

Chapter 1

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

I

If, as has been claimed, the origins of contemporary Irish drama can be traced to September 28, 1964, the date Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* premiered at Dublin's Gate Theatre,¹ then one might legitimately nominate March 27, 1987, as the inaugurating moment of contemporary Irish fiction, if by “contemporary” we mean writing that is “characterised by an increasing sense of democratisation, of challenges, from previously marginalised constituencies, to the values and judgements that historically had governed the formation of the literary canon.”² On that date, a twenty-eight-year-old Dublin schoolteacher named Roddy Doyle published *The Commitments*, a debut novel that vibrates with the exuberance, enterprise, and humanity of characters previously unheard in Irish fiction: disaffected youths from the impoverished working-class suburbs of 1980s Dublin. Unlike Friel two decades earlier, Doyle could not count on the backing of a major Irish cultural institution to promote his work nor did he have a successful literary apprenticeship behind him. On the contrary, his first novelistic attempt, the unpropitiously titled *Your Granny is a Hunger Striker*, written during the early 1980s, failed to attract the interest of a single publisher.³ Determined to avoid this fate for his second novel, and in keeping with the entrepreneurial, do-it-yourself ethic of the book's protagonists, Doyle and his friend, John Sutton, decided to bypass the publishing establishment and issue

Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel 1987–2007, First Edition. Liam Harte.
© 2014 Liam Harte. Published 2014 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

The Commitments under their own imprint, King Farouk Publishing, a name supposedly inspired by Dublin rhyming slang for “book.” This nod of allegiance to the urban demotic was reinforced by a short but combative manifesto in which the patrimony of the contemporary Irish novelist was unceremoniously jettisoned. As an exercise in symbolic patricide, it is stinging pithy:

.....
 King Farouk is a new company and will be publishing fiction by young Irish writers. King Farouk stories will be popular and direct. King Farouk novels will definitely NOT explore any of the following well-chewed Irish themes: the provincial upbringing of the protagonist, often the author in disguise, in the fifties and sixties; the absence of love in the home, usually the fault of the father; the brutality of the Christian Brothers' education, or the more subtle brutality of the Holy nuns or the Jesuits; the suffocating influence of the Church; the smallness of provincial town life; and, of course, the various frustrations that torment sensitive young men growing up in provincial towns in the fifties and sixties. Too many 'new' Irish novelists seem to have used the pages of their books to help rid themselves of their neuroses. King Farouk authors will keep their neuroses to themselves. King Farouk stories will entertain. King Farouk fiction will be just that: fiction – made up, direct and funny.⁴

With this audacious statement of intent, Doyle self-consciously set his face against what he saw as the anachronistic realist fictions of an older generation of Irish novelists, collectively characterized as chroniclers of the miseries of a repressive Catholic ruralism and national traumas that were foreign to him and his generation. The corollary of such impatience with moribund tradition was a desire to recuperate for fiction the voices and values of a new, disregarded generation of urbanized and internationalized working-class youth, specifically those from Dublin's socioeconomically disadvantaged northside, who had little affinity for the traditional pieties or priorities of Catholic nationalist Irishness. This was a “hidden Ireland” that Doyle knew intimately, having been born in 1958 in the fledgling suburb of Kilbarrack and raised there during a defining period of social, economic, and physical transformation. Kilbarrack was one of those “frontier” sites that Fintan O'Toole would later identify as seedbeds of postnationalist forms of cultural identity, places that broke inherited molds and buffeted the preconceptions of the ruling elites:

.....
 New places have been born, places without history, without the accumulated resonances of centuries, places that prefigure the end of the fierce notion of Irishness that sustained the state for seventy years. Sex and drugs and rock 'n roll

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

are more important in the new places than the old totems of Land, Nationality and Catholicism.⁵

As this suggests, for the children of these anonymous suburbs, cosmopolitan Anglo-American popular culture held far greater appeal than anything provincial Ireland had to offer, and it is the multivalent effects of these youngsters' absorption and appropriation of external cultural influences that much of Doyle's early fiction seeks to process. Although King Farouk Publishing passed quickly into obscurity, the iconoclastic spirit that informed Doyle's brash manifesto became the catalyst for the production of three of the most enduringly popular contemporary Irish novels, which established him as the country's pre-eminent comic novelist. That all three works went on to be successfully adapted for the screen by English directors Alan Parker (*The Commitments*, 1991) and Stephen Frears (*The Snapper*, 1993; *The Van*, 1996) meant that Doyle's vision of a working-class Dublin in transition became as internationally influential at the end of the twentieth century as James Joyce's searchingly realist *Dubliners* (1914) was at the beginning.

Doyle's own childhood memories of Kilbarrack reveal the structural and demographic shifts that underpinned the foundational changes O'Toole describes above. This was indeed frontier territory, where Dublin's metamorphosis from compact city to sprawling conurbation was visible in the raw:

When I was a kid it [Kilbarrack] 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. [...] As I grew up, the city cooperations [sic] bought out the farms, and the private developers bought out the other farms, and it gradually grew more inner city.⁶

What Doyle is describing here are the local effects of the radical refashioning of the capital's urban infrastructure during the 1960s, which led to "the building of hundreds of modernist office blocks in the capital, the destruction of many of Dublin's Georgian houses, and the construction of vast, low-density suburbs around Dublin to cater to an expanding and industrializing economy."⁷ This spate of urban renewal was driven by a new doctrine of economic modernization, the stimulus for which was a 1958 Department of Finance report, *Economic Development*, which called time on the protectionist policies of autarkic nationalism and accentuated the need for foreign direct investment to boost

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

industrialization and entrepreneurship. This report formed the basis of the Programme for Economic Expansion (1959–1963) implemented by Taoiseach Seán Lemass when he came to power as head of the new Fianna Fáil government in 1959. The economic revival that followed, which saw the country's annual growth rate soar to 4% by 1963, not only raised many people's living standards and expectations but also set in train a protracted process of uneven modernization that would create a "new Irish reality [that] was ambiguous, transitional, increasingly urban or suburban, disturbingly at variance with the cultural aspirations of the revolutionaries who had given birth to the state."⁸

While many parts of this society resisted the gospel of consumer capitalism and remained wedded to traditional values, the burgeoning cities began to show a more marked degree of openness to consumerist aspirations and international cultural influences, especially from Britain and America. As the decade progressed, evidence that the Republic was beginning a slow mutation into a less conservative, more outward-looking society took many forms, from the government's first (failed) application for membership of the European Economic Community in 1961, to the inauguration of a domestic television service (RTÉ) in 1962, to the relaxation of the literary censorship laws in 1967. In the education sphere, the introduction of free post-primary education in 1967 benefited many less well-off children, including Doyle himself, who went on to graduate with a degree in English and Geography from University College Dublin in 1979, after which he returned to Kilbarrack to teach in Greendale Community School until becoming a full-time writer in 1993, the year in which his fourth novel, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993), won the Booker Prize.

