Revista A Cor das Letras

Revista Digital dos Programas de
Pós-Graduação do Departamento de Letras e Artes da UEFS
Feira de Santana, v. 26, n. 2, p. 20-35, dezembro de 2025

http://periodicos.uefs.br/index.php/acordasletras/index
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ISSN 2594-9675

"Home is a place in mind" – the germinal in The *Visitor*, de Maeve Brennan

"Home is a place in mind" – o germinal em The Visitor by Maeve Brennan

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Abstract: This article is a close reading literary analysis of The Visitor by Maeve Brennan, considering the main subjects of the author's novel as embryonic for themes that she developed later, in more than forty short stories, mainly about female loneliness and the construction of an austere and mechanized feminine identity. This study considers Brennan's production inserted in the aesthetics of postmodernism, which explains the characteristics of gapped plots and fragmentary characters.

Keywords: *Irish Literature. Maeve Brennan. Feminine characters.*

Resumo: Este artigo é uma análise literária close reading de The Visitor, de Maeve Brennan, considerando os principais assuntos da novela da autora como embrionários para temas que a autora desenvolveu posteriormente, em mais de quarenta contos, principalmente em relação à solidão feminina e à construção de uma identidade feminina austera e mecanizada. Este estudo considera a produção de Brennan inserida na estética do pós-modernismo, que explica as características de enredos lacunares e personagens fragmentárias.

Palavras-chave: *Literatura irlandesa. Maeve Brennan. Personagens femininas.*

1 INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes Maeve Brennan's novel, *The Visitor*, examining themes addressed in the forty-two short stories written afterward, while the author worked as a journalist at *The New Yorker* Magazine.

Maeve Brennan was born in Dublin, in 1917, in Ireland belonging to the United Kingdom. It was previously the political division of the country into the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, therefore. The family was directly linked to the promulgation of the Republic. Her parents, Una and Robert Brennan were active in the

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political struggles that preceded Ireland's independence in 1922. Brennan's moving to Washington in 1934 was related to the political position that the writer's father took in the United States as a representative of the recent nation and in recognition of his role in the independence movement.

Brennan graduated in English in the USA, where she developed a career as a journalist. Between 1954 and 1981, she wrote *The Talk of the Town*, a column about everyday life in Manhattan. Some of these chronicles were collected in the book *The Long-Winded Lady*. The author compiled in the volumes *In and Out of Never-Never Land* (1969) and *Christmas Eve* (1974) short stories published in magazines where she was a journalist and fashion and trends columnist, *The Haarper's Bazar* and *The New Yorker*. She passed away in 1993, at the age of seventy-six, in New York, where she lived most of her life.

Posthumously, other stories were added to the stories in the two books organized by Brennan, and published under the titles *The Springs of Affection* (1997) and *The Rose Garden* (2000). The novel's completion date is not known for certain, but scholars of her work believe that it was written during the 1940s. It was, therefore, the first literary text produced by her, despite not having been published while the writer was alive.

If Brennan's birth and childhood refer to the fight for Irish independence, the context in which her literary work was produced is mainly that of the United States in the 1950s and 60s. At that time, the North American country was experiencing a period of economic growth. It was consolidating itself as a power due to its performance in the Second World War, which ended in 1945 and whose entry by the Americans into the conflict determined victory for the Allied group. Soon after, from 1947 onwards, the country entered the Cold War period, opposing the Soviet Union, until 1991. These movements reflected changes in American society, including in the configuration of some cities. Some stories of Maeve Brennan, such as "I see you, Bianca" and "The Snowy Night on West Forty-ninth Street", reveal changes that New York was going through in terms of urban reform and real estate speculation in that moment. These narratives show the destruction of old houses and small buildings to make way for skyscrapers. New York is located in the far East of the USA, so it is one of the city's calling cards to reflect American power to Europe and then to the rival USSR. Thus, the city experienced intense urban reform during this phase, to show the United States (and consequently capitalism) as an advantageous model. Brennan experienced these transformations, living around Broadway, in small hotels that were systematically being demolished, along with entire blocks of buildings that were small commerce and family homes.

Concerning aesthetics or literary period, Maeve Brennan's work lies itself between Late Modernity and Postmodernism, considering that she began producing literature in the 1940s with the novel and continued writing short stories until the 1970s. Her work presents characteristics of these periods, such as open endings and plots in which not everything is fully clarified by the narrators, in such a way that readers are called to be active in the reading process and need to act as participants in filling in gaps in meaning. As a post-war literary aesthetic, postmodernism is characterized by plots that are not always linear, and narratives that may present gaps. Also, contradictory characters, whose behaviors could seem evasive, surprise the readers, such as Anastasia King, the protagonist of *The Visitor*.

