

# Self-fashioning and Personal Portability in *Nora Webster*

## A reconstrução de si e a portabilidade pessoal em *Nora Webster*

## Auto-reconstrucción y portabilidad personal en *Nora Webster*



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**Abstract:** In this article, we will analyze *Nora Webster* (2014) by Colm Tóibín. This novel tells the story of the protagonist's journey towards restructuring her life with her children after the death of her husband. We propose to examine how the transformations experienced by Nora are influenced by the historical-social context in which she finds herself and how this affects her family unit and her identity. We understand that this work can be analyzed from the perspective of "portability". This term was first employed by Costello-Sullivan (2012) to discuss the cultural portability existing in *Brooklyn* (2011), another novel by Tóibín.

**Keywords:** Ireland. Widowhood. Portability. Nora Webster. Colm Tóibín.

**Resumo:** No presente artigo iremos analisar *Nora Webster* (2014) de Colm Tóibín. Esse romance narra a história da protagonista rumo à reestruturação de sua vida junto a seus filhos, após a morte de seu esposo. Buscamos averiguar como as transformações experienciadas pela personagem são influenciadas pelo contexto histórico-social no qual ela se encontra e como isso afeta diretamente seu núcleo familiar e sua identidade. Entendemos que essa obra pode ser analisada sob o prisma da “portabilidade”. Este termo foi utilizado primeiramente por Costello-Sullivan (2012) para discutir a portabilidade cultural existente em *Brooklyn* (2011), outro romance de Tóibín.

**Palavras-Chave:** Irlanda. Viuvez. Portabilidade. Nora Webster. Colm Tóibín.

**Resumen:** En el presente artículo analizaremos *Nora Webster* (2014), de Colm Tóibín. Esta novela narra la historia de la protagonista hacia la reestructuración de su vida con sus hijos, después de la muerte de su marido. Buscamos conocer cómo las transformaciones vividas por el personaje están influenciadas por el contexto histórico-social en el que se encuentra y cómo afecta directamente a su núcleo familiar y a su identidad. Entendemos que esta obra puede ser analizada desde el prisma de la “portabilidad”. Este término fue utilizado por primera vez por Costello-Sullivan (2012) para discutir la portabilidad cultural existente en *Brooklyn* (2011), otra novela de Tóibín.

**Palabras Clave:** Irlanda. Viudez. Portabilidad. Nora Webster. Colm Tóibín.

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... the capacity to develop out of oneself in one's own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken molds. (Nietzsche, 1983, p. 62)

## Introduction

Colm Tóibín's novel *Nora Webster*, published in 2014 and set in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is a third person narrative whose plot is built around the eponymous protagonist, recently widowed Nora, and her struggle to reconstruct her life, along with her four children. With this context in mind, we propose to examine the personal and social changes Nora has to undergo as a result of her new civil status, which has deeply affected her.

We will base our study on the traditional family structure at the time, slated in the Constitution of the Republic of Ireland of 1937. Also, in order to better understand the changes undergone by the protagonist, we will rely on the concept of portability. The term was first employed by Costello-Sullivan (2012), in her discussion of cultural portability in Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (2010). Curiously, Tóibín interrupted his writing of *Nora Webster* in order to write *Brooklyn* – which came out six years before *Nora Webster*.

As per the concept of portability, we believe it to have been borrowed from the field of telecommunications. Mobile Number Portability (MNP), also known as number portability and number porting, enables end users to keep their telephone number when switching from one telecommunications service provider to another. Prior to the introduction of MNP, changing service providers meant having to get a new telephone number. (cf. WHATIS.TECHTARGET.COM, n/d) The term thus implies the process of one's delinking from something while, at the same time, preserving a part of this link. We would like to argue that there are many instances of portability in the text, specifically in Nora's transition to widowhood – whilst preserving her maternal duties, according to the Irish ideal, even if these are affected by the death of her spouse.

## Nora's self-fashioning and personal portability

*Nora Webster* is set in late 1960s and early 1970s Ireland and is the story of a typical Irish woman. Maurice, Nora's husband, in turn, is also typical: A Catholic Irish nationalist and teacher – whose early death leaves Nora a widow with four children: Fiona, Aine, Donal, and Conor. If, in the time of the narrative, caring for her children was a heavy enough burden for women, it is even more burdensome to care for their well-being and education as a widow.

