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THE NOVELS OF RODDY DOYLE

CARAMINE WHITE

**A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of English**

**Greensboro
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Approved by



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This dissertation is a critical examination of the five published novels of Roddy Doyle, *The Commitments*, *The Snapper*, *The Van*, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, and *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*. Since this dissertation will be the first of its kind about Doyle, its basic purpose will be to introduce the novels to the reading public and to convince the reading public that Doyle, although a very popular artist, is also a gifted writer who should be taken seriously. There are six chapters: an introduction and a chapter devoted to each novel. The introduction offers an overview of Doyle's works and a discussion of the qualities of his novels each subsequent chapter will examine. Each chapter discusses one of Doyle's novels by examining the following: his innovative use of language; his manipulation of his audience's reaction via humor and comedy; the role, however slight, of religion and politics; his overall social vision as projected in the novels both individually and as part of the complete body of work. The analysis also examines other prominent aspects of the individual novels, namely, the function of music in *The Commitments*; Sharon's character development in *The Snapper*; the grimness and despair of *The Van*; the use of double-writing in *Paddy Clarke*; and the way Paula's life may be seen as a metaphor for the abuses women suffer in a patriarchal society in *The Woman*. An extensive interview with Doyle, which he was gracious enough to grant me several months ago, is included as an appendix.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Roddy Doyle, one of the brightest stars on the Irish literary scene today, knows the Dublin working-class characters of his books intimately. He was born in 1958 and raised in Kilbarrack, an area similar to Barrytown, the fictional Dublin suburb which is the setting for his first four novels. In a lengthy interview he recently granted me (which is included as an appendix to this work), he talked a little about his parents: his father was a printer, and “would have been blue collar, since he had ink under his fingernails. . . . he was definitely working-class” (Interview 223). His mother was “more middle-class--her father was a civil servant.” For the experience of his inter-class upbringing, Doyle is grateful: “I’ve grown up with a foot in each class. It’s a very useful position, especially socially. People who have grown up solidly working-class seem to be hopelessly lost in a different version of reality. Whereas being from the gray area, you seem to be a little more street-wise. . . . It’s a useful position to be in, especially as a novelist” (Interview 224).

Doyle is the only one of his three siblings to go to college. He graduated from University College in Dublin. In 1980 he started teaching English and geography at Greendale Community School, Kilbarrack. “Punky” Doyle, so dubbed by his students because of his spiky haircut and earring, enjoyed teaching but stopped when his success as a writer began to interfere with his classes. He retired from teaching in 1993 to devote

himself to his writing and his family, consisting of his wife, Belinda and two sons, Rory and Jack.

Doyle's first five novels have all been well received critically and popularly. The literati praise him: his fourth book, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, won the prestigious Booker Prize in Britain in 1993, while *The Van*, his third novel, was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1991. Although he has on occasion been "condescended to as merely entertaining, just popular and funny" (Shepherd 164), the reviews of his work have been consistently good. He has been called "the laureate to a generation of thirty-somethings now ready to reconsider that experience (of growing up on 1960s housing estates). . . . Doubtless, *Paddy Clarke* will soon be included on school syllabuses, as Salinger and Twain before it . . ." (Kiberd 24). And Doyle keeps getting better: "Each novel bears distinct resemblance to but is arguably better than its predecessor" (Shepherd 163).

Doyle is also a commercial success. His first two novels have been turned into popular movies, and a film version of the third has been completed. *Paddy Clarke*, the biggest seller of all the Booker Prize winners, has been translated into at least nineteen languages. Because of his popularity, in 1993 the BBC gave Doyle *carte blanche* to write something for television. He created *The Family*, a four-part mini-series about a family in turmoil, which was widely viewed and discussed by its Irish audience. Doyle's earringed and bespectacled visage is seen on numerous Irish magazine covers, and he periodically makes the international talk show circuit. Stephen Frears, the director of the movie versions of *The Snapper* and *The Van*, says of Doyle, "He's the only Irish writer I

know of who's actually read by the kids he writes about in Dublin. You don't see them walking around with *Ulysses*" (Christon 5). Doyle has also written two plays: *War* (1989), a disturbingly dark comedy which counterpoints scenes in a pub in which characters fiercely compete against each other in quizzes and scenes of unhappy family life at the protagonist's home, and *Brownbread* (1992), a farcical comedy about three unemployed, working-class youths who kidnap a bishop. Both enjoyed a local success: "He enjoys the reputation of being the most commercially successful playwright in Dublin since Sean O'Casey. . . . Roddy Doyle (is) a cult figure" (Eaton n. pag.). Considering his popularity today, it seems farcical that he initially had to publish *The Commitments*, his first novel, at his own expense.

The accessibility of Doyle's novels is partly responsible for their popularity. "Too often, when you read an Irish literary novel, even one that you're enjoying a lot, you get the feeling 'I've got through 20 pages of that. I deserve a rest.' I've wanted to produce books that are readable in the proper sense, books that you don't have to give up half your life to read" (Doyle qtd. in O'Toole "Leaving Spaces" n. pag.). These books are lively, realistic, engaging, hilarious, and they feature characters with whom one can sympathize. Instead of the "thematic lumber which bolsters your average Booker winner" (Shone 48), Doyle provides for us simple, immediate themes couched in simple, immediate forms. Doyle purposely avoids the multi-syllabic vocabulary which appears in many canonized texts:

. . . there's a school of writing which, though it may be unfair to summarize this way, has a lot to do with writers showing us how big their brains are. Like

Anthony Burgess, who wants to show us that he has the biggest vocabulary in the world. (Doyle qtd. in Christon 9)

Doyle also says, “The type of writing I prefer is simple, straightforward and serves the characters. I like writers like Elmore Leonard, Anne Tyler, Raymond Carver and Richard Ford, where you tend to forget you’re reading” (qtd. in Christon 9). Doyle succeeds in achieving an unobtrusive literary style by using common, everyday language, which includes a great deal of profanity and slang, little description of any sort, and almost no authorial commentary.

Because Doyle’s work is so popular and accessible, the inevitable debate over his value as a serious writer rages:

Why were the literary establishment so divided over Doyle? Elevated by some commentators as a social guru of enormous significance, other critics have objected to the unrelenting bad language which dominated the first three novels. Some questioned the authenticity of the life he described. (Battersby n. pag.)

Doyle has been accused “of playing up a professional Irishness for England and holding the Irish up to ridicule” (Bradshaw 129): “he simply serves up the foibles and patois of the working-classes for the patronising approval of the literary types” (Nolan n. pag.).

Doyle’s craft has been disputed: “There’s an over-reliance on incessant wisecracking, funny incidents, and teed-up punchlines . . .” (n. pag.). Obviously, many people object to the profanity and refuse to read his work because of the frequent use of profanity and vulgar language: “earthiness is a great tool to flush prudes, but too many sexual and scatological references can send the situation down into wearisome schoolboy vulgarity

and a tool becomes a crutch” (n. pag.). Doyle says he has been criticized for “the bad language in my books--that I’ve given a bad image of the country” (qtd. in Turbide 50). Doyle’s lack of descriptive writing has also received criticism: “No significant effort is expended on physical description of character or locale. . . . There were unkind thoughts that this department was being left to some cinematographer fellow in California with dark specs and a ponytail” (McFarlane n. pag.).

Stephen Frears counters: “Roddy’s a deceptive writer. On the surface the work seems simple, but it’s really very sophisticated, and very funny. He creates an entire world” (Christon 5). Doyle himself says his books

were on the list for books to be taught in schools, but they’re off the list now because the Minister of Education decided they weren’t literary. It’s utter drivel . . . the idea that they are less literary because they use the vernacular--I don’t agree. The decision to use the vernacular is a literary decision. The decision to use the word “fuck” is a literary decision. It’s a decision of rhythm . . . to use images from television instead of books, to use advertising jingles and such. It’s a literary decision. (Interview 230-31)

My aim will be to demonstrate that Doyle is indeed a serious artist. His novels are not simply entertaining, as a Brendan O’Carroll book is. Although Doyle might cringe at my saying so, his works have literary merit and worth.

His first three novels comprise the “Barrytown Trilogy.” These novels are concerned with one family, the Rabbittes, who live in the present-day working-class Dublin suburb Barrytown. Each novel focuses on a different family member. *The Commitments* spotlights Jimmy Rabbitte, Jr., and chronicles the rise and fall of the band,

the Commitments, he manages. Very little mention is made of other family members. In *The Snapper*, we read about the unplanned pregnancy of Sharon, Jimmy's sister, which is the result of an acquaintance rape. The Rabbitte family, especially the father, Jimmy Sr., figures much more prominently in this novel, and we witness the chaotic but loving family dynamics. The last book in the trilogy, *The Van*, centers on Jimmy Sr., who has lost his job and with it a lot of his *joie de vivre*. After months of unemployment, Jimmy enters into business with his best friend Bimbo. They purchase and run a chipper van business. (A chipper van is equipped with grills and deep-friers for cooking hamburgers, fried fish, sausages, and french fried potatoes.) The tensions resulting from, oddly enough, the success of the business, severely test their relationship, and we see how fragile even the most secure friendships can be.

Each novel has a simple plot within a tangible, event-based frame. *The Commitments* opens with the inception of the band and closes with its demise. *The Snapper* begins soon after the discovery of the pregnancy, flashes back to the actual conception, and ends with the delivery of a healthy baby girl. *The Van* is a little different. Jimmy Sr. has been unemployed for some time at the novel's beginning. About a hundred pages pass before the partnership between Jimmy and Bimbo is formed. The novel starts to move forward when the chipper van business begins. The novel culminates with the end of the partnership, and perhaps the friendship. "Each narrative is propelled by the creation of something new--a soul band, a baby and a chip van respectively--which for a short time alters everyone's life. Along the way something always happens which acts as a

test of people's true feelings; usually a threat of break-down, of resentment swelling to the bursting point" (O'Hagan 17). Each novel traces the rise and fall of various events in the protagonists' lives. (*The Snapper* traces the actual rise and fall of Sharon's stomach). Tangential events occur in the novels (for example, Jimmy Sr.'s epiphany in which he realizes the pain his childlike behavior has inflicted upon his family in *The Snapper*, or Darren and Jimmy Jr.'s various female entanglements in *The Van*), but these serve, not as subplots, but as added texture to the main story line. The Barrytown novels, while not merely comic novels in that they are more complex than a first reading may lead one to believe, are not, however, as serious as his last two works. Each contains some situations which are improbable, if not inappropriately farcical; the characters are not as fully developed as his later characters; and the novels, especially the first two, simplify reality by providing easy comic resolutions to difficult problems.

Paddy Clarke, although set in Barrytown, is a departure from the Barrytown Trilogy and its Rabbittes--"There are no more Rabbittes. I've eaten them" (Doyle qtd. in Christon 6). *Paddy Clarke* is narrated by a ten-year-old boy in 1968, which was Doyle's own age in 1968. The novel is told from Paddy's perspective; the other characters' importance is determined by their importance to Paddy. For example, we see a great deal of Paddy's mother, whom he adores, but very little of his younger sisters, as boys of his age and temperament do not usually spend much time with baby sisters. This novel has been faulted for having no structure, or for having its only structure "tacked on" two-thirds of the way through:

About halfway through the novel I began to yearn not so much for structure as for movement. I felt that Mr. Doyle had gone a vignette too far and that the book was in danger of stasis. I missed the sense of narrative machinery pushing toward a denouement. Moreover, if a non-narrative novel was his objective, what, then is the purpose of the marriage breakup? It is as though he too suddenly regretted the absence of story and decide he'd better supply one fast. (Flanagan 21)

However, the novel has a genuine framework: it chronicles the dissolution of a marriage through the eyes of a young boy. We are introduced to Paddy somewhere in his tenth year, and we learn about his friends, his school, his games, his family. His family situation becomes more prominent as his parents begin to fight bitterly. His parents' separation ends the book. The novel thus turns out to begin with the commencement of the parents' unhappiness. We do not perceive this unhappiness until later on in the novel simply because Paddy himself does not see it until then. The familiar event-based frame is in place, except that instead of a rise and fall, the book shows a gradual fall: *Paddy Clarke* has no "pivotal moment" (O'Hagan 17) in the manner of the Trilogy novels.

Doyle's most recent novel, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, again uses a first-person narrator. This novel is not set specifically in Barrytown, but in "an anonymous urban location which might be part of almost any European city" (Waters n. pag.); the television mini-series, *The Family*, which was written before the novel, and out of which the novel grew, was set in the Dublin suburb Ballymun. Paula Spencer, an alcoholic mother of four who had been beaten severely by her husband for eighteen years before she mustered the courage to kick him out, attempts to explain her life with Charlo, her monstrous husband who, shortly after their separation, is killed when attempting a

robbery. The novel combines Paula's memories with details of her present. The novel is not linear, like Doyle's previous books, but spiral-like, with Paula repeatedly returning to several key memories in an attempt to discern where her life took its awful turn:

I was aware, in the editing stages, of various books. *Black Water*, by Joyce Carol Oates, for example. It's a very short book, but it keeps going back to one episode. One episode is the book. I wanted to do that as well. I wanted Paula to go back to the first time she was hit, and I go back to that four or five times.
(Interview 203)

Paula repeatedly thinks about the first time she was hit and the circumstances leading up to Charlo's death.

Although all of Doyle's novels are distinct, and could never be connected as mere sequels, they do share common elements. His characters' speech is one of the most often noted aspects of his works. Doyle has been able to "prevent Yeats, Joyce, or Beckett from taking over [his] mind and drowning out [his] voice" (Donoghue 3) because he does not see himself as part of any great Irish literary tradition. Although he admires Flann O'Brien, his favorite novelists, like Anne Tyler, John Irving, E. L. Doctorow, Elmore Leonard, and George V. Higgins, are American. He claims that Joyce has had no conscious influence on him whatsoever: "I have read Joyce, but it never left that mark for life that it's supposed to leave. *Ulysses* is a great book, but so are a lot of other books. I don't see why just because it's set in Dublin it should be harder to escape than anything else" (qtd. in O'Toole "Leaving Spaces" n. pag.).

Doyle's method has been to listen to his pupils in Greendale and to their fathers in the local public houses. He has a remarkable ear. On the strength of it, he imagines what an even more thoroughgoing demotic English would sound like. Starting from Greendale and Kilbarrack he has invented Barrytown, a place impervious to the idioms of Yeats, Joyce and Beckett. . . . There is no precedent in modern Irish literature for the vernacular of Barrytown. (Donoghue 3-4)

Doyle says that by transcribing actual speech patterns, he can give the reader a better sense of his characters:

I've always wanted to bring the books down closer and closer to the characters--to get myself, the narrator, out of it as much as I can. And one of the ways to do this is to use the language that the characters actually speak, to use the vernacular, and not ignoring the grammar, the formality of it, to bend it, to twist it, so you get a sense that you are hearing it, not reading it. That you are listening to the characters. You get in really close to the characters. I think it's a stronger achievement, in the context of my books . . . because it gets you smack in the middle of it. (Interview 229-30)

His use of both profanity, so omnipresent in his works as to be called "a metalanguage" (Fitzgerald 16), and current slang has been faulted as being too obscure for the average non-Irish reader: "There are problems of local reference. . . . opacity on the page is harder to cope with" (Donoghue 6). Doyle does not compromise the integrity of his work by heeding these criticisms: "If I start thinking about people, then there's a small line between people and market and you start thinking, 'Well, will they understand this snatch of dialogue in Wyoming?'" (Interview 205). Like Synge and his Aran Islanders, or O'Casey and his slum-dwelling Dubliners, Doyle has the gift of transcribing precisely (and enjoyably) a vernacular dialect. He gives literary voice to Barrytown.

Understanding the speech in Doyle's novels is important because, at least in his first three novels, there is so little description or authorial commentary in his work that his

O'Casey and his slum-dwelling Dubliners, Doyle has the gift of transcribing precisely (and enjoyably) a vernacular dialect. He gives literary voice to Barrytown.

Understanding the speech in Doyle's novels is important because, at least in his first three novels, there is so little description or authorial commentary in his work that his novels at times read like screenplays. In fact, huge chunks were lifted from the novels for the films. Doyle dislikes overly descriptive writing:

I deliberately didn't want descriptions, because I think they interfere. Around the time when I wrote *The Commitments*, I read *The Sicilian* by Mario Puzo. The story was interrupted so often with unnecessary descriptions of the mountains the Sicilians were climbing over to escape the police, and ridiculous descriptions of physical characteristics. People with "generous lips" and things like that. All I could think that meant was that he had some kind of speech impediment and he sprayed people. I deliberately just let the words do the talking and it didn't seem necessary to describe places. (qtd. in Eaton n. pag.)

Doyle wants vivid characters, and he says "the best way to reveal a character is to get them to open their mouths" (qtd. in O'Toole "Leaving Spaces" n. pag.). The dialogue which occurs when the characters do open their mouths is indicated by dashes (which annoyed critic Noel McFarlane so much that he nicknamed the author "Dasher Doyle"), not quotation marks, and speakers change so often that voices seem to rush out from the page. Surprisingly, little confusion arises as to the identity of the speaker, and the dialogue is easy to follow.

His last two novels, written in first-person, do not contain as much dialogue. Paula and Paddy are telling us their stories, and while these novels do contain more descriptive writing, the description is what would naturally appeal to the narrator, either a ten-year-old boy or a thirty-nine-year-old uneducated woman. There are no “generous lips” in Doyle’s work, regardless of the narrator.

The first four novels occur in Barrytown, a fictionalized Dublin suburb, based on Doyle’s native Kilbarrack: “It’s not my life, but it’s my geography” (Doyle qtd. in Turbide 50). Doyle describes this area:

Kilbarrack is about five stops on the north side of the DART. . . . it’s about five miles from City Centre. When I was a kid it was bang at the edge of the city. . . . The city limits were right down the middle of the street. There was a farm across the road from us. There was the odd road that had been there for a long time. The people who lived there would have been railway workers for the local train. But gradually as the city grew, the estates grew--early 40s and 50s--and the people moved in like my parents, working-class, lower middle-class, who were in a position to buy their own houses. In many cases, they were all the same age. It was a great time to grow up--surrounded by all these kids--a lot of freedom as well. As I grew up, the city cooperations bought out the farms, and the private developers bought out the other farms, and it gradually grew more inner-city. People who moved into it would have been more solidly working-class--from the inner-city. Dublin had the worst slums of any city in Europe. These awful tenements . . . were all demolished in the 50s 60s and 70s, and these people moved out into the suburbs, into Kilbarrack and into other areas on the Ring of Dublin. (Interview 222-23)

Kilbarrack today is little more than the average lower-middle-class neighborhood. There are several streets, rows of lower-income housing, and the odd convenience market on the corner. It is a much cleaner and more orderly place than is depicted in the movies of

Doyle's works. Kilbarrack "is a blank canvas of ordinariness, like any working-class housing estate in any city in western Europe" (O'Toole "Comic Opera" n. pag.).

Although there is little actual physical description of the suburb in his novels, nevertheless Barrytown has a definite sense of place and community. As Eudora Welty wrote about her fictionalized Morgana:

Paradoxically, the more narrowly we examine a fictional character, the greater he is likely to loom up. We must first see him set to scale in his proper world to know his size. Place has most control over character: by confining character, it defines it. (*Place in Fiction*).

The idea of Barrytown as an Irish Yoknapatawpha County pleases Doyle: "I like the idea of all of a writer's books having a place in common" (qtd. in Eaton 1).

Toni Morrison, writing about the difference in the significance of place in black and white writers, discusses the "urban village," an American neighborhood, which "offered a nexus of community values and social purposes" (qtd. in O'Toole "Sound" n. pag.). She theorizes that white writers, like Hemingway for example, view a character's alienation from his city and subsequent retreat to the country as a heroic undertaking. However, black characters could not claim cities as their own since cities were the venue of white characters; neither would they think of the country, the place of slave labor and lynchings, as a retreat. Therefore, the community, or urban village, is most important for them, and alienation from this, while a triumph for the white hero, "may be an outrage for blacks" (n. pag.).

Barrytown can be considered such an urban village; it is “more like a neighbourhood urban community such as Harlem than an Irish country village or a classical city like Joyce’s or O’Casey’s Dublin” (n. pag.). Victory comes to its residents when they assimilate themselves into the culture and affirm the values of their neighborhood. For instance, Sharon is not ostracized when she is pregnant because a number of other Barrytown girls have been in the same situation and the community has grown to accept unwed motherhood. She is ostracized because the father of the unborn child is not a young boyfriend, and is, instead, an older married man, a state of affairs which is not acceptable in Barrytown. Sharon’s worst moments in the novel come when she has been spiritually cast out of the community’s bosom. Similarly, Paddy’s worst moments come when he is ostracized and given the silent treatment by his classmates, because, significantly, his parents have separated, another state of affairs which is not deemed acceptable at that time. Jimmy Sr. hates being out of work partly because his loss of income prevents him from spending time with his friends in the pub, the place from which he is able to derive his sense of belonging. Barrytowners need a sense of community to be successful characters.

Even though Doyle does not provide a great deal of physical description of Barrytown, his language conveys a strong sense of the place. This urban village is not extraordinary because of its physicality, but instead because of its people. The people are the place; they do not just live there. The community is comprised of individuals relating to other individuals, reacting to one another, speaking to one another: “Speech is the

expression of individuality, not in isolation but in communication” (n. pag.). Barrytown’s inhabitants are so vibrant and alive that Barrytown itself looms up in our minds and becomes a character.

Although Barrytown may be based on a real suburb, Barrytowners are not based on real individuals. Doyle says he has “never based a character on someone I know. . . . I would never do that. . . . I’ve never really needed to. . . . It’s not a particularly bright thing to do—invade other’s privacy, no matter how interesting that privacy is” (Interview 198). Despite the assertion that his characters are entirely fictional, he views his job as simply “to describe things and people as they really are” (Turbide 50). “I just write the things. . . . they are based on reality. . . . it’s real life; granted it’s speeded up and larger than life. . . . I’m looking at a part of Ireland, a part of Dublin, at an odd angle. I’m showing the part that’s not in the Bord Failte catalogue” (qtd. in Battersby n. pag).

Because Doyle is “depicting a reality,” he does not judge his characters: “I’m not a priest or a moralist” (Interview 214). Instead, confident of humanity’s basic goodness, he lets them judge themselves and each other, and behave according to their own consciences. Doyle treats his characters with respect. Although he is removed from them, his “forgiveness of just about everything and everyone” (Christon 2) is the overwhelming characteristic of his relationship with his creations. He is similar to Chekhov,

the good doctor who bore his characters’ ridiculous affectations and self-dramatized torments with grace and bemusement, because he knew that everyone’s body eventually breaks down in pain and dies, and that the enemy of life isn’t death, it’s futility. (Christon 2)

The Barrytowners' lives include much behavior which an author could easily judge. The characters do, after all, watch too much television, get intoxicated frequently, chatter about inane topics, have little soulful interaction, and have drunken sex. They live entirely in their own insular present, with no sense of Ireland's tormented history. There is no mention of English rule, no mention of the 1916 Easter Uprising, no mention of Catholic oppression. Similarly, there is no mention of the present "troubles" in Northern Ireland, no mention of the IRA, no mention of the numerous scandals involving the Catholic Church:

Reality is never presented as a private experience, something to be mulled over or worried about; it is always a social situation to be negotiated at the top of one's voice. Matters of concern to the rest of Ireland--the IRA, the Ulster Volunteer Force, murders in the North, Ireland's dealings with the European Community, financial scandals in high places--are of little interest to Barrytown. The world beyond Jimmy Rabbitte's house at 118 Chestnut Avenue, Dublin 21, has mainly televisual presence: life exists to end up on TV. . . . Modern Ireland, its history and political life, is also a matter of indifference in Barrytown. (Donoghue 4)

Doyle's characters are concerned only with what is going on in their immediate lives.

These characters' "sole context is whatever is enforced by dialogue and a short communal memory. The present tense is the only one, and it is fulfilled by speech" (Donoghue 4).

The characters are reacting to so many immediate stimuli that they do not have the time or inclination to ponder world problems.

Some find this insularity improbable:

I recall not one passing reference to politics of any sort throughout. This would be rare in a faithful depiction of working-class people and very rare for unemployed people: in fact, it's rare for Irish people generally. Is Roddy Doyle over-reacting by under-reacting to the usual stylistic crudities of preachy propaganda, carried out by hands as heavy as Limerick hams? (McFarlane n. pag.)

I disagree with this critic, who is discussing the first three novels, *The Van*, in particular.

In these novels, the characters Doyle has created would have very little interest in politics at the particular time in their lives during which we see them. Jimmy Jr. is young, out of work, interested in girls and in music. Although he tries to increase his peers' awareness by introducing them to soul music, he would have very little interest in who gets elected to what locally. Simply, Jimmy Jr. does not have the time; election outcomes would not directly affect him; and when he does get involved, his ideas are much larger than local politics. Sharon is a woman who has just been raped and is pregnant for the first time. She obviously has other things to ponder. Jimmy Sr., when we do see him with his friends, contrary to McFarlane's assertion, does discuss current topics like child abuse. When he starts working in the van however, he also has no time to chatter about the political situation. Many people do not care about situations which do not directly affect them--witness extreme voter apathy in America. The political situation in Ireland, even the "troubles" in Belfast (which as Doyle says, cause Dubliners to "close down psychologically. . . . Belfast becomes a place very far away" [Interview 227]), do not directly affect the Rabbitte family or their friends.

Finally, the fact that the characters do not discuss politics does not mean that Doyle's books are not political. McFarlane overlooks this point:

It's the difference between politics with a little "p" or a big "P." But a book about a woman in a violent marriage is a political book. A book about two unemployed men is a political book. This *Family* series brought domestic violence to a forefront, to the top of the political agenda, with a small "p" for a few months. (Interview 227)

Doyle's books are political, but his characters are not politicians. Simply because we do not witness political debates does not mean the characters do not, or have not, or will not, engage in them at some point. McFarlane, who would like Doyle to tone down his use of profanity because, although true to life, profanity is distracting and unpleasant, now would like Doyle to include tedious political discussions because their omission misrepresents reality. I think he is wrong.

Another conspicuous absence in this book is religion. In novels about Irishmen, one would assume there would be some mention of mass or prayer or the Virgin. There is no mention of any religious life at all (or should I say no mention that is not profane: Jimmy Sr.'s favorite exclamation is "JAYSIS!"). Modernity has removed these Dubliners from "absolute fidelity to binding social and religious tradition" (Gannett n. pag.):

[One of] the most striking features of Barrytown in the years denoted . . . is the decline in the influence of the Catholic Church on the working-class families. . . . In Doyle's novels set in recent years, priests do not appear. Few parishioners go to Mass. The founder of Christianity is frequently invoked, but only as a residual expletive, Jaysis. Paddy Clarke thinks the best story he ever heard was the one about Father Damian and the lepers on Molokai . . . but . . . it was only a game. . . . there is no sense of sin in Barrytown. No one feels guilt or sham. Or even misgiving. (Donoghue 4)

The novels contain no scenes in which any of the Rabbittes go to church. All, even the one-year-old Gina, regularly blaspheme. Jimmy once says he is so hungry he could eat a “leg o’ the lamb of God.” At the beginning of *The Snapper*, the Rabbitte parents, although they discuss telling the younger members of the family that what Sharon did was “wrong,” never do say anything, nor do they call her actions sinful. Abortion is not an option for Sharon, but this seems to come more from habit than from any religious conviction. *Paddy Clarke* includes religion, but in Paddy’s eyes, religion is more a game than a source of salvation.

Perhaps religion is absent because its position in Ireland has declined. While church-going rates are still higher than in most European countries, the rate is dropping, “and reports from some priests in working-class Dublin parishes estimate that only 10% of their parishioners go to Mass every Sunday. It is also important to note that amongst those who attend church regularly there is an increasing number who do not accept the Church’s definition of sin. . .” (*Frontiers* 84-5).

The Church in Ireland has been involved in numerous scandals in recent years. In 1992, the highly influential Bishop Eamonn Casey, the Bishop of Galway, who had been found guilty of drunk driving, was discovered to have an American mistress and a grown son. He sneaked out of the country with one hundred and fifteen thousand dollars of church funds. There have been numerous other disgraces, including a priest found dead in a gay sauna in Dublin, priests accused of sexual assault and pedophilia, and recently discovered atrocities perpetrated on children by the nuns at the Golden Bridge Orphanage.

The Church has also lost ground on its primary issues, namely, abortion, homosexuality, contraception, and divorce. While abortion is still illegal in Ireland, four thousand women a year emigrate to England for that purpose. In 1993, laws were changed to legalize homosexuality. Also in 1993, contraceptives, previously obtainable only with a doctor's prescription, could be sold from vending machines. And most recently, a referendum narrowly passed to allow divorces. Religion is still very prominent in Ireland--the Church controls most of the education, and masses are still full with "people young and old . . . locked in concentrated prayer" (Toibin 53). But in the lives of the young, uneducated, and unemployed--Doyle's characters--religion is practically nonexistent.

Doyle considers the absence of religion in his novels to be a depiction of the reality. Because of the aforementioned scandals and the resulting cynicism, which he shares, people do not have the respect and awe that characterize Ireland's religious history:

That's the way it is. . . . I wanted to get away from the cliched view of Ireland. An English critic of *The Snapper* said, "Where was the priest? This is a pregnant girl." And I wanted to say, "Fuck you pal--what do you know? You live in London." Priests in working-class parts of Dublin are peripheral figures--few people know who they are at all, and they're not particularly welcome when they knock on the door. It's a new picture of Ireland. . . . religion is still there, but it's more of a surface thing. On a Sunday, you'll still see crowds and crowds going to Mass, but it's not the deep devotion. . . . They'll be chatting in the back of the church. . . . So there's no religion, partly because of my imagination lack, and partly because that's the reality. (Interview 211-12)

Nor does religion figure in Doyle's own life:

There's no religion in me own life, for certain. I've no room for it at all. It's difficult in a country like Ireland because you do have to put your face out and tell it to go away. Fuck off. You have to be quite blunt to allow yourself your own agnostic space. . . . It kind of depresses me when I see all those people in the church. Particularly the kids. What are they going for? They're immortal--they're not, but they should think they are. What are they going there for? When you begin to slow down and there's a rattle in your breathing, then you go off to church to make your peace, not when you're seventeen and you should be avoiding at all costs that crap. (Interview 210, 212)

Doyle's characters do not share this vehement dislike of organized religion. For them, religion is an inconvenience, a weak presence. These characters do not have the original thinking or the philosophical stamina to flout openly the teachings and practices which have been inculcated in their society for thousands of years. Instead they ignore, or conveniently forget, their religious teachings.

Although Doyle himself does not judge the lack of religion, the dearth of in-depth discussion, or the frequency of drunken toots, other readers do. Some consider this insensibility to outside events, this aimlessness of purpose, this habit of reacting instead of acting, as signs that Doyle's characters lead meaningless lives. Doyle, although slow to anger, gets upset when the significance of his characters' lives is questioned:

What's meaningless about that? That's not meaningless. So why don't they talk about politics? Talking about politics is as about as meaningless as talking about sex or talking about football. . . . It's just conversation. It's filling gaps. So their lives are not meaningless but are filled with meaning. Their conversation is not deep--so what--whose is? In a lot of conversations, it's what they don't say that is more interesting than what they do say. I don't think they lead meaningless lives at all. . . . Sharon is going through a stage in her life. When I was that age . . . and was earning money, one of the things I'd buy with that money is alcohol, and not because I had the burning need for alcohol, but for the sheer pleasure of being with a group of friends and talking all night and getting pleasantly drunk. Getting drunk

is incidental, but it was just the whole thing. I don't see any problem with young people getting drunk. . . . (Interview 213)

Doyle believes that living one's life meaningfully is different for everyone. People must make meaning in their lives with the tools they have available.

For Doyle, a sense of family or community is essential. He frequently mentions his own family in his interviews, and four of his five novels are dedicated to family members. His characters, all uneducated, nevertheless have some type of supportive family, which provides them with an order (often rather chaotic). In the trilogy novels, the collective family is the mainstay for each individual member. "Families may break up . . . but no other social institution in Barrytown has replaced the family. Not even the pub, the likeliest contender" (Donoghue 3). The band, although so important to Jimmy Jr., is nevertheless a false family; it is the vehicle through which Jimmy attempts to achieve greatness. But when it dissolves, Jimmy Jr. will be able to return to his real family, who will give him the basis from which to try something else, even to start another band. Sharon's pregnancy is, admittedly, initially made more difficult when Jimmy Sr. becomes resentful, but it is her family which enables her to survive her ordeal finally: "Sharon's life . . . would be tragic without the support of her large and singular family" (Glyde 116). In *The Van*, Jimmy Sr., forced to choose between going to the pub with his unemployment check or to his home, unhesitatingly chooses his home: "But there you were; he'd a family to feed and that" (*Van* 35). Jimmy Sr. is last seen in Veronica's arms. He has lost his best friend, Bimbo, and his wife is all he has left and she comforts him. "Despite the

unemployment, poverty, alcohol abuse and limited social mobility that beleaguer them, [the Rabbittes] embody their own brand of family values” (Turbide 50).

Doyle’s last two novels address the topic of family support differently. His later characters, while they have their family’s support, must use this support to learn independence. The dissolution of his family causes Paddy’s troubles--his world is destroyed when his family breaks up. After his father leaves home, Paddy loses his friends, his place at school, his spark. However, as Paddy still has his mother and siblings and will still see his father, we sense that he’ll survive. Doyle himself says, “But I imagine, if I project forward, that Paddy will be all right” (qtd. in Flanagan 21). In order to be “all right,” however, Paddy must use what family support is available to learn to be independent enough to handle his strained family situation. In other words, the Clarke family must provide enough support to enable Paddy to endure the problems the Clarke family has caused.

Paula’s relationship with her family is even more ambivalent. Although her father’s coldness contributes to her marriage to the charming but brutal Charlo, her love for her children and the support of her sisters help resurrect her. Unlike Sharon, Paula cannot collapse into the arms of a lovingly supportive family; she must use the strength derived from her maternal and sisterly feelings to eke out an independent existence. Again, she must use her family’s backing to bear the nightmares it created.

Some type of supportive family is necessary for survival in Doyle’s world as his plots are hardly lighthearted. In *The Snapper*, the protagonist is raped and impregnated by

a family friend. In *The Commitments*, a sincere attempt at meaningful employment fails. Jimmy Jr. and the other band members are left with no prospects other than remaining on the dole. In *The Van*, Jimmy Sr., out of both work and self-respect, attempts to start his own business with his best friend but winds up losing the friendship. *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* chronicles the divorce of the parents of a ten-year-old boy and its effects on him. In *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, Paula is beaten for eighteen years by a brutally sadistic husband.

But a good deal of Doyle's work is uproarious comedy. This is especially true of the first two novels. His works can be hilarious, laugh-out-loud funny, and all of Doyle's successful characters have a keen sense of the incongruous. One critic observes that, when reduced to plot summaries, Doyle's novels "sound like the contents page of some sociologist dissection of mass delinquency. But [they are] redeemed by a gutsy, gusty humour which trashes any such misguided concern" (Shone n. pag.). Doyle is able to use humor and comedy in a way which enables him to make his situations endurable without "rendering absurd any part of the complex opinion on which seriousness rests" (Olson 109). How does he accomplish this?

Before I proceed, let me explain that comedy and humor are not interchangeable terms. Comedy, when used in the literary sense, is a form. Comedy, which is "basically the action of a sympathetic figure meeting and overcoming every obstacle, thus becoming heroic" (Grawe 14), explores and engages with the everyday occurrences which "are part of the audience's normal experience, rather than on cosmic higher values" (*Comic* 28).

Comedy as seen from a formal perspective is the representation of life patterned to demonstrate or to assert a faith in human survival, often including or emphasizing how that survival is possible or under what conditions that survival takes place. (Grawe 17)

Comedy is a representation of life, not an action. Comedy does not deal in facts but in faith. Comedy's message is hopeful, namely, that we humans will survive and that comedy shows us how this survival can be assured. Comedies celebrate "the survival, endurance or immortality of human life or identity . . . of fertility, rebirth and eternal life" (Lewis 68).

The philosophy behind a comedy is the comic spirit. The "message" of the comic spirit is that the human race will survive and can endure anything. Comedy has no self-pity. "The more carefully one defines one's identity, the more likely the definition is to turn into a cliché. The more protective one is toward the self, the more likely one is to pity oneself. Negligence about identity is likely to be much more liberating; the self is free to become whatever it will become. . ." (124). The comic sense of self is, if not an oxymoron, a fluid, ever-changing and adapting conception. If one's identity is never rigidly defined, one's identity cannot be shattered. The comic vision allows one to take what life offers and to incorporate it into one's daily existence. The comic vision is "hostile to the univocal mind. It rejects the neat, mechanical, perfectly balanced orders generated by logic and embraces the organic, irregular orders. . ." (31). For instance, Doyle is able to turn *The Snapper*, the story of rape, betrayal, and anguish, into a novel about family support, togetherness, and triumph.

Humor is different from comedy. There is no “unequivocal relationship between comedy as a literary form and funniness . . . even though in practice many if not most comedies are also—at least in part—funny” (Palmer 112). Humor arises from a perceived incongruity, a “pairing of ideas, images or events that are not ordinarily joined and do not seem to make sense together” (Lewis 8). Laughter, or at least a smile, is produced when the incongruity is resolved. Not all incongruities produce laughter—some are too horrifying, although “the difference between suicide and a self-effacing joke, between tragedy and comedy, lies in how we deal with the incongruous” (Lewis 18). Humor is, obviously, “a playful, not a serious, response to the incongruous” (Lewis 11).

Humor is powerful and risky. Comics must make value judgments about what is appropriate material for their jokes. By deeming something “joke material” they are trying to mold our attitudes about a subject and make us join in the laughter. Humor is “a force in controlling our responses to unexpected and dangerous happenings, a way of shaping the responses and attitudes of others and a tool in intergroup and intragroup dynamics” (13). Doyle uses both the comic form and humor to direct our responses to his work.

