1982, it was not approved for fifteen states which denied equal rights to men and women (THERBORN, 2006, p.153).

In 1974, the United States was in mourning for the thousands of young men killed in the Vietnam War, a controversial war heavily criticized both at home and abroad. The political climate was extremely unstable because of the Watergate scandal, which had broken in 1972 and ultimately resulted in President Richard Nixon's resignation on August, 9, 1974. Informatics and computers were just starting to become popular. American society early 1970s was portrayed in the novel through prostitutes, mid-class and upper-class women, all of whom faced racism, social and gender prejudice.

In the novel, Tillie, one of the prostitutes, crossed the divide of social classes in her occasional sexual encounters with upper-class and educated men. By the age of thirty-eight she was already a grandmother. When Tillie was a child, she lived right across the place where the prostitutes worked; she used to see them from behind her window and daydream about the girls' lives. She had an astonishing figure; a perfect body and men enjoyed seeing her walking. Her mother had also worked a prostitute until her "teeth fell out". After that, she tried to persuade Tillie not to be a sex-worker. Tillie had no idea of the identity of her baby girl's father. People used to say that he might have been a Mexican, although she had no memory of being with any of them. She hoped she would make enough money to buy a house and "lots of nice furniture" for her daughter, Jazzlyn. But things did not go according to plans. She says, "I gave Jazzlyn a bath once. She was just a few weeks old. Skin shining. I looked at her and thought she gave birth to the word *beautiful*."

I wrapped her in a towel and promised her she'd never go on the stroll" (McCANN, 2009, p. 236). At the same time she was conscious of her responsibility: "I was a junkie then. I guess I always have been. That ain't no excuse. I don't know if the world'll ever forgive me for the bad I slung her way. I ain't gonna sling it the way of the babies, not me" (McCANN, 2009, p. 236). Despite her reckless behaviour towards her daughter Jazzlyn, it is not possible to say that Tillie was a bad mother, or that she did not care about Jazzlyn. She tried to do her best, no matter the result. She was trapped in that position, with that job and she could not find a way of getting out of it to give her daughter and herself a different life. She seriously attempted to stay off the streets for a while, rented a house for her and Jazzlyn, found a job, and took Jazzlyn to school every day, but it did not work out. She could not help herself and came back to prostitution.

Tillie was caught by the police many times for loitering, prostitution, and drugs possession. When she was finally arrested for stealing, there was no way out; she was sent to prison. In fact it was Jazzlyn who stole two hundred dollars from a man who had promised them work which never materialized. Tillie took the blame for this robbery to leave Jazzlyn free to come back to the babies. After Jazzlyn's death, Tillie was deeply worried about who the babies were with. When she sent one of the inmates to the infirmary in a self-defence attack, she was set to be transferred to another facility in the north of the state for the last few months of her sentence. She complained, and trying to escape from the guards, she knocked the director's front tooth out. This meant she was further sentenced to undergo a psychiatric treatment in a Connecticut penitentiary. She was permitted to see Jazzlyn's babies before leaving to Connecticut and learned that they were living with Gloria and being cared for with love and affection. She regretted not having taken better care of Jazzlyn and her drug habit. Ultimately, killed herself in prison, just after seeing the babies. She realised that the girls were better with Gloria than they would ever be with anyone else.

Jazzlyn, the only daughter Tillie had, was very beautiful with one green eye and one brown. Ciaran describes her: "She looked half Mexican, half black. She was taut and lithe: she could have

been walking down a runway” (McCANN, 2009, p. 29). When Jazzlyn was nine years old, they moved to New York and for a while Tillie did not streetwalk; avoided drugs and worked in a supermarket. Jazzlyn was in school and lived an ordinary life for some years until Tillie went back to the streets. At this time Jazzlyn went too. They used to work together and Tillie says: “I kept Jazz around for company. She only went downtown now and then. She was the most popular girl on the stroll. Everyone else was charging twenty, but Jazzlyn could go all the way to forty even fifty (McCann, 2009, p. 217). She was succeeding in her mother's area of expertise. In an unequivocal maternal manner, the way Tillie felt at the beginning of Jazzlyn's career as a prostitute is comparable to the pride Claire felt to see her son Joshua following her path to also graduate and succeed in the field of maths. At the age of fourteen Jazzlyn started doing drugs. Tillie slapped her but it did not work and she continued using it. There was a feeling of identification between mother and daughter. Tillie had been through all of this before; she had also started early, working the streets and doing drugs. For her there was no news in what was happening in Jazzlyn's life, she already knew all the steps. Her biggest concern was her granddaughters. Tillie took all the responsibility for Jazzlyn's robbery, in order to keep the mother close to the little girls. As Tillie could not change either her life or Jazzlyn's, she wanted to try for Jazzlyn's girls. The process of social change for the girls started with their mother's death and adoption by Gloria.

