

‘You’re fuckin’ amazing, by the way’: Marginalisation and recovery in Roddy Doyle’s *Paula Spencer*

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Introduction

When in rapid succession Roddy Doyle published the three novels *The Commitments* (1988), *The Snapper* (1990) and *The Van* (1991), in what is known as *The Barrytown Trilogy*, they were generally perceived as offering something new in Irish fiction, and in Irish literature more broadly, in that they zoomed in on north Dublin suburban working-class life, for long an ignored and marginalised segment of Irish culture. These hugely popular novels were followed by the 1993 Booker Prize-winning novel *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and *A Star Called Henry* (1999), all of which in various ways also focus on the hardships and deprivation of the Irish urban working-class. In addition to these novels, Doyle wrote the four-part TV series *Family* (1994), where for the first time Irish viewers met the female protagonist Paula Spencer, a character later to re-emerge in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and its sequel *Paula Spencer* (2006). Notably, *Family* contained violence, wife-battering, unemployment, alcoholism and a dysfunctional family, which in turn infuriated a great number of viewers, who argued that Doyle had given a false image of Ireland. In other words, having touched some very raw nerves, Doyle was accused of tampering with and disturbing revered notions of Irishness and what Ireland represented.

Within just over a decade, then, Doyle had established himself as a writer who insisted on writing previously ignored, indeed taboo, experiences into existence in a country steeped in ideals cherishing rural ideals and what could be termed traditional family values originating in a strong and rigid Catholic ethos, prepared to turn a blind eye to hidden and uncomfortable features in Irish life. As such, Doyle’s texts, as Gerry Smyth contends, are involved in “an intense engagement with the social and cultural milieu from which it springs, as well as the opening up of the national narrative to a range of traditionally silenced voices from the past and the present” (1997: 66). This article will explore the ways in

which the silenced working-class voice of Paula Spencer, in the novel of that name, tries to resist, and arguably overcomes, marginalisation in a society that has wholeheartedly embraced hard-core global capitalism and where the gap between the haves and have-nots has widened. What will emerge is that Paula gradually recovers from her marginalised and vulnerable position—as a victim of an abusive husband (now dead), unemployment and alcoholism—and she does so both by relying on her own gritty inner strength and by reaching out to those in her immediate environment as well as to the world around her. Irish society, shaped as it is by the capitalist mentality of the Celtic Tiger era, does not seem offer any support to Paula; basically, in that social order, she is left to fight her own battles.

The critical perception of Roddy Doyle's writing

As I have suggested, much of Doyle's focus is on the Dublin working-class, its culture and its everyday struggles in the face of unemployment, marginalisation and poverty. However, while he has for some time been regarded as one of the most prominent and critically acclaimed Irish writers, both nationally and internationally, there are also those who argue that his portrayal of the working-class, particularly in *The Barrytown Trilogy*, is superficial and stereotypical and fails to engage with the complex social and political realities in Ireland at the time. For example, José Laners dismisses the *Trilogy* as “consciously a-historical and a-political in [its] reflection of the ephemera of contemporary North Dublin pop-culture” (2002: 245). As Eve Patten points out, early critical assessments held that Doyle's was “a patronising portrait” of the Irish working-class and that “his narrative style in the trilogy, heavily reliant on dialogue and replete with the blasphemies and idioms of a north-side Dublin vernacular, was also seen as verging on caricature” (2006: 266).

In his recent *A History of the Irish Novel*, Derek Hand, too, picks up on this feature of Doyle criticism which, we are informed, holds that in his early work, “Doyle is merely offering another version of the stereotype of the Irish person as public jester” (2011: 266). Assessing Doyle's early work from a distance in time, Hand, while pointing to the “iconic” status (2011: 266) of the *Trilogy* and identifying what he sees as “strong evidence of a social conscience within all [his] writing, a recurring aspiration for justice and fairness” (2011: 265-66), suggests

that this latter quality “can at times work against the aesthetic merits of the work” (2011: 266). Interestingly, too, Hand makes the surprising point that the importance of Doyle’s concerns should somehow have faded, arguing that “[w]hat is remarkable from the vantage point of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland is how rapid was the dating of Doyle’s Dublin, which was vanishing into a world of work, jobs, success and money even as it was being written about” (2011: 266-67). In the wake of the 2009 financial crisis and its severe economic and social consequences for Ireland, this seems like a rather odd comment to make, since the hardships facing the Irish population in the 1980s, for example in the shape of mass unemployment, emigration and a huge national debt, to a large extent the implicit and explicit focus of Doyle’s early texts, turned out to be equally true some 20 years later. Moreover, Hand’s argument becomes even more debatable since, while touching on all of Doyle’s novels to that date, he surprisingly fails to mention *Paula Spencer*, the novel by Doyle that is actually set in the Celtic Tiger era and that problematises the impact of its features on Irish society at various levels.

