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Eamon Maher

*Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie*

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Social and Cultural Change in Ireland as seen in Roddy Doyle’s Paula Spencer Novels

Eamon Maher
Institute of Technology, Tallaght, Dublin

Much has been written about Roddy Doyle’s emergence as a highly successful writer of urban fiction at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, a period that saw the publication of The Barrytown Trilogy - The Commitments (1987), The Snapper (1990) and The Van (1991). All three novels were made into successful films and The Van was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize.

1993, however, was undoubtedly the high point of Doyle’s career to date: it saw the publication of Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha, which won the Booker Prize for its author. The award was a sweet validation of Doyle’s literary merits, given the degree to which he had suffered at the hands of some critics. His novels were not always seen as literary, generously spliced as they are with expletive-filled dialogues and with plots generally revolving around loveable beer-swilling north-side Dublin working class characters. Doyle himself, in a feisty interview with Caramine White, took up the cudgels on the subject of the ‘literariness’ of his work:

One of the big issues about my books is whether they are literary or not. They were on the list for books to be taught in schools, but they’re off the list now because the Minister for Education decided they weren’t literary. … But the idea that they are less literary because they use the vernacular – I don’t agree. The decision to use the vernacular is a literary decision. The decision to use the work ‘fuck’ is a literary decision. It’s a decision of rhythm. … I’ve tried to surround the characters with their own world. So that’s where the language, the images, the music and the rest come from – the same reasoning. I try to get down to the characters. (Doyle, cited in Caramine White, 2001, p. 182)

Gerry Smyth maintains that ‘Doyle depicts a side of Irish life that had never found its voice in the nation’s fiction’ (Smyth, 1997, p. 67), namely the ‘new’ working
class suburbs of Dublin. Dermot McCarthy argues that the writer refuses to buy into the myth according to which Ireland suddenly ‘reinvented’ itself in the 1990s, with its spectacular shift from being a colonial to a postcolonial, rural-agricultural to urban-industrial, Catholic and nationalist to secular and post-nationalist, society. He notes:

If Doyle's narrative imagination articulates anything of an abstract nature, it is that any ambition to be 'central' to anything is suspect; that playing the nation-state game as that game has been played for the past three centuries is not worth the candle; that replacing the stereotypical 'stage Irishman' role with another on the 'world stage' is still 'performing' or 'acting' in a way that calls into question the authenticity of the agent concealed within the role. (McCarthy, 2003, p. 6)

One aspect on which most commentators are agreed is how easy Doyle’s novels are to read. The trilogy is very amusing in places, but, contrary to what some critics would have you believe, it does not attempt to belittle the impact of unemployment and unplanned pregnancy, alcohol abuse and poor dietary habits, issues that are all touched on in the three novels. Michael Cronin argues that the backdrop to the trilogy was the arrested modernisation of the Republic of Ireland in the 1980s after ‘the economic reforms of the 1960s and the tentative moves towards liberalisation of the society in the 1970s’ (Cronin, 2006, pp. 4-5) These developments would fall foul of two negating influences in the 1980s:

The first was the virtual collapse of the economy in the 1980s, with record levels of unemployment, high inflation and substantial outward migration. The second was the backlash against moves to liberalise social legislation with the 1983 and 1986 abortion and divorce referenda. The triumphant trajectory of modernisation appeared to have been brutally interrupted and once again poverty, joblessness and emigration seemed to be the inevitable fate of the Irish urban poor. (Cronin, 2006, p. 5)

There are certainly examples of the triumph of failure to be seen in the trilogy but that is because Doyle was intent on avoiding any facile sentimental portrayal of the north Dublin city working classes. He pointed this out in an interview in 1993: ‘If you say that you have to be wracked with angst and that you have to write of your direct experience which essentially must be miserable, you’re denying an awful lot of people and an awful lot of possibilities’ (Doyle, quoted in Fay, 1993, p. 39).