The fruits of 1960s prosperity were not equitably apportioned, however, nor were the levers of social mobility within everyone's reach. From Doyle's own lower-middle-class perspective, it was the ambivalent allegiances and value systems of those in the buffer zone between classes that drew him in as he sought to express the contemporary realities of a modernizing society and the altered identities that were emerging therein:

.....
 For people of my generation there was a huge grey area between working and middle-class and a lot of us occupied that area. We benefited from free education and the rising standard of living in the sixties and the surplus cash. And though we might have been regarded as middle-class, one leg was firmly on the working-class side of things and it's that grey area that most of my work inhabits.⁹

The Kilbarrack to which Doyle returned after university provided a rich canvas in this regard, since its gray areas were becoming ever darker as the gap between the optimistic rhetoric of the 1960s and the stagnating realities

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

of the recessionary 1980s widened. Not only were such economically blighted suburbs airbrushed from tourist-board images of Dublin, they also remained beyond the pale of literary representation. As O'Toole noted in 1992: "The great tradition of Irish writing is silent on the subject of the suburbs, so you can slip out from under its shadow. No one has ever mythologized this housing estate, this footbridge over the motorway, that video rental shop. It is, for the writer, virgin territory."¹⁰ It was here that Doyle would find the material for his trilogy of novels about Barrytown, the fictional working-class neighborhood for which Kilbarrack was the template. Through the vehicle of the noisy, rambunctious Rabbitte family, Doyle sought to give "working-class people a voice and a vibrancy of life that's often missing in literary representation,"¹¹ as he himself put it. In addition, he sought to challenge through the trilogy the long-standing hegemony of the rural over the urban in Irish culture. To Doyle, the view that "Dublin was a garrison town that wasn't quite Irish enough, the real Ireland was west of the Shannon and if you wanted to write, to paint or to create music that was the source to draw on,"¹² needed to be emphatically debunked. But whereas many of his fellow "northside realists"¹³ marinated their accounts of urban experience in anger, pessimism, and despair, Doyle chose to write about everyday life in corporation housing estates in a mode of comic social realism, influenced by his friend and dramatist, Paul Mercier, whom Doyle first met at UCD and who was a staffroom colleague at Greendale in the early 1980s. Seeing a rehearsal of Mercier's *Wasters* in November 1985 was a revelation and an inspiration to the novelist *manqué*:

.....
 It was fast and funny and wonderful but that wasn't it: for the first time in my life I saw characters I recognised, people I met every day, the language I heard every day. It was like watching an old cine-film; I could point out people I knew and remember them saying what they said. The way they dressed, walked, held their cans of lager – it was all very familiar.¹⁴

The spur to creativity was instantaneous and the evolution of what became the Barrytown trilogy organic. By June 1986 Doyle had completed *The Commitments*, which follows the exploits of Jimmy Rabbitte Jr as he attempts to build a band from scratch by appropriating and "Dublinising" the ethos, aesthetic and energy of African-American soul music. Keen to "continue the energy of the first book," but also to write a "more intimate" family narrative,¹⁵ Doyle immediately began work on *The Snapper* (1990), in which the focus shifts to the wider Rabbitte family and the domestic and social dissension provoked by twenty-year-old Sharon's unplanned pregnancy, the result of drunken sex with the father of one of her best friends. The novel took three years to complete,

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

in which time Doyle also wrote two plays, *Brownbread* and *War*, for Mercier's Passion Machine theatre company. *The Van* (1991), by contrast, was written "very quickly"¹⁶ in 1990 and short-listed for the 1991 Booker Prize, a development that marked Doyle's acceptance by the British literary establishment and intensified the antipathy of some in the Irish literary media towards him.¹⁷ The comic notes are necessarily scarcer in this novel, in which a critical spotlight is shone on the corrosive effects of unemployment and ageing on Jimmy Rabbitte Sr's masculine identity and male friendships, in a working-class community threatened by change.

In fact, it is only when we have reached the end of the trilogy that we realize that what we have been reading all along properly belongs to a tradition of Irish tragicomedy that stretches back through Brendan Behan to Joyce and Sean O'Casey, in which the bonds of family and community are continually tested by manifold internal and external stresses. Like his Dublin predecessors, Doyle's cultural and political project in the trilogy is at once defiantly parochial and determinedly international, even though the books' social and cultural coordinates are very different from those of his literary forebears. As he explained in a 1996 interview: "All my stories have a universal quality – like grief, birth and so on – but they're solidly founded on a couple of square miles of Dublin."¹⁸ Doyle knows his home patch as intimately as any sociologist and he also understands what is politically at stake in his act of cultural self-representation. His core aim in the Barrytown trilogy is to reinvigorate fictive views of contemporary Dublin and rescue its socially marginalized inhabitants from their subordination to pejorative images and stereotypes. "Ireland" *per se*, which at the time the novels were written mostly meant the Troubles, the North, and the IRA, doesn't get a look-in and there is no rhetorical obeisance to those iconic cultural forces of nationalism, religion, and the land. Barrytown is, quite simply, a priest-, peasant-, and politician-free zone. But by its very silence on such topics the trilogy sharply challenges secure but outmoded notions of what it meant to be Irish in the 1980s and 1990s and instead shows us what the conflicted, fissured future might look like from the perspectives of, respectively, a working-class teenager, a single mother, a housewife, and an unemployed plasterer. It is with the savvy teenager, Jimmy Rabbitte Jr, that we shall begin, a youngster who exudes a chutzpah and swagger hitherto unseen in the pages of an Irish novel.

II

The Commitments dramatizes the personal and musical tensions that beset a disparate group of unruly Dublin youths who come together under the management of Jimmy Jr to form a soul band in Barrytown. The novel instantly

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

divided critics. For every reviewer who praised its raw colloquial utterance and rumbustious humor there was one who castigated Doyle for his profanity and accused him of patronizing or exploiting ordinary Dubliners. Yet even dissenting critics applauded the way the narrative commends the protagonists' vim and spirit, and more perceptive commentators saw in the book the emergence of a daring new literary talent. Doyle's voice was, in Fintan O'Toole's words, "not just the voice of a new author, but the voice of a radically different country from the Ireland of traditional stories," whose "way of telling a story is different: there is no single hero on whom the action focuses, there are no passages of descriptive writing, and there is no assumption that everything happens in a simple, understandable place called Ireland."¹⁹ The formal and stylistic differences alluded to here are signaled before the narrative even begins, in the novel's framing devices, which feature three idiomatically distinct voices. The first is that of the author, heard in the dedication, who follows common custom by inscribing his book to his parents. Convention is immediately disrupted, however, by having one of the novel's characters, Joey The Lips Fagan, deliver a supplementary exhortation: "Honour thy parents, Brothers and Sisters. They were hip to the groove too once you know. Parents are soul."²⁰ The epigraph introduces a third voice, that of the soul singer James Brown, whose lyrics not only add another linguistic register but also derive a special voltage from their typographical appearance on the page:

.....
 —SOMETIMES I FEEL SO NICE—

 GOOD GOD———
 I JUMP BACK———

 I WANNA KISS MYSELF———!
 I GOT—
 SOU—OU—OUL—
 AN' I'M SUPERBAD———

With these paratexts, Doyle advertises key elements of the determinedly democratic conception of fiction that informs his debut novel and shapes the trilogy as a whole. Not only does he prefigure the vernacular energy of the voices that will shortly regale us, he also displays a subtle disregard for narrative hierarchy by presenting his own voice as simply one among several. This the first clue to the text's polyphonic nature, the polyphonic novel being "a democratic one, in which equality of utterance is central."²¹ Equality of utterance is embedded in the novel at every turn, from the narrator's refusal to

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

make moral pronouncements on the characters to his allowing himself to be interrupted by snatches of their conversation, as in this early example, where a past exchange between Jimmy and Outspan intrudes upon the narrative present like an abrupt burst of radio wave interference:

.....
 The last time Outspan had flicked through Jimmy's records he'd seen names like Microdisney, Eddie and the Hot Rods, Otis Redding, The Screaming Blue Messiahs, Scraping Foetus off the Wheel (– Foetus, said Outspan. – That's the little fella inside the woman, isn't it?
 – Yeah, said Jimmy
 – Aah, that's fuckin' horrible, tha' is.); groups Outspan had never heard of, never mind heard. (7)

The implicit challenge to convention signaled by this abdication of narratorial control is reinforced by Doyle's choice of epigraph. If, as Gérard Genette argues, a writer "chooses his peers and thus his place in the pantheon"²² by means of his epigraph, then Doyle's decision to quote the utterances of an African-American music icon is a pointedly anti-elitist gesture calculated to unsettle readerly, middle-class expectations. It is also a bold cue to the proliferation of non-Irish influences and international popular cultural practices that shape the characters' mindsets. More than any other novel of its era, *The Commitments* heralds the advent of a globalized, postmodern Irish culture by provocatively registering the disparate cultural forces – none of which are compatible with traditional determinants of Irishness – now molding the mindsets of working-class urban youth. There is also subversive intent in Doyle's use of capital letters, exclamation marks, and long and short dashes to replicate orthographically the vocal cadence and rhythmic pulse of soul music, which is one of the novel's most eye-catching stylistic features. Once the narrative proper begins, it quickly becomes evident that the author's readiness to experiment with conventional stylistics to capture the dynamism of soul music is part of his wider ideological agenda as a comic social realist: to give authentic expression to the distinctive accents and speech rhythms of a working-class Dublin demotic, irrespective of the dictates of literary propriety and eschewing a condescendingly superior narratorial point of view.

