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Mapping New York Irish-American Identities: Duality of Spirituality in Elizabeth Cullinan's Short Story "Life After Death"

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Abstract: Elizabeth Cullinan's short story "Life After Death" depicts a day in the life of a young New Yorker, Constance, walking along Lexington Avenue, attending the evening Mass at a Dominican church and visiting the Catholic college where she worked part time to pick up her paycheck. Though the woman is involved with the married Francis Hughes and confronted with the burden of the past and of intricate family dynamics, her voice, which is "the Cullinan narrative voice has become that of one of those sceptical granddaughters grown into a reasonably assured and independent adulthood [...] balanced between then and now, the ethnic and the worldly, and better able to judge self and others because of the doubleness" (Fanning qtd. in Bayor and Meagher 528). Thus, the paper will discuss the manner in which Elizabeth Cullinan maps, in her story, the oscillation of Irish Americans between the ethnic drive and a cosmopolitan individuality gained in New York, with a focus on the value of the duality of consciousness and spirituality, which facilitates enriching and clarifying answers to identity dilemmas.

Keywords: Elizabeth Cullinan, Irish-America, New York, identity, duality, ethnicity, Catholicism, city, multiculturalism

I. INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Cullinan was born in 1933 in New York City of Irish parents; she received a BA from Marymount College, Manhattan and in between 1955-1964 she worked as a secretary for The New Yorker. The, she travelled in between Ireland and America for a number of years, at present teaching creative writing at Fordham University. Cullinan's short fiction, republished in two collections, The Time of Adam (1971) and Yellow Roses (1977), has appeared in The New Yorker since the 1960s. Her two novels House of Gold (1970) and A Change of Scene (1982) have also been well received, according to Casey and Rhodes (216).

Cullinan's approach to Irish-American fiction fits the traditional pattern in an intricate manner. The writer tackles Catholicism but at a stage when the Catholic church no longer serves the primary supporting role for the immigrant in the US. The Irish heritage of family patterns (late marriage, celibacy, children as caretakers, self-sacrificing, demanding mothers and generational conflicts) is also challenged in short stories, such as "Life After Death". The Irish obsession with security translated in America through occupations in the public domain (police and fire department) and the story of the next generation's advancement

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are equally dealt with through stories of young females from Irish backgrounds, who seem to have settled safely in present day New York. The ethnic context is there, without being so visible, as Cullinan probably shares Flannery O'Connor's view: "I have never been greatly tied emotionally or sentimentally to my own Irish background. The Irish in America are sometimes more Irish then the Irish and I suppose some of my indifference is a reaction against that" (qtd. in Liddy 76). What the writer generally portrays are Irish American Catholics in the city, individuals involved in generational conflicts, young women trapped in affairs and bearing the burden of the past and of complicated family relationships.

II. Modern Irish American Short Stories: general characteristics

The majority of Irish Americans, the focus of Cullinan's stories, are descendants of the Catholic, Gaelic immigrants that reached America in large numbers from the nineteenth century to mid 1950s. Between 1854 and 1855, the number of Irish people in the US was around one million and a half and the trend continued so that in 1860, 5.12% population was of Irish origin. Their uprooting had been mainly caused, according to Liddy (75), by racial and political oppression, famine and poverty.

Constance, the protagonist in Elizabeth Cullinan's short story "Life After Death", comes a long way after the first massive waves of Irish female immigrants that reached New York in the nineteenth century and worked as domestics and factory workers, contributing to what is known as "chain immigration"[1] . Later on, as nuns, these women brought their contribution to the American society and when they gained more strength, as teachers and nurses, they gathered in unions and asked for more rights for their kin. Yet, the early Irish women immigrants did not easily move to better skilled jobs as "they were willing to defer or forgo marriage and family"; thus "they worked as live-in servants, and later as schoolteachers who had to remain single" (Diner xvi). The 1980 American Census showed that more than forty million Americans claim some Irish origin. And the kind of jobs the Irish women had access to or embraced, the associations they formed and the families they raised, have shaped the Irish American life for future generations.