However, while some critics apparently perceive annoying shortcomings in Doyle’s novels as highlighted above, there are many who find the concerns represented in his writing of the utmost importance. As I have argued elsewhere (Persson 2005), rather than being “a-historical and a-political,” as Lanthers suggests, the *Trilogy* actively participates in dismantling revered notions of Irishness, in fact writing against the nationalist and rural ethos of Fianna Fáil, the dominant political party for long periods in post-independence Ireland, as well as rigidly traditional Catholic ideals as represented in, for example, the 1929 Censorship Act, which had far-reaching effects on Irish life and culture well into the 1980s. Furthermore, examining the *Trilogy* as well as *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, I have also suggested (Persson 2006) that Doyle’s novels offer what I term third space, bottom-up resistance to top-down strictures imposed by hegemonic forces, thereby partaking in a transformation of Irish society. Similarly, Gerry Smyth asserts that his writing “develop[s] a subtle and complex vision of modern Ireland” (1997: 66). Assessing Doyle’s writing elsewhere, Smyth contends that “it was apparent from *The Van* (1991) onwards that Doyle was engaging seriously with the complexities of the new urban order” (2000: 23) that was emerging in Ireland towards the end of the twentieth century. Dermot McCarthy, too, finds considerable qualities in Doyle’s novels,

arguing that they “not only reflect a society going through rapid change but, as they circulate within the society, intervene in that change by throwing into relief or juxtaposition images of Ireland’s past and present which pose questions about its future” (2003: 20).

More recently, Doyle has also received positive critical attention for his short-stories published in *Metro Eireann* which, as Maureen T. Reddy states, “bills itself as ‘Ireland’s Only Multicultural Newspaper’ and takes an antiracist, pro-immigrant editorial position” (2005: 377). Commenting on the stories, later published as *The Deportees and Other Stories* (2007), Carmen Zamorano Llena writes that “[m]ost of the stories in the collection cast a critical eye upon various manifestations of racist or xenophobic views in contemporary Ireland, with special attention paid to Dublin” (2011: 94). It seems, then, that Doyle’s “serious moral concern” (2003: 19), as McCarthy puts it, in addition to “children, adolescents, married women, the family and the community” (2003: 19), also includes the newly arrived of non-European descent and the often harsh situation they face in contemporary Ireland.

Roddy Doyle and Irish working-class literature

In addition to his novels that deal with the predicament of working-class life, Roddy Doyle has in several interviews declared his affinities with the Dublin working-class. In one interview, for instance, he states that “[his] own upbringing was lower middle class,” but he asserts that “[he] feel[s] quite familiar in both these camps, the working class and the middle class” (Paschel 1998: 151). Still, in his writing, he claims to feel more at home in a working-class environment: “But if I were to write a book in a more solidly middle class setting and I needed [detailed] knowledge, I’d have to go off and find it, whereas if I’m writing about a working class context, I rarely have to research it, it seems to be in me already” (Paschel 1998: 151).

Interestingly, asked in another interview whether he views himself as a socially committed and politically engaged writer, he answers quite emphatically: “I would see myself as being [...] socially committed and politically engaged—I always have done. [...] I would like to think that everything I’ve done is political. I would like to think that the first three books celebrate working-class life. I tried to capture and celebrate crudity, loudness, linguistic flair and slang, which is the property of

working-class people” (Costello 2001: 91). Doyle makes the crucial point that official history, that is, the official narrative constructed by historians and politicians, tends to exclude grassroots voices, and he implicitly and explicitly sees it as his task in his fiction to let these voices be heard in what ultimately becomes a political project. Put in another way, he seems to wish to bring to the surface hidden narratives that have been the victims of social invisibility and that would offer a radical alternative to dominant narratives:

We are told to think of Ireland as a nation of farmers, but in fact there were relatively few farmers and a hell of a lot of labourers working for those farmers. And yet it's as if they didn't exist when you read the history of the nineteenth century—even though you know it's admitted that a million people, perhaps, starved in the famine and a million emigrated. It's an extraordinary rewriting of history. Well, it wasn't even written—so it's an extraordinary *writing* of history that allows one class of people to give their versions. It's inevitable. But for years in Ireland the other versions of history weren't there and, in fact, still aren't. The whole countryside is dotted with labourers' cottages. We drive by them, and nobody wonders, 'Who lived in them?' (Reynolds 2004: 27; Doyle's emphasis)

