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DIPLOMA THESIS

The Barrytown Trilogy: Roddy Doyle's Portrayal of Dublin Working Class at the Turn of the 1990s

Barrytownská trilogie: Roddy Doyle a jeho obraz dělnické třídy v Dublinu na přelomu 80. a 90. let 20. století

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I hereby declare that I have elaborated this Diploma Thesis by myself under the supervision of doc. PhDr. Petr Chalupský, Ph.D., using sources and literature listed on the Works Cited page. I also declare that I have not used this thesis to obtain any other degree.

Prague, 4 May 2020

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the depiction of working-class Dublin in Roddy Doyle's first three novels, *The Commitments*, *The Snapper* and *The Van*, known as *The Barrytown Trilogy*. The first part of the thesis provides a short overview of Doyle's early work in the context of modern Irish fiction with a focus on working-class protagonists and outlines Ireland's and specifically Dublin's cultural and economic background in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The second part is based on a comparative analysis of the three books in which the author celebrates everyday life in Barrytown, a fictitious neighbourhood in the north of Dublin, through the eyes of a typical working-class family. One section is also dedicated to the language of the trilogy used as a means of achieving greater authenticity.

KEYWORDS

Roddy Doyle, *The Barrytown Trilogy*, *The Commitments*, *The Snapper*, *The Van*, Irish literature, Dublin, working class, family, 1980s, 1990s

ANOTACE

Tato práce se zabývá vykreslením dublinské dělnické třídy v prvních třech románech Roddyho Doyla, The Commitments, The Snapper a The Van, souhrnně označovaných jako Barrytownská trilogie. První část práce nabízí krátký přehled Doyleových prvotin v kontextu moderní irské literární fikce se zaměřením na protagonisty dělnické třídy a popisuje irské a obzvláště dublinské kulturní a ekonomické podmínky na konci 80. a na začátku 90. let 20. století. Druhá část práce je založena na porovnání všech tří knih, v nichž autor oslavuje každodenní život v Barrytownu, smyšleném sousedství na severu Dublinu, očima typické dělnické rodiny. Jedna kapitola je rovněž věnována použití jazyka jako prostředku dosažení větší autenticity.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Roddy Doyle, Barrytownská trilogie, The Commitments, The Snapper, The Van, irská literatura, Dublin, dělnická třída, rodina, 80. a 90. léta 20. století

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Introduction

Contemporary Irish literature, although popular, does not receive the same attention as other English-written literatures. This lack of intensive study may be attributed to two main factors: a) Irish literature is rather young, at least compared to British or American Literature, and b) it is not usually studied as an independent category but rather included in British or Anglo-Irish Literature, which does not provide enough time or space for Irish authors to come under scrutiny.

One of the aims of this thesis is to elaborate a part of the work of Roddy Doyle, one of the most prominent Irish contemporary writers, and, by means of the analysis, spread awareness of this author and perhaps even arouse interest in his writing. Hopefully, his texts will eventually find a position in school curricula in and outside Ireland, along with the works of such authors as John Banville and Anne Enright, his fellow, esteemed and elaborate, novelists. After all, these writers are not only successful but also very popular and their works might even help Irish literature to gain the academic attention it deserves, for its value is indisputable and arguably comparable to other literatures.

Contemporary Irish literature should be valued mainly for its departure from classical writers such as George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, and especially James Joyce, usually regarded as one of the greatest writers of all time, who has been part of compulsory reading lists for decades. It seems that although his popularity among readers is often debatable, his works still have the power to eclipse a large number of Irish literary attempts that have come long after him.

Roddy Doyle's fiction focuses almost exclusively on working-class characters. He tries to depict them as authentically as possible, which offers an interesting perspective on the ups and downs of their everyday lives. Not only does he mention their problems and anxieties, but he also portrays the humour and spontaneity typical of working-class people, believing that every individual has a certain potential.

To understand Doyle's idiosyncratic writing, it is necessary to look into his life, especially the beginning of his career as a working-class writer. Most of the theoretical part is dedicated to the crucial features in Doyle's works, meaning characters and language form,

thanks to which his early novels earned an occasional label ‘dialogue novels’. A part focusing on *The Barrytown Trilogy* (1987 – 1991) immediately follows, explaining briefly the significance of place in Doyle’s works and summarizing all three novels. His writing is then situated in the context of modern Irish fiction aimed at working-class heroes. Since his protagonists come predominantly from the urban working-class background, there is a chapter describing the origins of Irish working class with a focus on Dublin community. The final section of the theoretical part covers Ireland’s history throughout the 1980s and the 1990s and provides a few examples of the very beginning of liberalism and secularization, two processes that have been deepening ever since. It also explores the particularity of Dublin, compared with the rest of the country, as well as the significance of the capital’s divide between the north and the south.

The practical part analyses and compares the three novels – *The Commitments* (1987), *The Snapper* (1990) and *The Van* (1991) – and their themes related to the topic of this thesis. The Rabbitte family, connecting the trilogy, serves as an instrument of Doyle’s portrayal of the lives of working-class Dubliners. Accordingly, the language employed in the trilogy is brought into focus, as it plays a pivotal role in terms of authenticity and often leads to Doyle’s work being either highly valued or strongly criticized. Other important features elaborated across the novels include a class-based struggle, recourse to humour, and the theme of family, which holds an important role in Doyle’s works in general.

The main aim of this thesis is to demonstrate unrecognized complexity in the trilogy, often considered to be simply comic, as well as Roddy Doyle’s merit of challenging the notions of high and low literature and, more importantly, offering an unconventional and sympathetic approach to the portrayal of urban working class.

Theoretical Part

1 Roddy Doyle

1.1 Life and Works

Roddy Doyle, a world-famous author and Booker Prize winner, is one of the most prominent writers in contemporary Ireland. He was born in Dublin in 1958 and still lives in the capital. His writing career started in 1987 when he published his first novel, *The Commitments*. Since then he has been praised by many reviewers and has become very popular with the public both in and outside the Irish Republic. His third novel, *The Van* (1991), earned him an inclusion in the shortlist of the prestigious Man Booker Prize, which he won for his next novel, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993). His other notable novels are *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* (1996), in which the author focuses on psychological aspects of a bullied woman from her perspective, and *A Star Called Henry* (1999), in which he moves closer to the genre of historic fiction. However, Doyle's creative efforts and commercial success are not limited to novels. His collections of short stories, *The Deportees* (2007) and *Bullfighting* (2011), are equally popular, along with his children's books. Besides, he also writes plays and scripts for his novels as well as screenplays for TV, such as the 1994 controversial TV drama series *Family*. Finally, he was much involved in the making of all three film adaptations of his novels from *The Barrytown Trilogy*. All things considered, it now seems surprising that he had to publish *The Commitments* at his own expense before his popularity began to grow (White 2).

Roddy Doyle graduated at University College Dublin in English and geography. Soon after that, in 1980, he became a teacher. Since he was dissatisfied with the demands of the teaching profession, he left after fourteen years to have more time to write, which was something he had wished to do since he had been a teenager (White 29). His parents, Rory and Ita, both come from a different background – working class and middle class – which seems to have proven helpful: "I've grown up with a foot in each class […] It's a useful position to be in, especially as a novelist" (White 28). Knowing life from both sides has enabled him to put himself in his characters' place. Both parents also taught him to be open-

minded and, being passionate readers, always encouraged him to read, for there was not much else to do at that time (28).

What has changed since his childhood is Doyle's perception of religious belief. Though raised Catholic, he now declares himself "a very happy atheist" (qtd. in White 39). He has a strong opinion about organized religion, saying it depresses him to see people in the church, especially children: "What are they going for? They're immortal – they're not, but they should think they are […] When you begin to slow down and there's a rattle in your breathing, then you go off to church to make your peace, not when you're seventeen and you should be avoiding at all costs all that crap" (White 39). It is not surprising that he rarely mentions the Catholic Church; when he does, the purpose is simply to mock it.

Doyle's success lies mainly in a distinctive approach to literature and a very accessible, instantly recognizable style. His texts are simple and readable, featuring monosyllabic words, short sentences, and a considerable degree of dialogues, which makes his characters more distinct. His work is, above all, meant to be entertaining: "[Books] have to be entertaining or no one will read them" (qtd. in White 2). Doyle wishes to remain humble in his writing attempts and admits he dislikes writers who intend to show the reader just how capable they are: "Like Anthony Burgess, who wants to show us that he has the biggest vocabulary in the world … The type of writing I prefer is simple, straightforward and serves the characters" (qtd. in White 3).

Doyle also tends to highlight popular culture, which is a feature directly related to his love of oral literature: "Popular history, says Doyle's fiction, is real history too. It may even be that it's more real than official history" (Reynolds and Noakes 8). Doyle seems to wish to continue with the Irish tradition of storytelling and come close to becoming an oral historian: "A love of words and stories is a kind of national characteristic" in Ireland and it is no different in Doyle's case (10). It also explains the connectedness and interlinked characters in Doyle's novels. *The Barrytown Trilogy* is a case in point: when Jimmy Rabbitte, the protagonist of *The Commitments*, is recruiting a potential singer for his band, Sharon, Jimmy's sister, appears for a split second on the stairs. In the second book of the trilogy, *The Snapper*, it is the same Sharon who tells the reader her story of an unintended pregnancy. The characters never appear on the scene or leave it "without some sense of

history – often someone else's history – surrounding them", however short it may be (6). Doyle plays with details and attaches great importance to seemingly unimportant events. In both life and work he is convinced that "history is around us all the time [and] it's not always the major events that make us what we are…" (8). In any case, despite the fictional nature of his work, there are aspects of the real world, one of them being the importance of stories. As long as there are people to tell them, the stories will continue, and the characters will become alive (11).

To make the portrayal of his characters in everyday situations as authentic as possible, Doyle must employ everyday language as well. Dublin dialect, or rather urban working-class sociolect, is filled with vulgarity and phrases unheard of outside Dublin. To simulate real speech, Doyle often uses the eye dialect technique, i.e. specific, non-standard spelling to match the true pronunciation of native speakers. Doyle has been surrounded by the same language variety for all his life. Therefore, in his case, it is not an artificial writing technique but merely a habit of intensive listening to the conversations of working-class Dubliners. He seeks to make his readers hear the voices the way he hears them. Unsurprisingly, reading his novels may have the effect of actually hearing the working-class Dubliners talk.

However, this accessibility is often subject to debates and criticism. Some critics claim that Doyle is "merely entertaining, just popular and funny", contesting his status of a serious author (qtd. in White 1). Rudiger Imhof, the author of *The Modern Irish Novel: Irish Novelists After 1945*, does not hide the impression Doyle's first novel left on him: "The novel, I felt, if *The Commitments* was a novel at all, could not be taken seriously" (240). Doyle is reproached for a simplistic style of writing, characterized by a significant lack of descriptive passages and a certain repetitiveness of flat characters. Moreover, apart from his writing skills, the truthfulness and authenticity of his work has been questioned as well. He "has been accused of […] holding the Irish up to a ridicule", one of the reasons being the use of bad and profane language which contributes to an unfavourable image of his own country (qtd. in White 3).

Doyle does not usually pay much attention to such objections. Nevertheless, in 1996, when his novels, at that time appearing on the list of books meant to be read at school, were rejected by the Ministry of Education for not being literary, he said earnestly: "It's utter

drivel … the idea that they are less literary because they use the vernacular – I don't agree. The decision to use the vernacular is a literary decision. The decision to use the word 'fuck' is a literary decision. It's a decision of rhythm … to use images from television instead of books, to use advertising jingles and such – it's a literary decision" (White 4). It appears that the real question is not whether Doyle's work is literary; rather, the issue lies in the term itself and how its sense has shifted over the last decades. Caramine White, a university teacher who wrote Doyle's thorough biography named *Reading Roddy Doyle*, argues that he "is indeed a serious artist" (4). She believes that Doyle's work is in a way a tribute to working-class life as well as to contemporary fiction writing (23-4). Roddy Doyle certainly gives the impression of cherishing freedom of authors with the motto 'follow your instinct no matter the cost': "You're challenging preconceived notions of what working-class people are like, or should be like. If the accusation is there that they're drunk all the time, or that they're fat, or whatever, just ignore it and get on with it and just do what you think is true" (Reynolds and Noakes 33). Furthermore, it makes no difference to Doyle that the people he writes about are his neighbours: "He feels no duty to 'do Ireland proud' and will not whitewash situations to save his country embarrassment" (White 39). In other words, he values authenticity regardless of what is considered appropriate.

His fiction corresponds to his postmodernist view on literature: "I've never liked the division between the high and the low, between the literary and the popular" (White 2). This also corresponds to his lack of interest in awards and honours: "Where the Booker has made a difference is that the first time I went to the States there were very few newspapers interested in talking to me. Afterwards, I was talking to all of them" (qtd. in White 25). The quote illustrates that not even the prestigious prize can disturb Doyle's peace. White claims that "his success as a writer is due, in part, to the fact that he lives and writes with his perspective" (25).

Additionally, although his books are known to be irreligious and focused on common people using profane language, there is no reason not to consider them political books either. "It's the difference between politics with a little 'p' or a big 'P'" (White 13). There may be no politicians or political debates as such, but the topics of poverty, unemployment or domestic violence are all political issues that certainly require much attention.

Generally, Doyle seems to be down-to-earth and unaffected by his success. This does not mean, however, that he would not care about other people:

> I live in happiness and contentment I once wouldn't have thought possible. But all I have to do is look at people to see that my contentment isn't shared [...] I wouldn't want to just build a wall around myself and say, 'Well, I've got this so fuck the rest of you'. (qtd. in White 40)

In a sense, his portrayal of working-class society is a reaction to the realization that there are people who do not share the same happiness.

Despite being known to answer all questions concerning his motivation, Doyle tries to distance himself from interpreting his works or explaining the actions of his characters: "I just write books. It's up to other people to interpret them" (qtd. in White 33). He is convinced that everyone should take from the stories what they want or believe. Furthermore, he appears to make a point of keeping his career as separate from his personal life as possible.

Roddy Doyle may give some critics a hard time, but there is no doubt that his books are popular and enjoyable. Stephen Frears, the director of *The Snapper* and *The Van*, makes it clear: "He's the only Irish writer I know of who's actually read by the kids he writes about in Dublin. You don't see them walking around with *Ulysses*" (Christon). Referring to the famous novel by James Joyce, Frears supports the claim that it is perhaps time to re-evaluate the subject matter of classic literature, the works of which may at times seem too abstract for many readers struggling to comprehend the plot and identify with the characters. On top of that, not only are Doyle's works regarded as entertaining, but the humanist and tolerant perspective of life that can be found in them might raise hopes of deeper sympathy and understanding among people, working-class society in particular.

1.2 Characters

Characters are the essence of Doyle's fiction. The reader meets them and keeps learning about them through endless dialogues, in contrast to a small number of descriptive passages and authorial intrusions, thanks to which his novels are sometimes called 'dialogue novels'. Almost all the information that is relevant to the story thus comes from the characters' conversations rather than from an omniscient narrator.

In his early novels, Roddy Doyle treats the issues of contemporary Ireland and elaborates on them via his working-class characters in a non-explicit, sometimes even obscure manner for which he is often criticized. The characters in his books deal with everyday problems, such as sexual abuse, unemployment, or church repression, yet they never talk directly about them. They are not interested in politics whatsoever and they spend their free time trying to entertain themselves, usually by watching TV, listening to music, and frequent alcohol consumption. They react to their immediate surroundings and do not incline to speculate about world issues. However, Doyle strongly opposes the accusation that his characters' lives are in any way unimportant or even meaningless. He believes that this view is based on the assumption, which is commonly shared by upper-class people, that meaningful conversation, covering politics and eloquent arguments concerning world affairs, is the foundation of a meaningful life: "Talking about politics is as about as meaningless as talking about sex or talking about football…It's just conversation – it's filling gaps" (White 16).

More importantly, unlike Joyce's middle-class and mostly passive *Dubliners*, Doyle's working-class characters are full of life and, despite all their struggles, they never give up. Whether they are enterprising in nature or simply used to sailing through life, they seldom renounce their optimism. On the contrary, they always keep the strength to laugh at their misfortune. Some of them even reach a state of happiness, although they need to make difficult choices and show some working-class solidarity.

Not only does Doyle try to destroy the myth of the meaning of life, but he also contests the notion of official history, asking himself: "What is our knowledge of history?" (Reynolds and Noakes 26). Doyle is not much interested in the leaders' view and the tales about victors. Instead, he is very fond of oral history, the kind of history that "seems to [him] living… like people [he] knows, people next door who have grown up in the same conditions" (26). Like his beloved oral historians, he tells stories about voices that would not get a chance to be heard otherwise, even though they are as important as the voices of leaders.

For Doyle, as well as for his protagonists, the most important thing is family. In all his works, the characters treat their relatives in a peculiar way, being rather mean and

unsympathetic at first. In the end, however, it is the family that makes life and its challenges bearable, which is particularly evident in the trilogy.

Although his characters are far from being flawless, one of the characteristics of Doyle's writing is that he never judges them. He states clearly: "I'm not a priest or a moralist" (White 11). His sole intention is to provide the reader with a real-life portrayal of the community which he knows so well and to which he is partial. He strives to depict life as it is, or rather as he sees it, not as he would like it to be. Moreover, in a sense, he sends his readers an important humanist message: people are not black and white, and although each of them has a darker side, they are all humans. Whether it is Doyle's straight intention or not, his work might, at least to some extent, lead the way to greater tolerance and respect.

All the features ranging from the self-centred view on life to the vitality and the importance of family are what makes Doyle's characters so believable and identifiable. What makes them even more authentic is the use of language which will be explored in the following chapter.