While drawing occasionally on earlier work by Doyle, my concern in this essay will be to highlight the way in which the publication of *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) marks a significant new phase in Doyle’s career. From this point onwards he comes to grips with societal change in Ireland in a more systematic and ultimately convincing manner. I do not argue that this novel and its sequel, *Paula Spencer* (2006), are better or worse novels than Doyle’s other fiction. Rather, my aim is to demonstrate the extent to which they chart the move from the Ireland of the 1970s and 80s right
through to the early twenty-first century. We do not need to be told how seismic a period this has been for Ireland. The cultural, economic, political and religious landscape was completely transformed by tribunals investigating payments to politicians, the unveiling of the systemic abuse of children in industrial schools and orphanages, and the clerical child abuse scandal. Doyle stated in an interview with Gerry Smyth in September 1996: 'For anybody living in Ireland, particularly in the last five years, it’s not just an economic thing. It’s cultural, religious, social, every aspect. You should bring your passport to bed with you because you’re going to wake up in a different place' (Doyle, cited in Smyth, 1997, p. 102). The moral authority of the former pillars of Irish society, Church and State, slowly crumbled. People were no longer prepared to be preached to by people or the institutions they represented, especially when serious flaws had been exposed in relation to the activities of some of their number. Change was everywhere visible: divorce was legalised, and homosexuality decriminalised. Contraceptives became widely available, emigration stopped as the economy showed signs of unprecedented growth, and generally a wave of consumer liberalism swept through the country. Roddy Doyle campaigned actively for divorce and found himself resentful of a certain Catholic mindset that was opposed to change:

It basically was the Catholic Church against everyone else. It was the insistence that if you’re Irish, you’re white and you’re Catholic as well, and if you’re not both of those things then you’re not fully Irish. Ultimately that is what it (divorce referendum) was all about ... I felt that it was a real fight, a fight for the future of my children and the future of the country. I was very, very emotionally involved. (Doyle, cited in Fay, 1996, p. 19)

A certain amount of this type of anger is palpable in The Woman Who Walked into Doors, which emerged out of the screenplay Doyle wrote for the RTÉ/BBC film drama, Family. It offers a snapshot of the life of Paula Spencer from childhood up to her marriage to the violent and criminal Charlo, who, we are informed in the opening pages of the novel, dies in a foiled kidnap attempt of the wife of a bank manager. Gone are the easy-going Rabbittes of the Barrytown Trilogy who never really became violent or threatening. Charlo is a self-serving, domineering man who can switch from charming to nasty in the blink of an eye. To Doyle’s credit, he does show some of the attractive qualities his character possessed in the eyes of his future wife. He offered an escape from a home that was dominated by an abusive father whose attentions were more focused on Paula’s sister Carmel than on her. He played horsey-horsey with Paula and her younger sister Denise (a dubious enough activity) while ordering Carmel to make tea. Looking back on her youth, Paula recalls that Carmel and her father were always fighting: ‘I remember the screams and the punches. She remembers them as well but she refuses to remember anything else, the good things about home and my father’ (Doyle, 1996, p. 46).

Paula blots out a lot of the unpleasant parts of her childhood and insists on trying to explain away her father’s perversity: ‘He loved her. That was why he did it. Fathers were different then. He’d meant it for the best, being cruel to be kind. Carmel hated
him. She remembers nothing else’ (Doyle, 1996, pp. 46-7). School was an unpleasant experience from start to finish. Teachers had no interest in the children and little enthusiasm for their profession, whereas boys, probably following on their fathers’ example, saw girls as ‘sluts’:

Where I grew up – and probably everywhere else – 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. If you wore platform shoes, and if you didn’t.