The artist must have a particular way of seeing the world to use comedy and humor successfully:

. . . you find yourself looking at a very wide range of situations all of which are characterized by a painful discrepancy between deserts and consequences—that is, you are studying injustice and finding it everywhere. Now the question becomes how can you make or savor comedy in a world like *this*? Every true comedian deals with that question; each works out his own answer. None pretends that injustice is either rare or evanescent; in one way or another all accept injustice as the price of life and are willing to try to pay

the price. Paradoxical as it may seem, one effect of the comic vision is to keep its possessor deeply aware of the reality of injustice. You make or savor comedy in a world like this precisely because it is a world like this. (Palmer 152)

It is easy to see how this philosophical outlook applies to Doyle's novels. His characters' misfortunes, like many of our own *real* misfortunes, are products of injustice. Jimmy Sr. is laid off because he is old and because there are too many younger men who want to work. Sharon is raped. Paula is threatened with murder if she tries to leave Charlo. While some extraordinary people could avoid these misfortunes, ordinary people, like Doyle's characters, with their ordinary trainings, cannot. His characters were born in situations where education is not expected, unemployment and living on the dole are the norm, getting drunk is the usual way to handle life's ups and downs, and a show of weakness is ridiculed. Doyle's Dublin contains child abuse, theft, drunkenness, adultery, all of which seem ever-present conditions of life. "Life is so unpalatable that its grotesqueness produces a comic effect" (Sypher qtd. in *Comic* 35). While the horrifyingly bleak backgrounds to his novels illustrate Doyle's realistically grim view of the world, his treatment of these calamities illustrates the unlimited possibilities he sees for human beings. The backgrounds to Doyle's novels are serious, but all contain some glimmer of hope. Even in *Paddy Clarke* and *The Van*, Doyle's two darkest novels, the family still remains supportive.

The discussion of Doyle's comic artist's vision leads to Doyle's social vision, derived by examining the trend his work has taken over the last ten years. The world, it

seems, is getting more serious, but not yet overwhelming, for Doyle. As his novels progress, the themes remain consistent and social conditions remain bleak, yet Doyle's emphasis changes. But in the first two novels, the darkness is illuminated by the characters' love for each other, their optimism, their humor, their *joie de vivre*. The band fails, but Jimmy Jr., undaunted, is ready to try again with a different format. Sharon's baby is a bastard who will be raised in a raucous, overcrowded environment and may well wind up on the dole. But Sharon is laughing uncontrollably at the end of the novel, and she loves her baby fiercely.

Doyle's third and fourth novels strike a different balance. In *The Van*, although Jimmy Sr. retains his wonderful sense of humor, his unemployment reduces him to a feeble, childlike old man. Although he has a temporary respite from his misery when he begins to work with Bimbo, by the end of the novel he is friendless and crying, like a baby, in the arms of his sleepy wife. Although, as Doyle says of Paddy, "I imagine, if I project forward, that Paddy will be all right" (qtd. in Flanagan 21), still Paddy has been robbed of his childhood and has worries that are overwhelming to that ten-year-old. The novel ends, not with the tableau of a mother laughing with and loving her newborn child, but with the cruel nursery rhyme with which the children taunt Paddy after his parents' separation. The desolation of the background in *The Commitments* has been pushed to the forefront in *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*. Conversely, the wonderful humor and optimism which was omnipresent in *The Commitments* is overshadowed in *Paddy Clarke*.

Doyle's most recent novel, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, offers another variation of the hope/despair equation. Paula's history, the background of the novel, which, due to the book's retrospective narrative technique, becomes the foreground, is horrible. At the outset we know that Paula has been sadistically abused for eighteen years. We quickly discover that she is also poor and alcoholic, and has just been informed that her abusive husband, whom she still loves, was killed by the police. One of her sons has run away and is probably a drug addict. None of Doyle's other novels contains elements of such "evil" (*Woman* 216); none of Doyle's other characters has so much to overcome. The earlier novels are concerned with quality of life, not life itself. For eighteen years, Paula has not been fighting for respect from her neighbors but fighting to stay alive. But although the novel piles up the miseries, it nevertheless leaves the reader with a strong sense of hope. Paula is adhering to her self-imposed rules concerning her drinking. She has a job. Her husband cannot hurt her now. Doyle says that *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* is very hopeful: "There is room for hope. . . . You can't help feeling that it's very sad and that she's missed out on a lot, but at the same time that she's going to make a stab at it" (Interview 190-91)

The thirty-eight-year-old Doyle is less idealistic than he was ten years earlier. His first two novels dramatize the powerful potential for human interconnectedness that his later novels do not. In *The Commitments*, Jimmy Jr. is trying to save Dublin by introducing its inhabitants to soul music. He is trying to make a connection between the working-class Dubliners and 1960's African-Americans. While the reader is in little doubt

that his dream is unrealistic, nevertheless, Jimmy is trying and he is also communicating. For a brief moment, he succeeds; the band is popular. Shortly afterwards, the band dissolves, but Jimmy made the attempt. Similarly, in *The Snapper*, Sharon gives birth to a healthy baby girl who will be loved. Although Sharon is not aware of the literary grandeur of this birth, nevertheless, the life force, symbolized by the healthy infant, has survived rape, violence, drunkenness, and hostility. Humanity will survive in spite of itself.

Yet in *The Van*, Jimmy Sr. is not making connections. He is merely trying to get out of bed every morning. He struggles to keep his dignity, and not very successfully. In *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, Paddy is also trying to survive. Not even innocence is an adequate barrier to the world's desolation. Paula, for a long time, merely sought to avoid pain. In her present life, however, she desires a better life for herself and for her children. She is a lonely alcoholic, and her daily goals are still very modest--to wake up early, to work, to care for Jack when he gets home from school, to postpone her drinking until Jack is in bed. These characters are trying to survive and do not have the stamina for anything more.

Doyle has telescoped his vision of life. Doyle is saying that living life, surviving day to day, is hard enough. His later characters are trying to stay alive. They lack the energy and desire either to promote worldwide communication or to celebrate, however unwittingly, the life force. Doyle himself says that, although he is not aware of any "downward trend" to his novels, he has become more aware of life's evils:

I have obviously aged--it's been ten years since *The Commitments*. . . . I was a teacher for fourteen years. . . . The first couple of years I was hopelessly naive and

Doyle, while not consciously growing more pessimistic, is growing more realistic about the world he inhabits.

The desperation underlying the *carpe diem* attitude of Dubliners is emerging in his novels. This pessimism comes from living in a country where, if one does get educated, one may need to emigrate to find a job; or, if one quits school and is lucky, one can find a low-paying job instead of living on the dole; where one's future is dim at best, and a bright future means leaving one's homeland. Many Dubliners, and most of Doyle's characters, do not have a "future" by American standards. Is it any wonder they so vigorously live life in the present?

The difference in attitude toward the future makes Doyle's characters so uniquely Irish. Although I am aware of the risk of stereotyping an entire country, it seems as if in America, there is always "tomorrow." Our history has been marked by huge expanses of land which promise fresh starts. People are upwardly mobile and always moving. We deny the existence of any impenetrable social classes. We are always seeking to better ourselves and have our children lead more affluent lives than we have led. Because of this perpetual motion, we tend to neglect the present, and perhaps as a result, we live less. We ignore today because we are focused on a future that never arrives.

A stasis not found in America seems to pervade Ireland. People lack the sense of a limitless future that goes with unlimited geography, as Seamus Heaney shows us in "Bogland": "We have no prairies / To slice a big sun at evening-- / Everywhere the eye concedes to / Encroaching horizon" (1-4). Consequently the Irish may appreciate the here-

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Doyle is a wonderful writer who has the Dickensian gift of appealing to the uneducated and the educated alike. His novels, even at their most hilarious, contain serious messages. Doyle is as forgiving of his readers' limitations as he is of his characters' and does not demand that his readers spend as much time with his work as he has spent. Any reader will find humor, an engaging story, and the unforced exploration of important human issues. One can easily sympathize with his likable and realistic characters. Doyle's art seems effortless--the dialogue flows easily, and yet the reader can sense his earnestness and personal struggles. His work is extremely contemporary in its characters and situations, cutting-edge with its language, yet old-fashioned in its values and conclusions. At an early age Doyle has become one of the world's best novelists.

CHAPTER TWO

THE COMMITMENTS

The Commitments, published first in 1987 at Doyle's own expense and picked up shortly afterwards by William Heinemann Ltd. in England, is a striking first novel. Not overly ambitious, it nevertheless provides material for the introspective reader to consider, while simultaneously offering engaging and lively situations and characters for the more casual reader. This novel introduces us to Doyle's working-class Dublin, a city without a future but a community full of joy.

This first book in the Barrytown Trilogy is set in present-day Ireland. The center of the trilogy is the Rabbitte family. Jimmy Sr., the father, who is spotlighted in *The Van*, is married to the long-suffering Veronica. They have six children: the intelligent, ambitious, wise-cracking oldest son Jimmy Jr., about 20 years old; independent 19 year-old daughter, Sharon; their troubled son Leslie, about 17; their hard-working, good-looking, athletic, and studious son Darren, about 15; and finally the twins, Tracy and Linda, about 13, sassy and rebellious. As the trilogy progresses, the family members age accordingly, and the family dynamics evolves realistically.

This novel focuses on Jimmy Jr. who has an unspecified but obviously uninteresting job in a "shop." Throughout the trilogy, Jimmy Jr. jumps "rabbit-like" from project to project. In this particular endeavor, he agrees to help two of his friends start a band, the Commitments, because he believes that this band could be a way to unify all of

Dublin. He says that a band is more than just a way to meet girls, but can be a political force. He idealistically chooses soul music as the language with which their band will unify the working-classes. Soul music, he says, was introduced in the 1960s as a vehicle through which the oppressed black race in America could assert itself. And, he continues, the Irish, and particularly the Northside Dubliners, are the “niggers” of the world. Soul music could empower Dubliners. The reader is never convinced that Jimmy’s band can accomplish such lofty ideals, but it is enjoyable to watch them try.

The band, formed after numerous auditions and rejections, is comprised of ten members, most of them inexperienced. The novel focuses on Jimmy, the manager; Joey the Lipps Fagan, an older sax player who is both a con man and a prophet; Deco, the lead singer with a terrific voice, but an annoyingly belligerent and self-centered personality; and Imelda, the prettiest of the three female backup singers, with whom the whole band is in love. After many riotous rehearsals and several less than auspicious performances, the band begins to take off. Dubliners can relate to their sound, if not their message. They eventually gain enough fame to attract a small, local record label. Before they can sign, the inner turmoil caused by sexual rivalries and enlarged egos dissolves the band. The novel ends with Jimmy vowing to give up his political goals, and planning to start an apolitical country music band.

This enjoyable first novel does have its limitations. The plot is almost farcical: the premise for the band’s creation, uniting all Dublin youth, calls for an extreme suspension of belief. The one-dimensional characters, although enjoyable, do not develop. Some of

the humorous situations read like scenes from situation comedies and, although funny, are somewhat forced.

Despite these criticisms, the novel is effective. Viewed in the spectrum of Doyle's work, we can see traits which Doyle uses and further develops in his later novels: the fast-paced, profanity-laced, realistically transcribed dialogue; the sympathetic and likable characters, isolated from their pasts and not looking toward their dim futures; the laugh-out-loud humor. These elements are some of Doyle's trademarks.

The novel, although most interesting when viewed as either the first book in the trilogy or as a measuring stick for Doyle's maturity as an artist, does contain noteworthy features of its own. Doyle's manipulation of both music and humor are especially remarkable. His use of music is so innovative as to remind the reader of the music in Joyce's *Ulysses*. His comedic writing is masterful, and the atmosphere of the novel is one of uproarious hilarity, yet *The Commitments* is not merely a comic novel. What is most significant is the way Doyle is able to employ both music and humor as vehicles for his social vision.

This novel is about a band, so of course it includes many references to song titles and lyrics. But Doyle does much more than merely mention songs. He includes lengthy excerpts of the songs--lyrics plus a humorously transcribed representation of the music--in the text. "Ten or fifteen of the book's 165 pages are filled with capitalized lyrics" (Christgau 60). It is hard to overlook almost 10% of a novel, and we wonder what Doyle is trying to do.

The music in this novel is accessible to many types of readers. Almost any reader, from a working-class Dubliner, to a middle-class American graduate student, to an upper-class British housewife, would be familiar with much of the music. The vast majority of his readers would have heard the often recorded “Knock on Wood,” which is one of “the classics, the ones everyone knew” (*Commitments* 116).

--I DON'T WANNA LOSE--THIS GOOD THANG--
 --THU--UNG UNG UNG
 --THA' I'VE GOT--
 IF I DO--
 DUHH DAA DOOHH
 --I WOULD SURELY--
 SURELY LOSE THE LOT--
 --COS YOUR LOVE-- --THI--THI--
 IS BET HA-- THU--UNG UNG UNG
 THAN ANNY LOVE I KNOW --OW--
 --IT'S LIKE THUNDER--
 --LIGH'--NIN'
 --DEH EH EHHH--
 --THE WAY YEH LOVE ME IS FRIGH'NIN--
 I'D BET HA KNOCK--
 --THU THU THU THU--
 --ON WOO--O--OOD--BA--BEEE-- (69) (instrumentals in my italics).

This passage exemplifies Doyle's emphasis on music. He transcribes the lyrics so fully to ensure that the reader, if perhaps unfamiliar with the song's title, will recognize the lyrics and the melody, or at least, will be able to get a sense of the flavor of the music. He does not want any of this music and these allusions to go unrecognized.

Because of the music's accessibility, the atmosphere created is absorbingly intense. The result of the instrumental and lyrical transcription (which is as accurate as his

transcription of the speech patterns of the working-class Dubliner) is the overwhelming rush of music which engulfs the reader when he opens the covers of this book. It is a true sensory experience--one can virtually hear the music and feel the reverberations of the instruments. As the most memorable aspect of the movie is the soundtrack, one of the most memorable aspects of the book is the "transcribed-track."

Music in the novel figures as more than atmosphere. It has several functions. Its most important role is to establish the link between 1980s Dublin and 1960s Black America. The band plays soul music for the specific, political purpose of trying to establish the same sense of brotherhood among the Dublin youth that soul music did with the African-Americans. Doyle, who has read Gerri Hirshey's book *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* which discusses this music's historical and political importance, has the band play soul music for the specific, political purpose of alerting the non-Irish reading public to the plight of the Dublin youth. The lyrics are also uniquely "Dublinized," which has the effect of anchoring the novel in 1987 working-class Dublin and allowing the reader a glimpse into its collective consciousness. Another function of the music is to comment on or foreshadow certain situations. Some of these commentaries are comic, but many are poignant. Finally, the music provides further insights into characters.

Soul music, which arose in the 1960s, redefined America's "perceptions of the Negro" (Rose 46): "soul serves . . . to provide a positive self-image for the large majority of black persons who find themselves still tightly locked behind the walls of the urban ghetto. Soul helps to free the black urban ghetto dweller from guilt about his apparent

failure to find escape from economic and social oppression” (Riedel 52). Even more so, this music offered a temporary refuge from injustice: “soul music gave many . . . somewhere to run—to get out of ourselves, to feel free, if only for two and a half minutes a side” (Hirshey xvi). Soul attempted to give African-Americans something to claim as their own and expressed “the blacks’ consciousness of non-Americanness while living and working in America, at the same time that it enables blacks to begin living on the same terms as other Americans” (Riedel 51).

Modern Dubliners experience similar economic oppression. One-third of the Irish live below the poverty line, and over a quarter of a million Irish are unemployed, with rates of up to 60 per cent in some areas of Dublin. Faced with the prospect of being on welfare their entire lives, 50,000 Irish men and women leave the country each year. All the young people in this novel are on welfare and, if they remain in Ireland, might be on it for their entire lives.

The social oppression and lost feeling of the 1960s Black are also part of the consciousness of Dublin youth. “Inequality is growing rather than diminishing, with social welfare insufficient to meet the minimum needs of a large proportion of the people” (*Frontiers* 7). Paul Hewson, also known as Bono, the lead singer of the internationally popular rock group U2, in an essay he wrote a year or two before this novel was published, recognizes this imbalance:

(UK critics) seemed to find any kind of passion hard to take, they prefer a mask of cool . . . unless you’re black. Which is interesting, because though this passion is to me an Irish characteristic, in American blacks it’s called soul. I was called a “White Nigger”

once by a black musician, and I took it as he meant it, as a compliment. The Irish, the blacks, feel like outsiders. There's a feeling of being homeless, migrant, but I suppose that's what all art is--a search for identity. (*Frontiers* 190)

The Irish artist and the Irish emigré feel like exiles, belonging to no one tradition: "it was like we were lost in space, floating over many traditions but not belonging to any one of them" (189). Unable to establish themselves in their home country, thousands must move away and attempt to find a niche in a country with a foreign culture, foreign mores, and a foreign dialect.

The ability to express themselves, to play with words, is especially crucial for Blacks in America. "For people denied social and economic power, verbal power provides important compensation" (Vlach qtd. in Rose 30). Verbal power is the ability to manipulate words, allusions, expressions in new ways. Black history is filled with powerful, emotive language. For instance, slave songs had double meanings, the surface meaning compliant and submissive for the benefit of the white owners, the real, deeper meaning angry and subversive. Powerful emotions accompany subversion: as recently abducted African-Americans began to see themselves as slaves and not merely as captives, their songs evolved away from the music of a free African people toward a music which could express their misery, their longing and hope. "Since the beginning of their American experience, blacks have cried out their sense of desperation and alienation in music--spiritual, gospel, blues, jazz, and now soul. The message seems to be always the same" (Riedel 53).

The Irish have also had a turbulent history of enslavement and oppression. Conquered by the Vikings in the eighth century, the Normans in the twelfth, the English in the sixteenth until the early twentieth, much of their culture also has been disregarded or destroyed. "In the end, the repeated invasions which had given Irish history its peculiar dynamic also led to . . . the tragic recognition of culture's failure" (Deane 23). Forced in the seventeenth century to make English their official language, their struggles to retain their heritage have resulted in the strong oral traditions and storytelling: "The destruction of the Gaelic order had, as one of its consequences, the enhancement of the oral tradition" (23). Because Irish is the oldest language of the European vernacular literature, when this written language was driven almost out of existence, poets and storytellers had to rely on an oral tradition to preserve the myths and legends which date back to pre-Christian times. Both the Irish and the Africans learned to utilize all of language's aspects.

In the 1960s, soul music took this history of African-American misery and rechanneled it. "Instead of a powerless music, soul became powerful. By redefining English words and sounds, revitalizing them, and giving them new meanings, often to the astonishment and bewilderment of the mainstream audience, "blacks have turned the table--white listeners are the outsiders, the excluded" (Riedel 51). Soul music is able "to change what counts as history and reality. . .what names mean, what reference means" (Rose 141).

Jimmy wants the Commitments to give Dubliners the same sense of power that soul gave the Blacks. He wants to instill a sense of pride in these people who have no education and little future:

Where are yis from? (He answered the question himself.)--Dublin. (He asked another one.)--Wha' part o' Dublin? Barrytown. Wha' class are yis? Workin' class. Are yis proud of it? Yeah, yis are. . . .--Your music should be abou' where you're from an' the sort o' people yeh come from.----Say it once, say it loud, I'm black an' I'm proud. . . .--The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads. . . .An' Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland. The culchies have fuckin' everythin'. An' the northside Dubliners are the niggers o' Dublin.---Say it loud, I'm black an' I'm proud. (*Commitments* 8-9)

Jimmy is attempting to borrow a tradition, which, successful once in uniting a people, he hopes will be successful again. Jimmy's mission accounts for the odd name of the band. He wants the Commitments to commit themselves to the transformation of their city.

Doyle specifies not only the style, but also the artist, of the music this band plays. James Brown, Jimmy's musical hero and the creator of soul music, is the original artist of thirteen of the songs on the band's limited playlist. Brown is an "icon of Black America" (Rose 22): "All music that we hear today is influenced by James Brown. I stand on that--everybody who calls himself a creator of music has been influenced by James," (Fred Wesley qtd. in Rose 37). Doyle himself calls him "The godfather of soul and what not. The main man of soul. The godhead" and says that in concert "He was great. . . . The show was terrific" (Interview 207).

Brown took soul music to new expressive heights. Through music, he “got out of himself” and enabled others to do the same. A master showman, he transported his audiences out of their lives for a short time, while simultaneously uniting them in this experience. Brown also knew that music tied blacks to their important heritage: “Black music shows the past . . . soul music, living history” (Brown qtd. in Rose 15). And he knew that the historical was political. He tried to make his audience aware of “how deep the codes and meaning of music run in black America, how they evoke an historic continuum, how they can move to unite” (56). In “I’m Black and I’m Proud” Brown sings:

But all the work I did was for the other man
 I worked on a job with my feet and my hands
 Now we demand a chance to do things for ourselves
 We’re tired of beatin’ our head against the wall
 And workin’ for someone else.
 I’m black and I’m proud. . . .
 We’d rather die on our feet than live on our knees. (qtd. in Rose 68)

It is fitting that Brown should be Jimmy’s hero. Jimmy is trying to change his fellow Dubliners, and Brown “had the audacity to believe he could make things happen. . . . He forced it on people . . . but he made us all believers” (Wesley qtd. in Rose 86). Jimmy wants his band to be as successful at transporting audiences as was Brown. He hopes that he has more in common with “America’s soul Brother No. One” than only a first name.

Jimmy attempts to immerse his band in soul music and its culture. For instance, he “gave [the band members] their stage names” (*Commitments* 42), like “James The Soul Surgeon Clifford” and “Billy The Animal Mooney.” In doing this, he is adapting to a long tradition in black musical culture. “Such names were essential identities in an America which had long been Negro but which would emerge . . . newly born as black. These were titles, beings, selves which existed beyond the reach of another [white] America. . . . These names and their world, however public they happen to become, remain very much a matter of private black control” (Rose 29). Doyle says, “I loved these names, these nicknames that they have to live up to” (Interview 207).

Jimmy also appreciates the nonverbal sounds of the soul singers, which are “a code . . . another language. That we are not just ‘black’--we are *multiply* black. . .” (Brown qtd. in Rose 127). He has Deco study “James for the growls, Otis for the moans, Smokey for the whines” (*Commitments* 31).

Jimmy taps into the African traditions surrounding food and the spirit. He puts Deco “on a strict soul *diet*” (31 my italics). Nourishment and the language surrounding it are integral to soul music: “soul tradition ‘feeds on truth’. . . . Food was a frequent metaphor in an escalating creative drive. . . . But it reaches back . . . towards more African definitions of what nutrition is all about: the feeding of the spiritual and cerebral as well as the corporeal self” (Rose 86).

Jimmy gives inspirational speeches to his band, trying to strengthen its connection to black history. He, in the manner of Black preachers, delivers messages to the band

quite often: “. . . he’d give them a talk. They all enjoyed Jimmy’s lectures. So did Jimmy. They weren’t really lectures; more workshops” (*Commitments* 35). Soul’s origins are in the church. “Soul came up from gospel and the blues” (Franklin qtd. in Hirshey xiii). James Brown also had a very strong gospel singing background: “In Brown’s art, gospel is central” (Rose 24). The soul singer and the gospel preacher even share the same origins: “The freestyle collective improvisations of the black church congregation and the rhetorical solo style of the black gospel preacher . . . the same techniques are used by the preacher and the singer--the singer perhaps being considered the lyrical extension of the rhythmically rhetorical style of the preacher” (Jones qtd. in Rose 118). James Brown felt that religion and soul were interchangeable: “As with the church itself, there was no end: this was meant to be music that would move the brother and sister for days. It was part of your black life, it was black life. As with real religion, you are meant to carry it out of the temple and with you into the daily arena of temptation, jubilation and despair” (Rose 60). Jimmy attempts to force his fellow Dubliners to see the similarity between themselves and blacks, to co-opt the latter’s modern tradition, and perhaps to gain a little self-respect. Doyle makes use of these similarities to broaden his readers’ awareness, while he cultivates a more respectful understanding of his countrymen.

A final feature of the band’s sound which harkens back to African traditions is the substitution of Dublin words and places into the body of the songs, which adds “a bit o’ local flavour” (*Commitments* 54). This localizing of the lyrics is common in soul music: “[The Afrocentric beat] is rhythm whose expectations of change, of improvisation,

surprise and participation are deeply embedded . . . rhythmic participation also symbolizes black spiritual unity” (Rose 123).

In the novel, the recognition of familiar places and common experiences inspires surges of local pride, and always evokes cheers and hurrahs from the crowd.

Interestingly, Deco, the band’s lead singer and the most disloyal character, starts this exercise in unity. For example, in the song “What Becomes of the Broken-Hearted,” he sings:

--I’LL SEARCH FOR YOU
DOWN ON THE DOCKS
I’LL WAIT UNDER CLERY’S CLOCK-----(*Commitments* 54)

Clery’s Clock, located on O’Connell Street, would have been used by most of the crowd as a convenient meeting-spot. In “The Chain Gang” Deco extemporizes:

I’M THIRSTY
MY WORK IS SO HARD--
GIVE ME GUINNESS----(56)

Many non-Irish know that Guinness is the official national drink of Ireland. Guinness is as common in Ireland as Coca-Cola is in America. A fortified version of it is even served in hospitals, and is also the sustenance recommended to be taken after donating blood.

One of the reasons Doyle changed the lyrics of certain songs “was the humorous effect--just seeing the Dublin accent written into a song and then changing the lyrics slightly” (Interview 206). Nevertheless, examining the new lyrics can give the reader

insights into the collective consciousness of the group of people Doyle writes about. For instance, “Night Train” is the band’s signature song with the most localized lyrics:

--STARTIN’ OFF IN CONNOLLY--
 . . . (Deco was travelling north, by DART)
 --MOVIN’ ON OU’ TO KILLESTER----
 --HARMONSTOWN RAHENY--
 --AN DON’T FORGET KILBARRACK--THE HOME O’ THE BLUES--
 --HOWTH JUNCTION BAYSIDE--
 THEN ON OU’ TO SUTTON WHERE THE RICH FOLKS LIVE--
 OH YEAH--
 --NIGH’ TRAIN----
 --EASY TO BONK YOUR FARE----
 --NIGH’ TRAIN--
 AN ALSATIAN IN EVERY CARRIAGE--
 NIGH’ TRAIN----
 LOADS O’ SECURITY GUARDS--
 NIGH’ TRAIN--
 LAYIN’ INTO YOUR MOT AT THE BACK--
 NIGH’ TRAIN’
 GETTIN’ SLAGGED BY YOUR MATES--
 NIGH’ TRAIN--
 GETTIN’ CHIPS FROM THE CHINESE CHIPPER--
 OH NIGH’ TRAIN--
 CARRIES ME HOME-- (106)

 COMIN’ HOME FROM THE BOOZER--
 NIGH’ TRAIN--
 . . . GETTIN’ SICK ON THE BLOKE BESIDE YEH--
 NIGH’ TRAIN--
 CARRIES ME HOME--
 NIGH’ TRAIN--
 TO ME GAFF-- (148)

The crowd, in the book, “laughed. This was great. They pushed up to the stage. . . . They cheered. . . . Dublin Soul had been delivered” (105).

This song's references describe general experiences to which most of the band's audiences could relate: the ever-present threat of the police; the drunken toots followed by nausea; hurried, semi-private sexual encounters; the late night binges on greasy food. Knowing about these general experiences makes the characters more accessible to a non-Irish, non-working-class readership.

Jimmy, in his renaming, preaching, and extemporizing, pushes the African-American connection as far as he can in an attempt to make his band an authentic purveyor of its music. Doyle has created such a character with such a band to broaden both his countrymen's and his public's awareness of cross cultural similarities in an attempt to engender sympathy and empathy.

Music in *The Commitments* also comments on or foreshadows the situation at hand. Not to overstate this function's importance, the musical commentary is similar to the whistling habit of Ira Moran, a character in Anne Tyler's *Breathing Lessons*, one of Doyle's favorite novels. Ira has a tendency toward reticence, a trait his wife has learned to accept because his whistling is so expressive:

But what he failed to realize was, his whistling could tell the whole story. For instance . . . after a terrible fight in the early days of their marriage they had more or less smoothed things over . . . and then he'd gone off to work whistling a song [with the lyrics] . . . "I wonder if I care as much . . . as I did before" . . . But often the association was something trivial, something circumstantial--"This Old House" when he tackled a minor repair job, or "The Wichita Lineman" whenever he helped bring in the laundry. (13)

Like the songs Ira whistled, some of Doyle's musical commentaries are frivolous and amusing, while others have serious connotations.

The humorous commentaries are simple and obvious to those on the lookout. For instance, one section of the novel begins with the sentence "The Commitments rehearsed three times a week" (*Commitments* 55), rough duty for a bunch of low-ambition teenagers. We have to chuckle when several lines later they begin to practice "Chain Gang." Another time, directly before Outspan's guitar string breaks, the lyrics are "--CAN'T GO OHON--"(81). The novel contains other similar examples.

Sometimes the songs insert serious commentaries, as in "--GET ON UP--STAY ON THE SCENE--GET ON UP--LIKE A SEX MACHINE AH--GET ON UP--YOU GOT TO HAVE THE FEELING--SURE AS YOU'RE BORN--GET IT TOGETHER"(18). These lyrics encourage the young men who have the dream of forming a band concerned with "real sex and real politics." This music urges the fledgling band to have a voice and to make a positive impact on the empty lives of the Dublin youth.

At one performance, Deco does not introduce the band members in the rehearsed manner. This transgression, added to all of Deco's other infuriating habits, angers the band. During the encore, however, with its conciliating lyrics --AT THE DARK EH-END--OF THE STREET--THAT'S WHER-RE WE BOTH SHALL MEET HIDIN' IN SHA-DOWS WHERE WE DON'T BELOHO-O-ONG. . . YOU AN' ME--" (118), the band decides to forgive Deco's transgressions and to keep its higher goal in sight: "The

Commitments were forgiving Deco. . . . It was beautiful” (118). Despite Deco’s maddening egocentricity, the other members subconsciously realize they must stay together; apart, they have no voice or power, and are totally alone “at the dark end of the street.” At least banded together they belong to something, even if this something has infuriating elements.

Finally, the novel closes with the Byrds’ “I’ll Feel a Whole Lot Better”--I HAVE TO LET YOU GO BAY--ABE--AND RIGHT AWAY--AY--Y--AFTER ALL YOU DID. . . AND I’LL PROBABLY --FEEL A WHOLE LOT BETTER--WHEN YOU’RE GOH--ON--(161). The band has broken up, and Jimmy, disgusted by all the warring and tensions which produced the split, is relieved to be rid of the worry and stress of a band manager. As Doyle says about Jimmy, he has “energy and resources . . . unemployment is just something to get out of the way--he’s other things to do--he’ll survive” (Interview 190). It is peculiar, however, that Jimmy is playing this “good-bye” song to introduce the genre of music which his next band will play. Jimmy is giving up the idea of a political band, which as the song tells us, will be much easier on him.

The music also cleverly foreshadows situations. For example, the first time we meet Joey The Lips, he sings a snippet of the classic Beatles “All You Need is Love.” Later, Joey has sex with every female member of the band, and actually leaves Ireland at the end of the novel because he was afraid he had become a “da.” Notice that Deco’s favorite song to sing is “I Heard It” (*Commitments* 31), a song about betrayal, which is what he ultimately does to the band when he attempts to go solo. When we read the lyrics

to the song “What Becomes of the Broken Hearted?” we realize that the novel answers the question--they go off and start a new band, which will most likely also fail because--
 HAPPINESS IS JUST AN ILLUSION--FILLED WITH SADNESS AN’ CON--FEU--
 SHUN-- (51). One of the band’s most popular songs, “Knock on Wood,” has the lyrics--
 I DON’T WANNA LOSE--THIS GOOD THANG--THA’ I’VE GOT--IF I DO--I
 WOULD SURELY--LOSE THE LOT--(69). This love song comes to seem rather grim when one realizes that the Commitments indeed do lose “the lot,” and are left living on the dole with few prospects. The song “It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World” talks about how--
 IT’S A MAN’S--MAN’S WORLD--BUT IT WOULD BE NOTHIN’--WITHOU’ A
 WOMAN OR A GURREL--(136). A few pages later, amid dissension and quarrels, Jimmy realizes that though the Commitmentettes were just backup singers, “Imelda might have been holding the Commitments together. Derek fancied her, and Outspan fancied her, Deco fancied her. He was sure James fancied her. Now Dean fancied her too. He fancied her himself. Imelda had soul” (145). Obviously, it might be a man’s band, but it would be nothing without Imelda. On a lighter note, it is Natalie who sings the solo for “Walking in the Rain:” “Natalie, in the middle, stepped forward.--I WANT HIM--”(58-9). Three pages later, “Dean found Natalie kissing [Joey]” (61).

Thus song lyrics connect, suggest, comment, foreshadow, and create an unforgettable mood. By inserting certain lyrics and certain songs, Doyle adds a subtle new dimension to his social commentary. Doyle carefully chooses his band’s playlist.

Humor plays an important part in *The Commitments*. Although Doyle's manipulation of his audiences via humor in his later works is anticipated here, the humor in this novel is straightforward and not overly sophisticated. The book's premise--ten very inexperienced young adults forming their own band under the absurd tutelage of the practical, yet bizarrely idealistic Jimmy Jr., and the middle-aged, Bible-spouting Joey the Lipps--reads something like a situation comedy. Characters are funny; situations are funny; dialogue is funny. Doyle's deadpan literary style is aptly suited for these comedic situations.

Doyle's Chekhovian manner of allowing the characters to reveal themselves is amusing in itself. For instance, Deco, the lead singer with no experience, is extremely egotistical. When Joey first plays the tape of a song which they will perform, "they listened, frightened, to Jimmy Ruffin. They could never do that. Only Deco thought he could do better" (49). Doyle's blunt, straightforward language perfectly captures Deco's lack of awareness of his own egotism.

Jimmy Jr. is also inexperienced, yet he must never let others sense this inexperience. When he interrupts some of the band members smoking marijuana during a break, he is upset:

Jimmy was doing some thinking. What had annoyed him at first was the fact that they hadn't got the go-ahead from him before they'd lit up. He needed a better reason than that.

--For one thing, he said.--Righ'--Yis're barely able to play your instruments when yis have your heads on yis. . . .Second, said Jimmy.--We're a soul group. . . .Not a pop group or a punk group, or a fuckin' hippy group.--We're a soul group.

--Wha' d'yeh mean, WE'RE? said Deco.

--Fuck up, you. Jimmy was grateful for the interruption. It gave him more time to think of something. (73)

Again, Doyle's style is the perfect vehicle for this humor. Doyle lays bare for us the inner thoughts of these young people, inner thoughts which we all have, yet will not admit to having. Seeing ourselves in these characters makes us laugh at them, and at our own fallibilities. Doyle employs this same brand of humor in his later novels.

The dialogue is also funny. One simple, typical example is found on the third page, when Outspan and Derek seek Jimmy's advice regarding the new band they have formed. Jimmy greets them sarcastically: "Puttin' the finishin' touches to your album?" Outspan replies with self-deprecating honesty: "Puttin' the finishin' touches to our name. . . ."

Doyle also uses slapstick situational comedy, which works in this novel simply because the audience, its disbelief suspended by the inspirational speeches, is already prepared for the highly incongruous. The band's first gig is a perfect example of this physical humor. This soul band, dressed in dark suits and black tight mini-dresses, is playing in a church hall. They are doing so as part of an anti-heroin campaign; a banner proclaiming this fact is behind them. The word "heroin" is misspelled, but "the syringe is very good though, isn't it" (96). The audience at this auspicious premiere is also presented comically:

There were about twelve of them . . . all kids, brothers and sisters of the Commitments, and their friends. . . . There were six other older ones, in their late teens or early twenties, mates, he supposed, of Deco or Billy or Dean. There were three girls, pals of Imelda, Natalie and Bernie. The rest were kids, except for one, Outspan's mother. The caretaker got her a chair and she sat at the front, at the side. (94).

Mickah, the semi-psychotic bouncer, shoves the few audience members “up to the front. . . . It’ll look better. . . . We don’t want the group demoralized” (95). When the first number goes well, the audience does not need Mickah’s prompting when it comes time to clap. During the next number, however, Deco, who has been swinging the microphone over his head, inadvertently hits Bernie with it: “[The mike] swooped into the back of Bernie’s head. She was sent flying forward and she had to jump off the stage. The Commitments stopped” (100). During the next number, the piano “bashed into the backdrop, the operetta society’s South Pacific scenery (last year’s Sound of Music scenery with a very yellow palm tree painted onto one of the hills). The song was over. The audience didn’t know this until Mickah told them to clap” (103). The highlight of the evening occurs when, during the encore, “something flies up and out of the darkness. It landed behind them, a little pair of light blue underpants.” Quite the compliment, until we see how they came to be thrown up there:

--I’ll get them back for yeh after, righ’, said Mickah.--When it’s over.

--Yeh said yeh’d give me a pound, the boy reminded him.

--I’ll let yeh in for nothin’ the next time, said Mickah.

This injustice stunned the boy for a while. He’d just made a sap of himself, flinging his kaks at your women on the stage and now he wasn’t even going to be paid for it. (109)

The evening ends prematurely during the song “Knock on Wood” when Deco “knocked over the horn section’s mike and half the horn section gave him an almighty kick

up the hole. Deco wasn't going to be able to sing again for a good few minutes so Jimmy drew the curtain" (110). This situation is one of the most outrageous of the book, but there are others like it.

Religion also supplies a source of humor. The agnostic Doyle, writing tongue-in-cheek, does not mean for this novel to be read as a Christian allegory, even though one of the principal band members is constantly spouting religious maxims. Joey the Lipps uses Biblical language to praise the benefits of soul music:

The Lord told me to come home. Ed Winchell, a Baptist reverend on Lenox Avenue in Harlem, told me. But The Lord told him to tell me. . . . The Lord told the Reverend Ed that the Irish Brothers had no soul, that they need some soul. And pretty fucking quick . . . the Brothers wouldn't be shooting the asses off each other if they had soul. . . . Jimmy was delighted. . . . The Commitments were going to be. They had Joey the Lips Fagan. And that man had enough soul for all of them. He had God too. (26)

It is no accident that the most religious-sounding character has sex with the band's three female members. In one of the novel's last scenes he is also exposed as a liar.

