Nostalgic and Bitter Memories of Love and Loss: Color Motifs that Represent Characters' Identities and Psychological States across Spaces in Alice McDermott's *At Weddings and Wakes*

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**Abstract:** In *At Weddings and Wakes*, Alice McDermott crafts her story's structure as non-chronological, which allows for characters' memories, and significant incidents to all in some way relate to the story's main theme of love and loss for this one Irish-American family, the Townes. The main characters lead lives of what Thoreau might characterize as, "quiet desperation" (*Walden*). McDermott's narrative circles back to characters' initial displacement from their mother country of Ireland during the first decade of the 20th century before the Easter Rising. Through the next seven or so decades in America, incidents of love and subsequent painful loss disallow several characters from breaking cycles of mournfulness, depression, and trauma, as the family matriarch holds fast to them in their very first apartment in the new world, Brooklyn, New York. The children in the plot, second-generation Irish Americans, allow for hope and change, as they seem to have been positively influenced by one aunt, who had persisted through hardships in her pursuit of happiness. Through McDermott's pervasive use of colors in this narrative, characters' reveal their nostalgic and bitter memories of love and loss in various environments. Self sacrifice for others and storytelling provide pathways to healing from wounds of inter-generational trauma.

**Keywords:** color metaphor, intergenerational trauma, death of parent, loss of love, Irish-American, storytelling and healing, self sacrifice and healing
Colours

Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Translated by George Reavey

When your face came rising
above my crumpled life,
the only thing I understood at first
was how meager were all my possessions.
But your face cast a peculiar glow
on forests, seas, and rivers,
initiating into the colors of the world
uninitiated me.
I'm so afraid, I'm so afraid,
the unexpected dawn might end,
ending the discoveries, tears, and raptures,
but I refuse to fight this fear.
This fear-I understand-
is love itself. I cherish this fear,
not knowing how to cherish,
I, careless guardian of my love.
This fear has ringed me tightly.
These moments are so brief, I know,
and, for me, the colors will disappear
when once your face has set...

In this third of Alice McDermott's novels, *At Weddings and Wakes* (1992), the all-knowing narrator reveals the deep family history of one rather ordinary but insulated Irish-American family's story across three generations, from the grandparents' (Annie and Jack Towne's) arrival to Brooklyn, New York as immigrants from Ireland,¹ who then married in

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¹ It is interesting to note that Jack Towne, as a young man, left Kildare, Ireland, prior to World War I. Kildare was one of the communities in which the United Kingdom of Great Britain set up military barracks. He arrives in New York a few years before the Easter Rising of 1916. From 1919-1921, the Irish War for Independence from British rule occurred. Cork had been one of the strongholds of the Republican resistance to British rule during the War for Independence, “the capital of insurrection” as the *Irish Times* called it. The center of Cork city was burnt out by British forces in December 1920. Annie journeyed from Cork via Mallow, and her sister, Mary, too, arrived in Brooklyn seven years later at the height of activity in her homeland by the Irish Republican Army. Cork was perceived as the stronghold of guerilla warriors, yet the narrator remains silent about the mother country that they left behind. Jack,
1913-1914 after their "shipboard romance" (AW&W, 101) to Annie's having given birth to their four daughters in seven years (Agnes, Lucy, May, and Veronica). Annie though dies after giving birth to her last child, Veronica, but her sister Mary, who had arrived from Cork, Ireland two weeks before the birth of Annie's last child, then serves without question as her four nieces' surrogate mother. Such a relationship in many Irish families is recognized. Within a year, Mary marries her brother-in-law Jack, and as step mother and aunt becomes "Momma" to Annie and Jack's four daughters. Before the birth of her and Jack's only child, Johnny, Jack dies suddenly after one year of marriage to Mary; he dies at the hallway entrance to this same fourth-floor apartment in Brooklyn², the site of traumatic family losses for the Townes'. Jack's sudden death leaves the rather recent immigrant Aunt Mary, "Momma," alone in her new country to raise all five children through the troubling economic times of the 1920s. All the reader knows about Jack's illness related to Momma's recollected fear that Jack before he died may not have heard her say, "All's forgiven, Jack" (AW&W, 103). Though not expressed directly, Jack seems to have drowned his fears in alcohol, whereas, Momma Towne, compared to other Irish-American literary mothers, as explained by Maureen Dezell, "is a far more astute portrayal of the martyred, manipulative Irish mother" (104) who manages to secure her emotional stronghold upon her daughters.

"I, careless guardian of my love.  
This fear has ringed me tightly." (Yevtushenko, "Colours")

Fear that Jack may not have heard her caring words despite their relationship, one built upon Mary's opposition to all of Jack's opinions, and her fear that he may have died without hearing her absolution for whatever transgression that might have occurred seem to haunt Momma's soul, and charge her own sense of guilt and personal pain.

Alice McDermott's 13 unnumbered chapters in this narrative are structured episodically rather than chronologically. This stylistic choice requires the reader to think about

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Annie, and Mary fled from their home country to escape the horrors of war and poverty; theirs was a dream for upward mobility, freedom, and happiness in America.

² Communities in Brooklyn, New York at this time where Irish immigrants tended to settle include Bay Ridge, Sunset Park, Windsor Terrace, and Park Slope.
the major crisis in the plot, and to understand how incidents that each character experiences loop back to that critical incident, and how it relates to other losses in the characters' lives. Throughout McDermott alludes to significant details and moments that all circle back to the hopes and disappointments realized by each family member as they negotiate the hand that they have been dealt by fate.

In the first chapter the narrator maps out the only married daughter's odyssey with her three children from her home in Long Island to her family homestead, Momma's lifelong apartment in Brooklyn, having taken two buses and two trains with a final walk of ten blocks to the destination. Along this passage, of sorts, the reader is introduced to the sights, sounds, and sensory appeal across communities with different class structures—working upper middle class, lower working class, impoverished and even, disenfranchised— and across decades with norms for anticipated decorum and style. It also becomes evident that stylistically color pervades the narrative, so the reader is compelled to consider the whiteness of certain architectural designs, skin colors, clothing, details on storefronts and in churches that in contrast to other colors- black, pink, red, gray, yellow, and blue- reveals values and beliefs, perhaps even memories of these Irish-American characters from the early part of the 20th century to the early 1980s. Theirs is a world into which color symbolizes the real experience of the places through which characters journeyed, in which they lived, and to which they engaged in customs and Catholic ritual; the people to whom they related, and to "others" in this society; and most importantly, the emotional states that each of the main characters experienced- their unstated depression, unrecognized trauma, and in several instances, their hopefulness and attempts to overcome mournfulness by celebrating life. Maureen Dezell elaborates on this lifestyle that was a "family enterprise [with] women taking the lead: "...they were the ones who fussed over the windows, stretched the family budget to pay for white gloves and starched white shirts, and made sure everyone made it to Mass in clean, well-pressed outfits on Sunday (103). Indeed McDermott captures this emphasis on whiteness and prim and pure appearances even during long commutes on mass transit for ordinary as well as special-occasion family visits.