Doyle's innovative treatment of narratorial voice is a crucial part of the novel's democratic realism and one of the qualities that, for all the author's literary inexperience, made *The Commitments* the most remarkable Irish fiction debut of the 1980s. The style of the novel is unashamedly anti-literary insofar as Doyle, in an attempt at unpremeditated authenticity, avoids retrospective and introspective narration and restricts himself to a vocabulary and idiom that

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

mimic those of working-class youths of limited education and means. From the opening sentence, the prose is shaped by a desire to replicate the oral demotic of working-class subjects accurately and graphically. The most remarked-upon manifestations of this are the stripped-down, script-like form of the novel, in which character is defined through quick-fire, expletive-laden dialogue rather than detailed description, and the vernacular speech patterns and idioms of the novel's protagonists, virtually all of whom speak in a broad northside Dublin dialect. That the narrator also speaks in the living voice of his characters underscores Doyle's ideological commitment to representing his subjects faithfully in their own demotic, powerfully fusing voice, character, and place in the process. His ability to capture the authentic sound and lexical peculiarities of this dialect means that much of the novel's levity stems from colloquial deviations from expressive norms. Our eyes and ears are continually arrested by the preponderance of phonetically rendered words ("righ", "annymore", "scarleh"), phrases ("prickin' around", "puked me ring"), obscenities ("fuckin'", "Jaysis"), syntax ("Keep the suits on but"), and slang terms ("ride", "gee", "gaff", "redner"), all of which imbue the prose with a musicality derived from a decidedly local source.

Doyle's desire to make the narrative bear the imprint of the spoken (and sung) voice makes him chafe against the barriers that separate the oral and textual forms of the language, as evidenced by his use of dashes of varying length rather than inverted commas to convey direct speech. These dashes function like musical notation, complementing the poetic cadence and metrical stresses of the dialogue, particularly the resonant repetition of "workin'" and "fuckin'" and the echoing rhyme of such memorable phrases as "say it loud, I'm black an' I'm proud."²³ In interviews, Doyle has spoken of the role this loose style of oral narration plays in enabling the reader to *hear* the dialogue, since "Sometimes just writing a sentence by itself doesn't quite capture the way you want the sentence to be heard."²⁴ There is also a definite anti-hierarchical impetus in play, as his comments to Karen Sbrockey reveal:

.....
 I didn't want there to be too big a division between the narrative and the dialogue. I thought by just using a dash it would advertise the fact that people were talking, but that there wouldn't be a huge gap between the narrative and the dialogue. I want it to be, at times, irrelevant.²⁵

Critics have rightly noted correspondences between Doyle's demotic style and that of contemporaries such as Irvine Welsh and James Kelman, whose recreation of the actual sound of working-class Scottish voices and accents leads

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987-1991)

to the artful elision of the distinction between the spoken and the written.²⁶ Indeed, Cairns Craig's comments on the significance of Kelman's rejection of inverted commas as speech markers are equally applicable to Doyle's practice throughout the Barrytown trilogy:

.....
 The text is designed visually to resist that moment of arrest in which the reader switches between the narrative voice of the text and the represented speech of a character, and what this does is to create a linguistic equality between speech and narration which allows the narrator to adopt the speech idioms of his characters or the characters to think or speak in 'standard English' with no sense of disruption.²⁷

A similar equalizing ethos informs Doyle's decision to replace an omniscient narrator with an immanent one who occupies the same plane as the characters and whose voice is infected by their oral idiolect. He explained to Carmine White:

.....
 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.²⁸

What Doyle is describing here is free indirect style, whereby “the voice of the character becomes embedded in the voice of the narrator; thus, the character's habit of speech is present, but direct imitation and quotation marks are not.”²⁹ *The Commitments* brilliantly exploits one of the great strengths of this narratorial mode, its ability “to suggest the precise flavor of the original utterance or consciousness that is ‘true’ to the character's mind.”³⁰ The qualities of oral performance are so powerfully preserved by the elision of the idiomatic divide between narrator and character that the reader has little sense of *The Commitments* being a *written* narrative. Rather, the novel's tone and structure are those of overheard oral storytelling, the effects of which are manifold. Most obviously, this style means that the voice and speech idiom of the narrator are virtually interchangeable with those of the characters, so that when the narrator explains that “He was getting air from further down” (32) or “The time flew in” (67), it could just as easily be one of the characters speaking. This leads to a blurring of individual voices and identities and sometimes to confusion as to

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

the source of particular utterances. Doyle's distinctive use of free indirect style also means that the narrator is presented as having no superior knowledge to his characters, but rather shares their limitations of expression, thought, and outlook. So close, indeed, is the non-omniscient narrator to the characters that he is tacitly on their side, in sympathy with their opinions and aspirations. Doyle's remark that he wanted "to write about the type of kids I taught and had become charmed by, really, and whose company I enjoyed, who are typical of the type of place I came from"³¹ is revealing in this regard. Here is a novelist who is so enamored of his characters, so indulgent of their foibles and follies, that the critical distance between author, narrator, and protagonist that usually sustains a novel has all but disappeared. The narrative voice that results from this elision has a distinctly partisan, even proselytizing, quality about it, in that it exerts a tangible emotional pressure on readers, asking that we too succumb to these characters' charm and share the narrator's warm feelings for them.

For many readers, this mode of narration is the perfect complement to Doyle's descriptive minimalism and an added source of pleasure and delight. Yet it presents some significant interpretive challenges, making it difficult to decode the specific targets of Doyle's comic scrutiny and gauge the precise points at which his comedic voice shifts between registers. Comedy, he has said, "is an extremely serious business; it's never casual, it has to be precise, it has to have a point."³² What then, apart from giving pleasure, is the point of the high jinks and freewheeling anarchy of *The Commitments*? Doyle himself has repeatedly stressed his celebratory motives, claiming in one interview that his aim in the trilogy was to "capture and celebrate crudity, loudness, linguistic flair and slang, which is the property of working-class people."³³ The text itself tells a more complex tale, however, in that the actual language users and music makers, and the views they express, are not univocally celebrated. On the contrary, characters are subjected to a subtle mixture of sympathy and satire that blends high-octane entertainment with mockery and social critique. Doyle's narrative irony is perhaps best exemplified by his double-edged portrayal of Jimmy Rabbitte Jr, would-be impresario and orchestrator of the novel's most celebrated scene, in which he tries to convert Outsplan and Derek to the ideology behind his proposition that they form a soul band:

.....
 – 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. (Then a practical question.)
 – Who buys the most records? The workin' class. Are yis with me? (Not really.)
 – 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.

