The Fiction of Rody Doyle

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Roddy Doyle is quite conceivably the most successful contemporary novelist of his generation. Recently Gerry Smyth, in a study on "the New Irish Fiction"[1] that groans under its prodigious weight of colonial and de-colonial theorising, assigned Doyle the central role within the context of the fiction produced in Ireland during the last two decades. "Roddy Doyle", Smyth remarks, is "one of the key modern Irish novelists" (p. 65). Perhaps that is correct. The question, though, is: key to what? "Doyle's work is given a central place here", Smyth suggests as if in answer to our question, "not on grounds of artistic value, commercial success or thematic typicality, although it could be argued that he rates highly on all three of these criteria" (p. 65). One must most energetically beg to differ with respect to the last part of this sentence.

But let us consider some of Smyth's further arguments. Doyle's excellence, we are told, partly resides in matters thematic.

...if there has been one overriding theme in Doyle's work to date it is the exploration of the relations between individuals and the collectives in which they find themselves, especially that collective known as the family. (p. 66)

But has not "the exploration of the relations between individuals and the collectives in which they find themselves" been the overriding theme of the majority of novels since the tradition of narrative prose texts evolved? So what should be so special about Doyle's books?

His representation of life as experienced by the Rabittes [sic], the Clarkes and the Spencers offers a range of perspectives on the ideology of the family as it operates in modern Ireland, and the serious challenges that were offered to that ideology as the 1980s slipped into the 1990s. (p. 66)

If that is true, then Smyth has regrettably failed to add that, judging on the strength(s) - or rather weakness(es) - of the "Barrytown Trilogy", that representation has resulted in pretty small beer. Does Smyth seriously want to make anyone believe that a novel about the introduction of soul music into Irish life has anything noteworthy to say about "the ideology of the family as it operates in modern Ireland"?

As for Doyle's excellence in terms of narrative technique, Smyth notes:

> Since the start of his career, his work has been geared more towards 'showing' than 'telling', letting characters speak for themselves as far as possible. (p. 67)

Smyth goes on to make much of Doyle's reliance - almost exclusive reliance, one feels prompted to add - on the scenic method to the detriment of the summary, or descriptive, method, arguing that as a result of "highly subtle effects through suggestion and narrative restraint" (p. 67), semantic gaps are left in what is told, gaps which the reader is called upon to fill in, so that the "reader must become an active part of the meaning-making process" (p. 67). This is a rum argument. Every literary text worth its salt leaves gaps in what it proffers; this is a constituent characteristic of literary texts, as, in particular, the findings of reception theory have taught us. Without active reader participation, no literary work of art can ever come to life. All art is constituted in, and through, a communicative act between reader/perceiver/listener and text/painting/piece of music. As concerns Doyle's preference for 'showing', or the scenic method, for relying on dialogue instead of description, what Smyth considers a strength of Doyle's art may equally well be singled out as a cardinal shortcoming. There is evidence in Doyle's first four novels, up to *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, that the author favoured the scenic method because he could not have been good at description even if someone had held a gun to his head. Which is to say, it is highly dubious whether Doyle elected to write in this manner, even though he had it in him to write in a different style, for purposes of what Russian formalists would have termed 'making it new, or different'. Dialogue-based texts are no novelty, and more is the pity, as the examples of Ivy Compton-Burnett, Henry Green and others show. But Dame Ivy had something profound to communicate through this technique. Doyle, on the other hand, especially in the Barrytown trilogy, may have been aiming at transcending certain stereotypes, but he set up new ones that have greatly appealed to an undiscerning mass readership. This is the reason for Doyle's colossal commercial success: the novels are easy to read, easy to understand and, *pace* Smyth, they do not require sophisticated reader participation.

Doyle himself has remarked in a recent interview that

> inevitably people pick up my novels with all their dialogue and think, 'Oh, thinly disguised plays', which is just ignorance really. They're not aware of the difference in writing a novel and a play, they think that somehow because a novel has a lot of dialogue it's not really a novel.[2]

Well, actually, it is not quite that. Doyle is rather obviously begging the question here by accusing his critics of ignorance instead of making clear what aims he tried to achieve by means of this concentration on dialogue.

