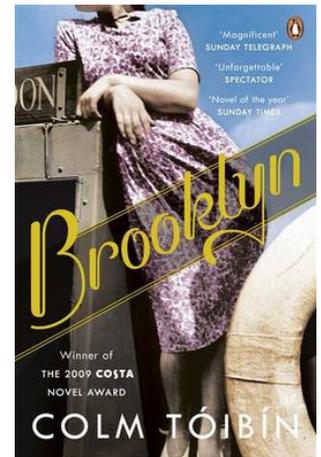


Reading and Responding: *Brooklyn*, by Colm Tóibín

The VCAA Bulletin describes the text as:

Tóibín, Colm, *Brooklyn*, Picador, 2009

In the 1950s Eilis, an Irish girl from a small town, moves to the USA to better her life. She obtains employment, but suffers severe homesickness as she settles into a ghetto-like Irish enclave in Brooklyn. After meeting a kind Italian-American boy, she plans an American future. However, when a tragedy calls her back to Ireland, and she realises that her position in the community has improved, she faces the dilemma of the migrant – the old country or the new? Tóibín lucidly presents two cultures, the dream-like quality that infuses whichever is the current 'other', and the seductive power of home.



Assessment in Unit 3 of this area study requires you to demonstrate the following key knowledge and skills:

- Thorough and insightful understanding of the ideas, characters and themes constructed and presented in the text.
- Complex discussion and critical analysis of the structures, features and conventions used by the author to construct meaning.
- Complex analysis of the ways in which social, historical and/or cultural values are embodied in the text. Construction of a sophisticated interpretation which demonstrates an understanding of ways in which the text is open to different interpretations by different readers.
- Considered selection and use of significant textual evidence and highly appropriate use of relevant metalanguage to support analysis.
- Highly expressive, fluent and coherent writing.

Your 'holiday' preparation for the close study of this text covers characters, themes, ideas and values.

The following pages contain several activities to complete before retuning to school in 2013.

Characters and Characterisation

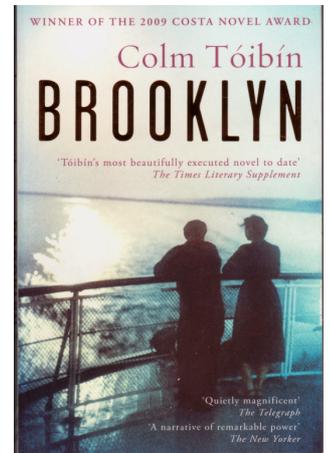
Understanding characters is critical to your study of a narrative text. Characters generate the action of the narrative; their fortunes and misfortunes, their aspirations and challenges, engage the readers' interests and emotions. Characterisation is the way in which the author constructs the characters, to position the reader to respond.

Main characters

Eilis (pronounced AY-lish) Lacey is the protagonist of the text. The protagonist and the main characters are carefully crafted by the author so that the reader is able to discern the underlying motivations for their behaviour.

When reading the text, you need to focus on the ways in which the author has created the characters by focusing on the following:

- The use of the narrative voice. From whose perspective is the text written?
- Direct description of appearance, thoughts feelings
- The character's speech and actions.
- What other characters say (or what is implied) about the character
- The character's relationships and actions
- Imagery and symbolism associated with the character.



Task 1: For each of the main characters write a summary of important information such as:

- Full name (spelled accurately)
- Age and age spans covered by the narrative
- Where they live, domestic circumstances, social status, relatives, friends, education, health...
- Personal qualities, attitudes, values
- Changes in their life circumstances, relationships, attitudes and values

Task 2: Create a concept map for Eilis and one of the other main characters

Minor characters

Minor characters receive less attention, but they can serve important functions such as:

- Provide important background information
- Interact with the main characters and enable the reader to see the main characters in different roles and settings
- Embody viewpoints and beliefs that contrast with those of the main characters.

Task 3: Select three minor characters and record the following:

- Relationship with the protagonist
- Role in the narrative
- Personal qualities that distinguish the character

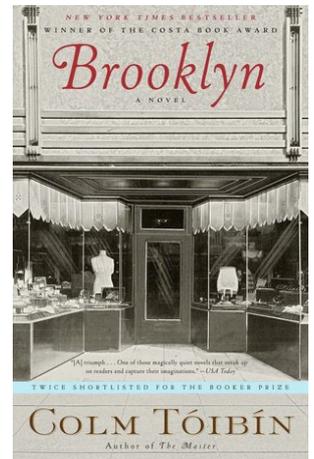
Themes, Ideas and Values

The themes of a text are its most general statements about human experience. The characters and settings exist only in the world created by the author. On the other hand, the ideas and values the text explores also exist outside the world of the text. This allows the reader to respond to a text by relating it to his or her own perspectives and life experience, even when the text describes events in the distant past or very different cultural mores.

Themes

A theme is an idea that a text explores and examines. It can be stated explicitly or implied. The theme universalises the specific context of a text.