On the same day of the tightrope man in the air and the death of Jazzlyn and Corrigan, Claire was entertaining other mothers in her elegant apartment in the Upper East Side. She had converted into Judaism for her marriage to Solomon, and also was educated at Yale and “one of only three women in the math department”(McCANN, 2009, p. 75). She is a more complex character as the narrator describes her behaviour in the mothers' gatherings. The need of interlocutors to mourn Joshua destabilised her. Claire was raised in a Southern, Protestant and racist family, but like many converts she observed the Jewish precepts and rituals as if she had been born Jewish. According to the American historian, Hasia Diner, after accepting the interfaith marriages,

the new convert to Judaism were the ones who mostly observed the Jewish precepts, rituals and festivities (DINER, 2004, p. 306). This is true of Claire; somehow she was more Jewish than Solomon. According to her, the Vietnam War was not her son's war. She was convinced that his obligation was with Israel. After undergoing treatment for depression with a psychiatrist treatment she had found out about the meetings through an advertisement from *The Village Voice*: "LOOKING FOR MOTHERS TO TALK TO NAM VETS. P.O. BOX 667" (McCANN, 2009, p. 90). She had cut it out and pasted it on the fridge door until one day she decided to answer the ad. She had been to four houses before hosting one meeting. In this group she met Gloria, her favourite from the very beginning. Despite the huge social gap between her and all the other mothers Claire continued to attend the meetings. On these occasions she could talk freely about her son, and the other mothers did not judge or criticize her. She was extremely self-conscious about the social gap between herself and the others, but enjoyed inclusion in the group. She needed to be accepted by the other mothers; she needed to have the sense of belonging. With this in mind, that morning she instructed the porter of her building to ensure her guests come up to her apartment in the "correct elevator"(McCANN, 2009, p. 79). When they arrived she was so uncomfortable she did not know how to behave, what to say, or even, where to sit. The scene of this particular gathering is described by two different narrators: Claire and Gloria, in two different chapters. The technique used by McCann which provides the reader with two different perspectives, both from below and above the social scale, of the same object, makes it even more interesting. Reading the same scene through the eyes of another character breaks with the reader's expectations, because they are different people and have different ways of seeing the world.

Gloria was the only girl among five brothers; her father was a house painter and her mother worked as a cleaner for a newspaper office amongst other things. Her mother used to bring home papers from all over the country and read the kids interesting stories that amused and excited their curiosity. Gloria's parents got along well and were deeply attached to each other. Gloria attended

college in Syracuse, New York, and never returned home. She graduated in History and got married for the first time to an engineer she admired for his intelligence, academic background, and activism. Love was not part of this marriage; they dated for only six weeks and got married. After only eleven months she left him. Her second marriage also ended in divorce. When her sons received their call-up to Vietnam, they were willing to go. The army seemed to give them the possibility of doing something different from what they were used to in the projects; it meant freedom to them. Gloria echoed the same feeling of Claire related to the other women from the group. She felt uneasy that had nothing in common with them, even though she appreciated attending those meetings and the opportunity to tell her sad story without being judged.

McCann uses Gloria to break down the other women's expectancies; she did not fit in the black poor woman stereotype. She was educated and appreciated opera; unexpected qualities for a white rich woman's concept of being black at that time. More importantly, Gloria was a sensitive and ethical person. When she saw the two little girls who lived in her building with their mother, leaving with the police and a social worker, she saw an opportunity to do something positive for her and the girls. The little girls aged two and three needed a mother and she needed children. By the end of the book, one of the girls, Jaslyn,⁶⁰ now an adult, recalls one episode of her life and describes the great friendship between Claire and Gloria, and how Claire helped Gloria financially to raise the girls and paid for their education.