While McDermott avoids describing the terrors of the grandparents' Mother Country from which they fled, and she omits much of Momma's story of survival through the Great Depression, somehow the reader patches together how the women children and her cruel
stepfather's nieces, the Miss McGowans, connect to Momma despite her bitter tongue and acerbic ways, and they rally somehow to survive. The Miss McGowans had been "angels of mercy for Momma in the months that followed her sister's death," but they "pulled in their white lips" (AW&W, 272) when they indicated how they disapproved of Momma's marriage to Jack and her pregnancy. Because of the pregnancy, they stopped talking to Momma until Jack's wake, when as the narrator tells the reader, the two cousins gossiped, "'It's a judgment, no doubt'" (AW&W, 272). After May's wedding, Momma refers to them as "a shanty Irish thorn in her side" (AW&W, 271). We learn that Agnes, the eldest daughter, has worked as an executive secretary, and Veronica, "unfortunate" as she has been with the circumstances of her birth and subsequent mother's death, and her facial scars, was "left some money" by a man for whom she once had worked (AW&W, 49) "but even this, somehow, had proved unfortunate" (49). With the mention of Veronica's name, the listener is described as showing a "knowing sigh" (49). The nature of Veronica's work in the office is secretarial, but descriptions of her behavior indicate her self medication to her overly-depressed state. Momma holds fast to her little apartment, her own homestead, perhaps through money the girls contribute over the years. Two of Momma's stepfather's nieces, the unmarried nieces, the Miss McGowans seem to intervene, but their role is muted in the narrative except for their presence again at May and Fred's wedding, and a cutting comment about them by the deceased Annie in her misplaced diary that her eldest child, Agnes, when she was seven or eight, we are told, has found, read, and hidden within a makeshift wall in Momma's homestead.

Annie's words hold a hidden presence in their daily lives, but only Agnes, and the all-knowing narrator, and we, the readers, know Annie's deeply-repressed and unspoken thoughts. In one entry she comments, "Dad's nieces were here again today. They mean well, I suppose, but aren't they a pair of moles? Tweedledum and Tweedledee" (AW&W, 241). Annie adds how Jack's nieces fear Annie's going out into the snow, but in reality they really fear that the neighbors might see how very pregnant Annie is in such a short time after May's birth. The Miss McGowans seem overly-concerned about propriety and the dignity of the family within the community. They might even be concerned about Annie's physical well being. Annie in another diary entry reveals a bit about her and Mary's own mother's tragic experiences in Cork—the loss of three children- Monica, James, and Tommy. Annie
confesses that she cannot hold the grief of her own mother's pain, of her mother's life filled with deep sorrow simultaneous to her own joy at the impending birth of yet another of her own children. She acknowledges her own perceived selfishness in her conflicted emotion, and without saying it to be heard, she writes, "If it's a sin, I'm sorry for it" (*AW&W*, 240). Annie refuses to look back to her past in Ireland. She denies the emotional ties between her and her own mother, and feels guilt for her sin of selfish desire to be happy. When Annie dies suddenly after birth of Veronica, Mary, Annie's sister, known to the children as "Momma," moves into the role of nurturer. Monica McGoldrick explains how in Irish families, "women generally raise their daughters to follow in their footsteps- to take responsibility. In fact, they tend to raise their daughters more like sisters..." (*Women in Families*, 173). Momma aligns well with this expectation to assume responsibility in the family; she unquestioningly saves each of her four nieces—Agnes, Lucy, May, and Veronica from life in any of the Brooklyn orphan asylums of that time; Momma seems for the girls and for Jack to equate to Mother Courage, Mother Machree, Mother Earth, and perhaps a "white Madonna." Through her act of selflessness, she also finds her means to survive.

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3 Mother Courage, the main character in Bertold Brecht’s drama, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939) tells the story of a woman conflicted by material pursuits and survival during war.
4 Mother Machree translates from Irish Gaelic as “Mother dearest.” It was a song in 1910, and then in 1928, a silent film, directed by John Ford, based on the 1924 work *The Story of Mother Machree* by Rida Johnson Young about a poor Irish immigrant in America. ("Mother Machree." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Machree](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Machree))
5 Mother Earth, Gaia, or Danu represents the life force of women.
6 The “White Madonna” is referenced in this narrative. Portovenere’s “White Madonna” torchlight procession is explained:
   As the story goes, during the French occupation in 1399, Portovenere was being devastated by a plague. Lucciardo, a local devout man, was praying in front of an image of the Virgin Mary asking for his village to be freed from the terrible disease when, suddenly, the colors of the painting lit up, gleaming. The plague disappeared after this miraculous event. ([https://discoverportovenere.com/portovenere-white-madonna-procession/](https://discoverportovenere.com/portovenere-white-madonna-procession/))
Throughout this narrative, the reader witnesses Mary "Momma" as mythic maiden, nurturer, and finally, as old crone, as what the narrator describes: "white and broad as a god" ({AW&W}, 26). The nieces' unspoken gratitude to Momma for her personal sacrifice seems repaid each summer with biweekly visits by Lucy with her own three children- Margaret, Bobby, and Maryanne- to maintain this close family tie, and to respect Momma, whom, we are told, lives to age 90. The three unmarried aunts who live in this small two-bedroom apartment also convene during these family ritualistic visits that typically end with a formal meat and potato dinner prepared by Momma, a dinner that the narrator shows as a disincentive to gather: "The food itself was a discouragement" ({AW&W}, 45). This is a tradition though to which the women cling, yet the children seem tormented by it with their endless waiting for each oppressive visit to end: "The end of this long dull day" (39); "the day's long wait nearly over" (54) with their father finally arriving to drive them away from this mournful environment to their home in suburban Long Island, far from their mother Lucy's endless rant to her sisters and to Momma that "he [Bob] was not the man she'd married" (61), and far from the alcoholism and depression evidenced by Veronica and hearsay about Johnny, their uncle "with [his] dark hair and dark eyes and white, white skin" ({AW&W}, 154) who "by seventeen ... was an incorrigible drunk" with "arrested charm" (157), Momma's "comfort in sorrow, her gift from the dead..." (159), who she feels compelled to dismiss from her home when he was twenty. This is a family bound to one another to maintain their familial connection despite each visit's prolonged silences, predictable outbursts, and glum revelations. The Irish proverb seems to apply here--"However long the day, the evening will come."7

Even after Aunt May dies, Lucy diligently visits Momma and her sisters, Agnes and Veronica, every day. She resists any change whatsoever to the ritual, and increases her presence in Momma's space. At the beginning of the novel, we learn how Lucy's return home

7 *Irish Proverbs and what they Mean* by Claddagh Design accessed on Jun 20, 2019 @ 7:40 pm in Ireland.
to Momma's apartment serves as a kind of spiritual pilgrimage, for she "hated being exiled from the place she had grown up in" (AW&W, 26). She and May chose to break from the kinship group to join another- Lucy married Bob Dailey and relocated to Long Island as part of the American dream to provide more enriching environments with a greener landscape for one's children. May committed to the life of a nun, apart from her family and its roots, now married to religious life with vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. While she served for a while as a teaching sister, and then as a nurse, we learn that she became ill, and was required to convalesce at a sanitarium near the shore of Long Island. Soon after, May leaves her order of fifteen years, and returns to Momma's homestead. Major segments of the novel portray May's joyful "furtive" interactions with the children, and seven years after her return to family life, her love relationship with Fred, the mailman. After their wedding ceremony with a high mass and formal reception, May's sudden death becomes the emotional center of the novel, or as Beatrice Jacobson explains, "[the] one core event or situation serving as the narrative center"(123) through which themes of love and loss, sacrifice for others, the role of memory in making sense of the mournful past, and the importance of storytelling for understanding each character's intent and for restoring faith, hope and most centrally, love:

    Like a stone dropped in water, that center generates a field of stories and reflections, both past and present, which ripple through the pages, complicating and deepening the impact of the central event. (Jacobson 123)