The Irish in the nineteenth century brought Catholicism to America; back then, the church was seen positively by the immigrants: it bridged the gap between the rural community in Ireland and the new urban neighbourhood in America and the Catholic parish preserved a pervading sense of community. However, the situation changed in the twentieth century, the second generation of immigrants no longer needing this kind of spiritual support. Even in the fiction depicting modern characters, Irish Americans still appear as "cultural Catholics (Hallissy 21), through their ethnic affiliation, which is the case of Cullinan's stories.

Family patterns (complicated mother and father roles, late marriage, long or permanent celibacy, dour parents-children relationships), brought over to the US by the Irish are also extremely influential when it comes to Irish heritage in America. Irish American patterns were also influenced by the way in which a rural population shifted to a predominantly urban population in America. Parents are closer to the Irish past, but sometimes the second generation has to comply with the burden of the past as well. Mothers-daughters and granddaughters often have complicated relationships, with the older generations having especially overbearing personalities. Silences and a certain inability to express feelings are registered among Irish family members and they appear as a topic in Irish American fiction as well. Charles Fanning observes that a recurrent theme in Irish and Irish American fiction consists of "the dutiful self-immolation of children on behalf of their parents" (qtd. in Hallissy 22). At home, maturity was defined by the parents' death and the inheritance of the property, but that often came so late that the "children" chose to remain single. In America, it seemed that the inheritance

1 Sending money back home to Ireland, so that other immigrants, relatives, friends could afford to pay for the journey to America. Guibernau and Rex even mention the network theory related to ethnic migrant groups expansion and they discuss migrant networks as "sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship and shared community origin" (316).

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problem was replaced by a difficulty to break away with the family, a quandary valid for both sons and daughters and so strange to the American lifestyle.

Looking at the work history of the Irish in the US, we come to grasp the occupation and social states of the characters in Irish American fiction. The Famine generations were low skilled and poor but by the beginning of the twentieth century, with the help of unionization, the Irish moved to better positions, better pay and higher skilled occupations. Jobs in the public domain also started being available to a stronger Irish American community thanks to Democratic politics and tight ethnic connections. "Irish Maries" moved up the social ladder and became office workers, "secretaries, stenographers, nurses and schoolteachers" (Hallissy 26).

It is more difficult to clearly identify what ethnicity means for later generations as the achievement of middle-class socio-economic status is often opposed to powerful ethnic identification; this was considered to be the case of the "lace curtain Irish" (Rains 213), who moved from the old neighborhood into the suburbs. There were great changes in America in the twentieth century related to social and geographical mobility and the civil rights, thus, critics such as Herbert Gans speak of attenuated ethnicity or "symbolic ethnicity" in the 1970s or the 1980s, acquired through these new forms of social mobility across generations:

This symbolic identification as more or less a leisure-time activity. Individuals identify as Irish, for example, on occasions such as Saint Patrick's Day, on family holidays, or for vacations ... Gans also wonders how such symbolic ethnicity can continue when the actual ethnic collectivity that the individual claims belong to continue to recede. (qtd. in Rains 216)

Blending into suburban neighborhoods caused a significant change in terms of the perception of ethnicity; "the bonds of ethnic community [which] were inevitably sundered by suburbanization" (Hallissy 30) by the second and third generation. In spite of this phenomenon, the Irish American community identifies itself as such and proudly produces ethnic culture.

Michel Novak, in the study published in 1972, The Rise of Unmeltable Ethnics, sees ethnic identity as cultural values and behaviours, "ethnic identity persists among individuals ... by being passed on in unconscious, tacit ways in their early nurture" (qtd. in Bayor 20). The legacy of ethnic identity is equally tackled by Elliott Barkan in And Still They Come:

in varying degrees across the generations, ethnicity has persisted among many groups even among the older ... ones. It could be seen in the private sphere of manners and mores, values, and specific traditional practices. (qtd. in Bayor 20)

Richard Alba also locates ethnic identity in the deep structure of the psyche, as explained in Bayor's study (20). Taking into account the concepts used, i.e. the unconscious, private sphere, the psyche, it is obvious that ethnicity has to be understood from a psychological viewpoint as well, in terms of attitudes towards child rearing, family roles, illnesses, for instance. One example used by Bayor in his study to demonstrate this theory refers to a psychiatry study in the 1960s in New York State, which revealed the patterns of disturbed behavior of Irish American boys because of maternal domination (21).