1.3 Language and Style

Roddy Doyle admits that his writing career started as pure experimentation. That should not be surprising, given the fact that it mostly takes writers some time to develop their style. Interestingly enough, Roddy Doyle has continued experimenting with the use of language ever since. When he decided to write *The Commitments*, after several unsuccessful attempts of creative breakthroughs, he almost immediately knew that language was the key point. He started listening to his characters the same way he listened to people around him with the sole purpose: to make them alive. As a result, his unmistakable style is typical of countless dialogues and very little description or narrative commentary: "I deliberately just let the words do the talking and it didn't seem necessary to describe places" (qtd. in White 9). Doyle further admits that although he loves Charles Dickens, if someone took away his authorial comments, his work "would be much more effective" (qtd. in White 9). It comes as no surprise that some of Doyle's novels, in which he uses dashes instead of quotation marks, are said to "read like screenplays" (White 9).

To make his characters' voices as authentic as possible, Doyle makes them speak the way Dubliners speak, which means using Dublin vernacular with everything that relates to it: "Doyle has the gift of transcribing precisely (and enjoyably) a vernacular dialect. He gives literary voice to Barrytown" (White 9). Predictably, Doyle states that one of the hardest things when writing his first novel was balancing the real working-class vernacular with concerns whether the reader would understand it without having to pause (Reynolds and Noakes 13). The authentic dialogue is pivotal and serves not only as a means of greater authenticity but also as a way of character depiction. Doyle considers it more faithful and accurate than character description, for it conveys all the features and, as Doyle puts it, "quirks" of every individual's speech (13): "Speech is the expression of individuality, not in isolation but in communication" (qtd. in White 10). In a sense, Doyle does his personal sociolinguistic research focused on groups and communities, such as working class, Dubliners, and people of a certain age. Therefore, his characters resemble the types of people he has certainly met at some point in his life.

With only a few descriptive passages, the sense of locality is mainly in characters' discourse; not only in their expressions (or slang), even though it is the most prominent feature, but also in syntax, hesitation devices, pauses, and other linguistic features. It can be said, with some exaggeration, that when Doyle's characters start speaking, Dubliners should recognize the speech of their neighbours (at least in *The Barrytown Trilogy*). Furthermore, Roddy Doyle is enthusiastic about slang and the way it is used by various groups of people: "Slang is fascinating – it's such an unrecognised form of creativity. Every street has its slang, every generation has its slang. Some words survive a couple of days among a couple of friends. Others grow and grow" (Reynolds and Noakes 16).

Being passionate about both language and music, Doyle also continually plays with the rhythm, especially in his first novel. He asserts:

> Well I love English how it's spoken in Dublin. I love the rhythm and the bullet of it. Even though I've grown up with it, I still actively listen to it. I find in other cities I have been to, people don't engage as informally as they do in Dublin. Now as a writer, if you have got something as strong as that: why wouldn't you use that language to create stories from? (O'Malley)

In addition to that, the rhythm encourages imagination and has the effect of film-watching: the reader (the spectator) becomes drawn into the story, perceiving smooth transitions between the background and humorously striking and dramatic scenes, reinforced by extended dialogues:

> If we can use the analogy of film, try and imagine that the author has a camera: he is bang up against the faces of the characters, and he is at their shoulders all the time, so that his view is almost theirs, but just slightly different. The author is somewhat detached. (O'Malley)

To interconnect the reality in his work with his intentions, the author further admits to significant editorial modifications. This effort, related to Doyle's well-organized writing routine, does not go unnoticed: "Roddy's a deceptive writer. On the surface the work seems simple, but it's really very sophisticated, and very funny. He creates an entire world" (Christon). The time spent on editing enables him to highlight emotional displays of a particular discourse as well as the general comic effect. One of the functions of language is thus to accentuate the already humorous situations.

There are more effects of the author's style. Clearly and importantly, the characters can be put into groups based on geography (region) and social class. Additionally, to destroy the distance barrier between the reader and the characters, Doyle opts for a specific language to capture the dynamics of the community, which produces a strongly comic outcome. Nonetheless, the comedy is not just a by-product of Doyle's portrayal of working-class community; it is his trademark. All his novels, regardless of how deeply they depict social problems and life crises, can be labelled 'comic'. After all, reluctant to distinguish between high and low art, Roddy Doyle "remains dedicated to making his novels enjoyable to the average reader" (White 145).

2 *The Barrytown Trilogy*

Roddy Doyle does not write about the Irish per se; his protagonists are Dubliners or, more precisely, Barrytowners. Barrytown is a fictional suburb in the north of Dublin based on Kilbarrack, a place of great value and importance for Doyle, as he grew up there, in his parents' house, occasionally watching people in the street from his window (Reynolds and Noakes 19). At that time, the neighbourhood was getting rougher as the inner Dublin was getting bigger. Nowadays, it is described as "a blank canvas of ordinariness, like any working-class housing estate in any city in western Europe" (qtd. in White 26). As Doyle puts it: "The architecture might vary but the spirit and the energy and the highs and the lows are the same everywhere" (Reynolds and Noakes 20). In his view, all the estates around the centre of Dublin are practically the same; not in terms of buildings and outward structure, but more in terms of their people and the mood they bring.

The sense of place is very important in all Doyle's novels but even more prominent in the trilogy. Since he never describes the actual setting of his stories in detail, it is through the characters – their speech and behaviour – that the reader meets Doyle's familiar neighbourhood: "The people are the place; they do not just live there" (White 10). They keep shaping Barrytown by what they do and say. Fintan O'Toole even refers to Barrytown as an "urban village", a term usually associated with American writers, saying it is "more like a neighbourhood urban community such as Harlem than an Irish country village or a classical city like Joyce's or O'Casey's Dublin" (qtd. in White 11). This assumption is supported by Åke Persson who observed that "characters do not seem to move beyond the local community in which they live" (49). It is no wonder that the characters in the trilogy are interlinked and share similar, if not the same, experience, attitudes, and acquaintances.

The Barrytown Trilogy follows the adventures of the Rabbitte family members: a couple, Jimmy Sr. and Veronica, and their six children. The oldest son (in his early twenties) is Jimmy Jr., then there is a 19-year-old daughter Sharon, sons Leslie and Darren, who are about 17 and 15, and twin girls, Tracy and Linda, who are about 13. Each of the novels focuses on one of the Rabbittes more closely and presents a different set of problems with which the characters struggle. The reader encounters specific periods in their lives: their falls, gaining in gravity and seriousness in each sequel, and the optimistic way of overcoming

all difficulties, characteristic of the Rabbitte family. After all, although they are "in fact far more complex than a first reading may lead one to believe", the novels are still primarily comic and certainly "not as serious as Doyle's later works" (White 5).

The Commitments

Roddy Doyle put his passion for and knowledge of music into effect in the first novel. Arguably the lightest and the most cheerful book in the trilogy focuses on a group of young Dubliners who decide to form a band with Jimmy Rabbitte Jr. in charge. Jimmy has a novel and charming idea to play soul music after the fashion of Black Americans in order to appeal to their working-class neighbours. As the reader expects, despite the talent and enthusiasm of most of its members, the band finally breaks up after a series of arguments produced by their overly dissimilar personalities. Although disappointed, Jimmy is determined to make a new band which will be much better than the old one.

The Snapper

A 'snapper' means a 'baby' in Irish slang and that is exactly what the novel is about. During one drunk night, Jimmy's sister Sharon gets pregnant under strange circumstances, not knowing who the father is. The reader explores the adventures of her pregnancy up to the birth of a healthy baby girl. More importantly, the novel tackles how Sharon's immediate surroundings take the news, especially her father, Jimmy Sr., who feels strangely affected by the new grandfather role ascribed to him. Above all, the story emphasizes the importance of family during hard times, depicting the Rabbittes, laughed at and insulted, defending Sharon and discovering new levels of closeness and intimacy.

The Van

The last novel in the trilogy is undeniably the most complex and the most serious one. It focuses on Jimmy Sr. and his friendship with Bimbo. Both men were made redundant and are now trying to find a way to overcome the bleak feeling of uselessness. The solution presents itself: 1990 is the year when the Irish football team qualifies for the World Cup in Italy and since Jimmy Sr. and Bimbo assume that no one will bother to cook during the month of the event, they buy a van, expecting to make tons of money by selling fast food. However, having no insight or experience in entrepreneurship whatsoever, their business

goes downhill fast. Jimmy Sr. and Bimbo start blaming each other for the failure and, after a heated argument, the two friends eventually part.

3 Modern Irish Fiction

Modern Irish writing has strong and popular foundations, yet it also holds a rather unusual position within English-written literatures. Occasionally, it is studied at universities in its wholeness, but mostly, even within literary studies, it is omitted or mentioned briefly as a by-product of the British Empire. Even then, the most (and sometimes the only) discussed Irish writers are James Joyce and Oscar Wilde, along with W. B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett and George Bernard Shaw, the three Irish Nobel Prize laureates in literature. There is no doubt that contemporary authors follow the tradition of those renowned writers who all made a significant impact on the world literary scene. Nevertheless, such a famous ancestry not only has its privileges but also poses many challenges: "The benefits include inheriting a sense of self-confidence and (through Joyce and Beckett) a sense of belonging within the mainstream of European literature" (*The Vintage book* viii). The obstacle for newer writers is that "Joyce and others are shadows that [they] are trying to avoid being pushed under" (viii). Indeed, James Joyce appears to be the most famous Irishman of all time and his work is mostly considered to be the work of a genius. Being compared to such an icon or simply fearing the possibility may be quite suffocating. Furthermore, Ireland is a country where bookshops are on every corner and where people enjoy everyday discussions about both the books and the authors.

In addition to that, the impact of the well-known part of Irish literature is remarkable, considering Irish population, the remoteness of the island in relation to other European countries, and, as has already been implied, a shadow cast for a long time upon Irish writing by everything that was produced in Great Britain. However, modern Irish literature has much more to offer and certainly deserves more attention and scrutiny, especially in the genre of fiction, as the following paragraphs will show.

The beginning of the 20th century brought modernist and even postmodernist tendencies, starting with James Joyce and continuing with Brian O'Nolan (known under the pseudonym Flann O'Brien), Kate O'Brien, Elizabeth Bowen, and many others. One of the highly acclaimed works is O'Nolan's *The Third Policeman* (written in 1940, published in 1967), a humorous and postmodernist novel about a mysterious theft investigation. Besides novels, the most prominent genre was a short story, often written by women who have always played

a very important role in Irish literature. Unlike their upper-class predecessors, these mostly middle-class authors depicted considerably different versions of contemporary Ireland based on their everyday experience (Halpen 271).

In the second half of the 20th century, the fiction started turning to working-class protagonists and the notion of identity. The most notable novelists of this period are Patrick McCabe, Sebastian Barry, and Joseph O'Connor. McCabe's 1992 novel *The Butcher Boy*, depicting the fantasies of a troubled boy from a broken home, was adapted into an acclaimed stage play and film (Imhof 287). *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* by Sebastian Barry is a historical novel reviving Ireland's troubled history. O'Connor's *The Secret World of the Irish Male* (1994) portrays the contemporary everyday life of Irish men. The prominence of pop culture in the novels of the end of the century, as in Roddy Doyle's early works, then basically prefigured postmodernism in Irish literature.

One might wonder why contemporary Irish writers are not studied in postcolonial literature, as is the case of Australian, Caribbean, African, or Indian literature. Instead, the most prominent authors and works are still sometimes assigned to British literature or, although less frequently, still classified as 'Anglo-Irish literature', a term allegedly used to distinguish Irish works written in English from the ones written in Gaelic (Stewart 88). Nevertheless, in the past, this term led to certain expectations in terms of "what constituted Irish literature, so that a literature of a young nation undergoing such rapid change was still supposed to be denominated […] by icons like the Catholic Church, an inbred peasant hunger for land, red-haired girls on the bog or navvies lusting after pints of porter" (*The Vintage book* xi). Furthermore, such an approach to Irish writers somewhat undermines the achievements of the nation that went through a period of a nationalism-oriented Literary Revival over a hundred years ago, finally achieving independence in 1922. One reason that could explain it is the fact that, broadly speaking, the term 'postcolonial' is limited to the criteria of race and distance from the Old Continent. In this interpretation, the Irish simply do not comply. However, some scholars believe that Ireland, as a "colony within Europe", should be included, for, historically speaking, except the two mentioned factors, it shares all the other characteristics and deserves to be studied "in the wider postcolonial dialogue" (Pedersen).

Be that as it may, today's Irish literary scene is full of novelists and short story writers born from the 1950s onwards, who describe with nostalgia not only life in Ireland but also the Irish diaspora in countries to which some of them emigrated (Peirson-Hagger). These authors prove that Ireland has changed significantly over the last four decades. The access to free education and the decline of the impact of Catholicism caused that the country has opened to the world and become a land of opportunities for young and talented writers. They write stories with deep meanings and psychological insights, often mixed with historical fiction. Their texts are bold, inventive, and original, needless to mention their merit for the world literature in general. Yet it should be said that all of it is also possible thanks to the Irish media and the area of publishing which are not yet dominated by the censorship of political correctness, as compared to Ireland's closest European neighbour.

3.1 Roddy Doyle and Irish Working-Class Literature

The Irish working class has always fought very fervently for its place in society. It was also notably involved in the fight for Irish freedom and independence in the previous century. First, they rebelled against the British rule. Then, having established an independent state, they struggled for a dignified life in an unbalanced and unstable society affected by the World Wars. After a period of both economic and cultural stagnation, Ireland started to recover from all the changes in Europe and the consequences of English occupation; therefore, the literary scene lived through another, though seemingly less significant, renaissance.

The working-class hero first got on the front burner thanks to the leading figures of the Easter Rising in 1916 and the subsequent War of Independence, notably Patrick Pearse, Oliver St. John Gogarty, James Connolly, and Arthur Griffith, the last of them being the founder of the nationalist political party Sinn Féin. These poets and essayists did more than sing the praises of the Emerald Isle; they promoted unity among working-class people, which was to serve as a prerequisite for a free state. Some of them, like Gogarty, also aimed at depicting poverty and life in Dublin slums.

Gradually, writers put aside politically charged texts and focused more on the living conditions of working-class society, bringing Dublin into focus. The versatile writer and journalist Patrick MacGill, known as 'the navvy poet', wrote about his harsh experience as

a seasonal worker, for example in his book *Children of the Dead End*, first published in 1914. The poet and playwright Thomas Carnduff, although coming from Belfast, expressed "bewildered incomprehension" in the face of a terrifying rate of unemployment on the island in his poem "The Song of the Unemployed" written in 1932 (Gray 29). One of the major figures of the rediscovered drama until the 1950s was Sean O'Casey who depicted poverty in streets of Dublin. Probably his best-known work is *Dublin Trilogy*, published from 1923 to 1926. The most significant novelist and short story writer in the second half of the 20th century was arguably James Plunkett who sought to record how the working-class culture had shifted in the course of time in his short story collection *The Trusting and the Maimed* from 1955 ("James Plunkett").

The new 'renaissance' or rather 'anti-renaissance' seems to have commenced with the work of the novelist Lee Dunne. His most famous novel *Goodbye to the Hill* (1965) was even labelled "the first book […] that dealt realistically and believably with the realities of the modern Dublin life" (Pierse 192). It is evident that this new wave of writers who treat working-class topics wants to digress from the non-authentic and patriotism-promoting writing of the Literary Revival period and, with exaggeration, pick up the threads of at times disillusioned authors such as John Osborne or Alan Sillitoe. These writers are novelists Sam Thompson and Dermot Bolger, playwright Paul Mercier, and many more, including none other than Roddy Doyle.

Not only is Roddy Doyle one of the Irish major contemporary writers focusing on working-class protagonists, but he is also one of the Irish most discussed celebrities. If there is one thing on which critics and scholars agree, it is the following statement: "Fewer recent Irish writers can have caused more controversy in Ireland than Roddy Doyle who 'created a new and vibrant genre in Irish literature'" (*The Vintage Book* xxiii). The way all writers struggle to invent their fictional world, albeit based on their experience, Roddy Doyle, too, produced his Barrytown, the world filled with life, energy, and humour, by which he contributed to the popularity of Irish writing and the understanding of working class. That is to say, "Doyle's comic fiction celebrates the vibrancy, stoicism and resourcefulness of that community" (Persson 47).

Doyle has been asked many times whether he thinks there is more honesty in the way working-class people speak and if that is the reason why he uses it in his novels. He replied in a way that reminds of his characters: "Yeah, I like the bluntness" (O'Malley). It seems that he simply chose something familiar for his literary debut that later developed into a passion.

It is important to realize, however, that Doyle does not depict Dublin working class in general; he specializes in the north of the city, whose residents can be recognized from those who live in the south. To put it another way, "the Northsiders' way of speaking is considered socially inferior to and less acceptable than that of the Southsiders" (Persson 50). This only proves that the usage of English in Ireland is very complex and there is not only a large variety of dialects but also countless sociolects, which shows a great diversity of the Irish and specifically Dublin society. Roddy Doyle is well aware of that and so are his characters. As the writer explains:

> Class is a very subtle thing in Ireland… I think class is often a question of priorities: what's important to you. If you have money: what will you spend it on? I really can't imagine any society, no matter how egalitarian it is, that will ever eliminate people's urge to somehow — for want of a better phrase — redefine themselves. By and large this subject of class is fun to deal with as a writer. I mean it can be atrocious at times as well. But little snobberies are hilarious really. Unless it's someone pointing out your own of course! (O'Malley)

As a matter of fact, many critics have detected a sense of pride in Roddy Doyle's work: "Doyle's collected works are a superlative study of family, aging, and the dignity of the working class" (Brown). Doyle might have had the same reason for choosing working-class people to be his heroes as D. H. Lawrence: all the sorrows and hardship, possibly unknown or at least somewhat distant to middle and upper classes, make these people strong, vigorous, passionate and full of humour. Since his father comes from a similar background, Doyle understands this kind of vitality and integrity; in other words, longing for independence and not giving it up. However, his mother's middle-class background helps him to see things in yet another perspective: "People who have grown up solidly working class seem to be hopelessly lost in a different version of reality. Whereas being from the gray area, you seem

to be a little more street-wise. You tend to have more sympathy with things. You don't give out about tax as much, because you know that tax goes to people who need it […] Whereas those from all middle class tend to see it as their money" (White 28). Clearly, both his parents' backgrounds have enabled him to see life from different perspectives.