This family connection despite the dysfunction of the characters' lives and the struggles they have to communicate glues them to an unquestioned lifelong commitment. Momma's two other daughters, especially the elder, Agnes, remain home to care for her through the decades. It was assumed that "at least one unmarried daughter would stay at home and care for aging parents. Until her parents died, [this daughter's] wants and needs were of secondary concern-at most" (Dezell 109). Momma holds the undying commitment of at least two unmarried daughters- Agnes and Veronica, but Lucy and May also respond to their matriarch's every needs. Momma also relates to Lucy's children by telling them her dismal memory of her prior years in the countryside of Ireland:

    'noone has to tell me about the country,' she said. 'I was born out in the country- did they know that? And they nodded, yes, yes, it was part of everything they knew. A
'Farm,' she said, and now her hands were raised to shield her from the memory. 'An awful place,' she said, but smiling, nearly laughing, as if at the foolishness of anyone who would think otherwise. 'Just awful. Dirt and mud and dumb animals (sheep the worst of them, nothing at all in their eyes, nights black as pitch, and illness and accident as common as the cold rain.' She was five years old when her widowed mother packed them all up, her and her sister Annie—the only two left of her five children who were still left—and moved to the city, where she married a terrible man for lack, it seemed, of anything better to do. It was because of him that Annie left for New York as soon as their mother died. Even years later she [Mary, Momma] herself had followed…. (AW&W, 215-216)

Unlike her own mother, Momma chooses to craft a life independent of another husband after Jack’s death. She seems to have relied upon her oldest daughter, Agnes, and even Veronica, to provide for her, and to support her existence. The children though, as the narrator explains, process such narratives about loss of one’s mother with a hidden fear "... of having been swept forever into that current of loss after loss that was adulthood" (219). What they remember of these family gatherings was "familiar and enchanting," but they would connect such memories "with the same nostalgia and bitterness with which they recalled the Latin Mass" as no longer relevant to Catholic rituals after changes initiated by the Second Ecumenical Council in the 1960s (AW&W, 39). This allusion reflects the children’s having participated in family traditions and Catholic rituals. Just as Bobby served as an altar boy and each participated in Catholic rituals and services in Latin, soon to be perceived as the dead language, any connection to their family’s history in Irish and American society, and their salvation from discrimination and suffering seem remote to their consciousness, perhaps even dead.

"I’m so afraid, I’m so afraid, / the unexpected dawn might end" (Yevtushenko, "Colours")

The narrator reveals significant details about the nature of each major character—Agnes, Veronica, the voice of the deceased Annie in her diary, several marriage
relationships—that of Lucy and Bob Dailey, the four-day marriage of May and Fred Castle (the mailman), and the minimally-described marriage of Momma's son, Johnny, to Arlene Towne. We learn, however, that Johnny is an alcoholic, just as his father was, and perhaps his grandfathers and step-grandfather. The narrator identifies significant stories for each character through which we learn much about their emotional responses to love and to loss:

(1) Bobby and Fred both World War II veterans with Bobby having experienced during the war a traumatic near miss with a German bomber;
(2) Bob and Lucy's two-week summer vacations to a different cottage in "green" Amagansett in East Hampton each summer;
(3) the aspirations of young Bobby and Margaret during Lent at the pristine "white" bakery;
(4) young Bobby's response to another boy's story about an apparition perceived through his aunt's stained-glass window;
(5) young Margaret's storytelling to Sr. Miriam Joseph about her deceased Aunt May, a former sister, who had died four days after her marriage to Fred;
(6) Aunt May's decision to leave her vocation as a nun, to escape from pristine "whiteness" of convent life and the sanitarium to which she was sent, and her short-lived experience with true love;
(7) Maryann's attempt to be kind to her teacher, Miss Joan, by giving her a bouquet of castaway but lovely gladioli from the cemetery’s garbage heap - a gift that sadly turns awry;
(8) Agnes's having read her biological mother Annie's diary that the child then hides in the wall that Momma demanded to be constructed to separate the children's sleeping area from that for her and Jack;
(9) Veronica's never having met her biological mother, her having realized that her birth caused her mother's death, and her tragic accident when Momma neglects to question the medical staff about their having exceeded specific time constraints with the sunlamp treatment for Veronica's pock-marked face;
(10) May and Fred's wedding ritual at a high mass and their formal reception all arranged by Agnes, the seeming breadwinner for the family;
(11) the annual token one-hour visit by Momma's biological son, Johnny, from the more suburban New York City borough of Staten Island to visit her and his half-siblings in Brooklyn, the family homestead, on Christmas Eve with his usual perfunctory box of chocolates; (12) Aunt May's attempts to delight the children- Margaret, Bobby and Maryanne with little treats and much-needed attention; and finally, (13) Uncle Johnny's seeming step-daughter Rosemary's cutting, but candid comment to her first cousins while at Aunt May's wedding to Fred about the nature of such Irish-American extended families as theirs: "Aren't you glad,' she said regally, 'that you only have to see your relatives at weddings and wakes?" (AW&W, 290).

She seems to be repeating her parents' derisive assumption about family ties to assuage their children's fears of having to connect to any "lace curtain Irish" relatives, or to any uncomfortable realities about their origins or their father's peculiar relationship with his mother.

The reality in this cruel comment by a young adult who seems to be related to the Townes as Johnny's children or stepchildren shows a need to dismiss or deny familial connection, and to erase any memory whatsoever of the Irish-American immigrant experience, or of family conflicts. For them, as for many descendants of Irish-American immigrants, any pain and suffering experienced by relatives past and present is erased. This idiomatic expression glibly connotes an easy tolerance for disassociation cloaked in a snickering wry wit. Such erasure of memory assumes a notion of American success that privileges individualism and assimilation into the American experience while suppressing or denying any shame, past or present, or any struggles with their family's social acceptance, or family conflict. In this narrative, Rosemary and Patrick, Johnny's own family members, are described indirectly as outsiders to the Townes. It is in select details that the reader can surmise why.

**Environments and Characters' Psychological States**

Color and references to light and dark pervade this narrative. The omniscient narrator excludes direct comments about the characters' psychological states or about cultural...
background—the societal disruptions in Ireland through early decades of the 20th century, ensuing discrimination against Irish-Catholic immigrants in the United States during those early decades of the 20th century, and before; even during the 1950s-1970s, social movements for social justice, racial equality, and gender equality are excluded from this narrative. Jack when he was alive had scolded Annie for her disinterest in the true plight of Ireland at the time of her emigration to her new homeland. In a letter to Mary (Momma), Annie describes how she told Jack that she left Ireland to escape the alcoholism and cruelty of her stepfather, but Jack responded: "Just like a woman. The whole country going to rock and ruin and all she sees is the drunk in the parlor" (AW&W, 204). Jack intimates larger political issues related to oppression that forced their displacement from their homeland. With Momma, he argues about politics in the United States, and she typically opposes his views even if she little understands the issue. Momma struggles to have a voice in this society, even if that voice is less informed. Through these arguments with Jack about societal issues, Momma remains stalwart, a "contrary Mary," as Jack calls her, though uninformed. The narrator describes her strategies to engage Jack in dialogue with her while she holds "a black stocking in one hand and a black darning ball in the other," (AW&W, 206), and she persists in opposing all that Jack believes. Through such oppositional interactions, Jack realizes how they had talked themselves out of their despair. Through their shared dialogue, Momma's and Jack's voices are at least heard, and the darkness of their environment is lightened:

He had discovered in life so easily shifted, battered, turned about, this overwhelming need to be, in impersonal argument if nothing else, immovable.