Maurice had left them with very little financial provision and, with the delay in receiving her pension, Nora finds herself in a delicate economic situation. Added to the modest pension, the protagonist also suffers bureaucratic setbacks with the Social Welfare Department, where they believe she is not entitled to financial aid, as can be noticed in Nora's dialogue with her sister Catherine and her brother-in-law Mark:

"Couldn't you get by on the widow's pension and the money you have saved?" Catherine asked.

"We saved nothing. We had nothing except the house in Cush and I sold that and put some of the money away for an emergency and I've been living on the rest. The widow's pension is six pounds a week."

"It's what?" Mark asked.

"There might be another pension, a contributory pension because of the stamps I have from the years I worked in Gibney's before I was married, but it's means-tested and the man from social welfare thinks I must have money saved. But I don't, and when he believes me I might get that as well." (p. TÓIBÍN, 2014, 95).

Apparently, the Irish government was attentive to guaranteeing the needs of women when it came to mandatory matrimony and encouraging maternity but ended up limiting women's autonomy in relation to work and her own body. According to Linda Clarke,

[f]ollowing independence, Ireland still retained the representation of submissive female by the Irish. Freed from colonial domination we instated a renewed set of colonisers in the form of the political elite. Those who wanted to create a society that was patriarchal and traditional. It was now up to Mother Ireland to earn her keep as wife and mother. Between the establishment of the Irish Free State of 1922 and the 1937 Constitution, measures were taken in the form of restrictions and bars to protect and limit women. For example the restriction of women's employment in the civil service (1925), whereby they had to leave upon marriage, the restriction of industrial employment (1935), which limited the employment of women in a given industry. The Juries Bill of 1927 which exempted women from jury service ensuring only one gender's voice is heard in the legal process and the Criminal Law Amendment Bill of 1934 banning the sale and importation of contraceptives, just to name a few. (CLARKE, 2013, p. 1-2)

The Constitution also promised to protect and care for the most vulnerable members of society, including widows, as can be read in Article 45.4.1: "The State pledges itself to safeguard with especial care the economic interests of the weaker sections of the community, and, where necessary, *to contribute to the support of the infirm, the widow, the orphan, and the aged.*" (cf. CONSTITUTION. ie, n/d, p. 161-163). In practice, however, the law was not so easily or effectively applied. The government didn't seem concerned with widowed women. Receiving a widow's pension always met with bureaucratic obstacles and, if a woman finally obtained the benefit, it was exceedingly low. After several attempts, Nora finally manages to prove that she had contributed to Welfare in the years

she had worked for Gibney, and that she did not own many assets. In this way, she is finally granted a second pension:

After Much argument, she had finally been granted a second pension, and both pensions had been increased in the previous year's budget. She had not been aware at first that the extra money had been back-paid by six months and she was surprised to get her cheques in the post for what she thought were large sums of money. (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 171)

Even with both pensions, she was unable to maintain her previous living standard. Besides keeping her two small children in school, Nora needs to help her elder daughters, who both study in other cities. The loss of Maurice leads Nora to rethink her role as mother, since she now carries the burden that used to be her husband's.

It is fitting that we analyze Ireland's historical context concerning the country's relation to the Catholic Church, since this will aid us in examining the structure of the Irish nuclear family as well as Nora's transition and social belonging. Jennifer M. Donohue (2009, p.2) comments that "[a]s Sinn Fein's<sup>1</sup> hold on Ireland increased, the Catholic Church took advantage of Ireland's pro-Catholicism political climate and became an extraordinarily powerful force in the everyday lives of Irish people." The Catholic Church and its educational institutions spread throughout the country and became one of its main poles of education, added to the family; this directly affected the social context of Ireland.

The family enjoyed the support and attention of the government, to the point of being backed by a specific article of the 1937 Constitution. Thus, the Christian model is consolidated through the proximity between laws and religious sovereignty. According to the Constitution:

<sup>1</sup> Nationalist political movement created in 1905 by Arthur Griffith to fight against British domination.