Joey is a parody John the Baptist. He paves the way for the real Messiah, Jimmy. Doyle, the disinterested Creator, paring his fingernails, has offered up his creation, Jimmy, to save Dublin. Jimmy preaches to his band members, the disciples, and through them, tries to reach the masses. Among the disciples, there is Deco, the Judas figure, James, a physician like Luke, and Imelda, the sacred, untouchable, female figure, the worship of whom holds the band together. But this attempt at saving humanity fails because the characters in this novel are ordinary, extremely fallible, heavy-drinking, sex-crazed Dublin

youths. Associating these characters with New Testament figures is a joke Doyle plays on the reader.

Humor is one of the most crucial elements in *The Commitments*. Young people with no jobs and no real prospects start a band, one of the few actions which might have meaning. Although the band fails, the novel is anything but dreary. Each character's outlook is either so positive or so humorously presented that pity is evoked for no one. The characters do not consider their situations dire, so the reader does not either. We enjoy their wit and optimism.

This discussion of Doyle's humor leads directly into a consideration of his social vision. As stated in the "Introduction," Doyle's earlier novels are much more life-affirming than his later novels. The bleakness is confined to the background while humor and optimism dominate.

This novel emphasizes solutions. There are many problems, but each is solved in some way satisfactory to the reader and to the characters. The first crisis occurs when Outspan and Derek seek Jimmy Jr.'s advice. Jimmy convinces them that soul music is the way to go. They agree. Crisis solved. Next, Jimmy must find other members for the band. Finding each member is a mini-crisis solved. When Joey the Lipps contacts him, a major crisis is solved. Joey, a middle-aged sax player, has played with numerous soul bands and becomes an invaluable asset to Jimmy in teaching soul to the less experienced musicians. Everything comes together finally, and the first rehearsal is planned and

executed. Another crisis overcome. Their first gig, already discussed, has good results in that they get a little bit of media exposure.

The next big crisis occurs when Billy, the drums player, quits the band because he hates Deco, the lead singer, so much: "I fuckin' hate him--I can't even sleep at night" (128). Less than a page later, Mickah, the former bouncer, decides that he wants to play the drums and, again, another problem solved. Then Jimmy discovers that Dean, the fledgling saxophone player, has been studying and playing jazz, the death knell for any soul saxophone player. But Jimmy and Joey talk to him, and he agrees to stop doing so. Catastrophe averted.

The last crisis, obviously, occurs when the band implodes. Not even Jimmy's fine talking and slick maneuvering can patch up the final rift. But again, in less than five pages, there is talk of another, better band, without Deco, whose egoism and abrasive personality were the catalyst for the Commitments' split. The emphasis is on the new band, the solution, which will be better than the old, strife-ridden group.

This solution-problem formula obliquely suggests a social vision. This world is hard to live in, and life is not easy. However, this world can be survived and even enjoyed. The difference between leading a miserable or joyful life is not located in our circumstances or our environment. The difference is in each person. Having a sense of humor is invaluable. The young adults who form the Commitments are from poor homes, live with violence and drunkenness, will most likely never have fulfilling or mentally

challenging jobs. Yet they are happy. They laugh at themselves and at each other. They do not dwell on the misery around them; they accept it and move on.

Their delight in belonging to the band shows us Doyle's second necessary ingredient for a joyous life. Family is crucial. Although the emphasis on family is more apparent in the later novels, it is present here. The band becomes a surrogate family for its members. It has all the usual family dynamics. There are two leaders, Joey, the experienced voice of authority, and the more conciliating problem-solver Jimmy. There are numerous siblings, some of whom are insufferable, like Deco, but who must be endured for the sake of the family. Others play family roles as well: Imelda, so pretty that she is the "glue" which holds the group together; Mickah, the crazy one; Outspan, the shy one; James, the smart one. This group gives its members a sense of belonging. For once in their lives, they are doing something worthwhile and belonging to something sustaining, and they realize it. After the band's demise, Imelda asks Jimmy, "If you're startin' another group let us be in it, will yeh? It was brilliant crack. . . . It was fuckin' brilliant" (160).

The Commitments successfully launched the career of Roddy Doyle. The popularity of the novel and the movie adapted from it brought name-recognition to Doyle and an interest in the Rabbittes, which created a market for *The Snapper*. The novel introduced Barrytown and its savory dialect to the world. Finally, the book's charm and accessibility created an audience for Doyle's later novels. In addition, *The Commitments* first demonstrates Doyle's comic genius while unpatronizingly giving literary voice to a

community of outsiders. He appealingly presents both the joy and the pain of working-class Dublin.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SNAPPER

Doyle wrote *The Snapper*, a book about a pregnancy, because “I knew nothing about it and I wanted to see if I could create a world which had nothing to do with me but which would be convincing” (Interview 187). Although reading Doris Lessing’s *A Proper Marriage* was invaluable to him when writing about childbirth, this novel, which he started immediately after he finished *The Commitments* in 1986, took him three years to write: “such a short book—it took me longest of any to write” (187). Like *The Commitments*, it is funny, fast-paced, and dependent on dialogue written in Doyle’s signature Barrytown-ese. Unlike *The Commitments*, it focuses on two characters who grow during the novel, rather than superficially on many who remain unchanged; there is less, but still some, reliance on situational gags to provide humor; and the story and characters are the basis of its popularity, not the soundtrack. Doyle has matured as an artist in his second novel, which, although still as raucous as *The Commitments*, evokes a more complex set of emotions.

The Snapper is not a light-hearted comedic novel (though the film was marketed as “the feel-good movie of the year”); some readers even view it as a tragedy. The story again centers on the Rabbitte family introduced in *The Commitments*. This time Sharon and Jimmy Sr. are the principals; Jimmy Jr., the hero of *The Commitments*, is rarely seen. The book opens with a scene in which Sharon, age 20 now, is telling her parents that she

is pregnant and intends to keep the baby (the snapper). The reader's interest is piqued when she refuses to reveal the father's identity. Her parents, wisely realizing that her pregnancy is a *fait accompli*, accept the news with relative equanimity. The book progresses with the pregnancy, and we witness Sharon telling the news to her friends and the rest of her unruly family; however, the father's name remains a mystery. When we finally learn the circumstances of her impregnation on page 44, we are shocked. In a flashback, we witness a drunk, semi-conscious Sharon having sex against a parked car with Mr. Burgess, the father of one of her close friends. Doyle never states that this sexual act is a rape, but Sharon's inebriation has made her not fully aware of what is happening. She is being taken horrible advantage of at the very least. George Burgess, a neighbor and her brother's soccer coach, is a spineless, unattractive, frustrated married man who is Sharon's father's contemporary.

Instead of experiencing the overwhelming negative emotions which often accompany such a violation, Sharon is primarily concerned that the father's identity will become known to all of Barrytown and that she will become a laughingstock. She is disgusted by the thought of a liaison with Mr. Burgess and wants only to forget the sordid event. However, Sharon is forced to confront him with the truth when she learns he is bragging that she is a "great little ride." The unforeseen result of this interview is that Mr. Burgess begins to believe himself in love with Sharon, and shortly after, leaves his wife, telling her that he is in love with "a girl . . . [who] is expecting. . . . [who] has no one else to look after her" (*Van* 117). Barrytown is not filled with "eejits," and its inhabitants

soon deduce a relationship between Sharon and Mr. Burgess. Sharon, still sickened by the thought of Mr. Burgess, denies the rumor, and invents a mythical Spanish sailor as the father of her child. Nevertheless, she becomes the joke of the whole of the town.

Surprisingly, not the pregnancy but the circumstances of the pregnancy drive a wedge between the Rabbitte family members. Jimmy Sr., believing the rumors he has heard concerning Mr. Burgess, is upset that he and his family are being laughed at. He becomes very angry at Sharon, and gives her "the silent treatment," which tears apart the family. Sharon refuses to accept blame for her condition. She forces Jimmy Sr.'s hand by threatening to move out of the home. Jimmy Sr. then realizes how much he would miss her, and they "make up" in a touchingly humorous scene. Jimmy Sr. then becomes very involved in the pregnancy, which provides more comic interludes. At the end of the novel, Sharon delivers a healthy baby girl. She thumbs her nose at all of Barrytown by naming her baby Georgina. The last scene shows Sharon in her hospital bed, where she is laughing uncontrollably at her joke on Barrytown.

One aspect of this novel which makes it superior to *The Commitments* is the characterization. Doyle concentrates on two characters, Sharon and her father, Jimmy Sr., and develops them more fully than any characters in the first novel. Although these characters are not as complex as those in his last two novels, the reader is able to recognize the personal growth which each undergoes and the consequent changes in their relationship.

At the beginning of the novel, Sharon is almost a textbook comic heroine. The comic hero “. . . is marvelously resilient: [he] endures indignities, disappointments, misfortunes, and frustrations, yet his setbacks are almost invariably followed by a marked revival. The capacity for survival and revival [is] kin to all the comic figures who are constantly undone but never finished” (Bell 44).

The comic hero does not seem to need or want our pity. Sharon is the victim, if not of a rape, of a gross-injustice, but oddly enough, we never see her as such. Because she “radiates a fundamental comic equanimity” (Bell 46), we do not pity her. We forget about alienation and adultery, rape and poverty.

From the beginning, we sense that Sharon is not a pathetic character. She is self-assured, plain-speaking, unemotional. Doyle conveys this to us in his plain, unadorned narration: “Sharon was pregnant and she’d just told her father that she thought she was. She’d told her mother earlier, before the dinner” (*Snapper* 1). With a narrative tone like that, it is hard to see this pregnancy as apocalyptic. We perceive her self-possession--“she was happy with the way things were going so far” (2). Sharon is not calculating, but she is extremely competent and is not going to be forced into some false sense of guilt or shame over something which could happen to anyone. Sharon shares Molly Bloom’s credo on guilt: “if that’s all the harm ever we did in this vale of tears God knows it’s not much” (*Ulysses* 18:1517-18). Sharon is very self-assured in this first, crucial scene. She controls her parents and their reactions. She has the savvy to tell her mother first and to enlist her support in shaping her father’s reaction. She refuses to divulge the father’s

identity. She cannot be forced to alter her course of action merely because her parents want their curiosity satisfied. She refuses to humiliate herself because others may think her actions “wrong.” By asserting her rights as an adult, she forces her parents and the reader to acknowledge them. Our reaction, as well as her father’s, is governed by her presentation of the facts. Just as we often need a prompt to tell us when something is funny or when we should laugh, Sharon’s behavior is our prompt to put away our tragic sensibilities, and to prepare ourselves to witness a self-sufficient character.

Another reason we do not pity Sharon is because she refuses to pity herself. Though she is not immune to worries, she rarely allows herself to get depressed. Her low point in the book lasts only two paragraphs:

Sharon lay on her bed. She couldn’t go downstairs, she couldn’t go to the Hikers, or anywhere. . . . She’d no friends now, and no places to go to. She couldn’t even look at her family. God, she wanted to die; really she did. She just lay there. She couldn’t do anything else. (119)

But she despairs only for a moment. “She was angry now. She thumped the bed. . . . She’d deny it, that was what she’d do” (120). Nothing in her situation changes except her mindset. This determination occurs again when she fears Yvonne Burgess, Mr. Burgess’ daughter, might cause a scene at the pub: “She hoped to God Yvonne wouldn’t be there tonight. Maybe she’d be better off staying at home—Ah fuck this, she said. And she got up and went out” (*Snapper* 106). She recognizes the futility of negative thinking, and she avoids it.

Another quality of the comic hero is “an odd sort of passivity that combines a flexible yet stubborn resistance to being pushed with a general reluctance to pull” (Galligan 84). The hero reacts, but rarely acts, to survive: “. . . none of them solves his problems by taking purposeful action; each waits for something to happen that will bring about a solution” (100). They are floaters. Comic heroes are patient, waiting for the “luck it takes to survive in this world” (115). “Comedy’s heroes are not men of action who can impose their will upon circumstances. . . . They are men and women who have the wit to keep circumstances from imposing on them” (33).

Sharon has these qualities. She blames no one and wants no revenge for her condition. She merely accepts it and expects others to accept it as well. She is pregnant and has refused the abortion option; instead she makes the best of her situation. Her actions are reactions--she visits Mr. Burgess only after he has spread rumors about her; she waits until the last moment to tell her friends about her condition; she quits her job only after her manager has made it unbearable; she invents the Spanish sailor only after her continued denials of Burgess’s paternity are not believed. Notice that even when she gets angry and vows to fight, she is still passive: “She’d deny it, that was what she’d do. And she’d keep denying it” (*Snapper* 120). Sharon’s ability to adapt defuses any difficult situation. Mr. Burgess, Jimmy Rabbitte, and the rest of the Barrytowners--not Sharon--have created the problem. Sharon merely accepts and reacts to what life offers her.

“In comic ignorance of the profundities which should be ruining or at least complicating his life, the comic protagonist concerns himself with such corporeal

trivialities as flatulence, constipation and its happy relief, elimination, and sex” (*Comic 32-*

3). We learn more than we care to know about the changes about to occur in Sharon’s sex life, nipples, menstrual history, urinary, and defacatory habits:

Her nipples were going to get darker. She didn’t mind that too much. The veins in her breast would become more prominent. Sharon didn’t like the sound of that. . . . The joints between her pelvic bones would be widening. She hoped they wouldn’t pinch a sciatic nerve, because she had to stand a lot of time in work and a pinched sciatic nerve would be a killer. She read about her hormones and what they were doing to her. She could picture them; little roundy balls with arms and legs. She hoped her bowel movements stayed fairly regular. Her uterus would soon be pressing into her bladder. What worried her most was the bit about vaginal secretions. They’d make her itchy, it said. That would be really terrible in work, fuckin’ murder. Or when she was out. She’d have preferred a pinched sciatic nerve. (*Snapper 13*)

Sharon, and later Jimmy, consistently monitor her body’s progress and changes. We are given catalogues of what is going on in her body, of what she eats, of how the baby is progressing. We experience, first-hand, her morning sickness; we know she urinates much more frequently; we are with her in the delivery room and witness her pain.

Most of the emphasis is on Sharon’s physical changes, rather than her psychological changes. She notices that her uterus is pressing into her bladder, instead of thinking of the responsibilities of a life; her growing tummy instead of the life her child will lead. She never despairs over having to share her body with an unwanted life. She experiences no angst over the fact that she is having to give up her body to something which she never asked for and whose father she despises; no angst over lost dreams and altered life plans. She experiences no depression over bringing a child into a world with

such poverty, violence, ignorance, spiritual aridity. We witness no self-questioning about whether she is doing the right thing. Sharon is only mildly concerned about how these changes would affect her work performance and her enjoyment of the pub. Sharon is extremely matter-of-fact about this pregnancy.

Why such a dearth of despair?

The tragic spirit is inimical to the comic hero, because comic characters have a morality which is complete, in the sense that their principles are generally clear and coherent enough so that they do not face soul-wrenching moral decisions. . . . the action in comedies derives from the changes of fortune that the comic heroes encounter. (*Comic 3*)

Sharon doesn't soul-search. She encounters a situation and handles it. She does not deal in "ifs;" nor does she concern herself with smaller matters of morality, like whether stealing a box of cod steaks is wrong. She manages what she is able to change and what affects the living of her life. Abstractions don't interest her.

"In traditional comedy the hero overcomes the senex figure, the father or his surrogate, and thus the dynamic renewal of the community is assured" (Waters 67). In the novel, Sharon must overcome her father. In true comic hero passivity, she does not confront him until she is forced to by his intolerable treatment of her. "A few weeks ago she wouldn't have blamed him for being like this. But--she flattened her hands on her belly--it was a bit late to be getting snotty now. She'd have to do something. . . . she wasn't going to let him go on treating her like shite" (*Snapper* 151).

For several weeks, Jimmy mopes around, pretending that he is truly suffering humiliation because of Sharon's condition. She is aware of what her father is doing and how dangerous it could be for her baby and the family's harmony. She decides to call his bluff. She apologizes profusely and then tells him she cannot live at home anymore because it would be too hard for the family. Jimmy, a loving father, does not want his daughter to leave home. Recognizing how badly he has been acting, he apologizes. He says that he will love the baby no matter who it resembles, and that there will be no more attempts at imposing guilt trips. Sharon forces her father to accept her and her baby.

Sharon, however, is not merely a stagnant comic heroine reacting to situations. Instead, *The Snapper* is a bizarre bildungsroman during which Sharon undergoes a rite of passage and matures because of her experience. She goes from being an almost stock comic heroine to being a fully realized and individualized character.

Although we do not see Sharon in any great depth before her pregnancy, nevertheless we can infer what she was like. Even though Jimmy Sr. calls her "the only civilized human being in the whole fuckin' house" (160), Sharon seemed to be a typical teenager, perhaps a bit more responsible than most. She probably left school early, and she is currently working in a grocery store. She regularly gets drunk, and has had sex, these two acts occurring, more often than not, in the same night. "I suspect that it is not the first time she has had sex against the car when she has been drunk" (Interview 185). She has probably done nothing that every other Barrytownner her age has not done.

Up to this point Sharon has developed only superficial relationships and she has no confidante:

She felt a bit lonely now. She'd have loved someone to talk to, to talk to nonstop for about an hour, to tell everything to. But--and she was realizing this now really--there was no one like that. She'd loads of friends but she only really knew them in a gang. . . . Jackie had been her best friends for years but now that was only because she saw her more often than the others, not because she knew her better. . . . She'd often read in magazines and she'd seen it on television where it said that women friends were closer than men, but Sharon didn't think they were. Not the girls she knew. (*Snapper* 42-3)

Sharon's particular gang of friends would get together, drink, laugh, and ridicule ex-lovers. However, when "one of the gang was going with someone . . . she'd disappear for a while, usually a couple of months, and come back when one of them broke it off" (42). Sharon's female relationships are shallow and immature because she and her friends are shallow and immature.

Sharon still lives with her family, but, judging from her conversations with her brothers and her father, their relationships stay on the surface. Although the familial love and loyalty are obvious, the various Rabbittes do not seem to know each other as people, only as family members. We most often see Sharon and her siblings yelling at one another. At the beginning of the novel, Jimmy Sr. fares no better at conversing with Sharon. When they attempt to have a drink together at the pub, Jimmy thinks, "He loved Sharon but, if the last five minutes were anything to go by, she was shocking drinking company. . . . There was only an hour to closing time but Jimmy Sr. wasn't sure he'd be able to stick it" (10). In this particular instance, Jimmy is not "able to stick it" and he gives Sharon a fiver,

the usual way he interacts with his family, and sends her over to a group of her own friends.

Sharon is forced to mature during the course of the novel. Doyle does not write a typical novel showing how childbirth makes a woman a more responsible adult. First, the pregnancy itself has little to do with Sharon's maturation; the circumstances around it do. Second, Sharon is an unwitting participant in her own maturation. Although the reader can discern Sharon's maturation, Sharon herself does not. She, as mentioned previously, is more concerned with her physical changes than her psychological ones, and is as dimly aware of her growth as she was of her impregnation.

The rites of passage of Sharon's pregnancy have nothing to do with accepting the burden of bringing a new life into the world. Instead, Sharon's alienation from her family and community is what makes her stronger. The provinciality of Barrytown, or of any small area, often results in the muting of independent personalities. All want to fit in; consequently, even offbeat personalities generally conform. Sharon was on her way to such a fate. She and her friends had become almost indistinguishable. Because our thoughts and actions separate us from others, those living thoughtless and reactive lives appear similar. Notice that their voices in the pub are interchangeable. Even as a literary character, Sharon had no distinction: she was a textbook comic heroine, a set of rules and definitions.

Sharon, however, because of the unfortunate Mr. Burgess affair, has no one's behavior to copy, and has no one to blend in with. She becomes the other, friendless and

alienated. She is alone, without even the support of her family when denied by her father. Sharon endures this exile, although it is painful, and actually becomes stronger than the community. It does not accept her, repentant, back into its folds; *she* accepts it back. She begins to be an independent force and starts acting. She breaks free from definitions and expectations and becomes distinctive.

We see her maturation when she stops reacting like every other Barrytownner. At first when a bunch of young boys heckle her, "How's Mister Burgess?" (125), she ignores them, her typical response to shouts from men, but "still, she was shaking and kind of upset when she got home and upstairs" (125). However, after she begins to change, she refuses to ignore these insulting remarks: "Sharon grabbed the boy. She held him by the hood of his sweatshirt. . . . Sharon slapped him across the head. . . . If you ever call me anything' again I'll fuckin' kill yeh, d'yeh hear me. . . . She'd never done it before. It was easy. She'd do it again" (130). Instead of appeasing her father's ill temper, she devises a plan to change his attitude. Her plan works and he begs her to stay; she has regained control of her position in the family: "I've been a righ' bollix, Sharon. I've made you feel bad an' that's why you're leavin'. Just cos I was feelin' hard done by. It's my fault. Don't go, Sharon. Please. . . . I can't look at yeh, sayin' this. It's very fuckin' embarrassin'. . . . I love you, Sharon. An' it'll be your baby, so I'll love it as well" (162).

The last scene of the novel encapsulates her newfound maturity. By naming her daughter Georgina, she refuses to be ignored by Barrytown and she refuses to apologize for her child. She is demanding that she and her daughter be treated respectfully, and that

there be no snide whispers about the child's paternity. This name also ensures that her daughter will be special. By advertising and glorifying one's difference, instead of hiding and covering it, one is forcing others to accept it. This act solidifies Sharon's new sense of personal independence, as well as giving her daughter her own uniqueness. From here on, Sharon will interact with the community on her own terms, not on theirs.

Jimmy Sr. plays an important role in the novel: "The father was taking over *The Snapper* and would have given birth to the baby if at all humanly possible" (Interview 189). He too changes, becoming aware of his shortcomings and then altering his lifestyle.

In the beginning, Jimmy, like most Barrytowners, has never engaged in much introspective thought. He is a simple man with simple thought processes, so simple as to be almost childlike and almost caricatural. For instance, when Veronica agrees to have sex early one evening, his response is similar to a child who has been told he can have a special dessert: "Are yeh serious? . . . Fuckin' great . . . it's not even dark yet. You're not messin' now? . . . I'll brush me teeth" (73). In another scene, he seems like an adolescent boy when he is embarrassed to kiss Veronica good-bye in front of his sons because "They'd slag him" (39).

Although Jimmy Sr. is the primary breadwinner of the family, he lacks the maturity to be the disciplinarian in his family. He tells Veronica to set the family policy concerning Sharon's pregnancy because "they'd only laugh at me. I'm only their da" (49). When his family do have news which they think will anger him, his anger is not something to be

feared, but instead something which must be cajoled or tricked away, like a child's anger. Sharon "prepares" the news of her pregnancy by enlisting her mother's help; and we have already discussed how she tricks Jimmy into a cessation of his ill treatment of her.

Instead of setting the rules, Jimmy functions in his family as the comedian. With his silly behavior, broad humor, and occasional fiver, he diffuses potentially angry or stressful situations. For instance, he makes fun of the twins' teacher when they announce, "Miss O'Keefe said yeh should be ashamed of yourself" (35); and he cajoles Veronica out of her ill humor over the twins' abandonment of ballroom dancing after she has slaved over their costumes.

Jimmy does not interact with his family in any way deeper than his prescribed roles. He seems unable to show affection overtly, and instead, is constantly giving the twins "fivers" so they can run to the store and buy Twixes and Choc-Ices for the family. We've already witnessed how he is unable to make simple adult conversation with his daughter. When he does interact with his family within the parameters of his roles, however, the result is rewarding. The scene in which he gives Darren the long coveted bicycle for his birthday shows Jimmy at his best in both roles. He is able to provide Darren with the present he most wants, and make a joke out of the situation at the same time. This is one of my favorite scenes in the novel.

As long as things are running smoothly, Jimmy is content. However, when something goes wrong or when his efforts are not appreciated, he sulks like an adolescent.

When he valiantly tries to protect Sharon's honor from imagined insults at the local pub, which efforts result in a bloody nose, Sharon is angry at him for causing an unwanted scene:

All Jimmy Sr. had wanted was value for his nosebleed. But something had gone wrong. A bit of gratitude was all he'd expected. He'd felt noble there for a while before Sharon started talking about leaving, even though he'd been lying. But she'd attacked him instead. . . . He was ashamed of Sharon. . . . There was something else as well: she was making an eejit of him. . . . But, fuck, his life was being ruined because of her. . . . He was the laughing stock of Barrytown. . . . Jimmy Sr. got moodier. . . . he knew he could snap out of it but he didn't want to. He was doing it on purpose. He was protesting; that was how he described it to himself. He'd been wronged; he was suffering and he wanted them all to know it. Especially Sharon. He wanted to make her feel bad. . . . (147-49)

Jimmy's behavior is extremely childish.

However, in a true epiphany, brought on by Sharon's trickery, Jimmy becomes aware of his childish behavior:

He was a changed man, a new man. That trouble a while back with Sharon had given him an awful fright and, more important, it had made him feel like a right useless oul' bollix. He'd done a lot of thinking since then. . . . There was more to life than drinking pints with your mates. There was Veronica, his wife, and his children. . . . he was responsible for them. But, my Jaysis, he'd made one poxy job of it so far. . . . his kids were grand, but . . . that was just good luck and Veronica because he'd had nothing to do with it. But from now on it was going to be different. Darren and Linda and Tracy, and even Leslie, were still young enough and then there'd be Sharon's little snapper as well. A strong active man in the house, a father figure, would be vital for Sharon's snapper. (193)

Jimmy does change for the rest of the novel, and he tries to become an *active* force in his children's lives. He coaches Darren's bike racing team; he reads up on pregnancy and

becomes so knowledgeable that he begins to annoy Sharon with his questions and comments. We see him genuinely engaging in conversation with Sharon, mostly about the baby. He even volunteers to be present at the delivery.

Not only do these two characters grow, but also their relationship matures accordingly. Before the situation with Mr. Burgess arose, both characters saw the other only as one-dimensional. Families have certain dynamics which involve members playing certain roles. Everyone in the Rabbitte family has a role. Jimmy is the breadwinner/comedian who, if necessary, must be appeased by means of trickery. Sharon is the oldest daughter and caretaker who lives her own life and causes little trouble to her parents; even in the beginning of her pregnancy, she still has things under control. These two characters cannot interact with each other except when playing their respective roles. We have already seen the fiasco of their tête-à-tête in the pub after Sharon discloses her pregnancy. However, after Jimmy's period of sulking and his subsequent epiphany, they begin to view each other differently. Sharon, never cognizant of her need of her father's support until it is gone, no longer takes Jimmy for granted. Jimmy sees Sharon as a woman, not as a child any more. We witness a conversation where they actually talk to each other like adults. This conversation ends in Jimmy's asking to be Sharon's partner in the delivery room. Their relationship has strengthened to the point where he can make such an intimate request; we could not imagine his asking this or even wanting to at the beginning of the novel. Sharon understandably says no thank you. We can sense Jimmy's relief, but nevertheless he made the offer.

The novel's most compelling aspect is the way Doyle makes the outcome of such sordid experience, Mr. Burgess's brutal violation of Sharon, something so positive. Doyle wanted the impregnation scene to be foul: "I wanted the circumstances from her memory to be really seedy and awful with the yawning big hole of embarrassment. . . . The awfulness is as much the fact that the man is so inelegant" (Interview 185).

Another reason for the "awfulness" is the question of rape which is raised during the scene. In the novel, Sharon "wondered a few times if what had happened could be called rape. She didn't know" (*Snapper* 45). Most reviewers do not even bring up the issue--only two of the twenty or so that I have read mention the circumstances of the pregnancy, and these two do call it a rape. Doyle himself says:

When I was writing the book, I didn't want to encroach too much. I wanted it to be left up to the reader. Legally, in Ireland, it is not a rape, although I believe that in some states in the States it is a rape. I wouldn't personally consider it a rape. I do believe that he behaved very wrongly in taking advantage of a drunk woman. But, again, does that, make it illegal? Where do you step from immorality to illegality? . . . I wanted the circumstances to be left open to interpretation. (Interview 185)

To me it seems a rape, but as Doyle says, he leaves the scene open for individual interpretation. The rape issue should not cloud the larger picture: the impregnation was a horrible violation with incestuous overtones--Mr. Burgess, her friend's father, who has watched her grow up, says, as parting words "I've always liked the look of you, Sharon" (45)--but Doyle is able to take such a circumstance and make it into a celebration.

How does Doyle do this? By creating such vivid characters who use the experience to grow, as we have discussed. And by manipulating his audience's reactions by means of humor. Doyle uses humorous situations to direct our responses to certain situations in the novel. ". . . We laugh more when we are in a humorous frame of mind. Indeed, once we begin laughing at a series of ludicrous incongruities we may be made to laugh at anything. . . . we will look forward to the pleasure and we will prepare our minds to receive it" (Schaeffer 18).

Doyle relies on this principle in the first scene of *The Snapper*. Notice how carefully Doyle shapes our response to Sharon's news. She "was happy with the way thing were going so far" and she and her mother "looked at each other, and grinned quickly" (*Snapper* 2-3). The reader takes his clue from Sharon that this passage should not be read glumly, and then finds himself free to laugh at Jimmy's childlike confusion. We can smile with Sharon and her mother at Jimmy. Then, when our mind is teetering on the tragedy/comedy fence, Doyle presents several comic interludes which are nearly impossible not to enjoy. Jimmy Jr., who wants to be Ireland's answer to Wolfman Jack, begins practicing his radio persona in a booming voice. Then, only several sentences after Jimmy Sr. "could feel himself getting a bit angry now" at Sharon's refusal to answer the paternity question, one of the twins enters the kitchen and complains that Darren is hitting her. The ensuing dialogue is hilarious:

--I'll go in in a minute an' I'll hit Darren an' you can watch me hittin' him.
 --Can I?
 --Yeah, yeh can. Now get ou' or I'll practise on you first.

Linda squealed and ran away from him. She stopped at the safe side of the kitchen door.

--Can Tracy watch as well?

--She can o'course. (4)

Jimmy, in his clown role, simultaneously diffuses the sibling fight and unwittingly his own anger with humor. Sharon and her parents discuss her situation a little longer, but the potential anger has already been rerouted, and the family harmony remains as it ever was.

These first scenes are very important because Doyle, if he wants his comic spirit to prevail, must get his readers into an accepting, light-hearted mood. We must be expecting more humor and be waiting to laugh, because when he finally divulges the real circumstances of Sharon's pregnancy, we will be so horrified that, had our minds not been primed, the future of his comedy would be dim. In the scene before our discovery Veronica is laughing so hard that tears stream down her face. The discovery scene itself is somber and matter-of-fact. Sharon is confused and hurt. She goes over what occurred that night in minute detail, and we feel her disgust. The reader is shaken up--Doyle has thrown us a curve ball--surely we had gotten past the worst with the unwanted pregnancy. Doyle does not allow the reader much time to think about the circumstances of the impregnation, however, as the next scene explodes with hilarity almost before the reader is aware of it. He lures the reader into reading the next scene immediately--"the reader is drawn into the book by the fluent, seductive rapidity of its successive scenes" (Kiberd 23)--by beginning the scene with violence and tears. The reader almost thinks the tears are a result of our latest discovery, until he realizes they are totally unrelated.

Instead, the characters are laughing hilariously, and the reader joins in. Doyle has almost succeeded in getting his audience to pass over the circumstances of her pregnancy.

Doyle allows his reader to slide by and avoid confronting issues like rape and incest. Ernest Becker insists that “such ignorance to denial is especially pleasant but also cowardly” because it “smooths over the rough edges of nagging truth” (qtd. in Lewis 68-9). Doyle makes it difficult to keep the rape in mind. We are given a number of uplifting, humorous side plots—like Darren’s birthday and bike team, the twins’ demand for ever-changing costumes, Jimmy’s voyage of discovery into the female body—which divert our minds from the violation. The criminal, Mr. Burgess, also is so pathetic and laughable that our minds are diverted from the atrocity of his crime. “Sharon’s incipient snapper is the result of what could well be called rape in the car park at the soccer club Christmas do, but she was so pissed at the time, and the offender, George, is so pathetic, that she lets that one pass” (Barnacle n. pag.). Conversely, Sharon is so sensible that it is difficult to pity her.

It is important to realize that Doyle is not holding up rape or incest as laughing matters. Humor is such a powerful tool because “the presenting of a particular image or idea as a fitting subject for humor is an exercise of power; a force in controlling our responses to unexpected and dangerous happenings, a way of shaping the responses and attitudes of others. . .” (Lewis 13). Doyle is not exercising this power to minimize such a despicable crime. He is exercising his power to present to the reader an alternative way of coping with the horrors everyone will encounter in life: humor can “console us by making

us feel that what we are dealing with is not worth taking seriously as an object of fear” (Lewis 69).

Doyle’s characters, in their daily lives, illustrate the healing power of humor. They use humor to diffuse anger and to restore harmony. Numerous scenes include anger, shouting, and potential violence, but the characters’ senses of humor prevail. For instance, when the family has assembled to hear Sharon’s “bit o’ news,” a fight breaks out between Les and Jimmy Sr. Veronica even slaps Les several times and the fight ends when Les storms out of the house almost in tears. Jimmy Sr. attempts to vent his anger onto Jimmy Jr., who makes a funny, sassy reply which evokes laughter from other family members. This scene could have turned violent, but then Veronica starts laughing-- “Sorry, she said.--I can’t help it” (*Snapper* 46). Everyone either laughs or grins, and Sharon now has the proper atmosphere in which to break the news of her pregnancy.

At the pub, humor works the same as it does in the Rabbitte kitchen. A jovial mood is almost broken when Yvonne starts to gripe jealously about Sharon’s job, and Jackie comes to Sharon’s rescue by attacking Yvonne:

--It’s nice for some, said Yvonne.--Havin’ a job to think abou’ givin’ it up.
 --. . . Fuck off an’ leave her alone.
 --Are you havin’ your periods or somethin’?
 --Yeah, I am actually. Wha’ about it?
 --You’re stainin’ the carpet.
 The row was over. They nearly got sick laughing. (56)

Humor keeps tempers under control, smooths over hurt egos, and allows a graceful exit from a fight.

In the reconciliation scene between Sharon and Jimmy Sr., humor eases the tension and makes apologizing easier for Jimmy. After he has told Sharon he is sorry for his past behavior and for trying to make her feel guilty, she asks him what he would do if the baby, by any weird coincidence, should resemble Mr. Burgess. Jimmy replies, "--If it looks like Burgess's arse I'll love it, Sharon. . . .--They were both laughing. They'd both won." When asked what if the baby were a girl and looked like Burgess, Jimmy says "Ah well, fuck it; we'll just have to smother it an' leave it on his step" (163). With this shared joke, the tension between them is broken, family equilibrium restored.

Doyle also uses humor to show group unity. "When we laugh together, we close ranks . . . in the face of something that threatens the solidarity of the group" (Waters 12). There is a great deal of laughing and joke telling going on at the pub, but this hilarity means more than just superficial fun. The laughter bonds the friends together and shows their support of each other. Sharon tells her friends about her pregnancy at the pub and "then they all started laughing. They looked at one another and kept laughing. . . . They were all blushing and laughing" (*Snapper* 53). Even though Sharon knows that Barrytown will talk about her, she thinks her friends will stand by her: "Fuck them. Fuck all of them. She didn't care. The girls had been great" (68). This united laughter shows their support of Sharon, and their joy at her news. During the scene when Sharon first tells Jackie about the Spanish soldier, laughter again provides solidarity. The beginning of the scene is tension-filled. The two are discussing the "Burgess situation" as Jackie is unconvinced that Mr. Burgess is not the father. "Jackie tried to laugh. They looked at

each other and then they really laughed. Sharon thought the happiness would burst out of her. . .” (122). With this laughter, Jackie’s doubts are pushed aside and she says she believes Sharon. She has said, with this laughter, that she will stand by Sharon. She and Sharon use laughter as others use a handshake.

The reconciliation scene discussed above leads us into a final way humor is used in this novel, namely, as a tool for characterization. We learn about a character when we see how he or she uses and responds to humor. We can also judge a character’s growth or regression from his or her use of humor.

Because it contributes to both maturity and to maturation, humor frequently arises in convincing literary treatments of growth or enlightenment. . . . a character’s use of humor should be related to his or her capacity for cognitive, emotional and moral development. . . . most maturing literary characters’ . . . potential for adaptation and growth may be reflected in their use of humor. . . . a growing person’s relation to his or her family and society will in many cases be apparent in his or her sense of humor. (Lewis 75)

This is true in the case of Doyle’s characters.

Sharon’s humor remains fairly consistent throughout the novel, although at times she understandably struggles to keep it. Examine the confrontation scene with Mr. Burgess. She, although raped by this man, can nevertheless see how ludicrous he and the whole situation are. After he tries to give her money, “she wanted to laugh but she thought that that wouldn’t be right. But she couldn’t manage anger.” And later, after being given back her underwear, “Sharon was stunned, and then amused” (*Snapper* 90-1). Even though just a bit earlier she was almost in tears, Sharon can still appreciate the

incongruity of her predicament. This outlook keeps her in control of the situation and also keeps her from appearing ridiculous and pathetic.

Her sense of humor enables her to triumph at the end. In the final scene, we see her humor as a sign of both her maturity and as a sign of her future success as a mother:

Georgina; that was what she was going to call her.
 They'd all call her Gina, but Sharon would call her George. And they'd
 have to call her George as well. She'd make them. . . .
 --Are yeh alrigh' love?
 It was the woman in the bed beside Sharon.
 --Yeah, said Sharon--Thanks; I'm grand.
 She lifted her hand--it weighed a ton--and wiped her eyes.
 --Ah, said the woman.--Were yeh cryin'?
 --No, said Sharon.--I was laughin'. (215-16)

As previously stated, Sharon has just played a huge joke on Barrytown, and she loves it.

We see her embrace and revel in the whole ludicrous situation.

Jimmy Sr. is another character with whom we may use humor as a measuring stick. In the beginning of the book, he is, as the family clown, one of the funniest characters. Always joking or the object of a joke, he is full of laughter. Having seen what a wonderful sense of humor Jimmy possesses makes it all the harder for readers to stomach the self-righteous, martyred Jimmy. He totally loses his sense of humor: "That was all; no joking, no smile, not even a guilty look" (151). Jimmy is trying to punish Sharon by withholding his good humor. He gets his comic just deserts when Sharon humbles him in the scene already discussed. Notice what the first sign of reconciliation is--a shared laugh: "They

were both laughing. They'd both won. Both sets of eyes were watery" (163). And in the next scene, chaos, or Rabbitte harmony, reigns again.