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

They looked at him.
 – James Brown. Did yis know ——— never mind. He sang tha'. ——— An'
 he made a fuckin' bomb.
 They were stunned by what came next.
 – The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads.
 They nearly gasped: it was so true.
 – 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.
 He grinned. He'd impressed himself again. (13–14)

Stylistically, the narrator's fugitive, *sotto voce* interjections work here to facilitate Jimmy's attempt to establish his intellectual authority over his credulous and speechless listeners, while the closed nature of his rapid question-and-answer routine suggests that he alone is capable of sophisticated, strategic thought. But what of the substance of Jimmy's bold manifesto and his plausibility as a self-styled postcolonial prophet? Are we to accept at face value his startling assertion of a symbolic kinship between white Irish people and black Americans, based on a shared experience of oppression and discrimination? The novelist's own comments reveal a contradictory mixture of comic and serious intent in composing this key set-piece scene. Asked in 1995 if he agreed with Jimmy's view of the Irish as "the niggers of Europe," Doyle replied: "No. There's some tongue-in-cheek there. I deliberately put it down because, one, it's bullshit, utter crap; two, it's funny; and three, there's a certain wisdom there."³⁴ His remarks in a later interview did little to clarify matters: "In one way it's a joke and in another it's all about Jimmy trying to motivate his band: he is trying to instil some sort of purpose in them. It's about overcoming the legacy of colonisation and it's also there to shock people out of their respectable, middle-class positions."³⁵

These discrepant responses have not deterred critics from accepting the basic validity and felicity of Jimmy's ethnic analogy, which touches directly upon Ireland's contested status as a postcolonial country and the nationalist implications that flow from this, a topic that was beginning to excite much intellectual debate at the time the novel appeared. Luke Gibbons, for example, claims that "the legitimacy of the claim that the Irish are 'the niggers of Europe', and so on, only makes sense by reconnecting with a colonial legacy in which Ireland was indeed a Third World at the back door of Europe."³⁶ Michael Cronin is also sympathetic to this reading, though he insists that Jimmy's homily needs "to be set in the context of a rights discourse that can and did travel from Alabama to Antrim"³⁷ in the 1960s. For Elizabeth Cullingford, however, the Irish/black analogy is historically misleading because it overlooks "the dismal history of Irish-American hostility to African-Americans," which complicates in turn any

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

notion of “the Catholics as the white Negroes of Northern Ireland.”³⁸ And yet, as Lauren Onkey and Timothy Taylor have observed, historical evidence to support this cultural correspondence can be found not only in the political wall murals of Derry and West Belfast but also in the utterances of leading figures in the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, who looked to the Irish literary revival for artistic models.³⁹ Onkey also alludes to remarks made in 1988 by a real-life music maker from Dublin's northside – Paul Hewson, a.k.a. Bono – which contain a striking echo of Jimmy's sentiments. Describing how he found “passports home” in American gospel and blues, the U2 singer identified “soul” as the quality that unites the musical traditions of Ireland and black America, and proceeded to link this to a shared history of subjection: “I was called a ‘White Nigger’ once by a black musician, and I took it as he meant it, as a compliment. The Irish, like the blacks, feel like outsiders.”⁴⁰ Of course, in Jimmy's case, the paradox of white working-class Dubliners being labeled “niggers” is based on an unspoken and unnuanced substitution of class for race as a marker of difference. As Dermot McCarthy points out: “Jimmy pushes identification with African-Americans because he sees the working-class urban Irish to be systemically *economically* disadvantaged in the same way that African-Americans are racially.”⁴¹ More specifically, the band's “blackness” is presented as a function of their systemic economic disenfranchisement by two Irish social groups perceived as being more privileged: the “southsiders” who live in the more affluent southern suburbs of Dublin city and “culchies” or “rednecks,” disparaging terms for Irish country people. Jimmy's appropriation of the race-based injustices visited on black America, then, is less about Ireland's past history of colonialism and more about the deep-seated internal inequities of the postcolonial nation.

But we should pause here and look again at the role of narrative irony in the presentation of Jimmy's galvanizing pep talk, since we are already in danger of overempowering him by uncritically accepting his political *bona fides*. Even as he is propounding it, Jimmy's tendentious thesis is being ironized by the narrator's hyperbolic remark that “it was so true,” just as Jimmy himself is surely being lampooned for his creamy smugness. Doyle's political subtext is thus exposed: glib identifications between the Catholic Irish and African Americans to bolster a sense of enduring Irish victimhood are bogus and meretricious. McCarthy bluntly states the case for the prosecution: “The narrator's ironic comment emphasises the improvisatory nature of Jimmy's language and behaviour. He is a ‘bullshitter’ and a ‘chancer’, and the ‘niggers of Europe’ analogy is a ‘con’ – a ‘pitch’; and the narrator's deflation of Jimmy's rhetorical balloon should prevent anyone from ascending into the ideological ozone.”⁴² Evidence to support this judgment mounts as the band takes shape. The credibility of Jimmy's “black pride” message is undermined by the crude racist stereotyping that he and others casually indulge in; his criticism of The Commitmentettes for singing in

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

their “ordin’y accents” (34) flatly contradicts his earlier valorization of working-class pride; and his motivational concept of “Dublin soul” becomes so nebulous and elastic as to be meaningless. It is, in fact, the blatant glibness with which the “soul” label is applied to everything from democracy to a bingo caller’s kidneys by Jimmy and his disingenuous mentor, Joey, that lays bare the true *raison d’être* of their “soul politics”: financial gain. Jimmy and Joey are classic micks on the make, opportunistically prepared to tailor their rhetoric to maximize the market potential of their impressionable, wayward protégées. What appears to be a principled “commitment” to working-class empowerment through local music-making is in reality a profit-seeking enterprise, and when money beckons, everything is negotiable: note how quickly Jimmy’s northside solidarity evaporates when a residency for the group materializes on the much-derided southside. As Mary McGlynn accurately points out, such pragmatism suggests that our hero’s strident localism is little more than “a pose, something to be dropped once economics are at stake.”⁴³

Jimmy’s response to the band’s acrimonious disintegration at the end of the novel shows that his seemingly evangelistic attachment to the emancipatory politics of soul music is equally disposable. Undaunted by the band’s demise, and with Joey’s valedictory verdict that “soul isn’t right for Ireland” (133) ringing in his ears, he sets about forming a “country-punk” (138) group from the embers of The Commitments, with a view to exploiting a more lucrative niche in the wider Irish market. Rednecks are now fair game, commercially speaking: “You’ve got to remember tha’ half the country is fuckin’ farmers. This is the type of stuff they all listen to. — Only they listen to it at the wrong speed” (139). But while the same musical formula will be employed – the lyrics of “Night Train” are already being “culchified” – Jimmy insists that this time the band will be an ideology-free zone. This cheerfully cynical *volte face* renders his whole political vision comically preposterous and suggests that he and Joey are ultimately to be regarded as blustering rogues bent on market exploitation, rather than “savvy entrepreneurs,” “cannily employing the capitalist strategies that have left them disenfranchised.”⁴⁴ The proposed name of his new group, The Brassers, obliquely suggests as much, “brasser” being Dublin slang for a prostitute or woman of dubious morality. Having first sold his “soul” without scruple, Jimmy now resolves to sell his “country” with equal relish.