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Doyle was born in 1958 and grew up in the Kilbarrack area of Dublin, the inspiration for his "Barrytown" settings. He was educated at a National School in Raheny, at St. Fintan's Christian Brothers school in Sutton, Co. Dublin, and at UCD before working in Kilbarrack as a teacher from 1979 until 1993. His literary career began in 1987, when he and a friend formed a small press, King Farouk, to publish *The Commitments*, which was later picked up by a London publisher. The novel was turned into a most successful film by director Alan Parker in 1991, with Doyle writing the screenplay. Doyle's second novel, *The Snapper*, was also turned into a film, directed by Stephen Frears, and it also won critical acclaim. The third piece in the "Barrytown Trilogy", The Van, was short-listed for the Booker Prize and also filmed. In 1993, Doyle won the prestigious Booker Prize for *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*.

Doyle has also written plays. His first one, *Brownbread* (which is rhyming slang for 'dead'), was first staged at the SFX Centre, Dublin, in September 1987. In it, three nineteen-year-old Dubliners kidnap an Irish bishop because "there was nothin' on the telly". The play thrives on quick-witted dialogue and coarse humour, as it pokes fun at modern Dublin sensibilities. In 1990 his second play, *War*, was performed at the SFX Centre. The setting is a pub, and the action features a quiz contest. Again the piece offers witty dialogue and outrageous humour, but it is not as convincing as *Brownbread*. His four-part play for television, *Family*, was screened in 1994. It challenged sentimental stereotypes by focusing on the emotional abuse of children by their violent fathers.

The "Barrytown Trilogy" has earned Doyle fulsome praise for his abrasive picture of contemporary Dublin.[3] If that praise is justified one must not forget to point out that in *The Commitments*, this picture is rather a microscopically small one. The novel treats of how the pop group of the title, under the leadership of Jimmy Rabbitte Jr., an ambitious young man, and the tutelage of the trumpet-player Joey 'The Lips' Fagan, who claims to have played with the likes of James Brown, Otis Redding and Sam Cooke, want to bring soul music to Dublin. According to Jimmy Jr., the music of black America is also the music of working-class Dublin. The book has been highly commended for "the candid dialogue and the author's ability to make the music lively even when all the reader has to rely on are the printed lyrics".[4] A friend recommended *The Commitments* to me after the book had been re-issued by Heinemann in 1988, particularly, it turned out, because of his acquaintance with the author. I began reading it, but gave up, I have to admit, halfway through, being firmly convinced that this represented a case of juvenile aberration. (Doyle's own characters would employ a four-letter word here.) The novel, I felt, if *The Commitments* was a novel at all, could not be taken seriously. To my shame, I still see no reason to revise my opinion. A Dublin publisher recently told me of a similar experience. He had bought himself a copy of *The Commitments*, but he had sent it windmilling over his shoulder at somewhere around page twenty. The copy was then picked up by his fifteen-year-old son, who just loved what it offered him.

Like its predecessor consisting mostly of dialogue, *The Snapper* focuses on Jimmy's twenty-year-old sister, Sharon, who, as a result of her having one night in an utterly drunken state engaged in priapic grappling with a married neighbour, is expecting a baby. The Rabbitte family, especially Jimmy Rabbitte Sr., stalwartly stand by Sharon and defend her against any invidious rumour during her pregnancy, as all await the arrival of baby Gina (in Irish slang "the snapper").[5]

In *The Van*, Jimmy Rabbitte Sr. and his friend 'Bimbo', both men having "become redundant" at work (that is: they were fired), decide to invest in a "Chipper van", called "Bimbo's Burger". The time is the summer of 1990, and all of Ireland is fanatical about the Italia '90 World Cup, which the Republic of Ireland team has qualified for. Reasoning that during the event no Irish person will have time to cook dinner, Jimmy and Bimbo expect to make oceans of money when the hungry soccer fans leave the pubs at closing time. But the business turns out a sorry failure. The partners have no business acumen. Further problems arise because Bimbo owns the van and Bimbo's wife wants to control the business. Eventually, a health inspector closes down "Bimbo's Burger", and after a fistfight with Jimmy Sr., on whom he puts the blame for the shutdown, Bimbo drives the van into the Irish Sea. In spite of everything, though, Jimmy Sr. and Bimbo remain the best of friends.