Nevertheless, ever since Doyle's promising career was launched, he has had to face criticism of his writing, mostly regarding the behaviour of his characters and the language they speak. These rebukes and misapprehension may partly result from the fact that working-class novels and plays, which were once popular as they sparkled with vitality and depicted life unknown to other social classes, have been gradually replaced by middle-class writing. This cultural attitude has only been reinforced by the trend of political correctness that propagates temperance but rejects any form of definite opinion, irritation, and vulgarity. In blunt terms of Tim Lott: "From being heroic, interesting, passionate, honest and authentic, working-class people are now seen as white, racist, thuggish, scrounging, loud, unpleasant and uncultured" (Lott). The position of working-class characters has shifted from heroes to antiheroes.

In his first three novels, Doyle made all the effort to make the language "true to the world of late twentieth-century working-class life" (Persson 52). In other words, he uses the language as an indicator of his characters' social status (51). In this respect, he follows the tradition of working-class literature associated with Scottish authors and peers such as Irvine Welsh and James Kelman. They all make use of this technique "as an alternative to middle-class expression, subverting and challenging middle-class expectations and views of life in that working-class experience, different from that of the middle-class, is voiced from within, in an authentic style appropriate for that experience" (51). To put it differently, they employ all dialect features in their characters' speech, contesting the formal and linguistic patterns of classic literature and stirring controversy, mainly regarding profanities.

Doyle's 'unmediated dialogue' is closely related to the image he wishes to convey in his first novels, yet it is specific to the trilogy. As Persson observes in his essay "Polishing the Working-Class?: A Sociolinguistic Reading of Roddy Doyle's *Barrytown Trilogy* and Later Fiction", the language code and the stylistics used in Doyle's later novels "[have] been made more accessible to the general reader" (47). Some scholars argue that Doyle abandoned

his authentic linguistic transcription "in order to grow as an artist", clarifying that "the world of the trilogy (particularly the first two novels) is a world of comic resolution" (White 143). In reality, one cannot simply expect humour to ultimately solve every problem, no matter how much Doyle believes that working-class people use that strategy. In his later novels, humour remains a powerful tool of the working class but no longer serves as an answer to every challenge in their lives. In any case, the language used in Doyle's later fiction becomes closer to standard English; at least, it is no longer "uncomfortable to read" (Persson 53). Whether Doyle made that choice to appeal to a larger audience or not, the decision eventually paid off. He received the Booker Prize and critical acclaim for *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, the first novel after the trilogy that witnessed a considerable shift in the style employed. Interestingly enough, Doyle was first shortlisted for *The Van*, the most serious and untypical novel of the trilogy.

There are still critics who do not recognize Doyle's artistic abilities, finding him too popular and concentrated on entertainment, while omitting his indisputable contribution to Irish literature as well as Irish society. Their reasons seem to be multiple: the profanity in his early novels, the bleakness of his later texts, black and white characters, obscenity, repetitiveness, and the very choice of his heroes. Doyle seems to be completely unaffected by such critical remarks, convinced that what he does is right. Nonetheless, there are more people convinced that the voice of working-class people deserves more and better advocates. Sherry Linkon, from The Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University, states that "popular culture too often relies on familiar narratives that blame poor and working-class people for the hardships in their lives," adding that "if we want to understand working-class culture, we need better stories – stories that reflect the complex realities of working-class life" (Linkon). There is no doubt that Roddy Doyle, who appears to be far from the end of his creative efforts, holds the post of a working-class storyteller adequately.

4 Irish Working Class

As Declan Kiberd invokes in his book *Inventing Ireland*, "the English have a class system and talk of little else; that the Americans have a class system, but pretend that it doesn't exist; and that the Irish are the worst offenders of all, since they operate a class system, but will not tell anyone what it is" (487). This quote only proves that the notion of class in Ireland is very problematic. On the surface, class seems to be a taboo subject. "Irish people tend to treat one another fairly informally, preferring, for example, to use first names even with relative strangers rather than titles and surnames" (qtd. in Pierse, *A History* 44). The ordinary social contact does not appear to be disturbed by the internal social structure, for the Irish prefer open, rather amicable demeanour. However, numerous statistics along with working-class literature, said otherwise "a literature that had been side-lined [but] finally attained a central role in Irish culture" (Seery), show that the sense of inequality is embedded in Irish mentality.

Throughout history, working class had been a large and influential group in Irish society, yet it never attained the same political attention as, for example, the working class in England. There are three possible reasons for that, also labelled "'three evil geniuses of socialism: the priest, peasant and patriot', that is, that the people of Ireland were motivated by issues affecting religion, land ownership and the relationship with Britain" (McGovern). It was also the British repressive rule that sought to keep it that way. The governing upper class feared that the Trade Unions, having been successively formed since the 1820s in Dublin, could result in both social and political destabilization (Ellis 177).

It can be said that the relationship with Britain was at least very complicated. On the one hand, working-class people were driven by the desire for freedom, while on the other, they were bound by the feeling of relative, though oppressive, protection and the fear of changing things. In the end, the desire turned out to be stronger and was more or less satisfied with the declaration of Irish Free State in 1922. It was supposed to be a great opportunity for the freshly established Irish Labour Party to start pressing for workers' interests, but due to the independence-related euphoria, those interests had to yield to the higher, national interest (McGovern). In fact, the disunity of Irish multi-layered society has become evident in the

political sphere and led to multiple disputes inside and across political parties, causing the Labour Party alone to change their fundamental principles several times ("Labour Party").

Being at the bottom of the socioeconomic structure, Irish working-class people were always the first to feel the effects of political pressure as well as natural disasters, such as during the Irish Potato Famine. In the 20th century, many Irish workers migrated to cities to work there, yet, having been exploited, they had to live in poor tenement houses and terrible living conditions. It is reported that from the 1840s until the 1970s, Dublin was burdened with some of the worst slums in Europe ("The Dublin Tenements", 00:01:45 - 00:02:47). Needless to say, these slums were also the centre of an extensive crime rate. None of that was depicted in literature until the first half of the 20th century.

In the second half of the 20th century, the number of manufactures was still growing, causing a further increase of urban working class which later proved to be progressive and very efficient in striving for general liberalism and secularization. Still, these urban working-class families were counted among the poorest and the most threatened with economic recessions. According to statistics, they also fell into the category of the least educated, often attaining primary education as the highest level (Gray and O'Carroll 13), which had an impact on the crime rate as well.

Today, working class is perceived as an antipole of middle class, both lower and upper, and consists of manual and service workers concentrated in larger cities such as Limerick, Cork, and Dublin. To return to the initial quote, there is a persisting paradox in the sense that the issues of working class tend not to be discussed in public. Michael Pierse, the author of *Writing Ireland's Working Class: Dublin After O'Casey*, presents James Wickham's "contention that working-class Dubliners have been on the receiving end of forms of 'cultural discrimination', which pervade basic assumptions about behaviour and status and result in their social invisibility" (248). Wickham proves his point, saying that "while it is often claimed that there are no class accents in Ireland, nobody expects someone with a 'Dublin accent' to come from Foxrock", referring to one of many wealthy suburbs in South Dublin (qtd. in Pierse, *Writing* 249). It seems fair to say that Irish society is pervaded with deep and unceasing class inequality which manifests itself in silent stereotyping, a

phenomenon challenged only by increasing attempts of working-class writers to give voice to “the invisible”.

Altogether, despite the reports of a significant improvement in the standard of living, Irish working class still is, as it was in its beginnings, considerably distinct from other classes and, however resilient, susceptible to the merest changes in the market.

5 Ireland Between the 1980s and the 1990s

The late 1980s and the early 1990s foreshadowed profound changes and transformations in the Irish state. The outset of the Celtic Tiger became evident not only in the booming economy but also in the reshaped values and attitudes of the government and society. Ireland moved from the dark times towards an era of freshness and prosperity as an admission ticket to the 21st century.

The 1980s were deeply affected by the global recession, a consequence of the world oil crisis. Ireland, attempting to support the local economy by immoderate spending, almost went bankrupt, which led to other serious issues, namely a great unemployment and poverty: "'The poorest of the rich' [was] heading for catastrophe, mainly because it had tried to erect a welfare state […] in an economy that was too poor to support one" (The Economist 1). As a result, the Irish economy reached the bottom and came out with the second-highest unemployment rate in the European Union (Barry 195).

As far as the sociocultural infrastructure is concerned, the Republic of Ireland had still been under heavy social conservatism from the part of the Catholic Church. This meant not only a heavy influence of the services such as education and healthcare but also an ongoing infringement of civil and political rights. The 1980s could be called the period of referenda, yet all the attempts to secularize and liberalize the state were suppressed. Divorce remained illegal, as well as contraception, abortion, and also homosexuality which, eventually, had to be "over-ruled by the European Court of Human Rights in 1988 and decriminalised in 1993" (Bartley and Kitchin 3). In terms of individuals' freedom, the Irish Republic was far behind its European neighbours.

Furthermore, it did not help much the country's poor state that the conflict in Northern Ireland began to rise again. The stir that had been provoked on the frontier by the Irish Republican Army only increased the feeling of uneasiness among the Irish population. All things considered, Ireland in the 1980s was far from being the advanced and prosperous country it is now. Therefore, it is unsurprising that before things started to change, Ireland suffered a significant wave of emigration, concerning mainly students and young people trying to find a better life somewhere else.

At the turn of the 1980s and the 1990s, things began to change dramatically. Ireland embarked on a new approach of social partnership (in terms of communities in the political process), planning, and decision-making, including the support of local trade and development. The government also designed a new 'regeneration programme' for urban areas, with the focus on both local and foreign investment, as opposed to the then more protectionist policy (Bartley and Kitchin 5). The programme involved economic projects with the purpose of making Ireland more attractive for foreign investors. It is worth mentioning that another contributing factor was that Ireland had already been in the EU since 1973, as well as the fact that more than one third of the population was under the age of 25 and, more importantly, educated, skilled, and English-speaking (Bartley and Kitchin 6). One of the evidence of brighter prospects is that Microsoft chose Ireland as a potential base factory for all European areas, Middle East, and Africa, having set up a small production plant in Dublin in 1985 which has been growing ever since ("Microsoft"). "As a result, Ireland is [now] reported as being the world's most profitable country for US corporations" (Bartley and Kitchin 7).

However, the ongoing improvement did not concern only the economic and business sectors. Social life was affected by the beginning of progressivism and moderation of the influence of the Catholic Church. What could have been regarded as a revolutionary idea at that time was employing married women, 95% of whom were still reported unemployed in 1966 (Bartley and Kitchin 8). In a short time, the demands of other social reforms followed. First, in 1985, contraception was legalized for women over 18 (3). Then, in 1995, after a fervent campaign, in which Roddy Doyle himself participated, Ireland witnessed a narrow pass of Divorce Act: "[Roddy Doyle] felt that the referendum involved more than simply the right to dissolve marriages; for Doyle, the central issue was the Catholic Church's attempt to dictate the terms of being Irish" (White 38). He also stated: "It was this insistence that if you're Irish, you're white and you're catholic as well, and if you're not both of those things then you're not fully Irish… I felt that it was a real fight, a fight for the future of my children and the future of the country" (qtd. in White 38). The changes towards the end of the 1980s had, undoubtedly, a large impact on Doyle's writing.

Despite the promise of better tomorrows, Ireland's transformation was occasionally overshadowed by the gap between the rich and the poor. Uneven opportunities caused the underprivileged regions to become even poorer, while the more affluent ones turned overprivileged (Seary). This was mainly the case of Dublin and other urban areas. The economic organization corresponded with the social one. The large working class was usually the driving force behind the introduction of modern and liberal ways of thinking, fighting not only Dublin's middle and upper-class conservatism but also the religious conservatism in the rural areas. However, after the long years of such rigid conservative policy and Catholic doctrine, both of which had been dictating civic life, there was emerging indifference, indolence, and distrust towards the new governance. As a consequence, public opinion was split intensely and in spite of all the efforts in the state sector, many people still felt that uncertainty ruled the day.

The Barrytown Trilogy is set in a period of complex transformations, the understanding of which requires a great deal of study. Although the characters hardly ever discuss the contemporary political, economic, or social situation in general, the mood of the society is perceptible in their everyday lives. On the one hand, the reader perceives a vision of change and a shift towards liberalism, while, on the other, they are confronted with distrust and apathy coming particularly from the working class.

5.1 Dublin in Focus

One of the characteristic features of Doyle's work is the focus on the local rather than the national. Strictly speaking, Doyle is an Irish author creating Irish characters, yet his and his characters' affiliation to Dublin extends beyond the Irish nationality. The capital emerges from the pages thanks to multiple allusions, remarks, and the language the characters speak. In addition to that, the protagonists either indicate or openly state how proud they are to live in their part of Dublin, only occasionally mentioning Ireland in general. Unsurprisingly, in 2015, *The Barrytown Trilogy* became the winner of Dublin: One City, One Book, an annual award initiated by Dublin City Libraries since 2006.

In connection with the previous section, it should be noted that all the progressivist thinking and the shift towards a more secular state were perceived mainly in the capital where all the decisions were made. Dublin was not only the economic, cultural, and

administrative centre, but also the target of foreign investment, attracting young people to work and live there. It was also the time when manufactures were increasingly replacing the then main occupations – fishing and farming (Bodkin). Most of these factories, employing thousands of people, were established in Dublin, making it one of the two largest bases of blue-collar work, with the second being Cork, which is also the second-largest city in Ireland ("Top"). As a result, some parts of Dublin were the homes of the highest number of working-class people.

As far as religious allegiance is concerned, it comes as no surprise that it was Dublin where most acts against the Church were decided. For instance, in the 1995 referendum on the dissolution of marriage, all parts of Dublin voted in favour, as opposed to other, especially rural areas ("Referendum" 53). In the same referendum in 1986, only six from the total of 41 constituencies voted in favour, five of them being in Dublin (41).

As has already been stated, *The Barrytown Trilogy* depicts the lives of Dubliners, a specific group of Irish citizens who differ from the rest of the country to a considerable extent. Additionally, even within the borders of the capital, Roddy Doyle singles out another, very distinct community – Barrytown, a formally invented but real-life neighbourhood in the north of Dublin. The emphasis placed on the north of the city, as opposed to the south, will be explored in the following chapter.

5.1.1 The Northside-Southside Divide

Historically speaking, it all started in 1745, when the 19th Earl of Kildare had his residence, later to become the seat of the Parliament, built on the south bank of the River Liffey, far from the opulent north. In 1766, he received the title Duke of Leinster, the highest degree of nobility. Since he was such an important political persona and, allegedly, a fashion icon, wealthy families soon started following his example and settling or resettling to the south (Igoe 116).

To some extent, the trend continues until today. Most upper-middle and upper-class families are still located in the south, while the north belongs, although not exclusively, to lower-middle and working-class people. The divide between the two areas was particularly strong in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, right before the Celtic Tiger era which entailed an upswing of investment and urban planning and lead to extensive gentrification.

As O'Toole explains in his article on the Northside-Southside issue, since the Earl of Kildare, the wealth and power have mostly been concentrated in the south, including the government, the media, as well as the most prestigious schools and cultural institutions. (O'Toole). It is worth mentioning that according to the report issued by Dublin City Council in 2012, more than 20 years after the publication of *The Van* and the peak of Ireland's most challenging times, the majority of affluent areas were found in the south-east; the same statistics also indicate a higher concentration of people who attained secondary education as their highest level (Hennessy). The data only prove the extent of the north-south gap.

O'Toole further remarks that "this division has a cultural dimension" (O'Toole). He mentions different standpoints in terms of literary depiction and gives an example of Sean O'Casey and Samuel Beckett. While the Northsider O'Casey experienced poverty and childhood labour and devoted his life to be the first notable playwright portraying Dublin working class ("Sean O'Casey"), his younger and more famous fellow writer was born into an upper-middle class family in the Southside, received higher education, and created many characters from similar background, middle or upper-middle class ("Samuel Beckett").

It has already been mentioned that the dissimilarity between Northsiders and Southsiders manifests itself in the language: "There is a working-class Dublin dialect that is definite by class. It's not geographical, it's people from a certain socioeconomic background talking a certain way" ("I Didn't Know"). As the quote implies, there is a working-class language variety that represents a purely social construct. Therefore, as most working-class people are located in the north, it is only natural that their dialect is distinct from the one spoken by the more middle and upper-class south.

Practical Part

6 *The Commitments*: The Portrayal of Dublin Working-Class Community

Doyle makes no secret of the fact that his first novel was an experiment. After an unsuccessful attempt to publish a political farce, he decided to devote his time to something simpler, more local, and arguably more enjoyable. After only six months, he fulfilled his dream of writing a musically toned novel (White 30). The result of this sudden experimentation is a beginning of the trilogy which, as a matter of fact, differs to a considerable degree from the remaining novels in terms of both content and stylistics. Although this surmise has not been utterly confirmed by the author yet, Doyle is most likely not to have intended to write a trilogy in the first place; after having written a few plays after *The Commitments*, he appears to have had the urge to come back to his beloved characters.