This ending also casts a retrospective shadow over Jimmy’s initial inspirational motto that “Your music should be abou’ where you’re from an’ the sort o’ people yeh come from.” Although the proclaimer of this creed is discredited in the end, the creed itself survives as a gentle rebuke to these aspiring musicians’ failure to live up to its emancipatory potential by creating original music. From the outset, Jimmy’s assertion of “difference” is predicated on an aesthetic of accurate reproduction rather than original production, the “Dublinization”

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

of American soul music being the band's sole concession to newness. Indeed, it is "the Dublin bits" (73) that Derek points to on the one occasion when Outspan laments the fact that they don't write their own material. As Gerry Smyth astutely notes, the band members are conspicuously devoid of the desire to compose "original material that would express (in a soul idiom) something of their own individual and/or collective identity."⁴⁵ When, early in the novel, Jimmy is challenged by Derek and Outspan to name a proper alternative to their "doin' bad versions of other people's poxy songs" (11), his retort that "It's not the other people's songs so much [. . .] It's which ones yis do" (12) tellingly exposes his lack of commitment to genuinely original modes of creative expression and underscores the fundamental paradox of a group striving to be "authentic" using borrowed forms and idioms – which is, of course, the classic dilemma of a colonized mentality. That the musically "superior" culture being imitated is that of subaltern black America rather than postimperialist white Britain complicates, but does not nullify, the force of this comic portrait of a community's inability to develop an independent identity under the neocolonial pressure of a globalized American popular culture.⁴⁶ Jimmy's swapping of soul for country music confirms this cultural hegemony. Indigenous music traditions have as little to offer these youths as Catholicism, nationalism, or the party politics of "Fianna fuckin' Fail or annythin' like tha" (13).

What we have in *The Commitments*, then, is a portrait of a culturally disregarded segment of Irish society that blends empathy with mockery and celebration with subtle social commentary. Beneath its verbal exuberance, irreverence, and earthy contemporaneity, Doyle's comic vision of working-class Dublin is fundamentally good-natured and optimistic, but also mischievously tongue-in-cheek; hence the warm, knowing glow that many readers are left with at the end of the novel. Whether his humane vision is reductive or patronizing is another matter, however. Perhaps only a humorless reader could accuse Doyle of perpetuating the negative stereotype of the cocky streetwise Dubliner who is not to be trusted, least of all by credulous culchies. That said, the characterization of Jimmy Jr and Joey as blathering chancers comes uncomfortably close to reinforcing hoary pejorative markers of Irishness. Ultimately, however, *The Commitments*'s novelty, buoyant charm, and somewhat unusual frame of reference – band-formation being a relatively uncommon working-class pursuit – protect it from the harsher criticisms leveled at *The Snapper*, in which Doyle seeks to recreate the feel-good factor of his debut novel while delving more deeply into the disjunctures and contradictions of social change in this urban subculture.

Although widely praised for the color of its language and its fast-paced narration, *The Snapper* led some critics to complain that its author was now succumbing to stereotypical images of the work-classing Irish as "happy-go-lucky slobs with sharp tongues and gutter vocabularies,"⁴⁷ thus sidestepping

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

meaningful engagement with vexed sociopolitical issues. In his acerbic review of the novel, George O'Brien blamed Doyle's "ethnographic" approach to his subject matter for turning his characters into simplistic "stage-lumpens" who inhabit a self-contained enclave that is "detached from the society that built it,"⁴⁸ while Shaun Richards accused *The Snapper* of presenting "an urban reality as partial in its representations as was Yeats's Celtic Twilight – rendered the subject of comic indulgence rather than critical concern."⁴⁹ Both critics clearly felt that Doyle's use of the comic mode was neither dexterous nor incisive enough to do justice to the complexities of the issues broached in the novel: alcohol-fuelled rape, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and potentially shambolic single motherhood. However, in a later contribution to this debate Brian Donnelly defended Doyle against such criticisms, arguing that the comic novelist is under no obligation to present a worked-through critique of the darker side of these dilemmas because he is operating within comic conventions that presuppose a happy ending.⁵⁰

It seems to me that both sides of this argument underestimate Doyle's deepening appreciation of comedy as a vehicle for the nuanced representation of a culture and society in the throes of turbulent transition. In both *The Snapper* and *The Van*, Doyle's use of the comic form as a tool with which to dissect the complexity of his protagonists' experience becomes ever more sophisticated. While these novels share several stylistic features with *The Commitments*, they also show Doyle developing more refined skills of characterization and narrative development. Although localized dialect and profane speech still proliferate, *The Snapper* and *The Van* are more nourished by focalized narration than *The Commitments*, chiefly because of Doyle's willingness to probe more fully the inner life and feelings of his protagonists. The process begins in *The Snapper* with his exploration of the internal dynamics of the Rabbitte family in the wake of the dramatic news with which the novel opens: Jimmy and Veronica's eldest, unmarried daughter, Sharon, has fallen pregnant but refuses to disclose the identity of the baby's father. Immediately, the spotlight is fixed on the issue of pregnancy outside of marriage, which is further complicated by the fact that Sharon conceived as a result of drunken, non-consensual sex – it is left to the reader to decide whether she was raped – with George Burgess, the father of one of her best friends. Thus, the family kitchen, a space traditionally associated with cozy conviviality in Irish culture, becomes a microcosmic testing ground for changing social, sexual, and moral attitudes.⁵¹ Whereas Veronica's latent Catholicism is audible in her murmured remark that her daughter's actions are "not right" (149), Jimmy's gauche question about abortion, prompted by "something he'd heard a good few times on the telly" (149), indicates that his is not a conscience conditioned to agonize over church teaching on sexual morality. Sharon's own moral outlook is an intriguing mixture of unreconciled impulses. On the one hand, her brusque declaration that "Abortion's murder"

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

(150) suggests a rigid conservatism that recalls the zeal with which activists on the Catholic right resisted efforts to liberalize Ireland's abortion laws in the 1980s. On the other hand, her farcical attempts to pray reveal the irrelevance of institutionalized religion to her everyday concerns: "She tried to remember the Hail Mary but she couldn't get past Hello Be Thy Name, and anyway, she didn't believe in it, not really; so she stopped trying to remember the rest of it. It was just something to do" (168). Yet the very fact that in a time of crisis she should resort to prayer, however ineptly, suggests that part of her continues to be governed by values in which she no longer believes.

It is a measure of Doyle's maturing practice that he sustains this complex characterization of Sharon for most of the novel, making her an engrossing embodiment of conflicted contemporary Irish womanhood. Although her acquiescence in the moral relativism of the community at large, where unmarried motherhood is accepted as the social norm, is made plain – "The baby was nothing. It happened. It was alright. Barrytown was good that way. Nobody minded. Guess the daddy was a hobby" (253) – this does not make her an unequivocally "modern girl" (205). Indeed, her reluctance to contemplate raising the baby on her own and her desire to remain in the family home so that her child would have "a proper family" (287) reveal as much about Sharon's ingrained traditionalism as it does her economic dependency, even though her poorly paid job provides enough disposable income for boozy nights out with her girlfriends. Sharon's latent conservatism also means that she colludes in her father's growing appropriation of her pregnancy, a product of his guilt-ridden, belated appreciation of that which he himself failed to practise as a young father: attentive, hands-on parenting. However, just as Doyle hesitates to make Sharon's rape explicit, this narrative strand shows him fudging the more problematic implications of her predicament. So intent is he on "Celebrating pregnancy outside marriage"⁵² that, when push comes to shove, he must make this daughter as soft-hearted and family-loving as her father. Consequently, *The Snapper* assimilates rather than confronts the issue of teenage pregnancy. By having Jimmy co-own his daughter's pregnancy, "the threat of the single mother bringing up her child in a non-paternalistic family unit is dispelled."⁵³