Anything could get you called a slut. (Doyle, 1996, pp. 45-6)

Paula gains some revenge on the male race on one occasion when she violently masturbates ‘a good-looking thick’ at the back of the class. For once, she feels she can exert power over men. The victory is short-lived, though, and the account of Paula’s life up until the moment she meets Charlo shows her to have been damaged by her experiences at home and in school. She says that what happened her in school was in no way unusual: ‘I wasn’t the only one. It happened to all of us. We went in children and we turned into animals’ (Doyle, 1996, p. 36). With such low self-esteem, it was natural that Paula should seek out a man who exuded confidence and disdain for all about him. She doesn’t over-romanticise Charlo or try to make him into some sort of demi-God. She maintains that he respected her and made her feel good about herself: ‘I stopped being a slut the minute Charlo Spencer started dancing with me … People looked at me and they saw someone different’ (Doyle, 1996, p. 45). Brian Donnelly quotes in its entirety the description of the first visit Charlo made to Paula’s house and how proud she was of his confidence in front of her parents and concludes: ‘Paula’s recollection dramatizes the vibrancy and nervous excitement of a young woman in love and reveals the vulnerability that Charlo would prey upon so relentlessly’ (Donnelly, 2000, p. 26). Shortly after their marriage, she would discover that her husband was just another in a long line of men who couldn’t, or wouldn’t, give her the respect that she so craved. In keeping with the psychological battering she received at home and in school, Paula always believed there was something wrong with her that made men act in a violent manner towards her:

There was something about me that drew them to me, that made them touch me. It was my tits that I was too young for; I’d no right to them. It was my hair. It was my legs and my arms and my neck. There were things about me that were wrong and dirty. (Doyle, 1996, p. 35)

For a short time, Charlo and she had been happy. There was employment available for people who wanted it – the papers were full of ads for skilled labourers and people to work on the building sites that were springing up all around Dublin – but Charlo didn’t always desire legal employment. It wasn’t the trauma of being unemployed that made him hit her for the first time either. The descriptions of the beatings are harrowing and their impact is summed up by Paula in the following manner: ‘I have a theory about it. Being hit by Charlo the first time knocked everything else out of
me’ (Doyle, 1996, p. 168). She was pregnant at the time and so the beating seemed even more unjustified. Alcohol offered a temporary escape from the horror into which her life had slipped; it got an ever-increasing hold over her as the domestic situation worsened:

He butted me with his head. He held me still and he butted me. I couldn’t believe it. He dragged me around the house by my clothes and by my hair. He kicked me up and he kicked me down the stairs. Bruised me, scalded me, threatened me. For seventeen years. (Doyle, 1996, p. 176)

The matter-of-fact manner in which this litany of abuse is recounted shows how with the passing years resignation took the place of anger. Then of course there was the constant recourse to seeing herself as being somehow responsible for Charlo’s behaviour:

I kept blaming myself. After all the years and the 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...; none of the other fists and belts would have followed if I hadn’t... He hit me, he hit his children, he hit other people, he killed a woman – and I keep blaming myself. For provoking him. For not loving him enough; for not showing it. (Doyle, 1996, p.170)

For seventeen years, Paula endures this barrage of violence and nobody steps in to cry halt. The doctors and the nurses in the hospital didn’t ask the obvious question when she presented with more bruises and broken bones. They smelt the drink and assumed she had fallen down the stairs, or walked into a door. Her parents didn’t intervene, neither did her sisters, or Charlo’s family, even though they must have all suspected what was going on. There is a sense in which society was complicit in what happened, in much the same way as Irish people turned a blind eye to the plight of girls who were committed to the Magdalen Laundries or children who were sent to the industrial schools. Paula was left with no one to turn to, exposed to an infernal repetition of the same scenario. Even a female doctor at the hospital fails to ask the obvious question. Had she done so, it might have been possible to do something to save Paula. But silence was the order of the day:

‘I fell down the stairs again’, I told her. Sorry.
No questions asked. What about the burn on my hand? The missing hair? The teeth? I wanted to be asked. Ask me. Ask me. Ask me. I’d tell her. I’d tell them everything. Look at the burn. Ask me about it. Ask. (Doyle, 1996, p. 164)