## The family

### Article 41

1.1. The State recognizes the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.

1.2. The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.

2.1. In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2.2. The State shall, therefore, *endeavor to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labor to the neglect of their duties in the home.*

3.1. The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack.

3.2. No law shall be enacted providing for the grant of a dissolution of marriage.

3.3. No person whose marriage has been dissolved under the civil law of any other State but is a subsisting valid marriage under the law for the time being in force within the jurisdiction of the Government and Parliament established by this Constitution shall be capable of contracting a valid marriage within that jurisdiction during the lifetime of the other party to the marriage so dissolved. (Documents/Bhunreacht\_na\_hEireann\_web.pdf. p. 161-163, our italics).

According to the law, the State must therefore protect the institution of marriage as an indispensable asset to a nation, against any act that may demoralize or deviate from the standards imposed by society. According to the Constitution, men were to engage in labor as providers of the home, whereas women were

to perform duties within the home, such as caring for the children. By passing on tradition to her offspring, a mother was building and perpetuating the customs and values of a people. Children's education also revolved around preserving tradition. If a woman succeeded in passing on the customs and moral principles of the Family, she was also preserving those of the Church and the State.

It was expected that the Irish woman, in her youth, should seek a suitor who was well-accepted in society and able to provide her with comfortable and stable living conditions. If the woman had a job, she should only keep it up to the moment when she married. This rule applied to practically all women in Ireland. Marriage automatically excluded woman from the work place, as she was pressed to dedicate herself exclusively to her 'natural' destiny: motherhood. As Borsa and Feil (2008, p. 4) explain this process, "[t]he sanctification of the mother figure arises as a way of rendering woman powerless by repressing her autonomy, through the construction of a discourse that blames and threatens her in case she does not fulfill her so-called natural maternal duty."<sup>2</sup> (our translation).

The Irish woman is induced to constitute a family according to Christian tradition, through a series of references – from the images portrayed in the stained-glass windows of the church to the priest's sermon during mass to school and, in especial, the home. Therefore, a woman who preferred to abdicate motherhood in order to pursue a career evaded the rules and the desired order, above all the order defended by the Christian way of thinking. A woman who refused to marry or who was overly concerned with her professional life was severely segregated by the community. As Mary E. Daly (1979, p. 77) ascertains, "[a]ttitudes towards women working were extremely hostile [...]". Carregal-Romero (2012, n/p) reflects that "[w]hat may remain clear is that a rigid, inflexible definition may pave the way for social inequalities and the marginalization of those who do not or cannot conform to the privileged version of the institution."

<sup>2</sup> [a] sacralização da figura da mãe surge como uma forma de reprimir o poder da autonomia da mulher, a partir da construção de um discurso que a culpabiliza e ameaçará, caso não cumpra seu dever materno dito natural.

Nora Webster finds herself living in the model of society and family structure, defended by both the State and the Catholic Church, described above. She had worked for one of Enniscorthy's affluent family's business for a long time, until she married Maurice, a teacher loved by all in the town and its outskirts. After marrying, she leaves work to dedicate herself exclusively to her duties as a housewife, as mandated by the Church and the government laws. Nora experiences a transition that impacts her place in society: as a single woman she worked and stood out in the performance of her tasks: "For eleven years, then, Nora had worked five and a half days a week in Gibney's [...]" (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 60). Her role changes when she marries Maurice: she is cut off from her work relations in order to identify exclusively as a wife.

However, after being married for several years, the teacher falls ill, and heart failure leads to his early death. As a result, Nora is left a widow with four children to care for alone, as mentioned before and represented early on in the novel when an acquaintance offers her condolences – "May Lacey shook her head sadly when Nora came into the front room. 'Nory, I waited until now. I can't tell you how sorry I am about Maurice'. She reached out and held Nora's hand." (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 2).

