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"So This was what Being Alone was like": Articulations of Vulnerability in Colm Tóibín's *Nora Webster*[1]

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Abstract

Set in 1960s Catholic Ireland, Colm Tóibín's *Nora Webster* (2014) foregrounds the inherent and pathogenic vulnerabilities of widowhood –from bereavement to economic precarity and the culture of grief for widows– in the figure of its eponymous protagonist. Drawing on recent research on vulnerability theory, this study adopts an understanding of vulnerability not as perpetual injury or victimhood, but as a site of potential transformation, which impels Tóibín's protagonist to relate to herself and others differently in order to restore a sense of security and well-being. This study therefore details the ways in which Tóibín dramatises Nora's progression towards increased autonomy, and how her vulnerability initiates a path towards resilience and self-reinvention.

Keywords: Catholic Ireland, Colm Tóibín, *Nora Webster*, vulnerability, widowhood

Set in 1960s rural Ireland, in Enniscorthy (Co. Wexford), Colm Tóibín's *Nora Webster* (2014) revolves around the experiences of the eponymous protagonist –a recently widowed woman in her mid-forties– and the challenges she faces now that she has to confront trauma and bereavement, heed her young sons and find employment. Nora's new

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responsibilities as a breadwinner do not lessen her obligations as a mother, while her widowhood makes her an object of increased moral scrutiny on the part of family and community. Many of Tóibín's short stories and novels develop within the terrain of the private and the domestic, and typically foreground the circumstances affecting the emotional life of families, which include loss and grief, the repression of sexual identities, disaffection and estrangement, and intergenerational conflicts. As was noted in previous studies, Tóibín often deconstructs the ideals attached to the so-called Catholic family[2] in order to create socially-engaged accounts of Irish life, past and present.[3]

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This article details the ways Tóibín's *Nora Webster* explores the particular limitations and constraints of widowhood in 1960s Catholic Ireland.[4] This analysis examines the protagonist's experiences of vulnerability (not completely disabling but potentially transformative) in her progression towards positive self-reinvention. In this way, this study goes beyond traditional understandings of vulnerability as heightened exposure to harm, passivity or incapacity, just conceive it "as a matter of affective openness, a form of ambiguous potential, and an occasion for becoming-other than what one is".[5] Such view of vulnerability "reconciles the apparently opposed binary categories traditionally associated with vulnerability, allowing individuals to be simultaneously and

[2] Costello-Sullivan, for example, argues that "[Tóibín's] representations of families consistently give the lie to the ideal of the emotionally and psychologically healthy, nuclear hetero-normative family, offering instead family units that have been broken by death, crippled by unnatural silences, or haunted by secrets". Costello-Sullivan, *Mother/Country*, 20. By subverting the ideals attached to the family, Walshe notes, "Tóibín constantly refashions sexual identities and gender roles within Irish culture and the traditional Irish family unit". Walshe, *A Different Story*, 6. Drawing on these views, Carregal-Romero further remarks that, typically in his fiction, "Tóibín explores the tensions between the personal and the political, while offering a subversive rewriting of the centrality of the [Catholic] family as a unit of social cohesion and control in Ireland". Carregal-Romero "What was a Family?", 75

[3] As a contemporary Irish author, Tóibín is not alone in his extended examinations of the family as a hetero-patriarchal institution which has excluded homosexuals and seriously constrained women's personal freedoms. The reason for the centrality of the family in Irish writing can be found in the socio-cultural context of Ireland, where conservative Catholicism held sway for most of the twentieth century. In public discourse, the so-called Catholic family was regarded as the most relevant principle of social order and cohesion, and was thus highly romanticised in spite of its fixed gender norms and profound power imbalances. As Irish writers have repeatedly shown, this ideal of the family often occluded unpalatable realities of violence and oppression which were usually hidden beneath a shroud of secrecy and shameful silence until at least the latest decades of the 20th century. For a more extended examination, see Morales-Ladrón (ed), *Family and Dysfunction.*

[4] For an overview of the circumstances and social expectations surrounding widowhood in Catholic Ireland and how they manifest in *Nora Webster*, see Carregal-Romero, "Widowhood". For analyses of Nora's grief and her role as mother and widow, see Costello-Sullivan, *Trauma*, 125-42, and Terry, "Sexual Identity and Mourning".

[5] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 141.

diachronically vulnerable and autonomous, or both weak and strong".[6] From a position of vulnerability, as will be argued, Tóibín's widowed protagonist slowly remakes her life, finding a personal space from which to develop new friendships and interests.