The main theme of *The Commitments* is captured in the following quote: "When I wrote the books that make up *The Barrytown Trilogy*, I hoped that the city would come off the page, like a character. When the characters spoke, Dublin spoke" ("Roddy Doyle").

It is a widely accepted fact that location can hold different meanings to people; meanings of various intensity that can even become parts of their identities. This concept has been explored in contemporary literature and *The Barrytown Trilogy* is no exception. As Roddy Doyle's quote shows, the sense of place bears much more significance than that of a plain setting in his work; it is more like a voice that cannot be silenced or excluded. This phenomenon is most perceptible in *The Commitments*. The sense of belonging is crucial for the creation of the band at the beginning. All those young people, most of whom need to work tirelessly to earn money, are mature enough and prepared to deal with real-life problems, which makes them feel embodied in the Barrytown community and, as they say, believe that they have 'soul'.

The music genre of soul works as an analogy to the working-class Dublin. The genius loci of the predominantly working-class suburb of Dublin is omnipresent, covering not only particular social issues but the politics as well. Jimmy Jr does not want to create a band similar to the ones he listens to and admires; he wants to create something special, something

that would appeal to a specific group of people: his kind of people. He wishes to speak to them. As the members of The Commitments are listening to him, they realize that their aim is not simply to make music for entertainment anymore. Jimmy strives to create a message through music:

> —Soul is dynamic. (—So are you.) —It can't be caught. It can't be chained. They could chain the nigger slaves but they couldn't chain their soul.
>
> —Soul is the rhythm o' the people, Jimmy said again. —The Labour Party doesn't have soul. Fianna fuckin' Fail doesn't have soul. The Workers' Party ain't got soul. The Irish people ——no. ——The Dublin People —fuck the rest o' them. ——The people o' Dublin, our people, remember need soul. We've got soul.
>
> —Fuckin' righ' we have. (Doyle, *The Commitments* 32)

Mocking political parties and excluding people living outside Dublin, Jimmy elevates the community he belongs to – ordinary urban workers who suffer from everyday routine and need an appropriate form of entertainment. Interestingly enough, all the Dublin references seem rather unflattering. Doyle's characters talk about the place in which they live in the same manner as they talk about their friends and family. The proud admission of being outsiders is simply an expression of togetherness:

> —Hurry up, for Jaysis sake, said Deco.
>
> No, Declan, said Joey The Lips. —We're in no rush. Rome wasn't built in a day.
>
> —Dublin was though, wha'.
>
> —A fuckin' hour. (Doyle, *The Commitments* 40)

On a previous occasion, right at the beginning of the novel, Jimmy Jr managed to label the impression that all the members already had as it was related to their sense of identity: "—The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads" (Doyle, *The Commitments* 7). The word 'nigger' employed here functions as a pejorative term for people of lower economic, educational, and/or social status, and refers to the position of Ireland among other European nations on the brink of the 1990s, right before the Celtic Tiger era.

Jimmy Jr develops his thought even further: "—An' Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland. The culchies have fuckin' everythin'. An' the northside Dubliners are the niggers o' Dublin" (Doyle, *The Commitments* 7). Keeping the tone of what he previously stated, Jimmy Jr calls the people living in Dublin, the only city in Ireland with the population of more than half a million, the low-status inhabitants of the country, distinguishing them from the 'culchies', meaning the people living outside the Dublin region, mainly in rural areas. Needless to remind that the capital city was once more of an industrial zone before large technology companies found their main offices there. Finally, singling out the Northside Dubliners is a result of a conventional division between the north and the south side of the city separated by the River Liffey. The rivalry, rooted in economic conditions, has been in place since the 18th century, when the upper-class people started to reside the south. Up to this day, prejudices and stereotypes have been circulating on both sides: "The north is stereotyped as being 'rough' and rundown, the south as ostentatious and spoiled" (Phelan). The contrast is so important for many Dubliners that it became a significant part of their identity; it is thus unsurprising that it has been subject to adaptations in various kinds of art and entertainment.

Jimmy Jr finishes his motivational speech about Dubliners' soul by an appeal: "——— Say it loud, I'm black an' I'm proud" (Doyle, *The Commitments* 7). The quote shows how proud he is of the place where he was born and where he now lives. Despite being amongst outsiders, he is grateful to be a part of the community. In fact, he is proud enough to exclude people from other communities from his ranks, regardless of whether they are from Dublin or not: "—Have you got Soul? If yes, The World's Hardest Working Band is looking for you. Contact J. Rabbitte, Chestnut Ave., Dublin 21. Rednecks and southsiders need not apply" (Doyle, *The Commitments* 9). Jimmy Jr displays a level of geographical segregation here. He disqualifies from the audition all the people living outside the north of Dublin, which means everyone from the south side, and all the 'rednecks', originally meaning farmers, hence people from the rural areas. However, he also proves how important the notions of place and identity are for him. The advert is like a manifesto of the 'soul' about which he keeps talking. He wants to create music for the community, which can only be done through people who understand what it means to be a Northside Dubliner.

Since The Commitments are to perform for a particular type of audience, Jimmy Jr knows they need to adjust the songs' lyrics if they want to be appealing. This is best portrayed in their rendition of James Brown's 1961 hit 'Night Train', when they interact with audience while singing about DART (commuter rail) stops heading towards the north of Dublin:

— STARTIN' OFF IN CONNOLLY ———

[…]

—MOVIN' ON OU' TO KILLESTER ———

They laughed. This was great. They pushed up to the stage.

—HARMONSTOWN RAHENY ——

They cheered.

—AN DON'T FORGET KILBARRACK – THE HOME O' THE BLUES –

Dublin Soul had been delivered. (Doyle, *The Commitments* 86)

The band achieved its goal. They managed to interconnect the genre of soul with their idea of what inner souls of Northside Dubliners represent, including the dialect. Furthermore, in the course of the song, they managed to capture the details of their audience's lives, and therefore, the song's cover might be perceived as a Northsider's working-class anthem:

—NIGH' TRAIN ———

AN ALSATIAN IN EVERY CARRIAGE ——

NIGH' TRAIN——

LOADS O' SECURITY GUARDS ——

NIGH' TRAIN——

LAYIN' INTO YOUR MOT AT THE BACK ——

NIGH' TRAIN ——

GETTING' SLAGGED BY YOUR MATES ——

NIGH' TRAIN ——

GETTING' CHIPS FROM THE CHINESE CHIPPER ——

OH NIGH' TRAIN ——

CARRIES ME HOME –

THE NIGH' TRAIN ——

CARRIES ME HOME ——— (Doyle, *The Commitments* 87)

Beside neighbours' dogs, potential criminality and laziness in the kitchen, the song makes reference to the friendly humour of Barrytown people, who are never short of teasing remarks.

One of the favourite allusions to Dublin is also Guinness, an internationally popular brand of dark beer established in the capital in 1759 ("Guinness").

—ALL DAY THEY'RE SAYIN' –

MY MY MY MY MY MY MY

MY WORK IS SO HARD –

GIVE ME GUINNESS –

I'M THIRSTY —— (Doyle, *The Commitments* 45)

Being amongst the best-selling alcohol brands in Ireland, Guinness became a symbol of free time and, particularly, time after work. Often referring to it simply as 'a pint' in the trilogy, most Barrytown working-class people drink Guinness with their friends to unwind after a hard day's work.

What comes as a surprise is the moment when Jimmy Jr asks the band not to use their own accents: "—Yis are, I'm tellin' yeh. An' yis shouldn't be usin' your ordin'y accents either. It's Walking in the Rain, not Walkin' In De Rayen" (Doyle, *The Commitments* 28). He contradicts himself. Soul music was supposed to be an instrument of innovation, yet the message was designed to approach Barrytown working-class people. There is no further mention of using different accents in other songs, such as the ones specifically modified for Barrytowners, but there seems to be no point in the band not using their Dublin working-class accents when they aim at Dublin working-class audience. Perhaps Jimmy is such a fan

of the music that he wants to do it proper justice. Or, he might be counting with a larger audience already and thinking about whether people outside Barrytown would understand them. In any case, his arrogance and inconsistency, which make him discount the principles he mentioned earlier, suggest a class conflict often associated with people of lower social status. On the one hand, he is proud of his roots and generally despises people from higher strata; on the other, he is ambitious, prejudiced and in want of an achievement. This working-class paradox haunts him also in the following novel and causes him to come closer to bourgeoisie which he supposedly hates.

When the band breaks up due to personal disagreements, Jimmy Jr is confronted with the failure of his first project and forced to reconsider the band's founding and audience. Finally, he decides to give up soul for a mix of country and punk: "———But, yeh know, Joey said when he left tha' he didn't think soul was righ' for Ireland. This stuff is though. You've got to remember tha' half the country is fuckin' farmers. This is the type o' stuff they all listen to" (Doyle, *The Commitments* 133). In the end, he is willing to extend his identity beyond the borders of North Dublin. While justifying his choice, he puts into effect some typical stereotypes about Ireland, as well as about Irish farmers who are not likely to enjoy the same genre as blue-collar workers, for their lives in the country are considerably different from the lives of people in the city. Jimmy Jr thus represents a young and enterprising man from a working-class background who will keep working on new projects as long as he has enough strength. He tries to break through both as a member of a family and as one of many working-class Dubliners, with whom he shares togetherness and sympathy.

7 *The Snapper*: Focus on a Working-Class Family

The second novel of the trilogy differs considerably from the first one and proves Doyle's increase in confidence and experience. *The Snapper* is longer, more complex and almost solely focused on the lives and relationships of the Rabbitte family members. It took Doyle three years to write this transitional work after the first, light-hearted and experimental novel, and before *The Van*, the bleakest and the most serious of the three.

Although a large part of the text centres on Sharon's physical and psychological development during her pregnancy, the novel also provides a remarkable depiction of some details of the Rabbitte family dynamics. The author portrays the members in a rather unflattering, albeit loveable, manner, with all their vices as a working-class family.

The relationships are rather outlined than described in detail. The members speak little with each other and if they do, they use offensive language and often call each other names. Apart from the twin girls who are always seen together, the rest of the children do not seem to enjoy each other's company much; they prefer to spend their free time outside with their friends. Unlike in middle and upper-class families, where the parents usually insist on certain routine and time organization, the Rabbittes only get together during breakfast and, less often, dinner. Other than that, the children's lives somewhat unrestricted; they are led to grow naturally with looser boundaries. This does not mean, however, that they are not supported by their parents in whatever they choose to do. In fact, they are engaged in many projects. Darren is a member of a cycling club, Jimmy Jr practises DJing and the twins change their after-school hobbies every other week, from Camogie to ballroom dancing, which irritates their mother because of the requirements regarding their clothing. Moreover, when Darren is dropped out of the team, Jimmy Sr, without thinking too hard, saves the day thanks to his zeal and spontaneity and suggests Darren to form their own club.

The difference between the Rabbitte children and the children raised in upper-class families is that the former are not forced to do anything except to perform the basic school duties and obey a limited set of rules. Furthermore, the obedience is mostly demanded using either bribery or (threats of) physical punishment as the only forms of authority in the household, which often leads to fights:

Les was nearly crying. So was Veronica.

—Shut up! The lot o' yis! said Jimmy Sr.

—You started it, Jimmy Jr reminded him.

—Good Jesus!!

—I'm going to smash your fuckin' records, Les told Jimmy Jr.

This time Veronica slapped him hard across the head.

—Wha'!?

—Don't Wha' me, said Veronica, and she slapped him again. —Don't think you can stroll in and out of here when you feel like it and shout language like a —like a knacker. (Doyle, *The Snapper*, 45-6)

As the example illustrates, either of the parents is in the habit of reasoning with their children; they take what they say for granted. This method has proven ineffective especially in the case of Leslie who, spending most of the time outside, seems unable to keep a job and later even gets in trouble with the law.

One of the Rabbittes' worst habits is alcohol, the cause of Sharon's pregnancy and possibly the result of insufficiently strict upbringing. Sharon drinks relatively often even during her first few months with her family knowing about it, which shows either recklessness or ignorance of the risks. Her older brother, Jimmy Jr, seems to be hungover every other day, which starts to interfere with his job, not to mention his parents' annoyance:

Jimmy Jr walked in. He wasn't looking the best. He headed for the fridge.

—Why aren't you in work? Said Jimmy Sr.

—Wha'?

Jimmy Jr's head came out of the fridge.

—It's alrigh'. I'll phone in. I'll work me day off. Is there anny Coke?

[…]

—Jaysis, he said.

Jimmy Jr was still staring at the table. Veronica looked from the dress.

—Get up, quick!

Jimmy Jr stood up and fell across the sink. He dropped his head and vomited – HYUHH –uh ——fuck ——HYY——YUUH! –onto the breakfast plates and cups. (Doyle, *The Snapper*, 160)

The scene portrays Jimmy Jr in his poorest state but is far from surprising. The tendency to alcoholism in the trilogy is strong and not specific to the Rabbitte family. Sharon is used to getting intoxicated with her friends and Jimmy Sr, though more of a social drinker now, meets his fellow neighbours in their favourite Hikers pub every evening, boasting about their daily achievements. Apart from watching TV, it seems that socializing while drinking is a common and sometimes the only after-work activity in Barrytown.

The main protagonists of the novel are Sharon and Jimmy Sr, both of whom are portrayed as reckless and carefree, as well as stubborn and proud, which are attributes typically associated with working-class heroes. When Sharon learns about her pregnancy, she does not for a second think about the consequences, neither she considers having an abortion. She works in a shop and hates the job but has no future plans or ambitions. She takes life as it comes and despite her unavoidable fear, she is strong enough to believe that everything will turn out well. Of course, she needs her family's support. It comes as no surprise that a considerable part of the novel depicts how the family members cope with the news about Sharon's unintended pregnancy and, more importantly, the uncertainty about who the father is, especially when it Mr Burgess, their middle-aged and married neighbour, suddenly abandons his family.

Initially, the most unhappy member is probably Sharon's mother Veronica who is openly concerned about what the neighbours might say and is not particularly willing to comfort her. By contrast, her father shows her much more support and enthusiasm at first, making jokes and searching for information about what Sharon is going through in order to feel closer to her, which produces humorous scenes revealing his lack of education in terms of female anatomy. Additionally, the display of lower education is mixed with Doyle's language playfulness:

—What's perception? Sharon asked.

—Wha?

—What's perception?

—Sweat, Jimmy Sr told her. –Why?

Sharon whispered to Jimmy Sr.

—It says my perception might be heightened when I'm pregnant.

—Yeh smell alrigh' from here, love, said Jimmy Sr. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 15)

Jimmy Sr obviously mistakes 'perception' for 'perspiration'. Doyle makes a comical reference to occasional ignorance of French loanwords in working-class people.

Throughout the story, Sharon has to put up with the fact that she became a Barrytown's laughing stock. Although she knows that it will fade one day, especially as she is not the only unmarried pregnant girl in the neighbourhood, it does not help her that her parents feel affected. In the end, the person most hurt by the incident is Jimmy Sr. Having discovered that he cares about people's opinion more than he though, he is willing to behave like a child. He is unpleasant, pretending to be offended by Sharon's behaviour and silently trying to force her to apologize. When Sharon, knowing him well, admits having brought shame upon the family and promises to move to her friend's house, he believes he has won. He gives up his pride and returns to his typically loving and supportive demeanour: "He was glad it was over. He preferred being nice. It was easier" (Doyle, *The Snapper* 158). As a hot-tempered labourer, Jimmy Sr is not fond of complexity. He prefers simple things and ideas – being kind, honest, and straightforward. Hiding emotions and using schemes to get his own way are skills he does not wish to improve.

However, since he starts believing that Sharon was serious about moving, he feels terrible and powerless. He understands how foolishly he behaved, not thinking of anyone but himself, which then leads to the most emotional and revealing scene in the novel. It is right when he watches his oldest son vomiting in the sink that he suddenly sees his family through the eyes of an observer and realizes his personal and possibly lifelong failure: "That was it, Jimmy Sr decided. There was no way Sharon could go. She was the only civilized

human being in the whole fuckin' house" (Doyle, *The Snapper* 160). Desperate to make Sharon stay, he tries to persuade her by invoking her compassion and explaining what an impact her leaving would have:

> Don't leave. We need you here. Your mammy –Your mammy's not always the best. Because of –Yeh know tha' yourself. I'm a fuckin' waster. Jimmy's worse. D'yeh know what he's at now?
>
> —Wha'?
>
> —He's down there getting' sick into the sink. On top o' the plates an' stuff.
>
> —Oh my God.
>
> —Poor Veronica. ——The fuckin' dinner might be –what's the word –steepin' in the sink for all I know. Believe me, Sharon, we need you. The twins, they need you. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 162)

For the first time in the story, Jimmy Sr reveals his inner struggle. He may appear energetic and content on the outside, but there are moments in his life when he wishes to be more and able to give more to the ones he loves. This conflict related to his working-class background occupies his mind until the end of the novel and even more so in the next one. Although everything turns out well, the course of events made him review his life. Towards the end, he makes one more confession and promise to himself:

> There was more to life than drinking pints with your mates. There was Veronica, his wife, and his children. Some of his own sperms had gone into making them so, fuck it, he was responsible for them. But, my Jaysis, he'd made one poxy job of it so far […] But from now on it was going to be different. Darren and Linda and Tracy, and even Leslie, were still young enough, and then there'd be Sharon's little snapper as well. A strong active man in the house, a father figure, would be vital for Sharon's snapper. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 193)

As a working-class father with only basic education, he has no successful career, no hobby that would keep him occupied, or goal he would pursue. He now knows that his family is not only his greatest accomplishment but also the pillar of his life; without it, he would be quite hollow. Therefore, he is now determined to do his best to make the home a better place.