It is certainly true that, in a sense, *The Van* is the most complete work in the "Barrytown Trilogy", and it is also correct to assert that the novel portrays a "darker side of middle-class Dublin [are the Rabbittes really middle-class?] - being on the dole, sorting out family problems, and the struggle to feel needed".[6] The question, however, is whether what Doyle chooses to show can qualify as a serious-minded analysis of contemporary life in Dublin, especially because the social problems engaged with are almost completely drowned by "plenty of laughs"[7] and the tone of the portrayal is too facetious and the picture of Dublin conveyed is rather fatuous. Again Doyle's method relies too heavily on dialogue couched in the idiom of the Dublin working-class and prodigiously peppered with scatological expressions. Quite a few reviewers and critics have raved about what they see as the vitality and freshness of Doyle's style, and they have praised the great variety of socio-economic phenomena highlighted by the author in conjuring up his characters' lives. But most of this is just silly hype. On the strength of the trilogy, it can justifiably be said that the thematic interest of Doyle's oeuvre is quite shallow.

Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha signalled a change in approach that has come to full fruition in *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*: narrative description began to take up more space and the tone of the books started to become darker and darker. Most notably, the social abuses, defects and miseries he now depicted are incomparably more compelling.

The events in *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* are rendered from the perspective of ten-year-old Patrick (Paddy) Clarke, who, together with the members of his family, among them his brother Francis ("Sinbad"), lives in Barrytown. Paddy and his friends like to fool around on building sites, lighting fires and bedaubing walls. They mess about in the barn of a farm and jump into the sea. The older boys take it out on Paddy, and Paddy retaliates by taking it out on Sinbad. At school, Paddy claims that one of the men who signed the Irish Proclamation of Independence, one Thomas J. Clarke, was his grandfather. But Thomas J. Clarke, as the teacher points out, was executed by the British on 3 May 1916. A headline in a newspaper makes Paddy believe that World War III is imminent. So he discusses with his father the question of whether there will also be war in Ireland. In a letter to Santa Claus he asks for a pair of Adidas soccer boots. In short - Paddy reports about his everyday experiences; his two friends, Liam and Aidan, whose mother died prematurely and whose father howls like a dog at nights in the garden from grief; incidents at school; games of cowboys-and-Indians; his enthusiasm for Father Damien, a missionary who devoted his life to the lepers; his love of books; visits to the cinema; the purchase of a car. And now and then Paddy, more in passing as it were, notices that his parents have rows and shout at each other.

A sewerage system is installed and Paddy gambols in the ditches. He and the other boys play soccer matches and watch the final of the European Cup on television; they discuss the matter of what fish fingers are made from, play with a dog and build a wigwam. Paddy is given a bicycle and learns how to ride it. He becomes a member of a soccer team, Barrytown United, and he locks Sinbad in a suitcase. One of his school mates drowns and the whole school attend the funeral. Paddy and his friends watch a butcher doing his work. Finally, Paddy wins a medal in a race.

Yet, despite all the distractions that life has in store for him, Paddy is compelled to realise that things at home are changing for the worse. One morning, he finds the breakfast table in a mess. The dishes from the supper of the night before have not been cleared away. His mother offers the explanation that she did not have the time. But Paddy knows the real reason to have been a row between his parents. The rows become more frequent. Eventually, the father hits the mother. From that point onwards, Paddy tries to stay with his mother as much as possible, so as to prevent his father from maltreating his wife once more. Paddy simply cannot understand his parents' behaviour. "I loved him. He was my da. It didn't make sense. She was my ma."[8] Again and again, the parents have fights and Paddy regards it as his duty to put an end to the fights or to prevent them in the first place. Then one morning, the mother does not get up at all; she stays in bed for two solid days. Paddy does not know whether she is ill or whether her behaviour is the consequence of a violent quarrel. He is utterly confused. In the end, the parents fight incessantly, and Paddy and Sinbad can hear the infuriated voices in their bedroom. He tries to stay awake whole nights, believing that in that way he will be able to forestall the fighting. At school he falls asleep from overtiredness. One night, the father returns home drunk. But the parents of some of his friends likewise have rows, and as a result they move from the area. Paddy senses that his family will be the next to decamp. He thinks of running away, but he stays on, knowing that he is helpless. "Why did people not like each other?" (p. 257), he asks himself. He has a fight with his best friend and after that is ostracised by all the other boys. In the end, the father moves out after another terrible row, and the kids in the street start shouting:

> \- Paddy Clarke -
> Paddy Clarke -
> Has no da.
> Ha ha ha! (p. 281)