Nora Webster –which Tóibín dedicates to his late mother, Bríd, and younger late brother, Níall– grows from the writer's own bereavement in the aftermath of his father's illness and death, as well as from the difficult familial adjustments that followed when he was in his early teens. Writing this book took him fourteen years, because, as Tóibín said in an interview, "the problem with *Nora Webster* is that some of it is so close to me, I couldn't put any shape on it".[7] Tóibín thus decided to distance himself and tell the story from the widow's perspective, modelling Nora after his teenage observations of his resilient yet emotionally unavailable mother: "Of course I was watching her. She was rebuilding her life –she wasn't rebuilding mine, anyway."[8] In an article entitled "The Literature of Grief", Tóibín recalls how, in those years, he became absorbed in Mary Lavin's short stories and how she portrayed the ways loss transforms the psychological worlds of widows and their children. For Lavin (and Tóibín), loss is more powerfully evoked not by scenes of raw sorrow and despair, but by the dramatisation of "palpable absences" and "the business of silence around grief",[9] shown, for example, in the characters' attempts to control or conceal emotion in order to manage social interaction.[10] Pervasive in Lavin's stories and Tóibín's *Nora Webster* is the protagonist's experience of being "unmoored" by loss, which can easily provoke feelings of uncertainty and disorientation, and also a heightened susceptibility where "emotions dart, fresh longings emerge".[11] In Tóibín's novel, losing her husband, Maurice, is the starting point of Nora's vulnerability, provoking much instability and insecurity in her life, both emotionally and financially. Yet, as shall be explained below, being unmoored eventually opens her up to the world of others, and this can be taken as an opportunity to enhance autonomy and resistance.

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[6] Gámez-Fernández and Fernández-Santiago, "Introduction", 10.
[7] Wood, "Colm Tóibín".
[8] Ibid.
[9] Tóibín, "Literature of Grief".
[10] Lavin's renditions of grief and widowhood influence Tóibín's writing in *Nora Webster*. Nora, for example, forces herself to hold back tears for the sake of the children, who have learnt, like her, "to disguise their feelings". Tóibín, *Nora Webster*, 5.
[11] Tóibín, "Literature of Grief".

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As pointed out above, *Nora Webster* relates the challenges of being a widow and a lone mother[12] of two boys (Conor and Donal) and young adult daughters (Aine and Fiona, away from home for their studies). Here, as in some of his other novels, Tóibín is concerned with psychology rather than plot. Even though a series of important events move the narrative forward (e.g. Nora's return to remunerated work), these do not lead to dramatic twists, sudden revelations or reversals of fortune. The novel begins six months after Maurice's death, and only "approach[es] loss indirectly".[13] In a calm, austere tone that avoids easy drama and sentimentalism, the story focuses on how Nora and the children cope with loss, and dwells on the expectation that the family will somehow overcome bereavement. As Tóibín declared in an interview, he is often "interested in trying to chart changes in someone's grief or in a family's way of knowing each other, or remembering things".[14] In his fiction, Tóibín constructs his characters' interiority through constant observation combined with interspersed introspection, as well as through their ways of interpreting meaning and intention in their relations with others. Taking Henry James's style as an inspiration, in *Nora Webster* Tóibín opts for a free indirect voice which gathers "detail after detail all observed and experienced by one character, mediated by one consciousness".[15] Between the scenes of the novel, Tóibín places "the silent registering of knowledge",[16] which materialises in the gradual evolution of the protagonist's self-concept, adaptation to new circumstances, and openness to new ways of living and relating to others. In this process, memory (e.g. the reevaluation of her past and former self) and imagination (e.g. her fantasies about another life) play a crucial role,

[12] Most mothers in Tóibín's fiction are widowed women who maintain strained, difficult relationships with their children, which leads Fogarty to explain that "the secluded, hostile space of the maternal becomes the locus in which all the conflicts engendered by the family are reinforced". Fogarty, "After Oedipus?", 177. In the same vein, Morales-Ladrón further observes how "cold, detached and abject mothers have populated Tóibín's novels, unresolved mother-son relationships being one of his most recurrent themes". Morales-Ladrón, "Female resistance", 26. However, it is important to note that, because the story is told entirely from the protagonist's point of view and readers sense the depth of her grief, Tóibín's *Nora Webster* "humanizes the figure of the flawed mother more than any of [his] previous works". Costello-Sullivan, *Trauma,* 126.

[13] James, *Discrepant Solace*, 110.

[14] Randolph, *Close to the Next Moment,* 171.

[15] Tóibín, *All a Novelist Needs,* 26.

[16] Ibid., 74.

as they catalyse positive change for the vulnerable, traumatised Nora (I will return to this later).