As demonstrated, *The Snapper* centres on everyday lives of a working-class family. However, it offers not only quarrels and anxieties but also happy and amusing occurrences. One of such moments is when the twins bring home a puppy and persuade their mother to let them keep it:

> —Ah, Ma-mmy! Let's.
>
> —Who'll feed it? Veronica wanted to know.
>
> —Wha' is it? Said Jimmy Sr.
>
> —A dog, said Linda. –I'll grow bigger.
>
> —Will it? Said Jimmy Sr. –That's very clever.
>
> Veronica laughed. She couldn't help it.
>
> Tracy pounced.
>
> —Can we keep it, Mammy? Can we?
>
> ——Alright, said Veronica.
>
> Jimmy Sr beamed at her. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 22)

Instead of long discussions and carefully considered decisions which are typical of richer families, the lives of the Rabbittes are based on rash and spontaneous actions that have the potential to cause numerous arguments as well as humorous situations:

> It was warm and quivering. Jimmy Sr could feel its bones.
>
> —Wha' sort of a dog is it but? He asked.
>
> —Black, said Tracy.
>
> —Go 'way! Said Jimmy Jr.
>
> —I'm your new da, Jimmy Sr told it.
>
> They all laughed.
>
> —An', look it. There's your mammy makin' the tea. He made its paw wave at Veronica. Linda and Tracy were delighted. They couldn't wait to do that. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 23)

Another example of the family having a good time is Darren's birthday, for which he gets his dream bicycle. At first, however, all the Rabbittes play a joke to keep him in suspense:

> He opened the back door and went out, and came back in with a bike, a big old black grocer's delivery bike with a frame over the front wheel but no basket in it.
>
> —Get up on tha' now an' we'll see how it fits, said Jimmy Sr.
>
> —Wha'? said Darren.
>
> His mouth was wide open. Veronica was laughing now.
>
> —It' a Stephen Roche special, said Jimmy Sr.
>
> Darren was still staring at the bike. Then he noticed the others laughing. He looked around at them.
>
> —Yis are messin'.
>
> He laughed, louder now than before.
>
> —Yis are still messin'.
>
> —We are o' course, said Jimmy Sr.
>
> He patted the saddle.
>
> —This is Bimbo's. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 98)

This is but one of many examples which proves that the Rabbittes are full of bold and heart-warming humour. Their everyday lives are like a swing and their endless fights, however serious they may sound to people from higher social strata, are as strong as the moments of fun and laughter.

Even Veronica resorts to humour when she is under stress. As was customary in Irish families of that time, it was the mother who took care of the household, doing the shopping, making the meals, and washing the clothes. She does not seem to enjoy it much, especially when she has to witness frequents quarrels. However, like the rest of the family, she uses her gleeful sense of humour to overcome difficult times. For instance, when Jimmy Sr leaves for work after another morning fight, he is excited about his lunch, having been promised corned

beef instead of the usual Easy Slices, a cheap kind of meat he often throws to the local dogs. He does not know that Veronica lied to him to get even and, on top of that, have something to laugh at heartily:

> But she wasn't crying. She was laughing. She tried to explain why.
>
> —They're not —
>
> She started laughing again.
>
> —They're not corned beef at all.
>
> A giggle ran through her, and out.
>
> — They're Easy Slices. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 40)

On the one hand, the scene may appear ironic, considering the lower family income that forces Veronica to buy cheaper products. On the other, it is just another detail confirming that the Rabbittes' everyday lives are full of twists, surprises, and amusement.

The end of the novel is optimistic and perhaps even too good to be true. When Sharon gives birth to a healthy girl, all the Rabbittes, who were waiting in breathless suspense for news from the hospital, are crying, laughing and hugging each other. Before that, while driving Sharon to hospital and listening to Jimmy Jr in the radio, Jimmy Sr asserts: "We're some family alrigh'" (Doyle, *The Snapper* 212). What he is in fact saying is that he is proud. As a working-class family, they have their problems and are far from being as elegant as richer families; however, all of them try to be good in their own way and that is what counts, at least in Jimmy Sr's view.

It is true that Roddy Doyle provides the reader with the pieces of his characters' lives that he finds important and/or interesting, while neglecting a great number of relevant details and consequences. Nonetheless, writing a comedy trilogy allowed him to use levity and pathos and, at the same time, enabled him to portray an image of working-class life that is different from, and presumably more accurate than, the one usually appearing in media and statistics.

8 *The Van*: Dublin Working-Class Conditions and Stereotypes

The peak of the trilogy is indisputably the most complex as well as the most serious of the three novels. It is also interesting in terms of working-class portrayal. Doyle both enlivens and refutes some of the most frequent stereotypes about working-class people and creates a general view of the conditions of one of many working-class families.

In a humorous and bleak manner, the author uses Jimmy Sr, this time the sole protagonist, to depict the heaviest burden of working class – poverty – often as a result of unemployment. The very first pages are accompanied by a depressing tone related to Jimmy Sr's observation of his surroundings.

> He was tempted to have a bash at the garden but the grass was nearly all gone, he'd been cutting it so often. He'd have looked like a right gobshite bringing the lawn-mower for a walk around a baldy garden, in the middle of November.
>
> […]
>
> There was nothing else happening, no kids on the street even. He could hear some though, around the corner, and a Mr Whippy van, but it sounded a good bit away, maybe not even in Barrytown. He took his change out of his pocket and counted it: a pound and sevenpence. He looked at his watch; the dinner'd be ready soon. (Doyle, *The Van* 2)

Having lost his job, either temporarily or permanently, he simply has nothing to do. He keeps watching the neighbours and cutting the grass in his backyard only to keep himself occupied. In addition to that, he begins to realize the inevitable lack of finances. It should be added that the Irish society of the 1980s and 1990s was still not used to married women working on a full-time basis, which caused men to be not only the main but often also the only source of income. The conventional idea of breadwinner fathers, which can be considered a relic of the past until the first half of the 20th century, puts men under a great deal of pressure. Although Veronica started studying to finish her leaving certificate, probably to start working part-time and help the family, it looks like a long-distance and rather uncertain run.

As the story progresses, Jimmy Sr's restlessness only worsens with Christmas approaching:

> He didn't want Veronica to finish. There was no point. He'd heard it before. It only made him angry now and he'd end up shouting. It wasn't fair.
>
> —We were always broke at Christmas.
>
> —After it, though, said Veronica.
>
> —Ah ——! Said Jimmy Sr.
>
> It wasn't fucking fair.
>
> —Ah sorry, said Veronica.
>
> —I didn't mean anything. (Doyle, *The Van* 14)

Usually rather optimistic, Jimmy Sr now cannot help feeling responsible for the loss of satisfactory income. He is insecure about the future, especially when Veronica, as worried as he is, reminds him of it. Throughout the novel, his insecurity and feeling of uselessness increase and become visible: "He looked miserable, and small and kind of beaten looking" (Doyle, *The Van* 28).

Naturally, anyone can lose their job, regardless of their status or the class they come from. The problem of working class is simply a lack of options. Statistically, lower education does not provide them with sufficient adaptability in the labour market. Frequent absence of ambition and information regarding personal development only aggravates their position in society. Darren Rabbitte is the opposite case. Unlike his siblings, he is ambitious and an excellent student, which enables him to enter the university. Furthermore, he is clearly dissatisfied with his social status and even more with his father:

> —What abou' you? said Darren to his da. —Look at the state o' you.
>
> Jimmy Sr looked at Darren. Darren was looking back at him, waiting for a reaction. Jimmy Sr wasn't going to take that from him, not for another couple of years. He pointed his fork at Darren.
>
> —Don't you forget who paid for tha' dinner in front of you, son, righ'.

—I know who paid for it, said Darren. —The state.

Jimmy Sr looked like he'd been told that someone had died.

—Yeh prick, Jimmy Jr said to Darren.

But no one said anything else. Linda and Tracy didn't look at each other.

Jimmy Sr took a sip from his wine.

——Very nice, he said.

Then he got up.

—Em ——the jacks, he said. (Doyle, *The Van* 94-5)

Jimmy Sr is not only taken aback by his son's remark, he is extremely hurt as well. Nevertheless, he is too devastated to do anything else than hide to save whatever is left of his face, having just lost respect of the son with whom he always got on well.

It is right from the beginning of the book that Jimmy Sr, as a former middle-aged plasterer, struggles with the fact that he practically has no other way of contribution to the family than his income. Suddenly, he is more aware of his role in the family than ever before; without a job, he does not know how to impress them. Moreover, money represents a certain means of asserting authority. He is used to bribing his children with money for sweets to make sure they would obey him and, as many other parents, buying gifts to help him gain in popularity.

Doyle's fondness for literature and intertextuality becomes evident in Jimmy Sr's reading efforts. It was curiosity that drove the father to reading in *The Snapper*; in *The Van*, it is boredom and an attempt to increase self-esteem. He associates reading classical literature with intelligence; after all, Veronica has to read novels for her leaving certificate. Therefore, he decides to prove himself to be able to finish such a novel. This also gives Doyle room to express what he believes to be the working-class views on reading classical literature, such as calling Alexander Dumas' *Man in the Iron Mask* "fuckology", while saying that three of Charles Dickens' books "were brilliant; just brilliant" (Doyle, *The Van* 50, 64). After all, Doyle also comes, though partially, from working-class background.

More and more troubled, Jimmy Sr experiences considerable mood swings that change from one day to another.

> There were days when there was this feeling in his guts all the time, like a fart building up only it wasn't that at all. It was as if his trousers were too tight for him, but he'd check and they weren't, they were grand; but there was a little ball of hard air inside in him, getting bigger. It was bad, a bad sort of excitement, and he couldn't get rid of it. (Doyle, *The Van* 49)

Always full of life, Jimmy Sr now shows his sensitivity and vulnerability. The intensity of his emotional displays correlates with the intensity of feelings inside him, which is typical of his kind of people.

The Van thus offers an interesting view of an unemployed working-class husband and father who does not want to simply accept his current situation but strives to find a solution. He does his best to replace the role of a breadwinner with being a full-time grandfather, mowing the lawn, helping in the kitchen, and keeping an eye on the twins and their homework. He starts going to libraries and watching the news every day to educate himself. The goal is to prove his potential. In his case, the issue is not a simple class struggle, but a midlife crisis and the question of self-respect in general. His situation does not improve with Veronica taking up her studies and Darren giving him lectures in the van about osmosis. However proud he is, he simply cannot help feeling intimidated by their ambition and intellect.

His best friend Bimbo feels similarly depressed after having been made redundant. Consequently, he decides to buy a chipper van, a mobile fast-food restaurant, and run business with Jimmy Sr. Although doubtful at first, he accepts Bimbo's offer of partnership and embarks on the enterprise with the same gusto as in any other project. Despite both men having no experience at selling or making fast food whatsoever, they act without scruples and engage their whole families in the business. Their enthusiasm and risk-taking have two main reasons. Firstly, their limited range of knowledge does not enable them to see all the potential issues coming with entrepreneurship that more educated people would probably find discouraging. Secondly, they see the business only as an opportunity to be better off, as

opposed to middle-class people who are likely to feel in danger of sinking to a lower class due to an ill-considered decision.

Despite initial problems with cooking and cleaning, Bimbo and Jimmy Sr's business starts well and becomes successful. Their chipper van prospers best during the FIFA World Cup held in Italy when, as Bimbo predicted, people get hungry coming out of pubs they filled earlier to watch the matches. As can be expected, most of the country is prepared to root for the Irish national team: "The country had gone soccer mad" (162). Yet the northside Dublin workers are particularly excited as they regard almost every pub visit as a social event. The World Cup connects not only friends and families but the whole community. The euphoria from the Irish team having reached the quarter-finals shows the true spirit of Barrytowners:

> There was Mickah Wallace, Jimmy Jr's pal, standing by himself with his tricolour over his head, like an Irish Blessed Virgin. He let Jimmy Sr hug him.
>
> —I've waited twenty years for this, Mister Rabbitte, he told Jimmy Sr. He was crying as well. (Doyle, *The Van* 166)

As the extract demonstrates, these mostly working-class people of are not shy of showing their emotions and feelings to one another.

The sudden fulfilment makes Jimmy Sr pleasant and satisfied again, the result of which is a relatively functioning family whose members spend more time together. In addition to that, earning some extra money, probably even more than he did working as a plasterer, Jimmy Sr shows his attitude to spending:

> They had a few drinks in the Park Lodge Hotel after the zoo. It was nice in there, after Jimmy Jr got them to turn the telly down. When they were thinking of going home Jimmy Sr ordered a taxi for them, and they went home that way, in style.
>
> —Honk the horn, said Jimmy Sr when your man, the taxi driver, was stopping at their gate.
>
> —Do not, said Veronica.

> They all got out while Jimmy Sr settled up with the taxi fella; eight fuckin' quid, but he said nothing, just handed it over to him. It was only money. He made sure he got the right change back off him though. Then he gave him fifty pence. (Doyle, *The Van* 211)

He obviously enjoys taking a taxi and not only as it is an extraordinary service for him. It is showing that he can afford it what he likes so much. He is not the kind of person who would save every penny. While Veronica is more moderate and tries not to stand out, Jimmy Sr, being a breadwinner and head of the family, wishes to impress other people – his family and, preferably, the whole neighbourhood. The same self-conceit can be seen in Bimbo when he buys the same nice-looking jacket that Jimmy Sr bought a few days earlier. He does not need it, but he will not fall behind Jimmy Sr or let anyone think he cannot afford it as well.

As has already been implied, Jimmy Sr's observations offer interesting views on class clichés and stereotypes. For instance, he and Bimbo make unflattering remarks while watching people on the beach: "They climbed up to the top of one of the dunes to have a deco and there wasn't a sinner on the whole fuckin' island, except for themselves and a couple of rich fat oul' ones playing golf down the way […]" (Doyle, *The Van* 171).

Subsequently, they discuss which events provide the best chance for them to sell all their food:

> The Horse Show was coming up as well but they weren't going to bother with that; the horsey crowd didn't eat chips.
>
> —They eat fuckin' caviar an' tha' sort o' shite, said Jimmy Sr.
>
> —An' grouse an' pheasant, said Bimbo. (Doyle, *The Van* 179)

With perhaps a little exaggeration, they associate rich upper-class people with eating caviar and pheasant, playing golf, and horse riding, simply because it is something they cannot afford to do. They do not seem to be truly envious; they never complain about their social status. However, the older they are, the more they realize how easier life is when they have more money, at least in the sense that they do not have to think so much about what they can or cannot afford to buy. This is best seen when the business flourishes and everything in the Rabbitte household goes back to the way it once used to be:

He'd brought home two hundred and forty quid the second week. They were going to get a video.

—Back to normal then, said Jimmy Sr. –Wha'.

—Yep, said Veronica. (Doyle, *The Van* 162)

As the story develops, Jimmy Sr and Bimbo's inexperience with conducting business becomes evident. Additionally, due to a lack of rules defining their partnership, the two friends gradually grow away from each other. Towards the end of the novel, Jimmy Sr, partly to restore their friendship and partly to comfort his ego, takes Bimbo to town for several pints and a flirting adventure. Jimmy Sr does not actually seem to want to be unfaithful to his wife; he just wants to prove to himself that he is able to impress younger and attractive women. What needs to be emphasized is that he is convinced of not being able to do it without the help of his wallet. To show two women at a bar that money is no problem for him, he orders an expensive bottle of wine that one of the women recommended:

—Pour away, compadre, he said. –How much is tha'?

—Twenty-three pounds.

——Grand –

My fuckin' Jesus —!

He handed over a twenty and a fiver. Thank Christ, his hand wasn't shaking.

—There yeh go, he said. —Keep the change.

—Thank you very much, sir.

—No problem.

If he didn't get his hole after forking out twenty-five snots for a poxy bottle of wine he'd —— He looked at Bimbo; he looked like he'd got a wallop off a stun-gun. (Doyle, *The Van* 246)

Jimmy Sr's ridiculous reaction only shows how much value he attaches to money and, more importantly, that he is aware of having nothing else to offer. The loss of fine income as a result of his unemployment represents a real misfortune for him. His class struggle

becomes most evident when he is angry with Bimbo for having told the women about the van. The issue is not that he is ashamed of working there; on the contrary, he is proud to have achieved something and being able to earn money again. However, he is convinced that to get what he wants, he needs not only to be richer but also to have more prestigious job:

> Jimmy Sr was on top of Bimbo. He had him in a headlock. He tried to get at his face, to get a clean thump in. Bimbo was thumping his sides, his arse; he got Jimmy Sr in the bollix, but not hard enough. Sharon and Gina were gone. Jimmy Sr gave up on the fist and opened his hand; he got his thumb to Bimbo's face somewhere and pressed. Bimbo whined. He found a wad of Jimmy Sr's fat over his trousers and he squeezed, dug his nails into it. Jesus, it was agony – Jimmy Sr let go of him and got back. He tried to kick him but he couldn't reach. He slipped. He grazed his arm on the counter trying to stay up.
>
> That was it; there was no mending anything now. (Doyle, *The Van* 281)

The final dramatic quarrel between the two friends shows the darker side of Jimmy Sr's temperament. His passion and vitality develop into violence and although he does not in fact intend to hurt Bimbo, he obviously struggles with self-control. He finds himself in a similar situation a few pages earlier, surprised at his own rash action:

> —Get ou'!
>
> —I'm tryin' to –
>
> He saw half of Bimbo's face behind the door. He threw everything against it and it smacked Bimbo's face, and all of the violence went out of him.
>
> He'd hurt Bimbo.
>
> He wanted to lie down on the floor. (Doyle, *The Van* 251)

As shown above, Jimmy Sr can be aggressive even towards his friends. It is not uncommon that people from working-class background are associated with quick temper and possible violence. The power of emotions over rational thinking seems to be stronger than in the case of upper-class people, which is illustrated by other working-class protagonists, such as Jimmy Porter and Stanley Kowalski.

