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Portraying Irish Working-Class Women in Love: The Consequences of Patriarchy in Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*

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ABSTRACT Set in the Celtic Tiger period of the 90's Roddy Doyle presents the story of Paula Spencer, the main character and narrator of *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996). Paula is presented as a marginalised character. She is the mother of four children, an alcoholic, long-term unemployed and battered by her husband Charlo. Doyle uses Paula as a means to convey the voice of Irish working-class women in a society where capitalism has been largely established and accepted.

It is my aim to consider Roddy Doyle's narrative difficulties as a male author in writing a novel about a battered working-class woman, mostly without education and an alcoholic. In this sense, I will analyze the way in which Doyle turns Paula, a woman without a voice and without means to write her own story, into a plausible character. In this sense, love, shaped by a patriarchal Irish culture and society, is crucial to understand Paula's relationship with her abusive husband. The paper will examine thus, the contextual factors that allow spousal abuse to exist and emphasize the way society becomes accomplice of these kinds of tragedies.

Introduction

First with the *The Commitments* (1988), *The Snapper* (1990) and *The Van* (1991), in what is known as *The Barrytown Trilogy* and afterwards with *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*

(1993), *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and *A Star Called Henry* (1999), Roddy Doyle has contributed much to Irish Literature by portraying Ireland's working-class people and culture. In relation to this topic, he also wrote the TV series *Family* (1994) where Paula Spencer, a marginalised woman, mother of four children, an alcoholic, long-term unemployed and battered by her husband, appeared for the first time. However, *Family* had bad reviews among viewers and critics since they thought Doyle was suggesting that what appeared on the series was realistic working-class life and that this was giving a wrong image of Ireland. However, he decided to delve on the character of Paula Spencer who later on became the main character of *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and its sequel *Paula Spencer* (2006).

Doyle maintained himself faithful to his social and political engagements and gave a particular but representative woman the voice of all those women who normally have no voice. Although, Roddy Doyle himself put it, "Biology put (him) a long way from her" (Crown 2011), he was able to create an extremely plausible character. This paper will explore the figure of the author as a man writing what is usually described as a woman's experience and the techniques that he used to create such a plausible female character. Love becomes central in the creation of Paula Spencer since from the beginning until the end of the novel she is in love with her abusive husband, a situation which is presented as a common feature of this kind of abuse. The paper will examine thus, on the one hand, the contextual factors that allow the situation described to exist. In this sense, love is shaped in Doyle's novel by patriarchal Irish culture and society. Indeed, Paula's fate is mainly caused by her patriarchal environment which is determined by the context of an Irish Society that has unquestioningly embraced a capitalist mentality and Catholic values and becomes an accomplice of Paula's tragedy while she remains in a marginalised social position having to struggle on her own. On the other hand, the paper will explore the reasons why Paula accepts the situation. In this regard, love is represented as self-delusion and as Paula's abusive husband's oppressive tool to control her mind and her life.

Roddy Doyle as a male author

One of the most striking aspects of *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* is the already mentioned fact that the novel is written by a man and this inevitably leads to wondering whether men can really write about women's experiences or, as in Doyle's case, write as a woman. But, what does exactly mean <<like a man>> or <<like a woman>>? Fuss (1989) in *Reading like a Feminist* calls into question, in contrast to Modeleski (1986), whether we "can speak so simply (...) of <<the woman>> and <<the man>> as if these categories were not transgressed, nor already constituted by other axes of difference (class, culture, ethnicity, nationality...)" (Fuss 1989:28). Furthermore, she directly questions Robert Scholes' essentialism stating that "there is little agreement amongst women on exactly what constitutes <<a woman experience>>" (1989:25). Therefore, faced with the evidence of the impossibility to base the authority of one gender over the other to read or write, in this case women's, on experience, Fuss suggests a theory based on the <<subject-position>> that emerges as a result of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Accordingly, there exists a reader that comes into tension with different <<subject-positions>> that at the same time the reader, as a subject-reader, also occupies. This <<subject-position>> is determined, you cannot choose this position, but you can (re)negotiate it. At this point, we can state that our writing or reading is not determined by our biological condition and that we do not write or read like/as a woman or like/as a man but from multiples subject-positions subjected to the social and historical context and also according to a political choice.