The Visitor tells the story of Anastasia King's return to her paternal grandmother's house in Dublin, after six years living in Paris with her mother. The narrative is in the third person, but it focuses on the protagonist's point of view. Her grandmother's reception is cold. Mrs. King makes it clear that she does not accept Anastasia as a resident and hopes the visit will be brief. The novel's feminine universe is complete with Mrs. King's housekeeper, Katharine, the friend Norah Kilbride, and Anastasia's memories of her mother's fragility.

Brennan's characters face a communication barrier and simply cannot say what they want. The difficulty in stating what they intend is characteristic of postmodern characters, as well as of productions that followed the two world wars. The astonishment caused by global conflicts may have disturbed the belief that language could explain everything, while there was a lack of words to define newly discovered emotions. The protagonist of the novel, for instance, fails in dialogue with her grandmother. Anastasia does not want to talk to anyone on the train or in the taxi, but when she arrives, she lies about the taxi driver's impertinence in asking her to talk. In the church, she responds to the nun with another lie, that she had been drinking, even if this answer would hinder the support search, which took her to that space. Concerning Anastasia, there is a mismatch between thinking and speaking, between wanting and saying, therefore.

The same incommunicability occurs in Brennan's short stories. On these stories, the interdict can be better understood by reading them as a group of stories. For example, the reader can gain a broader understanding of the stories about the Bagot family, from the compilation *The Springs of Affection*, when considering them as variants of stories about the Derdon family. This is possible because both couples sound like variants of the same, experiencing similar dramas. Both couples have trouble communicating, with husbands attributing this inability to their wives, as a fear of showing themselves too much through language. The two wives have their identities erased in domestic work, while they perform methodical tasks in a boring routine. They develop rituals within this routine, such as always serving tea in the same way, at the same time, with the tray always being taken to the living room. These women find taking care of the garden the only time to escape. In both couples, there is a greater affinity between the mother and the children, which makes the fathers feel that the women contribute to the distance between them and the children. Both the Bagots and the Derdons end up sleeping in separate rooms. The understanding can be further diluted if the reader takes all these stories as resonance of the short story "The Beginning of a Long Story", which was originally published in 1961. This one is on the compilation *The Rose Garden*.

Anastasia, from *The Visitor*, is a fragmentary protagonist, showing unpredictable behavior from the beginning until the last scene. According to Stuart Hall (2006), a fragmented identity characterizes the modern individual. This concept refers to late modern individuals who were absorbing and experiencing different cultures. It would happen thanks to displacements, migratory waves, and the circulation of goods and products in a globalized world. The scholar of the field of Cultural Studies understands that societies went through sociocultural changes in the 20th century, which fragmented the conception of the social individual, considered until then as solid. These social transformations, which concern cultural changings related to class, gender, sexuality, races

and nationality, according to Stuart Hall, replace our personal identities. This replacement can unsettle the idea one have about himself as integrated subjects. The author explains that the loss of a stable 'sense of self' is sometimes called displacement or decentering of the subject. This double displacement – the decentering of individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world and from themselves – constitutes an 'identity crisis' for the individual.

Anastasia's lies, which are not premeditated or catalysts for specific goals, may even leave doubts about her mental health. This character's changing identity is inspired by a time when many people did not know how to behave in a world that witnessed war atrocities involving several nations, and when individuals were uncertain about the future. The philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer reflected on the role of language in this period, in the work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published in 1944, in which they state:

> The blindness and muteness of the data to which positivismo reduces the world passes over into language itself, which is limited to registering those data. Thus relationships themselves become impenetrable [...] Today language calculates, designates, betrays, iniciates death; it does not express (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 133 e 209).

In this fragment, "today" refers to the post-war period. The atmosphere of doubt and pessimism of this historical moment could impact writers like Maeve Brennan, leading them to build characters and stories that defy linear logic, rather than reliable narrators, as prevailed in Realism, for example. Another postmodern characteristic found in Brennan's work since her novel is the lesser emphasis on actions and greater importance on psychological plots, in which the mental and emotional state of the characters is sufficiently important for the development of the plot. In most of the novel, as well as the author's short stories, the actions are secondary and occur to detriment of the conflicts internalized in the characters' thoughts.

The objective of this article is a *Close Reading analysis,* highlighting issues amplified from the novel to the author's short stories.

2 SEEDING WORK

The Visitor anticipates matters that Maeve Brennan developed in her more than forty short stories, mainly about the loneliness of ordinary women. In this aspect, the author constructs two groups of female characters: the austere, bitter ones, and the *outsiders*. The novel presents these two female types, in different generations and living together as mothers and daughters or mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Mrs. King and Norah's mother are part of the first group, while Anastasia and Norah represent the second.

In the novel, Brennan shows some of these characteristics (austerity, bitterness, and maladjustment) in all representations of the feminine, whether in the exercise of motherhood, in the relationship between women in the same family, or the character's performance and the social environment. For instance, the adjectives alternately fit the

three toxic mothers who, despite the appearance of weakness, illness, or senility, exercise control over their offspring. Coincidentally or not, these toxic mothers are not named. We only know them by their surname. They are Mrs. King, Anastasia's mother, and Mrs. Kilbride. The absence of a first name reinforces their impersonality in dealing with their children, as well as representations of motherhood as an almost institution, distancing the state of being a mother from the personal and human relationship that it could immediately suggest to the reader.