Structurally, there are no formal divisions into parts, but two distinct sections are discernible in *Nora Webster*. Beginning in chapter twelve (about Nora's first outing one year after Maurice's death), the second half gives much more ample space to the protagonist's personal reinvention. Up to that point, readers are presented with a view on Nora's life that highlights the vulnerabilities of widowhood in Catholic, small-town 1960s Ireland. According to Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds, there are two main sources of vulnerability: inherent vulnerabilities –which "arise from our corporeality, our neediness, our dependence on others, and our affective and social natures"[17]– and situational ones, which are context specific and are caused by "personal, social, political, economic, or environmental situations of individuals or social groups".[18]

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Whereas Nora's inherent vulnerability (e.g. grief and its impact on the family) is explored thoughout the text, her situational vulnerability (e.g. her financial stringencies, as well as her resentment towards her socially defined role as a widow) is given more prominence in the first half of the novel. When the overall effects of situational vulnerabilities threaten to become permanent, or when social interventions to ameliorate vulnerabilities actually produce new ones, then we may refer to "pathogenic vulnerability", which "undermines autonomy or exacerbates the sense of powerlessness engendered by vulnerability in general".[19] In *Nora Webster*, the depressed protagonist struggles against her pathogenic vulnerabilities, which feature as extra burdens, and clearly illustrate the largely unknown conditions of many widows in the patriarchal, Catholic Ireland of that time.[20]

One of these pathogenic vulnerabilities is the economic insecurity of widowhood in an Ireland where a huge majority of married women did not work outside the home, and

[17] Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds, "Introduction", 7.
[18] Ibid., 7.
[19] Ibid., 9.
[20] Writing in 1971, Eileen Proctor, who founded the National Association of Widows in 1967, complained about the general situation of Irish widows, how they lived as "forgotten women rearing families on a mere pittance", whose "value is never fully appreciated, [their] sacrifices and sorrow never really known". Proctor, "Women, Wives, Widows", 615.

where female workers were significantly poorer than men.[21] As lone women, most Irish widows suffered a big drop in living standards, and endured much distress because their meagre pensions were insufficient. Even though the 1937 Constitution states that "mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labor",[22] the truth was that "the Irish welfare debates did not emphasize widows' intrinsic rights to assistance in maintaining their domestic role in the absence of a husband".[23] Impoverished, most Irish widows not only confronted difficult familial adjustments, but also had to take on a role as breadwinners –an additional responsibility that did not lessen their moral obligations as mothers.

It is thus no coincidence that, as an acute observer of the Ireland of his youth, Tóibín initially locates Nora's most pressing concerns in the arena of "children, money, part-time work".[24] To avoid destitution, Nora sells the family's holiday house in Cush, an action that is experienced as both a sacrifice and her first autonomous decision in many years, sure as she is that "[the house] was the past (…) and it cannot be rescued".[25] Yet, to live in the present, Nora constantly returns to the past; her current situation recalls the memory of her late mother, also widowed in her forties. To underscore the economic precarity of widowhood and how it affects the family, Tóibín does not have Nora remember the trauma of losing her father, but the years after his death, when she began to work at fourteen and, even so, "her mother, herself and her two sisters lived on almost nothing".[26]

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If the protagonist's present condition is a more comfortable one, it is thanks to the help of others, like Jim and Margaret –Maurice's brother and sister, both unmarried–, who pay for their nieces' studies in Dublin and arrange for Nora to return to Gibney's,

[21] In her study on Irish widowhood, Mary Cullen remarks that, for much of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church and Irish State enforced a family ideology which compelled women to dedicate themselves to domestic roles, as made obvious by the introduction of marriage bars on the employment of women and the enshrining of motherhood in the 1937 Constitution. Placed outside the institution of the nuclear family by personal choice or circumstance, lone women, including widows, faced much discrimination, for example, in the sphere of work: "A comparison of industrial workers in 1966, 1971 and 1976 showed the disposable income of female breadwinners, both widows and single women, to be substantially lower than that of married or single men". Cullen, "Widows in Ireland", 610.
[22] Irish Constitution, "Article 41.2".
[23] Earner-Byrne, "Parading their Poverty", 33.
[24] Tóibín, *Nora Webster*, 7.
[25] Ibid., 8.
[26] Ibid., 50.

where she did officework before marriage. Open to others' influence, Nora learns to navigate through the opinions and perspectives of family and friends. At times, however, she has to distance herself from their expectations, as they cannot properly understand the hardships of widowhood and lone motherhood. When she announces that she is going to work full-time, her daughters and sister, Una, "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".[27] Feeling accused of neglecting her younger children, Nora insists that both her pension and future salary hardly bring enough money to subsist: "Is that all?",[28] replies an incredulous Fiona, one of the daughters, whose teaching career will shortly earn her a much higher income. In subsequent episodes, far from being abnegated, Nora continues to speak up and even praises Minister Charles Haughey as a hero for increasing widows' pensions,[29] doing so in front of her opinionated brother-in-law, Jim, who despises the Minister: "[Haughey] is the only politician I know who has bothered about widows".[30] Having identified herself as part of a marginalised group, Nora's upfront attitude about her precarity, as well as her sense of injustice about it, contribute to her characterisation as rebellious and resistant.