The theme(s) and subject of a text are not synonymous. The subject is specific, the themes are general and are able to be related to common human experience.



Task 1: Analyse the ways in which *Brooklyn* explores the following human experiences:

(Note: Students whose surnames begin with the letters A-L are to respond to the first five themes. Students whose surnames begin with the letters M-Z are to respond to the last five themes.)

- Family
- Class / social status
- Migration
- Racial prejudice
- Love and duty
- Education
- Commitment and marriage
- Pre-marital sex
- Role of church
- Growing up

For each of these 'themes', identify the following:

- Different perspectives explored by the text
- Identify (and substantiate by referring closely to the text) the author's view, that is, what he is implying

Values

Values are qualities that a society regards as worthwhile. These values are reflected in the laws and social conventions of different societies. Values provide common ground for everyday decisions about right and wrong behaviour. Not all societies share the same set of values. Values can differ from one society to another – some as a matter of emphasis, other differ radically.

There are many different values such as: honesty, justice, patriotism, respect for others, loyalty, fidelity, equality, freedom of choice, taking responsibility, tolerance, and the list goes on.

Individuals tend to absorb the values and priorities of their culture as they grow up, although maturation involves the questioning of family and social attitudes and beliefs as part of the process of personalising individual values.

Values are not necessary fixed: just as individuals question the values of family and society as part of the maturational process, social values also gradually shift over time.

In narrative texts, characters embody values through their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs and actions. A text can convey many different values through its various characters and narrative perspectives. However, the author will not suggest that all of these viewpoints are equally valid, or that the author shares the values expressed by every character.

Task 2: Consider the following questions and record your thoughts making sure to support your answers with close reference to the text.

- Identify five or six values that are held by the main characters of the text. Give a textual example for each, for example, a quotation or an action taken by one of the main characters.
- Do any of the main characters act in ways that contradict their basic values? What are the reasons? What are the consequences? Is your view of the character diminished as a result?
- Which values are portrayed as being most important? State which characters possess these values and which do not, giving a brief quotation or explanation for each.

Ideas

What are your ideas about the text?

Task 3: Write paragraph responses to each of the following questions. Make sure that you substantiate your point of view by close reference to the text.

1. Create two photomontages capturing what life was like in the 1950s in Enniscorthy (County Wexford) and Brooklyn.
2. What is the first indication in the text that Rose's life is not as 'rosy' as it appears to be?
3. Before she goes to America, Eilis believes that, "While people from the town who lived in England missed Enniscorthy, , no one who went to America missed home. Instead, they were happy there and proud" (pg 26). Why do you think the Irish had such a rosy view of America? How are Eilis's expectations met upon her arrival?
4. As Eilis begins night classes in accounting, she notes the divisions between Italian and Jewish students, and the lack of English or other Irish students. At work, she must confront racial integration when Bartocci's opens its doors for the first time to black customers. How does Eilis react to the divisions among Europeans immigrants from different countries, as well as those between white and black Americans? How are the traditional ethnic lines of Brooklyn beginning to break down in the 1950s?
5. When Eilis and Tony first meet, she seems more interested in him as an escape from her troublesome housemates than as a genuine romantic interest. Tony, however, is clear about his love for Eilis from the start. Why do you think Eilis is hesitant in her feelings? Is a relationship with such uneven attachment doomed from the start, or do you believe that one person can "learn" to love another over time?
6. Some characters in the novel are referred to as Miss or Mrs., while others are identified by their first name. Does this reflect their relationship with Eilis? Why would Colm Tóibín make this stylistic choice? How would your perception of the characters in *Brooklyn* be different if Tóibín had written the novel from the "first-person" perspective of Eilis?
7. Imagine Eilis in today's world. Do you see her primarily as a career-motivated woman, or as a wife and mother? How does Tóibín present the conflict between job and family in the 1950s? How is it different today?
8. When the clerk of the law bookstore in Manhattan engages her in conversation, Eilis displays an ignorance of the Holocaust that would startle us today. How do you explain her confusion? What does it tell us about the Ireland—and New York—of the 1950s?
9. Something happens to Rose that, in retrospect, makes you re-examine the reasons she might have urged Eilis to move to America. Discuss this.

10. Eilis decides to keep her marriage to Tony a secret from her mother and friends in Enniscorthy because she believes they won't understand. Do you believe that this is Eilis's true reason, or might her silence indicate other motives? Explain your reasoning.
11. Does Eilis's notion of her duty to family evolve from the beginning of the novel—when she leaves Enniscorthy—to the end, when she returns to Tony in America? Explain your reasoning.
12. If Eilis had been able to choose freely, between Brooklyn and Tony, and Enniscorthy and Jim, what do you think she would have chosen? Or is Eilis really a young woman who does not choose, who allows others to determine her fate? Explain your reasoning.
13. Tóibín ends *Brooklyn* before Eilis even boards the ship back to America, leaving her future unwritten. Why do you think Tóibín chose to end the book there? What do you imagine Eilis's future holds? Explain your reasoning.