Beyond Lacanian psychoanalysis, when Roddy Doyle was asked in an interview whether he is sympathetic to the position that writers should be socially committed and politically engaged he answered: "I would see myself as being socially committed and politically engaged—I always have done. (...) I would like to think that everything I've done is political" (Costello 2001:91). Doyle takes this politically point of view of Paula Spencer's situation and tries to represent her and other women who have lived the same experience but are unable to speak. This leads us directly to Spivak's reading of the *Subaltern Studies* and the idea of locating a collective consciousness as "a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak 1996 (1985): 215). In this sense, Doyle, as he put it in an interview, "find the angle that is the woman's angle" (Cudmore 2012) and this angle is not constructed biologically but it is used as a political strategy to let the subaltern voices speak. The woman's angle is then

understood as socially determined. Consequently, it can be stated that a man can write about women and from the social women's point of view and the other way around since there are not any innate essence in any of the sexes that are out of the opposite sex grasp.

The Celtic Tiger and the Irish patriarchal society

Doyle uses Paula's voice to indirectly point out the social factors that build her fate and this is why Paula reconstructs her past, going back to her school days, her relationship with her family and her childhood, since as Doyle's declares: "that's when being a girl became a different experience to growing up a boy" (Dayton 2012). Going back to Paula's early age is his way to show the fact that couple-related abuse is given by not only one reason but by a series of situations in life. These situations are clearly created by a particular social and political structure and historical context. *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* is set in the Celtic Tiger period of the 90's. The Celtic Tiger was the name given to the rapid economic growth that Ireland enjoyed from 1994 to 2007 after years of economic hardship, and that transformed Ireland enormously. However, not everybody benefited equally from the economic rise. Kieran Allen, for example, argued in 2000 that the Celtic Tiger brought dramatic levels of inequality and states that "part-time, temporary and short-term contract employment raised by 164.5 percent between 1988 and 1997" (2000:76), and there still remained high levels of unemployment. These high levels of unemployment together with the influence of the Irish Catholic Church perpetuated woman's primary domestic role. Indeed, the problems of women in Irish society are commonly originated by critics and theorist in the "deep structure" of "Irish myth" and in the fact that this myth has been recently institutionalized in the history of post-independence Ireland with the fall-out from the "collusive misogyny of the Catholic Church" and also the Valera's 1937 Constitution¹ with its attached role as a

¹ Article 41 in the 1937 Constitution of the Republic of Ireland is an example of the roles given to women: "In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved and the State shall, therefore, endeavor to insure mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labor to the neglect of their duties within the home" (Coakley and Gallagher 1992:79)

statement of the independence of the Irish State and its notorious conscription of women as wives and mothers modeled on the “Mother of God” and “Mother Ireland” strongly influenced by Catholic social thought (Dermot 1996:175; Coakley and Gallagher 1992:77).

Paula’s internalization of the roles as a woman, and later on as a wife, are shaped, in all these senses, by the male dominant culture and the patriarchal society constrained by the capitalist system and the Catholic Church. In this sense, her husband Charlo’s also fits perfectly in the idea of how is a man supposed to behave: he is the breadwinner, the strong one, the one that has the decision power, the one that protects the woman and takes her home and also the one respected by other men. However, Charlo is also a victim of the patriarchal mentality. His fate is also caused by the social context. Indeed, Doyle also opens a window onto Charlo’s life with Paula’s visit to his house before their marriage in chapter 15². The image she meets is that of the mother “making sandwiches” for the father, while Charlo and his brothers are “watching the telly.” “The three fuckin’ pigs,” Paula thinks (Doyle 1996:65). Charlo it is determined to follow this patriarchal familiar model where women exist exclusively thanks to men and to satisfy their needs. In this context, women’s identity is constructed when they enter into relation with men. We can perfectly see this in Paula since she is constantly enhancing the fact that when she met Charlo she began to be someone: “I was Charlo’s girl now and that made me respectable” (Doyle 1996:49). Interestingly, Paula grows up believing that she is not respectable since she is insulted by family and friends. In this sense, Doyle uses language to convey the hetero-patriarchal axes that organises Irish society:

You were a slut if you let fellas put their tongues in your mouth and you were a tight bitch if you didn’t – but you could also be a slut if you didn’t. One or the other, sometimes both. There was no escape; that was you. Before I was a proper teenager, before I knew anything about sex, before I’d even left primary school – I was a slut. My daddy said it, fellas said it, other girls said it, men in van and lorries said it. My mammy called me in off the street. (Doyle 1996:47)

² Doyle, Roddy. 1998. *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*. London: Vintage Books.

Obviously, being a “slut” is also a role attached to women merely by the fact that they are women and they are defined by their sexual practices: “since everyone calls her a “slut”, Paula comes to identify herself as such” (Mildorf 2005:109). Paula’s sexual practices and her relationships with men are the ones that build her identity. In this sense, she is just “the girl who wanked Martin Kavanagh” or “the woman who masturbated Charlo Spencer” (Doyle 1996:42-43). Her body becomes an object which may be abused, the object that makes her guilty:

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. (Doyle 1996:35)

There is something really sickening in this passage and it is the way Paula believes that it is something *natural* that her female body makes men behave the way they do. The passage sustains, hence, the way nature is superimposed over what it is essentially social and cultural and how this naturalization of cultural concepts and roles makes them unquestionable and irrevocable. In this sense, it is the Irish Catholic Church, and its belief that the woman was created for the man to be together, that shapes this superimposition of nature over culture. Society, then, shaped by the Catholic Church’s permanent effort to naturalize culture, does not offer Paula any alternative explanation to what happens to her. She cannot control being a “slut”, her body makes “men and boys do things” and even she smells herself to see “if it was that” (Doyle 1996:35).

Ironically and paradoxically, it is *nature* that saves Paula from Charlo. In a country where rates of unemployment are enormous, Paula, an uneducated working-class woman, has few possibilities to become an autonomous being. Consequently, she marries Charlo as a way to run away from her disastrous family situation and to acquire a respectable position in society by being a wife. Marriage is her option to build her own family, although family is not the path towards autonomy and freedom. As Karl Marx pointed out, family is a form of slavery and servitude, and he adds: “the first division of labour is between men and women for the propagation of children” (Engels 2008 (1884):126-138). When Paula gets pregnant for the first time is when she creates the ultimate bond between herself and Charlo: “it is through the act of child-breeding

that the first appearance of property arises with the family. This is when wife and child become the slaves of the husband” (White 2001:135). However, it is this *natural* bond the one that makes Paula throw Charlo out. When Charlo is about to hurt Nicola, her daughter, Paula grabs a frying pan and hits him. Something in Paula’s mind has changed: “I don’t know what happened to me—the Bionic Woman—he was gone. It was so easy” (Doyle 1996:213). She is able to stop the patriarchal abuse when she becomes a protective mother.

A Society that Watches Women Walking into Doors

There is a motif in Paula’s narrative and it is her continuous but silenced cry for help. Her incessant and repeated “Ask me”. The title itself reveals the way couple-related abuse is not given in isolation but corresponds to the entire society who denies the problem. Paula Spencer is the woman who walked into doors since people around her is able to deny the reality and believe the lie. Indeed, the title is only mentioned when she recalls her experiences with the doctors that treated her at casualty, with her family and with the people in the street:

I didn’t exist. I was a ghost. I walked around in emptiness. 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. No one looked; eyes stared everywhere else. I could walk down the street, I could sit in the church mass, [...] But they couldn’t see me. The woman who wasn’t there. The woman who has nothing wrong with her. The woman who was fine. The woman who walked into doors. (Doyle 1991:186-187)