A second manifestation of pathogenic vulnerability in Tóibín's novel is the Irish Catholic culture of grief for widows. Because widows were supposed to cling to their loss, Nora's actions, behaviour, social life and physical appearance can easily become the object of people's moral judgment. In this undesired situation, Tóibín's protagonist circumvents the expectations of widowhood by devising strategies of evasion and enacting small rebellions to escape the sometimes "suffocating atmosphere"[31] of her community. Contradictory as it may seem, the writer portrays this culture of grief as both society's protective, well-meaning reaction to Nora's disgrace and a mechanism of patriarchal control, which threatens to turn the protagonist into the sacrificial image of the unfortunate widow whose sorrow keeps "the husband's social self alive".[32] For Nora, this public understanding of widowhood is far from comforting, more so a year after

[27] Ibid., 86.
[28] Ibid., 89.
[29] Historian Diarmaid Ferriter explains that "Charles Haughey, as Minister for Finance, devoted particular attention to widows through the Succession Act of 1965, and in budgets in the late 1960s that prioritised public service pensions for widows and orphans. The Succession Act was introduced at a time when there was 50 per cent intestacy rate, and sought to deal with the fact that (…) there was often a failure to provide for widows". Ferriter, *Transformations,* 570.
[30] Tóibín, *Nora Webster,* 144.
[31] Apolinario Pires, de Souza Ferreira and Torres, "Self-fashioning".
[32] Lopata, *Current Widowhood,* 15.

Maurice's death: "She became nervous when she saw someone coming towards her ready to remind her of her loss. It was at times intrusive and hurtful".[33] In several ways, this culture of grief accentuates her depression –that is, her inherent vulnerability– and undermines her agency; upon receiving a neighbour's kind but unsolicited advice on what she should do, "once more [Nora] noticed the hectoring tone, as though she were a child, unable to make proper decisions".[34] Even if Nora wants to regard this kind of attitude as a "shorthand for kindness",[35] she clearly seeks to avoid being infantilised.

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To depict Nora's resistance against this culture of grief, Tóibín characterises his protagonist as "ambiguously shaped through a constant process of self-questioning and an almost obsessive self-awareness", which calls readers' attention to "the gap between her wishes and the imposition of norms of behaviour".[36] When Nora has her hair dyed and tries a fashionable hairstyle, she almosts regrets this decision, imagining the shocked reaction of others and accusing herself of "act[ing] on a whim without any thought for the consequences".[37] A moment later, though, Nora's mind travels far away to her teenage days, when she was penniless and stole a much desired book from a local shop: "Walking home with her new hair dye reminded her of her walking into her mother's house with that volume of Browning's poems".[38] Tóibín therefore has Nora recreate younger versions of herself so that she can experience the excitement of the forbidden, of breaking the rules. Something similar happens when she befriends a male co-worker (cross-gender friendships were often deemed inappropriate for widows)[39] and allows herself to become persuaded to join a trade union. Again, in this situation, Nora revives the freedoms felt by her younger self: "When he had gone, Nora felt light, almost happy for a moment. There was something about Mick Sinnott's tone (…) that reminded her of years before, years when she was young and went to dances".[40] This example and others show the

[33] Tóibín, *Nora Webster*, 152.
[34] Ibid., 10.
[35] Ibid., 10.
[36] Carregal-Romero, "Widowhood", 356.
[37] Tóibín, *Nora Webster*, 54.
[38] Ibid., 54.
[39] One of her bosses, Miss Kavanagh, reminds her of this when she dissapprovingly lets Nora know that she has been seen having a friendly conversation with this male colleague: "And what, Mrs Webster, were you talking to that lorry driver outside this building?". Ibid., 120. For some more notes on the "cultural distrust" of cross-gender friendships for widows in Catholic Ireland, see Carregal-Romero, "Widowhood", 350-1, 358.
[40] Tóibín, *Nora Webster*, 146.

subtle ways Tóibín dramatises Nora's resistance to social norms of behaviour. Rather than succumb to sentiments of guilt or self-blame about her decisions, Nora demonstrates an ability to reclaim and enjoy some autonomy, not through acts of open dissent or direct confrontation that could disrupt community ties,[41] but through the quiet rebellions sparked by the power of imagination.