Doyle manages skilfully to convey the confused mental state of his heroine. After one severe beating, Paula sees her husband worriedly examining her face and body and thinks: ‘He loved me again. He held my chin. He skipped over my eyes. He couldn’t look straight at me. He felt guilty, dreadful. He loved me again. What happened? I provoked him. I was to blame’ (Doyle, 1996, p. 27). Brian Donnelly
notes the difficulty Doyle must have encountered in remaining faithful to ‘the linguistic
range of the character without resorting to a succession of short sentences … His
achievement in this case is that, by and large, he creates an appropriate eloquence for
Paula’ (Donnelly, 2000, p. 27). Her eloquence comes from the consistency of her
psyche as wounded victim and a woman who is intuitive and self-critical. The narrative
is in some ways Paula’s attempt to make some sense out of her life. She is not a well-
educated woman with recourse to a supportive family or social network: she is alone
in her struggle to surmount her awful plight. Her children are suitably dysfunctional:
John-Paul is a heroin addict and Leanne appears destined to follow the path to
addiction also. The youngest, Jack, seems to be the only one to escape serious damage
— so far.

It doesn’t naturally occur to Paula to seek protection from her husband’s attacks.
Recording her experiences is therapeutic for her. She recognises that her sister Carmel
has difficulty with her slightly sanitised version of events: ‘I’m not. What Carmel
says. Rewriting history. I’m doing the opposite. I want to know the truth, not make
it up’ (Doyle, 1996, pp. 56-7). There are times when she is extremely lucid about
herself: she feels terrible guilt for neglecting the kids, not protecting them from their
father. She recognises that she cannot 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
(Doyle, 1996, p. 88). The event that sparks a transformation in Paula is the day she
sees her husband looking at their daughter Nicola in an inappropriate manner.
Something snaps in her as the primeval maternal instinct to protect their young
takes over. Whatever she felt about him abusing her, Paula wasn’t going to allow him
inflict himself on their daughter. She hits him on the head with a frying pan:

He dropped like shite from a height. I could feel it through my arms. He
fell like I used to fall. All the years, the stitches, all the cries, the baby I
lost – I could feel them all in my arms going into the pan. They lifted it.
They were with me. Down on his head. (Doyle, 1996, p. 213)

This is the moment Paula frees herself from Charlo’s insidious grip. However, that
naturally doesn’t rid her of all the other problems: alcohol dependency, psychological
scars, financial worries, bringing up a family on her own. That said, there is a definite
sense of elation when she takes her destiny in her own hands and drives the bullying
husband out of the house. The kids are happy to see the back of him as well. This is
how The Woman Who Walked into Doors ends. In an interview with Gerry Smyth
shortly after the publication of the novel, Doyle hinted that he and Paula had not
finished their dialogue. Like the French novelist François Mauriac’s fascination with
Thérèse Desqueyroux, a character who continued to fascinate him long after her
appearance in one of his most successful novels, Doyle sensed that he would return
to his heroine at a subsequent date:
I would be open to the idea of going back to characters. For example, I like the idea of somewhere along the line going back to Paula when she is six years older and I’m six years older, Ireland will have changed dramatically, and there’ll be plenty of material there to wonder what has happened to her. It would inevitably be a very different book because she’s already told her story up to 1993, although that story is deliberately left open. (Doyle, cited in Smyth, 1997, p. 108)

It took a bit longer than he had expected, but return to Paula he did, and with most felicitous results. We note from the outset of Paula Spencer that we are dealing with a more mature woman (in her late forties), but still someone who has to confront her demons. Primary among them is alcohol, which she has not touched for a year but whose soothing balm she still craves. She works as a cleaner in Celtic Tiger Ireland, one of the very few native Irish engaged in this activity. Of the four children, two, John-Paula and Nicola, have left home, while the other two, Leanne and Jack, are still living with Paula. John-Paul is clean of drugs and living with the mother of his two children and Nicola is married with kids. To judge from appearances, they could be deemed to be doing alright, especially considering the trauma that marked their childhood. Still, underneath the surface, some serious problems persist: ‘Leanne scares Paula. The guilt. It’s always there. Leanne is twenty-two. Leanne wets her bed. Leanne deals with it. It’s terrible’ (Doyle, 2006, p. 5). Doyle makes use of this type of telegraphic style throughout: it is an effective way of conveying Paula’s thoughts as they impinge on her consciousness. He shows a remarkable capacity to climb inside her head and convey the misgivings she harbours about what is happening to her children: Will John-Paul go back on heroin? Is Nicola happy? What will she do if Leanne continues to show such an unhealthy liking for drink? And Jack, the youngest and her favourite, will he manage to realise his full potential? Caring for her offspring is what keeps Paula on the straight and narrow, but it’s hard going: ‘She has to know where Leanne is. All the time. She’s on her own here, but she’s never alone. And it’s not just Leanne. Her children are all around her, all their different ages and faces. She has four divided into thousands. There are so many Leannes’ (Doyle, 2006, p. 160).