A few months after the death of her husband, Nora gets yet another unexpected visitor, one of Mrs. Gibney's assistants, Mrs. Whelan, who relays a message from the former – an invitation to come back to work at Gibney's:

"Just I have a message for you, so I won't delay, and no I won't have a cup of tea or anything. I'll just give you the message. I work for the Gibneys now, I don't know if you know that. Anyway, Peggy Gibney asked me to tell you that she would love to see you, and so would William, any day after dinner. She's always there, but if you said the day then she would certainly be there."  
[...]

"They'd like you to come back to the office. But maybe don't mention that when you see them. Let them tell you themselves."  
(TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 58)

The job offer sets a series of major changes in motion, most importantly as pertains to her economic status. Nora was well aware of the need to accept the offer, and saw no other way to improve her income:

Since the car was still there and the house appeared untouched by poverty, none of them had any sense of how precarious things were, despite her selling the house in Cush, and how, if she did not start working at some point, the car would have to be sold and she would have to consider moving to a smaller house. (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 104).

But, despite accepting the offer to return to Gibney's, Nora did not find the idea of going back to work appealing. She disliked having to punch in and out on a time clock and submitting to orders in the workplace; but the pension she got from the government was insufficient and, as the new provider of the family, she realized she needed the money:

Though Nora does not relish the prospect of resuming her work at the office after twenty-one years of married life, her economic situation impels her to do so. In spite of her long hours at work, both her income and the pension combined do not suffice to maintain the family's previous economic standards. (CARREGAL-ROMERO, 2018, p. 355)

In the time being narrated, women who held jobs, especially if they were single or widows, received lower salaries compared to those of men holding the same positions. Carregal-Romero (2018 p. 349) explains that "[f]or most of the twentieth century, widows in Ireland were extremely vulnerable to destitution, one of the reasons being the reduced earning power of women as compared to men."

One of the great changes the protagonist must undergo also affects her entire family, since holding a job implies being absent

from the house and away from her children for most of the day. Nevertheless, she continues to perform her duties as a mother, which imply her children's upbringing as well as keeping house. Thus, the new status of widowhood has motherhood portability. Nora's routine changes drastically: She no longer has time to take care of her offspring full time, nor does she have the same time for reading as she used to. Besides, observes Carregal-Romero (2018, p. 355), "[a]t home, her closest family cannot fully comprehend that Nora's acquired role as a breadwinner brings inevitable consequences on the time that she can dedicate to her children". Accustomed to the dictates of the Constitution and the Church, it did not occur to her family, much less to her children, that their mother would now be working outside the house, since this idea did not fit the social standards of the time.

Nora finds herself in a delicate situation: She was unable to count on her two youngest children; neither could she rely on her eldest daughters, who were still in school and didn't have jobs. This is to say that her four children were still dependent on her to care and provide for them. However, because social conventions were still very much rooted in her family and Nora did not let on to her children that she was going through a difficult financial situation, they blamed her for not being there for them, and were not aware that the social portability the family must carry forced them to adapt to a new order, as we can see in the conversation Nora has with them and her sister Una:

"Are you going to work in the office full time", Aine asked.  
Nora nodded.

"And what are the boys going to do when you're working?"

"I'll be home by six".

"But they'll be home by half three or four."

[...]

"But seriously", Aine asked, "would it not be better if they went to someone's house and waited there?"

"I'm g-going nowhere", Donal said.

“And Donal will look after Conor if there’s a problem”, Nora said.  
“And I’ll be home for dinner in the middle of the day”.  
“Who’s going to make dinner?”  
“I’ll have it ready from the night before and Donal will put on the potatoes as soon as he comes in”. (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 104).

“But the family cell is a social structure that was firmly established and self-regulating; manipulation of that discourse was an effective means of control and reproduction, both literally and figuratively, of the social order”, as Conrad (2004, p. 10) reminds us. Nora’s nuclear family, now consisting of her four children and her sister, questioned her as though she were neglecting her duties – “[a]ll five of them seemed oddly suspicious of her now, as though her going to work in Gibney’s were something she was doing in order to avoid her real duties.” (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 104). Her children’s discourse reproduces the traditional discourse that perpetuates an idealized image of Ireland maintained by the State and the Church, endorsed by its laws and extensive to the private sphere of the home. Up to then, women were relegated to the private sphere. So, by getting a job outside the home, Nora assumes the public sphere traditionally occupied by men. In this way, the normative social order was no longer present in Nora’s home after the death of Maurice. Her husband’s death pushes Nora into unexpected social mobility, and she is made to change her way of life.