Daniel J. Casey and Robert E. Rhodes published a Modern Irish-American Reader (1989), in which they include names like Finley Peter Dunne, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John O'Hara, Mary McCarthy, Brendan Gill, Mary Doyle Curran, Edwin O'Connor, Flannery O'Connor, J.P. Donleavy, William Kennedy, Maureen Howard, Elizabeth Cullinan, Mark Costello, Pete Hamill, Joe Flaherty and Mary Gordon. These writers themselves and critics have showed different understandings of the idea of Irish American fiction. For instance, interviewed on the topic, William Kenney discussed evolution in the fiction resulting from the social, cultural and political changes of the Irish American community:

God knows where I am in all of this, in this evolution, but I know all that came before me. I know that those who came before me helped to show me how to turn experience into literature. I know all that came before in the same way I know that the Irish ascended politically to become Jack Kennedy. After Jack Kennedy, anything was possible. Goddammit, we've been president, and you can't hold us back anymore. (qtd. in Casey and Rhodes 2)

In spite of the changes mentioned by Kenney, there are some traces of a traditional vein preserved in Irish American fiction, such as idyllic images of Ireland, or elements that symbolize the country of origin even for those for which it is no longer their homeland, a sublimated long-distance nationalism, some sense of the past, stubbornly transmitted from generation to generation and an awareness of the Catholic church as a church of immigration and of the ethnic neighbourhood networks.

Charles Fanning, before Casey and Rhodes, published in 1987 an anthology of nineteenth century Irish American fiction (The Exiles of Erin), in which he distinguishes three generations of writers: the pre-famine, the practical fiction of the famine stage and the literature of a new middle class. Some themes analysed by Fanning as being of concern to those generations have been transmitted to later generations in one form or another, i.e. Catholicism, success or failure in the New World, nationalism and politics.

On Irish American fiction in the 1960s, like Kenney, Fanning states that it has been written under the impact of some major events, such as the civil rights and sexual revolutions, the rise and tragedy of the Kennedy family, the breakup of the Irish ethnic neighbourhoods and their move to the suburbs (in Bayor and Meagher 811).

This change and energy are reflected in the perspective of liberating doubleness that characterizes much Irish American literature since the 1960s. (Fanning qtd. Bayor and Meagher in 511)

In no other place have the Irish been more successful as in New York, which is valid for writers too. Thus, Maureen Howard, Jimmy Breslin, J.P. Donleavy, Alice McDermott, Elizabeth Cullinan and Joe Flaherty are representative of more recent New York Irish American fiction. Many of these writers continue the depiction of everyday family life in the big metropolis, tackled by their predecessors. "In addition, much of this fiction published over the past few years illustrates both the persistence of ethnicity and the phenomenon of ethnicity as liberating doubleness" (Fanning qtd. in Bayor and Meagher 519).

III. Elizabeth Cullinan's "Life After Death": a dual approach of New York Irish American spirituality

The short story "Life After Death" starts with Constance's thoughts referring to President Kennedy's sisters. There are two interesting remarks here: one, the allusion to the epitome of Irish success in the US, which is symbolized by President Kennedy, the first Irish president in America, and secondly, the modernity of the narrator's consciousness rendering images of the street in New York as paper clippings: "Sister of the late President looks in shop window. Sister of slain leader buys magazine. Kennedy kin hails tax on Madison Avenue" (in Casey and Rhodes 27). Thinking in newspaper headlines points to a quality of fragmentation of consciousness of the urban individual. "Newspaper formulas move into a vacuum of authority in West's disordered, violent urban world" and the situation becomes absurd so that even when people "meet face to face, they talk 'in headlines'" (Bremer 128). Actually, the protagonist of the short story thinks in headlines, which shows further internalization of disintegration but she seems to apply this approach to public figures only, as if everything was neatly packaged for public display.