Her struggle with alcoholism is painful and constant. On one occasion she scours Leanne’s room in search of a can or a bottle. She finally comes across a can under the bed and feverishly puts it to her mouth, but it’s completely empty. She had a lucky escape and she knows it. Her drinking has wreaked havoc in her life and that of her children and yet she’s only ever one drink away from slipping back into the abyss. She marvels at how her sisters Carmel and Denise can drink like fish and still not go under. Paula thinks back to the time when she lay on the floor after one of Charlo’s beatings. Being sober brings acuity to her evocation of the past, but it does not necessarily bring healing:

Maybe it’s age. And it’s definitely the drink. She’s not sure. Maybe it’s the way the brain works to protect itself. It invents a new woman who can look back and wonder, instead of look back and howl. Maybe it happens
to everyone. But it's definitely the drink, or life without it. It's a different world. She's not sure she likes it that much. But she's a new-old woman, learning how to live. (Doyle, 2006, p. 136)

Passages like this are what give Doyle's Paula Spencer novels such force. Her ruminations on life ring true; she gives us access to her most intimate hopes and fears and her comments are always consistent with her personality and character. Doyle allows her the freedom to develop and to reach some sort of accommodation with a much-changed Ireland. She doesn't bemoan her lowly position on the social ladder or resent the fact that Carmel is buying property in Bulgaria or that Denise is having an affair with a man she met at a parent-teacher meeting. Change is omnipresent:

The whole area has changed. She's been here since the beginning. It was a farm a few months before they moved in. It was all young families, kids all over the place. Out in the middle of nowhere. No bus of its own. Near the tracks, but no train station. No proper shops, no pub. No church or schools. Nothing but the houses and the people. (Doyle, 2006, p. 17)

Paula doesn't express an opinion as to whether things have changed for the better or the worse but the reader has the distinct impression that she and the other inhabitants of this estate are the forgotten people, the ones who are left to survive as best they can in this concrete jungle, this ghetto where there is little hope of advancement. Religion, education, social amenities are conspicuous by their absence. It would take a giant step for anyone to rise to the top from such a background: the more normal destiny would be to remain rooted at the bottom of the social scale. Paula has to work very hard indeed to make ends meet. Possessing no educational qualifications, she finds herself in middle age cleaning office blocks and tidying up after open-air concerts. Through sheer hard work, she manages to get Jack a computer for Christmas and feels huge pride as she watches him surfing the internet. When she is working, even though her bones ache, at least she is being kept busy. Paula's friend, Rita Kavanagh, dates the arrival of a prosperous Ireland back to the emergence of so many children's clothes shops: 'I noticed them before all the new cars. And the talk about house prices. Even all the cranes' (Doyle, 2006, p. 166).