As Carregal-Romero (2018, p. 351) writes, “a widow’s grief emanates from within, but a grief-based identity can also be socially induced.” The protagonist experiences portability as a consequence of being devoid of her social status as wife. She must now assume the role of the widowed wife, the victim of a vicissitude of life. She will no longer be seen in the same way and going through this social transition while refashioning herself as well as her life affects not only Nora but those who are a part of her life in some way. Nora’s self-fashioning is a palimpsest, a new self-narrative made up of grief for the passing of her husband, of recollections of her life with Maurice, as well as his constant presence in the scar

that his absence has left, an absence that people are ever eager to bring up. So, as we can see, Nora's actions are regulated not only by her immediate family but also by the small community, whose denizens reprehend her for acting against what is expected from a widow.

The Gibneys, on the other hand, did not have the sensibility to offer her a part-time job, which would allow her to care for her family whilst supplementing her income. The Gibney business is the picture of the stagnation of Ireland. When she returns, after being away for several years, Nora perceives that nothing has changed: the same methods, the same professional positions, the same employees: "In all the years, then, she thought, when she was married and having children, Francie was still in Gibney's [...]" (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 72). The fact that Francie Kavanagh continued to work for Gibney's since Nora had left to marry, twenty-one years before, reflects not only the company's protectionist policy but also the protectionist policy advocated by Éamon de Valera, who governed Ireland during the time the story takes place.

As a married woman, Nora had enjoyed a modicum of freedom, the tranquility of the moments when she felt at peace, when her only responsibilities were associated with the private sphere. Now, her day was consumed by her job, which meant that she had to abstain from the small privileges once accessible to her as a fulltime housewife. Despite the changes in her circumstances, her preferences and personality are carried over into her new life, in a process of self-fashioning and portability. At the same time that her circumstances force her to work at Gibney's, she would much rather stay at home reading while her children are at school, for instance.

She thought of the freedom marriage to Maurice had given her, the freedom, once the children were in school, or a young child was sleeping, to walk into this room at any time of the day and take down a book and read; the freedom to go into the front room at any time and look out of the window at the street and

Vinegar Hill across the valley or the clouds in the sky, letting her mind be idle, going back to the kitchen, or to attend to the children when they came home from school but as part of a life of ease which included duty. (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 60-61).

Paradoxically, Nora cherishes the freedom she once had as a married woman, protected by the privacy of the home. It is important to note that by portraying Nora in this way, Tóibín writes against the grain of a more contemporary feminine system in which, for the majority of women, conquering the public sphere is seen as desirable. The author also evades the habitual representation of the dysfunctional Irish Family and paints a picture of an Irish home whose standards are socially sanctioned by the Constitution and the Church. In her discussion of Tóibín's works, Costello-Sullivan (2012, p. 3) observes that they "[...] grapple with how social settings construct individuals who, in turn, are then personally limited and delimited by those internalized historical constraints". This observation coincides with the concept of self-fashioning introduced by literary historian Stephen Greenblatt (1983), who uses the term to describe the process of constructing one's identity and public persona according to a set of socially sanctioned standards, and the conscious effort to strive to adjust oneself to an accepted model in a particular society.

Nora's routine is drastically altered and reestablishing herself in society still cost her an enormous effort. She must, at the same time, create a new territory for herself and a new form of belonging to Irish society. Her children's adaptation depends on her ability to adjust herself to these new circumstances. This transition is visible in a number of passages in the narrative, as when she visits the family's summer home for the first time in years. She takes her car and, unbeknownst to anyone, makes her way to the house alone – "As she drove down the hill outside The Ballagh and caught her first glimpse of the sea, it occurred to her that she had never been alone before on this road." (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 7). The car trip leads to the awareness that she will often find herself having to do things