The thoughts neatly arrange in the young woman's head under a headline "LIFE AFTER DEATH", which could mean after Kennedy's death, a painful moment that crushed the hopes of many young Americans at the time, or it might hint at a moment of peace evoked by the conclusion Constance will draw at the end of the day analysing her life.

A typical Cullinan short story follows this pattern: incisively observed encounters and emotional consequences build in seemingly casual movement to climactic generalizations so appropriate and valid as to be immediately recognizable as wisdom. (Bayor and Meagher 528)

It is no wonder that Constance's thoughts gravitate around Kennedy, whose election as president was considered a major breakthrough for the Irish Americans and it provoked commentaries such as McCaffrey's:

The Irish are even numbered among the so-called beautiful people- part of the Kennedy heritage. On television handsome men, women and children

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wearing Irish knit sweaters and with Irish names like Kevin, Brian, Sean, Sheila and Maureen sell cars, soap and toothpaste. (qtd. in Rains 215)

Representations of Kennedy's visit in Ireland in 1963, his speech on arrival at Dublin Airport, his speech in the Irish Parliament, all point to the historical relationship between Ireland and American, the importance of the Irish diaspora, Ireland's struggle for independence, its progress and role in the global economy and politics. According to Kevin Kenny

It was in 1960 rather than 1860 that the American Irish finally became 'white', if by that term one means full racial and cultural respectability, a final acceptance by white American Protestants of Irish-American Catholics as their equals in all things important. (qtd. in Rains 19)

Thus, in the context of the short story, though an element of powerful ethnicity, the Irish American president is seen as a liberating figure.

As it is a cold day and the protagonist of the story is warmly dressed thanks to her mother's advice, this gives the woman a moment to focus on the mother-daughter relationship. The mother is typically Irish: overprotective, self-sacrificing, "her sheer competence, her strength, her powers of endurance, her devotedness" (in Casey and Rhodes 219) being revealed in Constance's meditation on her mother's relationships with the three daughters (Grace, Rosemary and Constance) and in Constance's dreams about her mother (in one, though dead, she rises and takes charge of the household and in another one, she is held captive in the house, beaten and suffering without being rescued by her daughters who can witness the ordeal). Grace, the oldest of the sisters, was married with six children and a perfectionist, never satisfied with anything or anyone. The middle sister, Rosemary, aged forty, had lived all her life abroad and was about to get married to a man of a different religion. In the short story, like in the other works by Cullinan we have "single-shot, slowed down moments of life in an Irish New York Matriarchy" (Liddy 83).

Conversely, "the fathers peep forward in shadows, bread losers, happy go lucky, financially distressed" (Liddy 83). The protagonists in traditional Irish American writing, young women, are usually affected by their mother's ambition. Therefore "Life After Death" depicts a cry for evasion. The affection the daughters return to their mother in "Life After Death" is very far from being the self-sacrifice expected by Irish mothers:

We have a sense of irony that my mother with the purity of instinct and the passion of innocence sees as a threat to our happiness and thus to hers. Not one of us is someone she has complete confidence in. (in Casey and Rhodes 218)

As Constance continues her walk along Lexington Avenue, she remembers the explosion in the always active area (since the mid-1940s busy with commuters around Central Station), which is under construction. Since after WWI, New York has been described as "the first capital of the world" (Chevrillon qtd. in Bremer 114), displaying "more contrasts than any other city in the world" (Mencken qtd. in Bremer 114), as "all the cities" (W.L. George qtd. in Bremer 114), as "the new Cosmopolis" (Hunecker qtd. in Bremer 114), a creative place "where all belong but none is uncontested owner" (Bremer 115). Due to its harbour in the beginning, New York started growing as a center for commerce and communications, then to host international headquarters for banking and stacks, printing and publishing, radio and television.