References to significant events give some chronological order to the narrative: the tsunami in Asia, the death of Pope John-Paul II, Liverpool winning the Champions' League, the tragic death of five girls in the Meath school bus accident. Paula's Dublin is a vastly different place to what we encountered in The Woman Who Walked into Doors. Religion was never a big influence in her life, the scepticism possibly fuelled by a negative impression a local priest had on her: 'The looks he gave me when he was talking about faith and the Blessed Virgin, it wasn't my tea he was after or my biscuits. It isn't just the bishops who like to get their exercise' (Doyle, 2006, p. 90). This is an evident allusion to Bishop Eamonn Casey, who provoked great scandal when it was discovered in May 1992 that he had fathered a child with a distant American cousin, Annie Murphy, some years previously, an event that marked the beginning of a downward spiral for the Catholic Church in Ireland. Paula turns up
her U2 CD, thinking that she will impress the Poles living next door. Then again, they probably won't be there, as they leave early every morning and return late: 'Sunday's the only day she really hears them. She sees them go out on the street, in their good clothes. They're the only ones heading off to Mass' (Doyle, 2006, p. 272). Ireland has become a multicultural society, one that boasts full employment and growth rates that are the envy of the developed world. Things have definitely progressed from the declaration by Jimmy Rabbitte who, in The Commitments, encourages his band to produce a new form of soul music, stating that soul is about sex and politics, but a different kind of politics, the politics of disenchantment:

'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'. (Doyle, 1987, pp. 7-8)

Already in the first instalment of the trilogy, there was a social message evident in Doyle's work. Religion was not satisfying the needs of Jimmy Rabbitte's generation and social background and so they needed to find some worthwhile alternative: be it music, alcohol or sex. The economic climate was bleak, unemployment spiralling out of control, the population of the north city working class suburbs demoralised. In Paula Spencer, the problems encountered seem to be more existential than financial. In fact, the economic prosperity, the huge retail outlets, the bigger cars, the property abroad, have pretty much passed Paula by. Even those close to her who have improved their economic status don't seem to be terribly happy: 'They're all cracking open. They all have to baste themselves' (Doyle, 2006, p. 188). Doyle's heroine can at least point to some significant improvements in her own life: she has enough money to get by, she is a reasonable success as a sober mother and she is no longer the victim of a vicious husband. The final pages of the novel show her making her way to the Mater hospital to see Carmel, who has had a mastectomy. Paula has met an older man, Joe, whose wife left him for another woman and with whom she may enjoy some companionship, although it is far too early to judge how the relationship will develop. What the future holds for her in the new Ireland is also left hanging in the air. Her greatest achievement is to have survived in light of the rotten hand she has been dealt. The last lines read: 'It's her birthday. She's forty-nine. She bought a cake earlier. It's in the fridge. They'll have it when she gets home' (Doyle, 2006, p. 277). There are no wild dreams here, just a quiet determination to take each day as it comes.

At times, in the Barrytown Trilogy, readers have the impression that for all that they live in a pretty disadvantaged milieu, Doyle's characters nevertheless maintain an amiable and appealing disposition. They are far from wallowing in self-pity and appear, in fact, to be making a reasonable fist of their lives. Michael Cronin remarks:
It is possible to see why politically informed critics can object to the conventional representation of lowlife characters as amiable clowns; it is equally necessary to avoid the tyranny of a kind of pedagogic earnestness which becomes a veiled form of class condescension in its insistence on viewing the working-class life in one way and one way only. (Cronin, 2006, pp. 5-6)

It would be equally wrong for Doyle to have given himself over completely to the tragic aspects of Paula Spencer's experiences and to have given her an eloquent voice to rail against the inequity of her situation. But, as we have seen, what is most impressive about the two Paula Spencer novels is precisely the degree to which the author refrains from putting expressions in Paula's mouth that don't fit her character and background. He stated once in an interview: 'You can't graft anger onto characters just because it suits certain reviewers'. And he continues: 'The reader can make his or her mind up about the characters and what happens to them. The reader doesn't need me to tell him or her how to think' (Doyle, cited in Fay, 1993, p. 40). It is this restraint that distinguishes Doyle from his talented contemporary, Dermot Bolger, who, in The Journey Home (1990) in particular, tends to allow social commentary too free a rein. Take the following example of how the main character in the novel, Hano, while looking from the window of a city centre pub, has a premonition of the ominous fate that awaits Irish society:

Far below, Dublin was moving towards the violent crescendo of its Friday night, taking to the twentieth century like an aborigine to whiskey. Glue sniffers stumbled into each other, coats over their arms as they tried to pick pockets. Stolen cars zigzagged through the distant grey estates where pensioners prayed anxiously behind bolted doors, listening for the smash of glass. In the new disco bars children were queuing, girls of fourteen showing their way up for last drinks at the bar. (Bolger, 2003, p. 47)