by herself, not only driving to Cush or Dublin, as she had done with Donal and Conor when they visited Fiona in Dublin, but when caring for her family as well. In the eyes of society, being a widow and not having Maurice at her side puts her in a vulnerable position. However, in the instances when she goes out alone, Nora has no desire to meet or speak to anyone – “She drove to Cush in the old A40 one Saturday that October, leaving the boys playing with friends and telling no one where she was going”. (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 7). Nora’s behavior is a way of escaping from the suffocating atmosphere of Enniscorthy, a small town that is “[...] oppressively small and familiar – at times, suffocating so.” (Costello-Sullivan, 2012, p. 191). There were many reasons for this feeling of being suffocated, mostly derived from her process of portability: being treated like a child, being reprehended by both family and society, and being regulated by society in terms of monitoring her grief by determining what actions she should take as a widow. According to Carregal-Romero,

[...] if grief is a private emotion, its performance usually becomes a socially regulated act. In most conservative and patriarchal societies, widowhood is perceived to be a grief-related identity and, for this reason, clear rules of grieving exist for widows. (CARREGAL-ROMERO, 2018, p. 348-349)

The change in social status affects Nora’s personal life, as can be observed throughout the novel – in the most banal details, such as dyeing her hair, her actions reveal that she is acquiring autonomy. As a widow, she can now fulfill old wishes she had kept to herself because they were not considered proper as Maurice’s wife. With her newly acquired autonomy, in a house without a patriarchal figure, she gradually assumes decision-making, like letting the children stay up late to watch a movie with her. “Maurice seldom came with her to the pictures in the years when they were going out together, and, once they were married, he lost all interest in

them. He was too busy with Fianna Fáil<sup>3</sup> and writing articles and correcting homework.” (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 99). In the time of their marriage, Maurice did not care to for movies and they spent very little family time viewing films together, especially since the children had to be in bed early. These new moments with her children, brought about by her change in status, awakened new sensations in Nora – for example when, one evening, after watching the nine o'clock news together, Nora notices that the boys are sitting very still. She couldn't remember when she had ever watched a movie with them and felt flattered that they had trusted her opinion to watch “Gaslight”. (TÓIBÍN, 2015, p. 100). Nora allows the boys to cross a subtle border by letting them stay up late – let alone letting them watch a thriller. We can see how she now carries into her new sense of selfhood her love for films, suppressed during her marriage to Maurice.

Not only is the widow affected but also her now fatherless children. The boys are still quite young and see themselves suddenly forced to grow up in a different social territory, as orphans. During the time when Maurice was in the hospital and she was forced to be away from her children in order to care for him, a chasm grew between Nora and them. She relied on her brother and sister-in-law Jim and Margaret, who were always present and helped care for the children, including financially. During the time when he was being taken care of by his aunt, Donal developed a stammer and suffered from nightmares. In this way, we can argue that Nora's children are directly affected by the social portability in which they find themselves. Both boys suffer with the father's absence, but are able to mask their feelings as if nothing had happened, in what may be interpreted as an attitude of denial in the face of change:

She realized now that they had come to behave as if nothing were really missing. They had learned to disguise how they felt. She, in turn, had learned to recognize danger signs, thoughts that would lead to other thoughts. She measured her success

<sup>3</sup> Fianna Fáil (the Republican Party) is a conservative and Christian-democratic, Irish nationalist political party in Ireland.

with the boys by how much she could control her feelings.  
(TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 7).

Lídia Possas (2011, p. 62-63) observes that “[...] within a certain dimension of culture, borders have a way of untangling themselves from the idea of previously defined territorial limits, of a boundary with conflicting sides”<sup>4</sup>. (our translation). We can imagine that Nora’s social portability leads her to surpass the borders of her private space, to create a larger space, related to questions of the Irish nation. One noteworthy example is her choice of newspapers. She preferred reading *The Irish Times* – “[i]t was a Protestant newspaper, but it had longer articles, she thought, and they were better written than the articles in the other newspapers. There was something more serious about *The Irish Times*” (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 91). Nora to hide her preference from her brother-in-law Jim as well as from Maurice because she knew that, as nationalists, they would disapprove. Both men impose a form of binary border thinking that avoids relations and approximations with Protestants. Nora once more carries her previously hidden preference into her new reality, proving that her sense of border is more aligned with the one postulated by Possas (2011, 62-63), discussed above, even though she only allows herself to do this with the death of her husband.