This passage represents the way in which society through negation and silence becomes accomplice of Paula’s tragedy. Doyle portrays a superficial society and culture whose complacent middle-class not only denies poverty, alcoholism and spousal abuse but also makes her responsible for everything. A stream of voices are always following her and making her guilty: “*Had you had a drink Mrs. Spencer?*” “*What made him do that, Paula?*” “*Did you say something to him, Paula?*”” “*Why did you marry him then, Paula?*” (Doyle 1996:171) and even ten years after when Doyle resurrects Paula in

Paula Spencer, her daughter Leanne also blames her mother for everything his father did to them:

- I never hit you. When did I ever hit you?
- He did.
- He hit us all.
- Yeah well, you fuckin' married him.

Paula's fault. (Doyle 2006: 71)

Paula's relationship with her mother is also striking in this sense. Her mother is also a battered wife, although Mr. O'Leary never hits her, he abuses her emotionally and psychologically. Paula's belief of how a marriage should be is modelled by her parents' relationship and the way her parents build her identity. There is a crucial image in which Paula's identity is constructed through her mother's eyes. Paula remembers it as one of the only bad things from her childhood:

It was after my bath on Saturday night; I was standing on the towel, shaking, pretending I was cold. Mammy was rinsing Denise's hair. I started to dry myself. I saw Mammy looking at me, at my chest. Then at me, my face. I couldn't understand her expression. I thought she was going to lose her temper. She looked away when she saw me looking back at her. Then she part that killed me: she was blushing. (...)

I'll never forget it, the look on my mammy's face. It left me feeling like I'd done something terrible to her; I'd hurt her badly and I didn't know how, just that I'd done it (Doyle 1996:15-16).

The way her mother looks at her is the same way society does it: judging, deciding. Her identity is built up by the way others look at her. Paula is "an extraordinary set of characters": the very young Paula of the happy memories, the teenager Paula who starts being sexually active and falls in love with the young Charlo, the adult Paula who is married, alcoholic and abused and finally, the current Paula who is "trying to make sense of all her old selves" (White 2001:120). Paula's continuous attempt to come to terms with her old selves, however, is not do it in isolation. While Paula tries to

remember her childhood relationship with her father positively, Carmel, who is more down-to-earth, remembers him negatively. Self-delusion, denial and silence become, in this sense, some of Charlo's oppressive tools:

- Put his woman to bed the minute you get home, Mister Spencer, and bring her up a cup of tea.
- Yes, doctor.

The two of them, looking after me. Laughing at me. The woman who walked into doors. They didn't wink at each other because they didn't have to.

They were all the same; they didn't want to know. They'd never ask. Here's a prescription; now fuck off (Doyle 1996: 190)

This passage clearly represents how indifference and silence operates. Paula as a consequence of Charlo's manipulation over her is not able to explain her problem. Consequently, the only way she can be saved is by other people getting involved in her life and addressing directly what is happening. Silence is, in this sense "a symbol of oppression, while liberation is speaking out, making contact" (Mildorf 2005:117). Paula's experiences are, in this context of collective silence, thus, not heard and she has to fight alone her own struggle. It is important to emphasize the fact that she is not only socially alone but also culturally alone. Although Doyle shows cultural references and allusions of Irish modernity and how all they surround Paula's narrative — songs, films and TV programs — they do not help Paula to understand what is happening to her. We all need mirrors, we need somewhere to look at and see ourselves. Paula, though, has nowhere to look for herself. She watches the television but she and other like her are not there.

Paula is a production of her society: the school, her family, her class, and ultimately, the patriarchal culture that circulates around her life. This society is the one that denies giving her the help she needs and, consequently, allow the problem to continue:

They could smell the drink. *Aah*. They could see the bruises. *Aah, now*. They could see the bumps. *Ah now, God love her*. Their noses led them but their eyes would't. My mother looked and saw nothing. My father saw nothing... My brothers saw

nothings... Denise saw nothing — at first. (Carmel was living in England.) The woman who kept walking into doors (Doyle 1996:187).