(208)

Sinead Moynihan identifies how color in this novel reveals the "anxieties" at that time of the Irish-American white identity "in an increasingly multicultural environment" (Moynihan 40-41). Through McDermott's stylistics of heavily-repeated references to "hue white, white skin color, and the association of whiteness and Catholicism, [she] forces readers to confront and critique the privileges of white Irish-American identities" (Moynihan 40-41). Color in this narrative, while capturing images and impressions of the children as they traverse community boundaries and neighborhoods on their bi-weekly jaunts to Brooklyn, focuses primarily on
color within the context of Momma’s home, the clothes characters wear, the pallor of characters' faces, the walls and statues in subways stations, in Churches, on the streets of south Brooklyn, the impressions at the cottage in East Hampton, and in other contexts for several stories related to the children. It is as if Momma's parlor is the center of the universe, and all that really matters. Whiteness may not be a site of "privilege" as Moynihan contends, as the Towne matriarch and two of her four daughters remain in her urban landscape despite white flight to greener landscapes by other younger families. There does seem to be a mournfulness among this family that persists inter-generationally. This paralysis, or an inability to get beyond deep sorrow encapsulates the emotional state, overall, of the women in this family. It is as if such deep sorrow that the characters experience relates to some unhealthy coping mechanisms that the characters turn to as a way to remember to forget their past.

Select details with color encoded in each segment of the novel represent the varied psychological states of the characters. Slight references to history are made through images that the children find in popular magazines, playbills, and songs on the record player that Aunt Agnes leaves in the parlor, but these serve to provide just a bit of historical context around the major thrust of this story- what another narrative voice from yet another novel by McDermott asserts as a tragic romantic view that there is "the inevitable, insufferable loss buried like a dark jewel at the heart of every act of love" (McDermott, Child of My Heart 134).

As characters move through different environments or experiences, color is emphasized. Even the color of clothes is described in such a way that the reader associates color with a sense of a character's innocence, naiveté, hopefulness, depression, hopelessness, beauty, or degradation of an environment; in some cases, as with Bob's attempts to add "greenness" to his children's life, and Aunt May's grasping at joy and being open to love, this family's inter-generational tale attempts to counter the master narrative of tragedy. Patricia Mary Carden also identifies how "[the children's] stories enjoin a master narrative of tragedy which subverts the happily-ever-after expectations of romance and of the progress-oriented immigrant story" (11). Color as a motif is used to reflect environmental reality of the times, and to serve metaphorically as a lens into a character's mental health and interior space.
Identity of Momma's Children

Agnes

Agnes, the oldest child, seems more like Momma's sister. She shares responsibility for decision making in this household. Agnes remains culturally aware and professionally alive through her experiences at theatrical venues, films, and other cultural events; her work as an executive secretary at one of the tall buildings in Manhattan suggests her more cosmopolitan experiences. Agnes leaves her magazines and other cultural artifacts in the parlor where the children often try to entertain themselves while waiting for the day to end. One of the songs that Agnes plays on the recorder is "All the Things You Are" written by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II for a 1939 musical, Very Warm for May with the following lyrics:

Time and again I've longed for adventure
Something to make my heart beat faster
What did I long for I never really knew
Finding your love I've found my adventure
Touching your hand, my heart beats the faster
All that I want in all of this world is you
(Chorus)
You are the promised kiss of springtime
That makes the lonely winter seem long
You are the breathless hush of evening
That trembles on the brink of a lovely song
You are the angel glow that lights a star
The dearest things I know are what you are
Some day my happy arms will hold you
And some day I'll know that moment divine
When all the things you are, are mine ("All the Things You Are"
https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/5013355/tony+Martin )

Very Warm for May, the title of the play for which the song was written includes in its title the name of May, the focus of the novel's emotional center—the love she found and the loss other characters experience when she dies suddenly. In her relationship with Fred, she "found [her] adventure." These lyrics also animate Agnes's aspirations, but any romantic desires for her remain unrealized. "The dearest things I know are what you are" in the context
of this story relates to Momma's hold on the girls, and perhaps, Agnes's needed link to her role as nurturer. She, the oldest child, witnessed the death of her mother after Veronica's birth, and within a year, the death of her father, Jack. She must have been traumatized by Momma's having given birth to Johnny within one year after her biological mother had died after having given birth to Veronica. Momma is Agnes's closest link to both her mother and to her father, and to her Irish heritage; it is Agnes who from an early age reads and rereads her mother's words, and ultimately, conceals her mother's diary in "the skeleton of the new wall" (AW&W, 244) that Momma had insisted that Jack build to separate their sleeping area from that of the children. Her mother had written, "Agnes will be the brilliant one" (241) which acts for Agnes as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Marriage of her own would only occur, if ever, after Momma's death, as is the fate of many oldest Irish daughters, as explained by Maureen Dezell (109).

In her role as major provider, Agnes, as the narrator explains, attempts to bring a cosmopolitan sense into the home environment with the "black lacquer surface" of the cocktail cart to which she fills tall stem glasses with special drinks during "the cocktail hour" of each of these family visits (AW&W, 44). For these visits, she is described as wearing a "black shirt" with "black slippers," or she is garbed in "black silk pajamas or a green velvet dress... or once, a quilted satin skirt that touched the floor... above that barren loveless [place]" (141). When she welcomes the mailman Fred into their apartment for one Christmas family gathering, the narrator describes her as she moves toward the cocktail cart: "her long, elegant hands are whiter still by the thick black silk of her sleeves" (143). A bit of drama characterizes this aunt, who escapes into her world of concerts, music, theatre matinees, and art as an antidote to Momma's day-to-day life in her enclosed world. Patricia Coughlan explains how "nothing can free the still-confined aunts from the grip of their familial-ethnic past of deracination and hardship (135). Agnes, however, is the only person who has read her mother's diary; it appears that she understands her mother's expected role for her as the oldest daughter, who must serve as the most responsible for maintaining family ties. Agnes, too, is the child that her mother Annie in her diary had identified as the person who already shows that "she knows how she wants things to be done and she's got more control over the other two than I have (AW&W, 241). Agnes, indeed, orchestrates much of May's wedding—securing the finer church, and planning the reception venue. She oversees every detail of
May's wedding, and the children respond to her directions without resistance. From the cocktail cart, she orders Manhattans for each of the adults without concerns for their desires.

Veronica

Veronica, on the other hand, is the child who knows that her mother died as a complication of her birth. She, like Agnes and May, experiences the trauma of losing both parents, but Veronica has an additional emotional pain, perhaps a sense of guilt, as her birth celebration coincides with the death of their mother—both a joy and a sorrow. The psychological needs of children were not recognized at this time, especially for those struggling to survive from day to day. Veronica's pale skin also is described. As an antidote to her facial pock marks, she had received a treatment that should have lasted just five minutes under an ultraviolet lamp, but somehow the attendants at the Red Cross clinic forgot about the fifteen year old. As an effect of this medical neglect, Veronica's face then suffered burns, leaving scars "red and purple" and blotches (AW&W, 129). The narrator explains how at the same professional building where Veronica's other sisters worked, she was interviewed. At that time, she is described as "having lovely thick hair and a face scarred red and purple" (129). We are told that she is bullied by strangers when she commutes, and is taunted for her facial disfigurement. After Agnes introduces her to a man at the office who needed secretarial help, she works there for five years, becoming friends with others who would drink frequently after work. Veronica wore a veil from her hat to cover her face, and in the dark light of nightclubs, and with the comfort of alcohol, she spoke to others, and escaped into the illusion of social acceptance. Momma in total misunderstanding of Veronica's constant derision by strangers and any other emotional pain that she could have been experiencing tells her the story of her biological mother's death, and admonishes her, but to no avail:

'Who would have believed that a time would come when I'd say it was just as well, just as well that Annie died young and missed seeing this, her own last child, the girl she'd named, throwing away the very life she'd given her.' (132-133)
Momma's rebuke probably did more harm than good, as Veronica seems to have been deeply wounded on multiple levels, and without proper counseling and ongoing therapy, her depression would only worsen. The children remember Aunt Veronica as living in her dark bedroom, wearing a black velvet band on her hair, and a dark robe and slippers (35). On her face she had "white scars the size of thumbnails" (35). Inevitably after cocktail hour during these bi-weekly visits to Momma's apartment, a sudden anger would erupt among the four sisters, an anger that the children perceived as "the routine" (45). The children describe the sudden outbursts and Veronica's typical retreat from the parlor. One such retreat occurred after she had suggested to the children that it would be interesting for them to find their grandmother's lost diary. In a way, then, they could get to know her better through their true grandmother's words. After this suggestion, Veronica retreats to her bedroom to change her clothes with the children waiting for her return. For them, time is drawn out, and all of eternity seemed focused on that here and now of waiting:

… a sudden eternity stretched between the moment when the room was black and the one when the light under her [Veronica's] door would be shining, and that into that slow time (slower even than the hours they had spent in the apartment today) all their past and all their long future would drain- as if this single moment of mild expectation was both the last and the only moment of their lives. (AW&W, 107)

Agnes, the only child who has read that diary, surmises what Veronica has challenged the children to find— one source of genealogical research to connect with their grandmother, Annie Towne, through her diary entries. Veronica seems to understand that they, perhaps, will have children of their own unlike her, Agnes, and May, so their grandmother's diary will provide a direct link to knowing her (106), and ultimately, their own Irish ancestry, and their own ethnic identity. Veronica, too, perhaps longs for this connection. Sinead Moynihan identifies how this particular white Irish-American family is unable to sustain itself for future generations:

to reproduce itself and the already anti-genealogical relationships that have developed within. Not surprisingly, the Towne maiden aunts- by failing to live
up to their potential for motherhood — bear a disproportionate responsibility for the family's failure to reproduce. (48)

Agnes, to protect her siblings, and even to respect her mother from her admitted guilt and pain, has concealed the diary. The reader remains uncertain when or if she may share their mother's words with the surviving siblings, Lucy and Veronica, or even with the children, Margaret, Bobby, and Maryanne, to protect them from any sense of shame about their family's history and its origins in unhappiness, and desperate attempts to survive. That diary, as explained by Claire Crabtree-Sinnett, allows for the memory of Annie and Jack's struggle to permeate the space of Momma's apartment:

The long ago deaths of Annie and John echo in the walls of the apartment, where Annie's journal is hidden, as if to underscore the interpenetration of the tragic past with the paralyzed present. (38)

It is Agnes who understands Annie's interior struggle, and it is Agnes who strives to introduce her family to some stability, propriety, and a more cosmopolitan perspective.

The children — Margaret, Bobby, and Maryann— over time consider Aunt Veronica's behavior as strange: "all of Aunt Veronica's movements struck [them] as furtive and unpredictable" (AW&W, 124). They consider some possible explanations for her erratic behavior with "too many women in one small place ... too much repression, too much pity, too much bad luck. And then finally, convinced they'd hit the mark at last, too much drink" (124). We learn in this narrative that Veronica is alcoholic, but this addiction, we the readers understand, is fueled by her undiagnosed and untreated major depressive disorder that the medical community at that time little understood. Veronica seems to have experienced a sense of worthlessness, and she has lost her self esteem, especially after her face had become scarred; in her daily movements in the public sphere, she becomes marked as "other," one to be scorned and one to be pitied. She experiences fatigue, and as the narrator

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describes her, she gets quite agitated during such family visits when, as part of the expected routine, the aunts argue, and Veronica abruptly retreats from the group to her bedroom. Veronica seems frozen in stasis, as we the readers recognize that she has not received the kind of emotional and psychological support that she needs. She turns to alcohol to drown her pain that remains invisible to the children, just as her male ancestors and her brother, Johnny, drown themselves in alcohol, too.

**May**

But your face cast a peculiar glow
on forests, seas, and rivers,
initiating into the colors of the world
uninitiated me. (Yevtushenko, “Colours”)

In this novel, the narrator quite emphatically identifies May as determined to break from the cycle of depression and hopelessness, and for the most part, through her choices, she succeeds:

… the one of their mother's sisters most determined to be happy, and although she treated joy as a kind of contraband, sneaking them [the children] glasses of Coke, bags of pistachios, folded dollar bills, …[and] she was for the most part successful. (AW&W, 21)

May though does not escape difficult times. Even though she professed as a nun, having followed a vocation and having served for years as a teaching sister, she seems to have become restless, and then trained in another helping profession as a nurse. Still restless, she is described as having changed radically in the nature of her relationship to God, and in her desire to forsake heaven, so she could live forever: "... she knew she no longer desired heaven, the sight of her dead parents or the face of the living God [which] held no appeal" (AW&W, 197). May also "fasted and went without sleep and took on the household's humblest tasks and still she guarded her daily life" (197). To help May heal, she is sent to Mercy, the convent on Long Island "as a rest cure" (197). While in this location, May is described as
having developed additional physical complications with ulcers, and a nervous rash; she was determined to be dangerously thin (197). The narrator neglects to identify what these psychological and physical symptoms seem to portray. The DSM-V identifies characteristics of persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia) that several of May's altered physical and psychological symptoms suggest though the narrator remains muted about her psychological well-being. While an exact cause of this chronic form of depression is unknown, Katie Hurley explains how a person may be at increased risk of dysthymia if one or more of the following five factors is evident: chemical imbalances in the brain; a genetic history of a "first degree relative with depressive disorder"; environmental factors or certain life incidents, such as death of a parent, other traumatic events, financial concerns, or higher than normal levels of stress; negative personality traits that suggest low self esteem, dependence upon others, pessimistic views; self criticism; and finally, a medical history of other mental disorders ("Causes of Dysthymia").

In May's case, the narrator neglects to disclose any precipitating factors in her professional roles as a sister, yet the reader knows that she becomes restless, wanting to shift professional focus from teaching to nursing, and she loses faith about notions of salvation. However, the reader knows the circumstances of her family life with at least two siblings suffering from forms of depression, for which they have received no rest cure. They self medicate by overindulging in alcohol. The reader also knows that after May finds love in her relationship with Fred, the mailman, and she marries him, four days later, she dies suddenly. This unanticipated death perhaps may indicate some serious, underlying health issue that like her father Jack's health condition, and even her biological mother's, precipitates a sudden stroke or heart attack. The thought that she may have commit suicide hides in the silences about her sudden death. Even if her death is not caused by suicide, perhaps an underlying health condition precipitated May's former episodes with persistent depression.