The implications for Doyle's own writing of this urge to unearth hidden and silenced histories are perhaps not difficult to see, as most of his texts focus on groups and individuals who are not visible in Irish society and who have been outside the official constructions of Irish identity. Or as Doyle states:

All [my] characters, in a way, are confronted by the reality of their isolation. They live in a society [...] that has no interest in them whatsoever. They're not even statistics really. They are officially, but it never goes beyond that. Unfortunately, it hasn't changed all that much. 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 2004: 24-25)

The refusal by official Ireland to include certain groups, not least the working-class, in the dominant version of history as well as the dominant notion of what it means to be Irish may explain the lack of interest in working-class literature in Ireland, and despite Doyle's attempt at rectifying this situation, working-class literature has not been given much attention by the literary establishment. However, as Michael Pierson shows in his recent ground-breaking book, *Writing Ireland's Working*

Class: Dublin After O'Casey, working-class literature has not been totally absent on the Irish literary map. Nevertheless, as John Brannigan holds in his "Foreword" to the book, "questions about the pervasiveness of class divisions, and the significance of class as a material and cultural category [...] should be key questions within the field of Irish Studies, and within Irish society, and yet the critical record on class in Irish literature, culture and history is shockingly thin" (2011: vii). There are several reasons as to why this has been the case, and Piers points to the notion that Ireland "is assumed by many to be a less hierarchical state than others" (2011: 9), further emphasised by what many observers have viewed as "increased opportunities for social mobility in the 'Celtic Tiger' economy" (2011: 9). Even so, sociologists claim that despite popular assumptions, "class inequality is and has been a highly significant feature of Irish social organization" (Share et. al. 2007: 171).

Historically, though, the issue of class has not been regarded as important in Irish politics and culture. Partly, this has to do with what he calls "the country's under-development in capitalist terms" (2011: 12) and Dublin's "tame industrialisation" (2011: 12) in the early twentieth century, which had the effect that a "thoroughgoing class consciousness" (2011: 12) was not developed, as it was in Britain. Moreover, although "workers played an important role in the decolonisation struggle" and the War of Independence, especially urban workers were poorly rewarded in the Free State, while other groups, such as farmers, agricultural workers and merchants "all received something in return for their nationalism" (2011: 13). This, in turn, was due to the fact that, following the War of Independence and the Civil War, "the major political parties [were] [...] eager to downplay social inequalities and to cement loyalty to the fledgling state" (14). In this process, Piers goes on, "[l]abour was subordinated to nationalism, partly because it avoided taking a clear stance on the Civil War and largely because it agreed to toe the line in forming Free State hegemony" (2011: 14).

The political and cultural atmosphere in the new state, then, was such that the matter of class was removed from the agenda, as it had seemingly no place in what was "a largely agricultural economy" (2011: 15); Piers even argues that in contrast to the growing influence of the British working-class, both in politics and culture, at this time and between the two world wars, "the Republic's working class [...] withered, in political, social and cultural terms" (2011: 15). As in many

other areas in Irish society, the Catholic ethos blocked political change as, in this case, it was not open to class politics; or as Pierse aptly phrases it, “it can be argued that the power of Catholicism, aligned with capitalism, inveigling itself strategically into every institution and power block of the new state, was the principal reason why working-class consciousness was sublimated into more moderate forms” (2011: 15). If anything, this situation became worse during and after World War II when the hegemonic power of Fianna Fáil “intensif[ied] its attacks on communism” (2011: 17) as a result of increasing activities among trade-unions. Thus, it seems fair to argue that Catholic values and the political power of Fianna Fáil prevented the growth of a class consciousness, and it was not until the late 1960s that a working-class similar to that of other European countries emerged in Ireland. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it was mainly in urban environments, particularly Dublin, but also Cork, that the working-class began to “gr[o]w in voice and numerical strength” (2011: 19), largely due to the fact that Dublin was becoming the “economic and cultural centre in which formerly dominant, conservative cultural norms were increasingly outmoded” (2011: 20). Nevertheless, even if this change was gradually taking place, it is also true that, generally, the working-class was not able to move upwards socially, as could perhaps be expected; as Pierse states, “working-class people largely remained working class” (2011: 20). He goes on:

Class inequality in Ireland since the middle of the twentieth century has remained gaping. Despite the considerable adjustment that ‘external dependent industrialisation’ entailed, it seems that the prospects of mobility for (and the economic power of) working-class Dubliners actually *diminished* during this period.
(2011: 20; Pierse’s emphasis)