Mrs. King does not forgive her son's secret marriage, which surprises her when he returns from a vacation trip: "*God knows I loved him more than anyone else ever loved him, my only child. He should never have married, and he knew it himself* " (Brennan, 2000, p . 43). She criticizes Norah Kilbride's mother for being possessive over her only daughter, but acts with her only son in the same way, being critical of his marriage and creating friction with her daughter-in-law. Anastasia's mother falls ill and needs the girl to travel with her during the university registration period. If we read this need as an indication that the woman wanted her daughter only for herself, separated from social interactions and activities that connected her with maturity, this would not be the only mother created by Brennan to try to interdict her offspring's relationship with the world. The same relationship between mothers and daughters appears in some of the short stories, as we will see below. These mothers act to kidnap their children from social life, make it difficult to cut ties, and, consequently, traumatize their children's full realization as adults.

Brennan's toxic mothers promote the annulment of their daughters' individuality: Anastasia is called " *pet* " and Norah's nickname is "*Other Self* ", in addition to the obligation of dressing like her mother, when the woman was healthy and in charge of the house. The same type of possessive, oppressive, and affection-emptied maternal relationship appears in the short story "A Young Girl Can Spoil Her Chances", by *Springs of Affection*. In this story, Mary advises her daughter's fiancé to think better about what a bad deal it would be to marry the girl, as she believes Rose is not smart or mentally healthy, despite the girl showing her own opinions and helping in her mother's store.

3 MARKS OF POST-MODERNITY IN *THE VISITOR*

Characters with fragmented identities, acting contradictorily, are characteristic of the literary aesthetics of postmodernism. The protagonist of *The Visitor* is built in the spirit of that time, when the shock of the absurdities of two world wars encouraged the composition of fragmentary and sometimes incoherent narratives because fragmented and uncertain individuals were entering the second half of the 20th century. Anastasia's lies may surprise the reader because they are not aimed at any benefit. Therefore, they have no logical justification.

The tendency of literature to turn to characters like this, as well as experimental narratives and to narratives with gaps occurred because of historical events that overturned paradigms about what was considered right and safe. Furthermore, from the beginning of the 20th century, psychoanalysis verified the tripartite nature of the human psyche, divided into conscious, subconscious, and unconscious. In the wake of these events, Stuart Hall understood the postmodern subject as not being composed of a single

identity, but of several identities, sometimes contradictory or unresolved (Hall, 1990). The protagonist of Brennan's novel fits this fragmented character description.

Anastasia's fragmentation is noticeable from the moment she arrives, and her arrival is not friendly. The man on the train and the night rain evoke the idea of a negatively immutable Ireland. Arriving at night, in itself, refers to the end of a cycle, not a new beginning. She notices that Irish houses have remained unchanged since her departure (like the house in all the stories in *The Springs of Affection,* in which families change but the place stays the same*)*, as well as Mrs. King's living room and the trinkets in Norah's house. This configuration is a possible criticism by the author of her country's resistance to new developments, a certain stagnation, and stubbornness in living in the past.

Anastasia looks at the garden from her bedroom window on the third floor but never goes there. She walks around the city but never goes down to the garden, which remains enveloped in an atmosphere of unreality, like the park in front of the house when seen through the living room window, in the firelight. This atmosphere that flirts with a dream or with the unreal appears again in Brennan's work about the space of the beach and the magical house in the final stories of *The Rose Garden*, written throughout the 1960s. These stories have animals as protagonists, which in turn dialogue with the mini-story "A Daydream". It is about a daydream of a home with loved ones: Bluebell and the cats. Such returns and repetitions between the author's narratives tell us of a work in constant dialogue with itself, which has in the novel its creative seed. Mrs. King's house, as another example of repetition concerning space, is reminiscent of the house in Brennan's stories in *The Springs of Affection.* This can be told because of the lowered kitchen, from which Katharine must climb with the heavy tray to serve tea in the living room, like the mothers in the stories. Also because of the vegetation in the yard. But the King's residence appears to have an extra floor and it is in a more upscale neighborhood, as it is in front of a park, Noon Square, while the house in the stories (and which replicates an address where the Brennan family lived in Dublin) faces a row of identical houses.

The girl knows she should be leaving Dublin instead of arriving. Therefore, melancholy takes over her as soon as she sees the city streets at night. The return to her homeland is not an invitation but corresponds to an end of a cycle with her mother, in Paris. When she arrives at her grandmother's house, the door opens automatically, without either her grandmother or Katharine being there to welcome her, which reinforces the absence of invitation and welcome. In the bedroom, the protagonist succumbs to disappointment due to the cold reception. She "tried to forget where she was, and that she was alone in her home" (Brennan, 2000, p. 11), even though this loneliness is not a physical absence of other beings.