Bimbo is no exception, although he is a little more temperate than his long-time friend. He buys a chipper van as he falls in love with it at first sight, without thinking and considering other people's arguments. In the end, he sets his mind on drowning the van simply because he is momentarily desperate and wants to make a significant gesture. He wants to become his own man for the moment, showing disregard for Jimmy Sr's and his own safety.

Alcohol is not very helpful either. Its power to intensify emotions and reduce self-control has been known for centuries, but this fact does not prevent Bimbo and Jimmy Sr from getting intoxicated at the earliest opportunity. Alcohol is a means of problem-solving for them and for people alike. It either gives them courage and strength or helps them forget their sorrows. At the beginning of the book, Jimmy Sr claims that he likes to go to Hikers because of the company and not because of the drinking, which would be understandable during special events like sport matches mentioned earlier. However, using alcohol as a first aid contradicts Jimmy Sr's claim to some extent. The way he keeps saying how much he needs a drink every time he feels uneasy suggests how dependent he is on it. It is presumably the result of the fact that people like him simply do not know other ways of entertainment and relaxation. There is the television, sex, occasional sport activities like 'pitch and putt', yet the easiest and most effective is apparently alcohol drinking. In other words, working class seems to lack diverse ways of cultivating mind.

The ending of *The Van* is bleak and open, yet not really surprising. Jimmy Sr's enterprising efforts ended in a similar way as his son's in *The Commitments*. Furthermore, the prospect of new difficulties in Jimmy Sr's future after a heavy life lesson is as strong as in *The Snapper*, although Sharon's final words are much more cheerful. Being gifted with the same vigour as his first-born son, Jimmy Sr is likely to try to make use of his potential again. Inevitably, he will continue being lonely and feeling low at times, but he is almost sure to keep rising to his feet, knowing well that he has no other choice.

9 The Significance of Style for the Portrayal of Dublin Working Class

All three novels in *The Barrytown Trilogy* represent a certain degree of dialogue novels. *The Commitments* is like a prototype of this concept, containing only rare descriptive or explanatory passages, usually no longer than five sentences, which are casually included in brackets within the dialogues. With each novel, the number of descriptions increases, but the dialogues still occupy most of the texts. This unusual approach to writing a novel produces the effect of a theatre prompter on the scene, replacing the common omniscient narrator, who is present only to make sure the audience follows the author's intention. In terms of the narrative structure, Doyle's novels often resemble scripts and theatre plays – fast-paced, dynamic, and rememberable texts that read quickly and intensively. The descriptive passages are written mostly in the past simple tense and follow a chronological order.

The simplicity of the textual organization corresponds to relatively straightforward plots. There are no parts or chapters, only thematic units loosely separated by three asterisks, usually designating a day or a particular situation relevant for the denouement. All three novels are quite short, though the number of pages is increased with each volume. The whole trilogy comes across as a summary of real events that the protagonists experienced, narrated and embellished by little voices inside them.

There are multiple reasons for Doyle's stylistic choice. As has been stated in the theoretical part, Doyle is passionate about languages in all their layers, slang words in particular. Therefore, writing dialogues is likely to satisfy his interest and liking for experimentation. He also believes that speech is more authentic than authorial commentary as it captures the features of a character's personality that make him unique and memorable, such as Jimmy Sr's unmistakeable phrase 'fair play to someone' ('well done to someone'). All this is in accordance with the portrayal of working-class people and their generally energetic, spontaneous, and impulsive nature that frequently manifests itself during conversations. All the arguments and fits of laughter appear more striking and dramatic in real-life dialogues with language that seems plausible in the particular context. Last but not least, Doyle's novels are designed to please the average audience, including, if not aiming at, the class he writes about.

Although all three novels are characterized by a similar style Doyle chose to employ for working-class portrayal, there are considerable differences as each volume adapts to the specific topic and the idea Doyle wishes to transmit.

The most distinct feature of *The Commitments* is undoubtedly its musicality. At first it may appear that the only two links with music are the plot and a significant number of lyrics; however, Doyle's innovative approach to form also results in the creation of a detectable and unique rhythm. One theory explaining Doyle's motives is that he wanted the atmosphere of the place to arise. After all, Dublin is famous for its traditional music pubs; music thus inevitably penetrates the lives of its inhabitants. More importantly, it represents the energy and spontaneity of working-class Dubliners. Their lives may be tied by work routine but their vivacity has the power to make little adventures even from the most ordinary moments.

As has already been pointed out, *The Snapper* is marked by Doyle's experience and confidence, which manifests itself in the style as well. The novel can still be labelled 'dialogue novel', even though it is a more moderate version of it. As the theme of the novel is no longer music, there are no lyrics. However, in contrast to *The Commitments*, the second novel contains considerably more physical descriptions. The author himself claims that the choice was deliberate, correlating with the tone of the story and the characters. True enough, *The Snapper* is thematically very different and the style used in *The Commitments* would not do justice to the depiction of the ups and downs of the Rabbitte working-class family. Nevertheless, Doyle still adheres to the principle he set with the first novel and describes only what he believes to be relevant for the story or character's depiction.

As far as the form is concerned, *The Van* does not differ much from the preceding novel, which marked the transition from a prototypical 'dialogue novel' to the style Doyle employs in his later works. The progress can be seen in a rising number of descriptions, chosen carefully to depict Jimmy Sr's position and state of mind through the observations of his surroundings. Such an example can be seen at the beginning of the novel, when Jimmy Sr gets agitated about the twins asking him for a video player. He tries to make them understand that they simply cannot afford one, which is all the more difficult as he would really wish to buy one, especially for little Gina: "Jimmy Sr noticed her pile of video tapes on the shelf; Postman Pat, The Magic Roundabout – that was a great one – five of them, presents from

people. And no video to play them in. God love her" (Doyle, *The Van* 26). Doyle seems to have come to the conclusion that no matter how effective dialogues are to produce comic and dramatic scenes, they are not sufficient to express more complex feelings and suffering. Jimmy Sr's inner thoughts and regrets related to his social status can only be conveyed through some forms of description, which is, however, in no conflict with his simplified narrative style.

10 The Language of *The Barrytown Trilogy*

What must inevitably strike every non-Irish reader about the trilogy is the language. As has already been pointed out, Doyle uses the Dublin dialect in its complexity, meaning not only the differences in spelling and syntax, but also a significant number of slang words, vulgarisms, and expressions generally regarded as abusive. This is also one of the reasons for Doyle's exclusion from the list of mainstream writers, as well as one of the main arguments for not including his works in schools' curricula. To understand this deliberate use of what is considered bad and inappropriate language, the issue of communication in Ireland needs to be studied in a broader, sociocultural and historical context.

10.1 North Dublin Dialect

North Dublin dialect is a specific variety of Irish vernacular, characteristic of people living in Dublin's Northside. It is typical of speech rather than writing and it includes differences in spelling, pronunciation, lexical items, and syntax. The dialect is not exclusive to the north but allegedly spoken mainly by the people of that area. Given the fact that the north of Dublin is the place where the highest percentage of working-class people live, North Dublin dialect could easily be replaced with the term 'sociolect'.

In terms of phonetics, the variations to the Received Pronunciation are marked in the novels by the eye-dialect technique. Very frequently, the singular pronoun 'you' is pronounced 'ye(h)', while the plural form of 'you' has the equivalent of 'yis', as in: "— Yis're usin' your noses instead of your mouths, said Jimmy" (Doyle, *The Commitments* 28). The adjective 'old' is pronounced 'oul' or 'aul', especially in the collocation 'oul fella' and 'an oul one', meaning 'father, dad' or 'an old lady'. The possessive adjective 'my' has the form of 'me', either standing on its own or as the first part of the reflexive pronoun 'myself', which is thus pronounced 'meself'. One of the frequent features is also the use of apostrophe to indicate an omission of the last consonant, mainly /ŋ/, /t/ and /d/, for instance: "Even if it's rainin' there's still trainin', righ'" (Doyle, *The Van* 23). Like in Cockney English, there is also a common elision of the middle consonants, such as in words 'def'ny' for 'definitely' and 'birth'y' for 'birthday'.

As can be expected, the area of lexis provides the greatest number of oddities. Some of the commonly used words and expressions are listed here, in alphabetical order, along with their possible explanations and examples from the novels:

Gaff – house

> "If he'd been in his own gaff he wouldn't have been sitting like this, like a gobshite, too far back in the armchair –" (Doyle, *The Van* 52).

Gas – amusing

> "He did it again. The sound was the same as well, as when he was a kid. That was gas ——" (Doyle, *The Van* 16).

Mot – girlfriend

> "—Yis should see his mot. Darren's mot" (Doyle, *The Van* 60).

Poxy – stupid

> "—I wouldn't touch your poxy socks" (Doyle, *The Snapper* 75).

Rapid – great

> "—Ah rapid! Da ——Ma —. Thanks" (Doyle, *The Snapper* 99).

Ride – to have sex; a person with whom the speaker either had or would like to have sex

> "—You said I was a ride. Didn't yeh?" (Doyle, *The Snapper* 86)

Scarlet – embarrassed

> "They were scarlet. They sounded terrible" (Doyle, *The Commitments* 26).

Slag – to make fun of someone

> "—Fuck off slaggin', said Imelda" (Doyle, *The Commitments* 28).

The jacks – the toilet

> "—Anyway, he asked Tracy, —why am I to put a tick on this piece o' paper when I go to the jacks?" (Doyle, *The Van* 8)

Your man (occasionally spelt ‘yerman’) – a reference to another person

“He’d read three of your man, Charles Dickens’ books now” (Doyle, *The Van* 64).

As is implied, the working-class sociolect is considerably different from the variety spoken in the predominantly middle and upper-class south. Doyle uses Jimmy Jr and his efforts to become popular to briefly outline the difference between the two varieties, at least in terms of pronunciation. In *The Snapper*, Jimmy Jr is learning to speak with the southern bourgeois accent to increase his chances to get a job as a radio broadcaster. His conviction and enthusiasm are not welcomed by his family.

—I’ve a gig in a few weeks; Soturday, he told Sharon.

—Stop talkin’ like tha’, will yeh.

——I’m tryin’ to get used to it.

—It makes yeh sound like a fuckin’ eejit.

—Here maybe, but not on the radio, said Jimmy.

[…]

—Hoy there, you there, out there. This is Jommy Robbitte, Thot’s Rockin’ Robbitte, with a big fot hour of the meanest, hottest, baddest sounds arouuund; yeahhh. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 188-9)

It seems overly demanding to try to get rid of linguistic indicators of one’s class in order to be accepted, but the fact that Jimmy Jr seeks help in elocution lessons proves how much importance he places on it (Pierse, *Writing* 249). Although he is proud to be working class, he believes he needs to adapt to succeed. His upbringing and behaviour go against his ambition.

This instance not only shows a considerable difference between both forms of language spoken in Dublin but also proves their relevance to working opportunities in certain institutions. Doyle’s suggestion about the significance of one’s dialect (sociolect) is supported by the fact that in the previous century, several authors of working-class drama decided to include glossaries of typically working-class expressions in their plays to ensure

the comprehension of middle-class audience (Pierse, *Writing* 248). All that is the evidence of a deep cultural gap within one city, determined by social and educational backgrounds.

10.2 Profanity as an Attribute of (Working-Class) Hiberno-English

The Irish are notorious for the use of profane language and swearing, the evidence of which can be found in numerous web pages and discussion fora. These are filled with lists of words and their meanings for non-Irish speakers, as well as questions about the commonness, frequency, and undertone of their use.

As Irish speakers like to point out, they are entirely capable of speaking in a respectable manner, using relatively standard expressions and syntax as well as avoiding swear words in contexts where using 'bad language' would be considered highly inappropriate. Nevertheless, the number of accounts from people who were shocked or even offended by the way the Irish speak to one another is what led some people to write articles to explain the phenomenon.

Such an article in *Irish Times* describes the use of 'F-word' as a matter of principle and highlights its potency throughout the history of literature, going from James Joyce's *Ulysses* and D. H. Lawrence to Roddy Doyle ("The F-Word"). True enough, *The Commitments* is an epitome of the usage of the aforesaid word. At the very beginning of the novel, one of Jimmy's friends says: "Aah, that's fuckin' horrible, tha' is" (Doyle, *The Commitments* 1).

However, the F-word is but one of many vulgarisms that can be heard in the Irish variety of the English language, usually referred to as Hiberno-English. The number of profane words observed especially in Dublin and Cork, the largest Irish cities and, thus, the places with the highest concentration of urban working class, led to speculation as to whether social class is the decisive factor for the use of such profanity. An interesting study led by Timothy Jay supports this assumption. Jay suggests that there is a correlation between explicit cursing and social power. Generally speaking, all classes curse, but unlike middle classes who are afraid of offending someone, working-class people are more likely to swear, for they "have no power, and so they have nothing to lose by cursing" (163).

There seem to be numerous reasons for the use of swear words in Ireland. Apart from effect and impact-related motives, it apparently helps the Irish react to stress and lower the

level of anxiety, which is probably common in other countries as well. What is characteristic of the Irish population, the working-class community in particular, is the use of swear words to express affection towards friends and family, a feature which foreigners consider to be the most confusing and disturbing. Such a case can be found in the way Jimmy Jr says goodbye to Joey, the former member of the band, at the end of *The Commitments*.

> —Listen to this. ——O sing unto the Lord, a new song, for he hath done marvellous things. Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise. ——Psalm Number 98, Brother Jimmy.
>
> —Fuck off, Joey. Good luck. (Doyle, *The Commitments* 128)

Clearly, Joey is trying to tease Jimmy, who expresses comprehension by the usual and all-purpose phrase which is in no way to be taken as an offence. The wish of good will at the end of the dialogue follows the earlier tone of gratitude and only proves the friendship of the two men.

Interestingly, what has been said does not quite agree with Veronica's character. She does not make peace with everyday swearing and blasphemy and the reason for that seems to be social class. Not only does she keep criticising her husband for the use of the F-word but she also disapproves of her children overusing the words 'Jaysis' or 'Jesus', even though she sometimes uses them as well. Her dislike for profanity is most likely either a result of her gender-specific standpoint or a refusal of the Irish, or rather Dublin-related, stereotype. Another, albeit improbable, cause could be religion. However, her behaviour and occasional but witty jokes at her husband's expense, while never mentioning God or the Church in any way, rather suggest that swearing reminds her of the embarrassment of being lower class. It seems that Doyle, like Timothy Jay, is inclined to believe that there is a link between being working class and using vulgar language.

Jimmy Sr is aware of Veronica's fear of a potential language-related stigma and, therefore, when the occasion and/or the surroundings require a certain type of behaviour, he struggles to keep his words in an appropriate register. Moreover, he tries to reduce the number of vulgar expressions at home to prevent little Gina from picking them up and even makes everyone in the family use a swear box as a form of motivation. Nevertheless, the

following situation shows that trying not to curse represents a considerable strain. At a Christmas party at his friend Bimbo's, he feels uncomfortable in such a well-kept household and, more importantly, near Bimbo's mother-in-law:

> He heard feet on the path.
>
> —Thank fuck.
>
> It was out before he knew it. And she nodded; she did; she'd heard him; oh Christ!
>
> She couldn't have; no. No, she'd just nodded at the same time, that was all. Because, probably, her neck wasn't the best any more, that was all. He hoped. (Doyle, *The Van* 53-4)

Be that as it may, the spontaneous emotional outbursts of Jimmy Sr as well as of other characters, those not belonging to the Rabbitte household, suggest that swearing is like a second nature to Barrytowners, nearly impossible to change. In reference to what has been stated about class-determined profanity and the Irish infamous characteristic, it seems that the difference between lower and upper-class people's swearing does not lie so much in the quantity as in the ability to control it. In other words, the energetic and impulsive behaviour of working-class people corresponds with the form of language they speak. The emotional aspect of their personalities, which was not moderated by any specific learning environment, surpasses the rational one and makes them say whatever is on their minds.

Roddy Doyle wanted to create authentic language as he knew it, which is in harmony with his love of slang, as well as the language play and creativity that is so deeply rooted in the nation's culture of storytelling. He is aware of the significance the Irish nation bears for profanity and seeks to reflect it in literature. However truthful critics may be about the abundance of swearing in the trilogy, they in fact do not take into consideration either Doyle's intention or the actual context of the novels. Although there are many supporters of Doyle's work on the trilogy, the number of reproaching critics implies that the world of literature may not yet be ready for this kind of idiosyncrasy.

11 Working-Class Dynamism

The energy and enthusiasm of working-class characters usually become evident in their struggle with being on the periphery, which is a feature typical of this kind of literature. Although it might not be clear at first, it is this inner conflict portrayed by the members of the Rabbitte family that connects all the novels in the trilogy.