In the context of the busy and noisy city, Constance also recalls Francis' call among the noise letting her know that they had to postpone their meeting. Francis Hughes was a documentary producer, a married man with four sons, whom Constance was secretly seeing. In her walks, West Fifties is avoided because of the memories of the time when she was working with Francis being around him longer hours:

When I'm in that part of the city, the present seems lifeless, drained of all intensity in relation to the lost time when my days were full of Francis, where for hours on end he was close by. (in Casey and Rhodes 222)

And another area in New York avoided is Thirty-fourth Street with Third Avenue, where Constance's uncle owned a restaurant, Flynn's, a typical Irish family business. Constance's father, whose memory she treasures, had

been a manger there for a while and apparently tampered with the books, and, though no charges were pressed, this incident severed the family ties and the young woman avoided that part of the city as much as she could afterwards.

From this viewpoint, of memories and lived experience in the urban space, it is interesting to look at New York as a fictional city in Cullinan's story as a "thirdspace", described by Soja in his studies Thirdspace (1996) and Postmetropolis (2000). Soja speaks of a "firstspace" in the city as "spatial practices" meant to create concrete forms and patterns of urban lifestyle; the "secondspace" belongs to the mental or ideational realm as a "conceived space of imagination" (Soja 10-11). What the narrator renders through Constance's walking or avoiding walking in New York is this alternative third dimension of space, "lived space", "a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual, locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency" (Soja 11), fed by Constance's fears and anxieties and the city dynamic with television and Irish pubs at their peak. Soja considers that understanding "lived space" is comparable to writing a biography; this could be one meaning attached to Cullinan's short story: walking through New York with Constance, a young Irish American in the 70s, we remake, in a nutshell, the evolution of the ethnic community of the Irish in America; we witness the writing of an alternative monograph of New York City.

Constance had attended a Catholic college, like many Irish girls and she had a part-time job in the same institution working for the Admission Office. The nuns that are still at the college remind her of the old days of the Catholic school, otherwise the personnel now form a multicultural community, typical of New York City, and which the Irish, once the most dominant immigrant population in the city, adapted to: Yeshi, who comes from Ethiopia, Maggie, a Haitian, Delia, from Puerto Rico, all members of ethnic groups that entered the US in various waves in the twentieth century. In America, and especially in cities like New York, "every individual urban center, from the largest to the smallest, seems increasingly to contain the entire world within it, creating the most culturally heterogeneous[2] cityspaces the world has ever seen" (Soja 152). This multicultural milieu constituted by her colleagues gives Constance contradictory feelings. On the one hand, diversity offers a chance for tolerance and reconciliation, as ethnic consciousness implies an acute awareness of other ethnic groups: "I'm half convinced that time is on our side, that nothing is ever lost, that we need only have a little more faith, we need only believe a little more and the endings will be happy" (in Casey and Rhodes 226), i.e. her mother will trust her daughters, Francis will realize how much she loves him and she will walk again confidently on 34th Street.

On the other hand, this intricate melange of people may create difficulties in one's ability to identify oneself, like in the Dominican church Constance attends the Mass in in the evening:

Since it's a city parish, my companions at Mass are diverse – businessmen and students and women in beautiful fur coats side by side with nuns and pious people, the backbone of the congregation. I identify myself among them as someone who must be hard to place. (in Casey and Rhodes 228)

Without claiming to be a typically devout Catholic, Constance reveals a high degree of spirituality, her attendance of the Mass causing a powerful meditation on the meaning of life and death, which explains the title of the short-story:

During those twenty or so minutes, I feel my own past to be not quite coherent but capable of eventually proving to be that. And if my life, like every other, contains elements of the outrageous, that ceremony of death and transfiguration is a means of reckoning with the outrageousness, as work and study are means of reckoning with time. (in Casey and Rhodes 228)

The fact that Constance's moments of spirituality are not solely Catholic Mass bound is proved by the next meditation on vanity and fleeting life caused by New York City street life: "The street was crowded with people – flesh-and-blood images, living tableaux representing virtue and temptation: greed on one face, faith on another, on another charity or sloth,

2 Appadurai calls them ethnoscapes, cities that have been shaped by global flows of people at an unprecedented level (in Soja 201).