Before May leaves her vocation as a nun, a very serious departure from a lifelong commitment, she had recognized the healing powers of nature at the Mercy convent on one of the shores in Long Island:
... that at the very hour of her death this place would be the single thing she'd most long for: an endless garden and the smell of the sea and a trellised wall thick with red roses. (AW&W, 198)

May's desire for a "trellised wall" rather than a white picket fence at the hour of her death suggests her own insulated view at that time of peacefulness: beauty infused only by the scent of nature. Family members are excluded from this vision of her passage into eternity. This vision she holds before her return home, however, and her subsequent brief courtship with, and marriage to Fred. It is she who had pursued this romantic relationship with him. It is she who had infused joy into each of the children's bi-weekly visits to Momma's apartment with at least one-half hour of distraction and delight during those six years after having left the convent. It is May who, we are told, "wants one of those white garden swings like they had at Mercy" (214), and it is May who shares her dream of a house with Fred surrounded by such natural beauty. May recognizes beauty and joy in relationships, and dreams along with Fred of moving to their own home in Long Island despite the stressful commute by car back and forth to Brooklyn. Through her dreams, her ability to laugh, and to connect to Lucy's children, the narrator reveals May's healthy choices, and her success at counteracting at least several precipitating factors for her depression.

Her wedding is described as the traditional, formal high mass and reception at a restaurant's hall somewhere in Brooklyn. She and Fred seemed destined to share their lives and to be happy. Claire Crabtree-Sinnett explains how May singly among her family members "abandons her paralyzed innocence when she reaches beyond the family heritage of mourning to a marriage with Fred. [But] her desire is cruelly thwarted, as if in punishment for seeking happiness, and perhaps for having intercourse..." (40). Momma with her superstitious beliefs "As May's wedding approaches, in an explosion of distrust of Fred and anger at May's naïve happiness, ... unconsciously foretells May's death" (AW&W, 39). She tells the children how May's envisioned ideal home with a garden by the sea "sounds like a cemetery to me" (145). Crabtree-Sinnett also reminds the reader how Momma had heard the uncanny cry of the banshee before her sister Annie's death, yet she realized how no one would possibly believe her understanding of environmental shifts, such as "the light grow flat," "the air become hollow," and an "unmistakable cry" (AW&W, 85) that in her mother country
easily would have been recognized as the cry of the banshee, a cry foreboding her sister Annie's imminent death.

In several references in the narrative, however, the narrator circles back to the critical incident in the plot— one character, Aunt May, in this ill-fated family, who epitomizes radical life changes to create a world infused by happiness— dies suddenly only four days after her crossing the threshold of marriage. Like her father, Jack, she, while in her thirties, dies suddenly, perhaps having experienced a stroke or heart attack, or even perhaps suicide. Lucy and Bob learn of her death during their annual respite from responsibilities to family, during their annual two-week vacation, what Bob Dailey perceives as "an antidote of green" (AW&W, 65) at the rented cottage in Amagansett in East Hampton, Long Island: "The laughter and the whispered threats and exhortation settled down. The cottage was silent until Mrs. Smiley made her first timid tap at the glass in the front door" (307). These last lines of the novel are suggested in earlier chapters when it is explained how typically Momma would call the owner of the cottages to contact Bob and Lucy for any number of problems that would occur. Dutiful Lucy then, as expected, would interrupt her time with her husband and children, and leave them to attend with Momma a neighbor’s funeral, or to address any of Momma’s or her sisters' needs, no matter what the urgency. However, with this particular phone call during the hours before dawn, something more serious warranted all of their return to "Momma's place at noon" (AW&W, 77). The reader now knows the severity of this loss: the aunt that the children had loved, the aunt who had provided hope for the future of the Townes' lineage, the aunt who seemed to have broken the fatalistic spell of misfortune and anti-romance, had died suddenly, and by so doing, had inadvertently reintroduced to all their fears of love and its inevitable, impending loss.

Lucy

May's love and her death echo the long ago deaths of Annie and Jack. To counter Momma's ensuing emotional needs, Lucy returns home every day to Momma's apartment in Brooklyn. The narrator explains how Margaret one day after having been laughed at by her fourth grade classmates, noticed out the school's bathroom window her own mother walking toward the bus stop to start her now daily trek—two buses, two trains, and a ten-block walk—
to Momma's apartment: "She saw instead her mother in her white car coat and gray skirt, a small white hat covering her ears... going to Momma's, as she did every day now to make up for May" \(AW&W, 237\). The deep pain and sorrow that the family experiences with May's passing warrants Lucy's even more intense connection to Momma, Agnes, and Veronica.

While Lucy understands the pain of loss, she misunderstands her husband Bob Dailey's change in behavior after he returned from World War II. In the 1950s, post traumatic stress syndrome was little understood. While "shell shock" had been understood as part of the psychological effects from World War I, little was recognized about the long-term effects of trauma on those who had experienced near death. The narrator explains that long after Lucy and Bob had separated, during one visit to a beach in Amagansett on Long Island with his two now-grown daughters with one now married, "a heavy gray military plane" flew over \(AW&W, 62\). Their father describes for them a recollection that they had not heard before—an incident that had occurred during World War II some forty years before. Now in the 1980s, perhaps when he is sixty, the daughters neglect to see in his response to the old plane flying over them that day on the beach the significance of his flashback to an incident of a German plane that was coming directly at him as he was carrying a can of gas "across the open road that bisected their camp" \(AW&W, 62\). His pondering about the German pilot's not having taken shot at him, and his questioning whether the reflection he saw in the cockpit's glass was that of the German pilot or of his own, show his own confusing memory of this close encounter with his near death. The daughters misunderstand his silence about this incident over the years, little understanding how the precipitating experience of the rare military plane's overwhelming sound had terrorized all of those present on the beach that day, and most significantly, had dug deeply into their father's memory of his past traumatic experience, triggering his re-experiencing this frightening incident, and finally, telling them his wartime story.

Quite possibly Bob's pent-up trauma and repressed fears had caused those changes that Lucy had complained about all those years, with her little understanding the lasting effects of trauma in war upon those who survive. Even in this peaceful retreat at the beach in Amagansett, a place where Bob believes peace can be restored, his tranquility is disrupted unexpectedly by the peculiar misplaced warplane that conjures up for him a terrorizing story.
that before this day had been suppressed. His sharing his story opens up his daughters to understanding at some later time in their lives their father's own hidden fears.

**The third generation of Townes: Second-Generation Irish Americans**

The Dailey children during visits to Momma's apartment in Brooklyn seem to be experiencing what Crabtree-Sinnett identifies as "an atmosphere of permanent mourning" (37). The children witness relentless intergenerational trauma with their family's past pains and sorrows resurfacing in the present; these patterns of love and loss seem resistant to change. The children, however, attempt to get beyond the ever-present mournfulness at Momma's homestead by engaging in storytelling, and for one child, by giving a gift to her teacher. The girls attempt to relate to others outside of the family, and the boy aspires to serve as a priest.