Finally, Mr. Burgess is the one character with no sense of humor or appreciation of the incongruous, and therefore, he is ludicrous. Mr. Burgess' lack of humor leaves him vulnerable and weak. For instance, his idiocy makes it easy for Sharon to control their confrontation. He crumbles before her disdain. His inflated sense of gravity contributes to his ridiculous decision to leave his wife for Sharon, with whom he has convinced himself he is in love, and who, he has convinced himself, needs his protection. He bears the weight of all of Doyle's infrequent satire. Examine his letter to Sharon. It is written on pink stationery bordered with bunny rabbits. Burgess is so pathetic he seriously rehearses bathetic lines to use on Sharon--and admits it:

--Sharon, I've been livin' a lie for the last fifteen years. Twenty years. The happily married man. Huh. It's taken you to make me cop on. You Sharon.

--Did you rehearse this, Mister Burgess?

--No--Yeah, I did. I've thought o' nothin' else, to be honest with yeh. I've been eatin' an' drinkin' an' sleepin'--sleepin' it, Sharon.

--Bye bye, Mister Burgess. (128)

Sharon wants no part of him, and avoids him. When he finally forces her to talk to him, she berates him, laughs at him, and even denies his paternity. He cannot see how ridiculous he is. He is the exact opposite of Sharon who knows how funny her situation looks to outsiders and finally embraces its comedic value. Burgess never understands, and the Barrytowners and we readers laugh at him every opportunity.

Humor also plays a part in the novel's treatment of religion, only this time Doyle himself, not one of his characters, is having some fun. As in *The Commitments*, religion is not a factor in the Rabbittes' lives. Still, if the Rabbittes had not been professing Catholics, the story would have unfolded quite differently. Notice how Sharon will not even consider having an abortion:

Jimmy Sr. now said something he'd heard a good few times on the telly.--D'yeh want to keep it?

--Wha' d'yeh mean?

--D'yeh --d'you want to keep it, like?

--He wants to know if you want to have an abortion, said Veronica. --The eejit.

--I do not! said Jimmy Sr. This was true. He was sorry now he'd said it.

--There's no way I'd have an abortion, said Sharon.

--Good. You're right.

--Abortion's murder.

--It is o'course. (6)

Sharon, a woman with no knowledge of biology, would have objected to abortion only for religious reasons. Thus, there must be a religious undercurrent in her unconventional life.

However, it is interesting to note that premarital sex, another sin in the Catholic church, is not even mentioned. The most inconvenient tenets of the Catholic church, most of which concern impulsive actions like sex, are dispensed with. Abortion itself is not unheard of in the country: "In an average year, three to four thousand Irish women go to England to have an abortion" (Donoghue 3). This leads one to wonder how inconvenient having a child was to Sharon. We sense that Sharon actively wants the child--early during

her pregnancy, when she thinks her period has started, she thinks “she’d been robbed” (26)—and that pregnancy is not an inconvenience at all. Sharon also likes the attention her condition receives before Burgess’s paternity is known. In this light, Sharon’s hasty statement—“Abortion’s murder”—seems more like religion used to validate what she wants to do rather than an indication of a true Catholic belief.

This novel, like *The Commitments*, also could be seen as a tongue-in-cheek religious allegory, with Sharon as the Virgin Mary and Jimmy Sr. as Joseph. The circumstances and paternity of each pregnancy were disputed and became an issue within each woman’s community. Few believed either woman’s version of her impregnation. Of course, Sharon was lying and Mary, according to the New Testament, was not. Both women are accompanied by older men who, though not the babies’ biological fathers, will be the male role models. Finally, it would amuse Doyle’s iconoclastic sensibilities to rewrite the Virgin Birth with Sharon and George Burgess’s daughter occupying the principal role.

The combination of memorable, sympathetic characters, witty, fast-paced dialogue, a story line that is neither predictable nor drawn out, and a hopeful, optimistic vision makes *The Snapper* a joy to read and reread. This richly comic novel contains a great deal of wisdom. It shows us we can make our own lives bearable, and we can do so under any circumstances. “Attitude is the paintbrush of the soul”—Sharon shows us how to create a masterpiece with crayons.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE VAN

The Van, published in 1991 and short-listed for the Booker Prize, is the last installment of the Barrytown Trilogy. This novel is concerned with Jimmy Sr.'s experience with unemployment, and although it utilizes Doyle's trademark brand of humor, it "is a darker book by necessity and there's little room for a sequel at the end" (Interview 190). The novel is not, as the publishers and some reviewers assert, "a tender tale of male friendship" (Fitzgerald 16); instead it is in a sense the bleakest of Doyle's novels. It contains no hope for an ultimate triumph brought about by his characters' Irish resiliency. Because of *The Van*'s more somberly realistic portrayal of the world, it is a pivotal novel in Doyle's career: he has traded his unabated optimism for more complex and substantial, and consequently more vulnerable and frangible, characters.

The Van takes place in 1990, about one-and-a-half years after *The Snapper*, judging by the vocal skills of Gina, Sharon's baby whose birth ended *The Snapper*. *The Van* centers on Jimmy Sr.; Jimmy Jr. and Sharon, the protagonists of Doyle's previous books, have only minor roles here. Jimmy Sr. has become redundant; he has lost his job as a plasterer because of his age, and the first third of the book centers in his efforts to retain any of his fast disappearing self-respect.

His family is moving on, leaving him behind, as it seems to him. Jimmy Jr. has moved in with his girlfriend and gets engaged during the novel. Veronica has gone back

to school and is intent on succeeding by herself, without the help or interference of any family member. Darren has grown up, is now an honors student and an accomplished athlete, has an attractive girl friend, and has become disrespectful to his unemployed father, who desperately wants his son's affection. Leslie had gotten into some trouble with the police and was sent to England; he has never since contacted his parents, and they have no idea where or how he is. The twins, Tracy and Linda, are experimenting with make-up, cigarettes, boys, and truancy. Sharon is still good-natured and responsible, but mothering is much harder than she had anticipated and she is struggling. Everyone is leading his own life, and seems not to need Jimmy's help.

Jimmy, alone or baby-sitting Gina, merely tries to find ways to spend his time. He goes to the library, plays pitch and putt, attempts to read. He still is able to appreciate the humor in many situations, but often he is plagued by awful feelings of uselessness and loneliness. Exacerbating his loneliness and depression, the money he receives on the "dole" is not enough to enable him to socialize at the pub. Consequently, he rarely sees his old buddies anymore. His redundancy and the consequent loss of self-esteem cause him to doubt his virility and experience an unnamed, but pervasive fear. He is frightened, yet he cannot pinpoint why.

Things take a more positive turn for Jimmy when his best friend, Bimbo, loses his job as a baker. The two spend a great deal of time together and are often able to cheer each other up. Bimbo, with his redundancy money, decides to buy an old chipper van, which is a large vehicle, equipped with deep-fat fryers and a grill, from which hamburgers,

french fries, and such food is prepared and served to waiting customers. He and Jimmy Sr. become partners in the enterprise, although Jimmy has no money with which to split the cost of the van. After fixing up the van, which “with no wheels, no brakes, no engine, no water, no electricity, filthy, too almost beyond purification . . . might stand for the valiant illusions of Barrytown” (Fitzgerald 16), they enter the chipper van business.

The initial months of their partnership are hilarious. We see them cleaning, scraping grease, learning how to peel and fry potatoes, deciding on a menu, cooking burgers, and fast becoming successful business men. However, with success comes dissension. Jimmy slowly gets squeezed out of the partnership. We never know if Maggie, Bimbo’s wife whom Jimmy sees as a grasping Machiavel, is behind Jimmy’s demotion from partner to paid help, or if it is the long-suffering Bimbo, who, after playing sidekick their entire friendship, is finally able to make Jimmy listen to what he says. Although Jimmy blames Maggie, Jimmy and Bimbo’s friendship suffers the consequences. Eventually, Bimbo starts to pay Jimmy wages, instead of splitting the profits 50-50 as they initially did. Jimmy, deeply hurt, retaliates by taking government prescribed coffee breaks, asking for overtime pay, and talking about joining a union. The two finally come to blows near the end of the novel. After the fight they go to the pub and get drunk together. Bimbo, severely intoxicated, begins to apologize to Jimmy and vows to repair their friendship. He then drives the van into the ocean and leaves it there. Jimmy tells him he can get it the next day when the tide goes back out. The last scene shows Jimmy climbing into bed with his wife Veronica, asking her for a hug.

The Van is such a dark book because Jimmy represents such a large portion of the Irish population: "It's just a lot of people in Ireland--unemployment is a reality for the rest of their lives. . . . basically, the rest of their lives is filling their days. There're hundreds of thousands of people in Ireland like this" (Interview 190). Although a large percentage of Ireland is unemployed, this state affects the older generation more severely than it does the youth. Jimmy Sr.

doesn't have his son's energy or resources or education. With the younger Jimmy, unemployment is just something to get out of the way--he's other things to do--he'll survive. He may be knocked about when he gets older, but he's flooding with self-confidence. But the father, once he had his steady job and a couple of quid in his pockets for a few pints, he never has to worry about self-confidence. But it just happens that he is unemployed at the same time in his life that he's slowing down and he looks back and imagines, "Where were they when I was young?" and he feels like he's missed out and he feels redundant in every element in his life. (190)

Jimmy Sr., a strong, jubilant character in Doyle's first two novels, is weak and pitiful here. In the eyes of his daughter, "he looked miserable, and small and kind of beaten looking" (*Van* 30). He's "useless" (41), and cannot even comfort his daughter when she is crying because "he wouldn't have known what to do any more" (51). He goes through the day miserable: "That was how he sometimes--often--felt now, scared shitless. And he didn't know why" (54).

At the novel's beginning, Jimmy Sr. has been unemployed for months, long enough for its novelty to wear off. He suffers all the hardship of being unemployed. Obviously, having no job means having no paycheck. The welfare money is enough to cover basic

expenses but leaves no money for entertainment. Jimmy is left to his own devices, which are few, to pass his days. Unfortunately, Jimmy lacks inner resources and is bored much of the time. He has not been educated enough to be able to appreciate literature, art, music, or self-reflection. Yes, he does read *David Copperfield*, which Doyle includes to show how “brilliant” and accessible Dickens is as an author, but a mind not used to reading will not be able to find refuge in it for long periods of time. Thus, not having extra money means not being able to buy the video machine which could provide entertainment. It means not being able to take day trips when one is bored.

Not having extra money also means not being able to go to the local pub to hang out with his friends. Too proud to drink at the pub without being able to buy a round, Jimmy remains at home, lonely:

It wasn't the pints Jimmy Sr. loved; that wasn't it. He liked his pint--he fuckin' loved his pint. . . . but it wasn't his gargle he was dying for: it was this . . . the lads here, the crack, the laughing. That was what he loved. (*Van* 34)

Spending time at the pub with “the lads” is a source of rejuvenation for him. The pub, not the church or the arts, allows Jimmy to escape from life’s burdens, and to find a place where he can enjoy himself and be carefree for a short while. Losing a source of income alienates Jimmy from his friends and the solace they provide.

Losing his source of income also alienates Jimmy from his family. Giving his children money is one of the ways the undemonstrative Jimmy shows affection. In *The Snapper*, he often gives the twins a fiver to buy the family Choc-ices, Twixes, or other

edible treats. He gives Sharon money when he wants to show her his approval after she breaks the news of her pregnancy. He likes being able to provide Veronica with enough money to run the household the way she wants to. Without money, Jimmy is at a loss as to how to show his love.

Money is also the source of Jimmy's authority in the family. His status as breadwinner allows Jimmy to assert his dominance in the household. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Veronica is the family's true authority figure. Jimmy's personal sense of authority is derived from knowing that his wages are feeding and clothing his children and wife, and that without him, perhaps they wouldn't survive. Once he is no longer earning wages, his sense of personal authority vanishes. Jimmy's redundancy makes him an easy target for the sarcastic Darren. During an argument at dinner, he answers Jimmy's admonition--"Don't you forget who paid for tha' dinner in front of you, son"--with the insult, "I know who paid for it. . . .The state" (102). Another blow to any pretensions he might have had about providing for his family comes from Jimmy Jr., whose life has greatly improved since the days of *The Commitments*. He gives his father a fiver with which to go to the pub: "It was funny; he'd been really grateful when young Jimmy had given him the fiver, delighted, and at the same time, or just after, he'd wanted to go after him and thump the living shite out of him and throw the poxy fiver back in his face, the nerve of him" (31). Although Jimmy Jr. is not trying to insult or hurt his father, his generosity nevertheless makes his father that much more aware of his own inadequacies.

Because Jimmy has been stripped of his sense of authority, he feels impotent even in situations unrelated to money. Despite the closeness achieved by the end of *The Snapper*, Jimmy is no longer a force in Sharon's life, merely, it seems, a free baby-sitter. During one brief scene, Jimmy hears Sharon crying in her bedroom. The Jimmy of *The Snapper* would have demanded to know the reason for the tears, and most likely would have suggested post-partum depression, or some other phenomenon he had read about in his pregnancy book, as the cause. But this Jimmy doesn't: "Jimmy Sr. held the door handle. He was going to go in. But he couldn't. He wanted to, but he couldn't. He wouldn't have known what to do any more. He went back down to the kitchen very carefully, and stepped down over the stair with the creak in it" (51). Jimmy has become an emotional coward.

His relationship with Darren is the most problematic. Darren is beginning to date, studying subjects his father cannot comprehend, and regularly being brutally sarcastic to his parents. No longer an adoring adolescent boy, he is growing distant to his father. Jimmy often tries to curry Darren's favor with jokes and humor. The scenes in which Jimmy does this are some of the most humiliating for Jimmy both because they show how desperate Jimmy is and because the attempts are rarely successful.

The twins, now teenage girls, are experimenting with boys, smoking, and truancy. Their parents have become, if not enemies, merely dupes to fool and subvert. Jimmy can no longer control them by offering them money for treats, both because they have grown out of the stage where a Twix could be effective as a bribe, and because Jimmy doesn't

have the money with which to bribe. They too have moved on, at a time when Jimmy feels stagnant and weak.

Finally, Jimmy feels alienated from and intimidated by Veronica. She has returned to school and wants to finish her education by herself. “She wanted to do it on her own, even going up to the school on her own and walking home; everything” (16). She will not discuss her educational worries, anxieties, or joys with Jimmy. The depressed Jimmy senses her increased power and tries to latch on to it by becoming involved with her studies:

—Did yeh ever read David Copperfield, Veronica? . . . D’yeh want to read it after me?

Veronica . . . knew what he wanted her to say. —Okay, she said. . . .

He was delighted. He didn’t know why, exactly. . . . He wondered if maybe he should take notes as well . . . no; that would just have been thick; stupid. (54)

Veronica senses Jimmy’s need and is able to help him in this instance, although we never actually see her reading the novel.

Besides alienating him from his friends and his family, Jimmy’s redundancy emasculates him. In addition to doubting his position as the head of his household, he also begins to doubt his virility, his position as a man. He tries to reassure himself sexually. He often fantasizes about young women, even peering, hidden behind his bedroom curtain, at factory girls as they pass his house. He finds himself thinking about both his sons’ girl friends: “A ride; she was. It was weird thinking it; his son was going out with a ride. . . . He could’ve given himself a bugle now, out here in the hall, just remembering what she

was like and her smile” (52). He even starts comparing Veronica with his friend Bertie’s rather sexy wife Vera. At a Christmas party at Bimbo’s house, Jimmy, in the bathroom, starts playing with Maggie’s razor and begins to fantasize about Vera: “It was Maggie’s that was it; for her legs or--only her legs probably. . . . Vera probably used one of these when she was shaving her legs--” (63). We witness an even more humiliating scene when he lures Bimbo, under the guise of a night on the town in hopes of restoring their friendship, to an expensive disco where he hopes to pick up a woman:

What he wanted was to see if he could manage a young one or one of these glamorous, rich-looking, not-so-young ones. He’d back off once he knew it was in the cards; actually getting his hole wasn’t what he was after at all--he just wanted to know if he could get his hole. (256)

Jimmy reaches a low in this scene. In an attempt to pick up a woman, who later turns out to be married, he spends a great deal of money on overpriced bottles of wine, lies about his profession, tries to force the woman to kiss him, and ends up fighting with Bimbo over the woman. In an attempt to bolster his flagging sense of self, Jimmy embarrasses himself and worsens the situation with Bimbo.

Jimmy’s fantasies and his excursion into the uptown nightlife only serve to reduce himself further in his own estimation. He is embarrassed that he fantasizes about the young factory girls, and he feels dirty when he thinks about Darren and Jimmy’s girlfriends. The day after the disco fiasco finds him extremely hung over and guilt-ridden; he pledges to take Veronica out for a nice dinner, with wine. These attempts to regain his manhood only diminish it in his own mind: “He’d felt like a right cunt then, gawking out

the window; like a fuckin' pervert" (111). Notice the emasculating word he calls himself after his attempt to feel more virile.

These scenes are as humiliating to Jimmy as the scenes in which he tries to curry Darren's favor. We see Jimmy at his most vulnerable; we learn things about him that he does not even want his closest friends to know, things of which he is ashamed. Doyle, however, never judges Jimmy or excuses him. The reader does not judge Jimmy either, perhaps because Jimmy is so ashamed of himself, as in the previous scene in Bimbo's bathroom: "--Ah fuck this! He threw the Girl Care [the razor] back onto the shelf over the sink. God, he was a right fuckin' eejit. . . . He felt weak, hopeless, like he'd been caught. Was something happening to him?"(64). If he were oblivious to his abasement, he would be despicable, or at least ridiculous. As it is, we tend to worry about him and pity him.

Finally, Jimmy's job loss causes him to lose part of his identity. For Jimmy Sr., a job means more than a steady source of income. A major part of his identity comes from being a skilled plasterer. Jimmy's identity has been based on his being a plasterer for most of his life. Losing his profession is difficult to come to terms with.

When one part of an identity disappears, other such shifts inevitably occur. Jimmy's innate comic vision cannot survive the blows which his identity and self-esteem have suffered. He is still able to recognize the absurdity in situations, but he can no longer laugh at those absurdities. For instance, examine Jimmy's thoughts on renting pictures from the library:

That was a bit fuckin' stupid when you thought about it; sticking a picture up on your wall for a fortnight and then having to bring it back again; on a bus or on the DART, sitting there like a gobshite with a big picture on your lap, of a woman in her nip or something. (12)

Notice the recognition of the absurdity of the situation and of the potential for humor, but Jimmy is bitter when pondering it. There is no raucous laughter; he doesn't store this observation away to share with the lads or even laugh to himself. Jimmy's low spirits have robbed him of his ability to enjoy life, and hence have robbed him of another part of his identity.

In my discussion of humor and comedy in the "Introduction," I mentioned the artist's comic spirit which enables him to discover humor even in the worst circumstances.

This spirit is entirely lacking in Jimmy Sr. and in this novel.

The comic spirit encourages blurred lines of demarcation between the self and the not-self. . . . The more carefully one defines one's identity, the more likely the definition is to turn into a cliché. The more protective one is toward the self, the more likely one is to pity oneself. Negligence about identity is likely to be much more liberating; the self is free to become whatever it will become. (Galligan 124)

The comic sense of self is fluid, ever-changing, and adaptive. Jimmy Sr. desperately needs the comic spirit. He had become so fixed in his roles as breadwinner and family head that he cannot exist outside these roles. The other family members can adapt to their changing roles, i. e., Veronica is the student now and not merely the mother, but Jimmy Sr.'s personal identity depends on his traditionally male roles.

Depression and anxiety occur naturally when such huge gaps in one's identity occur. For Jimmy, low-level depression and generalized anxiety, induced by his no longer being able either to enjoy his present or avoid his future, are new experiences. As Doyle says, "once he had his steady job and a couple of quid in his pockets for a few pints, he never has to worry about self-confidence" (Interview 190). However, now that Jimmy is unemployed and aging, doubts and worries plague him.

The employed, more virile Jimmy had been accustomed to purge his volatile emotions immediately; however, shouting or sharing pints with his mates are not sufficient to chase away depression and anxiety. Also, the source of his worries is not going to change. Jimmy must learn to live with these new emotions.

Jimmy's fears and anxieties take on physical properties, not surprising in a man unused to experiencing mental or spiritual malaise. Unable to articulate his mental pain in such terms, he compares it to physical discomforts:

He'd thought his teeth were going to crack and break; he couldn't get his mouth to open, as if it had been locked and getting tighter. And he'd had to snap his eyes shut, waiting for the crunch and the pain. But then it had stopped, and he'd started breathing again. He felt weak now, a bit weak. . . . There were days when there was this feeling in his guts all the time, like a fart building up only it wasn't that at all. It was as if his trousers were too tight for him, but he'd check and they weren't, they were grand; but there was a little ball of hard air inside in of it. (*Van* 53)

Jimmy is experiencing a generalized anxiety, punctuated by periods of severe anxiety.

Generalized anxiety and anxiety attacks are the result of an overwhelming, omnipresent fear of imminent danger or disaster, real or imagined. Jimmy can no longer live entirely in

his present, as he was accustomed, because his present is so miserable; yet he is terrified of a future of repetitive, unfilled days. He is afraid that the rest of his life will be devoted to, as Doyle said, “filling his days” (Interview 190)

Jimmy compares the dread he is living with to a similar feeling he experienced when a boy:

It was like when he was a kid and he'd done something bad and he was waiting for his da to come home from work to kill him. He used to use his belt. . . . He didn't wear a belt; he only kept it for strapping Jimmy Sr and his brother. . . . he'd stare at Jimmy Sr and make him stare back and then Jimmy Sr'd feel the pain on the side of his leg and again and again. . . . it was agony, but not as bad as the waiting. Waiting for it was the worst part. . . . he'd go through the whole day scared shitless, waiting for his da to come home. . . . And that was how he sometimes--often--felt now, scared shitless. And he didn't know why. (*Van* 53-4)

At least the young Jimmy understood why and of whom he was scared. The adult Jimmy has no one to blame for his anxiety, which makes the fear worse.

Thus we see how weak and pitiful unemployment has made Jimmy. As Doyle says, he has become “redundant in every element in his life” (Interview 190). He has been robbed of his self-esteem, his sense of humor, and his identity.

Jimmy's circumstances change significantly when his best friend Bimbo also loses his job a third of the way through the novel. Life begins to become more pleasant:

The next couple of weeks were great. . . . If he'd been looking for someone to be made redundant it would have been Bimbo. That didn't mean that he'd wanted Bimbo to get the sack; not at all. What he meant was this: he couldn't think of better company than Bimbo, and now that Bimbo wasn't working he could hang around with Bimbo all day. It was fuckin' marvelous. (*Van* 86)

Jimmy is no longer lonely, and although he and Bimbo both have depressed days, they help each other through them.

When Bimbo buys a chipper van and invites Jimmy Sr. to be his partner, Jimmy is reinvigorated. This new enterprise returns Jimmy to his breadwinner role, which renews his self-esteem and enables him to function in his other familiar roles.

The business is quite successful, and Jimmy feels vindicated by being able to give Veronica the weekly sum she had been accustomed to receiving before his redundancy. After the first night in business, which was very profitable, he fantasizes about giving Veronica his wages: "At the end of the week--next Friday--he was going to put money on the table in front of Veronica, and say nothing" (172). With the restoration of his role as breadwinner, Jimmy's feelings of self-worth have returned, and once again becomes the magnanimous husband: "You're not to waste it all on food now, d'yeh hear, he said.-- You're to buy somethin' for yourself" (176). Now that he can again provide luxuries for Veronica, he feels he has taken back the familial power.

Jimmy's sense of humor returns with his self-esteem. He continues to notice life's little incongruities, but now he vocalizes them. For instance, he tells Sharon, who has been tanning at the beach, that she is "like a well-cooked burger" (200). He jokes much more with his family, and his exuberant attitude is resurrected. The scene in which he and Darren are practicing their ketchup bottle-tossing routine, a la Tom Cruise in *Cocktail*, is reminiscent of the Jimmy of *The Snapper*:

Veronica looked up. . . . Jimmy Sr. had his face squashed up to the window. . . . She screamed, and laughed. His nose was crooked and white against the glass.

He was miming to the Georgia Satellites. . . . He kissed the glass. . . . But he lowered himself from the ledge and backed into the garden still miming, with his hand clutching his crotch. . . . He turned and dropped his shorts and wriggled. God, he was terrible. (247)

This quotation illustrates the return to normalcy of Jimmy and Veronica's relationship.

She no longer worries about his moping about, and the two are again on an equal footing.

Jimmy's relationships with his children also improve. He gives both Sharon and Darren jobs working in the van. He has stopped kowtowing to Darren: when the two get into a minor argument while working and Darren leaves the van, Jimmy "prayed for him to come back but he wouldn't go to the door to look out; he wouldn't even look at it" (203). Their relationship has become more adult: Jimmy apologizes for the argument, which was his fault, and Darren accepts the apology. Mutual respect has developed between the two.

Jimmy begins to interact more with the twins. With his new funds, he can buy them expensive haircuts and new clothes, instead of Choc-ices. He now can discipline them, and he makes them clean the van when he catches them misbehaving. The depressed Jimmy Sr. wouldn't have bothered to punish them.

Jimmy and Bimbo's close relationship continues as long as they remain in the sheltered, although miserable, life on the dole. However, when they begin the business of the van, problems and tensions never encountered before arise. These two men have no mature conflict resolution skills, and their childish behavior aggravates these problems until their relationship is destroyed.

Bimbo reneges on his original offer of partnership because he is jealously possessive of the first power he has ever had. Bimbo had been employed as a low-level

baker, and had never been a leader among his friends. Doyle portrays him as childlike and gullible; the reader even wonders if he is slightly retarded. Jimmy's feelings are understandably hurt when Bimbo starts acting on his newly acquired power, and he plays childish pranks on Bimbo. Jimmy pretends he is going to join the union. He calls Bimbo "boss" and "sir." He starts taking his coffee breaks during the busy parts of the day. He gives Bimbo the "silent treatment" which he tested on Sharon in *The Snapper*. The easily fooled Bimbo does not know how to handle these childish actions. When the health inspector shuts the van down, Bimbo believes that Jimmy has betrayed him by requesting the inspection. The two come to blows and their friendship ends.

Jimmy blames the friendship's demise on Bimbo's wife. He believes that Maggie is behind the change in Bimbo and begins to dislike her meddling in the van's business. Although it is unclear in the novel, Doyle says Maggie is not at fault and that it is less painful for Jimmy to blame her than to blame himself or Bimbo:

I feel that Jimmy blames Maggie because it's easier than blaming Bimbo. . . . It's clearer in the film because it's from the film's point of view, not from Jimmy's point of view, and in one scene, after Bimbo has made Jimmy a wage slave, he asks Maggie, "Do you think I'm right?" and she says, "Yeah, you are." But it's very obvious that it's his decision. She's involved in the management and that sort of thing and Jimmy resents it, but what right does he have to resent it? It's understandable because she is bursting in on their territory and he doesn't like it at all, but she has every right to be there. It's much clearer in the film that she's not to blame. (Interview 196-97)

Although Jimmy eventually faces the fact that Bimbo is enjoying his power--"Jimmy realized that Bimbo was enjoying it, being the boss; like he was giving out to a thick lad, a

thick kid he liked” (*Van* 283)--he still hates Maggie: “The cunt, he hated her. It was easier than hating Bimbo” (282).

Jimmy’s inability to adapt to the new Bimbo stems from his being stripped of another role he is accustomed to play. The dynamics of Jimmy and Bimbo’s relationship has changed; Jimmy no longer holds the dominant position which he had held:

That’s right . . . I am the boss. It had always been that way. . . . Jimmy Sr had always been the one who’d made the decisions, who’d mapped out their weekends for them. Jimmy Sr would say See yeh in the Hikers after half-twelve mass, and Bimbo would be there. Jimmy Sr would put down Bimbo’s name to play pitch and putt and Bimbo would go off and play. Jimmy Sr had rented the pair of caravans in Courtown a couple of years back and the two families had gone down in a convoy and stayed there for the fortnight. (254)

Neither Jimmy nor Bimbo can handle the change in their relationship maturely.

Jimmy and Bimbo’s disintegrating relationship, while not exactly allegorical, does lend itself to comparisons with British politics in the 1980s. Doyle

depicts the miserable dissolution of his male bonding with Bimbo as a direct result of their success in escaping the misery of unemployment that cemented their lifelong bond in the first place. . . . All of a sudden they’re a two-man microcosm of Thatcher’s class-warring United Kingdom, kicking and gouging in the mud and the blood and the beer. (Appelo 15)

Doyle, while not “political,” follows world politics: “I do follow it some--the razzmatazz of it all” (Interview 228). Thatcherism glorified capitalism as the system which provides the greatest financial rewards and happiness for all, including those at the lowest level of society. Doyle seems to be dramatizing the idea that instead of bringing people together for mutual advantage, capitalism instead pits people ruthlessly against one another. In *The*

Van, the economic relationship of employer/employed mirrors and parodies the class structure and demonstrates the divisiveness and brutality of contemporary capitalism.

The penultimate scene--in which Bimbo drives the van into the sea--is startlingly Sam Shepardesque in its extremity. Bimbo's action is his childish, futile attempt at reconciliation. He tries to destroy that which he believes has destroyed his friendship with Jimmy. He doesn't realize that it was not the physical van, but the finally expressed intangible feelings of inequality and resentment built up over his lifetime which ruined the relationship. Jimmy, perhaps unconsciously, recognizes that the van is only the symptom and not the cause of their mutual animosity, and that Bimbo's grand gesture means nothing. Jimmy undercuts Bimbo's "heroic" gesture by saying, "You'll be able to get it when the tide goes out again" (*Van* 311). Doyle undercuts the gesture by ending the scene with Jimmy walking alone up the beach.

The breakup of Jimmy and Bimbo's relationship implies subsequent losses for Jimmy. He will not have a job and will have the same problems he had at the beginning of the novel. Jimmy will actually be worse off than he was initially. He has lost his best friend: "He was lonely. That was it . . . lonely" (284). This loss is permanent and cannot be restored simply by getting a job as his other losses were. The gatherings at the pub with the lads will no longer be spiritually healing for Jimmy as Bimbo will not be a part of them. "Their friendship is over--maybe they'll try to revert to some sort of civility--it'll never be the same again and that's a big loss. Jimmy won't be involved with the van again" (Interview 195).

Jimmy also will not have his family for much longer. As previously stated, his children are growing up and will be moving away soon. Sharon is seriously dating a nice man at the novel's end; Jimmy Jr. is engaged; Darren has graduated from high school and may go on to the University; the twins are maturing rapidly. Veronica is educating herself, and who knows what she will attempt next. Although his family will always support him, everyone will have moved on before Jimmy can even recover from the loss of his best friend.

The Van is a transitional for Doyle in that it is the first novel in which his characters do not rally and make a joyous comeback. In *The Commitments*, although the band dissolves, Jimmy Jr. does not despair and our last view of him has him busily making plans for a new band. In *The Snapper*, Sharon is lovingly holding her new-born daughter and thumbing her nose at all of Barrytown by naming her baby Georgina. But in *The Van*'s final scene, Jimmy Sr. is weak and infantile, begging for a hug from his sleepy wife: "Give us a hug, Veronica, will yeh?" (*Van* 311). It is dawn, and this "new day" casts an ironic light on Jimmy's future prospects. He has no big plans--he does not have a job, and most likely will not have one again. Jimmy will be faced with the same problems he was having at the beginning of the novel, worsened by the fact that his friendship with Bimbo has been irrevocably severed.

This book is ultimately Doyle's bleakest. There is no room for hope, and no reason to expect that things will change for Jimmy Sr. He is not young, like Paddy Clarke, the hero of Doyle's other drearily ending novel, and lacks youth's adaptability. Nor does

he have the resilience and optimistic determination of Paula Spencer, the battered and alcoholic heroine of Doyle's most recent novel. Jimmy does have the support of his wife, but as we have seen, this support is not enough to give his life a sense of purpose. As we have seen in the previous novels, he does not have religion to soothe him, nor does he have education. Although Jimmy does not have to worry about food and shelter, he is defenseless in his world.

The discussion of the novel's darkness leads paradoxically into Doyle's use of humor in the novel. Doyle uses much of the same type of humor as in his previous novels, the riotous family scenes, the drunken revelry, the witty repartee between the friends, and occasionally the somewhat forced and predictable situational humor, as when Jimmy serves a customer a fried diaper by mistake. However, the wounding element of humor also figures prominently in *The Van*. The great deal of bitter sarcasm, although clever, is not funny because it causes pain to the characters. For instance, many of Jimmy's ploys to annoy Bimbo are clever and would be funny if used against a boss who were anonymous and nasty, but because the target is Bimbo, who was Jimmy's best friend, the fake letter to the union and the scrupulously adhered-to coffee breaks are not funny at all. Darren's dinnertime remark about the state providing the meal is witty, but because it wounds Jimmy it produces no laughter but only grimaces. This use of humor is another indicator of the darkness of the novel.

This depressing ending, completing a novel that is the story of a man whom life has defeated, marks the transition from Doyle's riotous and raucous novels to his more serious

work. *The Van* is important partly because Doyle first sheds his authorial “baby fat” and begins to write fiction with a harder edge. He begins working with the more compelling characters and situations which we find in his later novels. He uses his distinctive dialogue and language to “bring his books down closer and closer to the characters” (Interview 229). In this novel, he comes close to achieving this purpose by allowing the characters to experience feelings and thoughts which are not always funny; he dispenses with his tendency to simplify his characters for comedy’s sake. By showing both the scarcity of joyous humor and the absence of the comic spirit in Jimmy’s life, Doyle demonstrates the tremendous need for both.

CHAPTER FIVE

PADDY CLARKE HA HA HA

Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha, Doyle's fourth novel and the winner of Britain's Booker Prize in 1993, departs stylistically and thematically from the Barrytown Trilogy. Aside from the obvious difference in the book's title--"No more *the 's*" (Doyle qtd. in Flanagan 21)--this novel dispenses with both the Rabbitte family and their omnipresent chatter. Although we are still in Barrytown, this novel centers on the respectable, middle-class Clarke family. It is set in 1968, when the corporation houses like the one the Rabbittes inhabit were just being built. In *Paddy Clarke*, a more patently artistic novel than the Barrytown Trilogy works, Doyle fully matures as a novelist.

The novel is comprised of a series of vignettes, "free floating paragraphs stirred by sequence rather than consequence" (Lane 92), and is narrated entirely by Paddy, a young boy skillfully depicted by Doyle. Instead of the great blocks of dialogue in the trilogy novels, in *Paddy Clarke* the protagonist, describing and commenting on his life, talks to the readers. Paddy's narrative is "minutely descriptive, from the hairs on his father's hands to the look of melting tar" (O'Toole "Comic Opera" 21). These vignettes relate to each other in a somewhat stream-of-consciousness fashion. They are not as tightly knit as Benjy's section of *The Sound and The Fury*, in which the reader can trace exactly what word sets Benjy off on another memory. In *Paddy Clarke*, sometimes the reader can pick

out the word or circumstance which sparks a vignette; sometimes he cannot. Doyle wanted the novel's organization to be

. . . basically . . . the way a kid's mind would work. . . I've tried to make links, but indirectly. It may be a question of color or light and something sparks off another memory, and so he goes on to that. I wanted it, particularly the first half, to seem haphazard--winding memories, and by degrees the winding memories become straighter and straighter as the parents' marriage becomes worse and worse. And that's just the way a kid's mind would work. Also I wanted to get away from the linear time I used in the previous books, and it just fits the story better. (Interview 200)

Paddy Clarke is a major stylistic departure for Doyle partly because of the character Paddy. Because of the intensity of the first-person narrative, Paddy is one of Doyle's most fully realized characters. The 282 pages of almost uninterrupted Paddy provides the reader more insights into him than the trilogy's rapid-fire, profanity-laced, multi-character dialogue gives into the Rabbittes. Doyle explores Paddy more deeply than any of his earlier characters.

Paddy, a typical ten-year-old schoolboy, is part of a gang of neighborhood friends, which includes Kevin, Liam, Aidan, and Ian. With his friends, Paddy terrorizes the neighborhood gardens, idolizes certain soccer stars, is fascinated by fire, small animals, and curse words. Paddy beats up his younger brother Francis ("Sinbad"), loves his mother, doesn't quite understand his father, and doesn't care to understand either of his two younger sisters. His days are filled with playing, exploring, and testing his boundaries. We are charmed by his candid, perceptive views of the world. Doyle

convinces us that this story is indeed being told by a ten-year-old boy rather than by a thirty-eight-year-old novelist.

While being fully immersed in Paddy's world via such vignettes as a Viking funeral for a rat, setting fire to an insect with a magnifying glass, and racing all over town through an obstacle course consisting of various gardens and their walls, we perceive disharmonies in his world. First, Barrytown is being developed by the government, and all the open fields and playing grounds which were Paddy's world are now being destroyed for Corporation housing. The building of this urban village, which provides a positive community atmosphere for the Rabbittes, is a sign of the erosion of Paddy's safe world because of the advent of families like that of Charles Leavy:

Charles Leavy didn't care. . . . He stayed up all night all the time. Listening to his ma and da. Not caring. Saying cunt and fuck. . . . He terrified me. He was there, all by himself. Always by himself. He never smiled; it wasn't a real smile. His laugh was a noise he started and stopped like a machine. He was close to no one. . . . He had no friends. (*Paddy* 238-51)

Charles Leavy and his ilk are the precursors of "the living dead," a group of fearless, non-feeling teenagers who terrorized Jimmy Sr. and the chipper van in *The Van*. These are the people whose homes are encroaching on Paddy's playgrounds and who first break into the innocence of Paddy's childhood.

