

## Brooklyn (2015)

### Major Credits:

Director: John Crowley

Screenwriter: Nick Hornby, adapted from a novel by Colm Tóibín

Cinematographer: Yves Bélanger

Production Design: François Séguin

Costumes: Odile Dicks-Mireaux

Cast: Saoirse Ronan (Eilis), Emory Cohen (Tony), Julie Walters (Mrs. Kehoe), Domhnall Gleeson (Jim Farrell), James DiGiacomo (Frankie), Jim Broadbent (Father Flood), Brid Brennan (Miss Kelly)

### Background:

Based on an esteemed novel set in 1951-2, *Brooklyn* adheres to the narrative structure and cinematic style of both classical Hollywood and the British “heritage” film (of which the PBS *Masterpiece* productions may serve as a convenient example). Like the best of *Masterpiece*, the film’s success depends on period details, melodramatic plot turns, and charismatic (albeit theatrical) performances. John Crowley, a native of Cork, is a playwright and stage director in addition to working in film. Most of the Irish actors here are veterans of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin; Saoirse Ronan, New York-born of Irish parents, carries the story, as she has in nearly every film in which she has appeared, including the current *Lady Bird* (2017). For budgetary reasons, only two scenes—the exteriors of emblematic brownstones and the beach date at Coney Island—were actually shot in Brooklyn; the rest was shot in Montreal or in Enniscorthy, Wexford, the Irish village where Tóibín set the novel. The iconic scenes of Eilis going to work with the Brooklyn Bridge in the background utilize composite shots combining a Montreal street with a photograph of the bridge.

### Cinematic Aspects:

*Brooklyn* is essentially a *theatrical* film, primarily consisting of interior sets and relying on nuanced performances. Unlike most contemporary action films, the plot complications build slowly, while emotions—homesickness, love, grief—and language (letters in voiceover, repartee over meals) assume prominence. Nothing is as impressive as the total effect. Nevertheless, several cinematic techniques contribute to the overall impression.

1. Close-ups: Saoirse Ronan’s face, luminously lit, provides emotional expression in nearly every scene. Note how frequently Eilis is portrayed simply *watching* something rather than actively responding to others.
2. Long shots: Crowley effectively employs expansive landscapes of Long Island and Curracloe Strand (the Irish beach where Steven Spielberg shot the opening scenes of *Saving Private Ryan*) to contrast with the confining interiors in which Eilis spends her days and to suggest the possibilities of an imagined future.
3. Color: Crowley deploys a palette that begins with drab greens and browns for the opening scenes in Enniscorthy, then opens up into exuberant pastels when the setting shifts. Eilis is consistently associated with green, most strikingly in her American bathing suit.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Barely glimpsed in the background of Miss Kelly's upstairs room is a sampler that reads "Teach Me to Love." The message, of course, provides an ironic commentary on the climactic scene that follows, but it also poses a fundamental question at the center of the narrative; what lesson about love does Eilis learn?
2. With its nostalgic portrayal of postwar Brooklyn and unremitting emphasis on raw emotions, the film runs the risk of sentimentality, a danger noted by many reviewers. Does *Brooklyn* also engage serious *ideas* that help to redeem it from the manipulative excesses of female-oriented melodrama, once dismissively described as Hollywood "weepies"?
3. In a dissenting review, *New Yorker's* Richard Brody describes the heroine's blank passivity ("Eilis expects nothing, knows nothing, sees nothing, does nothing") and laments the film's "condescending" view of the past. While praising the performances, other commentators have noted how the period drama preserves decorative details but ignores the Korean War (why wasn't Tony or his brothers drafted?), racial conflict in the ethnically diverse borough (no mention of Jackie Robinson, the Dodgers star), or any reference to current events (McCarthyism, the Rosenberg case). How do you respond to this criticism of the film's historical perspective?
4. Perhaps *Brooklyn* does speak to a *contemporary* issue in addressing the conflict between the claims of ethnic identity and finding a new self among "people who don't know your aunty." Like *The Big Sick* (2017), for example, the film offers the very real attraction of an arranged marriage against the risk of an unfamiliar lifestyle. Clearly, this film takes sides, but why does it ultimately affirm Eilis's decision (to cite Thomas Wolfe's famous phrase) that you can't go home again?