One day, Nora’s aunt Josie invites her on a trip to Spain. Nora declines at first, although everyone knew she felt suffocated and in need of a break from Enniscorthy and her immediate entourage. In order to do this, she would need to surpass a larger border, a geographical one.

“What I really came to tell you”, Josie said, “is that I have money invested. Not much now, but still. And I got the dividend last week and I thought I’d like to do something nice with the money, and I thought, in a few months’ time at the end of the summer, when everything has calmed down, it would be lovely to go to

4 [...] em uma dimensão da cultura, a(s) fronteira(s) tem como desvencilhar-se da ideia de limite territorial definido a priori, de um espaço limítrofe e de conflitos entre as partes.

Spain with you, and you need a break from all of them.” (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 261).

Despite her initial refusal, Nora feels so suffocated that she finally decides to take the trip. With each passing day, with each change of scenery, she begins to feel herself healing. She soon becomes accustomed to the warm weather and to the time she has for resting in her single bedroom, where she can sleep for as long as she pleases. The widow who had originally considered declining the invitation to go to Spain is enjoying her time out more than she expected:

She noticed the sun’s first heat as she lay back and floated. She felt lazy now and tired as well, and yet the energy that came to her earlier was there too. She would, she thought, stay in the water for as long as she could; she would use up her energy. She knew that a morning like this would not come to her so easily again, the early light so beautiful and calm, the sea so bracing, and the promise of the long day ahead and the night that would follow when she would be alone once more, undisturbed, allowed to sleep. (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 269).

Nora grows more serene, and the responsibility that had fallen on her shoulders became somewhat mitigated during her Spanish respite. Since Maurice’s illness, and throughout her period of mourning and social restructuring, Nora hadn’t been able to enjoy a vacation like the one she had just had. Upon her return home, she feels like a new person:

In the morning when she woke, she felt a new energy and realized that she did not mind going back to work after her holiday. She chose clothes from the wardrobe that she thought would make her look most dignified. As she walked to work across the town, the idea that the letters were in her handbag gave her pleasure. At work there were several notes on her desk with queries that

had arisen while she was away. She dealt with each one briskly and by ten thirty had settle down to a pile of invoice which needed to be entered into a ledger.  
(TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 262).

Once she crossed the geographical border of Enniscorthy, Nora's behavior changed, her confidence heightened. If the idea of holding a job had deeply troubled her before, after the trip Nora doesn't mind having to go to work. The mobility between married life and widowhood brings about a transformation in Nora's identity; she becomes determined to break off with social conventions and release herself from her own self-regulation: "In Tóibín's subtle characterization of a widow who battles with depression, Nora emerges as a woman trapped between her search for self-determination and her constant defiance against social conventions." (CARREGAL-ROMERO, 2018, p. 355) She gradually begins to see the advantages offered by her new status: "It is also significant that, alongside her slow emergence from bereavement, Nora begins to reevaluate certain aspects of her widowhood in positive terms, since she can now make decisions without requiring Maurice's consent". (CARREGAL-ROMERO, 2018, p. 357).

When Nora agrees to accompany a mutual friend of hers and Nancy's, Phyllis, to a quiz show, and afterwards they end up singing a duet at a bar, Nancy suggests that Nora join a choir she belongs to:

"I haven't sung for years".  
"Well, it was happening while you were silent, and with a bit of practice your voice would be very good, quite unusual."  
"I don't know."  
"They do auditions sometimes for the choir in Wexford. It's a lovely choir. "We usually sing a Mass."  
"I'm not sure I'd have time."  
"Well, I'll tell them about you and we can see. And maybe you could come to the Gramophone Society? We meet every Thursday in Murphy-Flood's. We each make a choice of records."  
(TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 211)