The second, more important cause of disquiet in the Clarke household is the escalating tension between Mr. and Mrs. Clarke. Paddy first mentions their fighting almost offhandedly, inserting "They were having another of their fights" (42) before

jumping immediately to another topic. However, as the novel progresses, the fights occur more and more often and begin to influence Paddy's behavior in school. The reader watches sadly while Paddy's personality changes as his parents' fighting increases. He goes from being a happy, mischievous, curious little boy to being a needy, solitary, worried, friendless outcast. The title of the book is actually the refrain from a cruel rhyme with which his peers taunt him at the end of the novel after his parents have separated:

Paddy Clarke
 Paddy Clarke
 Has no da.
 Ha ha ha! (281)

Paddy claims he "didn't listen to them. They were only kids" (281). He has been robbed of the innocent, jubilant childhood of the novel's opening pages. Although Doyle says, "... I imagine, if I project forward, that Paddy will be all right" (qtd. in Flanagan 21), we feel the poignancy and bitterness of Paddy's loss.

Paddy Clarke has notable literary ancestors. Although we neither see him at ten years of age (but instead both younger and older) nor through a first-person narrative, Stephen Dedalus from Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* immediately reminds us of Paddy. Both characters are Irish Catholic Dubliners; both live with dysfunctional families. More significantly, both boys possess poetic natures and are fascinated by physical sensations and words.

Stephen Dedalus's most remarkable quality, his poetic and artistic nature, manifests itself first in his sensitivity to sensations and his love of words. The first page of

Portrait (opening with “Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road,” which is like *Paddy Clarke*’s opening sentence, “We were coming down our road”) includes references to all five senses. Stephen frequently remarks on the smells, temperatures, and sounds of objects not likely to be smelled, felt, or heard. For instance, his mother’s jewelled slippers had “a lovely warm smell” (*Portrait* 10) and “there was a cold night smell in the chapel. But it was a holy smell. It was the smell of the old peasants who knelt at the back of the chapel at Sunday mass. That was a smell of air and rain and turf and corduroy” (18). He recognizes the red and green backs of Dante’s brushes, and the way sheets are cold initially but later become “lovely . . . hot.” He is perceptive enough to see the differences in walking styles of “the higher line fellows [who came] down along the matting in the middle of the refectory. . . . And every single fellow had a different way of walking” (13).

Paddy perceives his surroundings similarly:

There was a smell of church off the desks in our school. When I folded my arms and put my head in the hollow, when Henno told us to go asleep, I could smell the same smell as you got off the seats in the church. I loved it. It was spicy and like the ground under a tree. I licked the desk but it just tasted horrible. (*Paddy* 61)

Paddy remarks on the colors of his hot water bottles, red and green, and how he “loved the smell off the bottle” (33). He also discerns the difference in the ways people walk:

“When my da was standing up he stood perfectly still. His feet clung to the ground. They only moved when he was going somewhere. My ma’s feet were different. They didn’t

settle. They couldn't make their minds up" (103). Both boys are hypersensitive to physical sensations.

As each grows older, this perceptiveness translates more fully into a delight in words. Stephen, who longs to be "like the fellows in poetry and rhetoric" (*Portrait* 17), notices that "suck was a queer word," and that if he were to read verses written by a schoolmate backward, "then they were not poetry" (16). The meanings of words intrigue him: "What did that mean, to kiss?" (15). He also ponders the "different names for God in all the different languages in the world" (16). As *Portrait* progresses, Stephen, the budding artist, becomes more involved with language.

Paddy takes an even greater delight in words. Paddy reads "*It was Ginger's turn to push the pram and he seized it with a new vigor. --Vigour, I said. . . . For a day we called ourselves the Vigour Tribe. We got one of Sinbad's markers and did big Vs on our chests, for Vigour*" (*Paddy* 58). Paddy is so enamored of this new word that he prints it on his skin. These young boys manifest the traditional Irish love of language: "The word was made flesh" (129).

Paddy and his friends invent a number of ceremonial games, the most striking of which involves the group of boys kneeling on damp ground around a small fire. Kevin, as the high priest, walks around the circle with a fire poker with which he hits the kneelers in the back as part of their initiation. The other part of the ceremony involves chanting "magical" words whose meanings are unknown to the boys. "Trellis trellis trellis!" or "Ignoramus ignoramus ignoramus!" or "Substandard substandard substandard!" (Is it

accidental that the protagonist of Flann O'Brien's word-enamored *At Swim-Two-Birds*, one of Doyle's favorite novels, is named Trellis?) These boys collect words they hear based solely on their sounds: "I could never guess what word was going to be next. I always tried; I looked at all the faces in the class when a new word or a good one got said. Liam and Kevin and Ian McEvoy were the same, doing what I was doing, storing the words" (128).

The next part of this ceremony is the most critical. Each boy shouts out a "bad word" which was to be his name until the next ceremony. Paddy screams out "Fuck" because it

was the best word. The most dangerous word. You couldn't whisper it Fuck was always too loud, too late to stop it, it burst in the air above you and fell slowly right over your head. There was total silence, nothing but Fuck floating down. . . . It was the word you couldn't say anywhere. It wouldn't come out unless you pushed it. It made you feel caught and grabbed the minute you said it. When it escaped it was like an electric laugh, a soundless gasp followed by the kind of laughing that only forbidden things could make, an inside tickle that became a brilliant pain, bashing at your mouth to be let out. It was agony. We didn't waste it. (132)

Although the *verboten* aspect is a large part of the word's magic, Paddy is also delighted by the word itself--its explosive sound, the liberating feeling this short expulsion of air can give.

Since Paddy shares Stephen's poetic sensibilities, we naturally wonder if Paddy will also become an artist. Perhaps he will grow up and write five successful novels before he is forty-years-old--five novels in which a love of words and language is evidenced in an

extraordinary transcription of local dialect. Understandably, Doyle does not admit to his being the basis for Paddy, but he acknowledges that he researched the novel by taking “trips up to my parents’ attic to remind me of books and what not” (Interview 199). In 1968, Doyle was, like Paddy, a ten-year-old with a precocious literary imagination. We can draw our own conclusions.

Although Mark Twain’s Huck Finn, from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, superficially has little in common with Paddy, the two characters share many personality traits. Huck is a thirteen-year-old backwoods American. He is uneducated, irreligious, orphaned, and rebellious. Paddy, ten, has grown up in a middle-class Dublin suburb, goes to school where he is a fairly good student, lives with both his loving parents and his three siblings. However, both boys are feisty, inquisitive, and wisely perceptive beyond their years. Each plays boyish games which, during the course of his experience, he discards when he prematurely enters adulthood.

Huck Finn’s and Paddy’s typical boyish natures dominate the reader’s mental picture of the two characters. Both get dirty, bruised, or scraped every day. Paddy is not as “tough” as Huck and still relishes the healing properties of his mother’s magical kisses, while Huck, not accustomed to receiving sympathy, generally ignores his own physical discomforts.

Despite their boyish natures, each possesses remarkable perception. For instance, Huck knows enough about human nature to be able to fool almost everyone he wants to. He deters the two men in the canoe from finding the hidden Jim by implying his father is

aboard the raft with smallpox. He discerns the true identities of the “king” and the “duke,” and realizes that the Phelpses are so good-natured and easy-going that Tom could free Jim without all his machinations. Instances of Huck’s perceptiveness abound throughout the novel.

At times Paddy also possesses uncanny perception. He reads people as well as Huck does. He knows that when his father “folded his legs . . . and leaned a bit to the side into his chair” (*Paddy* 25) it meant that he was receptive to Paddy’s questions. He is able to direct his parents’ conversation away from an argument and make his mother laugh. He can tell when his father is being lazy. He also makes observations about human nature which, although true, are rarely admitted by adults.

It was great. Liam was finished now. Kevin and me wouldn’t even talk to him any more. I was delighted. I didn’t know why. I like Liam. It seemed important though. If you were going to be best friends with anyone--Kevin--you had to hate a lot of other people, the two of you together. It made you better friends. (182)

Paddy’s perceptions, although simplistically stated, often reveal a side of people which we prefer to ignore.

Both boys, as a balance to their uncommon insights, also engage in the superstitious thought processes of the uneducated. Jim and Huck are terrified of touching a snakeskin--they call it “the worst bad luck in the world” (Twain 59). They also believe other superstitions; for instance, one isn’t supposed to “count the things you are going to cook for dinner” (52) or shake a tablecloth after sundown or look at the moon over one’s left shoulder--performing any of these actions bodes certain evil.

Paddy's superstitions are more apparently products of his immediate environment. For instance, Paddy, afraid that a neighbor, having discovered one of his transgressions, is on her way to his house to tell his parents, invents his own ritual to ward off his neighbor's potential "evil":

If the bell didn't ring by the time I'd finished all the ice-cream she wouldn't be coming. But I couldn't rush it. I had to eat it the slow way I always did, always the last one to finish. I was allowed to lick the bowl. The bell didn't ring at all. I felt like I'd done something; my mission had been accomplished. (*Paddy* 61)

Both boys order their respective universes with superstitious rituals. When either feels powerless or frightened, he attempts to regain control with magical thinking. The most superstitious talk in Twain's novel occurs in the beginning of Jim and Huck's journey when they are most afraid. Jim fears that he will be captured as a runaway slave and separated forever from his family; Huck, that his father (who will beat him severely) or Miss Watson (who will make him live uncomfortably in the pre-Civil War equivalent of middle-class suburbia) will catch him.

Paddy relies on magical thinking when he is frightened. In the earlier quotation, he fears punishment for messing with Mrs. Kiernan's laundry. Paddy believes that his ice-cream ritual has prevented Mrs. Kiernan from telling his parents about his misbehavior. The "successes" of his ritualized behavior give Paddy a sense of power over his circumstances. He uses all his powers to prevent his parents' fighting:

I was on guard. I was making sure that they didn't start again; all I had to do was stay awake. . . . I stayed awake. The cock crew. There was no more fighting. . . . Mission accomplished.

I had to stay still. If I moved it would start again. I was allowed to breathe, that was all. It was like after Catherine or the other baby stopped crying; forty-five seconds, my ma said--if they didn't cry out inside forty-five seconds they'd go back asleep. I stood. I didn't count; this wasn't a game or babies. I didn't know how long. Long enough to be cold. . . . I was in charge. They didn't know. I could move now; the worst bit was over: I'd done it. But I had to stay awake all night; I had to keep an all-night vigil. (232, 234)

Paddy's phrase--"this wasn't a game"--takes us into Paddy and Huck's most significant similarity--their rapid and premature entrance into the adult world. In the beginning of Twain's novel, Huck role-plays with Tom--they imagine they are a gang of murderers and thieves. Although he soon tires of the pretense, Huck still greatly admires Tom and his "learning." But Huck realizes the river contains no place for such games when he encounters a real gang of murderers and thieves who put his and Jim's lives at risk. Later when Huck regresses and tries to fool Jim, a la Tom, by convincing Jim that he dreamt a huge storm, Jim feels betrayed. Huck realizes such childish pranks are not funny and can hurt people:

It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed *his* foot to get him to take it back. It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterward, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd 'a' knowed it would make him feel that way. (90)

Huck has entered an adult world with no place for silly games. When he meets Tom again and reverts into game-playing, "we resent the relapse into childishness because it is a

relapse but also because the joke just ain't funny" (Elliott 284). However, at the novel's end, Huck leaves civilization (and Tom) and its (and his) negative influences.

Paddy begins the novel playing games. He pretends to be various saints, priests, soccer players, and explorers. He plays games for the same reason Tom does: "Tom is playing hooky from stern, respectable, right/wrong morality" (284). Paddy, raised in an Irish Catholic household, role-plays to escape respectability's strictures. However, at the end of the novel, Paddy is no longer respectable--his parents' separation has thrust him outside the circle of acceptability and he has no more use for childish games. He expects his mother to tell him, "You're the man of the house now, Patrick" (*Paddy* 281). (Notice his suddenly adult name.) He tells the reader that the cruel rhymes of the other children don't bother him because "they were only kids" (281). Huck has no use for childish games either, but *he* abandons *them*--he decides to "light out for the territory" (Twain 283). Paddy's abandonment by his "respectable" neighbors is his tragedy.

More important than the similarity between Paddy and Huck is the similarity between the two narrative techniques. *Huck Finn*, which Doyle undoubtedly taught during his fourteen years as a middle-school English teacher, and *Paddy Clarke* are both first-person narratives that feature boy narrators. *Style indirect libre*, "the capacity to describe a character's environment as he would describe it himself" (Lane 93), can be difficult: "When novelists try to find a voice for the inarticulate--for the young, the sick, the daft--they often can't sustain it; they become knowing, sentimental, or both" (Mantel n. pag.). Although Doyle and Twain sometimes slip and make their protagonists too

perceptive or articulate, these slips are not egregious. On the whole the novelists convincingly register their narrators' voices. Like Twain, "Doyle has the perfect pitch" (Lane 92).

If authenticity were the only noteworthy aspect of these novels, *Huck Finn* and *Paddy Clarke* would at most be mere artistic exercises, interesting for not very many pages. Most boys do not possess the observational or verbal skills to interest adults for the several hours it takes to read a novel. Thus, each author must organize his protagonist's thoughts and observations so as to engage adults, while remaining true to the chosen narrative voice. The author cannot indulge in false psychologizing or make the narrator wiser or more knowing than his years. Nor can he make the narrator's stories too obviously significant. To err in any of these ways would destroy the character's voice.

Each author writes his novel on two levels. *Huck Finn* is superficially the story of the adventures of a runaway boy drifting down the Mississippi with a runaway slave. However, Twain also wanted his novel both to criticize the spiritual and ethical blindness of the righteous and respectable slave-holding society and illustrate the corruption and moral decay of all classes of people. Superficially Doyle presents a series of a young boy's random experiences which become increasingly dominated by his parents' unhappiness. More deeply, these experiences are not random at all: Doyle communicates with the adult audience by means of Paddy, who regularly says more than he knows. The novel casts a cold eye on a society in which divorce is commonplace.

Because Huck is older, more independent and worldly-wise, Twain's "two-level" writing is not always as pointed as Doyle's. Huck will often philosophize, for example, on such subjects as the morality of helping a slave escape. Although he comes to the "wrong" conclusion, that he will go to hell, the reader knows what Twain thinks. Paddy, too young to philosophize, does not (and cannot) reflect on moral, religious, or political issues. Doyle guides the reader in other subtle ways.

Paddy's perceptions, discussed earlier, offer a good example of Doyle's two-level writing. Doyle comments on adult behavior by having the almost too candid Paddy make embarrassingly accurate observations which lead the reader to think about the topic in question and examine his/her own behavior. Often Paddy will ingenuously tell us about events in his neighborhood or his life which relate to weighty topics. For example, the passage that observes how excluding people strengthens friendships is obviously relevant in today's xenophobic world.

Paddy's experiences with and thoughts about death are especially striking. We first glimpse Paddy's attitude about death in the novel's opening page: "Liam and Aidan had a dead mother. Missis O'Connell was her name. --It'd be brilliant, wouldn't it? I said. . . . We were talking about having a dead ma" (*Paddy* 1). Death to a ten-year-old is not so horrible. It is merely a personal trait, much like having blonde or brunette hair. Paddy's mom is pretty; Charles Leavy's mom is dirty and stinks of cigarettes; Liam and Aidan's mom is dead. At first, death in such a light seems partly comic, and we chuckle at

how childish Paddy's thoughts are. He has never experienced death firsthand, so he thinks of it as a type of urban myth, something that happens to other people:

A fellow in Raheny swallowed a bee by accident and it stung him in the throat and he died. He choked. He was running with his mouth open and the bee flew in. When he was dying he opened his mouth to say his last words and the bee flew out. That was how they knew. (123)

Or "they said that two men were killed doing this work but we never saw anything. They were killed when some of Donnelly's field fell on them, after it had been raining and the ground was loose and soggy. They drowned in muck" (112). Or if you went swimming after eating a full meal, "you drowned if you were full of your dinner. Your belly was too full and too heavy. You swallowed water. It got into your lungs. It took ages for you to die" (174). Notice how the fellow who was killed lived in Raheny, not Barrytown, and how "they said" that some nameless adults died in the field. Paddy is merely repeating what he has heard. He has no conception of what actual death is, or that it could happen in his own circle.

When Paddy is confronted with real death, as when a boy from one of the Corporation homes drowns in a pond, he is deeply affected and struggles to comprehend it:

He'd slipped in face first and his coat and jumper and his trousers got so wet and heavy he couldn't get up; that was what they said. The water soaked his clothes. I could see it. I put my sock in the sink, hanging into the water. The water crept up the sock. Half the water went into the sock. . . . (196)

Paddy cannot easily come to terms with this death. He first tries to understand it by experimenting with his sock, trying to reconcile what “they said” with what he experiences for himself.

Paddy’s childish ideas about death exist even in the adult world. One would think with physical maturity come wisdom and acceptance, but Doyle does not believe so. Death is unintelligible in an adult world, and we use the same sophomoric “tricks” to distance ourselves from it that Paddy uses. We perceive the beginnings of our supposedly adult avoidance behaviors in a ten-year-old boy.

Paddy Clarke also handles language on two levels. Many of the games that Paddy and his friends play involve words and their sounds. This fascination with language hearkens back to a very a strong oral tradition. Irish, the language of the oldest European vernacular literature, has a long “oral tradition of songs, laments, lays and ballads” (Deane 17). Under British rule, especially harsh under Cromwell, Gaelic civilization was reduced to “an immiserated peasant culture” (21). By the late eighteenth century, the Irish language had “receded to an unprecedented degree” (21) as English became the official language of Ireland. In order to survive politically, Irishmen had to deny their original tongue and speak English. The language someone spoke, aside from what he or she actually said, became a political statement. Forced to communicate in a foreign language, the Irish learned to manipulate English to make it more palatable. As the number of people writing Irish fell, the Gaelic oral tradition remained alive through the efforts of storytellers and poets. (Brian Friel’s *Translations* addresses this English subjugation of

Gaelic language.) The spoken language became the conveyor of Gaelic culture. Paddy and his friends, with their obvious delight in words, remind us of “this formidable tradition of truthtelling . . . brought to perfection in Ireland” (Lane 92).

This discussion of language naturally leads us to consider Doyle’s own fascination with speech. Doyle’s ability to reproduce the spoken language is exceptional:

Eliot once pointed out that “an artisan who can talk English beautifully while about his work or in a public bar, may compose a letter painfully written in a dead language bearing some resemblance to a newspaper leader.” The language of most contemporary fiction is, by these standards, close to death, so we might as well rejoice when we meet the living thing. Roddy Doyle is that rare species: the artisan who comes home from the public house and makes art from what he heard there. The Commitments played soul because, as one of the said, “anyone with a bin lid can play it.--It’s the people’s music.” But they were hardly needed; the people were making enough music as it was. (Lane 94)

Paddy’s self-consciousness about language makes us appreciate the beauty of vernacular Irish English.

Doyle’s two-level humor in *Paddy Clarke* is different from the humor in the trilogy. The humor arises when the omniscient adult reader watches as Paddy tries to make sense of his experiences. Doyle makes Paddy unconsciously humorous, as in his commentary on Daniel Boone:

Daniel Boone was one of the greatest of American pioneers. But, like many other pioneers, he was not much of a hand at writing. He carved something on a tree after he’d killed a bear. --D. Boone killa bar on this tree 1773. His writing was far worse than mine, than Sinbad’s even. I’d never have spelled Bear wrong. And anyway as well, what was a grown-up doing writing stuff on trees? (*Paddy* 56)

We knowing adults enter into complicity with Doyle as we laugh at Paddy's observation, which he does not intend to be humorous. We also laugh at the way Paddy collects bizarre data and regurgitates it at odd moments, like "The life expectancy of a mouse is eighteen months" (44) or "Snails and slugs were gastropods. They had stomach feet" (53). The reader "laughs in recognition: if none of us can retrieve our innocence, we can all remember our eagerness to get rid of it--that ludicrous, indiscriminating appetite for scraps of knowledge" (Lane 92). Doyle "is brilliant on the obsessive concentration a child can bring to doing nothing, on the weird mixture of obscure facts and pure ignorance which clutters a child's head" (O'Toole "Comic Opera" 21).

Yet we knowing adults do not laugh at everything Paddy finds humorous, such as dead legs, "pruning" (grabbing someone's testicles), and many of the other cruel things he does. Paddy and his friends pour lighter fluid into Sinbad's mouth and light it; they shoplift; they build dangerous booby traps around their forts; and all in the name of fun.

This discussion of violence in Paddy's world is yet another instance of two-level writing. Paddy and his friends engage in these savageries because they find them amusing. Doyle says this is typical behavior:

Little boys are violent. Read *Lord of the Flies*. When the kids don't have any parental guidance, they are little savages. . . . Peter Brook [the director of one of the movie versions of the book] put the kids on the island and just filmed, and his conclusion was that the book was very unrealistic because the kids became savages much more quickly in reality. The book took too long--he said the little fuckers were on the island for only a couple of hours before they were beating each other on the heads. So kids are very violent. I think also, there is a certain amount of curiosity in their cruelty. Cruelty to animals is more curiosity. My own kids--they have rabbits and fish and they love them, but they'll push the rabbit, not to be cruel but to see what would happen if they push the rabbit. (Interview 218)

In the novel the children kick their neighbor's dog to see what will happen; they put lighter fluid in Sinbad's mouth for the same reason. Paddy does not realize the harm he may be causing because he cannot comprehend all the possible consequences.

Paddy's violence, however, escalates during the course of the novel. Pushing a dog and trying to break a friend's nose are different types of negative behavior. Paddy's environment grows harsher, as children like Charles Leavy enter the neighborhood and as his parents yell at each other and occasionally revert to physical violence. Paddy changes: "Paddy's naughtiness shades into delinquency, although he himself can hardly tell the difference, let alone give a reason; he catches unhappiness off those closest to him, the very people who are supposed to make him happy" (Lane 92). Significantly, as Paddy's parents grow further estranged, Paddy grows more infatuated with Charles Leavy, the tough boy who seems to need no one. Paddy's increasing violence reflects his disintegrating surroundings: this novel "uses Paddy's half-formed consciousness as a prism through which he can refract the ordinary pain of adult experience, so that . . . loss and grief can be bent at a new angle and show their true colours" (O'Toole "Comic Opera" 21).

Mr. and Mrs. Clarke, as Doyle has acknowledged, are ordinary people, but their fighting is increasingly damaging to Paddy. Even though Paddy's mother seems saintly and his father deeply flawed, we must remember that we are seeing them through Paddy's eyes--we never even learn their first names. Consequently, we do not receive an objective

picture of either parent. Paddy spends more time with his mother, as she is his primary care-giver and seems to be a very nurturing woman. She listens to him, is patient with him, tries to understand him.

His father, whose favorite song contain the revealing lyrics “I married a wife-- she’s the plague of my life--I wish I was single again” (*Paddy* 84), is less patient than his wife, has a quicker temper and a sarcastic sense of humor. He does not spend as much time with Paddy as his wife does; consequently, he does not understand the way Paddy’s mind works and loses his temper with Paddy more often. For example, when Paddy asks about wearing jeans on Sundays, his father answers “No” while his mother says “It depends--Not till after mass anyway.” The father again says “No.” “My ma looked at him with a face, like the look she had when she caught us doing something; sadder, though. --He doesn’t have any jeans, she said. --He’s just asking” (61). Mrs. Clarke knows that Paddy often asks questions just to be talking or engaging his parents. While Mr. Clarke may not be the best of fathers, he is not a bad one. The reader must work to overcome an instinctive negative reaction against him because of Paddy’s perceptions.

Mr. and Mrs. Clarke are simply two people who can no longer live together. Paddy and his siblings are experiencing the negative effects of this incompatibility. And so we witness another instance of two-level writing, this time with a political agenda. Over the past ten years, Doyle has become a passionate supporter of the divorce referendum in Ireland. Having worked for the Vote Yes campaign since he stuffed leaflets through letterboxes in 1986, he used his celebrity status on behalf of the success of the referendum:

The referendum was about divorce, about whether we wanted it or not and I felt strongly, yeah, we should have it and should be allowed to have it. But I felt that the debate went beyond that, particularly in the tone of the No Campaign. It basically was the Catholic Church against everyone else. It was this insistence that if you're Irish, you're white and you're Catholic as well, and if you're not both of those things then you're not fully Irish. Ultimately, that is what it was all about. . . . I felt that it was a real fight, a fight for the future of my children and the future of the country. I was very, very emotionally involved. . . . My children are growing up and they're not going to be Catholic. I felt that I had to insist that they are perfectly entitled to grow up non-Catholic in this country. But the word coming from the No campaign was that they couldn't do that. You had to be Catholic and Irish. (qtd. in Fay 19)

Doyle was so impassioned about this debate that had the referendum not passed, which it did by a very narrow margin, he and his family would have considered leaving Ireland:

If divorce was rejected again, leaving Ireland seemed inevitable. It's something we'd be loath to do. But it was something that myself and my wife were going to have to talk about if the No vote won. We were going to have to seriously weigh up the options. The problem was, as we both said, "Let's pack a bag but where do you go?" (qtd. in Fay 19)

Paddy Clarke depicts the pain that warring parents unintentionally inflict on their children. If we extrapolate forward from the end of the novel, perhaps we see no reconciliation between Paddy's parents. These two adults, because divorce is not possible in Ireland in 1968, cannot remarry. Paddy's mother, a religious woman, will most likely never have a male companion again, and her life will be spent raising her four children alone. Mr. Clarke, who is not religious, will nevertheless be forced to abide by the anti-divorce law. Perhaps he will be like Mr. O'Connell, whose sister-in-law takes his children away from him because his long-time girlfriend, whom he cannot marry, moves into his

spare bedroom. Whatever happens, these two likable people will never be able to have another legal relationship.

If, on the other hand, we prophesy reconciliation in the Clarke future, this option seems no more encouraging. These two people cannot live together peaceably, and unless their personalities change drastically, which seems improbable, the fighting will begin again. Having witnessed how a relatively short period of fighting has affected Paddy, we must wonder what a lifetime of fighting will do to the other children.

Paddy Clarke addresses the issue of spousal conflict which Doyle addresses more fully in his next novel, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*. The obvious question at the end of the novel is "What happens next?" With divorce against the law, and with little hope for the principal characters changing their fundamental attitudes, no good alternatives exist. Doyle forces the reader to confront the optionless futures divorce laws ensure.

Religion can also be viewed on two levels in *Paddy Clarke*. We see both Paddy's childlike view of religion, which concentrates on the mysteries and entertaining stories, and the agnostic Doyle's personal view of religion, discussed in the "Introduction."

Although, as Doyle says, "*Paddy Clarke* is filled with religion--a childish version of it" (Interview 211), it offers Paddy no help in his time of need. The ten-year-old Paddy cannot grasp the real significance of the mass, sacraments, and saints. To Paddy, religion is merely another set of bizarre rules imposed by adults that he must blindly follow. He notices that his father is still chewing at thirty-six seconds past half-eleven on Sunday

morning, which breaks into the proscribed fasting period before Communion. Paddy says, "I kept it to myself. If he went up for communion I'd see what happened. I knew and God knew" (*Paddy* 155). Mr. Clarke has broken the rules, and Paddy expects him to receive his punishment accordingly. Interestingly, Paddy, raised in a Catholic household, is only concerned with the picayune regulations of religion, while Huck, raised with no religious training, actually grapples with heady questions of good and evil and right and wrong.

Doyle draws parallels between the rules of religion and the rules of Paddy's teacher, Mr. Hennessy, who relies heavily on the stick to maintain order. Indeed, seen from Paddy's viewpoint, religion and classroom order have much in common. Both sets of arbitrary rules, if broken, result in horrific punishment; both sets of rules are enforced by frightening, and at times, inconsistent, omnipotent figures. In 1996, physical punishment as a "teaching method" is considered inhumane, but the religious dicta have changed relatively little since Paddy's childhood.

Although religion is incomprehensible to Paddy, it can still be an enjoyable game. One of his favorite pastimes is to act out the story of Father Damien and the lepers, but to do this, "I needed lepers. Sinbad wasn't enough. He kept running away. . . . So I needed lepers. . . . I got the McCarthy twins and Willy Hancock. . . . They thought it was great being with a big boy, me. I made them come into our back garden. I told them what lepers were" (51). Paddy, playing the title role of Father Damien, coerces first his younger brother, then some younger neighbors, into playing this game. This vignette

reveals Doyle's cynical view of saints and the religious community. To be a priest, a saint, a savior (or even a schoolteacher), one needs worshipful followers over whom one has complete control. The lower the followers, the higher the saint, the more complete his power.

Paddy plays other games with religious themes. He and his friends stage a mock funeral for a rat, although it is a Viking ceremony with no formal priest. He cuts penny-sized communion wafers out of a vienna roll and leaves the round shapes on a windowsill for two days: "They got hard like the real ones but they didn't taste nice any more. I wondered was it a sin for me to be making them. I didn't think so" (48). In a scene reminiscent of Mary Lavin's story "My Vocation," Paddy tells his parents that he has a vocation because he "wanted [his mother] to cry. I wanted my da to shake my hand. I told him when he got home from his work" (52). The surprising outcome of his revelation to his father is a fight: "He sounded angry. --Encouraging this rubbish, he said. . . . --You did! He roared it" (53). Paddy's father is outraged and disgusted when Paddy considers (although not seriously) entering the religious life.

It is noteworthy that Doyle makes one of the novel's most sympathetic characters, Mrs. Clarke, very religious, and the least sympathetic, Mr. Clarke, the most irreligious. Doyle would never use his novels as mere vehicles for his own personal agenda by blatantly assigning his beliefs to the most likable characters. A person as patient and even-tempered as Mrs. Clarke probably would have been religious, whereas the caustic, cynical Mr. Clarke would not have been. But the fact that religion is the basis for a number of

fight in the Clarke household underscores the irony of the disputes and bloodshed which religion has always inspired.

Aside from the games, the Church does nothing for young Paddy. In one of the few times we ever see the Church called upon for consolation in Doyle's novels, it fails.

While listening to one of the early fights between his parents, Paddy reports:

Their fights were like a train that kept getting stuck at the corner tracks and you had to lean over and push it or straighten it. Only now, all I could do was listen and wish. I didn't pray, there were no prayers for this. The Our Father didn't fit, or the Hail Mary. But I rocked the same way I sometimes did when I was saying prayers. Backwards and forwards, the rhythm of the prayer. Grace Before Meals was the fastest, probably because we were all starving just before lunch, just after the bell. (154)

Prayer gives no consolation here. It is separate from the real world Paddy inhabits and cannot fill empty bellies or make his parents stop fighting. Paddy finds more consolation in his ritualized vigils than in any type of prayer. Doyle says, "It kind of depresses me when I see all those people in the church--particularly the kids" (Interview 212). Neither Paddy nor Doyle finds religion adequate to the problems of the modern world.

Paddy Clarke is obviously one of Doyle's most disturbing novels. It begins as a celebration of childhood but ends as a memorial for both childhood and marriage. Paddy's parents' fights dominate both the novel and Paddy's life. These fights suffocate him spiritually while the development of the Corporation homes encroaches on him physically. Although Doyle asserts that there is no pessimistic trend to his works, he does say that he tries to depict all aspects of life; his first two books show its more positive aspects, while

the next two show the grimmer side. And although Doyle protests that his outlook is not pessimistic, merely realistic, he does choose to end and entitle this novel with the cruel rhyme with which the other school children taunt Paddy. This chant appears in the penultimate, not the ultimate, section of the novel, but its power is so overwhelming that the last section, in which Paddy and Mr. Clarke meet in a formal, stilted visit and awkwardly shake hands, is overshadowed by the haunting rhyme. Thus, Doyle concludes *Paddy Clarke* with a powerful image of childhood cruelty that somehow “contaminates” the entire novel. Although Doyle says that there is room for hope, as Paddy is still very young and has two loving and responsible, although separated, parents, the novel feels far from hopeful.

Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha is a breakthrough novel for Doyle. His first patently artful novel, *Paddy Clarke* made the literary critics and his popular audiences take him seriously as an artist, rather than brush him off as an entertainer. Doyle has mastered the technique of entering another’s consciousness; he skillfully makes Paddy the unwitting vehicle for humor, political statements, social commentary, and religious criticism. In Paddy, Doyle has created a fully realized character. Paddy’s candor, perception, and final confusion, betrayal, and hurt will remain in readers’ minds. His gift for observation and way with words suggest that he may grow up to be a remarkable person. Although always humorous, Doyle concentrates more on developing character than on providing laughs. *Paddy Clarke* is a masterful, enduring coming-of-age novel which will continue to speak to generations of readers.

CHAPTER SIX

THE WOMAN WHO WALKED INTO DOORS

The Woman Who Walked Into Doors, Doyle's most recent novel, published in 1996, is also his most ambitious. Although this novel is Doyle's second first-person narrative, *The Woman's* narrator demands more of an imaginative stretch in Doyle. In *Paddy Clarke*, he could draw upon both his own experience as a ten-year-old boy and on his son, roughly Paddy's age, a living model for Doyle. But Doyle has never even known a thirty-nine-year-old female victim of repeated spousal abuse; yet such a woman is Paula Spencer, the narrator of Doyle's fifth novel.

In 1994, the BBC invited Doyle to write "anything I wanted." He responded with a screenplay "about a family in crisis . . . in four episodes" (Interview 192). This controversial series views a contemporary family over a period of several months, with each episode focusing on a different family member, starting off with the violently controlling husband Charlo and ending with his wife Paula. The series, entitled *The Family*, was widely watched. Doyle received many letters and queries concerning Paula, asking "How could she have married him in the first place?" The novel grew out of those inquiries:

I felt strongly that she had an awful lot that she could say and I had grown very fond of her and very protective of her because she'd been through so much, and I could imagine her sitting down when she had free time . . . and she would start writing and explore her past. . . . The book lets her explain to an extent why she

fell in love with this man and why he fell in love with her and it made him something less of a monster as well (192-93)

Paula Spencer attempts to explain, to the reader and to herself, how she became a thirty-nine-year-old alcoholic and abused widow with four children. She hopes to change herself by understanding what happened to her.

As in many novels where the narrator attempts to explain his or her life, the structure is not linear or chronological, but instead spiral-like. A present situation sparks off a memory, which in turn provokes another memory, and so forth, until the narrative returns to the present, which then begins another chain of memories. Paula, as she is speaking to us, is coming to terms with and learning about herself and her life. She is confronting her “memories of the people, places, objects, events and feelings that make up the story of your life. Memories that answer the questions, Who am I, and How did I get to be this way?” (Kotre 168). After sharing with the reader some important background information, she articulates her memories of many important events, from which we learn a great deal about her: “Memories of ordinary events don’t reveal much about a person’s character, but memories of extraordinary events do” (168).

Paula Spencer, née O’Leary, remembers her youth in an unidentified Dublin suburb as relatively happy and secure, with the family going on day trips and the occasional holiday; with Paula and her friends chasing after little boys; and with Paula performing well in primary school. However, her older sister Carmel, whom Paula asks to confirm her memories, remembers this period as horrible, with a tyrannical father, a harried and harassed mother, and constant fighting and yelling. Paula also tells us about her days in

secondary school: how she was put in the “stupid” class and the changes in her this assignment wrought; about the rigid societal codes which girls followed for fear of being labeled “slut”; about her physical changes after puberty and the reactions of her peers. We see Paula as a precocious, attractive, “normal” teenage girl who is hardened by a miserable school and class system.

Then, at a local dance, she meets the Byronesque, mysterious Charlo about whom she has heard exciting rumors: he is tough and has been in jail. Paula and Charlo are attracted to each other and begin to date exclusively. Because of his reputation as a vicious fighter, dating Charlo commands such respect from the neighborhood that Paula feels free from societal restrictions for the first time. They get married. Paula is proud that she was not pregnant at the time: “So there. It was love” (*Woman* 129). Charlo has a job, and they move into a small flat. Paula gets pregnant very quickly, and just as quickly their relationship begins to go awry. Only months into their marriage, Charlo hits her for the first time. They both are horrified by this blow, which knocks Paula to the ground, and Charlo is repentant. But his remorse is short-lived, and he begins to beat her more often and more severely. The title of the novel comes from one of the excuses she frequently uses when Charlo takes her to the emergency room after his more violent beatings. “I walked into the door” (181). As she explains to the reader:

I didn't exist. I was a ghost. People looked away, I wasn't there. They stared at the bruises for a split second, then away, off my shoulder and away. There was nothing there. . . . The woman who had nothing wrong with her. The woman who was fine. The woman who walked into doors. (187)

Paula endures the beatings because she feels that she has no choice. Her father has become a distant, cold, humorless, man who, Paula thinks, feels triumphant at the sight of her wounds; her mother, enduring her marriage to Mr. O'Leary, has become a nonentity with no opinions or life of her own, and consequently can offer no consolation. Paula stays with Charlo for eighteen years and eventually has four children and one stillborn child. She lives in fear and becomes an alcoholic in an attempt to escape the pain of daily existence. She can never muster the courage either to leave Charlo or to kick him out of the house until one morning when she sees him looking at their oldest daughter Nicola with an expression of seething hatred. This look forces her out of her alcohol- and fear-induced lethargy, and she hits him with a frying pan. Paula forces a bloody and stunned Charlo, the man she has feared for the last eighteen years, out of the house. He never returns.

Paula is struggling to come to terms with her past so that she can be able to live and survive in the present: "The book is . . . her attempt to sort herself out, her recent past, not her present. . ." (Interview 191). She is trying to recover her life. At the novel's commencement, Paula, on her own for two years, is trying to control her alcoholism, although "she's not ready to do anything about it because she needs it" (Doyle qtd. in Interview 190). She is trying to be an active force in raising her youngest son. She works four days a week as a maid and is becoming financially independent. And she has just been told that Charlo was shot and killed by the Guardia in a foiled bank robbery/kidnapping attempt. In the novel Paula is both trying to understand where her life

went wrong and to redirect the spiraling course her life has taken: “The historical structures that mold our lives pose questions we must respond to and define the immediate possibilities for change” (Hartsock 61).

The most remarkable thing about *The Woman* is the character Paula Spencer. She is far more complex than any of Doyle’s previous characters. Paula is a fully formed, complex, intricate character. Indeed, compared to her, the Rabbittes do seem more like caricatures (Shepherd 164) than “reality,” a word that Doyle frequently intones when discussing his work. Paula’s narrative is a “more complex interior monologue than that of Paddy Clarke, the chirpy 10-year-old—the voice of a woman with adult responsibilities to deal with, as well as all the crack and agonies that come with growing up as a girl” (Turner n. pag.).

