

Brooklyn: subverting and challenging genre conventions



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Brooklyn by Colm Toiblin tells the story of Irish immigrant Eilis Lacey's journey to America during the 1950's. The novel explores Eilis's relationship with home as it shifts in correlation with her loyalties to those around her. The conventions of the novel allow for it to be read as a 'hero's journey' story. Generically, this subgenre involved a protagonist (the hero) who reluctantly accepts a 'call to adventure' taking him out of his ordinary world. After crossing the first threshold, he encounters multiple tests, allies and enemies. Eventually, he finds himself at his lowest point where he faces the 'supreme ordeal'. With the help of a mentor he 'seizes the sword' by picking himself up and is pursued on the road back to his own world where he returns transformed and admired by the members of the ordinary world. Although Brooklyn is close enough to conform to the Hero's Journey subgenre, it does subvert generic conventions to a significant extent.

Brooklyn uses a sense of realism to create a 'call to adventure' driving the protagonist out of her ordinary world. Traditionally, texts under the hero's journey subgenre would involve a male protagonist leaving his home to face a mythical external danger. Set in the 1950's, Toiblin portrays the adverse economic conditions in Ireland during the time. The reader is able to see that it is difficult for Eilis to procure suitable employment as she is left with no option but to work for Mrs Kelly who shadows her every action. Mrs Kelly "checked every price Eilis wrote down and added up the figures up herself after Eilis had done so." This proved humiliating to Eilis as she was skilled in both math and accounting. Also, Enniscorthy seemed to have denied Eilis a 'rosy romantic future' as is portrayed when she meets Jim Farrell, an eminent suitor, who "imperiously glanced around the hall, ignoring her." Noticing

Eilis's bleak future Rose and (Eilis's soon to be mentor) Father Flood devised the plan to send Eilis to America to open her world up to opportunities that were not available for her in Ireland during time. Eilis is instructed [Quote i. e. You will be going to America where you stay with father flood...] This 'call to adventure' becomes a decision that is made for the protagonist by those around her. This deliberate decision by Toiblin subverts the convention of the hero choosing to personally undertake the 'call to adventure' as would be generically expected.

The perils faced by the protagonist in Brooklyn are emotional and psychological rather than physical. Generically, hero's journey stories involved physical acts of valour which were undertaken by a male protagonist. These acts often involved conquering a monster. In Brooklyn, Eilis is faced with the threats of alienation and homesickness. These metaphoric 'monsters' test the characters emotional and psychological strength. Upon arriving to Brooklyn she compares her room to a "tomb" in which she "feels like a ghost". Eilis's "hate [of] the house" was as a result of the lack of familiar connections she felt to home as "nothing here was part of her." Here, Toiblin has used setting (the house) to create a strong sense of alienation within the protagonist. The comparison of herself to a ghost reflects Eilis feeling insignificant in her new environment. Eilis is plagued by homesickness- the psychological supreme ordeal she must overcome.

The protagonist in Brooklyn returns to the 'Ordinary World' armed with a newfound sophistication symbolized by clothing, speech, action and education. Eilis is precipitated back to Ireland by the death of her sister.

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Generically, when the protagonist returns from his journey he is deemed a hero and comes back armed with physical skills that he has learnt along the way. He would have gained a newfound respect from the members of the ordinary world who view him in admiration. Upon arriving back in Enniscorthy, Eilis's transformation is observed by those who knew her with people repeatedly telling her that "she has changed". Nancy, Eilis's close friend informs her "you have an air about you...everything about you is different." Her new persona exuberates confidence, a trait that does not appear to be completely accepted by Eilis's mother "You'd better wear sensible clothes. Nothing too American." Although the heroine's transformation was not admired by elder females as she was seen to have been challenging tradition, she had caught the attention of male characters, in particular Jim, who was attracted to her difference despite ignoring her in the past. Here, Toibin both subverts and conforms to the generic expectation of the hero coming back to be admired by those in the new world.

Toibin has made deliberate decisions to subvert certain generic conventions of the hero's journey subgenre. The reason behind this decision could be seen as a result of a change in ideologies over time. Authors write for a purpose which is to convey a message to a particular audience in an engaging and entertaining way. They do this by appealing to one's beliefs and values. Over time, as ideologies change, writers have to adapt their works to appeal to new audiences, much as Toibin does in Brooklyn.