This is not the only time Anastasia disregards her grandmother as a significant presence. The girl thinks with regret that when she and her mother refused to return to Dublin with her father, he was alone and sad, but he was never alone. He was always in the shadow of his oppressive mother. The grandmother is a presence that imposes itself and cannot be ignored in the routine of the house. Even so, the grandmother does not represent company due to the coldness of her behavior.

If real subjects can influence literary characters, it is natural that the experimentalism of late modernity inspired the creation of fragmented identities. It was

on this treadmill that Maeve Brennan wrote the protagonist of *The Visitor*, a narrative in which we can infer her disagreement with the way women were treated after the establishment of the Republic in Ireland, in addition to the influence of the changes that were happening in the world. Anastasia's contradictions and inconsistencies, such as her lies and difficulty communicating with her grandmother, are part of this character's identity composition.

Considering identity an important theme of modernity and post-modernity aesthetics, when Brennan's work is placed on, it is possible to understand the protagonist of the novel based on two major questions surrounding the debate on identity: whether identity would be something given or constructed over time, and whether identity as subjectivity should be conceived in individual or social terms.

At 23 years old and going through challenges in her personal life, Anastasia King can be read as an identity in formation and transformation, questioning social expectations and discovering her role in the social net. She feels the discomfort imposed on those lonely in the city, seeing Dublin as divided into two worlds: inside the house and outside, on the street. She feels that a time limit is imposed for a solitary person to enjoy urban spaces before the eyes of the accompanied pedestrians judge the strangeness of being alone. In Anastasia's understanding, the world does not want loners roaming freely or feeling comfortable. The world is not for lonely souls: "There is no patience for solitary aimless wistful hangers-on who want to sit and watch" (Brennan, 2000, p. 54). Therefore, she feels pressure to demonstrate happiness, to appear to belong, and not to be lonely, which could be an explanation for lying in the store where she pretended to be waiting for her mother. Even though no one questioned it, the need to be busy and accompanied is implicit. Faced with this social pressure, Anastasia's turbulent behavior becomes more understandable. Due to this demand, she feels more comfortable in the inner world of the house, but she is driven to the external world by her grandmother's coldness.

As soon as Anastasia settles into her old room, the narrative presents a brief stream of consciousness, beginning with the phrase "Home is a place in the mind", which opposes the opinion that when she arrived at the station that same night, a voice in her mind clearly said, "Ireland is my dwelling place, Dublin is my station" (p. 10). The coldness of the reception indicates that the most appropriate would be to accept that Ireland as a home only exists in her mind, in her thoughts, as something from the field of dreams. The character's thought that home is a place in the mind is connected to a phrase written by Brennan in a letter to a friend, on one of her visits to Ireland, saying "No place is home. And that's how it should be". This letter is mentioned in an article by Ellen McWilliams whose title is exactly the phrase "*No Place Is Home – It Is as It Should Be": Exile in the Writing of Maeve Brennan*. The letter has no date, but the researcher believes it was written in the 1970s. It reveals the writer's discomfort in Ireland, and the lack of identification with the place that was once her home. Anastasia also realizes it, a character created by the writer in the 1940s. Brennan concludes that, once Ireland loses this status, no other place is home: "Dublin is a spectacle to me now, not home, not anything. No place is home – it is as it should be, & I am getting - it is really what I want – perspective" (Brennan In: McWilliam's, 2014, p. 98).

Maeve Brennan's perception that nowhere is home and that this is how it should be offers two aspects. The negative aspect is the melancholy that the phrase immediately evokes like a sentence resignedly accepted that one has no roots or a familiar place to return to and to feel integrated into the community and culture. It makes us feel – or at least perceive how the author felt – like loose pieces in the world, disconnected from ties of memory or affection related to familiar places. This aspect also implies not having anyone to return to, in addition to having nowhere to return to. It supposes a possible disconnection of relationships, and lack of interpersonal or emotional ties. In Brennan's life, the way she grew old and died, alone and unknown, in a nursing home, confirmed her loneliness. According to Irish writer Anne Enright, in an article for The *Guardian* newspaper in 2016, Brennan was not remembered even by herself due to the problems of senility and lapses of lucidity she faced: "In the Irish paper published an obituary when she died, in a home where no one knew her story, not even Brennan herself" (Enright, 2016, sp).

The positive aspect of Brennan's opinion that no place is home, as written in the letter, is the gain in perspective that an uprooted existence could lead to. If no place is home, every place in the world has the potential to be a temporary home and provide some form of learning or comforting bond. McWilliams interprets that the Irish author embraced a state of nomadism: "'No place is home – it is as it should be' suggests an acceptance and even an embracing of her nomadic state" (McWilliams, 2014, p. 98). Brennan changed addresses several times, having lived in bustling Manhattan, in a beach house, and several hotels.