Doyle shows how ten-year-old Paddy tries to explore the reality of his existence and make himself at home in it with almost febrile curiosity and a carefree thirst for action. Inevitably, he also comes face to face with the dark, seamy sides of life, or rather the kind of life he is forced to lead in the particular social milieu he grows up in, and Paddy reacts to this with helplessness and a sense of pain and loss. The recreation of Paddy's childhood, regarded by some as "superb",[9] gives the impression of being quite random and repetitive. That randomness and repetitiveness might well be in accordance with Paddy's way of gaining experience. After all, it is he himself who is telling the tale. And yet there is also Henry James's view, as expressed in the "Preface" of *The Spoils of Poynton*, according to which life is all inclusion and confusion and art is all discrimination and selection.[10]

As in the "Barrytown Trilogy", especially in The Van, the family is again the focus of attention. If we saw the institution coming under pressure in the preceding novel, in *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* we see it cracking and falling apart. Gerry Smyth has argued:

> The dysfunctional family is a symptom of an increasingly disjointed society, for the confusion Paddy feels with the onset of his parents' break-up is anticipated by the confusion already confronting him at the social and cultural levels.[11]

The remark may be to the point. No doubt, the Clarkes are a dysfunctional family; but it remains arguable whether Doyle has succeeded in sufficiently characterising, and giving shape to, that "increasingly disjointed society". Paddy is like most ten-year-olds - confused at the social and cultural levels. Clearly Doyle's attention to the details of a young boy's life is impressive. Without resorting to sentimentality, he re-creates the honest thoughts of Paddy, who may be slightly more sensitive and aware than most children of his age. Doyle also manages to steer clear of spoiling the narrative with "witty adult observations".[12] All this is clearly in favour of the book. Yet, the social and societal factors responsible for the decline of the family unit in the Ireland of the late '60s are allowed to remain too much in the shadow. They are at best implied, but that is rather inadequate for a novel with socio-critical pretensions.

Perhaps the most appropriate explication one can offer of Paddy's story is to suggest that Paddy's experience moves from sufficiency to inadequacy. At the start, Paddy is suffused by feelings of possession and belonging. "We owned Barrytown, the whole lot of it. It went on forever." These gradually give way to a sense of displacement and isolation. As Gerry Smyth notes,

> If Barrytown, like Ireland, was a country, then like Ireland in the 1960s it was soon to have the myth of national possession and self-sufficiency shattered. The fields and cows disappear, newer and bigger gangs take over, and Paddy finds himself boycotted by his former friends because of the social stigma attached to the break-up of the family.[13]

Most critics are agreed that *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* is Doyle's most convincing novel to date. The narrative is in the form of a heart-rending, a deeply agonising monologue. It is not a soliloquy because Paula Spencer is trying to communicate with someone about her miserable existence. Doyle tries to show, through Paula's words and point of view, the contradictions thrown up by the acts of violence, the guilt, self-hatred and victimisation which she has to suffer in addition to her husband physical assaults.[14]

Paula notes of herself: "I'm a sucker for romance".[15] Her life with Charlo Spencer may have begun as a romance, but it certainly did not end as such. This is what happened to Paula when she first met her future husband:

> I swooned the first time I saw Charlo. I actually did. I didn't faint or fall on the floor but my legs went rubbery on me and I giggled. I suddenly knew that I had lungs because they were empty and collapsing.
> Charlo Spencer. (p. 3)

They danced, and Paula comments: "I put my head on his shoulder. He had me" (p. 4). He was "the King" for her, and that made her someone. "Not a Queen or a Princess, just someone. It was a start. It filled me" (p. 54). But now Charlo is dead. A year after Paula threw him out of the house, he was shot by the Gardi when he tried to make his get-away during an abortive attempt to extort money from a bank manager. Charlo was holding the man's wife hostage in their house. Suddenly he saw Special Branch men closing in on the area and he lost his cool and killed the woman. He ran off to the stolen car and climbed inside. Then he remembered that he was incapable of driving a motor car, never having possessed a car himself or ever had any driving lessons. He was shot while he was trying to get out of the vehicle. Before Paula met him, Charlo had been in prison for robbery. But he was a builder; he had a job. Paula is going over her memories in order to come to terms with her plight.

In her recollection, she tries to convince herself that she had a happy childhood and a loving, caring father, both of which her sister Carmel denies (cf. for instance p. 11). Carmel herself got married when she was seventeen. She would have married anyone just to get out of the house (cf. p. 47). The entire misery probably began as early as Paula's childhood, despite her insisting upon the following:

> Once upon a time my life had been good. My parents had loved me. The house was full of laughter. I'd run to school every morning. (p. 56)

Wishful thinking, more likely than not. For reality would seem to have been quite different. There was, for instance, the fact that where Paula grew up young girls were easily called sluts, whether they liked it or not.