It is highly unlikely that Hano would have been capable of such detailed analysis of the way cosmopolitan Dublin was heading down the slippery slope of substance abuse, car theft and the orgy of underage drinking. So the only conclusion one can reach is that the novelist is transposing his own view of the situation on to his character. Hano, and the other depictions in this novel, feel displaced and marginalised in the hostile city that is Dublin. They are in a state of perpetual dislocation throughout the novel and the image that is translated of their hapless lives is an extremely pessimistic one. The error Bolger makes is to allow the (justifiable) anger he felt about political corruption and social discrimination to come across in the novel; Doyle is careful not to fall into that particular trap. This is not to detract from the important role Bolger has played in highlighting the ineptitude of the leaders of both Church and State when it came to tackling the massive gap between rich and poor, between the haves and the have-nots in Irish society. This ineptitude may have been linked to the threat such a move would have posed to their own privileged status in Irish society, a status that has been eroded in more recent years by revelations of political corruption and the clerical sex abuse scandals. I make this brief parenthesis in order to show how two
talented novelists can differ in their treatment of analogous social contexts. While they have a similar ideological position on many issues, the manner in which they explore these issues in their novels is very different.

Brian Donnelly argues that Roddy Doyle’s novels ‘attempt to articulate a part of late twentieth-century Irish experience that had largely remained outside the horizons of Irish literature, ways of life hidden from the concerns of people who typically buy and read literary fiction in Ireland’ (Donnelly, 2000, p. 27). With the publication of Paula Spencer, we can now add the early part of the twenty-first century to this assessment, where the experience of the heroine would be even more foreign to the bulk of Irish people who buy and read fiction. Donnelly continues: ‘Like (William) Carleton, Doyle’s enterprise involved an imaginative reproduction of the world of his characters, articulated in their own words’ (Donnelly, 2000, p. 27). There is a certain language which has the ring of a real hammer on a real nail, which is true to the experience it conveys. This explains the popularity of Doyle’s portrayal: there is no discernibly false note in what Paula says or thinks. Her feelings are ones with which all humans can identify and are expressed in a wonderfully transparent language. By commenting on what she lives through, she is providing a kind of diary for the progression of Irish society in the past three decades. This is what prompts Sylvie Mikowski to compare Doyle’s chronicle of Dublin with that of McGahern’s rural Ireland, both of which expose contentious hidden aspects of Irish society, especially in the realm of domestic violence:

But while McGahern suggests a link between this violence and the history of the nation, Doyle resituates the problem of domestic violence in a more social setting, attributing the causes of this phenomenon to poverty, a lack of education and all the handicaps afflicting the most marginalized sections of the population. (Mikowski, 2004, p. 121)

Doyle is also one of the few contemporary Irish novelists to tackle in a serious way the consequences of immigration in the establishment of a multicultural society, the prosperity of an elite that has been hugely enhanced by the past few decades of economic prosperity and the quiet desperation of others who, like Paula, continue to struggle with their demons at a remove from the public limelight. Paula’s is the kind of story that doesn’t make the front pages of newspapers because she stumbles through her life with a quiet dignity, seeking merely to survive from day to day and to be as good a mother as she can be in difficult circumstances. She is representative of a generation of Dublin working class women who have been failed by the political, religious and educational systems and yet who survive and even manage to achieve some control over their lives in spite of the odds stacked against them. Paula seems to be a glowing example of how the human spirit is indomitable and Roddy Doyle deserves credit for giving a voice to such a compelling and utterly convincing post-Celtic Tiger woman. In fact, with the publication of Paula Spencer, Doyle has grown into a novelist of substance and is rightly now placed among the finest living Irish prose writers. He has become one of those people who manage to change a country,
not by arguing about it, but by describing it. This, in my view, is what will end up being his major contribution to Irish letters.

References