McWilliams draws attention to the fact that Brennan's focus on exile has two different modes of expression. The first aspect of Brennan's interest in the theme of "exile" is that she is attentive to the history of Irish migrants, which serves as inspiration for stories in *The Rose Garden* about Irish maids in the USA, and for the novel *The Visitor*. The other aspect of the "exile" theme for Brennan is the reshaping of the image of the modern Irish artist as an exile, which she promotes by taking an interest in the productive capacity of uprooting and separation from home. The letter to her friend reinforces it when connects the idea that no place is home to gaining perspective. In Irish literature, the classic example of an artist who went into self-exile is James Joyce. He left Ireland to give vent to the creativity he believed was impossible there due to Irish stagnation. Like the protagonist of *The Visitor,* Joyce lived in Paris, where he published his masterpiece, *Ulysses*, in 1922.

It is worth mentioning that Joyce published his acclaimed novel on a return to Paris. He had moved from Dublin to the French capital in 1902, shortly after graduating with a Bachelor of Modern Languages. This stay only lasted about a year. Joyce returned to his hometown due to his mother's illness. The writer stopped living in Ireland permanently in 1904, accompanied by Nora Barnacle. With her, who would be his lifelong companion, he chose some other European cities as his home, having returned to Paris in 1919. If we take Joyce's biography as a reference for an Irish artist who "blossomed" outside the island, we can infer a promising future for Anastasia, if she manages to break out of the comfort zone that her imagination produces about Ireland being a nest of hospitality and accepts returning to Paris as something good. Seen in this way, the

grandmother's attitude of not allowing her to stay at home could have a didactic and visionary intention for her granddaughter's future.

4 DEVELOPMENTS FROM MRS. KING

The editor responsible for Maeve Brennan's posthumous publications, Christopher Carduff sees in the grandmother of the novel *The Visitor* a feminine profile that is repeated in many of the writer's other stories[1]. He points out that the characteristics of this character also appear in Mary Ramsay, the protagonist of Brennan's first story, "The Holy Terror", published in 1950. Then, in Mary Lambert, the protagonist of "The Rose Garden", and in Min Bagot, the protagonist of "The Springs of Affection" (titles of short stories that were chosen by this editor to name the compilations). It is worth adding to the list the character Betty Trim, from the short story "The Anachronism" (1954), which is one of the stories set in the New York luxury condominium Herbert's Retreat. Betty Trim, like Mary Ramsay, works in a hotel bathroom and makes this small room her kingdom. All of these protagonists seem to be offshoots of Mrs. King, even if they belong to another social class. Let's look at the characteristics of them based on the one that was first written by Brennan: Anastasia's grandmother.

From Mrs. King onwards, Brennan created other austere and mechanized female characters. Although the protagonists of the short stories that replicate Mrs. King's personality are poor women, who need to work to support themselves, they keep a strong identification with Anastasia's grandmother. They are women confined to a certain place, with no desire to explore other territories because they have dominated the space that they consider their private kingdoms, where outsiders are not welcome and from where loved ones are not allowed to leave. Betty Trim and Mary Ramsay, for instance, are intelligent, economical, cunning, observant. However, they are lonely and maintain an attitude of silent and spiteful competition towards other women, whom they look at as commodities on which they can set a price. They generally find that all other women are worth less than themselves and that they could easily buy or sell anyone, according to the fragments: "I could buy you and sell you, m'lady, she thought" (Brennan, 2000, p. 31), and "I can price anyone" (idem, p. 161). This look at the other – and in this case, the other women – in commercial terms says something about the personality of these characters. We can understand they give up interacting in communion with other human beings. The coexistence, if necessary, only makes sense to them within the scope of profit. These two characters live in the inhospitable environment of hotel bathrooms, a place of passage for other women, who frequent these buildings as customers.

In the bathrooms, Trim and Ramsay witness prosaic moments in the lives of these passers-by who are so different from them. The observation of such moments in others' lives gives Tim and Ramsay a certain advantage. Still, they remain confined to the environment where others leave waste and bad odors. These two characters are survivors of the harsh solitude in which they live, invisible in a space where others only appear out

[1]Mentioned in the editor's note at the end of *The Visitor* (2000).

of necessity. They are hardened by poverty and invisibility, living the individuality of postmodernity. They are bitter, conditioned to the routine of the only place in which they can establish rules. They are unfriendly as a form of self-protection against the exclusion to which they were confined, and they have long since given up all traces of femininity and vanity. Betty Trim goes through a change of scenery once she accepts a new job at a house, but for Mary Ramsay, there aren't even any days off. Her entire life is limited to the Royal Hotel's bathroom, in Dublin. They are toxic women, mainly towards themselves. Like Mrs. King, who, by expelling her granddaughter, condemns herself to lonely aging.