> Where I grew up [...] you were a slut or a tight bitch, one or the other, if you were a girl - and usually before you were thirteen. You didn't have to do anything to be a slut. If you were good-looking; if you grew up fast. If you had a sexy walk; if you had clean hair; if you had dirty hair. [...] Anything could get you called a slut. My father called me a slut the first time I put on mascara. (pp. 45f.)

Paula was a slut before she was a proper teenager, before she knew anything about sex, before she even left primary school. "My father said it, fellas said it, other girls said it, men in vans and lorries said it" (p. 47). The first time she went with a fellow was when she was only eleven. A long string of other fellows followed. Still she insists: "It was great then, that year or two,

from ten to eleven or so. It was all fun" (p. 82). Yet, she is clear-eyed enough to add: "But it got complicated after that, and nasty".

There was also no happy running to school. School was a nightmare. The teachers, if they were not perverts, were either stupid or bored or women, and the only good thing about the women teachers was that they did not mess around with Paula and her fellow-pupils. School made her rough; she was not that way before she started there. "Now I had to act rough and think dirty. I had to fight. I had to be hard" (p. 35). It makes little difference that she adds: "maybe it all happens anyway, when you're growing up, no matter where you are". Most probably things of that nature do not happen "no matter where you are", but most likely they occur in the second lowest class, 1.6, where Paula ended up, eventually "wanking a good-looking thick in the back of the classroom" (p. 41).

A good while later (notably enough there is no mention of her ever having worked), she was swept off her feet by Charlo. Charlo and Paula got engaged not least in order to spite Paula's father, who was against the liaison, hating Charlo and calling him a waster, a criminal. Does one dare add: who would blame him? No matter, Paula contends that after their wedding they were happy, for a while. She could see a smile on Charlo's face that said: I love you and I want to rip your clothes off. "A smile that said We're going to live happily ever after. He believed it. I believed it" (p. 134). Their honeymoon in Courtown was a great success. She can still vividly and lovingly remember details of their mutual experiences in Mrs Doyle's guest-house (cf. p. 154), and plenty of sex, though little tenderness. At one point, she expressly states: "We were very, very happy" (p. 167).

Yet things started to go downhill not long after the honeymoon. And then he started to hit her. She had said that there was a smell on his breath, and "whack" was the answer. She went to a doctor: whack again. He followed her. "There's nothing wrong with you; what's your problem? Whack. And I loved him when he didn't do it; I loved him with all my heart. He was so kind. He just lost his temper, sometimes" (p. 158). In her retelling of her abuse, she always wavers between criticism of her husband and self-accusation, between self-assertion and subjugation. When it happened, she had told him: "- Make your own fuckin' tea" (p. 169). More often than not, she feels that it was all her own fault:

> But sometimes I can't help thinking that I could have avoided it, I could have been cleverer. I could have made that fuckin' tea. [...] it wouldn't have killed me. He'd had his moods before. I'd seen them. I recognised them. I could have seen it coming. Instead, I provoked him. And now, here I am.
> - Make your own fuckin' tea. (p. 169)

She goes even further to note in parenthesis:

> (I keep blaming myself. After all the years and broken bones and teeth and torture I still keep on blaming myself. I can't help it. What if? What if? He wouldn't have hit me if I hadn't...[...] (p. 170)

Charlo kicked Paula up the stairs and he kicked her down the stairs. He burned her, scalded her, threatened her, thumped her, raped her for seventeen years. She became the woman who walked into doors, a euphemism for a battered wife. And all these seventeen years she was craving attention, interest, understanding and compassion. But no one seemed to care. "Ask me ask me ask me", she repeatedly pleads (for instance p. 187). It is a desperate cry for help. "Broken nose, loose teeth, cracked ribs. Ask me" (187). Yet, all that people did - the doctors, the neighbours, even her own mother and father - was ignore her, look through instead of at her:

> I could walk through crowds. I could see all these people but they didn't see me. They could see the hand that held out the money. They could see the hand that held open the door. [...] They could see the mouth that spoke the words. [...] But they couldn't see me. The woman who wasn't there. The woman who had nothing wrong with her. The woman who was fine. The woman who walked into doors. (p. 187)

She goes on to remark:

> My mother looked and saw nothing. My father saw nothing, and he loved what he didn't see. My brothers saw nothing. His mother saw nothing. [...] The woman who kept walking into doors. (p. 187)

But when did it all start? At one point Paula says that Charlo started beating her up after he had lost his job (cf. p. 192). But she then reasons:

> I could rest if I believed that; I could rest. But I keep on thinking and I'll never come to a tidy ending. [...] Why did he do it? No real answers come, no big Aha. (p. 192)

It is all such a frightful mess, such terrible confusion.