In her attempt to overcome her pathogenic vulnerabilities, Tóibín's Nora gradually builds a sense of resistance in ways that recall MacKenzie's feminist conception of autonomy. For Mackenzie, autonomy is a relational competence, since it grows from "practices of social recognition", when one is considered a "respect-worthy, self-authorizing agent".[42] Though autonomy is established through social relationships, it also necessitates "appropriate self-regarding attitudes",[43] such as the ability to regulate one's frustrations, reflect critically on norms and cultural values, and understand the possible consequences of one's actions on others. These self-regarding attitudes in turn coalesce into what MacKenzie identifies as the three interrelated dimensions of autonomy: self-determination, self-governance and self-authorisation. Self-determination means to be able to enact decisions "of practical import, concerning what matters, who to be",[44] while self-governance demands that such decisions cohere with one's alleged "values and commitments".[45]

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The third axis of autonomy, self-authorisation, asks autonomous agents not only to take responsibility for their decisions, but also to "stand in relations of reciprocal accountability".[46] Autonomy is thus not a simple exercise of power or personal independence, but a social practice where individuals develop their personality and make their choices within the bounds of relationships of care, where they both affect and become affected by others.

Throughout the novel, Tóibín stresses notions of agency and autonomy for his widowed protagonist. Told entirely from her perspective, the story is interspersed with

[41] She does have, though, direct confrontations with two characters: her strident boss Miss Kavanagh and Brother Herlihy, the school director. These two people are not part of her social circle, though.
[42] Mackenzie, "Autonomy", 522.
[43] Ibid., 525.
[44] Ibid., 523.
[45] Ibid., 524.
[46] Ibid., 525.

Nora's reflections on the "strange happiness"[47] that she experiences everytime she makes her own decisions, asking for nobody's permission. She is even fuelled by "a new energy"[48] when she resolves to mount a picket against Brother Herlihy, the school director, after relegating her youngest child, Conor, to B-class for no apparent reason. By defying the Brother's righteousness, Nora reclaims an authority that was lost to her because of her widowhood: "You would not have moved Conor if my husband were still teaching".[49] Tóibín therefore has the self-determined (at times intimidating) Nora find emotional strength in the vulnerability of her widowhood, which creates situations and opens up possibilities that were almost unthinkable in her married life.[50] Her widowhood and lone motherhood, too, facilitate Nora's openness to some people's positive influence, as she learns to welcome other perspectives, correct her past actions and reconsider some of her decisions for the sake of others, especially her younger children, Conor and Donal. Initially incapacitated by the inherent vulnerability of grief,[51] the protagonist eventually acquires an "ability to see [her] errors and gradually to intuit [the children's] needs", which becomes "redemptive because she carries that burden alone".[52] Significantly, Nora's slow progress towards autonomy and self-reinvention is accompanied by her adoption of caring attitudes that improve both her social and familial lives, helping her ameliorate her depression.

As pointed out above, Nora's self-reinvention is inseparable from her vulnerability, no matter how damaging it might have been at the beginning. Vulnerability can be regarded as the different types and degrees of "susceptibility, exposure, and proneness" caused by "a range of undesirable conditions (…) and states",[53] like discrimination, deprivation, loss and illness. Even though it occasionally produces inmense harm or need (especially in cases of irreparable damage), vulnerability can also be transitory and not necessarily experienced as completely disabling, since it compels individuals to devise new ways of "being in the world and living in relation to others"[54] in order to re-establish their well-

[47] Tóibín, *Nora Webster,* 280.
[48] Ibid., 228.
[49] Ibid., 226.
[50] For example, in her first outing, while socialising with neighbours and old acquaitances in a pub, Nora suddenly becomes aware that "she had never been alone in a crowd like this": "Maurice would always decide when to leave or how long to stay". Ibid., 170.
[51] Readers clearly perceive Nora's desolation and alienation from others when, in a family visit to her sister Catherine, she feels that "she was on her own now and (…) had no idea how to live". Ibid., 72.
[52] Costello-Sullivan, *Trauma,* 140.
[53] Engster, "Care Ethics", 104.
[54] Ibid., 104.

being. Some forms of vulnerability, if managed successfully, lead to positive transformation:

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> The receptivity that our vulnerability signifies means we are open to a whole host of experiences –positive, negative, and many in between– and, therefore, is a concept that should not be understood merely in terms of potential injury of some kind. Instead, there are forms of vulnerability that we should value (…) We may well need to enter into and embrace vulnerability in order to have many other experiences that carry with them positive affective states and the possibilities of personal transformation.[55]