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fortitude, or purity" (in Casey and Rhodes 228). To the crowd, Constance finally adds the image of the new flower seller at the corner of Sixty-eight and the short story serenely concludes on the noble, beautiful and still faces of people from all over the world settling in New York.

According to Raymond Williams, the experience of an individual in a large city could go either way "into an affirmation of common humanity, past the barriers of crowded strangeness; or into an emphasis of isolation, of mystery – an ordinary feeling that can become a terror" (qtd. in Tally Jr. 89) or rather to moments of oscillation like in the case of Cullinan's protagonist. Equally, Walter Benjamin, in "A Berlin Chronicle", Charles Baudelaire, in "The Painter of Modern Life", Edgar Allen Poe, in the short story "The Man of the Crowd" and Michel de Certeau, in his "Walking in the City", discuss this modern figure, the stroller, le flâneur, who covers an "urban island, a sea within the middle of the sea", a phrase used by the latter to describe Manhattan (qtd. in Tally Jr. 96).

The conclusions of these writers' works interestingly converge to one idea, namely the mental protean phenomenon characterizing an individual's urban experience, which is an intensification, an "electricity": "the psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer stimuli" (Simmel qtd. in Tally Jr. 96). At times, this type of experience creates a state of transition, which may oppress or reinforce any feelings of community. In the case of the young Irish American woman, we have stimuli like, the Kennedy sisters, the explosion on Lexington Avenue, the cold outside, the uncle's pub, the college, the church and the new flower seller in the corner of the street, which trigger her thoughts and meditation. So, it is the story of a woman stroller, a modern Irish American young girl whose consciousness is bombarded by the urban flux.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the movement of these Irish American characters, such as Constance in Cullinan's "Life After Death", through urban space – New York City, ultimately points at an oscillation between the parochial ethnic neighbourhood - represented by the mother, the uncle's restaurant, the old college - and the liberating downtown – the streets, the office, the church, which parallels Constance's ancestors' migration from rural Ireland to urban America. The story take place within the diaspora discourse, which

> ***articulates, or bends together, both roots and routes to construct what Gilroy describes as alternate public spheres (1987), forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/ space in order to live inside, with a difference. (Guibernau and Rex 325)***

With Cullinan, the approach to the protagonist's journey appears as sophisticate and, though alluding to specific ethnic details, applicable to any immigrant in New York, whose experience becomes universally illuminating:

> ***... the doubleness of ethnic consciousness is enriching and clarifying, that the debate cannot really be resolved, and that a refusal to decide between the poles of ethnic community and cosmopolitan individuality can mark the beginning of a rich, varied life. The middle, straddling position, having something to compare everything with – therein lies a valuable source of energy and understanding. (Bayor and Meagher 530)***

As there is silence in relation to chain migration, re-Irishing, Hibernian activities in the US, and visits to Ireland and encounters with Irish people (Hallissy 30), as strategies of coming to terms with ethnic identity dilemmas to be used by Constance, her only answer remains storytelling. Thus, we learn about Francis, her mother, her father, her uncle's pub, her office work and colleagues, the church she attends, choices through which she seems to find comfort and peace even in the absence of clear cut verdicts as to her belonging to the Irish American community.

The spiritual universe of the protagonist remains ethnic bound, Irish, and cosmopolitan and profoundly humane as well. On the one hand, the presence of president Kennedy's sister reconnects her to the ethnic community, which was liberated from many viewpoints by the charismatic leader; Constance's mother is a constant remainder of their attachment to the

Irish community, yet the girl chooses to challenge any family oppression; Flynn's, her uncle's pub, is avoided because of the family conflict but Constance longs to return there one day and feel confident about walking in the restaurant; the Catholic college Constance works for, the same she attended as a student, is now multicultural, which can only enrich the spiritual dimension of the protagonist's consciousness even if at times freedom is offered by the possibility to mask one's identity, through different clothing, for instance. Finally, both the Dominican church and the streets of New York, as the two facets of existence, the religious one and the lay one, cause very powerful spiritual insights for the young Irish American woman.

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BIOGRAPHY

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