5 COMPETITIVENESS AND LONELINESS IN THE FEMALE SPHERE

One of the key readings for *The Visitor* is the wickedness among women. It is a subtle evil lurking beneath the appearance of normality. Despite the apathy with which her daughter remembers her, Anastasia's mother guaranteed the liveliness of the home, because the grandmother states after her departure she no longer received visitors. Therefore, the daughter-in-law was responsible for maintaining the circulation of visitors and exchanges with friends in the house. After her departure, only her faithful friend, Norah, visits the elderly woman. The normality of maintaining social relationships at events promoted by Anastasia's mother hid the excluded atmosphere in which they lived. When the environment becomes unbearable and the woman leaves not only her home but also the country, Mrs. King restores the mansion's cold routine, returns to being the leader of the house, and makes the atmosphere of social distancing that had been broken by her unwanted daughter-in-law prevail. Anastasia's mother's attempt to make the King's house a home, to build a cozy home, which can be inferred from gatherings with friends, was defeated by the matriarch's experience in isolation.

Unlike what happens in the King's house, where the matriarch is a recluse, Norah's mother provides liveliness in the Kilbride's home, not the younger woman. The mother was responsible for keeping them up to date with fashion, calling on dressmakers. She was attentive to decorating the house and opening windows, which promoted renewal and air circulation. This mother's wickedness lies in the erasure of Norah's identity, making her a replica of herself, through which she would relive her youth. Mrs. Kilbride does not seem to want to extend to her daughter the atmosphere of joy and connection with current affairs, which is implicit in her attitude of making Norah's relationship difficult. Norah's deceased (or missing) fiance also represents liveliness within the narrative, being a character associated with mobility, with coming and going, as opposed to his girlfriend, her mother, and Anastasia's grandmother's confinement. As a postmodern work, in which the plots do not explain everything and the reader must fill in gaps, *The Visitor* does not provide detailed explanations about the sudden disappearance of Norah's beloved. It is possible to believe, like the character, in the accident. Or to infer that the man got tired of the furtive meetings and abandoned her.

Women's loneliness is one of Maeve Brennan's main themes. As the first protagonist created by the writer, Anastasia experiences this feeling intensely. She lies to

make her life seem more interesting than it is and pretends to have connections with other individuals. She lies that the taxi driver talked nonstop when he didn't say anything the whole way. At the store, she lies that she is waiting for her mother. She lies in church about being drunk, when in reality she is just looking for hospitality and then responds in precisely the way that would get her expelled. At the hotel, she lies and expects to meet with Dolores Kinsella, whose name had not been mentioned before and is possibly a character invented by the girl.

Brennan's lonely characters do not find comfort in the sphere of religiosity, as might be assumed in narratives set in the Catholic and devout Dublin of the 20th century. Anastasia's expulsion from the church represents well the unwelcoming aspect of religion in *The Visitor*. This act comes from a young nun, which points to the maintenance of exclusionary attitudes in the institution by those who renew the congregation. The fact that the expulsion came from a nun can also be read as a criticism by the author of a failure and non-alignment between the feminine in post-independence Ireland, considering Anastasia and the nun as women of the same generation, both heirs of the politically free Ireland. The difficulty in communication between Anastasia and her grandmother, as well as the protagonist's disregard for Norah's romantic request to put the ring on her finger during the wake, could be interpreted as generational conflict. The young nun's failure to welcome the bewildered girl reveals a lack of complicity among Irish women of the same age group.

Anastasia is constantly cold, a sensation that can be associated with loneliness, the discomfort of estrangement, and not belonging. However, despite being uncomfortable in solitude, she seems to not want to get close to anyone. In the diffuse light of the train heading to Dublin, she is happy for the noise that "automatically raised a barrier of hostile irritation to daunt the chummy souls" (BRENNAN, 2000, p. 8). She doubts that she is the one the man asking for matches is talking to, indicating that she is not frequently invited to conversation when in a public place. The other moment in the narrative in which she smokes is when visiting Norah, therefore always when she tries to appear mature. She does not want to socialize, but the taxi driver's silence makes her feel rejected. Even though she wants to be understood, she lies about being drunk in church. The protagonist's attitudes therefore reveal difficulty in interaction, as if she had not had the opportunity to learn social interaction by example, and had not been taught to be a sociable person.

Anastasia's memory of her mother lying in her bed because she was cold is a scene replicated in Brennan's short stories. In the novel, the mention of refuge under the child's blankets generates discussion among family members. Her husband's company is not the first option on a cold night. When he shows annoyance with his wife's attitude, he also does not consider the possibility of her going to his bed. Instead of offering himself as company, the husband reminds his wife that she could have gotten more blankets, demonstrating the lack of intimacy between them, who do not seem to share the same room in Mrs. King's house. Just as the couples Derdon and Bagot, from the short stories *The Springs of Affection*.