Claire and Gloria were ahead of their time; they were independent before independence was something expected from a woman. Claire broke boundaries by working in a male-dominated area as mathematics, while Gloria was the first African-American woman to graduate from the University of Syracuse. She was married twice and did not come back to her parents' house after either divorces. Both Gloria and Claire had been more politically active in their youth. Nevertheless, their convictions remained active in their minds. After a misunderstanding with Claire

⁶⁰ The girl was given her mother's name with ss and not zz. Already an adult she changed it eliminating one s, in order to make it different from her mother's.

just before leaving her apartment, when Claire insensitively inadvertently offered to pay Gloria to stay a little longer than the other guests, Gloria reflected that:

Sure, I didn't want to leave Claire there with all those leftover crumbs on the carpet, and the crushed-out cigarettes in the ashtrays and I suppose I could've easily stayed, rolled up my sleeves, and started washing the dishes and cleaning the floor and tucking the lemons away in the Tupper-ware, but the thing is, **I had the thought that we didn't go freedom-riding years ago to clean apartments on Park Avenue**, no matter how nice she was, no matter how much she smiled. I was pretty sure I could've just sat down on the sofa and she would've served me hand and foot, but we didn't go marching for that either (McCANN, 2009, p. 297, my emphasis).

Despite this misunderstanding, their relationship became strong and resistant to minor flaws. Gloria came back to Claire's house when there was nowhere else for her to stay after having her purse stolen in the middle of the street. The experience of the group led them to form a close bond. According to Judith Butler (2006) the group or community is crucial to our understanding of ourselves even in losses contexts. In her words:

When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us (BUTLER, 2006, p. 22).

The real meaning of those meetings for Claire and Gloria was the opportunity to carry on their work of mourning. According to the French sociologist, Alain Touraine (2007), another reason for the constitution of this group is the women's need of non-mixed spaces where they can freely exchange words among themselves to help them to analyse their situation; as they have a distinctive way of doing this (TOURAINÉ, 2007, p. 43).

Mothers mourning sons is an image that erroneously drives us to idea of man's supremacy, as men have their own particular way of mourning. Mary O'Brien (1983) explains that there is a clash between traditional wisdom on the idea that: "Women are naturally trapped in the childbearing function/ Women therefore cannot participate in social life on equal terms with men", and the feminist view which keeps the premise but alters the conclusion: "Therefore the liberation of

women depends on their being freed from this trap” (O'BRIEN, 1983, p. 20). According to Declan Kiberd (1996), the relationship between a son and his mother represented in Irish literature is very intense as the father is a fading presence in the families. He adds that mothers find in their sons “an emotional fulfilment” that they do not find it in their husbands (KIBERD, 1996, p. 381). For the mourning mothers of the novel, their sons represent their treasure. In Claire's narration Joshua is always present; no matter what she is talking about, something that reminds her of him always comes up.

A sign of the obstacles to the social crossing borders in the American society in the 1970s is represented by Adelita, the Guatemalan nurse. She emigrated with her children with the intention of finishing the Medical School in the United States. It would have meant her opportunity to change her life for the better as it was not easy in New York. She worked hard but the wages were not good, and she lived in a first-floor apartment in a clapboard house in Bronx. She fell in love with Corrigan. The religious impediment to this relationship was his priesthood. The decision whether to pursue his relationship with Adelita could only be taken by him but eventually he broke his vows. She was in suspense as to whether he would leave his Order to be with her and the children. They used to talk about faith, religion, and the meaning of all of this to them. After his death, she went back to his words: “He told me once that there was no better faith than a wounded faith and sometimes I wonder if that is what he was doing all along – trying to wound his faith in order to test it – and I was just another stone in the way of his God” (McCANN, 2009, p. 284).

Of all the female characters in *LTGWS* (2009), Lara, a twenty two-year old painter, daughter of a successful car manufacturer father and a Norwegian model, is the only one who is not a mother. She was married to Blaine, a successful film director in the late sixties and a celebrity in the film-making world. Their drug use began to affect their personal and professional lives. She stopped painting. She describes her life at that time:

I'd had enough beauty to get taxi drivers fighting. But I could feel the **late nights draining me. My teeth were turning a tinge darker from too much Benzedrine. . . Instead of**

working on my own art, I went to the hairdresser, twice, three times a week. . . I would get back to painting again. I was sure of it. All I needed was another day. Another hour (McCANN, 2009, p. 124, my emphasis).