At some point, this blind society believes that it is Paula the one that has to resolve her problem. This is why they ask her the reasons why she married Charlo and stayed with him for so long. There is an answer in the novel. We do know the reasons why Paula married Charlo and why she stayed with him for seventeen years. The reason is that she was in love with him.

Patriarchy and Working-Class Women in Love

Most critics and theorist agree that *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* is Roddy Doyle's most convincing novel. The narrative is written in the form of a stream of consciousness monologue — evoking Joyce's Mary Bloom's monologue in *Ulysses*— and is used together with a series of back-and-forth in time and a widely used informal spoken dialogue that creates a sense of oral narrative. This sense of oral narrative is the one that makes Paula, an uneducated working-class woman, plausible. Her retrospective narrative is her attempt to understand her relationship with Charlo. In this reconstruction of her past we can see how patriarchy works but also how love is created: the attractiveness of Charlo, what Charlo said to her, the clothes they wore, the smells, the flirting. However, the answers she seeks are not to be found in just one aspect of her life but are the result of all the components of her past. In her earlier memories, Paula recalls how her bother tried to abuse her when she was fourteen:

My brother, Roger, called me a slut when I wouldn't let him feel me. I was fourteen; he was twelve. It was dark, in the kitchen. I thought it was a joke at first; he was my little brother. [...] He put me his hand up my skirt. I waited for him to tickle me. But it didn't happen. He was grabbing me. I thumped him. (Doyle 1996:47)

Although she is not finally abused by her brother, this passage shows the origin of Paula's inability to differentiate *love* and *pain*. In this regard, we can begin to

understand why Paula is from the beginning until the end of the novel in love with Charlo. Although he batters her, the abuse is seen by Paula as a proof of love. Love is then presented as self-delusion and as Charlo's oppressive tool to control her mind:

He hit me. He sent me across the kitchen and I hit the sink and fell. I felt nothing, only shock. A spinning in my head. [...] Then he came down to me [...] His eyes were going over my face, every inch, every mark. He was worried. He was shocked and worried. He loves me again. (Doyle 1991:175)

“I can't separate the two things, the love and the beatings. [...] I can't make two Charlos. I can't separate him into the good and the bad” (Doyle 1996:193)

One of the most decisive factors to determine the continuity of a relationship is when violence appears in an already created affective relationship based on feelings of love and maintained over shared moments and projects (Lorente Acosta 2009: 183). Charlo, in this sense, uses love to rename some situations of abuse — “You fell”, “You walked into the door” — confusing Paula:

I knew nothing for a while, where I was, how come I was on the floor. Then I saw Charlo's feet, then his legs, making a triangle with the floor. He seemed way up over me. (...) Then he came down to meet me. His face, his eyes went all over my face, looking, searching. Looking for marks, looking for blood. He was worried. He turned my head and looked. His face was full of worry and love. He skipped my eyes.

- You fell, he said (Doyle 1996:5)

Paula's interpretation of Charlo's search for injuries as a sign of love clearly exemplifies how love operates in spousal abuse. Renaming, in this sense, is Charlo's way of refusing to assume responsibility for what he has done and ensure that his crime is not going to be detected (Mildorf 2005:115). Charlo's behaviour fits perfectly in what Lorente Acosta describes as the aggressor common behaviour: “the aggressor always assures that he has the necessary arguments and the convenient justifications to not to face with the responsibility of having abused his wife” (Lorente Acosta 2009:155).

Doyle's aim, however, is not victimizing Paula, and hence, battered women, as other 20th century Irish novels do —such as Edna O'Brien's novels where women are victimized by their relationship with men—. Paula survives and, as we can see in *Paula Spencer*, starts again, showing that her identity does not belong to any man but only to herself. In *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, hence, Doyle achieves to build a particular voice that comes to represent a silenced collective experience. Doyle through his narrative techniques integrates the representation of an entire society and culture that has shaped our character's life and achieves to portray a woman that fits perfectly in what she represents: a gender and a class.

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