> He loved me and he beat me. I loved him and I took it. It's as simple as that, and as stupid and complicated. It's terrible. (p. 192)

Yet, on another occasion she suggests that Charlo hated her for being pregnant, for not being his little Paula any more - "and he drew his fist back and hit me" (p. 163). To escape her misery, she flees into daydreams featuring the likes of Robert Redford or Bruce Willis (p. 58) or imaginary men - a barman, a plumber or an electrician (p. 100): "I ran away in my dreams" (p. 210). Of course, she also withdraws into alcoholism. She started to drink because drink helped; drink calmed her down; drink gave her something to search for and do (cf. p. 212). It was as simple and as complex as that. One of her sons died, "cot death" (p. 84), or so she imagined, once when she was absolutely plastered, and she swore never to drink again. But she could not give up the booze:

> I am an alcoholic. I've never admitted it to anyone. (No one would want to know.) I've never done anything about it; I've never tried to stop. I think I could if I really wanted to, if I was ready. (p. 88)

But she has not been ready yet, not even now after Charlo's death while she is putting her plight into words. The picture she conveys of herself now is this:

> She'll be thirty-nine in two months' time. Give her a mirror, and some make-up and a half-hour, and she'll make herself look thirty. See her when she's getting out of bed and she'll look fifty. She's an office-cleaner; she gets two-fifty an hour. She does houses as well in the mornings. [...] She has four children. She is a widow. She is an alcoholic. She has holes in her heart that never stop killing her. (p. 43)

She is still on the bottle. Sometimes she simply has to get out, cannot stand it any longer - the dirt, the emptiness, the stuffing coming out of the furniture, and nothing in the fridge. "I can't cope. The urge. The bottle. I have to get out" (p. 103). Hers is a terribly miserable existence. At times, she would like to see someone worse off than herself; but she can only get comfort from the telly, the reports from the Third World on the News or pictures from Sarajevo. "[...] but they all seemed to have good warm clothes" (p. 10), she notes. Her own children never had such clothes.

The point about Paula is that in the end, after seventeen years of walking into doors, she is still capable of mustering enough strength to survive: she can still pick herself up.

> I never gave up.
> I'm here.
> I picked myself up. I washed the blood off my face. I put on the kettle. (p. 205)

As one critic has suggested, at the end of the book Paula is half in and half out of the door, an image that represents the threshold between self-control and subjection.[16] She has reclaimed her role as mother and homemaker, even though she may still depend on alcohol to carry on. "I could never get past the door" (p. 209), she writes. But she finally had the will and the power to hit Charlo over the head with a pan and throw him out of the house. "It was a great feeling. I'd done something good" (p. 226). This, significantly, is the last line of her searching account.

Paula's story is of course not structured in the chronological fashion of the present analysis of the battered woman's life. It rather hopscotches about among Paula's recollections and conveys the impression of having been penned in random fashion, just in the way in which her memories assail her. The only conspicuous features that seem to effect a rudimentary sort of compositional patterning are certain recurrent passages which appear to treat of traumatic key experiences. Here are two such passages. The first describes the moment when Paula found herself on the floor after having been hit by Charlo, presumably the first time he did so:

> 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. Miles up. I had to bend back to see him. [etc.] (pp. 5 & 175)

The second one concerns the fact that the doctor she went to see, hoping to get help from him and be able to express her devastating grief, did not care in the least:

> The doctor never looked at me. He studied parts of me but he never saw all of me. He never looked at my

eyes. Drink, he said to himself. I could see his nose moving, taking in the smell, deciding. (pp. 23, 164, 186)

The apparent randomness of the design shows that what Paula has put to paper are memories. She herself states:

> That's the thing about memories. I can't pick and choose them. I can't pretend. [...] I can never settle into a nice memory, lie back and smile. (p. 197)

A little further on, she appropriately notes:

> It's all a mess - there's no order or sequence. I have dates, a beginning and an end, but the years in between won't fall into place. (p. 203)

It is an excellent way of characterising Paula's approach and of supplying a *raison d'être* for the book's structure.