A man writing convincingly and unpatronizingly as a woman is an accomplishment in itself; a man writing successfully as a woman who is uncertain about her status both as a person and as a woman, and who is trying to discover her own identity by examining her history is extraordinary. The writer must invent and account for the whole life of this character—he must give her memories and experiences appropriate to her gender and to her current psychological condition, but which are not inane obvious—there are no *quid pro quo* experiences in real life. He must make the narrator self-conscious, but he himself cannot be self-conscious. The writer must be able to unfold the narrative, yet make it seem as if the narrator is doing this on her own. Inventing a character who lives in the present and who is reacting logically to current situations is difficult enough. Inventing a

character who is trying to reinvent herself is an accomplishment. Doyle successfully completes his task and allows Paula to complete her task also.

One might say that Paula is an extraordinary set of characters. Arguably there are four Paulas. When reinventing herself, the narrator Paula must take stock of the other three Paulas, and decide how she became who she is. The first Paula is the very young Paula, the Paula of the memories of a happy home and of caring, loving parents. This is the precocious, joyful Paula who, with her girlfriends, chases after boys and gets her first brassiere. The second Paula is the teenager who is placed in the “thick” class, who becomes brash and bold only to avoid being overlooked, who is aware of society’s strictures, and who meets and falls in love with the dashing young Charlo. The third Paula is the alcoholic, abused, insensible woman who is married to Charlo, the victim Paula. We know very little about this Paula because the current Paula remembers nothing of this time-- “I missed the 80s. I haven’t a clue. It’s just a mush” (*Woman* 203). This Paula lived in fear and agony; she lived to forget what was happening to her. Finally, the current Paula, the narrator, is trying to make sense of her old selves. Doyle shows us how these four separate identities are connected, and how each has evolved into the next.

The young Paula is filled with a touching *joie de vivre*. She is reminiscent of Paddy Clarke before his parents started fighting. Paula and Paddy are perceptive and full of imagination and curiosity. Each child also remembers his or her own “safe place.” While Paddy has his fort under the dining-room table and loves to stare at dust particles illuminated by sunbeams, Paula’s first and “safest” memory is of her bedroom:

There were noises from downstairs, the radio and my mammy humming and putting things on the table. I was warm. Carmel was asleep in her bed. . . . My father in the coal shed scraping coal off the floor into the bucket, the screech of the shovel on the concrete. . . . I always loved that noise . . . maybe knowing that there was a lovely big fire coming. The cot was white, chipped so that some of the wood underneath showed. There was a picture of a fawn at the end where my head was. . . . When I think of *happy* and *home* together, I see the curtain blowing and the sun on the wall and being snug and ready for the day. . . . I see flowers on the curtains--but there were never flowers on the curtains in our room. (*Woman 6-7*)

Although the circumstances surrounding the relating of these memories differ--Paula is remembering thirty years later while Paddy is still a little boy only several years removed from his memory--these memories are gender-based, almost to the point of being stereotypical. Paddy, the young boy, is alone in his memory. He is curious and observant. He has made a barricade of the dining room chairs. His fort is always cool, and is rather dirty. Paddy often falls asleep on the bare linoleum on which the table stands. This is the safe place of a mischievous little boy. There are no frills, no amenities, no comforts. He likes what he can observe from his haven, such as the difference in his parents' walking patterns and the secret life of dust particles.

Paula's memory is much different. She is with her family, covered in warm blankets and thinking of future warmth and love. Everything is clean and orderly. She imagines flowers on the curtains, and animals on her bed. As an adult with her recent history, she would naturally find this memory, with its safe and sane order, comforting. She misremembers flowers on the curtains, because flowers would more naturally appeal to her sense of beauty than the masculine stripes which were the actual pattern.

Notice, however, that Paula's memory does not include intellectual curiosity.

Doyle is not making a statement about cultural attitudes about women. At the time of the memories, the 1960s, boys were more encouraged towards intellectual pursuits than were girls. Paddy's father teaches him about fingerprints, while Paula's father tends to ignore her and her sisters' minds. Paula was never encouraged in school, which also had the effect of stifling her intellectual curiosity. In Paula's current state, a memory of a loving atmosphere would be more compelling to her than one of intellectual stimulation. This memory helps us learn about both the young and the adult Paula.

The young Paula is a winsome, intelligent, exuberant little girl. Instead of describing the "stuff" that comes out of a dead rat as Paddy does, Paula describes her mother taking her to get her first bra. She describes the problems of her first menstruation. In probably the most powerful time of her life, we see her and her girlfriends going steady with and breaking up with different boys every day:

I went with dozens of fellas after that for about a year. We swapped them around and they didn't know. I suppose it made them feel good, being chased by little young ones. Sometimes it actually was like a game of chasing; you'd dump one and run after another. It was a gas. Absolutely harmless. . . . We were still a bit young to be called sluts for it. Anyway, the young fellas all thought that they were in charge; they asked us to go with them--but they wouldn't have if we hadn't made them. . . . I went with (a boy) for eleven days, then I broke it off . . . because I wanted to. I just wanted to. I wanted to be able to say it. I wanted the word to go around; she broke it off with him. I wanted the power. (75-7)

Paula also does well in her same-sex primary school. Encouraged by her female teacher, Paula writes imaginative, creative stories and begins to learn: "I loved primary

school. . . . I was good in school, especially at stories. She [the teacher] always got me to read mine out to the class. . . . I was good in school; she made us think that we were good” (25). This young Paula is curious, happy, intelligent, sought-after, self-confident.

Things begin to change when she enters a coed high school. “I changed. I noticed it then; I’m not just looking back. I changed. I stopped trying to hide myself. I pushed myself forward. . . . I wasn’t the only one. It happened to all of us. We went in children and we turned into animals” (36-9). The first blow to her self-confidence occurs when she leaves her primary school and her beloved, encouraging female teacher. The headmaster calls out the list of names for the various levels. Paula is assigned to the next to lowest level. The headmaster has labeled her-- “we were the dopes, the thicks. There was only one class after us, 1.7. They were nearly retarded” (27). Her new teachers, particularly her English teacher, thoroughly quench her intellectual curiosity: “The prick; I was good at English until he came along with his Brylcream head. He never let us forget that we were dense, that we were a waste of his time” (33). As for the rest of her teachers, “The ones that weren’t perverts were either thick or bored or women” (34).

Paula cannot stand out among the students with her stories any longer, and to avoid being swallowed up, she realizes she must use her body. She starts grabbing Derek O’Leary, her piggish seat-mate, to retaliate for his grabbing her. She “wanks off” a boy in the back seat of her class room: “I did it to him; he didn’t do it to me. I did it. . . . That was how you made a name for yourself in 1.6” (41). She practices seductive smiles and poses. Paula stops being a thinking human and starts becoming a reacting body.

In this period of her life she meets Charlo at a local dance, and the two immediately become smitten and inseparable. Because of her experiences at her school, she has become so accustomed to inappropriate treatment that she says about their first meeting, "Charlo respected me, I have to say that. All the way home . . . he didn't try to get his feel or pull me behind a wall or none of the usual stuff. It was nice for a change" (52). "The usual stuff" has become so commonplace that its absence, which self-confident women would demand as a basic level of conduct, seems a significant a compliment to Paula. Of course, Charlo would discontinue this decent treatment eventually: "He'd do that to me later. . . . I always knew what to expect" (53). She falls in love with Charlo because he "made me someone. Not a Queen or a Princess, just someone. It was a start" (54). Her environment has so worked on her that she barely considers herself a person. She falls in love with Charlo because he makes her feel, not like a worthy person, but less like a thing.

This low self-esteem makes her accept ill treatment from Charlo without remark. Their sex life consists of quick trysts in which "he came, and we went" (155). When they meet each other's families, Paula tries to make a good impression on Mrs. Spencer, but Charlo tries deliberately to anger Mr. O'Leary. On their wedding night, Charlo gets severely intoxicated and deserts his wife. Paula goes to sleep alone, and never gets to throw her bouquet, a marriage ritual she was eagerly anticipating.

Paula, narrating this period of her life, continually asserts, "He loved me. He respected me." She is fooling herself. Instead of a mature love, Charlo's feelings toward

her were more, as Paula herself says about her own childish fancies, “. . . all about ownership, really. You had to have a [mate]” (76). I am not disputing Paula’s memories of this time. She and Charlo were, no doubt, very happy when in “that first totally obsessive phase” (Interview 193) of their relationship. During this time, Paula, who had been taught not to expect much, sees Charlo, who treats her better than she had been accustomed to, as a benefactor and liberator. Paula fulfills all of Charlo’s needs--she is attractive, sexual, eager to please--why shouldn’t he want “to keep her”? Paula attempts to prove that they were in love--she wasn’t pregnant at the time of their wedding, therefore there can be no dispute about the fact that they were in love. Thus, because this couple was operating under the false impression that lust is mature love, when the first romance fades, a greater understanding and respect for each other do not evolve. Instead, abuse follows. Paula has such a debased view of herself, exacerbated by her relationship with Charlo, that she becomes a perfect candidate for abuse.

The victim Paula occupies most of Paula’s life, yet we see her only a few times, and mostly in the last section of the book as if she couldn’t bring herself to confront this period earlier. We do not learn much about her because the narrator Paula does not know much about her. Paula is experiencing the partial amnesia that traumatic occurrences inspire (Newman 15). She cannot remember much about her life during this period at all. “What did I do in the 80’s: I walked into doors. I got up off the floor. I became an alcoholic. I discovered that I was poor, that I’d no right to the hope I’d started out with”

(*Woman* 204). She has become so submissive that she has squeezed her identity out of existence:

I was looking for everything I got. I provoked him. I was useless. I couldn't even cook a fry properly, or wash a good shirt. . . . I was hopeless, useless, good for fuckin' nothing. I lived through years of my life thinking that they were the most important things about me, the only real things. I couldn't cope, I couldn't earn, I needed him. I needed him to show me the way; I needed him to punish me. I was hopeless and stupid, good for only sex, and I wasn't even very good at that. He said. That was why he went to other women. (177)

Living with Charlo's abuse has made Paula a nothing. She lives in fear and pain. She is grateful for the Flake bar Charlo leaves her to apologize for his beatings. We have witnessed the near death of an identity.

Paula would never have left Charlo as long as the situation remained this way. First, her weak identity made her incapable of leaving him. Second, she always hoped that things would get better and return to the way "they used to be": "In most cases, the woman feels if she just holds on to the old pattern a little longer, why surely the paradisaical feeling she seeks will appear in the next heartbeat" (Estes 49).

The only thing that saves Paula from her family, is, ironically, her family. Although Paula has nothing left of herself, she still is biologically and emotionally a mother. Ironically, this label, which is often enough to erase many women's sense of personal identity, resurrects Paula's. "She stops being a battered wife when she becomes a protective mother" (Gordon 7). When she observes Charlo looking at their oldest daughter, Nicola, in the same manner with which he looks at her, "not with desire, as a

lesser writer would have suggested, but with hate and a wish to annihilate” (Gordon 7), something in the victim Paula snaps: “I don’t know what happened to me--the Bionic Woman--he was gone. It was so easy. Just bang--gone. The evil in the kitchen; his eyes” (*Woman* 213). She picks up a frying pan and hits him--her first independent action since the abuse began. In this moment she stops being self-less and recaptures her lost identity: “My finest hour. I was there. I was something. I loved” (213). She never second-guesses the significance of this action. She does not, as she does about other experiences, wonder how much of her recollection is imagined, or how much her battered psyche invented to keep her sane. “Realism becomes, not a literary convention, but a human triumph. The ability to say what novelists say--this happened, then this happened--is, for Paula, the mark of escape from victimhood” (O’Toole “Realist” n. pag.). Paula realizes that this time she can not overestimate her strength.

Ironically and paradoxically, her moments of identity involve her reaction to Charlo. She first feels like a person when she dates and then marries him. And she at last feels like a somebody when she drives him from her home. This final epiphany would be as false as the first had it caused no enduring alteration, but the narrator Paula is changing. The narrator Paula is learning from her history how to better her present: “Slowly, ever so slowly, she appears to be a woman in the process of getting a grip on her past” (Turner n. pag.). Her healing is much more difficult than that of any earlier Doyle character because Paula’s occurs in relative isolation. Doyle’s other characters, especially the Rabbittes, can rely on each other. “The Rabbittes existed mainly in the supportive, sociable medium of

dialogue. But Paula has to pull herself together from the inside of her own mind” (Turner n. pag.).

One example of Paula’s metamorphosis is the continued interest she takes in her youngest child Jack. She is a much better mother to Jack than she was to her other children. She has become a hands-on mother, involved in Jack’s daily life. Her other children’s childhoods are a blur because she was either drunk or severely injured during most of them. Now, however, she makes it a point to read Jack a bedtime story every night. She refuses to take a drink before Jack is asleep. She picks Jack up from school every day, and they have a tea-time together. She also is at home every day when Leanne gets home from school.

Paula has also proved to herself that she doesn’t need Charlo or his money to survive. She has a four-day-a-week job that she does uncomplainingly, and brings home enough money for her family. She runs her household very well--everyone has a routine, and everyone helps out. “We usually clean the house together when there’s so much dust that it has no room to settle. It’s nearly a tradition now, a game. Leanne loves it” (*Woman* 93). They all seem to enjoy each other. Nichola has a good job and a nice boyfriend. Leanne is doing very well in her school work and could go farther in her education than anyone else in the family.

Paula is regaining a little self-confidence and starting to realize that she is not stupid. She says tentatively about Leanne’s intelligence, “I wonder where she got the brains from. Maybe from me” (104). Paula is indulging her love of fiction by reading, and

is even making critical judgments on what she is reading: “Danielle Steele. It was shit, but I loved it. I’ve seven in my bedroom, in alphabetical order. All saved from the bins. Catherine Cookson is my favourite. I’ve two of hers. She’s very good” (109). (Paula is another Jillsey Sloper, the cleaning woman turned book editor, in John Irving’s *The World According to Garp*, one of Doyle’s favorite novels). Paula recognizes her progress: “I get up at eight o’clock every morning. I used to sleep it out a lot; sometimes I couldn’t get up. But not any more. I made the decision. I make the effort. I get up when the alarm goes. It’s a little victory; I’m in charge of myself” (91).

Humor and laughter demonstrate mental health in a Doyle character, and Paula is healing herself with humor. She is beginning to realize how ludicrous certain situations are and is now able to laugh at herself. Paula, always perceptive, has a keen sense of the incongruous. Her ability to laugh, however, has been retarded because of all the pain and isolation in her life. However, she is starting to look at her life from a distance, to discern its absurd components, and to recognize them as such.

She can easily recognize the humor in the early stages of her life. For instance, when she was chasing the little boys, she says, “I’d go into a field with one fella and sometimes we’d do absolutely nothing, not even talk; we’d stay a bit and go back to the rest. They’d nudge one another when we were coming towards them. I’d make myself blush” (76). She can perceive the inanity in society’s hypocrisy. She tells us that a single girl was called a slut on almost every occasion: “Everything made you one thing or the other” (48); but once she begins dating the disreputable Charlo, “I could have walked

around in my nip with twenty Major in my mouth combing my pubic hair and nobody would have said a word. I was Charlo's girl now and that made me respectable" (49). She sees the humor in the younger, pre-abuse Charlo. Telling us about strolling arm in arm with him on their first night, she remembers his walk: "His side-to-side walk . . . they all walked like that then, the fellas . . . walking like they're afraid they'll topple over because their balls are so heavy. . . . I began to walk like him so we wouldn't keep bashing into each other. . . . We must have looked ridiculous, the pair of us, strolling . . . like two hard penguins" (54). Or later, shortly after they were married: "I think it was during the Hunger Strikes. Charlo was big into the H Blocks. He'd have loved to have been in there with them. I said that to him. . . . He didn't even know I was slagging him. . . . He still ate like a pig, though, and drank like one" (180).

Paula even ridicules herself. The first time she meets Charlo's mother, she tries to make a good impression but fails miserably: "I said Hello and not Howyeh. All mothers said that their sons' girlfriends were common. . . . All the mothers were the same. I was drunk as a skunk, I'd no jacket on me, there was probably grass on my back, I was smiling crooked but I made sure I said Hello instead of Howyeh" (64).

Paula sees the humor in situations which many would fail to find funny. For instance, she could have surrounded the memories of her youth in a maudlin atmosphere; instead, she is straightforward and wry. Because she finds humor in these potentially bathetic situations, we hope that she will eventually be able to work through the horrors of

her beating. Doyle has given Paula the gift of laughter, and with it she will be able to heal herself.

To summarize, we have a good understanding of what the narrator Paula is like, and how she has evolved. She is perceptive and intelligent. She is determined--she is battling her history and alcoholism and winning. She knows her limitations--she realizes that alcohol is vital to her at this stage and accepts it, as much as she hates it. She knows she has a desperate need for a solid history, for memories of a "good" childhood. Inventing a past where all was safe and comforting is alluring but ultimately harmful, so she seeks validation from her family members about her memories.

In *The Snapper*, Doyle's only other novel that attempts to enter the feminine consciousness, Doyle makes Sharon Rabbitte a convincing character. Ironically, although Sharon is pregnant, the reader views her more as a young person than as a young woman, as a body more than a mind. Sharon is in a crisis, and is reacting, not reflecting; she lacks the time and inclination to look back over her life. She lacks the maturity which true reflection requires. She and the other Rabbittes "do not have time to ponder life; they live it instead" (Bradshaw 128). The thoughts and feelings which Sharon does experience--for instance, curiosity about her condition, shame regarding the circumstances, fear about the future--are so basically human that they are appropriate to either gender. Jimmy Sr. actually feels the same emotions, i.e., curiosity, shame, and fear, and expresses himself in terms similar to Sharon's.

Paula's novel is a series of female reflections. For this book, Doyle studied women's psychology, whereas for *The Snapper*, he read about the physical effects of pregnancy: "I did a hell of a lot of reading while I was writing--I read a lot about women and violence, women and alcohol, sexual fantasy. And I used very little of it in the strict sense. It was just to make the ice I was walking on thicker as I walked along" (Interview 199). Doyle seems to have used more of his research than he imagined, because he does a convincing job of creating a female psyche: "Unsure as to whether a self-portrait by a woman . . . could be handled by a male . . . I submitted the novel to a gender test which it passed triumphantly" (Gowrie 6).

Paula's life is in a sense metaphorical for all women's lives: "By calling attention to the specific experiences of individuals, feminism calls attention to the totality of social relations, to the social formation as a whole" (Hartsock 61). Paula's loss of identity has happened to many women when they entered the patriarchal society of the 1970's Ireland or the patriarchal society of 1990s America. "Beneath its colloquial 'Dub' style is a universal story of invisible women everywhere, lost in vast council wastelands on the fringes of cities. This is the tale of a little life, of childhood, motherhood and widowhood" (Foster 36). Paula's physical beatings reflect the psychological beatings women receive and are taught to receive uncomplainingly in patriarchies. Paula's scars--"the gaps in my mouth . . . the tiny bruises on my arm. The scar on my chin" (*Woman* 197)--in part represent women's psychological scars. Paula's body is the manifestation of many women's psychological damage.

Paula struggles to keep the power she earned in her youth, before patriarchal rules began to apply. During this time, her naturally vibrant and dominant personality thrives. In her same sex classroom, Paula excels. Her stories are selected to be read in class; “the applause and the smiles” (25) stand out in her memory. She is popular and has many friends. When she and her friends chase boys, they are in charge. “It was all about ownership really. You had to have a fella” (76). In these early relationships, the female is the “owner.” The empowered Paula even feels magnanimous enough to elevate poor Bickies O’Farrell for a brief moment: “I even went with Bickies O’Farrell for a bit because I felt sorry for him” (76). Paula here is the benign despot handing out favors, and not some broken slave accepting a Flake bar as recompense for physical beatings. Paula “broke it off” with one of her first boyfriends because “I just wanted to. I wanted to be able to say it. I wanted the power” (75). Power in Paula’s sheltered world is non-gender-based, and she flourishes.

When she leaves her primary school and enters a coed school, she also leaves her sanctuary. A male headmaster first makes her feel unimportant: “I was only in the tech half an hour when I realised that I wasn’t good at all. . . . The headmaster stood on the steps and told us to shut up” (25). Paula is put in one of the classes for the least capable students, a fact which is stressed by the way her male teacher introduces himself: “W.A.T.E.R.S. You are 1.6, but you should be able to remember that one” (26). The first day she gets in trouble because she tries to protect herself against her obnoxious male seatmate: “He kept trying to feel me till I punched him in the face and told him to fuck

off. I was made to stand up for making noise” (27). Paula, a female, is ostracized and punished for trying to assert herself over a male.

Paula feels uncomfortable in the new school and begins to doubt herself for the first time:

There was something about me that drew them to me, that made them touch me. It was my tits that I was too young for; I'd no right to them. It was my hair. It was my legs and my arms and my neck. There were things about me that were wrong and dirty. I thought that then; I felt it. I didn't say it to anybody. . . . I was a dirty slut in some way that I didn't understand and couldn't control; I made men and boys do things. (35)

Paula is blaming herself for uncontrollable and exclusively female conditions. She knows that physical maturity is not her fault, yet she still takes the blame--“I made them do things.” This guilt and blamefulness are typical of abused children, and persist until they have come to terms with their abuse. One of Doyle's favorite novels, *Bastard out of Carolina*, about a young girl physically and sexually abused by her stepfather, illustrates the self-hatred of the victim mentality:

It was my fault, everything. . . . I kept trying to figure out how I could have prevented it all from happening . . . not let anyone see . . . the bruises. . . . I should have gone to Mama and made sure she knew that I deserved that beating. . . . What was it I had done: Why had he always hated me? Maybe I was a bad girl, evil, nasty, willful, stupid, ugly--everything he said. Maybe I was. . . . (249-52)

Paula's mistreatment makes her a ready victim for domestic abuse. “Charlo may have acted out his self-hatred on Paula, but Paula does a fine job of heaping it on herself” (Slater 4).

The young Paula's situation is not unusual in modern patriarchal societies. "The relations of sexual hierarchy . . . allow men to express their power. They have internalized the relations and act upon them daily" (Eisenstein 51). Women, conversely, internalize the feelings of subordination: "The structure of values in industrial capitalist society has reinforced the ideology of inferiority and relative lack of power vis-à-vis men which women brought with them from preindustrial, precapitalist times" (Chodorow 90). When males wrongly assert their dominance in an already patriarchal world, females, having internalized the submissive female/dominant male paradigm, have little choice but to accept the mistreatment. Children naturally trust their "protectors," and if women are not allowed to mature intellectually and emotionally, then, forever juvenile, they will continue to see men as their blameless protectors while accepting blame for things beyond their control. This insidious process prevents any sort of self-actualization or the development of a sense of personal identity.

Paula learns quickly however. She refuses to be erased or swallowed up. She learns how to hold her own. "The school made me rough" (*Woman* 35). She starts grabbing her disgusting deskmate after he tries to feel her, "pre-emptive strikes" which make him afraid of her. She finds girl friends with whom she shares adolescent fantasies. She "stopped trying to hide [herself]. [She] pushed [herself] forward" (39). She still plays at dating, "going with fellas," but innocent talks and self-inspired blushes are no longer enough. She masturbates a boy at the back of the classroom: "I ended up wanking

a good-looking thick in the back of the classroom. That was how you made a name for yourself in 1.6” (41).

Paula tries to keep her power, but she continually subverts herself to keep it. When she masturbates the boy, she is in control, and he is out of control. She literally holds him in her hand. But this is not a true power because she must become submissive to possess it. As Socrates demonstrates to Polus in *Gorgias*, tyrants and orators have very little power:

For they do just about nothing they want to, though they certainly do whatever they see most fit to do. . . . If a person does anything for the sake of something, he doesn't want this thing that he's doing, but the thing for the sake of which he's doing it. (466D-467E)

Sexual power is not true power if the woman must degrade herself to wield it. Paula gets nothing from the act in the back of the classroom. She is taking notes while she is doing it, and she repeatedly hits her hand on the desk top, which she says was painful. When it is over, she unceremoniously wipes her hand on her sock. Similar to the power exotic dancers claim to possess, Paula's power is humiliating and debasing. She has started her descent into powerlessness.

As Paula grows up, she becomes aware of the silent yet powerful strictures ruling young women's conduct. As “bitch” is the catch-all name today for a nonconforming woman, “slut” was the term in 1960s Ireland. Paula knows the nuances of being labeled a slut:

It was alright to sit or lean on the wall during the day but not when it began to get dark. It wasn't respectable. . . . Getting yourself a bad name. Smoking was another. It was alright for a gang of girls to smoke, share the fag, laugh and cough. But it wasn't on for a young one to smoke by herself, say, to walk down the road by herself, smoking. She had the makings of a slut if she did that. Keeping the cigarette in her mouth when she was talking, that made her a definite slut. Smoking Major, the strongest, made her an absolute prostitute. If you didn't smoke at all you were tight and dry and a Virgin Mary. Everything made you one thing or the other. It tired you out sometimes. . . . If you smiled at more than one boy you were a slut; if you didn't smile at all you were a tight bitch. If you smiled at the wrong boy you were back to being a slut and you might get a hiding from his girlfriend, and she'd be a slut for pulling your hair and you'd be one for letting her. Boys could ask you to go with them and you couldn't ask them. You had to get your friends to let the boys know that you'd say yes if you were asked. That could make you a slut as well, if you got the wrong friend to ask for you. . . . Jesus, if you went wrong once you were a slut. --Slut. My little brother. --Slut. My father. --Slut. Everyone. They were all in on it. (*Woman* 49)

Paula knows and plays by the rules of the games. The stakes are a good husband who will take her out of her less than ideal family situation and who will give her the respectability of being a wife. Getting married was the most that someone like Paula, an uneducated female in country with a horrendous unemployment rate, could hope for.

To play this game, Paula must again spend even more of her dwindling identity reserve. She cannot decide for herself if she likes smoking Major or even if she likes smoking at all. She cannot pursue her own likes and interests because she is too busy staying within the tacit guidelines for "getting a fella." And "getting a fella" is the only option open to her because her education in the patriarchal school has been so horrendous that she knows of nothing else. She must conform to prescribed behavior and act in certain ways or else she will be ostracized. "The pattern is set for life, rules learnt, dreams stripped away, horizons perpetually closed down" (Bolger n. pag.).

Women today must follow certain guidelines to win the prize, the securing of a “good husband,” which, sadly, is the same prize which Paula was vying for. “Class categories are primarily male-defined, and a woman is assigned to a class on the basis of her husband’s relation to the means of production; woman is not viewed as an autonomous being” (Eisenstein 31). Being attractive to the opposite sex is important to both sexes, but it is a *raison d’être* for many women. Being submissive is one of the ways women are attractive to men in a patriarchal society; this serves to perpetuate the patriarchal system. Unfortunately, the securing of the prize is not the end of the game: “A man who is labeled upper- or middle-class . . . has more money, power, security, and freedom of choice than his female counterpart. Most women are wives and mothers, dependent wholly or in part on a man’s support, and what the Man giveth, he can take away” (Willis qtd. in Eisenstein 32). Throughout their whole lives, women must submit to men for fear of losing their place in society. Paradoxically, women must lose their voices to acquire voices.

Paula meets Charlo. She believes she has “captured” a man who is not only “a ride” but also is so tough that she will be free from gossip. He provides security; no one dares to call her a slut. But, for this freedom, she must give up everything. Even in their first evening together, when they do the “penguin walk,” she has started compromising herself to accommodate him—she gives up her old walk in exchange for the side-to-side walk which Charlo favors. Sex, even though later Paula describes it in glorious terms, is no more mutual than the “wanking off” episode in the classroom. Charlo, however, gets

something from sex--orgasms--but Paula gets nothing. Paula, not Charlo, occupies the position of weakness. She has unwittingly traded her sexual power, which was better than nothing, for powerless sex. At their wedding, the Spencer family pushes aside the O'Leary family and takes over: "The Spencers were in charge now. My crowd were huddled in corners, sipping their drinks and waiting for going-home time. The Spencers had taken over. . . . They took over the whole place" (142). The same usurpation happens during the marriage--Charlo takes over and Paula is huddled in a corner, physically and mentally.

This "taking over of the whole place," of Paula's whole being, happens gradually. Paula believes that the first time Charlo hits her is a mistake, a one-time occurrence, and that Charlo's solicitude and tenderness after the episode more than make up for the abuse. But the next time it seems easier for Charlo to lose control of himself, and, although she does not say so, easier for Paula to accept this loss of control. Is she mistakenly thinking she will have a sort of perverse control over him because he will feel guilty?

In marrying Charlo, Paula has traded one form of servitude, that of daughter, for another more horrible form, that of wife. This inequality is first manifested when she is pregnant: "It is through this act [child-breeding] that the first appearance of property arises within the family. . . . this is when wife and child become the slaves of the husband. . . . this latent slavery in the family . . . is the first property" (Marx qtd. in Eisenstein 12). Instead of the young Paula "having" a young boyfriend, now Charlo owns her, and he uses her with less regard, sexually and emotionally, than many slave owners

used their African slaves. “The relation between man and woman . . . becomes an object of commerce. The woman is bought and sold. . . .The mentality of having twists species relationships into those of ownership and domination, and marriage into prostitution” (Eisenstein 10). The pregnant, married Paula experiences a more severe form of the enslavement which women suffer universally.

The two most important men in Paula’s life, her father and Charlo, have both treated her badly. Both men are responsible for her--Paula goes from one’s protection to the other’s. In the best-case scenario in a patriarchal world, a woman, incapable of sustaining herself because she is not expected to do so and is consequently untrained, has a responsible, loving, wise father who places her in the hands of a responsible, loving, wise husband. The woman, although dependent, nevertheless lives out her days contentedly. But, as this is not the best of all possible worlds, most people, including men, are as incapable of handling the burden of another’s well-being as they are incapable of handling their own. The fallibility of mankind is one of the places where patriarchy breaks down. Paula’s “governors” unfortunately are irresponsible men, since her father is “a bitter little pill and a bully” (*Woman* 120), and Charlo is “still living the lifestyle of a big kid” (Doyle qtd. in O’Toole “Charlo” n. pag.).

Paula has no one to turn to--her father has successfully blocked any avenue of communication with himself, and by extension, with his wife, Paula’s mother--and Paula, very young, naive, and guilty, feels that she must accept this physical abuse as her deserved lot in life. The amount of abuse is in indirect proportion to Paula’s self-esteem.

When the beatings get horrifically severe, Paula is so depressed that she has no hope for her salvation. Only when Charlo threatens to hurt her daughter does Paula assert herself.

Charlo resents his daughter growing up, and it's about basically keeping her in the same position that he has his wife in. He uses that leer, just before Paula hits him with the frying pan, not as an expression of his attraction, but as a way of pinning her down, of making her feel uncomfortable, of rattling her independence. (O'Toole n. pag.)

Paula literally strikes a blow for womanhood by hitting Charlo. She refuses to continue the patriarchal abuse cycle which has victimized herself and her mother.

More importantly, Paula realizes that just stopping the abuse is not enough. From this point she decides to lead an independent and active, as opposed to dependent and reactive, life. She has marshalled her courage and taken a step that proves irrevocable. Striking back at Charlo makes his return impossible. Her love for her daughter gives her the strength to free herself from her husband and, by extension, her father. She finally begins to take control of her life.

The *Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, a book about power and powerlessness, can be read as a metaphor for all the spiritual violence done to women in a patriarchal society, "the experience of the powerless and voiceless" (O'Toole "Realist" n. pag.). Sometimes a woman must see violence happening to another, as Paula does with her daughter, to be able to recognize the extent of abuse that she herself is enduring and to rebel. Doyle surely wants his readers--both female and male--to understand the dreadful dynamics of spousal abuse.

The relationship between absolute truth, personal truth, and memory also figures prominently in the novel. Doyle says, "Memory can't always be trusted" (qtd. in Bradshaw 129). Paula believes that absolute truth is vital to her full recovery, and consequently is obsessed with defining and understanding her upbringing. She discovers, however, that one's personal truth, while perhaps not the absolute truth, is more crucial to one's life.

"I want to know the truth, not make it up" (*Woman* 57), Paula says repeatedly throughout this novel. She desperately needs to define her history for several reasons. First, she wants to know where her life got "off track." Adults use memories "to establish contrast--I am no longer that; I have overcome that. We can use memory to create independence" (Kotre 168). She believes that if she could discover the "reality" of her childhood, then she could somehow figure out how her life became so hellish. If she were once lovely and lovable, she can be so again.

Secondly, she needs to validate herself. "As adults, we look to memories for metaphors and symbols revealing recognizable patterns in our lives. We find continuity--I am this, and I have always been this" (Kotre 168). She yearns to believe that at one time she was happy, secure, self-assured, confident, attractive, and loved. She needs her past to bolster her shaky present: "My past was real. I could stand on it and it wouldn't collapse under me. It was there. I could start again" (*Woman* 59). Paula is trying to use her memories to recreate herself. She instinctively realizes that "fully developed individuals can only be the product of history and struggle" (Hartsock 61).

Paula wants to know the truth about two connected areas of her life: her relationship with her father and her relationship with Charlo. To understand her relationship with her husband, she must first make sense of her life with her father. Charlo and Mr. O'Leary react to women in similar ways: "Him [Charlo] and my father were very alike. She said--twenty one years later. The wise old woman of the bottle" (*Woman* 121). Paula unconsciously chose Charlo as a husband because, after watching her parents for almost twenty years, she had learned the response expected of women by this type of man. "Children . . . learn attitudes and behaviors from real models. . . . The children do as their parents do, not as they say. . . . the learner learns . . . not a response, but knowledge about responses and their consequences" (Kotre 231).

Notice that Paula, still the victim of a patriarchy, is trying to define herself in terms of her relationships to men. She should examine her mother's life, as Paula's life with Charlo had begun to mirror her parents' lives together. Paula's mother

. . . was different. She wasn't the same person she'd been when I was smaller. She used to be bigger, happier, noisier. . . . She was grinning away . . . and she looked miserable. She looked so sad. She hadn't worn a new piece of clothes in years. She didn't drink, she didn't smoke; she didn't do anything except sit in front of the telly and watch the programmes that he put on and say yes and no when he spoke to her: she didn't even knit. (*Woman* 120)

The mother's identity has been even more fully erased than Paula's. Because Mr. O'Leary's abuse had been primarily emotional, his wife had had nothing concrete to rail against. Consequently, over the years, her personality had nearly been snuffed out of existence. The destruction of her identity is a direct result of her role as wife: "Sex roles

would preassign tasks to women which would necessitate continued alienation and isolation. . . .the sexual division of labor in society organizes noncreative and isolating work particularly for women” (Eisenstein 11). Because she is as isolated as her mother, Paula is not even aware her mother’s plight until it is too late. Because her mother’s identity has nearly disappeared, Paula never considers examining this life with the same intensity she devotes to considering her father’s. Her mother’s opiate is not alcohol, but television: “Television, like drink, applies a comforting cushion to muffle communication” (Foster 36).

When married to Charlo, Paula becomes a nonentity like her mother. She and her mother experience the same perceptions and feelings, whether it be noticing their daughter’s budding femininity, or feeling an overwhelming anxiety on the family outings, or reacting submissively to their husband’s abuse. Paula had become trapped in a vicious cycle, with her life revolving around a core of abuse, similar to the narrative form in which she tells her story, which repeatedly returns to the first time Charlo hit her. Doyle designed the novel around that event: “It’s a very short book [*Black Water* by Joyce Carol Oates], but it keeps going back to one episode. One episode is the book. I wanted to do that as well. I wanted Paula to go back to the first time she was hit, and I go back to that four or five times” (Interview 203). By attempting to discover the truth about her parents and her relationship with Charlo, she hopes to break free from the cruel cycle and straighten out her life. One senses that if she can do this, her next book will feature a linear plot structure.

Figuring out Mr. O'Leary (who has since died) is problematic for Paula. As she goes through various stages, so does her father--three seemingly different men appear. Young Paula's father is warm, caring, and patient. His presence is central to Paula's first happy memories. He takes his family on day trips, and at least one vacation. "He used to play with us and act the eejit, always saying and making up stupid things" (*Woman* 121). He "had been a nice man" (59).

Paula's older sister Carmel says that this father never existed: "I know what you're up to . . . rewriting history. . . . I'm sure you have your reasons" (56). The father Carmel remembers is instead angry and abusive. He is irrational and becomes enraged easily. She hints at his having sexually abused her. Paula denies this man's existence--"My father never did anything to her" (85). Paula believes that Carmel "remembers nothing good" (82) about their father because

she'd had a hard time from our father when she was a teenager; they never really recovered from it--they were always at each other, at Christmases and christenings--and now she was giving herself a good reason for hating him, making it up and believing it. Loving herself for hating herself. (85)

Mr. O' Leary has entered his last stage by the time Paula meets Charlo. When this third Mr. O'Leary meets Charlo, he is determined to pick a fight with him: "He'd become a bitter little pill and a bully. He made rules now just to make us obey them, just to catch us out. He used to laugh a lot but now he couldn't or wouldn't and he hated hearing laughter in the house" (120). This father does not say a word while in the limousine with

his daughter on the way to her wedding. He makes a banal, cold speech at the wedding supper. Paula makes the mistake of marrying Charlo in order to leave this father.

Paula attempts to come to terms with her father by engaging in dialectics with her sisters. She realizes that “one way people . . . can establish an independent identity is by comparing family recollections with personal recollections” (Kotre 168). Carmel and she adamantly defend their very different recollections:

Every Sunday, we used to go out. Bray and Skerries. We always got chips and 99's. . . .

D'you remember Mammy crying because she'd put too much vinegar on his chips, do yis? Ask her.

He was nice then, I said.

When it suited him.

He was nice. At home. Watchin' the telly. We were always laughin'.

What do you think, Denise?

I don't know. . . . Yes, he was nice. . . .

All the time?