It thus transpires that vulnerability entails an awareness of being affected, and oftentimes changed, by circumstances out of one's control. A transformative effect of vulnerability is its capacity to reconfigure one's previous "narrative identity", evincing the unavoidable "narrative-shaped fragility"[56] of one's life story. For a number of theorists and cultural critics, vulnerability should not only be seen as inextricable to human existence, but as a key component of self-growth and sociability.[57] To live in community with others and earn their trust, and hence develop an autonomy competence, individuals should allow their self-narratives to be revised and corrected to a certain extent. This fragility or vulnerability of the self remains in place for much of human life, since "we need alterity: identification with role models, heroes, correction by others, precepts and norms to which we are confronted, in order to develop as full human beings".[58] *Nora Webster* precisely dwells on this ongoing vulnerability of the self –"its susceptibility to impression, its

[55] Miller, "From Vulnerability to Precariousness", 646.
[56] Hettema, "Autonomy and its Vulnerability", 495.
[57] For Pellicer-Ortín, who draws on vulnerability theory in her analysis of Zinah Rohan's *The Small Book* (2010), "recognising our own vulnerability, and consequently the possibilities of being wounded and traumatised, can help us feel closer to the other's traumas and wounds, and thus make us realise we are all interconnected and interdependent subjects". Pellicer-Ortín, "Transgenerational Trauma", 342. Drawing on Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay's *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016), Romo-Mayor has also argued in her analysis of Rachel Seiffert's *The Walk Home* (2014) that "social interconnection and interdependency have the potential to create modes of agency that can foster the development of resilience by victims of trauma". Romo-Mayor, "Violence, Vulnerability", 116. For more insights into the ethics and interconnectedness of vulnerability, see Diprose, "Corporeal Interdependence", Dodds, "Dependence, Care and Vulnerability", and Brison, "Personal Identity and Relational Selves".
[58] Hettema, "Autonomy and its Vulnerability", 495.

malleability and openness, its formation and mutation through relation"[59]– in the figure of the widowed protagonist and her changed circumstances.

How is, then, this vulnerability of the self represented in Tóibín's novel? As explained above, Nora's evolution is not made explicit in the text, but can be perceived in her "silent registering of knowledge",[60] when she considers the views of others. One of the early scenes has the protagonist visit her aunt Josie, who took care of Conor and Donal whilst Nora spent a relatively long time with the dying Maurice in a Dublin hospital, communicating with nobody from home. Now returned to town, Nora brings up the delicate subject of her children's fear and uneasiness around Josie, but the aunt's reaction is to insist that the boys' suffering originated from their feelings of abandonment:

> 'I phoned and you never phoned back.'
> 'Everyone was enquiring.'
> 'Was I just everyone?'
> 'I never knew how long…'
> 'And the boys didn't either. So we all did the best we could. By the end, they became better. By the end, Conor only wet the bed sometimes.'
> 'I didn't know about the bed. I'm grateful to you for what you did.'[61]

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In the rest of the novel, Tóibín does not return to this thorny issue, so readers never learn whether Josie was ever cruel to the children. The significance of the scene therefore relies on Nora's tacit acceptance that her emotional neglect worsened her children's trauma.

A second example of this vulnerability of the self, which catalyses positive change, concerns the ways Nora overcomes her initial "failure of empathy"[62] towards her son Donal. Caused by trauma, Donal's stammer preoccupies Nora for much of the story, but her inaction about it is presented as something that must be corrected by others. When Margaret arranges for Donal to change school and visit a speech therapist, Nora is angered at not having been consulted and feels the urge to tell her sister-in-law "not to interfere in her children's life".[63] Yet she demonstrates flexibility to regulate her frustrations; instead

[59] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*, 47.
[60] Tóibín, *All a Novelist Needs*, 74.
[61] Tóibín, *Nora Webster*, 45.
[62] Costello-Sullivan, *Trauma*, 126.
[63] Ibid., 250.

of arguing with Margaret, she talks to Donal first, who is moved to tears when confessing that he can no longer study at the same school his father taught. Observing Donal's raw bereveament, Nora silently acknowledges that Margaret's was the right decision, so, for her child's sake, she disregards her previous anxieties about maternal authority: "And, now, for the first time, how he felt seemed more urgent, more worthy of attention than any of her feelings".[64] In this instance and others, this vulnerability of the self –the receptivity to others and ability to correct one's self-narrative– becomes fundamental to cement relationships of trust and care, bringing "positive affective states".[65]

A final topic for consideration is the protagonist's confrontation with her own trauma, which Tóibín depicts as the most salient aspect of her inherent vulnerability. Trauma is one the central topics of the novel; in the early chapters, Tóibín captures its full force through the painful silences within the family, since "[Nora] can only manage by putting her grief aside and discouraging any discussion of her own and children's feelings, a form of splitting sometimes necessary in order to survive."[66] As typical of novels representing trauma, in *Nora Webster* this silenced pain of loss resurfaces through "memories, flashbacks, dreams, and hauntings", and trauma features as "part of [the] dramatic action",[67] since the narrative details how the protagonist gradually achieves a new understanding of her past. Nora's trauma lingers throughout the story, but there is a sense of alleviation about it,[68] which readers perceive through her gradual opennes to others.