The Woman Who Walked Into Doors is meant to be Paula's work. She has written it, thereby proving that she is capable of exercising control. We find her in a position where she is able to tell her story. That she is responsible for the account becomes apparent through a number of meta-discursive comments. Thus at one point she declares in parenthesis: "(It kills me writing that and reading it - *I could never afford good shoes for my kids.* I don't put all the blame on him either.)" (p. 10). Gerry Smyth sees the effect of introducing the meta-discursive comments as follows:

> I would suggest that Doyle's introduction of the metadiscursive aspects [...] is a way of defamiliarising the narrative, not in order to alienate the reader from Paula's plight, but rather to highlight the issues of authority and responsibility which are the actual themes of the novel. In effect, the text is asking the reader a series of questions. Can language describe violence? How does literature relate to the 'real'? Can a person tell the story of his or her own life? How reliant are notions of identity and character on textual devices? Can a man tell a woman's story? It is indicative of Doyle's skill that when he employs formal defamiliarising techniques [...] the effect is to heighten rather than mitigate the message of the novel.[17]

There are rather a lot of questions here that the meta-discursive statements allegedly ask, and while some of them do make some sense ("How does literature relate to the 'real'?") others are quite silly ("Can a man tell a woman's story?"). Nor do the remarks really defamiliarise the story. They merely throw into relief the fact that Paula is in authority; she is the implied authoress - a woman who has acquired the skill to write impressive passages such as this:

> I walked to the end of the cul-de-sac. There were cars in front of most of the houses. People in; someone was looking - there had to be somebody. Looking at a wet woman in her daughter's jacket. There was a small park at the end of the road and another road at the other end of it, to the left. That must have been where they'd parked their car, Charlo and Richie Massey. I wasn't going to go over there. (Does blood leave a stain on cement?) In front of me, to the right, over a bunch of bluey-green trees, there was a beautiful house, like a castle. A really beautiful thing with two round roofs shaped like cones. And windows in them. A gorgeous-looking place. People lived in that. There was a weather cock on top of the highest roof. It wasn't moving. I don't think I'd ever seen a weather cock before, or noticed one. Arrows pointing four ways. People lived in there, had bedrooms in that roof. The trees in the park were in round groups. They looked old but the place seemed brand new. No cracks in the paths, no dog dirt. I looked over at where I thought Richie Massey had parked the car. I could feel nothing. [etc.] (pp. 145f.)

The meta-discursive statements provide comments on Paula's very own procedure, without aspiring to the status of postmodernist metafictional claptrap. Instead, these comments lead to the cardinal question of what Paula is trying to achieve by committing her experiences to paper. Once again, Paula herself supplies the answer:

> (I'm not. What Carmel says. Rewriting history. I'm doing the opposite. I want to know the truth, not make it up. [...]) (p. 57)

Her writing constitutes a sense-making process. It is an effort to get at the truth, to come to grips with her own life. Repeatedly, she admonishes herself to adhere to "Facts" (cf. for instance p. 104). Or she notes:

> I'm messing around here. Making things up; a story. I'm beginning to enjoy it. Hair *rips*. Why don't I say He pulled my hair? *Someone is crying. Someone is vomiting.* I cried, I fuckin' well vomited. [...] 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. (pp. 184f.)

Her entire account represents an utterly honest attempt to understand her life, to face the truth and not seek consolation in alcohol. By the same token, she wants to understand why after seventeen years of abuse she still loves Charlo:

> I loved him when I was throwing him out. I loved him when Gerard [the Garda who came to tell her of Charlo's death] rang the bell. I love him now. (p. 24)

Paula may still, as she admits, occasionally need a drink, but the fact that we find her capable of writing her story down and not straying from the facts marks another decisive step in her efforts to become the woman who can walk past the door.

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5. Cf. Bernard Share, *Slanguage - a dictionary of Irish slang*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1997, s.v. 'Snapper', p. 264.
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12. "Roddy Doyle" entry, p. 378.
13. G. Smyth, p. 80.
14. Cf. G. Smyth, p. 85.
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16. Cf. Smyth, p. 209.
17. G. Smyth, p. 87.