From the very first pages of *The Commitments*, Jimmy Rabbitte Jr expresses his views on conventions in music business and his criticism of bourgeoisie: "—All tha' mushy shite abou' love an' fields an' meetin' mots in supermarkets an' McDonald's is gone, ou' the fuckin' window. It's dishonest, said Jimmy. —It's bourgeois" (Doyle, *The Commitments* 6). In his characteristic way, Jimmy Jr insinuates that, as far as he is concerned, bourgeoisie makes life look different than it really is. His effort to create a band is provoked by his belief that there is a gap in the market for (Barrytown) working-class people. Jimmy is conceited and ambitious enough to be able to explain to others what they feel deep inside but cannot name. Moreover, he openly admits being proud to belong to working class. In fact, he automatically expects everyone else to be proud as well, as if it was an inseparable characteristic of all working-class people. Therefore, in a way, he consciously supports class division.

A direct class conflict can be seen when Joey, the oldest and most experienced member of the band, expresses serious doubts about one of the members listening to jazz. According to Joey's theory, different music genres are designed for different social classes and the boundaries are impassable:

> —Jazz is the antithesis of soul.
>
> […]
>
> —Soul is the people's music. Ordinary people making music for ordinary people. —Simple music. Any Brother can play it. The Motown sound, it's simple. Thump-thump-thump-thump. ——That's straight time. Thump-thump-thump-thump. —— See? Soul is democratic, Jimmy. Anyone with a bin lid can play it. It's the people's music. (Doyle, *The Commitments* 101)

Subsequently, he becomes excited when explaining the virtue of jazz and mentioning what sort of people listen to it:

> —Polyrhythms! Polyrhythms! I ask you! That's not the people's sound. ——Those polyrhythms went through Brother Parker's legs and up his ass. ——And who did he play to? I'll tell you, middle-class white kids with little beards and berets. In jazz clubs. Jazz clubs! They didn't even clap. They clicked their fingers.
>
> […]
>
> —Charlie Parker was born black. A beautiful, shiny, bluey sort of black. ——And he could play. He could play alright. But he abused it, he spat on it. He turned his back on his people so he could entertain hip honky brats and intellectuals. ——Jazz! It's decadent. ——The Russians were right. They banned it. (Doyle, *The Commitments* 102)

As Joey puts it, jazz is exclusive. At the end of his speech, he states that it is "for the mind", as opposed to 'for the people' (Doyle, *The Commitments* 103). It is much more abstract and complex and presupposes not only a different target audience but also a specific response. In Joey's view, jazz lacks the energy and passion of ordinary working-class people who listen to music for the purpose of relaxation and taking their minds of things.

Despite his inner conflict, as the protagonist of *The Commitments* and a potential Barrytown working-class spokesperson, Jimmy Jr could be compared to an inconspicuous voice of his author. In this respect, *The Commitments* is the most if not the only autobiographical novel in the trilogy. After all, Doyle claims: "I'm a middle class person commenting on working class life" ("Roddy Doyle"). He also imprinted his postmodernist view on art and literature in Jimmy who, on the one hand, distinguishes classic popular music of the previous century as a means of finding one's soul, but on the other, values freedom to express one's ideas and opinions. When he is explaining soul music to the rest of the band during one of his workshops, he reaches the essence of the music genre and, for many people, the essence of art itself.

> —Soul is a double-edged sword, lads, he told them once.
>
> Joey the Lips nodded.

—One edge is escapism.

—What's tha'?

—Fun. ——Getting' away from it all. Lettin' yourself go. (Doyle, *The Commitments* 29)

The notion of art as a form of entertainment as well as diversion from everyday reality and stereotype is quite common in contemporary viewpoints. Often attributed to the working class, this concept, however, is not limited to any social group or class. As a matter of fact, it alludes to the fundamental purpose and effect of absorbing any form of art, which corresponds to Doyle's disregard for the classification of high and low literature.

The essence of soul and working-class dynamism is thus encapsulated on no more than five pages and in no more than a few sentences. Although the issue of revolution is but theoretical and within the confines of music as a means of self-expression, it is clear that these people, largely blue-collar workers, are driven by class conflict and economic demands, but since they do not believe in politics being able to change anything, they come to terms with the state of affairs and settle for a 'music revolution' as a means of escapism.

The characters keep fighting their isolation and finally decide to create their own versions of reality: "They live on the periphery. They look for themselves on the television and they're not there, so culturally they don't exist. They're rejected really and it's up to them to take this fact by the scruff and reject it" (Reynolds and Noakes 25). Jimmy Jr does not give up his endeavour to be a part of something people enjoy and admire. Whether it is by managing a band or becoming a DJ, he simply wishes to be more than one of many people whose names are known only to their families and friends. Sharon, too, battles with periphery and spreads the story of how she got pregnant – the story she invented and would like to believe herself, to protect herself from judgment and disdain. When it does not work out the way she wanted, her only triumph is to turn the mockery in her favour. Jimmy Sr, not very different from his son, embarks on a business venture to prove himself, his family, and the whole Barrytown that he is full of potential and an asset to his surroundings. Towards the end of the novel, he praises himself and wastes money to attract younger women, only to make himself feel successful and self-confident.

There are more people striving to fit in somewhere else in Barrytown. Darren, for example, though coming from a strictly working-class background like his older brother Jimmy, plans to study at university and, in the final novel of the trilogy, even shows certain signs of shame and disapproval of his father's position and actions. A similar conflict can be seen in Veronica. There is not much said about her in the trilogy, but the fact that she tries hard to finish her education, wants her children to call her 'mammy' instead of 'ma', and seems to be in a bad mood most of the time, especially when it comes to discussing money or upbringing, implies her inner struggle and suffering. Whether she comes from a working-class background or not, being a mother of six children now seems to have prevented her from pursuing her dreams and realize her unfulfilled passions. Although she is aware that this will probably never happen, she does her best to change at least the little details that keep reminding her of what she misses in her life. For instance, unlike her husband, she strives to make the children speak in a certain way, such as calling all adults 'Mr' and 'Mrs' and avoiding swear words, even though she sometimes uses them as well. Quite understandably, she is indignant about Jimmy Sr's reckless behaviour that undermines her efforts, such as when the twins describe what they said to their teacher when she asked them a question about their parents:

> —She told everyone to say wha' our mammies an' our daddies said to each other tha' mornin'.
>
> —Oh my God! said Veronica.
>
> […]
>
> —An' would yeh by any chance remember wha' I said to your mammy? Jimmy Sr asked.
>
> ——Yeah.
>
> —Well? What was it?
>
> —Yeh pointed ou' the window ——at the rainin' – She pointed at the window.
>
> —An' then yeh said. ——
>
> Jimmy Jr laughed. He remembered.

—Go on, said Jimmy Sr.

—You said It looks like another fuck of a day.

Jimmy Jr howled. So did Darren. Jimmy Sr tried not to. Veronica put her hands to her face and slowly dragged her fingers down over her cheeks. Her mouth was open.

—Oh sweet Jesus, she said then, to no one.

[…]

—Serves her righ', the nosey brasser.

Jimmy Jr, Darren and the twins laughed. Jimmy Sr grinned at Veronica. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 36)

While everyone, including Jimmy Sr, finds the situation amusing, Veronica is not at all impressed. Regardless of how many working-class children attend the school along with the twins, she would like to prevent herself and her children from being labelled as lower-class people who do not have much of a hope to move up the social ladder. It does not help that Jimmy Sr shows a considerable disrespect towards authorities, which is a phenomenon usually found in working-class families. Consequently, even though she sometimes finds it comical herself, Veronica keeps criticizing Jimmy Sr's behaviour and the language he speaks. At the same time, none of that means she is not proud and as protective of her family as her husband. At one point, she even loses her self-control and hits Mrs Burgess:

—Why do you want her? said Veronica.

Now Doris looked at Veronica.

—Well, if you must know, she's been messin' around with George. ——He's the father.

—Get lost, Doris, said Veronica.

—I will not get lost now, said Doris. —She's your daughter, isn't she?

There were two women coming up the road, four gates away.

—Of course, said Doris, —what else would you expect from a —

Veronica punched her in the face. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 118)

However calm and reasonable she normally seems, trying to act as a respectable woman from a good family, it is clear that Veronica tries hard to conceal her temper. She is, in fact, prone to become aggressive when her family is being insulted. The same energy and hot temper are present in Sharon who, just like her mother in the previous scene, uses force rather than words. When some teenagers are laughing at her and calling her 'ride' on her way home, she lets it go at first; the second time, however, she decides not to swallow insults anymore:

> Sharon slapped him across the head.
>
> —Wha'!
>
> —Wha' did yeh call me? said Sharon, and she slapped him again.
>
> —I didn't call yeh ann'thin'!
>
> Sharon held onto the hood and swung him into the wall. There was another rip, a long one.
>
> —If you ever call me annythin' again I'll fuckin' kill yeh, d'yeh hear me?
>
> The boy stood there against the wall, afraid to move in case there was another tear. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 130)

Her father does in no way fall behind when it comes to family honour; he tries to restore respect with his fists, showing once again his impetuous nature.

> —You didn't hear them, said Veronica.
>
> —I know wha' I heard., said Jimmy Sr. —I'm not goin' to stand by an' let anyone —annyone, I don't care who, jeer Sharon.
>
> —You're a fuckin' eejit, Daddy, said Sharon. —Why couldn't yeh just ignore them?
>
> —I'm not like tha', said Jimmy Sr.
>
> He was nearly crying.
>
> —I'm not goin' to let them jeer yeh.
>
> He was liking himself now.

—Why not, for fuck sake?

Veronica tut-tutted.

Jimmy Sr thumped the table.

—Because you're my daughter an' —well, fuck it, you're my daughter an' as long as yeh live in this house I'm not goin' to let bollixes like them say things about yeh. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 146)

Not only does he not know how else to right the wrongs according to his moral code, but he even enjoys this machismo which, for a while, makes him feel stronger. It would not be accurate to state that only working-class people show this kind of thinking and behaviour. On the other hand, due to the lack of education and forming that would teach them to control their emotions and enhance the process of reasoning, they belong to the group that is most associated with it.

Everything considered, the first two novels are mostly designed to portray the heart and soul of working-class people, filled with pride, energy, vitality, and impulsiveness. *The Van*, as the height of the trilogy, intensifies this impression and, on top of that, raises the socioeconomic struggle and its consequences to another, more serious, level.

11.1 Barrytown Humour

The particularity of the mostly working-class neighbourhood is well perceived through the humour of its citizens, depicted across the trilogy and contributing significantly to its comic value.

Sharon is the character that has to put up with Barrytowners and their sense of humour throughout the whole novel. As soon as the neighbours find out that there may be a connection between her pregnancy and Mister Burgess' leaving, Sharon becomes an object of constant ridicule:

So it made more sense. But she knew this as well: everyone would prefer to believe that she's got off with Mister Burgess. It was a bigger piece of scandal and better gas. She'd have loved it herself, only she was the poor sap who was pregnant. Yeah

> definitely, Sharon and Mister Burgess was a much better story than Sharon and the Spanish sailor.
>
> So that was what she was fighting against; Barrytown's sense of humour. She'd keep telling them that it was the Spanish sailor and they'd believe her all right, but every time they thought about Mister Burgess with his trousers down and pulling at her tits and watering at the mouth they'd forget about the Spanish sailor. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 135)

Whether they believe her or not, the idea of her and Mister Burgess sharing more than a talk is so preposterous that it becomes comical. Sharon herself admits she would find it hilarious under different circumstances. What the author reveals about Barrytown inhabitants is that they are overly cheerful, gleeful, and rather inconsiderate for the sake of gossip and mockery. In the end, Sharon accepts her neighbours' temperament and fights back the only way she believes she can – with the same, audacious humour. Her winning laugh at the very end of the novel when she decides to name her baby Georgina after George Burgess is the peak of comedy in *The Snapper* and probably in the whole trilogy.

Another example of Barrytown's humour and glee can be found in a scene in *The Van* when Jimmy Sr helps Bimbo to get the freshly bought engine-less van in front of his house:

> Anyway, they got the useless piece of rusty shite to stop just after the corner and there was a really huge crowd by now and they cheered when they missed the corner, the cunts. […] No fear of the lazy shites giving them a hand, of course.
>
> There really was a huge crowd out. It was a bit like Gandhi's funeral in the film, except noisier. It was more like the Tour de France, the neighbours at the side of the road clapping and whooping, the cynical bastards.
>
> —Hey Jimmy, are yeh pushin' it or ridin' it!?
>
> And they all laughed, the eejits, like sheep. (Doyle, *The Van* 110)

Barrytown is a predominantly working-class suburb where most people know one another and are all curious. Instead of helping someone, they prefer laughing at their misfortune. However unpleasant it is, there does not seem to be anything personal in it. In

fact, it is quite likely that if Jimmy Sr was not the one pushing the van, he would also be standing in the crowd or at least watching from the window.

One of the means of comedy in the trilogy is the characters' attitude to religion. The object of Doyle's open mockery is not faith itself but rather the Church as an institution and everything related to it. The indifference and disdain towards the Church found in working-class community were not only caused by progressive endeavour of young people and uncovered scandals of Catholic clergymen in the 1980s and 1990s, but also determined by the place where people lived. Although the whole country was formally still under a heavy influence of the Catholic Church, in towns and cities, as opposed to rural areas, people were much more liberal-minded, working class in particular. This attitude is portrayed in a few yet well noticeable scenes in the trilogy. In *The Commitments*, when Jimmy is telling the band about James, his candidate for a pianist, it is a story of James's inappropriate behaviour in the church that finally persuades them of his worthiness:

> —No way, Jimmy, said Outspan.
>
> —No, hang on, listen. He told me he got fucked ou' o' the folk mass choir. —— D'yis know why? For playin' The Chicken Song on the organ. In the fuckin' church.
>
> —Jaysis!
>
> They laughed. This didn't sound like the James Clifford they'd known and hated.
>
> —Just before tha mass, Jimmy continued. –There were oul' ones an' oul' fellas walkin' up the middle, yeh know. An' he starts playin' The fucking Chicken Song.
>
> —He sounds okay, said Deco.
>
> No one disagreed with Deco. (Doyle, *The Commitments* 12)

A similar case can be found in *The Van*, when Jimmy Sr and his friends discuss the things which Bimbo, having recently lost his job, could do to pass the time:

> —He can clean the church on Monday mornin's, said Bertie.
>
> They roared.

—Some oul' one tried to get Vera to start doin' tha', said Bertie. —Help cleanin' the fuckin' church on Monday mornin's.

—I wouldn't say that'd be Vera's scene exactly, said Jimmy Sr.

—Not at all, said Bertie. —She doesn't even help to dirty the fuckin' place on Sunday mornin's. (Doyle, *The Van* 69)

Apparently, they find the idea of working in the church ridiculous, especially when they do not even attend the service on Sundays. They are not interested in institutional religion at all and probably do not believe that it has any merits either.

12 Family as a Source of Comfort and Support

Instead of writing about completely new characters after the success of *The Commitments*, Roddy Doyle decided to return to the Rabbitte family and explore it further, which enabled him to portray Dublin working-class mentality and demonstrate the importance of family in general. His approach to the theme is captured in the following statement: "Doyle employs family levity with laser-guided precision. It is the balm that allows the reader and the characters to withstand plots teeming with the challenges of life, poor decisions, and accompanying atonements" (Brown). Simply put, it is always family that offers cure for all afflictions the characters sooner or later encounter.

The theme of family pervades the whole trilogy but is treated very differently in each volume. Overall, it seems to be rather under the surface; each novel portrays a part of life of one or two family members. Their lives and problems mirror those of the people around them. Therefore, Doyle does not depict only the Rabbittes but all the Barrytowners: one big Dublin working-class family brimming with spirit and life energy, or, as the members of The Commitments band say, 'soul'.

Although pushed aside, the theme of family is not at all omitted in *The Commitments*. Jimmy's band becomes his family for a while – a place where he can realize his potential and, perhaps, even fulfil his dreams. Yet before long, Jimmy discovers that this kind of family is not stable or reliable; on the contrary, the band members keep exhausting him with their complaints and untrustworthy behaviour. By contrast, his father, who keeps scolding him and making fun of him, turns out to be supportive:

> —Come 'ere, you, said Jimmy Sr. –Are you sellin' drugs or somethin'?
>
> —I AM NOT, said Jimmy.
>
> —Then why are all these cunts knockin' at the door?
>
> —I'm auditionin'.
>
> —You're wha'?
>
> —Aud-ish-un-in. We're formin' a group. ——A band.
>
> —You?

—Yeah.

Jimmy Sr. laughed.

—Dickie fuckin' Rock. (Doyle, *The Commitments* 18)

Referring to the famous working-class singer and North Dubliner Dickie Rock, who was most successful during the 1960s, Jimmy Sr does not hide his surprise at his son's initiative, yet he does not discourage him either. He seems to be excited about the outcome and proud that his son is bold enough to pursue the path of a man who has presumably meant a great deal to the community.

Albeit marginally, the trilogy offers various kinds of family relationships. Besides the parent-child relationship, *The Snapper* also contains depictions of the bond between the siblings. As has been shown, for the most part, their relationships are not presented as strong and loving. However, despite all the arguments and strong language, there is a degree of support and affection underneath. An interesting example is a short dialogue between Sharon and Jimmy Jr. Their relationship is more intimate than it would seem, as Jimmy Jr confides in Sharon about his plan to get elocution lessons because of his DJ practice, while she opens up about her physical check-ups. In addition to that, he supports her concerning the baby's father: "—An' they'll prob'bly always say it. ——I couldn't give a shite who the da is. D'yeh know what I mean?" (Doyle, *The Snapper* 140) This is exactly the kind of support that helps Sharon when she feels lonely. Subsequently, Jimmy makes use of her advice about his DJ stage name which he did not mention to anyone else. However stubborn, he relies on the security of his family that helps him gain energy for his projects.