While Brennan was writing her novel with a protagonist who lies and fails in using language, Adorno and Horkheimer were reflecting on the same theme: the failure of

language in postmodernity or the changes through which the instance of communication had passed after episodes that war ads used language to convince people to segregate one another, install violence and authoritarianism. Regarding the word used as an instrument of terror, they explain:

> With words I can intrigue, propagate, suggest that is the attribute which entangles them, as it entangles all activity in the world, and in the only one which is understood by the lie. It insinuates that even when one contradicts the existing order, one is acting in the service of other emergent powers, competing bureaucracies, and rulers. In its nameless fear, it can and will see only what resembles itself. Anything which is absorbed into its medium, language is mere instrument, becomes identical to the lie as objects become indistinguishable in darkness. But although it is true that there is no word which could not ultimately be used by the lie, the word's temper never gleams in the lie but only in the thought hardened in the fight against power (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 181-182).

Through the suggestion of these thinkers to attach the attribute of the word to the lie, during the crisis that language went through as a referent in the first half of the 20th century, another understanding of Anastasia's grandmother's speech opens up. Mrs. King ratifies the power of matriarch and mistress of the house by using language to express discomfort with the girl's presence and to send her away, but what this speech exactly enunciates is the lament for a social ideal of family construct that was no longer possible after the death of her son. By denying her granddaughter shelter, Mrs. King erases an entire unwanted path, which her son embarked on when he chose to get married and start his own family. If Anastasia's language is used to lie or fail to communicate, the grandmother's language is denial and erasure for an instance of unwanted reality.

Brennan's novel is probably written in the 1940s when Ireland had been an independent Republic of the United Kingdom for about two decades. The surname of the protagonist's family is King, a word that represents patriarchy, and tradition. But it also refers to a time that is no longer sustainable, since the time of "kings" has already past in the Republic of Ireland, since 1922. During the independence process and the years of the Irish Civil War, George V was the sovereign of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions. Although Mrs. King has been abandoned by everyone (only Norah still visits her), she remains influential in her small territory. The grandmother is "king" in the house that is her kingdom and from there she declares that the granddaughter is not allowed. But, even with all of Mrs. King's power, in Anastasia's opinion, the one who really owns and controls the house is Katharine, employed there for years, whose name also has a K, like many surnames in this narrative. Katharine has enough autonomy in the house to invite beggars to eat at the kitchen table, as a character also does in the short story "The Beginning of a Long Story". Also like Delia Bagot, protagonist of the last eight stories of *The Springs of Affection*. These two characters in the short stories live in a house identical to that in all the other stories in this compilation. It is like a real-life house that was home to the Brennan family during Maeve's childhood, at 48 Cherryfield Avenue, Ranelagh, Dublin.

The surname of Norah Kilbride can be read as "killing the bride". Norah was secretly engaged, which ended up killing her while she was alive. She lived two years of

clandestine romance with her boyfriend because her mother did not admit the relationship. She spent the rest of her life feeling like the widow of a fiance who was never able to accept her. Norah was, therefore, a bride disconnected from everything and everyone around her, a plot that reverberates in the protagonist of "The Bride", Margaret Casey, a short story from *The Rose Garden*. The character in this story has no emotional connections with anyone, not even with Carl, her fiance, for whom she has no affection. Margaret, like Anastasia, has a bedroom on the upper floor of the house. They share the experience that the owners of these houses do not allow them to feel at home. Her bosses see Margaret as another utensil in the house, and Anastasia's grandmother informs her that she cannot live there. However, even if only due to the position of the rooms, they are above these owners.

The words "germinal" and "seed" in the title and subtitle of this article were chosen to name *The Visitor* as a work that carries the features that Maeve Brennan would later develop in the short stories due to the botanical concept which says the seed contains all the genetic information of what will become the adult plant. The choice of a word from this area makes sense given the attention that Brennan dedicates to plants in her literary work. In her narratives, gardens are significant. It is no coincidence that one of the most emblematic short stories in Brennan's style and which gave its name to one of the compilations is "The Rose Garden". Some specific plants repeat the formula of appearing in the novel and later being replicated in the stories. It happens with the forsythia that covers a wall in the garden of Mrs. King's house and in the house in the *Springs of Affection*. The forsythia appears also in the short story "The Bohemians", and in the aforementioned "The Rose Garden". In this story, the flower covers a wall in the nuns' garden. This garden is the object of adoration for the protagonist, who can only visit the place once a year and is unaware of the forsythia blooming on the wall. Caring for the back garden is one of the Bagot and Derdon wives' only joys.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Visitor echoes the message that Ireland is a place where returning is not worth it. Brennan herself may have felt the unfriendly atmosphere when she returned to visit her homeland since she made choices that went against what was expected of women in the first half of the 20th century: she did not accompany her family when they returned to Ireland. Instead, she stayed in the USA, worked as a journalist in New York, and built an independent career in which she was encouraged to express her opinion. She was single even after the age of 30, and became known for her strong temper and sharp tongue, which went against the tradition of customs that predicted dedication to marriage and female subservience for women, such as dictated by Victorian and Catholic ideals that shaped the Irish mentality for years.