Nora speaks with the music teacher and begins to take singing lessons. She also becomes an official member of the Gramophone Society. Participating in the society's meetings she experiences, once more, a process of portability, in that she resignifies her life through the migration of the private space to a space of social interaction with music and new friends. Joining the Gramophone Society is important for Nora's process of adaptation, an act of free-will, a decision made without asking for her husband's consent – and, in the process, she crosses the border that separates being a married woman and no longer being a married woman. To Nora, music means a personal moment, without the children's or her family's presence. Singing, which had already been a part of Nora's life through her mother, who sang at parties and weddings, becomes the path to her metamorphosis. This metamorphosis, however, contains a double bind, since it also implies transgression: “[h]aving passions of her own can help Nora alleviate her grief, but the fulfillment of these newly found passions becomes problematic, as they often imply the transgression of social expectations” (CARREGAL-ROMERO, 2018, p. 355). By taking singing lessons and participating in the choir meetings, Nora disengages herself from a previously defined boundary, with conflicting sides, and “[...] acts, assimilates, resignifies roles and behaviors”<sup>5</sup> (POSSAS, 2011, p. 63, our translation).

Through migrating from the closed space of the home to the public space of her music classes and interaction with friends, Nora recovers the interest in music she had before she married, bringing it into her new life. Besides the time spent at work, Nora's life is now filled with these new public activities that lead to a distancing from her old life:

It was only after a month, when she had had four or five lessons, that she realized that the music was leading her away from Maurice, away from her life with him, and her life with the children. But it was not merely that Maurice had no ear for

<sup>5</sup> [as pessoas] agem, assimilam, resignificam papéis e comportamentos.

music, and that music was something they had never shared. It was the intensity of her time here; she was alone with herself in a place where he would never have followed her, even in death. (TÓIBÍN, 2014, p. 245).

Nora's new involvement with music lessons and meetings also leads to a social repositioning and widening of her circle of friends, and she gradually distances herself from Maurice: "Crucially, music helps Nora heal herself and provides her with new interests and a richer inner life. Because of this renewed sense of self, the protagonist begins to maintain a distance from the emotional turbulence caused by her loss, [...]". (CARREGAL-ROMERO, 2018, p. 356-357)

Every time Nora leaves the house, on the way to her lessons or meetings at the club, she nurtures her new identity and gradually distances herself even from her children, who still occupy the private family sphere. Nora Webster's personal and social portability occur mainly when she leaves the private sphere of the home, denying the stereotyped cultural role expected of a widow, reminding us of Stuart Hall's assertion that "[the] fact that we project 'ourselves' into these cultural identities, at the *same* time internalizing their meanings and values, making them 'part of us', helps to align our subjective feelings with the objective places we occupy in the social and cultural world." (HALL, 1992, p. 276, author's italics).

As events unfold in her life, Nora is led to readapt to each new situation, according to either convention or convenience. While frequenting new spaces, her identity undergoes changes, but Nora still retains preferences and interests that make up her old identity. Returning to our introductory analogy with telecommunications, Nora may have kept her old phone number, but the new carrier gives her access to services that were previously limited or unavailable.

## Final considerations

In our study of *Nora Webster* we sought to examine the traditional Irish family within the socio-political context of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in order to better comprehend the society being represented by Colm Tóibín. Based on historical data, we were able to examine the changes Nora goes through as the plot develops, and how the actions she exhibits in the face of these changes are relevant to the construction of her new identity as a widow being closely regulated by Irish society of that time.

We saw how, as a married woman, Nora unquestioningly preserved the habits of the typical Irish homemaker; and that, as a widow, she is faced with situations that force her to step outside her former comfort zone. These situations directly affect her, as well as do her reactions to them, especially as concerns her more immediate family unit. In order to address these topics and explain Nora's process of self-fashioning, we deployed the concept of portability.

As member of a traditional Irish family, Nora finds herself in the double bind of both adhering to social expectations and breaking some of the rules, while taking on the responsibility for providing for her family, even when she was not prepared for this. Her new civil status leads her to the discovery of her autonomy, which permits her to break old habits, that lead to new hierarchies in her own family unit; and create new social circles outside the home. We concluded that the socio-historical contextualization of Tóibín's novel was an important support for our interpretations of the situations experienced by the characters throughout the plot.

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