Family has also an important, socioeconomic relevance, best portrayed in *The Van*. Jimmy Sr, currently on the dole, keeps having a strange sensation in his stomach: "And that was how he sometimes – often – felt now, scared shitless. And he didn't know why" (Doyle, *The Van* 50). He started feeling that way after he had been made redundant; therefore, there is no doubt about the source of his uneasiness. Being a husband and a father, particularly in Ireland, means being the head of the family and, more importantly, almost the only source of income. Furthermore, working-class families are low-income brackets, sometimes even

close to the breadline, with no savings or property. Without a regular income, they are likely to run out of money rather quickly.

Doyle uses Jimmy Sr's suffering in *The Van*, as well as Sharon's uncertainty in the preceding novel, to demonstrate how important family's support is in such situations, when they have no one and nothing else to rely on. Even though they do not spend as much time together as they once used to, all the members know they can count on one another in need. A case in point is Jimmy Jr giving his father money for beer:

> He followed Jimmy Jr to the door.
>
> —Come here, said Jimmy Jr. —Could yeh use tha'?
>
> It was a fiver.
>
> —Eh —
>
> —Go on, said Jimmy Jr.
>
> He put it into his da's cardigan pocket.
>
> —A few pints, he said.
>
> —— Thanks.
>
> —No problem. See yeh.
>
> —Thanks.
>
> —Shut up, will yeh. See yeh.
>
> —Okay. ——Good luck, son. (Doyle, *The Van* 27)

Since Jimmy Jr knows his father and his situation well, he is willing to help him, arguably being better off at the moment. There are two ways to view the scene – either as a bitter irony regarding Jimmy Sr's current position as a middle-aged working-class father who has but a little chance to improve his social status, or as a display of affection and gratitude towards a parent. However reluctantly, Jimmy Sr finally accepts, as he is practical and truly misses the time spent with his friends in a pub, which is, apart from a modified version of golf, his sole active hobby.

In both *The Snapper* and *The Van*, it is family that helps to overcome all the obstacles and challenges of being working class. In Sharon's case, it is faith and hope as a result of her family's support, whereas at the end of *The Van*, family compensates for the loss of two jobs and the best friend: "—Give us a hug, Veronica, will yeh. —— I need a hug" (Doyle, *The Van* 287). Jimmy Sr's final words indicate that family represents an ultimate comfort for him. Despite his feeling of failure, loneliness, and isolation, it is his family on what he can always rely.

13 Politics in the Trilogy

The trilogy provides the reader with Doyle's perception of politics with a lower case 'p'. It has already been mentioned in the theoretical part that Roddy Doyle distinguishes two kinds of politics. While politics with a capital 'P' is the kind of publicized administration and decision-making of selected people, politics with a lower case 'p' is personal and includes all issues any individual may be faced with, from unemployment to domestic violence; in other words, problems in society that are often depicted only in statistics. With his portrayal of the Rabbitte working-class family, whose feelings should not be ignored, Doyle thus pushes the sphere of personal politics to a different level and makes all the issues visible.

The only allusion to actual Irish 'Politics' is made by Jimmy Jr when he is trying to explain that real music should be about sex and politics:

> —Wha' abou' this politics?
>
> —Yeah, politics. ——Not songs abou' Fianna fuckin' Fail or annythin' like tha'. Real politics. (They weren't with him.) –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. (Doyle, *The Commitments* 7)

Surprisingly enough, though having stated that music is about politics, Jimmy Jr dismisses the idea of singing about the Irish Republican Party or anything else of that sort. He reduces politics to what he can label and understand; that is to say, whatever has a direct and non-representative impact on his life. In addition to that, he believes that music should represent actual everyday lives of people for whom it is intended, meaning no abstractions or metaphors, and is determined to deliver on his promise. Equally, Roddy Doyle writes working-class fiction for working-class people, which is reflected in both content and style of his work.

While *The Commitments* is a light-hearted comedy that introduces Dublin working class with levity and exaggeration, *The Snapper* and *The Van* represent more seriously elaborated

works. Although the second novel essentially depicts relationships within the family and both physical and psychological development of the main heroine, there are some encounters of serious social issues. For example, when Jimmy Sr watches the News one day, he learns about child abuse in England, which truly disconcerts him:

> —I'll never lay a hand on the twins again, he told Sharon.
>
> —Wha'?
>
> —The twins, said Jimmy Sr. —I'll never touch them again.
>
> —Did you hit them?
>
> —No! ——No; it's all tha' child abuse stuff goin' on over in England. Were yeh not watchin' it?
>
> —No. I was miles away.
>
> —On the News there, Jimmy Sr explained. –It looks like yeh can't look at your own kids over there. They'll take them away from yeh. An' inspect their arses —
>
> —Daddy!
>
> —It's true, Jimmy Sr insisted. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 109)

Further on, he gets more agitated: "——I'd kill anyone tha' did somethin' like tha' to a child. A little kid. They do it to snappers even. I'd chop his bollix –excuse me, Sharon –off. I would. Then hang him. Or shoot him" (Doyle, The Snapper 109). In his own usual way, he takes the news personally and despite having no experience with the reported issue, he lets himself being influenced by it. Being a loving father, he simply cannot comprehend how anyone could abuse children. What is more, he fears he might be associated with it himself. It can be said that as a hot-headed working-class person with lower education, he is likely to be attracted by sensational news, as well as to jump to conclusions when hearing them. A few days later, he even feels the need to discuss the issue with his friends and warn them of the possible consequences.

A threat working-class people mostly face is unemployment and the related job search, challenges especially for middle-aged working-class men:

—D'yis know wha' they had me doin' today, do yis? Yis won't believe this.

—Wha'? said Bimbo.

—They were teachin' us how to use the phone.

—Wha'!?

—I swear to God. The fuckin' phone.

—You're not serious.

—I am, yeh know. I fuckin' am. The gringo in charge handed ou' photocopies of a diagram of a phone.

[…]

—Then he was tellin' us, Bertie continued, —wha' we should an' shouldn't say when we're lookin' for work. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 113)

Describing some kind of a supporting or retraining programme, Jimmy Sr's friend insinuates that there is a general lack of meaningful solution and support for unemployed people. It may be that the author implies calls for the seriousness of this issue to get appropriate attention from the relevant authorities.

Although *The Snapper*'s main topic is unintended pregnancy, the novel is directly related to the problem of being out of work and not having sufficient income. When Sharon wants to leave her current job as a stock assistant, mainly due to work relationships that have been worsening since her pregnancy, her mother is trying to persuade her to stay, which she managed to do before:

—Sharon, love, she said. —A job's a job. Could you not wait —

—I don't care, I'm not goin'. You can't make me.

Veronica let it go.

—You'd love to make me go back, wouldn't yeh? Said Sharon. —Well, I'm not goin' to. I don't care. ——All you care abou' is the money.

Veronica got out of the kitchen. She sat on the bed in her room. (Doyle, *The Snapper* 191)

Veronica is obviously worried about Sharon's future and the future of the whole family. Not only is she aware of how difficult it is for a single mother to find a suitable job, but she also knows that maternity benefit, reportedly one of the lowest in Europe (MacGuill), will not help her much in the beginning. Logically, the financial burden will, to some extent, necessarily fall on the family as well.

Despite the fact that *The Snapper* is considerably more serious than the first novel, it is *The Van* that can be considered the political height of the trilogy in terms of Dublin working-class issues, described through the observations of the returning Jimmy Sr. Taking a closer look at Doyle's favourite character in the last novel, it is clear that the reason for his anxiety is as simple as the life he leads. Unlike wealthy and successful people who may be prone to clinical depression, Jimmy Sr appears to have been happy with his job as it gave him some order in life. Now he and his friend Bimbo suffer the consequences of being unemployed and running out of money, which is a real scenario in many lower-class families.

One of the consequences is the already mentioned job seeking, by which Doyle draws attention to the seriousness of unemployment in Dublin:

> He – Bimbo – got the Independent every morning. It was supposed to be the best paper for jobs, and he went straight to the back pages. He hadn't a hope in shite of getting a job out of it, he knew it himself; they knew nobody who'd ever got a job out of a paper. But he still got it and went down the columns with his finger and got ink on it and then on his face, and then got depressed when there was nothing for him. God love him, Jimmy Sr had to stop him from writing away for a job in McDonalds; there was a huge ad for them in Saturday's paper. (Doyle, *The Van* 88)

Being out of work for longer than Bimbo, Jimmy Sr is likely to have more experience with job searching, and therefore is rather sceptical of his friend' efforts. Apparently, looking for employment is considered to be a widespread problem, especially for middle-aged men.

Despite his financial difficulties, Jimmy Sr still keeps a certain level of dignity, as he would not apply for some kinds of jobs such as the one in McDonalds. Interestingly enough, he would not let Bimbo apply for it either, explaining that "he couldn't let a friend of his – his best friend – allow himself to sink that low" (Doyle, *The Van* 90). Obviously, the issue

does not lie with having a job per se. Even money does not have the deciding power, for Jimmy Sr claims that if he "ever got offered proper work he'd jump at it, even if it was less than the dole" (Doyle, *The Van* 90). The reason for not applying for a job in McDonalds is much more complex: "They're lookin' for young ones an' young fellas tha' they can treat like shite an' exploit" (Doyle, *The Van* 89). To put it differently, Jimmy Sr strongly believes that such a job was designed for young people who are not yet at risk of losing their self-respect and life energy.

In the end, the above mentioned difficulties and a curious nature force Jimmy Sr to go into the unknown and start business. While describing the two friends making progress, Doyle mentions for the first time the level of criminality, or rather delinquency, and suddenly shows the North Dublin suburbs in a different, more dangerous light:

> There was a gang of them that hung around the Hikers carpark, young fellas, from fourteen to maybe nineteen. Even in the rain, they stayed there. They just put their hoodies up. Some of them always had their hoodies up. They were all small and skinny looking but there was something frightening about them. The way they behaved, you could tell that they didn't give a fuck about anything. When someone parked his car and went into the pub they went over to the car and started messing with it even before the chap had gone inside; they didn't care if they saw them. (Doyle, *The Van* 173)

These young troublemakers, who are jobless and do not attend any school, have not developed any ethics; that is to say, they do not care about anyone or anything. They endanger the van crew and their business by damaging the vehicle and threatening to steal the goods, often causing the van to move to another place. Lacking basic education, these young delinquents are in a real danger of becoming felons in the future.

What has changed in the last novel, compared to the previous ones, is the fact that Jimmy Sr, now having time on his hands, takes more interest in world affairs updates: "He couldn't keep up with what was happening these days, especially in the Warsaw Pact places" (Doyle, *The Van* 64). He did not care much about political matters before as he was used to relaxing after a hard day's work. Nonetheless, although he finds the news interesting, he still seems to be lost when it comes to world leaders and politics with a capital 'P'. These rare references

to political affairs and personas like Thatcher and Gorbachev serve almost as a derision from the author who has understood through his father's background that working-class people, being among the poorest, only care about their immediate lives and actual problems. That is what makes *The Barrytown Trilogy* a political work, depicting real-life problems and concerns, albeit with some exaggeration, of real-life characters: Dublin working class.

Conclusion

This thesis is concerned with Roddy Doyle, one of the Irish most popular and successful contemporary writers focusing on working-class protagonists, and his first three novels, generally known as *The Barrytown Trilogy*.

The theoretical part outlines Doyle's biography and the importance of his childhood in one of the suburbs of North Dublin, as well as the relevance of his class background for the depiction of his characters.

A brief description of his style seeks to distinguish him from other contemporary working-class novelists and emphasizes his language experimentation. Further research into the literary community presents theories of his popularity, related to simple plots, extended dialogues, the sense of locality, and everyday language. Interestingly, for some critics, these are also the shortcomings preventing his novels from being credited with literary merit.

Doyle's works are then situated in the context of both modern Irish fiction and Irish working-class literature, and his early novels, influenced considerably by pop culture, are recognized as a contribution to the development of postmodernism in Irish literature.

Finally, the history and significance of Irish (urban) working class is brought into focus, as well as the socioeconomic background in the Irish Republic at the turn of the 1990s, a period of liberal transformation and progress. The very end of the theoretical part explores the conditions of Dublin working class and explains the division of the city between the north and the south.

Although *The Barrytown Trilogy* is principally regarded as a comic work, the analysis of each novel in the practical part explains its controversial nature and demonstrates a larger complexity under the surface.

The first experimental novel highlights the sense of place, which does not serve as a mere setting but constitutes the essence of the characters – their behaviour, opinions, and specific language. Music references, occupying a large part of the text, are apparently related to its historical importance rooted in urban working-class in Ireland and are used to capture the vitality of North Dublin working class. The main protagonist of *The Commitments* is an

epitome of this vitality which, however, along with his ambition, causes a clash between his outward pride and internal struggle to achieve something beyond his current social status.

The relationships of a typical working-class family portrayed in *The Snapper* are very dynamic due to rather impulsive natures of the characters, to which contributes a loving yet unrestricted and less demanding attitude to upbringing based on rule enforcement rather than reasoning, as the corresponding chapter shows. Despite numerous arguments and tense situations, it is family on which the characters rely in need of joy and support.

While the first and second novel provide a light-hearted view on the everyday lives of working-class Dubliners, *The Van* offers a bleak reflection on their vulnerability. Being constantly threatened by poverty, working-class people attach great importance to money, believing it is the only key to success. Since Jimmy Sr lost his only asset and contribution to the family, his inner class struggle deepens. It is again family that brings him comfort and sympathy.

The comparison of the three novels is followed by an account of the significance of Doyle's specific style for the trilogy. The previous chapters of the practical part show Doyle's playfulness with dialogues, making the dramatically tense and humorous situations more dynamic and vivid like theatre plays. The reduced number of descriptive or narrative passages, though steadily increasing, corresponds with Doyle's belief that physical descriptions are only relevant if they contribute to the story or are part of the characters' depiction. The reader thus perceives the world of the protagonists through their own eyes.

The Commitments is characterized by extended conversational passages and musicality. Both the dialogues about Barrytown people and the music represented by song lyrics emphasize the genius loci of the vivacious working-class Dublin, creating a regular rhythm and referring on many occasions to Dublin realia related to everyday working-class life.

Given the fact that Doyle decided to focus on the Rabbitte family dynamics in *The Snapper*, he inevitably had to resorts to using a certain degree of narrative commentary and internal monologues to encapsulate the characters' experience of family relationships.

This approach escalates in the last novel where, employing the highest number of descriptions, the author tries to depict complex feelings of the main protagonist who, being

unemployed, has a great deal of time to observe his surroundings and come to realize his inconsolable position.

What is typical of the trilogy is the highlight of popular culture and history, as well as many references to television, radio, music, sport, food, and beverage brands, all of which correspond to the everyday lives of the characters. Doyle attaches great value to popular history and storytelling, arguing that classic literature is an anachronism. This relates to his postmodernist approach to art and disregard for the division of high and low literature. Overall, his work may be designed for an average reader, including the community of people he writes about; that does not mean, however, that his fiction lacks artistic merit.

Everyday speech, including slang words and profanities, is an inseparable feature od Doyle's work. As a language enthusiast and proud Dubliner, he believes that speech can capture the essence of Dublin working class, which leads to a significant number of dialogues mainly in his early novels. He has been criticized many times for an excessive use of swear words and blasphemy and even accused of damaging the image of the country, which resulted in his exclusion from the lists of school curricula. The scrutiny of the trilogy in this thesis not only shows how he mastered the rendering of North Dublin dialect, or rather sociolect, as is suggested in the theoretical part, but also proves that by employing the language he has been exposed to all his life, Doyle succeeded in achieving a certain level of authenticity. As a matter of fact, he seeks to destroy boundaries and deep-rooted conventions by giving voice to the isolated and still mostly taboo Dublin working class.

The significance of language is related to the spirit of urban working class, which is elaborated in the penultimate chapter. Doyle aimed at several key traits: humour, vitality, impulsiveness, stubbornness, and emotionality. Adopting a humanist and non-judgmental approach, he created working-class characters in their complexity – with virtues and vices, rash decisions, short temper, and stereotypical ideas about social classes. Their loose-tongued, impulsive, and occasionally even aggressive nature leads to numerous arguments as well as humorously memorable moments. The chapter also illustrates the use of humour as a form of escape from everyday routine.

North Dublin, presented as Barrytown and a place predominantly inhabited by working-class people, is characterized by liberal and profane thinking with an open disdain for the

Catholic Church, as opposed to the more conservative South Dublin bourgeoisie and people from rural areas to whom they demur.

In spite of all their pride and stubbornness, Doyle's characters often suffer from class struggle, wishing they had more assets that would enable them to experience success. Family is what they usually depend on; it becomes their recourse in distress and stable support in all their efforts and projects.

The last important theme concerning the trilogy is politics. Doyle's early novels have been reproached for the lack of interest in both world and local agenda. The extracts presented in the last chapter suggest that Doyle does not ignore this agenda but rather ridicules it through his characters. Working-class Dubliners are far too preoccupied with their financial difficulties and isolation-related struggle to be interested in the high politics to which he refers to as the one with a capital 'P'.

Although popular, Doyle has had to face strong criticism regarding the reliability and seriousness of his work. However naïve and simple the first two novels may appear, Doyle did not choose the genre of comedy to undermine the difficulties of Dublin working class or ridicule the Irish in general. On the contrary, as Caramine White claims, Doyle challenges the notions of what should be considered serious literature. This thesis argues in favour of her opinion, demonstrating the underlying complexity of the presupposed popular and humorous trilogy, portraying working-class Dubliners as complicated rather than black and white characters, and calling for more attention, tolerance, and sympathy towards their lives in isolation and constant class conflict.

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