No, said Denise. (*Woman 55*)

Carmel seems more convincing at first, merely because she is more vehement. We know more about Paula's doubts since we are privy to her thoughts. However, Paula raises some interesting questions. Is Carmel, wittingly or unwittingly, only remembering the bad things? Perhaps Carmel gets satisfaction out of remembering all the wrongs done to her. A history (not to mention a scapegoat) that is totally black is much more comprehensible than a gray one. Or perhaps it is Paula who is embellishing here. She needs to see her father in a positive light as desperately as Carmel needs to see him negatively. Perhaps Paula is like the landlady on her honeymoon of whom Charlo says, “I think she makes up

half the things she says” (151). This landlady, a widow who lives alone and runs a small Bed and Breakfast, tells Paula and Charlo all about her dead husband, her children, and grandchildren. Because she never offers to show Paula any pictures of her family, Paula suspects that the old woman may have fictionalized her stories. This suspicion leads us to ask “so what?” If the old woman is so lonely that having a loving, but imaginary, family makes her feel less alone, good for her. If vilifying her father helps Carmel cope, then there seems to be no harm in that either. But Paula insists on knowing the truth.

Paula needs to know about her father so that she can know about Charlo. She questions whether they were ever really in love. There was the “first totally obsessive phase which you cling to and hope to have for the rest of your life” (Interview 193) which Paula tells us about--how he ate chips out of her knickers, how he respected her, how passionate he was on the honeymoon. She paints for us (but more for herself) a glowing picture of a young love.

Then she tells us more about his abusiveness: how he ruptured her eardrum, and broke her fingers, ribs, arms, knocked out her teeth, kicked her, tore her hair and clothing, taunted her about her inadequacies, stupidity, and helplessness, threatened to burn her and kill her. Paula is uncertain about how things really were--could they have ever been so good if they ended up so miserably; or could they have ever been so bad, if they were ever that good? Sometimes she even doubts the abuse:

Do I actually remember that? Is that exactly how it happened? Did my hair rip? Did my back scream? Did he call me a cunt. . . . How can I separate one time from the lot and describe it? I want to be honest. How can I be sure. . . . I choose one word and end up telling a different story. I end up making it up instead of just

telling it. I don't want to make it up, I don't want to add to it. I don't want to lie. I don't have to; there's no need. I want to tell the truth. Like it happened. Plain and simple. . . . Did any of this actually happen? Yes. Am I sure? Yes. Absolutely sure, Paula? (*Woman* 185)

The reader also wonders what actually happened between Charlo and Paula. Paula has a penchant for making up optimistic scenarios. When she visits the home of the man whose wife Charlo shot, she does not want to see him. Instead, "I was glad now I hadn't seen him. It was better imagining him. It made more sense" (147). Is Paula unwittingly making up parts of the story she is telling us? The reader cannot distinguish between what actually happened and what she may be "improving" out of her own need.

Doyle is questioning the truth of even one's sharpest memories. Can we ever be certain what really happened? All that remains after an event are memories of one's impression of the event, and no two peoples' impressions are ever the same. "That is the genius of this novel: the layering of what is concrete and dream, a daily diet of romance and violence, fleeting illusions of liberation and affluence" (Foster 36).

Although he asks questions about narrative reliability, Doyle seems to be more concerned with Paula finding her own truth, making sense of this truth, and building on it to survive. Doyle, who has been likened to Chekhov in his forgiveness of everything human, wants his characters, and, by extension, his readers, to find their own personal truths which will enable them to live their lives. The Rabbittes of the trilogy use their comic perception to make the world endurable--simplistically, what they cannot make sense of, they laugh at. Paula is using her imagination and memory to order, or reorder, as

Carmel sees it, the disarray in her life. This approach seems to be working for Paula, as it is working for the landlady of the Bed and Breakfast. One's imagination makes reality more endurable.

This novel offers a similar message to that of Doyle's earlier novels. While pointing out life's horrors, *The Woman* celebrates humanity's resiliency. Doyle says, "there is room for hope however. This woman has gone through a brutal marriage for seventeen years and the husband is gone. She actively threw him out. . . . she's going to make a stab at it" (Interview 190-91). Doyle manages to make his abused, damaged heroine a remarkable, believable woman who in a qualified way triumphs. Her triumph is humble enough to serve as a model for the ordinary reader. Paula lacks extraordinary abilities to handle her extraordinary difficulties. Yet she does live, and she celebrates her successes, however small, when she has them.

The novel contains another hope for women. Jack, Paula's son, embodies this hope. Perhaps by raising him the way she does, Paula can break the cycle of thoughtless and cruel men that victimized her. With Jack could begin a new, healthy cycle of mutual respect and tenderness.

The Woman Who Walked Into Doors is Doyle's most compelling novel. Paula Spencer is an ordinary woman made heroic. She is his most fully realized character, and we can agree with Doyle when he says, "I felt strongly that she had an awful lot that she could say and I had grown very fond of her and very protective of her because she'd been

through so much” (Interview 192). This novel, like *The Snapper*, addresses a horrible situation and makes it hopeful.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

Roddy Doyle is one of Ireland's most talented and successful contemporary writers. His vibrant characters, wonderful dialect, hilarious comedy, and old-fashioned yet never oppressive morality have led to international acclaim. Doyle has been able to combine critical and popular success, a feat seldom accomplished, and has won his way to fame and fortune.

Although *The Commitments* (1987) and *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* (1996) are very different novels stylistically, both are still recognizably "Roddy Doyle novels." Doyle's novels consistently contain several basic components. The characters are all working-class or middle-class Dubliners, and in the first four novels, northside Dubliners. Doyle has been able to give an accurate, compelling, uncondescending voice to these social (and literary) outsiders. This voice vividly expresses their chaotic lifestyles, and is filled with joy and Doyle's trademark humor. The absence of intrusive references to religion or Irish politics is another aspect common to Doyle's novels. Instead of belaboring questions of sin or nationality, Doyle explores significant social problems. Their immediate environment and surroundings, including their families, greatly affect his characters. A strong familial relationship, good or bad, is central in his characters' lives.

Not so obvious are some crucial qualities each successful character possesses. Courage, resiliency, hopefulness, self-understanding, and humor are the five keys to

survival in a Doyle novel. Jimmy Jr. can bounce back from the Commitments' break-up in less than a page because he believes another, better band is waiting to be created. Sharon's sense of humor and ability to laugh enable her to recognize how ludicrous her situation is and join in with the laughter. She wins out because she can laugh. Paddy, really too young to be labelled, nevertheless has the courage and resiliency of youth—he will go on because he must go on and is too young to despair; he, with his estranged parents' love and support, will handle their separation and his classmates' desertion. Paula is strikingly sustained by these qualities. She knows herself almost too well (witness her battle with the key to her alcohol stash) and obviously possesses the courage and resiliency to reclaim her life after being brutally abused for most of it. *The Van's* Jimmy Sr. is the exception. He has his daughter's optimism and resiliency for most of his life, but he loses these qualities when he loses his job and best friend, thus making him Doyle's only character with dubious prospects.

Although this current of strength runs through his main characters, Doyle does not (and seems determined not to) repeat himself as an artist. His novels have significantly evolved since the publication of *The Commitments* in 1987. Each trilogy novel, though similar in many respects, is separate and distinct; none seems a mere sequel. Although the popularity of the Barrytown Trilogy would have guaranteed the success of at least several more "Rabbitte" novels, Doyle put aside the inhabitants of 118 Chestnut Avenue after only three. He followed with *Paddy Clarke*, which, with its first-person perspective and title character, is unlike any other Doyle novel. Although Doyle re-uses the first-person

narrative in his next novel *The Woman*, Paula is so different a character that neither the form nor the novel seems repetitive.

Doyle abandoned the Barrytown Trilogy with all its broad humor, wise-cracking characters, and profanity-laced dialogue in order to grow as an artist. Despite these novels' strengths and appeal, ultimately they are not as complex as his last two works. Although Doyle grounds all his novels in social realism, the world of the trilogy (particularly the first two novels) is a world of easy comic resolution. Doyle uses comedy to smooth over any uncomfortable, jagged edges. For instance, the Commitments' demise is almost forgotten in the subsequent riotous comedic scenes. Sharon's rape in *The Snapper* similarly gets glossed over, and her final laughter demonstrates her well-being and the well-being of her baby. *The Van* is Doyle's transitional work. Although the same humor is present, the conclusion is not smoothed over. Jimmy and Bimbo do not repair their close friendship, which stuns the reader who anticipates a happy reconciliation. Doyle's last two novels depict long-term conflict and hardship. Despite Paddy's magical rituals and charm, *Paddy Clarke's* ending, in which Mr. and Mrs. Clarke separate, is far from cheering. In *The Woman* Paula struggles daily to overcome her problems. Humor, although healing, cannot eliminate her cravings for alcohol. In these two novels, Doyle's characters must struggle with difficult problems. His last novels are more ambitious, more complex works because they do not provide easy solutions for realistically painful problems.

The first two novels simplify reality and treat unpleasant situations as temporary--characters triumph almost as a matter of course. The last two works view life more seriously; in them, painful conditions must be overcome in long, arduous processes. For example, in *The Commitments* Jimmy Jr. is temporarily involved with a band which temporarily breaks up; another band will follow shortly. Pregnancy is obviously a temporary condition, as is the disharmony in Sharon's family. The transitional *Van* attempts to have it both ways. Doyle says, "*The Van* . . . even though it's dark, is also very funny. It's hilarious. So I think the two balance each other well" (Interview 194). Jimmy's redundancy and the loss of Bimbo's friendship seem to be permanent. However, the reader hopes and expects that the redundancy is temporary and the van is permanent. Only at the end, with the "drowning" of the van, do we suspect that Jimmy's depression will remain. In *Paddy Clarke* and in *The Woman*, we never doubt that both Paddy and Paula have difficult times ahead of them and will remain emotionally scarred. Though life is getting more problematic for Doyle's most recent characters, he endows them with the qualities that will allow them to come through.

Besides depicting a more serious world, Doyle has "upped the ante" in each consecutive novel--each novel takes on a more serious problem with more serious consequences. For instance, when the band fails, no one's life is drastically altered. Being pregnant and unmarried is hardly an ideal situation, but Sharon sees her condition as fortunate. The break-up of Jimmy and Bimbo's partnership and friendship is distressing,

but it will not have the consequences on family members that Mr. and Mrs. Clarke's split does. Paula's life and the survival of her family are at stake in Doyle's most recent novel.

From *The Van* on, Doyle seems to me to be confronting graver, more serious social problems in his work. However, he understands his artistic development differently. His conscience has increasingly compelled him to bring social reality to light:

There is a growing awareness. I am very aware of my own luck, my own good luck, and I know that there are a lot of people out there who got my chunk of bad luck. While I'm flourishing, they're not. And I don't know why it can't be evened out somewhat. So as my career began to flourish, I found myself going for darker and darker subjects. I don't think it's a slope; I think it's rather cyclical. (Interview 195).

However, even as his luck and fame increase and he needs to write more about the grimness of life, he can still write comedy. He is currently working on

a screenplay based on a book by Liam O'Flaherty called *Famine*, set in the first two years of the Great Potato Famine of 1845. . . . This is not funny stuff, and it won't be a lighthearted romp through. It's grim, very, very grim, but I just started a novel, the first few pages, which I hope will be funny. But at the same time I have a project in my mind which is dark. (Interview 195)

Meanwhile he is beginning a comic novel about "a very old man who has been around for a long time and he claims to have been bang in the middle of it" (199). Doyle says that the old man will be an unreliable narrator (Doyle also calls him a liar), which perhaps will be the source of much of the humor. One can surmise that Doyle will give this new character the same resiliency he gives his other successful characters. But the point is that while critics might expect his future novels to be progressively harsher and more socially aware,

he is apt to be simultaneously writing comic and “very grim” novels. He is under no obligation to follow a pattern determined by critics.

We can also surmise that Doyle’s success with both the literati and the public will continue. He has demonstrated his ability to create fiction with artistic depth, but he remains dedicated to making his novels enjoyable to the average reader: “I’ve no problem with cleverness or intellectual muscle men, but I just think now and again it becomes gratuitous and you go beyond any sort of reality and you are just wasting your time” (Interview 200-01). Doyle believes that “somewhere, in the twentieth century, they built a wall between popular and high art. It’s a great pity. . . . I’ve never like the division between the high and the low, between the literary and the popular. One of the big issues about my books is whether they’re literary or not. . . . It’s utter drivel” (210, 230). One assumes that Doyle’s future works will continue to tear down that wall.

Not content to rest on his past successes, Doyle has attempted increasingly more ambitious works. Each work shows greater maturity and skill, while retaining the qualities which first brought him success. In all his work, Doyle demonstrates his compassion for and understanding of humanity. His readers and his characters benefit from the “lessons” found in his works, namely that humor, some type of family, and self-understanding will provide the independence and strength to live a satisfying life in today’s difficult world.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW WITH RODDY DOYLE
MARCH 20, 1996 DUBLIN, IRELAND

CW: Has anyone written any books on you yet, or am I the first?

RD: Books or dissertations?

CW: Either.

RD: There was a guy last year who did his MA thesis on my work, the lot, and has been submitted and accepted, the lot. So he was the first in Ireland, but there have been several in Italy and in Finland. I don't remember all the different students I have spoken to. I don't remember if I have spoken to any post-graduate students in the States or not. I don't think so. Or if I did, it seemed as if they were doing some undergraduate work or something--nothing major. The guy who did the MA here has gone off to work in Korea, but he was talking about expanding his work into a book. But he'd be the first. A couple of French students. It's hard to keep track of all that's going on.

CW: What is fame like? You were a schoolteacher and now all of a sudden. . . .

RD: Well, it wasn't all of a sudden. To be honest, when you're a schoolteacher living in an area, in a suburban area like Dublin, and you work in the area, and you grew up in the area as well, you have a certain celebrity status anyway, even if you are only famous for being the teacher who gets students in trouble--within your own locality you are a little bit famous--so it doesn't encroach on my life all that much. I have a book coming out

next month [*The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*] and it'll be riotous for about a month. I'm doing a string of interviews next week, and the whole bandwagon rolls for about five or six weeks, and then it's a bit strange and unusual. Particularly when I'll go touring. I love doing the readings, but it can be odd when you wake up early in the morning at the airport and then you're off somewhere else. It can be a bit hard to keep your bearings. Not when you are in a country as small as Ireland. I was in Scandinavia a year before last. Not only was I in a different town a day, but I was in a different country a day. It seemed as if the media all had the impression that they were being sparkling original by having a television interview in a pub called The Dubliner, and I did four different interviews in four different countries in four different pubs, all called The Dubliner. It begins to addle you and you begin to lose all grasp about where you are. But it's a short spell. You pick up the Irish newspaper and scan it for any reference to yourself, and then you begin reading it. But that's it. An unusual bubble in the normal pattern of the year. If I were given the choice between having my books read or not read by lots of people, then I'd say, "Yeah, please, let's have lots of people read my books, and like them or not like them." But with that comes the inevitable pen name and I guess it's too late now, I suppose, and with that comes fame. But Dublin, and I have only lived here, except for a few places for short spells, is good insofar as they let you have your own life. They won't muscle in on you or stop you or stalk you. I don't think writers get the same horrible attention that rock musicians do. Writers are just writers, whereas rock musicians are expected to be gurus, which is quite ironic if you think about it because if you take away the music you are left

with some very shallow lyrics at times, yet they are expected to be the fonts of human wisdom, whereas writers just write novels. So the short answer to your question, it doesn't really encroach on your day-to-day living, which is just as I would like it.

CW: Speaking of people expecting you to be a guru, one of the things I really like about your work is its message of hopefulness, like in *The Commitments* and in *The Snapper*. Oh, did you mean it to be a rape?

RD: When I was writing the book, I didn't want to encroach too much. I wanted it to be left up to the reader. Legally, in Ireland, it is not a rape, although I believe that in some states in the States it is a rape. I wouldn't personally consider it a rape. I do believe that he behaved very wrongly in taking advantage of a drunk woman. But, again, does that make it illegal? Where do you step from immorality to illegality? I wanted the circumstances from her memory to be really seedy and awful with this yawning big hole of embarrassment, as much as anything else, with this awful hole and the knowledge inside that must be kept secret. The awfulness is as much the fact that the man is so inelegant--a friend of hers--not the Spanish sailor that she creates. I suspect that it is not the first time she has had sex against the car when she has been drunk. I wanted the circumstances to be left open to interpretation. Speaking of people reading things that aren't in the book--a few years ago at a reading of *The Van*, a woman starting arguing it was a rape and began to describe the scene and actually she was describing the scene from *Thelma and Louise*. She had mixed the two up. She apologized and we went on. With the film, what was the big issue there that became apparent when we were in the car park was the angle of the

camera. At one shot, when the camera was above the pair, it looked like he was imposing his will and his physical bulk on her. But when you brought it down to their level, it's not like that at all. I wasn't in London when they did the cuts but they wisely got rid of the high shot. It would be very hard to be humorous after that if you have that sort of picture--a large man taking advantage of this hopelessly drunk girl and then you have the absurdity of it later on. The two don't knit together at all. There's some yawning gap that can't be filled. So it was all about camera angle there.

CW: I thought in the book she didn't remember anything--she was passed out, and then it would have been a rape.

RD: She remembers parts of it. I don't get drunk often, but there have been times I have been and I am aware that things have happened and there are gaps in the evening. By degrees it comes back sometimes. Other times I am not particularly interested because no one phones up and asks me, "How long were you in intensive care?" It's easiest then to take a few Panadol and just smooth things over. But, you see, it's all from her point of view, and it may well be that she's keeping away the seedier side of things, but I don't think she herself thinks it's a rape. If I remember correctly, she halfway wishes it were rape so that she could at least get angry at the thing.

CW: There's a sentence that says something like "Was it rape? She didn't know."

RD: I think there is a place where she almost wishes she could call it a rape. Of course, that was taken from a male writer's point of view. That was a really tricky point of view for me, just writing that passage, because pregnancy was really an unknown for me, basic

biology, and once you read you can use a certain amount of information and imagination to create what it's like. But that particular point--the actual sexual act in the car park--was the really tricky piece and once I got over that, and liked what I'd written, the rest was relatively easy.

CW: I thought, since you dedicated that novel to your wife, that maybe she was pregnant with your first son.

RD: Not at all. I finished *The Van* a couple of months before my first son, Rory, was born. I started *The Snapper* before I'd even met my wife. I started *The Snapper* immediately after *The Commitments*, which I wrote in '86, so I started *The Snapper* late '86. And I met my wife in '87. I was finished in '89, although it was published in '90 in England and Ireland, and a couple of years later in the States. One of the reasons I chose pregnancy was because I knew nothing about it and I wanted to see if I could create a world which had nothing to do with me but which would be convincing. I wrote *The Commitments* very quickly and I didn't think it would be a good idea to fly through another book before I even had the first one published. So it struck me as a particularly good idea to go for an unknown territory so that I'd have to spend a lot of time because I was also writing a play for a theater company here. *The Snapper* took me three years to write--such a short book--it took me longest of any to write.

CW: *The Snapper*--how did you turn such a horrible thing into something so wonderful?

RD: Yes. There were at least two roads one could have gone, the bright and the dark. The dark is another reality. I wasn't trying to say, "This is it, this is how it is," but it is our

reality. I think if I had been writing the book in the '50 or '60 or '70s, or in another class group, it would have been darker. All Ireland at the moment--it's particularly healthy, but it's a very unsettling place to be insofar as an awful lot of these stones under which we've kept secrets are being lifted up and these dark and horrible secrets are coming to the surface very very quickly. The reality of child abuse in the Church and what happened to orphans. I think if I had set the book in the '50s it would have been quite appalling. She would have been sent off to one of these laundries which were run by the nuns and the baby would have been taken from her while she was too weak to know what was going on or to make her own mind up. But the baby would have been gone. These measures were taken to make sure that the mother and child were separated irrevocably. Parent records were falsified. And in some places, like this Golden Bridge Orphanage which has been in the news so much lately, the babies were treated like they were the guilty parties, if guilt really exists, in the most appalling ways. Whereas now, the reality is that in some places in Ireland, one-third of children are being born outside of marriage, and it's not getting smaller, and they are being accepted within the family. It's not a particularly wonderful situation--you've got 15, 16-year-old girls being pregnant. I would have thought that they would go back to school or to work or whatever, and it's the mother--the girls' mothers--who are the victims. They should be putting their feet up and listening to the radio for a couple hours in the day. But these women in the '40s and '50s are becoming mothers all over again. So it's not a wonderful situation, but at least in many cases it's warm and

accepting, and that's what I wanted to depict in the novel. After the initial shock, and the humiliation of whatever--particularly the eejit across the road--

CW: He was great in the movie.

RD: He's a good actor--particularly that look on his face. Such an unlikely paramour. Once the baby arrives, all these considerations disappear and the baby is loved. It happens. Granted, next door, it may not be as tolerant, but it was a reality. Once you chose to write about one family, you have to concentrate on that family. It's a criticism I hear a lot--why was it so cheerful? But you can't have, "Meanwhile down the street. . . ." It breaks the story up completely. And it's not a sociological tract--it's a story about people. But it was a version of reality. And I know from watching people I know in the same situation. But it's not the big scandal it used to be. It's a pity, and an inconvenience, because it does rob them of their youth. Parenthood should come when you're emotionally ready, not just biologically ready. It robs them of their youth, and it certainly robs their mothers of their middle-age and makes the cramped conditions of their houses even more cramped, but there're love and warmth and affection which are the most important things for kids growing up.

CW: Well, the first two novels are so upbeat, but the last two--*Paddy Clarke's* ending made you want to cry, and the new novel--the snippet I've read--seems pretty grim too.

RD: As I said, when I was writing *The Snapper*, I was depicting a reality and I wrote *The Van* because the father was taking over *The Snapper* and would have given birth to the baby if at all humanly possible--there's another book in him. It's a darker type of

book--the story line parallels *The Commitments*--instead of a band it's a small business enterprise which falls apart at the end. Unlike *The Commitments*, Jimmy Sr. doesn't have his son's energy or resources or education. With the younger Jimmy, unemployment is just something to get out of the way--he's other things to do--he'll survive. He may be knocked about when he gets older, but he's flooding with self-confidence. But the father, once he had his steady job and a couple of quid in his pockets for a few pints, he never has to worry about self-confidence. But it just happens that he is unemployed and the same time in his life that he's slowing down and he looks back and imagines, "Where were they when I was young?" and he feels like he's missed out and he feels redundant in every element in his life. It's a darker book by necessity and there's no room for a little sequel at the end. It's just a lot of people in Ireland--unemployment is a reality for the rest of their lives. They missed the modern education system and they're not qualified to do anything else. They missed the re-education threshold. Basically, the rest of their lives is filling their days. There're hundreds of thousands of people in Ireland like this.

CW: The last one is darker too.

RD: There is room for hope however. This woman has gone through a brutal marriage for seventeen years and the husband is gone. She actively threw him out.

CW: She's an alcoholic.

RD: Yes, she's an alcoholic but she knows she's an alcoholic and quite frankly, she's not ready to do anything about it because she needs it. On the other hand, she's got her independence and she's beginning to gain a certain pride in that. She's creating conditions

at home where she's becoming financially independent and she's actively raising her younger children whereas the older ones--she missed out on them. But the younger ones--she's reading to them, she's taking them to school, she's bringing them home, she's looking at them, and she's determined they will stay in school and that they will get more than the older ones did. She's motivated by guilt to a certain extent but she's also driven by determination. The book is from her point of view--her attempt to sort herself out, her recent past, not her present, and I left it open because it is much better that way. But if you read it, you can see that she is a very funny and very strong woman in many ways. Even though she's been knocked senseless. But you can't help feeling that it's very sad and that she's missed out on a lot, but at the same time that she's going to make a stab at it.

CW: How did you come up with this topic? Was it like *The Snapper* in which you didn't know anything about wife-beating so you thought. . . .

RD: I certainly didn't. I was writing a screenplay for the BBC--an invitation from the BBC to write anything I wanted. There was one guy I was particularly impressed with--a producer from the BBC--Michael Waring who produced this *Boys From the Black Stuff*. It wouldn't be standard viewing in the States--I don't know if you saw it. It was written by a Liverpool man Alan Gleasdale. It was broadcast around 1980. I'll never forget it--it was absolutely stunning. And this invitation came from him. And a friend of mine came from London and we decided to work together. I thought I'd write about a family in crisis

and I'd decided, for some reason, to have four episodes, and I'd have the story told from four different points of view.

CW: Like Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*.

RD: I haven't read the book. To tell you the truth. One of many I haven't read. I had to accept about five years ago that I'll never read every book--it's a horrible admission to make. Even if you took the rest of your life off, you could never read them all. I've read some Faulkner, but not that one. Anyway, I thought I'd take the same episode from different viewpoints, but I dismissed that because I thought it'd have to get a bit tedious by the middle of the second episode and that it would be unbearable by the fourth. So instead, I had about three or four months in the life of this one family. The focus changes in each episode. It started with the father, a man called Charles Spencer, and then it goes to the teenage son, John Paul, then the next episode was Nicola, a slightly older daughter about 16, then it finishes up with Paula. Charlo is--I was writing the story line when it dawned on me that one of the ways he would control--and he's a real controller--is to hit, and the threat of violence is always there. And that is when it happened--in the first episode, before I'd written the storyline of it--it just dawned on me that this is the type of man he is, and all the other episodes rolled out of that because he was the agent of all the trouble and right up to the fourth and final episode his presence was always there. When I was writing this last episode--by necessity it was stuck in a couple of months in 1993--and I felt strongly that she had an awful lot that she could say and I had grown very fond of her and very protective of her because she'd been through so much, and I could imagine

her sitting down when she had free time--maybe as a result of a writing group, and there are an awful lot of women's writing groups throughout the city--and she would start writing and explore her past. That's where the story grew out of. By the time the series was shown--it caused a storm here in Ireland--again one of those stones that has been overturned. I remember the day after the first episode was shown, people were phoning in to the radio stations: "How could she have married him in the first place?" It's a reasonable question on one level, but on another level it's such a stupid question. Everybody goes through different phases of a relationship--the first totally obsessive phase which you cling to and hope to have for the rest of your life. But we all go through that, and things tend to calm down a bit and by the time kids arrive reality beckons in all its glory. It's just a complicated thing. So it was a reasonable question, but an unreasonable one as well. And the book lets her explain to an extent why she fell in love with this man and why he fell in love with her and it made him something less of a monster as well. And again it goes back to when they met and he does have a kind of a rough charm, although this doesn't justify it by any means. Other people are saying, "Why did he have to be working-class? Upper-class men beat their wives as well." And of course they do, but once you make the choice to choose one family, you can't go, "Meanwhile down the road this was happening as well"--it's bad art. The book allowed me to give the full woman rather than just a few months of this woman. It confirms the choices you see in the broadcast because it allows her to explain.

CW: So, you say there's hope for Paula Spencer. There's no trend, no downward trend to your works? Nothing has happened to you personally that would cause a more pessimistic view?

RD: Well, it remains to be seen. I don't think so. I have obviously aged--it's been ten years since *The Commitments*, but I don't think that has an impact--one does a lot of living in ten years. I was a teacher for fourteen years. I loved it for a long long time--about ten or eleven of those years--obviously there were times which I hated, around exam time--but generally I loved it. The first couple of years I was hopelessly naive and I wore these frilly blinders and I saw nothing beyond the wonderfulness of all these kids. But as I calmed down and grew older--then you begin to see malnourishment, now and again, to see red eyes of someone who has been up all night, and you begin to wonder why. I am not saying that was the norm--most of the kids were healthy, well-cared for kids, but you begin to wonder. So I think that is what happens as you begin to grow older. I found that the last ten years have been unbelievable in my life--in most peoples' lives--but so much as happened, not only work-wise, over the past ten years. I got married--if you told me ten years ago that I would have been a father I would have laughed. I never saw myself as that kind of material--I had no contact whatsoever with young children. The ones I taught were teenagers, and I'd never picked up a young child in me life. So that has a huge impact on you. Also, a growing awareness. I am very aware of my own luck, my own good luck, and I know that there are a lot of people out there who got my chunk of bad luck. While I'm flourishing, they're not. And I don't

know why it can't be evened out somewhat. So as my career began to flourish, I found myself going for darker and darker subjects. I don't think it's a slope; I think it's rather cyclical. While I was writing *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, I was also writing *The Van*, and even though it's dark, it's also very funny. It's hilarious. So I think the two balance each other well. I am working on a screenplay on a book by Liam O'Flaherty called *Famine*, set in the first two years of the Great Potato Famine of 1845 to, according to whichever historian, 1849 or 1851. This is not funny stuff, and it won't be a lighthearted romp through. It's grim-- very, very grim--but I just started a novel, the first few pages, which I hope will be funny. But at the same time I have a project in my mind which is dark. So I don't think there was a conscious decision of mine to start off with high optimism and work my way down. I haven't become grimmer--I don't think I have anyway. Am I happy or content? Happy is hard to sustain 24 hours a day. I am content. I feel very lucky. No amount of angst will take that away. I do feel very lucky. There are those who are happy and feel that everyone must be happy.

CW: The last scene in *The Van*, when they drive into the water and Jimmy says, "You can get it tomorrow"--what's going to happen?

RD: You can answer that as well as I can. My interest ends when the book does. I did want to leave an open door so you can keep on walking through it if you want. Maybe they go back with a shovel. I don't know. I don't think it matters because their friendship is over--maybe they'll try to revert to some sort of civility--it'll never be the same again and that's a big loss. Jimmy won't be involved with the van again. But I don't like to

imagine too far after that. But they are creations of mine and I suppose I can turn them on and off, but readers will give them flesh, if they like, and are engrossed in the book.

CW: But it seems like you gave Paula Spencer flesh?

RD: Oh yes, but still when you're writing the book it's not driven by the heart all the time. The decision to put one word after another is an intellectual exercise, and is quite manipulative sometimes, because you're working the reader down the page towards some sort of thing. And even though your sympathy is with the character, it can be at times, particularly with the last book, the subject matter can be quite upsetting, now and again. Don't overstress it. But still all the time, you're working with the head--like, "Put a break here and bring it down here so it has a dramatic impact." So, while you're hoping it will be her book, the same time you're working the reader. But if you're working with your head, now and again your heart will catch up and say, "Hey, can I have a look?" So the final book . . . I definitely want it to have an emotional base, but the actual writing is quite a cold exercise.

CW: So, was Maggie behind it all, or was it Bimbo?

RD: Again, it's all up to you, but I feel that Jimmy blames Maggie because it's easier than blaming Bimbo. It's clearer in the film, which is in the editing phase now, so it'll be released in September. In the film it's clearer because it's from the film's point of view, not from Jimmy's point of view, and in one scene, after Bimbo has made Jimmy a wage slave, so to speak, he asks Maggie, "Do you think I'm right?" and she says, "Yeah, you are." But it's very obvious that it's his decision. She's involved in the management and

that sort of thing, and Jimmy resents it, but what right does he have to resent it? It's understandable because she bursting in on their territory and he doesn't like it at all, but she has every right to be there. There is one scene where she looks like Lady Macbeth. It's much clearer in the film that she's not to blame. There's one nice scene, which isn't in the book at all, where she and Bimbo are lying in bed, and there are just talking and she says, "You all have been friends for years," and again, she's being fair. As they are falling asleep, she says, "He doesn't like me--sure he doesn't." And Bimbo says, "Ah, he does." And then she says "No, no, he doesn't." And then a pause, and she says, "It doesn't matter." And it obviously does matter because she is hurt. The film makes it clearer, and that's a strength of the film, but it wouldn't be a strength of the novel because it would be too cut and dried if she did sit down with needles like Madame Defarge. They are two separate exercises. But it's an easy option--blame her--it's part of his paranoia toward the end. It's the same with groups too. At the beginning of this year there was a spate of particularly violent murders. And we Irish like to think we are so warm and friendly, and we are. But these murders were very gruesome--three people, four people murdered--and you could tell by the press coverage that they were jumping on blaming it on an outsider. So, one woman murdered grossly in County Kildare, the one right next to this one, and the police jumped to question a man with a French accent. There are also a group of people called the Travellers--they have mysterious origins--dispossessed peasants from a hundred years ago or something--but they are definitely Irish--but they are a separate community altogether. Some of them don't live in fixed homes at all--they travel

all the time, hence their name. A small group of them have been involved in violent crime, but the readiness of the community to jump and blame them for any murders. So we do go for the easy answers, and it is much easier for Jimmy to blame Maggie.

CW: Where do your characters come from? Are they composites?

RD: I've never based a character on someone I know. I could never say, "He is that guy." I would never do that. If I did what Irish writers did fifty years ago and emigrate, then it would be easier. It's not an option really. I've never really needed to. As I said, I've grown up and lived in the same general area, and my kids go to the same general school, so it's not a particularly bright thing to do--to invade other's privacy, no matter how interesting that privacy is. There may be snippets of things I know from general observation, but not the characters. Paddy's parents are not my mother and father for example.

CW: Are you Henno?

RD: I am not! A different generation and a different style of teaching. But snippets of things. My father's humor comes across now and again in Paddy's father, although he is a distant sort of man. My mother definitely isn't in that book. I basically make them up. But I suppose you can't make things up unless you have some sort of experience. The bulk of it is made up. I've literally never seen anyone beat up someone in a domestic situation. The imagination is often underestimated. I've been to writer's group and heard people say you should write about what you know. In one sense, that's wise, but in a literal sense it's absurd. You've just admitted you're thirty, so you could only write about

only a thirty-year-old American woman, and only your particular version of it. You can only see what you've observed and that is not always what happened.

CW: You've done research for your material, haven't you? I noticed in *The Van* you thank those two guys who worked in a chipper.

RD: That was kind of a joke. They are two students of mine who worked in a chipper van on the weekends, and basically I met with them for a couple of hours, and brought a notebook with me and they gave me the inside track on working in a chipper van and I fed them drink and that's that.

CW: Should I be feeding you drink?

RD: No no, not at this hour. Definitely not. I've never been in a chipper van, no formal research. I did a lot of research on the biology for *The Snapper*, but I did no research whatever, except for that conversation, for *The Van*. For *Paddy Clarke*, trips up to my parents' attic to remind me of books and what not. It struck me that this was going to be a ten-year-old's point of view anyway, so newspapers and history books really wouldn't help. For *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* I did a hell of a lot of reading while I was writing—I read a lot about women and violence, women and alcohol, sexual fantasy. And I used very little of it in the strict sense. It was just to make the ice I was walking on thicker as I walked along. The book I am going to start on soon—it's about a very old man who has been around for a long time and he claims to have been bang in the middle of it. So I'll have to do a lot of reading to the extent that it'll take years and years and years to write. But I'm stuck because I can't think of anything else to do.

CW: In *Paddy Clarke*, how do you jump from one section to the next--do they relate? I was going to ask if it was like the Benjy section of *The Sound and the Fury*, but since you've not read it, I guess it doesn't.

RD: You can continue on with your thesis if you wish and just cut out this answer, but basically I just thought it'd be the way a kid's mind would work. It's been a while since I've read the book--four years since I wrote it--so my memory isn't as fresh as yours. I've tried to make links, but indirectly. It may be a question of color or light and something sparks off another memory, and so he goes on to that. I wanted it, particularly the first half, to seem haphazard--winding memories, and by degrees the winding memories become straighter and straighter as the parents' marriage becomes worse and worse. And that's just the way a kid's mind would work. Also I wanted to get away from the linear time I used in the previous books, and it just fit the story better. The inspiration for that would be cinematic. As I was writing it I was remembering films--like *Amarcord*--Fellini's film--my favorite film--sort of autobiographical--Fellini growing up in the 1930s when Mussolini was at his height. It was seemingly a haphazard year--it goes from clip to clip with no seeming unity. But the unity is there when you see it a second time and you wonder, "Why did I like it so much the first time?" and you see the unity there underneath the surface. There's another film, *My Life as a Dog*, a Swedish film, a beautiful film.

CW: Did you see *Pulp Fiction*? I loved that movie.

RD: Yes I did. I thought it was fantastic. One of the best in recent years. It was also nice to see John Travolta working.

CW: I was so horrified when *Forrest Gump* won.

RD: I never even saw it. It looked like all flash. I've never seen a movie I liked by Roger Atkinson. He's a real Hollywood animal who works the system. *Forrest Gump* tried to be all things to all people, and when you do that it's nothing to anyone. It obviously worked. I don't think it went down as well in Europe as it did in America.

CW: Okay, now I have to ask the typical question. How much Joyce have you read? I know you said you don't like writers like him because he writes to show off his brain.

RD: Yes, particularly the later Joyce. But I've read everything else, except for *Finnegans Wake*, which I read the first few pages. I haven't read *Stephen Hero*--I've never read that and I don't see the point because I wouldn't want any draft of mine ever to be published. It's a ludicrous exercise. I've read them all, and I think in order.

CW: What about the Spanish sailor, the word "foetus," the red and green hot water bottles, the keyless characters, the *Paddy Clarke* introduction?

RD: Well, I don't think Joyce has a monopoly on the word "foetus"--you have to use some word to describe that thing. The introduction--it's a ten-year-old's point of view and I know that Joyce started off much younger. But I didn't like Stephen, particularly the older Stephen. I thought *Ulysses* was terrific, exhilarating. But what's the point of *Finnegans Wake*? There are so many full-time academics that I don't want to hurt their economy, but I feel like it's a complete waste of time. It's a great pity, because he spent

so much time writing that shit that he could have spent writing real books. I've no problem with cleverness or intellectual muscle men, but I just think now and again it becomes gratuitous and you go beyond any sort of reality and you are just wasting your time. And there's a certain snobbery that goes along with it--the inner circle who has read the book and can talk about it while the rest of us are embarrassed to admit we've never read it, or are happy to admit that we've better things to do.

CW: So it's all coincidence?

RD: Actually, I never knew about the Spanish sailor. You're the first to point it out to me. Her inspiration for the Spanish sailor comes from the British film *Letter to Brezhnev*. It was very very popular in Ireland. It's about two women, one unemployed, one who works in a chicken-processing plant--a very glamorous job--and they are out on the town on a Friday night and one of them robs a wallet from some guy who's getting drunk and they go out and blow the money with two Russian sailors. One of them falls in love with her Russian sailor and he has to go his separate way and she stays back and she knows so little about the outside world that she starts writing Brezhnev asking permission to come and visit--Brezhnev is long dead--Gorbachev is actually head at that time--but eventually she visits Russia and marries her Russian sailor. Sharon, in the novel, is a bright woman and knows that there is never a Russian boat on the Liffey, while there are plenty of Spanish about. It's more realistic. The Spanish sailor connection never dawned on me.