The highly-detailed landscapes through which they journey en route with their mother, Lucy, from their home in Long Island to the Towne family homestead in Brooklyn are portrayed in color with intense emphasis on black and white. From their house in Long Island with its "white, eight panel door that served as backdrop for every Easter, First Holy Communion, Confirmation, and graduation photo…," the images shift as they approach Momma's apartment, and they "turned the key of the black lock…" (AW&W, 1), or they observe other ornamental designs while en route, such as "sculptured to resemble a black vine curved into a question mark…" (1-2). The girls in their "white sandals" and the boys in "white shirts" and Lucy, herself "wore a cotton shirtwaist and short white gloves and heels…” (2). Details about the "white sign" for the bus stop where they awaited "the first glint of sun against the white crown and wide black windshield of the bus that would take them to the avenue" (3) reflect the reality of this bygone time that is frozen for them in memory. These strong images of the signposts along their ritualized journey, one which the children take twice each week, could very well be like the pebbles dropped by Hansel as indicators of paths to and from their home. After they leave this first bus, they notice immediately the "eternal white and pale blue pile" of laundry that a Chinese couple in their storefront are preparing (6), "two black men passed by" (7), "the white pole" on the bus (10), "the white tunnel light" (11), and the baby on the train in a "white eyelet dress" (12). On these train rides, they notice all kinds
of people who speak different languages, and they also notice many who live on the fringes of society, or those who are disabled (14-15). As they ascend from this subway to descend into yet another, they smell the "fine black (or so they imagined the color) pieces of grit that the subway's constant underground breeze had slipped between their lips..." (AW&W, 15). When they finally ascend the four staircases and enter into Momma's apartment that is designed like a railroad car, they notice color in this environment as well. From her parlor window, the children notice "an opaque lozenge of white skylight" (18), and other black buildings from which they see "a dazzling white line of sun-drenched sheets" (21), a sure sign of the class structure of those who live in this neighborhood. Momma is described as white faced with "soft white hair" (21). There's a photo of their mother from her wedding day with her "white scoop of neckline and an armload of long white flowers" (24). On the sidewalk outside the apartment, there are "painted squares for potsy [a children's street or sidewalk game similar to hopscotch] which were now burning white in the city sun" (24). On the drive home one of the girls imagines herself on "a black street" (53), and their father asks them to pay attention to how "... the leaves were blackened by the rain" during summer showers at their beach cottage in Amagansett. White for the children represents pure and pleasant experiences, age, innocence, and later in the narrative, rituals of the sacraments of Baptism, Holy Communion, Confirmation, and marriage, whereas black is associated with death, a pungent sense of smell, sorrow, a shadowy existence, and the unknown.

The little wedding favor from May and Fred's reception reflects joy and hope through its multiple colors—"They were lovely colors, bright pink and pale violet and sky blue, gathered in white net and tied with the thinnest white satin bow" (AW&W, 72). The girls bring their favors to the beach cottage right after the wedding. May and Fred's wedding for the children was a "glorious, miraculous, timeless day on the edge of the year's best journey..." (AW&W, 246). It was their first wedding. The ceremony itself in the church is filled with details of white, as would be expected for the Catholic ritual and western wedding traditions: "The altar cloth was pure white trimmed with gold and on it was the same arrangement of baby's

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9 A railroad apartment (or railroad flat) is described as an apartment with a series of rooms that connect to each other in a line. The name comes from the layout's similarity to that of a typical (mid-20th century or earlier) passenger train car.
Breath and white roses…” (249). The priest is described as "white robed," the aisle is draped in "the white carpet" (251), and there is a "pale white, life-sized Christ on the cross" (251). While the marriage ceremony is high formal with a complete mass and the exchange of vows, Aunt May chooses to wear "a slim off-white suit and a hat with a small veil" rather than the traditional white gown (247). The children while slightly disappointed by this detail get caught up in the joy of this occasion, and the flurry of "white rain," a bygone tradition whereby each guest throws a handful of rice at the bride and groom as they descend the steps from the church, and walk toward their getaway car, a limousine in this case; this gesture of throwing the rice symbolizes prosperity, fertility and good fortune for the newly-married couple.

A detail about one of the characters, Johnny's daughter, Rosemary, indicates that perhaps Johnny and Arlene's children are not white. Rosemary's "cupped black hand" during the Communion signals that Jack and Arlene's children, who seem outside of the Towne family experience at Momma's, even at Christmas, quite possibly could be adopted, or Arlene's children from another relationship. How the children are described suggests that they are Johnny's stepchildren, but this one detail in the narrative presents another possibility about racial difference. Rosemary and Patrick are as much related to the Townes's as are Momma's stepfather's maiden nieces, the McGowans. To Momma these relatives are dismissed from her narrow world where she is frozen in time, paralyzed by her own mournful past.

*Margaret*

Margaret somewhat envies her brother Bobby's privileged role as an altar boy. At that time in Church history, girls were excluded from this choice to serve in Catholic rituals. When Margaret attends services for which Bobby serves, "she was more discouraged than ever by the sight of him…” (AW&W, 3). The narrator explains this envy through the details that we are told that she observes: "By the way he held his hand to the white breast of his cassock and held the gold plate just under his chin at Communion" (223). Margaret wants to be as selfless and as responsible as her brother, but as a girl, she is excluded from key roles, such as that of an altar server. One day after morning mass during Lent, when she is trying her best to fast, she relents to eat one roll after having abstained from eating food before mass.
Bobby, in fact, has persuaded her to eat the roll, but to abstain from eating the cookie. Bobby also reassures her that gathering the twenty or so gladioli from the heap of castaway floral arrangements in the cemetery would be a nice bouquet, as a gift for Margaret's teacher, Miss Joan. Margaret sees how Miss Joan seems miserable in her teaching assignment, and most students regret being in her class. Margaret's intent was to bring joy to Miss Joan and to forge a good relationship with her teacher; however, when the innocent Margaret explains in all honesty where she had gotten the beautiful flowers, Miss Joan is wildly offended, and says to the class, "From the cemetery, no less" (237). Margaret is reduced to tears by the laughter of her classmates and Miss Joan's cruel response to her gift. Through this incident, the reader recognizes how Margaret attempts to be giving and to add joy into the life of another. This gift, though, has an unintended effect; it is a gift that has gone awry. The child though is attempting to connect to another adult like her Aunt May, but this adult, Miss Joan, has a cruelty about her that the child had not recognized. This memory of her attempt to connect and to heal shows how at an early age, she is compelled to care for others, but she may need to learn a bit about discretion.

**Bobby**

The narrator reveals that Bobby has a secret: from a very young age, "He wanted only to be a priest" *(AW&W, 190).* Through two incidents in the narrative we learn much about his aspirations. One schoolboy tells a story to other boys about how his aunt had observed through the small stained-glass window on the stair's landing a man with red or yellow hair who was sitting in her neighbors' bay window (170). The storyteller, somewhat new to this group of children continued his story, adding how his aunt checked numerous times during the day and continued to see the phantom. When she observed it up close, it disappeared. She showed the image to the woman of the house, who could see it only through the stained glass window. Eventually the police examined the situation, as did two priests. One priest whose hand had touched the stained glass bleeds: "The priest touched the glass, something none of them had thought to do before, and a red stain fell across his fingers" (174). The stained glass window is removed and replaced with a clear glass, as was the recommendation by one priest (174). This solution to Bobby seems inadequate. Bobby seems
to have learned from his father to speak up to those who are suffering, as his father had done with the bereaved Fred who persisted in attending Sunday family gatherings at Momma's homestead long after May's death. Bobby's solution is simple: ask another what they need, or what they expect from others. Bobby reflects on the boy's attention-getting story, and considers how he would have proceeded rather than what is told in the narrative about how the priest recommended changing the environmental factor by removing the stained glass window. Bobby would have communicated with the figure in the bay window: "He would have blessed himself and said, 'Are you a soul? Can't you escape?''" (176). He also would have preached to the women in both homes, "'From such moments as these…'" (176). This story, the narrator describes, had occurred during Bobby's "brave youth, from a time when he had believed himself to be holy, and mortal" (177). His solution is more dialogic, more idealistic, a solution that responds more directly to the needs of all involved, including those of the soul or phantom. Bobby from a very young age is intent upon listening to another.

The reader learns that Lucy and Bob entrust Bobby with the house key, even though Margaret is older, so both girls need to wait for him to let them inside the house. Bobby, too, receives praise from the priest about his sense of responsibility, and his proficiency with Latin, the language of the mass at that time. Lucy and Bob are careful not to overpraise Bobby, as they wish him to remain humble, yet they privilege him as a male with the house key.