Yet in spite of this evasiveness, the novel successfully uses the social reality of single motherhood to portray the unresolved dilemmas thrown up by social change in a working-class context, where the undertow of conservative value systems continues to trouble the liberal stream. Just because one-parent families diverge starkly from the de Valeran ideal of the nuclear family as "a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights,"⁵⁴ it does not necessarily follow that older belief structures have been wholly supplanted. *The Snapper* also skillfully dramatizes the refiguring of traditional gender roles through its depiction of Jimmy Sr's struggles to reconcile his preconceived

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

notions of what fatherhood entails with the changes happening around him. From the outset, his shortcomings as a husband and father are comically skewered, rendering him a domestically clueless figure of fun. There is much of the pantomime father about him, from his puerile jokes and reflex prejudices to his incontinent swearing and cringe-inducing malapropisms. The juvenility of so much of his banter and behavior – both at home and in the Hikers pub, his home from home – defines him as an outsized boy, as when, for example, he seeks to appease Veronica by buying her an ice cream, a childish gesture that preempts Burgess's pathetic offer of money for "sweets" to Sharon. Such tactics are part of the adolescent gamesmanship that Jimmy practises in all his relationships, since for him "paternal authority and respect are all about 'winning' and 'losing' and these come down to keeping up appearances."⁵⁵ Hence his need to punish Sharon by coercing her into admitting that she has "disgraced the family" (286), only for her to outmaneuver him by insincerely threatening to move out, a ploy that results in their mutual "victory." But whereas there may be humor in Jimmy's attempts to save face domestically and socially, his persistent abdication of parental responsibility raises fewer smiles. The frequency of his pub excursions makes the Rabbittes resemble a single-parent family – a foreshadowing of Sharon's own – and his disingenuous justification for refusing to assist Veronica in the moral guidance of the twins betrays an exasperating platitudinous evasiveness: "They'd only laugh at me. I'm only their da. Anyway, it'd sound better comin' from a woman, wouldn't it?" (189). Jimmy's propensity for self-pity is equally unappealing. His rash disregard for what the neighbors might say about Sharon soon curdles into selfish resentment when he comes to believe that "his life was being ruined because of her" (278–279).

Yet for all his flaws, Jimmy Rabbitte undoubtedly commands a special affection on account of his amiable openness, good-natured solidarity, and sham-bolic indefatigability, qualities that set him apart from an arch-patriarch like McGahern's Michael Moran, about whom we shall hear more in the next chapter. Whereas Moran rules his wife and family with an iron will, Jimmy Sr seems destined never to come into his patrimony as "the head of the fuckin' house" (186) but is all the more endearing for it. The starkness of the contrast is nicely captured by the oblique way in which Jimmy's offhand quip, "The family tha' eats together – How does it go?" (236), parodically deflates the pious solemnity of Moran's controlling mantra, "the family that prays together stays together."⁵⁶

That is not to say, however, that Jimmy has transcended his cultural conditioning and transformed himself into an enlightened paterfamilias, despite his claims of having done so following a sudden bout of critical self-appraisal as Sharon's due date approaches. In truth, he is no more a "new man" at the end of the novel than he was an unalloyed patriarch at the beginning. He remains in thrall to prescribed notions of what these roles entail, constantly struggling to

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

pass the “paternity test.” From the novel’s opening exchanges, we see how much fatherhood is for him a matter of “manly” performance. On hearing Sharon’s news, for example, he instantly feels he should “throw a wobbler or somethin’” (146) and is reassured when his anger starts to grow. The stunting effects of his having internalized the expectations and assumptions that accompany a culturally sanctioned version of macho Irish manhood are again revealed when he hesitates to kiss his wife in front of his sons for fear they’d “slag” (180) him, a sure sign that these young men have already begun to conform to the same oppressive cultural norms. Jimmy’s crooning of “The Great Pretender” in the novel’s closing scenes carries much symbolic truth in the light of this masquerade of masculinity, as does his reading of Alexander Dumas’s *The Man in the Iron Mask* in the early part of *The Van*, for by the time this novel opens the strain of faking it has begun to take a corrosive toll. The notion of masculinity in transition that is comically explored in *The Snapper* takes on a much darker coloration in *The Van*, as serious and disquieting questions are raised about what happens to contemporary working-class masculinities when they are subjected to sustained economic, social, and psychological stresses.

In the final installment of the Barrytown trilogy the recessionary realities of the late 1980s come more fully into focus, darkening the devil-may-care mood and complicating characters’ attempts to improvise their way around personal and economic difficulties. *The Van* is mainly concerned with the plight of Jimmy Rabbitte Sr as he faces into a financially precarious middle age, having lost his job in the economic downturn. That his changed status as an unemployed plasterer is having a profound impact on his sense of self and his relationships with family and community is crisply captured in the novel’s opening scene, which establishes the bass notes of despondency and diminution that resonate through the first third of the novel (like its two predecessors, *The Van* is chapterless). Having already been cooped up in his kitchen because the other rooms in the house are occupied, Jimmy symbolically evicts himself when he gives up this space to Darren and drifts outside to sit on the front step, hoping to find it a more congenial place in which to kill time. Instead, his feelings of homelessness and isolation are amplified by the November chill and the sight of passing motorists he doesn’t recognize. Precisely because it is so understated, there is real pathos in this vignette of a redundant plasterer searching the streets in vain for a familiar face that might lessen the pain of his loneliness.

In a culture where masculinity is defined not in terms of being but of doing, Jimmy’s alienation and bewilderment cannot easily be shrugged off with a whimsical one-liner. While he is still capable of acting the buffoon, there is now a hollowness to his clowning, as it becomes increasingly clear to him that he is being pushed to the side of his own life while those close to him get on with theirs. Sharon is absorbed by single motherhood; Darren has outgrown his

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

childish interests and no longer talks to his father “properly” (353); Jimmy Jr has moved into a bedsit with his girlfriend; and the wayward Leslie is “in England, somewhere” (359). Veronica, too, gives off an air of emotional detachment and confident self-reliance. Having started studying part-time for her Leaving Certificate, she is determined to achieve her educational goals without interference from her husband and pointedly prioritizes her studies over babysitting Sharon's snapper, thus forcing Jimmy to assume the role of feminized caregiver, leaving him literally holding the baby. His abortive attempt to kick-start his own educational journey by joining a library merely compounds his sense of futility and plummeting self-esteem: “He was useless; couldn't even read a book properly” (372). Within moments of Jimmy admitting this to himself, Jimmy Jr drops by and hastily stuffs a fiver in his father's pocket (373), a gesture made all the more poignant by its feigned casualness. When, afterwards, Sharon finds her father in a kind of fugue state, his diminishment is palpable:

.....
 – Are yeh alrigh'?

He looked miserable, and small and kind of beaten looking.

– I'm grand, he said.

He looked around him, as if for a reason for being there. (374)

Scenes such as these showcase Doyle's maturing ability to manage the representation of emotional nuance and complexity without lapsing into sentimentality or heavy-handedness. Cumulatively, they contribute to the suasive force with which the novel evokes the ramifying effects of redundancy on Jimmy Rabbitte Sr, which, as we have already hinted, go far beyond the mere fact of his ceasing to be the family breadwinner. The profound sense of male inadequacy Jimmy feels as a result of his loss of economic status is intimately connected to other psychosocial anxieties and insecurities that are contingent upon changing socioeconomic conditions, shifting gender relations, and his keen awareness of the losses being wrought by ageing and mortality. To say that he has slid into depression is too simplistic a diagnosis. Self-destructive feelings of anger, envy, frustration, and aggression are also welling up in this out-of-work father in ways and for reasons that he cannot fully understand, but which we as readers recognize as a deepening crisis of old-style, patriarchal masculinity. That an overwhelming sense of fear is at the root of this crisis is made clear in the scene where Jimmy is described as having days when he is plagued by “a feeling in his guts all the time, like a fart building up only it wasn't that at all” (395). It is a sensation that reminds him of the silent terror he felt as a child, when he was forced by his mother to “go through the whole day scared shitless, waiting

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

for his da to come home” (395) and sadistically beat him for some reported misdemeanor – a rare and deeply affecting vignette of Jimmy’s boyhood. But whereas his childhood anguish had form and focus, Jimmy’s visceral sense of dread as an adult is more inchoate and diffuse.