CW: What about the red and green hot water bottles and Dante's red- and green-backed brushes?

RD: Well, you know, I've got hot water bottles at home--me kids love them--and they come in red and green. Blue as well, but that's the reality.

CW: What about music--Joyce uses a lot of music in *Ulysses*, and the humor, which is very similar to your work.

RD: Well, I've read the book, so who's to say whether it's not in the back of your mind. But if the influence is there, it's working subconsciously. In this most current book, I was aware, in the editing stages, of various books. *Black Water* by Joyce Carol Oates, for example. It's a very short book, but it keeps going back to one episode. One episode is the book. I wanted to do that as well. I wanted Paula to go back to the first time she was hit, and I go back to that four or five times. Joyce Carol Oates's book kept coming back into my head, particularly during the editing. When I was writing *Paddy Clarke*, Richard Ford's *Wildlife* was there. It's about a man in his early 40s and he's looking back at a time in his life when he was 16 and his parents' marriage was falling apart. So that was the spark for that. *The Snapper*'s spark came from *[A] Proper Marriage* by Doris Lessing, a description of pregnancy in that book really grabbed me because it got beyond the area below the neck and got into the head--stunning, phenomenal. So certainly I was aware of some influences, but I was unaware of Joyce. The problem is, it's like a gun is put to your head--"Do you like Joyce?" and there's no room for "yes and no." It has to be "yes" or "no," in journalese. I do resent the academic industry, the summer schools, where all these academics appear for a week in the summer and discuss one writer. Once a reputation is established all the academics want to become

experts on this and then you have this huge industry around selected writers to the neglect of other writers. For instance, Shakespeare's the main man. There's a wonderful book by an American Gary Taylor called *Reinventing Shakespeare* which explores the haphazard and political nature of Shakespeare becoming the god of English literature, and it ties into the British Empire and his patronage of the royal family and his depiction of the royal family and it argues that Marlowe would be just as good a choice as the great playwright, but he's now rather a marginal figure. Everything that Shakespeare wrote is supposed to be superb and people study it and pour over it like it is Karl Marx or the Gospel. It's the same with Joyce--you go out there and you see the tee-shirts and the Anna Livia statue, and the statue of Joyce himself. It's right that these people should be remembered, but it's become a huge industry. I suppose every university has its Joycean scholar. Flann O'Brien I would argue is just as good as Joyce, but not as many people are aware of him.

CW: Who do you write for?

RD: At the time I am writing I write for myself.

CW: Who do you want to read your books?

RD: Everybody. When I was writing *The Commitments*, being modest I didn't see beyond Dublin or even a group of friends, but that's when I was putting it together. When I'm writing, I write for myself and I don't care who reads it. In fact, the more strange and exotic the better and also one would like one's next door neighbors to read it. If I start thinking about people, then there's a small line between people and market, and you start

thinking, “Well, will they understand this snatch of dialogue in Wyoming?” Once the book is finished and gone, then I start to wonder. But then it’s too late.

CW: Not about critics or the literati?

RD: No. I’m not interested in the critics. The new book . . . I’m excited about the critics. I got people to read it early and the response back was enthusiastic and I’m very happy with the book. No negative criticism will shake me. I’m looking for a mixed reaction, so I can read a variety of criticisms. I won’t be losing sleep over the reviews. The critics aren’t too influential in my case anymore. They hammered *The Van* and yet it went over very well here. Critics don’t seem to have the power of say New York theater critics, who can really demolish a play. That doesn’t happen here. But with a novel or a play, there are a few key critics and the rest follow their lead. And if you see a big review in a journal, you’ll see the key points again and again in other reviews as if fresh. The public seems to ignore the reviews. They liked *The Snapper*, and so they didn’t see why they wouldn’t like *The Van* as well. So the critics don’t really matter at this point. It’s a nice position to be in. But you have to put a check on yourself as well, because there are publishers who will publish any piece of shit I write because it will sell. An absurd example of this—I got a letter from a woman compiling a book of letters from Irish college—it’s a college out in the country where you go and just speak Irish, which is a very difficult language. A lot of people go—I went for a month. And she wanted to compile a book with these letters, if you have any letters left over. So, I didn’t have any, and I wrote her back telling her such and wishing her good luck with the project. I got a letter

yesterday back from her asking if she could use that letter in her book. Because they couldn't get a real letter, they'd use any bunch of crap to plug my name along the way. They want to use a copy in this book of a letter saying, "No, I don't have a letter." I wrote back saying that if you're ever writing a book of letters saying, "I have no letters of Irish College," then by all means use it, but a book of letters from Irish College should be just that. But it just underlines the point that they'll take any old crap so I have to be my own critic, and I have to be happy with it and that I am not just deluding myself into thinking that just because I have written a few other books that this one is also good. I have to be careful.

CW: Do you listen to soul music yourself?

RD: I do--not exclusively, obviously, but I do.

CW: Do the songs you use, with their particular lyrics, have any special meaning within the novel itself, for instance, in a foreshadowing capacity?

RD: Yes, although my memory isn't as fresh as it was ten years ago when I was writing the book, I did try to integrate the lyrics with the story. I'm not sure if I used the lyrics to predict something that is coming. Pop music will do that for you anyway. If you break down the lyrics you probably have ten stories, two country-western ones, and three soul. But basically they are the same things, aren't they? Obviously I'd thousands of songs to choose from, and I chose based on a lot of different reasons. One was the humorous effect--just seeing the Dublin accent written into a song and then changing the lyrics

slightly--like in *Night Train* or *It's a Man's World*. They just had humorous possibilities which the others didn't. Any in particular you talking about that?

CW: None that I care to put under your scrutiny. But I notice you have a lot of James Brown.

RD: Of course. The godfather of soul and what not. The main man of soul. The godhead. I loved those. When I was reading Gerri Hirshey's book *Nowhere to Run*--a great book--I loved these names, these nicknames that they have to live up to.

CW: Have you seen him live?

RD: Yeah. Last November he came here. He was great. He was late coming, but it was a hell of lot better than not coming at all. It was a great night. It started with Bo Diddley, then Van Morrison played as well. It was a great night.

CW: I've only seen him on various TV specials. Did you meet him?

RD: No. Just watched him. The time to have seen him was 1961 or so. He's 60-odd now. I would have loved to have seen him fall onto his knees--he didn't this time because I don't think he could have gotten up again. But the show was terrific. It was interrupted too often but once he got into it he was awesome. There were a lot of instrumental breaks--he obviously needs a lot of breaks now--but still, he was pounding away. It was terrific.

CW: What is your writing routine?

RD: Basically, I go from nine--half-nine--when I bring the kids to school 'til five o'clock when the lady who looks after the kids goes home.

CW: Does your wife work?

RD: My wife's a student. But even if she's around, I stop at five. I gave up teaching because I wanted to write, but I decided I would keep the routine because it fits everybody else's routine. I don't see why I should have to work into the night just because I am a full-time writer. I work roughly nine to five, Monday through Friday. If possible, if I'm working on two things, which I like to do, I tend to try to work on the novel first of all, because if you're working on the novel you get engrossed and if five o'clock came you wouldn't necessarily want to stop in the middle of a sentence. I tend to work on the novel in the first part of the day and the screenplay toward the latter part of the day because it isn't as engrossing and it's easier to stop. It's not a literary exercise at all. I read then as well--sometimes the newspaper--so it's an hour before I start doing any kind of work. And I pick up the kids and drop into the supermarket, and I bring me kids swimming now and again as well. So it isn't strict at all--I don't put my head down at nine and come up for air at five. That's how I work. We went on holiday for seven weeks last year, and I had to come back to Dublin for two weeks for a rewrite. And in that two weeks I was at home alone, my schedule just went out the window completely--I'd be working late into the night and wake up and start writing. I didn't feel the need for a routine. It's just that the routine fits well into the other elements of my life. It's not the stuff of great literature--I know you're supposed to be a tortured soul and work deep into the night. But that's a lot of crap. I have other little tortured souls to look after.

CW: What is your wife studying?

RD: Business. About which I know very little.

CW: Me too. What's your favorite book?

RD: Tough question--it changes all the time. It changes all the time. There are so many of them. There's *At Swim-Two-Birds*. There's *The World According to Garp*, which at whatever age I was when I read it--I think I was 19 or 20--it was wonderful. I'd never read anything else like it. Recently, it was *Bastard out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison, an American writer. It floored me completely.

CW: Anne Tyler?

RD: Yes I love her. I guess my favorite by her is *Breathing Lessons*, but it's not my favorite book. *Wise Blood* by O'Connor. *Ragtime* by E. L. Doctorow. *A Proper Marriage* by Lessing.

CW: Do you read Dickens? Jimmy seems to like him.

RD: I love Dickens. *David Copperfield* is one of my favorite books. It's no coincidence that I was rereading it when I was writing *The Van*. I just wanted to remind people how accessible and brilliant Dickens is. I guess now that he is studied at universities and is a classic, he isn't popularly read, but in the 19th century, everybody read him. A new installment of Dickens is like a big episode of a soap.

CW: Like *90125*?

RD: Oh, is that the Beverly Hills show? No, not like that--British soaps tend to be more down-to-earth. Like *Coronation Street* and *East Enders*. If you have a chance, *Coronation Street* comes on Wednesdays and Fridays, and turn on your TV and catch a

snippet of it and you'll see the difference. It's a working-class street, and it's genuine drama, violence, unemployment--all the stuff that is reality. And humorous. I haven't watched in a while because it's on at half-seven, which is a tricky time in a household with two kids, but I imagine it is like a Dickens installment. Somewhere in the 20th century, they built a wall between popular and high art. It's a great pity. Jimmy discovers Dickens. Dickens is there to be enjoyed by everybody, but rarely is. *David Copperfield* is one of my favorites. *Little Dorrit* as well.

CW: Why is there such an absence of religion in your books?

RD: That's the way it is. There's no religion in me own life for certain. I've no room for it at all. It's difficult in a country like Ireland because you do have to put your face out and tell it to go away. "Fuck off." You have to be quite blunt to allow yourself your own agnostic space. There's no car driving as well, because until recently, I wasn't able to drive. Or smoking. Because I don't smoke.

CW: Everybody smokes here.

RD: Yes, but far less than they used to. A hell of a lot of kids smoke, particularly young girls. Partly the peer pressure. Just recently have there been the anti-smoking laws in the restaurants and places, but they're ignored. I personally don't smoke and never have. I would be against introducing anti-smoking laws in a pub--I agree you shouldn't smoke in restaurants and where there are small children, and I don't want smoking in me own house--but in a pub, it just seems part of it--part of the atmosphere. But in the books

there is very little smoking because I don't smoke. I suppose if I did feel the burning need for a gasper now and again, it would be a part of the books.

CW: And drugs--there's a little mention of it in *The Commitments*--marijuana and heroin.

RD: In the new book, one of the kids she suspects is a heroin addict, but he doesn't live in the house so he's not in the book. On his episode there was substance abuse--he was sniffing glue and drinking alcohol, PH 14. It will be in the new books because it is something I can't ignore. It's a problem in City Centre here, and the problem is city-wide now. It's something I can't ignore. I'd have to go off and do my own research there, because I've never taken heroin in me life. My experience of drugs is very limited--coffee, Guinness, the odd Head-Ex tablet. Literally so. No experience first-hand. The religion aspect--I wanted to get away from the clichéd view of Ireland. An English critic of *The Snapper* said, "Where was the priest, where was the Church? This is a pregnant girl." And I wanted to say, "Fuck you pal--what do you know? You live in London." Priests in working-class parts of Dublin are peripheral figures--few people know who they are at all, and they're not particularly welcome when they knock on the door. It's a new picture of Ireland. *Paddy Clarke* is filled with religion--a childish version of it, because it's a different time, the 1960s. Everybody goes to a Catholic school. My older boy goes to a multi-denominational school--there are only two on the north side of Dublin, for half a million people. But that's fine because that means they'll be good schools. But the rest are run by the Catholic Church or the Church of Ireland, Anglican. So the religion is still

there, but it's more a surface thing. On a Sunday, you'll still see crowds and crowds going to mass, but it's not the deep devotion you might get in the Third World. They'll be chatting in the back of the church. It kind of depresses me when I see all those people in the church. Particularly the kids. What are they going for? They're immortal--they're not, but they should think they are. What are they going there for? When you begin to slow down and there's a rattle in your breathing, then you go off to church to make your peace, not when you're seventeen and you should be avoiding at all costs all that crap. So there's no religion, partly because of my imaginative lack, and also because that's the reality. One thing in *The Commitments* film which made me uncomfortable was the religious scenes and holy statues and such. The confession scene, very funny lines, but it annoyed me--I didn't write that scene--you know where he goes in and starts talking about the temptation of women and the soul music and the priest contradicts him. They're playing *When a Man Loves a Woman* by Otis Redding and the priest says, "No, it's by Percy Sledge." It's funny, but it annoyed me. That kid would not have gone to confession. Kids do not go to confession anymore. I don't think it's a sacrament anymore. You don't have to go to confession anymore--you can make your peace with God in your own privacy. Very few people go to confession anymore. None of those kids in the film would have gone near a confession box. But it's in the film and it annoys me.

CW: Do you like your characters? Do you think they live meaningless lives? They get drunk, aren't educated, have meaningless sex, steal, watch too much TV. . . .

RD: What's meaningless about that? That's not meaningless. So why don't they talk about politics? Talking about politics is as about as meaningless as talking about sex or talking about football. I don't see any difference in a bunch of kids talking about politics or talking about Manchester United Football. It's just conversation. It's filling gaps. So their lives are not meaningless but are filled with meaning. Their conversation is not deep--so what--whose is? This conversation is not normal--in fact you're taping it--but we are not having a chat on the bus. But when you do have a chat on the bus, like when I was on my way here today, I stopped and chatted with the caretaker at the local school about the weather, and then later someone stopped me and we talked about a match that was on the telly last night. So these are normal conversations. That's what I wanted to record. In a lot of conversations, it's what they don't say that is more interesting than what they do say. I don't think they lead meaningless lives at all.

CW: Even though Sharon gets drunk all the time?

RD: She's going through a stage in her life. When I was that age, when I stopped being a student and was earning money, one of the things I'd buy with that money is alcohol, and not because I had the burning need for alcohol, but for the sheer pleasure of being with a group of friends and talking all night and getting pleasantly drunk. Getting drunk is incidental, but it was just the whole thing. I don't see any problem with young people getting drunk--I'm not advocating it as a nightly exercise, but there's no point in moralizing and saying that it destroys brain cells because that's just a guarantee that they'll go out and destroy a few more. That's just the wrong approach. When I was a teacher

and I had a tutorial and I was trying to get them to talk about smoking--it's very difficult to get 14-year-olds to say they are destroying their lungs and health, because, once again, they're immortal, and it's much more important that smoking's cool. Showing them the pictures of the death-rattling lungs and emaciated 70-year-olds, while it might shock them, they don't see themselves there at all. They are different beings completely. The books aren't moralistic at all--I've gotten letters from women who are irate that a pregnant woman would smoke, but it happens. Personally, I'd prefer that pregnant women didn't smoke or drink, but I've seen them do both. So what are you supposed to do? Ignore it? A novel is a novel. I'm not a priest or a moralist, and I try to write within reality. I've even had one letter from an American journalist complaining about the ending of *The Van*. I've had a lot of complaints about *The Van*, but one about the ending was a new one on me. She said, "They drive the van into the water and just leave it there?" I said they were going to come back. "We shouldn't leave something like that in our greatest natural resource. They should go back and take it out." Dollymount is a great place to take the kids, but the water is absolutely vile, filthy. Nobody swims in it. It's an outrage. And she was worried about the van--there are a lot more sinister things floating about the water. The van is pristine in all that crap. So people will have objections about everything, so you just shut your ears and go on. But I don't think they lead meaningless lives at all. Their lives are a different pattern. Jimmy Sr. and Bimbo spend a lot of time sitting on a doorstep and talking about nothing in particular, but the people who are saying their lives are meaningless are sitting in a cafe, talking about the same things, but using different

accents and an active vocabulary of about a couple of hundred words, but they may be coming to the same conclusion. They many not have any more depth, but because the setting is right, and they've the right haircuts and are dressed in black, this is depth and that is shallow. I don't see it that way at all.

CW: What are a dead leg and pruning?

RD: Pruning I think is redundant now--I don't think anyone uses it anymore. But what happened to little schoolboys is that other little schoolboys would run up to them and grab their testicles and squeeze. You don't need a diagram. A dead leg is when you go up to someone and put your knee there, which numbs the whole leg and you fall over.

Absolutely dreadful. It hasn't happened to me since school time. These things would go ripping through the school yard, and you'd have everybody in agony over having dead legs and pruning. There was one phase where you grab the breast of someone and say "whistle." It was absolutely impossible. I guess it only happened in the boys' schools--schools were segregated and I don't think it happened in the girls' schools.

CW: Tell me about *Your Granny's a Hunger Striker*.

RD: It's never been published and it never will. I wrote it over a four-year spell, between 1981-5 or 1982-6. It centers around Dublin, the summer of 1981 with the H Block hunger strikes. A strange time. Where you had these men--Sinn Fein, IRA members, in the H Block of Longash in Northern Ireland--who were starving themselves as a protest and they wanted political status as prisoners because they didn't consider themselves standard criminals. They were there as political criminals and wanted political

status. They had five demands, none of which I can recall. Thatcher, in her first or second year as Prime Minister, wouldn't give in, and so basically seventeen men died. It was a strange time because a lot of people who should have known better were walking around wearing black arm bands and you had to decide whether you were against them or for them. It was very hard to remain aloof. It was a very shrill time. A lot of protests. So I wrote this absurd, very snide, undergraduate-type humor story about a group of people who were either by design or accidentally around the H Block campaign in Dublin. It was a very long book, if I remember. I was just glad to be finished. There were some passages which were very very funny, but overall it was dreadful, just dreadful. It'll never be published, not if I can help it. I have all the copies.

CW: Posthumously possibly?

RD: I think there's a way to stop that. I think there is something in me will that forbids its ever being published. My wife knows anyway. She knows how I feel about it. It was a good exercise, anyway--just getting from the first page to the last is good practice. It's a rehearsal for doing it again, like with *The Commitments*, which only took me six months. Also, I sent a copy off to every publisher I could find, and invariably it came back unopened. So they didn't reject the book--they rejected the notion of someone sending them a book. So myself and John Sutton published *The Commitments* here in Dublin by ourselves, which was a great exercise. But I imagine people wouldn't see any of the other things in the other books in this book--I haven't read it in a long time--but it was a very smart-arsed book if I can remember. But at the time, I thought it was fine. That

wasn't easy. But I have no interest in it now. It's hard when I'm touring and people ask me if I wrote anything before *The Commitments*. I have to say, "Yeah, it's called *Your Granny's a Hunger Striker*." I was doing a reading at a Republican center, where all the paraphernalia of the dead Republican heroes is, and it was going fine, but as I was looking out on the crowd, I know there must have been some active members of the IRA there, and I was just saying, "Don't anyone ask me. Please, please, don't anyone ask me. I need my kneecaps. Don't ask me." I'd have to get in the car after and head for the border.

CW: Why do you write? Is there something burning inside you that needs to be expressed?

RD: No, not initially. That comes later when you are convinced there's a book there. I'm always open to suggestion that there's a book there, or that there just isn't a book there. That hasn't happened yet, but there have been times when it feels like it's happening. Like with *The Snapper*. It took so long. And the last book--it was very hard to get her voice, to get to a good level with her--and I was wondering if there was a book. But when you do become convinced there is a book, like with the last one, then it becomes important. I finally really felt the burning, like I really had to get it finished, which I didn't feel about *Paddy Clarke*. I feel it should have been written and I'm glad I wrote it--in an Irish context, it says things that should be said and haven't been said before. So it does become engrossing. Which is good and bad. It makes it easier to get on with the job, less distractions, of course. But it can be a bad thing because it becomes

harder to switch off at five o'clock, and particularly when the subject matter is grim. It makes it hard to shake off.

CW: Why is Paddy so violent?

RD: Because little boys are violent. Read *Lord of The Flies*. When the kids don't have any parental guidance, they are little savages. There are two film versions of the book-- Peter Brook directed one, and then there's one very bad one--I can't remember who directed or starred in that one--but the very good one by Peter Brook, better known as the theater critic. And he put the kids on the island and just filmed and his conclusion was that the book was very unrealistic because the kids became savages much much quicker in reality. The book took too long--he said the little fuckers were on the island for only a couple of hours before they were beating each other on the heads. So kids are very violent. I think also there is a certain amount of curiosity in their cruelty. Cruelty to animals is more curiosity. My own kids--they have rabbits and fish and they love them, but they'll push the rabbit, not to be cruel but to see what would happen if they push the rabbit. Now if you see an adult do that, you've got someone to avoid. But kids are curious. When the kids are cruel to the dog in the back garden, they are just curious to see what will happen. And when they split the rat they want to see what'll come out. The whole thing about skin and what's inside is fascinating to them. Now he's not going to go off mutilating things to see what's inside, but they are just curious.

CW: Veronica in *The Van* has to read *Lord of the Flies*.

RD: Yes, she has to. It's a set text for her course.

CW: Were you reading it too?

RD: In the fourteen years that I taught, I read it dozens of times because it's a set text. The one piece I took from it is the word "stuff." It's a real kids' word. Not so much in the modern context--this stuff and that stuff--but as a word for entrails and what not. So when Piggy is killed and his head smashes on the rock, "stuff" comes out. It's a perfect word to describe what a kid would see. So when Paddy is hitting the rat with the Irish hurling stick, he talks about the stuff that comes out. That's the one conscious thing I took from *Lord of The Flies*. But I really liked the book, because the people I was reading it to, or with, liked it, and that's not a very common experience with a set text. There's little freedom with texts--everyone in Ireland is reading the same thing--and some of it's ridiculous--I was reading *Persuasion* to a bunch of kids who had no interest in reading anything.

CW: Have you seen the movie?

RD: The recent one? Yes, I thought it was OK. I went to *Sense and Sensibility* last night and I thought it was brilliant. I never liked Jane Austen, and I always wondered what if she weren't being ironic at all but being literal? I think the irony, which is always pointed out in notes, you know, wasn't irony at all but snobbery, and snobbery within the snobbery. I think, "Oh God, this is dreadful." And you can imagine teaching this to 15-year-olds. But I thought the film lifted the humor, which I found totally absent from the books, and the characters became totally endearing and human, while the story remained. I thought she did a fantastic job. And to make the little kid a character--and little kids are

nonexistent in Jane Austen, or at least they never speak--but to make this little kid such a great character. I thought it was a terrific job.

CW: How do you like what they've done to your own movies?

RD: I think they've done a terrific job. I am very happy and increasingly so. I liked *The Commitments*. I wasn't involved in any of the decisions or around for any of the decisions, so when I saw it I was relieved--they could have done anything. I thought Parker would do a good job--I didn't know if it would be my good job--but I was very happy. With *The Snapper*, I was much more involved, and with *The Van*, I was in control from day one and I've seen four or five rough cuts and it looks great. The music is being recorded now--Eric Clapton is doing the music for us. It'll be brilliant and I am dying to see that version.

CW: Why did you have to change the names?

RD: I didn't have to. With *The Snapper*, I did it because I didn't want it to be seen as a sequel. It's not a problem with the book but it is a problem with the film, because if it's a sequel, you have to have the exact same actors, the exact same streets, you'd have to bring the Commitments, at least one or two of them, somewhere along the line since it's the same community. I didn't want that--I thought it'd be a dreadful idea. I just wanted it to be an entirely separate film. Also, *The Commitments* was a big cinematic film whereas *The Snapper* was made for TV. We knew that from the word go that we were employed by the BBC, which caused Stephen Frears to make some cinematic decisions. There are a lot of close-ups and a lot of faces--it was made for the telly and not the big screen. The

big screen picture came after. I didn't like it on the big screen--I thought it was grainy.

So I changed the names so it would be seen as a fresh new film. And I changed them again in *The Van*--Colin Meany, who is in *The Snapper*, is in it, but aside from that it is an entirely new cast.

CW: He's the guy from *Star Trek*?

RD: Yes.

CW: He's good.

RD: He's great. Again, I wanted it to be fresh. *The Snapper* was promoted in America as "the feel good movie of the year." Now *The Van*, while it's very funny, is not a feel good movie. The ending is very, very sad and we are not going to change so it can be billed as "a feel good movie." *The Snapper* had very little music, whereas this one will have much more. It'll be very, very different, so it just made sense to change the names. Also, while I was writing the screenplay, I discovered that the people who had made *The Commitments* had the cinematic rights to the names--but that didn't matter, because I wasn't going to use the same names anyway.

CW: Why Rabbitte? Is there any significance to that name? The thought actually occurred to me that "rabbits eat blooms."

RD: You can forget that. Rabbits also eat carrots--they eat a lot of things. I told my kids to go get food for the rabbit, and they came out with a frankfurter sausage and a can of peanuts. It was lovely. Well, names are quite important. They must fit into the flow of

things. Get a phone book--there are Rabbittes there--there's a prominent politician called Pat Rabbitte. Rabbitte has a humorous ring to it, but it's also in reality.

CW: There's also a "Paddy Clarke" we found in the phone book.

RD: Yeah. There'd be loads of them, absolutely. Clarke is very common, and Paddy was the most common Irish boy's name.

CW: Tell me about Kilbarrack. We drove through there the other day.

RD: Kilbarrack is about five stops on the north side of the DART. So you get on here at City Centre and you go about five stops--it's about five miles from City Centre. When I was a kid it was bang at the edge of the city. Quite literally, on my side of the road you were in Dublin 5 postal district, and then you crossed the road and you were in County Dublin--you'd left the city. The city limits were right down the middle of the street. There was a farm across the road from us. There was the odd road that had been there for a long time, the people who lived there would have been railway workers for the local train. But gradually as the city grew, the estates grew--early 40s and 50s--and people moved in like my parents, working-class, lower-middle-class, who were in a position to buy their own houses. In many cases, they were all the same age. It was a great time to grow up--surrounded by all these kids--a lot of freedom as well. As I grew up, the city cooperations bought out the farms, and the private developers bought out the other farms, and it gradually grew more inner-city. People who moved into it would have been more solidly working-class--from the inner-city. Dublin had the worst slums of any city in Europe. These awful tenements--decayed Georgian houses--had in some places 80 people

living in them. The norm was that a family lived in one room. It was the Dublin of Sean O'Casey. So these were all demolished in the '50s, '60s, '70s, and these people moved out into the suburbs, into Kilbarrack and into other areas of the Ring of Dublin. So this working-class, traditionally blue-collar, manual-workers, had never worked, but was being bracketed as working-class. It's much trickier now than it used to be. Middle-class traditionally was white collar. Me own father. . . .

CW: He was a printer?

RD: Yes. So he would have been blue collar, since he had ink under his fingernails. Then he became a teacher of printing, and so he took off his blue collar and put on a white one. I think he was earning roughly the same money--actually, I think he took a dive in pay for a while. Then he coordinated the training of printing teaching, so he was then a civil servant. His father was a tram driver. So his background was definitely working-class, whereas my mother's background was more middle-class--her father was a civil servant, a state employee. And she stayed in school until she was 18, which was quite unusual for a girl, whereas my father left when he was 15. So their backgrounds were definitely different. So a lot of Irish people are in this gray zone between working- and middle-class. Also, I started my secondary education in 1971, and it was free. My parents had to buy books and pay for transport, but it was free. Up until 1968, it wasn't free. The state might have put some money into it, but it wasn't free at all. I think there was a fee of some sort. So that meant a closed door to a lot of people. Whereas people of my generation, there was a new door opened up. I think my parents would have sent me to

secondary anyway—they could have afforded it—but what I am saying is that it became the norm to go to high school—everybody went. I was part of that generation that benefited from free secondary education. Education facilitated the move for me from working-class to middle-class.

CW: And then college.

RD: Yes I went to college. There were fees for college. If you lived at home, like I did, you'd really want to be on the bread line to get any kind of grants or anything. When I was in college, it was measured by family income. And my mother was working, my father was working, my two sisters lived at home and were working, so I didn't get any kind of grants because family income was way too high. I worked during the summers. Now, there are no fees for college, which I don't think is a particularly clever move because when you go into primary schools, the neglect is horrendous. I think a lot of primary schools, although they all get the same amount of money from the state, it's the parental money which gives it the edge. If you're in a working-class area, where there's 60-70 percent unemployment, where there's not that much surface money, so if there's any money to be spent, it shouldn't be spent on third-level education, it should be spent at the bottom, in primary education, if they genuinely want to even things out and make everything the same for everybody. In my own case, I've grown up with a foot in each class. It's a very useful position, especially socially. People who have grown up solidly working class seem to be hopelessly lost in a different version of reality. Whereas being from the gray area, you seem to be a little more street-wise. You tend to have more

sympathy with things. You don't give out about tax as much, because you know that tax goes to people who need it, and so what if a few waste it? Not all of it is wasted.

Whereas those from all middle-class tend to see it as their money. It's a useful position to be in, especially as a novelist.

CW: Did your brothers go to college too?

RD: I have one brother and two sisters. No he didn't.

CW: Are you Darren? He's going to college isn't he?

RD: Not at all. A different generation. He'd be typical in an unusual context for a working-class kid going to college. My sisters didn't go because they didn't get the exam results wanted to go. They went off and did commercial courses--typing and such. One does computers now, but she got her training in the bank where she works. I don't think my brother wanted to go. Actually, I was the only one who probably was academically able to go. I was the only one who was interested.

CW: Did you always want to be a writer?

RD: Yes and no. I always wanted to be a professional footballer, but was never good enough. And I always wanted to be a professional rock musician.

CW: I wanted to be Madonna.

RD: Oh yes--and you probably will want to be all your life. But you know you will never be her, but that doesn't stop you from dreaming. Wanting to be a writer is much the same. As a teacher, I found myself with a lot of free time and not needing to fill it with getting another job to make more money. It's an easier path than learning how to play

the guitar. I already know how to write--I learned years and years ago. All you need is a pencil and paper. You don't need money. I suppose there was a little ambition in the back of me head--I'd read an awful lot at the time, and somewhere along the line I figured I'd try to see if I could do it.

CW: Did you take courses?

RD: No. They were and are quite rare here. I think writing courses are quite common in America, but there are only a couple in Ireland.

CW: Yes they are. I go to UNC-Greensboro, and they have a great writing program. I'm supposed to plug UNCG--they'd really like you to come speak. It's a fabulous place. Has your family changed since you've become famous?

RD: No. My parents are very happy that it's happened--very proud. My mother likes to go to all the "launching parties" and she'll be very excited about this new book.

CW: I've talked to a few older women here, and they think your books are too filled with profanity. Does she?

RD: My mother will admit that people do use it, but she doesn't like it herself. She's more open about it, as is my father. I think she liked the films more than the books. And she really admires the new one. She read it in a day, and called me very quickly. She didn't know the world was like that, and she found it quite shocking, but she admired it. They don't agree with me on religion and politics, and even if they don't like the subject matter, they like the idea that I'm doing it. They're very happy with it all. I get a lot of encouragement from them all. Of course they've changed over ten years.

CW: What about politics? There aren't any politics in your novels?

RD: Belfast, if the traffic is with you, is only two hours away, but it seems like a different country. When the violence starts, we close down psychologically to an extent. It becomes a place very far away again. If you were a writer in Toronto, would your book be a lesser book because it didn't contain anything about Quebec? It's the difference between politics with a little "p" or a big "P." But a book about a woman in a violent marriage is a political book. A book about two unemployed men is a political book. This *Family* series brought domestic violence to the forefront, to the top of the political agenda, with a small "p," for a few months. I've very little interest in party politics. I don't think that's what politics is about. The only way to get politicians to do any thing is to force, and to probe, and to make them see it is worth their while. If they don't do it, they'll lose votes, and if they do, they'll get exposure, which is what they crave. That's what real politics is. I'd defend the need for a democratic structure--this idea that you have one group on one side of the room and another on the other side, and they get up and debate like teenagers, and they say "Hear, hear." I find, when you watch the BBC, it's particularly dreadful--all these men, "yah, yah." Something about the English politicians--you want to kill them. Whereas in Ireland, it's more rural and they're screaming and shouting at each other, and you say, "Jesus, they're big kids." But it's better than anything else. I don't want Hitler or Stalin. So give me democracy, but I don't want to be engrossed in it. It's all so much appearance and media. I find American politics fascinating. All the candidates were confirming their status as outsiders, and Pat

Buchanan has been writing speeches for political farts for years. And has never moved outside of Washington in his life.

CW: You follow American politics?

RD: To an extent. You can't but. I read up on it. I was fortunate to be in America during the last Republican Convention when Bush and Quayle were elected, and I found it fascinating and disturbing. I think you can take it to an extreme, if you elect dogcatchers and the such. I do find American politics interesting. For black reasons, I was hoping that Lamar Alexander would last a bit longer--with his plaid shirt and his wife Holly, is it? And his kids. Just the name--Holly and Lamar Alexander, with his plaid shirt. An ex-Secretary of Education, and he was an outsider, a man of the soil. Ah, Jesus. It is disturbing to say that the only way to establish your standing is to say you're an outsider. The government is not necessarily the enemy, but they make it seem so. Until recently, about four years ago, the use of the word liberal--when they use the word liberal it's to sneer at chinless guys who guaranteed anything--in context of the British Liberal party, which isn't around anymore--all chinless wonders which were never for or against anything--they'd never definitely say "Yes" or "No." But in American politics, "liberal" is almost evil, sinister, perverse. It's fascinating how one word can mean one thing and the exact same word something different. So I do follow it some--the razzmatazz of it all.

CW: I didn't realize how stupid it all was until I married my husband, who is in politics. He's in it as little as possible.

RD: What I found so horrible is the abuse and use of the family. I've got four politicians in my constituency--and they all send me Christmas cards. I don't want a Christmas card from them, and the majority of the people are like me. I vote for them not on their image but on what they stand for. But they're trying to push an image. You get them playing in the snow. It snows here very rarely--like once every four years--so they must be on the lookout for it--"Here's some snow--get the photographer." They're rolling around in the snow with the wife and kids. They use the children and wives as part of the package. Ugh.

CW: Being the wife of a politician, I am always nervous I am going to do something that'll cost him a vote. Like eat a grape in the grocery market before they're weighed it or something.

RD: "Wife of politician caught robbing."

CW: One last question--what about language? Your "unprecedented use of the Irish vernacular?" And in one interview you discussed how the Irish have a particular relationship to language because of the storytellers and the English coming in and such.

RD: Yes. I've always wanted to bring the books down closer and closer to the characters--to get myself, the narrator, out of it as much as I can. And one of the ways to do this is to use the language that the characters actually speak, to use the vernacular, and not ignoring the grammar, the formality of it, to bend it to twist it, so you get a sense that you are hearing it, not reading it. That you are listening to the characters. You get in really close to the characters. I think it's a stronger achievement, in the context of my

books, especially my latest book, because it gets you smack in the middle of it. You can't ignore this woman--it's not an option--you're in this woman's life. That's why I do it, because it fits the book. Probably not the next one--it'll be a bit different.

CW: The one about the famine?

RD: No, the old man one. I don't know what it'll be like, but it won't be similar. I've never had a problem with being a fan of rock music, of popular music. Of course, you can't say fan--"I'm a fan of Mozart"--you can't use that word. But I don't see why you can't be both. I don't see why I can't read Salman Rushdie's new work and Elmore Leonard's new work. I don't see any real difference, except that one's more self-consciously literary than the other. They're both good literature. And yet, if I go buy Rushdie's book in Waterstone's around the corner, it'll be in "Literature," whereas the other will be under "Crime." I don't like these divisions. When I was a teenager, you'd go for a band because it would give you a certain status, a certain depth, which wasn't necessarily the case, but it just seemed so. So I've never liked the division between the high and the low, between the literary and the popular. One of the big issues about my books is whether they're literary or not. They were on the list for books to be taught in schools, but they're off the list now because the Minister of Education decided they weren't literary. It's utter drivel. I'm quite happy they're off because I'm not quite comfortable for them to be taught in an exam situation. But the idea that they are less literary because they use the vernacular--I don't agree. The decision to use the vernacular is a literary decision. The decision to use the word "fuck" is a literary decision. It's a

decision of rhythm. It's not even a decision--it's a habit. Whereas in the context of writing the books, it's a literary decision to use these words. To use images from television instead of books, to use advertising jingles and such. It's a literary decision. I've tried to surround the characters with their own world. So that's where the language, the images, the music, and the rest come from--the same reasoning. I try to get down to the characters.

CW: What do you do in your spare time, besides take your kids swimming? What's your other son's name, by the way?

RD: Jack. My free time. Lately, I clean the kitchen, make dinner. . . .

CW: Me too!

RD: I'm interested in football, as a fan. I read a lot, go to the movies.

CW: So, like in *The Van*, you're into soccer.

RD: Yes, the whole country is. I spend a lot of time going out to eat, quite a lot. I enjoy books, I enjoy going to pubs--once or twice a week I'll meet a couple of friends in a pub and we'll just talk and such. We go on holiday quite often, quite close generally. Just fill the car and drive for an hour and a half. Last year we went to France. I do what most people in Ireland my age do. I probably read more than the average person, and I probably go to movies more than the average person. But much the same. I'd rather go to the movie than wait for the video. I usually make the effort.

CW: Did you see Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*?

RD: Yes. I liked it, although as a play it doesn't do much for me. Behind all that glory is a lot of bloodshed and human misery, and Ireland's had its fair share of all human misery. I'm not anti-British or anything. I can see how in wartime it would go down a bomb and quite rightly so, like in 1940 in the Battle of Britain--quite stirring stuff, but I am not convinced that it has a place. I don't think we should ban it or anything, but it didn't do anything for me in 1991. Life is more complicated than the world of *Henry V*. I prefer *Henry IV*.

CW: I think that's everything.

RD: Well, if when you go back, you find you have omitted anything, write me and I'll get back as quickly as possible to you.

CW: Thank you so much. This has been so nice of you. It was wonderful to meet you.