Lara abandoned her work as a painter and adopted a more superficial lifestyle which contributed to the physical deterioration noted in the above excerpt. In an attempt to change their lives and get rid of drugs, they bought a log cabin an hour and a half far from New York and moved there to live more healthily, which they did for a while. On the very day of the accident, they were coming home with the unsold canvas in the trunk of the car. Lara was severely disturbed by Blaine's indifference, as he seemed more concerned about his own car than about the injured people. Despite the long relationship she had shared with Blaine, his lack of responsibility and ethics was too much for her. She left him. By the end of the book Jaslyn was flying to Dublin to visit Ciaran, and Lara who became a famous painter in Ireland.

Jaslyn and Janice, the girls raised by Gloria and Claire, lived a different life from their ancestors. Jaslyn went to Yale and was very conservative in her dress and behaviour according to the narrator's description: "At work she is known as one of the bosses with ice in her veins" (McCANN, 2009, p. 328). Six years after Gloria's death Jaslyn flew to New York to be with the dying Claire. She was not welcome in the apartment; Claire's relatives looked down on her when she arrived. But racial and social prejudice, seemed to not affect Jaslyn, who decided not to stay but came back later to see Claire. The association formed between Gloria and Claire to raise the two orphans made them overcome their own preconceptions regarding social, racial, and religious differences. The result was positive; the girls grew up emotionally and physically healthy, and the two ladies were companions until the end.

* * *

All female characters mentioned above looked for a way of dealing with their pain, either collectively or individually, in order to overcome potentially insurmountable differences among

themselves. They were ethical people to the extent of their capacity. However, Lara provided an example of the difficulties one faces when there is a decision to be made which puts herself at risk. Tillie let her maternal love prevail sacrificing herself for Jazzlyn. Although Colum McCann does not stereotype his characters, it is possible to argue that those of *LTGWS* (2009) seem to accord with the third wave of the feminist movement, or as it is also called *post-feminism*, which embraces diversity and change. According to the Portuguese scholar, Ana Gabriela Macedo (2006), post-feminism is a concept that lacks unanimity. There are different currents of thought defining it, its concerns are no longer gender equality, and therefore it does not represent women's wishes adequately. Actually, the term identifies a more individualist and liberal agenda (MACEDO, 2006, p. 813). Despite their own peculiarities, the female characters of the novel do not have any political or religious affiliation. This actually makes them seem closer to the ordinary women and generates empathy for them.

It is clear that McCann is not talking about woman trapped in the feminist backlash. The women portrayed in the novel are not concerned about the man's domination as they were in the beginning of the feminist movement, in the 1970s. Rather they are concerned to take responsibility for their own lives. Agency is their most important weapon to fight for their rights. Jason Knirck (2006) explains that in Irish politics, following the Easter Rising, women used the images of their deceased husbands, sons, brothers, or even fathers, to be identified with, and participate in the political debate, and obtain positions in the Irish parliament (KNIRCK, 2006, p. 69). The Irish historian states: "The Irish mother was a particularly effective figure in revolutionary propaganda, which often emphasized both her economic and emotional losses" (KNIRCK, 2006, p. 57). Mothers who have lost their children held a relevant role in Irish history; this was a fact. In *LTGWS* (2009), Colum McCann used the same image to point out the importance of these women. The difference among the mothers of the novel is that they held together in a group. One of many things that McCann highlighted in the novel was the power of a community. By herself, Claire was not

able to cope with her pain. It was the group that empowered those mourning mothers to the point of Gloria with the help of Claire adopted the two little girls, descendants of a prostitute lineage, whose destiny was transformed from that moment onwards.

CONCLUSION

LTGWS (2009) was written to engage with the events of 9/11. It was Colum McCann's personal response to the tragedy, although the episode is not directly mentioned. The author's silence about the terrorist attacks is broken in the paratext, "A Conversation with Colum McCann and Nathan Englander" at the end of the book, and in a conversation with the Irish poet Theo Dorgan to whom McCann tells his personal connection to 9/11 and reveals that the artistic silence about it strongly motivated him to write the novel. The fact the author had someone of his family directly involved in 9/11 and in the 'Troubles', in Northern Ireland is fundamental for his comparison between them. 9/11 is a cultural trauma, due to its long permanence in collective memory.

The idea of overcoming is close to McCann's heart and is present in all his work. There is no healing or forgetting, but people manage to move on, putting aside their own traumas and living their lives as best they can. Colum McCann depicts ways of coming to terms with one's own drama, and in all of his texts the presence of the group is vital for this. McCann shows us different behaviours, sometimes opposite to what it is expected by society, and making impossible to define them.