Little by little, this fear is revealed to be bound up with an anxiety about the potential redundancy of his phallic power and a corresponding horror of emasculation – the dread prospect of becoming a feminized man. This anxiety is memorably crystallized in the scene where Jimmy is overtaken by a sudden and, to him, bewildering compulsion to try out Maggie’s electric razor when he finds himself in the Reeves’ bathroom on Christmas Day: “He felt weak, hopeless, like he’d been caught. Was something happening to him?” (405). Characteristically, he shies away from further introspection, but we have seen enough to recognize that this furtive flirtation with femininity is as much a product of Jimmy’s sense of himself as a member of the contemptible “weaker sex” now that he is jobless as it is an expression of suppressed sexual desire for Bertie’s wife, Vera, about whom Jimmy fantasizes, Leopold Bloom-like, as he shaves his shins: “She was a bit of a brasser, Vera, but Jimmy Sr liked that. [. . .] He looked at the door again. Vera probably used one of these, when she was shaving her legs” (404–405).

Probing a little deeper, we can see in Jimmy’s disgusted reaction to his “lapse” into womanliness while coveting his neighbor’s wife the lineaments of his male fear of, and hostility towards, women’s sexual power over him. Psychiatrist Anthony Clare’s analysis of the roots of contemporary male insecurity and its relationship to the masculine need for control speaks directly to Jimmy Rabbitte’s predicament here. As Clare explains, the fact that some men “regard every woman as a potential whore who has it within her sexual power to ennoble or degrade him” means that

.....
 That which is desired is detested, for that which is desired exercises a terrible, nagging, insistent, irresistible temptation and poses an immense challenge to the male sense of control. The preoccupation of men with pornography provides an example of how men can and do turn their own self-disgust against women. [. . .] Men know only too well how tragic they appear, know too the extent to which they feel enslaved by their libidos. [. . .] Men in thrall to sex exhibit self-disgust and disgust with what is seen to be the cause of their degradation: women.⁵⁷

The result of this swirl of destructive emotions is a neurotic aggression, directed against the self and against others, since men “are not just fearful of, and angry with, women. They are fearful of, and angry with, each other. Men repudiate the feminine not only in women but in themselves. [. . .] If a man feels he does

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

not have *it* – masculine strength, masculine bravery, masculine achievement – he is a castrated male. He is a woman.⁵⁸

And so it is with Jimmy Rabbitte. Enslaved by his libido and oppressed by feelings of inadequacy, his renascent need for power and control in his jobless middle age fuels his embarrassingly desperate quest to shore up his impaired and weakened manhood. One of the most striking developments in Jimmy Sr's character between *The Snapper* and *The Van* is his heightened sexual awareness of young women, whom he lasciviously inspects at every turn, including Darren's girlfriend, Miranda: "A ride; she was. It was weird thinking it; his son was going out with a ride; but it was true. [. . .] He'd never gone out with a young one like that" (395). Still more disturbing for him is the realization that Miranda's generation is far less beholden to men, financially and emotionally, than the women he grew up with were. The evidence practically overwhelms him on a trip into the city center, where he counts "fifty-four great-looking young ones going by in only a quarter of an hour; brilliant-looking women now, and all of them dressed beautifully, the height of style; they must have paid fortunes for the stuff they had on them; you could tell" (409–410). Against this background, the aggressive male chauvinism exhibited by Jimmy and his friends is symptomatic of their reactionary response to feminism's displacement of the certainties and privileges of traditional patriarchy. The unraveling of the old fictions of Irish masculinity has bred in these marginalized men a kind of siege mentality, which expresses itself in their preference for all-male company and their wish to protect the bar of the Hikers from territorial invasion by couples. Here in this public space, which Bertie paradoxically claims as the men's private nation state, women are verbally demeaned and traits identified as feminine routinely mocked as signs of weakness and dependence. Insofar as women are appreciated by these "lads" – to use Veronica's telling characterization of them – it is almost exclusively in terms of their looks and perceived willingness to indulge in casual sex. Banter it may be, but there is a sinister undertow to Bertie's leering account of his sexual intimidation of sixteen-year-old Mandy in the local newsagent, which culminates in his misogynistic declaration that "All women are prostitutes" (418).

Although he joins in the laughter, Jimmy is discomfited by such talk, which makes him feel "dirty; kind of. And then stupid. Talking about young ones like that, very young ones" (417). These feelings of self-disgust, which are inextricably bound up with his resentment of women's sexual power over him, later resurface when he recalls his own erotic interest in the teenage girls who work in the sewing factory. Surreptitiously watching them from his bedroom window, "he'd felt the blood rushing through his head, walloping off the sides, like he was watching a blue video and he was afraid that Veronica would come in and catch him" (448). Afterwards, he'd felt "like a fuckin' pervert," but convinces

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987-1991)

himself that “he just liked looking at them, that was all” (449). As the porn analogy indicates, however, the objectifying mind does not escape unscathed. Increasingly, we see Jimmy mentally comparing his wife's slack flesh to the nubile bodies of these miniskirted teenagers and to the coiffed and sculpted figures of the “brassers” in the blue movie Bertie loans him. The aggression and self-hatred this provokes in Jimmy shockingly materializes in his impulsive desire to lash out at Veronica one boozy night, while she is helping him to untie his shoelaces. Even though Jimmy stops himself from hitting her, his sudden switch from silent contempt to unspoken smugness is no less dismaying: “It was nice as well sometimes, being mothered by Veronica” (384). In this moment of reprehensible self-satisfaction, Jimmy shows himself to be a regressive male in every sense, willfully resistant to making the transition from boy to man.

It is this same quality of incorrigible childlike egocentricity that is ultimately responsible for Jimmy's bust-up with Bimbo, after the two men have worked hard to build up a lucrative fast-food business in Barrytown. Once again, Jimmy's narcissism and control-freakery wreak havoc on a relationship. The fact that Bimbo owns the burger-and-chips van and is therefore Jimmy's employer rankles to the point where the latter is unable to endure his subordinate status and takes his frustration out on his best friend and his “wagon of a wife” (616), Maggie. Being a dependent employee of the man he is used to bossing as he would a wife is incompatible with Jimmy's fragile machismo. Revealingly, we are told that the dissolution of their partnership “was like a film about a marriage breaking up” (615). No amount of barroom overtures from Bimbo can heal the rift, and the men's friendship is already doomed by the time Bimbo sabotages the business by driving the divisive van into the sea at Dollymount, the place where Stephen Dedalus recognized his artistic destiny in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

The novel ends with Jimmy returning home to Veronica after this sacrificial act of “vanslaughter” and asking her for a hug, a gesture which Dermot McCarthy reads as the logical consequence of Jimmy's “inability to change” and “a poignant but pathetic emblem of his defeat.”⁵⁹ And yet it may be that, in a faint nod to Joyce, Doyle is hinting at some possible signs of transformation here, given that this unemployed-again husband has, for the first time in the novel, decided to verbalize his need for emotional comfort and support rather than bottle it up. In one sense he is back where he started, jobless and dejected, yet it is also possible that, by opening up emotionally and expressing his vulnerability and need for love, Jimmy Rabbitte Sr may just have begun the process of liberating himself from the insistent need to dominate and master that which he fears and loathes. While he is far from being on the threshold of a transfigured new life, as Stephen is in *Portrait*, Jimmy's admission that he has learned his lesson may not be all cliché.