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If in the first half of the novel the self-contained Nora feels that "being released into the world of others seemed impossible",[69] in the second half she is self-consciously "unmoored" and starts distancing herself from her loss, an experience that signals a new phase in her mourning and highlights the receptivity of vulnerability. Chapter twelve –

[64] Ibid., 259.
[65] Miller, "From Vulnerability to Precariousness", 646.
[66] Terry, "Sexual Identity and Mourning", 162.
[67] Garratt, *Trauma,* 5.
[68] In the early chapters, Nora is haunted by intrusive memories of Maurice's suffering and harrowing death. At one point, Tóibín has the protagonist remember how, as Maurice lay dying, "he was more alive then than he had ever been before, she thought, because of his needs and his panic and his fear and the pain that seemed to be burning in him". Tóibín, *Nora Webster,* 74. As the story unfolds, Maurice continues to be present in Nora's life, not so much in the memory of his death but in her reconsiderations of their married life. Trauma, however, persists. Readers are starkly reminded of this in the last chapter, which stages Maurice's unsettling apparition in (what seems to be) a dream that Nora experiences as real.
[69] Tóibín, *Nora Webster,* 71.

when she is in a pub with a new friend, Phyllis, and sings with her in front of people– is crucial in this respect, as Tóibín has Nora realise that:

> So this was what being alone was like, she thought. It was not the solitude she had been going through, nor the moments when she felt his death like a shock to her system, as though she had been in a car accident, it was this wandering in a sea of people with the anchor lifted, and all of it oddly pointless and confusing.[70]

In his fiction, Tóibín generally adopts an observational, austere style of writing where much is left unsaid,[71] that is why passages like the one above, of expanded self-reflection, become particularly meaningful. In his analysis, James rightly notes that: "since most of Tóibín's sentences are brief, those with additional clauses tend to stand out both rhythmically and semantically. And it's in these sentences –with the extra clauses– that Tóibín moves from description to prospection, from noting basic actions to mapping Nora's intimations of promise".[72] These "intimations of promise" become the more frequent in the second half of the novel, which describes how Nora's rediscovered passion for music helps her construct a "soundproofed" space away from the inherent vulnerability of trauma.[73] Music becomes "a place where [Maurice] would never have followed her",[74] where his memory is not present.

As illustrated by the example above, in his fiction, Tóibín employs spatial metaphors which work as "symbolic extension[s] of the self",[75] demonstrating that "no person exists outside of place",[76] with its personal and cultural identifications. At the same time, these metaphors serve to dramatise his characters' inherent vulnerabilities: for instance, "filled (…) with what had been lost",[77] the "strangeness"[78] of Nora's family home initially

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[70] Ibid., 170.
[71] Delaney was one of the first critics to remark how, throughout Tóibín's canon, "silence informs the subject and the style of what is being narrated, and it helps to shape the story that is being told". Delaney, "Introduction", 19. In her analysis, Costello-Sullivan underlines "Tóibín's canonical investment in representing characters who struggle with silence and repression", along the lines of the personal, sexual, social and political. Costello-Sullivan, *Mother/Country*, 182. Expanding on these previous observations, Carregal-Romero focuses on the formal and stylistic aspects of silence and concludes that "[it] emerges as an aesthetic practice and key narrative element in Tóibín's work, produced by variations in tone and distance, gestures and indirection, the language of taboo, controlled release of information, the tensions between revelation and concealment, and the skilful dramatisation of (self)-denial, absences and grief". Carregal-Romero, "Varieties of Silence", 82.
[72] James, *Discrepant Solace,* 104.
[73] Tóibín, *Nora Webster,* 204.
[74] Ibid., 204.
[75] Easterlin, "Ecocriticism, Place Studies", 242.
[76] Ibid., 236.
[77] Tóibín, *Nora Webster,* 83.
[78] Ibid., 72.

mirrors her (and the children's) confusion and depression. On most occasions, though, spatial metaphors have an emancipatory function, as illustrated by Nora's rebellions against the social norms of widowhood, when she imaginatively returns to scenarios of her younger self, before her marriage with Maurice. Like Nora, most of Tóibín's protagonists display a "double consciousness –at once home and away",[79] which permits them to "pass boundary lines" and "discov[er] renewed selves".[80]

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By making use of this technique, Tóibín foregrounds the fact that "the private life has a reality that is quite unlike the public display",[81] creating a space for his main characters' "heightened sense of living in an 'other' world".[82] What makes *Nora Webster* different from Tóibín's other novels is that the protagonist is not just "enlivened"[83] by the past, but also by her fantasies of an imagined life. With this psychological characterisation, Toíbín skillfully portrays Nora's susceptibility to impression, adaptive capacities and resistance against norms of behaviour, all of these being circumstances that derive from the vulnerabilities of her widowhood.