Although the mothers are mostly positively represented in the novel, they are not all successful in raising children as it is portrayed in the central nucleus of the prostitutes. The author subverts stereotypes assigned to peripheral characters and refuses to use conventional binary oppositions and hierarchical relationships which can lead to division between rulers and subjects. In doing so he confirms Touraine's statement that after having achieved great victories against the inequalities imposed on them, women are less worried about masculine domination.

LTGWS (2009) portrays a microcosm of individuals working through processing with their own dramas. Nonetheless, the dramas never affect just one single individual, but groups of people.

McCann truly believes in group working and therefore portrays people organising themselves this way in order to overcome their pain. Not all the characters found the same way of dealing with trauma; the mourning mothers found their way of dealing with their loss in the group; Lara overcame the guilt of failing to rescue the victims of the car accident, by trying to help and eventually confessing her participation in the accident to Ciaran; Tillie and Jazzlyn could not overcome prostitution in their family, their deaths were the watershed in the lives of Janice and Jaslyn.

Despite the traumatic impact on Ireland for more than two centuries migration is still a reality for many countries in the twenty first century. The developed world receive people from the developing countries who seek a better life that they can find in their home country. In Ireland particularly, migration has affected the lives of millions of people and not always in a positive way. A huge number of families have been dismantled because of mass emigration. At the same time, emigrant Irish women represented a reliable help for their families as they sent money home. When the economic situation in Ireland had improved, many émigrés came back to Ireland and adapted to new conditions.

Human beings are not naturally tolerant. In a world as individualistic as the one we live in, group support as a means of overcoming trauma is a challenging suggestion. Groups are made by people with at least one common interest which allows the construction of tolerance. Tolerant people are normally more empathetic. Solidarity and empathy are lifted to the category of healing tools as McCann proposes the two feelings as crucial for any kind of recovery. Are they enough? In the case of the mothers, the group working was presented as a way to help them to deal with their loss. For Lara, it saved her from guilt and made a new start with Ciaran possible. They were not enough for Tillie who killed herself in prison after seeing her granddaughters safely distanced from prostitution, living with Gloria.

Is there any possibility of moving on from 9/11 or the 'Troubles'? From wars, genocide,

tortures, or sexual abuse? Forgetting seems impossible; but moving on is necessary to come back to everyday lives. At the same time it is necessary to look back over the fact every now and then. To remember is part of the recovery process. That was the option for the mourning mothers group. In fact, these women were transforming the paralysis, into which they had been thrown since their sons' deaths, into agency and resuming control of their lives. Moreover, the world cannot afford to forget the atrocities. Repetition of such stories and the images have their place in the process of recovery and in order to avoid the risk of these brutal actions being repeated.

As an artist's answer to 9/11, *LTGWS* (2009) offers some comfort to those who would remember. McCann's proposal of 'healing' cannot completely eradicate the enduring distress, nevertheless I see it deeply encouraging for those who remain trapped in suffering and pain caused by traumatic past experience.

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APPENDIX

List of *Let the Great World Spin*'s characters analysed in this dissertation:

Corrigan – Irish catholic priest, moved to the Bronx, New York. His work was to help prostitutes of the area, allowing them to use his bathroom. He also helped Adelita in an elderly home for immigrants. He fell in love with Adelita. He died in consequence of a car accident.

Ciaran – Corrigan's brother. He moved to New York, following his brother after having been hurt in one IRA bombing attack in Dublin. After Corrigan's death he came back to Ireland.

Adelita – a Guatemalan nurse who immigrated after her husband's death to give her children a better life. She fell in love with Corrigan.

Claire – married to the judge Solomon, whose only son was killed in the Vietnam war. She was a mathematician at Yale, and lived at Upper-East Side Manhattan. She joined the group of mourning mothers who had their sons killed in Vietnam where she met Gloria.

Gloria – had three sons killed in Vietnam. She was a historian but never worked in her area. She lived in the Bronx, in the projects. She adopted two little girls, whose mother was killed with the priest in a car accident. She raised the girls with Claire's total support.

Tillie – a prostitute from the Bronx who had a good relationship with Corrigan. She killed herself in prison.

Jazzlyn – Tillie's daughter was killed in the same car accident that killed Corrigan. She had two little daughters Janice and Jaslyn who were adopted by Gloria, after her death.

Lara – a painter. She was married to Blaine, a successful filmmaker who lost everything to drugs, who caused the accident that killed Corrigan and Jazzlyn. After the accident she met Ciaran when she went to the hospital to have some news about Corrigan. She went to Ireland to live with Ciaran.