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

Notes

1. Richard Pine, "Brian Friel and Contemporary Irish Drama," *Colby Quarterly*, 27:4 (December 1991), 190. Cited in Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), 2.
2. Steve Padley, *Key Concepts in Contemporary Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), xii.
3. Gene Kerrigan, "Catching the Rhythm," *Magill* (April 1987), 43.
4. King Farouk press release, April 30, 1987, unpaginated, original emphasis. It seems likely that this press release was misdated, given that the novel was actually published in late March.
5. Fintan O'Toole, "Introduction: On the Frontier," in *A Dublin Quartet*, Dermot Bolger (London: Penguin, 1992), 1.
6. Caramine White, *Reading Roddy Doyle* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 176–177.
7. Andrew Kincaid, *Postcolonial Dublin: Imperial Legacies and the Built Environment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 128.
8. Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–2002* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 299.
9. Stephen J. Costello (ed.), *The Irish Soul: In Dialogue* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2001), 91–92.
10. O'Toole, "Introduction", 1–2.
11. Pat Wheeler and Jenny Newman, "Roddy Doyle," in *Contemporary Irish and British Fiction: An Introduction Through Interviews*, eds Sharon Monteith, Jenny Newman and Pat Wheeler (London: Arnold, 2004), 68.
12. Ulrike Paschel, *No Mean City?: The Image of Dublin in the Novels of Dermot Bolger, Roddy Doyle and Val Mulherns* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998), 148.
13. This label was applied to Doyle and Finglas-based Dermot Bolger by Shaun Richards in "Northside Realism and the Twilight's Last Gleaming," *Irish Studies Review*, 2 (Winter 1992), 18–22.
14. Roddy Doyle, "Introduction," *Brownbread and War* [1989] (London: Secker and Warburg, 1992), 1.
15. Costello, *The Irish Soul*, 88.
16. Costello, *The Irish Soul*, 89.
17. Despite his popularity with the reading public, critical reaction to Doyle's early novels in Ireland was far from fulsome and often openly hostile. See, for example, Justine Cunningham's scathing review of *The Van* in the *Sunday Business Post*, August 11, 1991.
18. Gerry Smyth, "Appendix: An Interview with Roddy Doyle, September 16, 1996," in his *The Novel and the Nation* (London: Pluto, 1997), 100.
19. Fintan O'Toole, "Brave New World," *Sunday Tribune*, April 12, 1987, 21.

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

20. Roddy Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy* [1992] (London: Minerva, 1993), unpaginated dedication. Subsequent page numbers are cited parenthetically in the text.
21. Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 112.
22. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 160.
23. See Penelope Fitzgerald, "Fried Nappy," *London Review of Books*, September 12, 1991, 16.
24. Wheeler and Newman, "Roddy Doyle," 62.
25. Karen Sbrockey, "Something of a Hero: An Interview with Roddy Doyle," *Literary Review*, 42:4 (Summer 1999), 547.
26. See, for example, Matt Maguire, "Dialect(ic) Nationalism?: The Fiction of James Kelman and Roddy Doyle," *Scottish Studies Review*, 7:1 (2006), 80–94.
27. Cairns Craig, "Resisting Arrest: James Kelman," in *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*, eds Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 103.
28. White, *Reading Roddy Doyle*, 181–182.
29. Paul Copley, *Narrative* (London: Routledge, 2001), 231.
30. Monika Fludernik, *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1993), 260.
31. Sbrockey, "Something of a Hero," 544.
32. James Drewett, "An Interview with Roddy Doyle," *Irish Studies Review*, 11:3 (December 2003), 347.
33. Costello, *The Irish Soul*, 91.
34. Niam McArdle, "An Interview with Roddy Doyle," *New Orleans Review*, 21:3–4 (1995), 117.
35. Wheeler and Newman, "Roddy Doyle," 57.
36. Luke Gibbons, "The Global Cure?: History, Therapy and the Celtic Tiger," in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, eds Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 94.
37. Michael Cronin, *The Barrytown Trilogy* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2006), 20.
38. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Ireland's Others: Ethnicity and Gender in Irish Literature and Popular Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), 159–160. It is notable that both Cronin and Cullingford silently elide the political differences that distinguish north Dublin youths from Northern Irish Catholics.
39. See Lauren Onkey, "Celtic Soul Rebels," *Éire-Ireland*, 28:3 (Fall 1993), 147–158; Timothy D. Taylor, "Living in a Postcolonial World: Class and Soul in *The Commitments*," *Irish Studies Review*, 6:3 (1998), 291–302.
40. Paul Hewson, "Bono: The White Nigger," in *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s*, ed. Richard Kearney (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1988), 189–190.

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

41. Dermot McCarthy, *Roddy Doyle: Raining on the Parade* (Dublin, Liffey Press, 2003), 33, original emphasis.
42. McCarthy, *Roddy Doyle*, 39.
43. Mary M. McGlynn, *Narratives of Class in New Irish and Scottish Literature: From Joyce to Kelman, Doyle, Galloway, and McNamee* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 91.
44. Mary McGlynn, "Why Jimmy Wears a Suit: White, Black, and Working Class in *The Commitments*," *Studies in the Novel*, 36:2 (Summer 2004), 234.
45. Gerry Smyth, *Music in Irish Cultural History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 82.
46. See M. Keith Booker, "Late Capitalism Comes to Dublin: 'American' Popular Culture in the Novels of Roddy Doyle," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 28:3 (July 1997), 27–45. There is a latent irony in the fact that what in the novel is described as the "back to basics" (9) ethos of the British punk and postpunk eras, to which Jimmy is ideologically opposed, would appear to be more suited to the lives of aspiring musicians from a north Dublin working-class background than soul music. Arguably, the music produced by young working-class musicians in 1980s London and Manchester has as much if not more to say to these youths than 1960s Motown. If they were to write, one imagines that they would be more likely to compose songs about "meetin' mots in supermarkets an' McDonald's" (12) than about sexual liberation and political revolution.
47. Charles Foran, "The Troubles of Roddy Doyle," *Saturday Night*, 111:3 (April 1996), 64.
48. George O'Brien, "Aspects of the Novelist," *Irish Review*, 10 (Spring 1991), 116–117.
49. Richards, "Northside Realism and the Twilight's Last Gleaming," 19.
50. Brian Donnelly, "Roddy Doyle: From Barrytown to the GPO," *Irish University Review*, 30:1 (Spring/Summer 2000), 17–31.
51. In *A History of the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Derek Hand makes the valid point that "While the teenage pregnancy in *The Snapper* is somewhat unconventional, it merely reflected the social reality, not only of working-class Ireland but also of the middle classes at a time when the political realm was being constantly buffeted by demands for a liberalisation of the constitution with regards to both divorce and abortion" (266).
52. Sbrockey, "Something of a Hero," 538.
53. Ruth Barton, "Feisty Colleens and Faithful Sons: Gender in Irish Cinema," *Cinéaste*, 24:2–3 (1999), 42.
54. <http://legislationline.org/documents/action/popup/id/5284>.
55. McCarthy, *Roddy Doyle*, 66.
56. John McGahern, *Amongst Women* [1990] (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 137.

In the Family Way: Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy (1987–1991)

57. Anthony Clare, *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), 200–201. There are signs that Darren is also beginning to exhibit an ambivalence towards girls he fancies, such as the buxom Mandy Lawless, who we are told “often took her jumper off in school and wrapped it around her waist, even when it wasn’t all that hot. Darren liked that, and it annoyed him as well sometimes” (370).
58. Clare, *On Men*, 205, original emphasis.
59. McCarthy, *Roddy Doyle*, 90, 96.