Drawing on previous analyses on Tóibín's use of spatial metaphors, Foley explains that the writer's "depiction of fluid and distant spaces"[84] articulates an "alternative politic of non-participation and resistance", where characters "explore spaces virtually", which "allows a comprehension of space apart from the material".[85] By so doing, Tóibín's protagonists, including Nora, refuse to be "interpellated by a political structure, by the material ideologies of education, religion, and economy".[86] In the novel, fluid and distant spaces are often articulated through Nora's vivid fantasies about an alternative life, one in which she would have developed a professional career as a singer. In the last chapters, Nora's rediscovered passion for music is presented, in Gilson's formulation of inherent vulnerability, as a "matter of affective openness" and "an occasion for becoming-other than what one is".[87] Nora had never sung in her married life, but, now that her anchor is lifted, she takes singing lessons with a former nun, Laurie O'Keefe, and joins the

[79] O'Connell, "Permeable Boundaries",73.
[80] Ibid., 79.
[81] Hagan, "'As Though' Reality", 34.
[82] Ibid., 33.
[83] Ibid., 45.
[84] Foley, "Distant Depths", 378.
[85] Ibid., 381.
[86] Ibid., 381.
[87] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*, 141.

Gramophone Society, whose members exchange records in their meetings. In one of their reunions, Nora is taken away by the music: "She thought how easy it might have been to be someone else, that having the boys at home waiting for her (…), and her work in the morning, were all a sort of accident. They were somehow less solid than the clear notes of the cello that came through the speakers".[88] Tóibín has these fluid and distant spaces become increasingly common and important in Nora's life:

> What she had told no one, because it was too strange, was how much this music had come to stand for. It was her dream-life, a life she might have had if she had been born elsewhere. She allowed herself to live for a time each day in a pure fantasy in which she could have learned the cello as a child (…) She wondered if she was alone in having nothing in between the dullness of her own days and the sheer brilliance of this imagined life.[89]

These desires of her imagined life –partially accomplished when, in the final chapter, she is invited to sing in a choir– are not only psychollogically comforting,[90] alleviating the pain of trauma, but also encourage the self-authorised Nora not to be constrained by the pathogenic vulnerabilities of widowhood (e.g. its attendant culture of grief) and motherhood (e.g. the ideal of the stay-at-home mother) in 1960s Catholic Ireland.

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Despite initial reservations that her singing would damage her domestic life –at one point she wonders "what she was doing taking lessons when she should be looking after her job and her house and minding her children"[91]–, the truth is that Nora's process of transformation is accompanied by an increased emotional connection with both Conor and Donal.[92] Echoing Virginia Woolf, Tóibín describes this creation of "a room of one's own" –both Nora's new passion and the redecorated room in her house, where she plays her records– as a healing experience and a much needed reclamation of autonomy.

In its focused attention on the main character's psychology and evolution in the course of the story, this study has traced the ways Tóibín dramatises vulnerability and resistance

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[88] Tóibín, *Nora Webster,* 213.
[89] Ibid., 262-3.
[90] Music, for example, brings her closer to the memory of her late mother, who also sang, and from whom she felt estranged for many years.
[91] Ibid., 202.
[92] Tóibín makes this clear in the last-but-one chapter, which shows various domestic scenes of emotional proximity and care between Nora and her children.

in *Nora Webster*, a "veiled elegy"[93] to his late, widowed mother. This reading has proposed an understanding of vulnerability not as a condition of perpetual injury or victimhood, but as a site of potential transformation. As discussed, Tóibín highlights the unavoidable susceptibility and receptivity of vulnerability, of being "unmoored" by loss, and how this impels the protagonist to relate to herself and others differently in order to restore a sense of security and well-being. In the novel, Nora is affected by grief, economic precarity and patriarchal norms of behaviour, but she confronts these undesired situations with self-determination. To dramatise this, Tóibín often invokes the power of memory and imagination, allowing the protagonist to progress towards possibilities of being other than those socially demarcated. In the vulnerability of her widowhood, Nora reclaims, and somehow achieves, an autonomy that was unavailable to her in her married life: "She had to remind herself that she was free now".[94] This autonomy, though, does not signify mere independence or authority over others, but an acceptance of a vulnerability of the self, of being open to the positive influence of significant others. Ultimately, Tóibín's *Nora Webster* becomes a tale of self-growth in the face of life-disrupting loss, where vulnerability initiates a path towards resilience and self-reinvention.

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[93] James, *Discrepant Solace*, 89.
[94] Tóibín, *Nora Webster*, 276.

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