In the novel, Brennan approaches female austerity or the inadaptability of lonely women in all of the characters. The protagonist of *The Visitor* is unprepared for an independent existence, for adult life, presenting herself at her grandmother's house as a young woman with no plans or connections. She studied for a year in Paris but did not

establish a network of contacts. She liked having to travel with her mother during the period of enrollment at university, which put an end to her time of study. Her parents were also adults unprepared for this phase of life. Just like Norah, who spent years caring for her bedridden mother and then lived resentful for a prematurely interrupted love.

But why did Maeve Brennan create so many unadapted characters? What is the criticism implicit in these profiles? To understand what the author criticizes with these characters, one needs to think about their surroundings, and what leads these women to live in such conditioning. By constructing mechanized Irish characters, Brennan could be pointing to the external pressure that forced real women into lives emptied of humanity. The pressure to survive in a sexist environment, the oppression of Catholic dogmatism, and the rigidity of customs can be the determining factors for the transformation of women into machine-people, with difficulty in communicating and expressing feelings. In this sense, Mrs. King is the outline of this personality that Brennan would develop in several of her short stories. Furthermore, Anastasia is the first protagonist to give shape to two of the author's most dear themes: the suffering of not having a home, as she is not welcome in the family home; and the feminine loneliness, a complete disconnection from relatives, friends or ideals.

Brennan's vision that "nowhere is home" can mean gaining perspective. Although it might have sounded melancholic in the 1970s, it is an opinion that resonates today with the digital revolution. The current moment allows the existence of workers known as digital nomads, who work online and, therefore, theoretically, can live anywhere in the world and change their place of residence whenever they want. Brennan could hardly have done her job outside of *The New Yorker* magazine's offices, considering the time in which she lived. But she changed address several times, albeit within New York City. In addition to the changes, she had another characteristic of nomads, which is having only the essentials to be able to roam freely. In the afterword of *The Visitor*, the editor Christopher Carduff wonders whether she had lost the novel's manuscript (which he found, after the writer's death, at Notre Dame University) between her changes, in a suggestion that she was not attached to material things, not even her manuscripts.

Concerning the Catholic church, the novel's criticism is that the institution is not capable of providing the comfort and guidance that Anastasia's generation needs. Brennan's biographer Angela Bourke understands that this protagonist sings at the end because it is what the poor did on Christmas Eve to be let into the houses and get a meal in the kitchen (Coughlan, 2020). Katharine allows poor people to have a meal in the kitchen, just like the mothers in "The Beginning of a Long Story" and in some of the Bagot family short stories. Feeding the underprivileged represents Irish hospitality, which constitutes a contradiction: the hospitality that is offered to strangers does not exist for the granddaughter. Then Anastasia behaves like a beggar entering her own house, including taking off her shoes and socks, which Palko considers to strip away the items of respectability (Palko, 2010, p. 22).

The song that Anastasia sings talks about happiness in a distant land, indicating that she is aware that happiness is not there, in her grandmother's house. This dialogues with the criticism of Irish stagnation promoted by James Joyce in *Dubliners*. A poor person who receives a meal appears in several of Brennan's short stories, but always from the

recipient's point of view. Unlike what Brennan would do in the short stories, in the novel, the point of view is in Anastasia's desperate action to return to the residence interior. She, however, is the protagonist and only heir of the house from which she was expelled and still needs to act to receive attention.

The Visitor, probably written during the 1940s, is one of Maeve Brennan's earliest literary works, considering that her first published short story is from 1950, "The Holy Terror". The novel is the seedbed for themes that the author later developed: female loneliness within the home; the estrangement of women who do not feel belonging; the lack of a home; the exhaustion of housewives who do not find companionship in their partners and cannot verbalize their emotions; the confinement of these women to the domestic space, where they waste their lives in repetitive work; the prevalence of indoor environments and collapsed marriages/relationships. These themes are repeated in the short stories can be already found in the novel, such as the scene of Anastasia's mother seeking to warm herself in the daughter's bed and falling asleep there. The cold mother's visit to her daughter's bed returns in the short stories "The Beginning of a Long Story" and "The Carpet With The Big Pink Roses On It", in which exhausted and lonely mothers count on the warmth of their daughters, their successors in managing domestic tasks.

But why does not Anastasia keep her promise to put the ring on Norah's finger? Why throw the ring far from the city, in a place where it would "fall infinitely"? Why have the trouble of getting on a bus and getting more walking to throw away the ring? Perhaps, for Anastasia, Norah represents a sterile existence, as a metaphor for Irish stagnation. By breaking her promise and definitively discarding the ring, Anastasia broke away from a future that could repeat Norah's unhappiness. Still, Anastasia could be taking revenge on a pattern of lonely, resentful Irish female existence.

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Submetido em 20 de agosto de 2024
Aceito para publicação em 10 de setembro de 2025