In the Lenten story after Mass at which he had served as an altar boy, he and Margaret who had attended the service stop at a bakery that projects its identity of whiteness:

Their impression was that it was entirely white, from the white tile floor to the white walls to the tall refrigerator case filled with ice-cream cakes covered in white frosting, to the five-tiered wedding cake in the front window. But of course there were many other colors as well…. Still, their first impression was of whiteness…. (AW&W, 226)

Each item would be packaged in a "white bakery box" or a "white bakery bag" (226). After each Mass, Bobby would stop at the bakery, and he would be given a freshly-baked roll, and even a cookie. We later learn that he gives the cookie typically to Maryanne, and then to be fair, he also shares the treat with Margaret. On this particular day, the woman asks if his sister
would like a roll, but Margaret is insistent to continue her Lenten fasting until lunchtime. The shopkeeper though had added another roll and two cookies to the bag. Finally, after the brother and sister leave the bakery to continue their walk home, when they stop by the cemetery, Bobby persuades Margaret to eat the roll, so she won’t get ill from fasting all morning with the exception of her having received the Communion wafer. Through details in this memory about time shared between brother and sister, the reader can notice Bobby’s innocent wisdom and his ability to counsel another; he explains how Margaret can eat the roll to say nourished, but she can save the cookie until later to maintain her Lenten fasting. Not only does he provide a rational solution, but he also acknowledges to Margaret that her gathering flowers for her teacher, Miss Joan, would be "nice" (*AW&W*, 232). His approval lifted her spirits, as she like him, was attempting to do a good deed. Little did he anticipate that Margaret’s gift along with her honest explanation of where the flowers came from would cause her some grief.

*Maryanne*

The youngest child, Maryanne, attempts to gain the attention of her fourth-grade teacher, Sr. Miriam Joseph by telling her the story of her Aunt May’s sudden death to which she added that Aunt May had formerly been a nun. The child’s storytelling, as Coughlan analyzes it in the context of this novel, "suggests an understanding that [it] carries out positive psychological and cultural work, as it did in traditional societies, including rural Ireland in living memory (and may continue to do, in modern or postmodern urban milieus, in the form of literature and the other arts)" (136). Maryanne, missing her sweet Aunt May, is enamored of this nun, and the narrator describes details that Maryanne appreciates of her presence— "her tall black veil," "the flash of her black stockings and heels," "white teeth," her accent of the city," and her gift to each child of a stick of Dentyne gum that they could chew for several minutes, so it would allow her, too, to chew gum during class to avoid being perceived as a hypocrite (83-84). She adds that word to the board, so the students can add it to their vocabulary. She wears a "white scapular," and "her waist was defined by a man's black belt" (82).
Like Aunt May, Sr. Miriam Joseph transgresses the rigid rules of the classroom, so Maryanne, feeling somehow connected to this Sister, burst forth with her story: "I have the saddest thing in the world to tell you" (84). The child explains to the Sister that "Something burst inside her [Aunt May]" after only four days of marriage (85). The Sister's response changes from initial deep sorrow over the cruel fate for what she understands as the death of the recently-married bride, to her anger at the other children in the classroom when she learns of this older bride's initial loss of her vocation as a nun, and then of her sudden death after her marriage. There's an indication in this narrative, too, that Sr. Miriam Joseph chews gum to address her unbearably dry mouth, "the first symptom of her own illness" (AW& W, 90-91). Maryanne initially loves this Sister, who probably for a time, helps to heal the wound of her now absent, loving Aunt May. The reader learns how this child recognizes through this incident with Sr. Miriam Joseph that her storytelling could be empowering, "something she could own and offer in a way that no real event could allow. It became pure story" (88) that had an effect upon the listener. In this case, this story's effect on Sr. Miriam Joseph cracks her patience with the other children, and in response to their probable disruptions during her dialogue with Maryanne, "she turned both perfect arrogance and perfect scorn upon the small white faces of her fourth-grade class" (90). This sudden shift in her demeanor toward the class quite possibly indicates yet another symptom of Sister's own unidentified health issue. Maryanne may not perceive Sr. Miriam's change, but the reader can imagine another impending loss in the child's life.

Conclusion

Early in the novel, the omniscient narrator confides to the reader the mental state of Lucy as she journeys rather regularly with her three children to visit Momma and her three siblings- Agnes, May, and Veronica: "...she was aware of the stunned hopelessness with which she moved. Of time draining itself from the scene in a slow leak" (AW&W, 4). Through this passage, Lucy is depicted as aware of her own constricted behavior, of her being locked into her bi-weekly visitation to Momma, of her being bound in marriage to her husband whom she no longer loves. Time is passing, yet she seems frozen in it. After May dies, the narrator
explains how Lucy visits Momma daily in her attempt to compensate for Momma’s emotional pain with the sudden and unexpected loss in her life of yet another close family member.

Kai Erikson explains how such trauma has to be understood as "resulting from a constellation of life experiences as well as from a discrete happening, from a persistent condition as well as from an acute event" (185). This traumatic event can create a sense of community, as Erikson explains, and such is the case with the women in the Towne household. Momma Towne and all four of her daughters reunite bi-weekly, and after May’s death, each day in the Brooklyn homestead. In their mournful community they find solace of sorts, but these women except for Agnes remain as withdrawn from the world about them as Erikson characterizes those who are traumatized:

… they have withdrawn into a kind of protective envelope, a place of mute, aching loneliness, in which the traumatic experience is treated as a solitary burden that needs to be expunged by acts of denial and resistance. (186)

However, the Dailey children, Fred Castle, and Bob Dailey hold hope, and in their own ways attempt to break out of their routines to relate to others, to enjoy the beauty of nature, or to try to make others feel appreciated. These characters through their actions attempt to connect, or to show their selfless care and concern for others.

When your face came rising
above my crumpled life,
the only thing I understood at first
was how meager were all my possessions.
But your face cast a peculiar glow
on forests, seas, and rivers,
initiating into the colors of the world
uninitiated me. (Yevtushenko, "Colours")

Aunt May who understands the healing power of a beautiful environment and the joy of teaching children, or helping those who are suffering, influences Fred and the children-
Margaret, Bobby, and Maryanne. When the children were younger, it was often believed that "Children should be seen, but not heard," yet Aunt May defies this view about interactions between children and adults. May provides a strong antidote to the mournfulness that the children witness of their mother, aunts, and grandmother. Erikson explains how traumatized persons feel more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life:

They look out at the world through a different lens. And in that sense they can be said to have experienced not only a changed sense of self and a changed way of relating to others but a changed worldview…. But they also come to feel that they have lost a natural immunity to misfortune and that something awful is almost bound to happen. (Erikson 194)

Suzanne Mayer provides an overview of a twofold healing process for those wounded by intergenerational trauma: the caregiver or counselor becomes critically instrumental to the healing process for those who are traumatized by working toward creating an empathic bond. As the person who is traumatized tells details or fragments from their story, the listener needs to "hold the memories and their almost unspeakable feelings, and focus on the person sharing" (200). Through empathic dialogue, and deep listening, those who have experienced such severe and traumatic losses, "A loss of history, a demise of heritage, the destruction of culture, the silencing of voices, the fracturing of time, the crushing of dreams– so much collateral damage carried by descendants of the traumatized" (Mayer 198), the Townes' grandchildren hold potential to heal as "words come, stories unfold, [and] narratives are woven" (Mayer 200). Through storytelling to empathic listeners, as attempted by the children, even by Bob and Fred through their common ground experiences during World War II, "truth is born" (200).
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