Significantly, what Pierse calls the “ostracism of the working-class” (2011: 26) in independent Ireland, and the consequences of this kind of exclusion, are also reflected in the literature he has examined, for example, by Seán O’Casey, James McKenna, James Plunkett, Christy Brown, Dermot Bolger, Paula Meehan and Roddy Doyle. These realities are particularly visible in the area of education, which is frequently represented as oppressive: “Official disdain for working-class people often manifests in encounters between their children and the state apparatus, particularly in terms of repressive educational machinery in which working-class concerns have been eschewed” (2011: 26). The

consequences of the state's attitudes to and treatment of the working-class and their children are far-reaching in that they come to believe that they are actually inferior to other groups: "Working-class children, these works imply, have learned to recognise their inferiority in Irish society through the harshness and inferior quality of their education [...]" (2011: 28). However, he also insists that, despite the fact that much of working-class experience and literature have not been seen as hugely important in Irish culture, or that their "identity is outside hegemony" (2011: 50), Irish working-class culture and literature "might be seen as the very basis for counter-hegemonic culture" in that "we hear the subaltern speak of an alternative conception of its own history and a radically alternative vision of Ireland from within" (2011: 50). This, I would suggest, becomes even more true regarding working-class women, as in *Paula Spencer*, given that Irish working-class women have arguably been doubly oppressed: by the fact that they are working-class in a society that turns a blind eye to class divisions; and by the fact that they are women in a rigidly patriarchal society governed by traditional definitions of women as domestic creatures and child-bearers (e.g., O'Connor 1998; Valiulis 2009).

Celtic tiger-style capitalism and social division

After decades of economic hardships, as a result of an inability to create sustainable economic policies, instead relying on protectionism and heavy borrowing, the consequences of which were, among other things, mass unemployment and mass emigration, the Irish economy in the early 1990s emerged as one to look up to by the rest of the world. For approximately a decade, 1995-2005 or so, Ireland saw an unprecedented economic boom, commonly referred to as the Celtic Tiger, which created a completely new situation in the country. Assessing the Irish economic climate in 2002, the economists Peter Clinch, Frank Convery and Brendan Walsh contend that "throughout the 1990s Ireland significantly outperformed all other EU countries" (2002: 25). In their assessment, this performance helped raise the standard of living for most groups in Ireland; the unemployment rate, for example, "fell from 17% in the 1980s to 4% in 2001" (2002: 27). As importantly, they claim that it is a fact "there was a dramatic fall in the level of absolute poverty in Ireland during the boom" (2002: 31).

From the perspective of economics, they contend that the boom that made Ireland a much-admired player on the global scene was to a great extent based on what they call “good domestic economic policies” (2002: 29), policies that are well-known and advocated in capitalist economies, such as “[a] favourable environment for FDI [Foreign Direct Investment], including low corporate tax rates [...]” and “[a]n elastic supply of good-quality [...] and relatively inexpensive labour” (2002: 29). In order to implement several of these policies, the government and the business sector on the market entered into a social partnership with the trade-unions and other organisations for the benefit of the nation. Basically, the argument went that if trade-unions and these organisations could agree temporarily to accept only moderate wage increases and flexible working conditions, the whole nation would benefit and they would be rewarded at a later stage.

While the general opinion seems to be that in many respects Ireland as a nation gained from the Celtic Tiger success in the 1990s and the first years of the twenty-first century, which generated what Kirby calls “a widespread mood of self-congratulation” (2002a: 3), there are also dissenting voices. In fact, even quite early in the boom, there were critics who argued that large groups were left out as they did not benefit from the new affluence, but if these groups objected they were told that they were lacking in solidarity. Kieran Allen, for example, argued as early as 2000 that “[t]he Celtic Tiger has quite simply one of the worst records on earnings dispersion in the developed industrial world” (2000: 76). Moreover, while the unemployment rate fell in this period, behind that reality is the fact that “part-time, temporary and short-term contract employment has risen by 164.5 percent between 1988 and 1997” (2000: 76), and Allen sums up by holding that “[t]he rich are getting richer, the poor are still confined to poverty and the bulk of workers are losing out” (2000: 77). It is not only, Allen contends, that the workers got a bad deal on the labour market; it is also true that they lost out in other ways, too, especially regarding public services, which were severely underfunded during the Celtic Tiger, due to the fact that the wealthy got extensive tax cuts. Thus, Allen points out that in the areas of education, housing, transport and health, underprivileged groups, such as manual workers, the poor and the elderly, faced marginalisation and exclusion, while Irish society at large faced vast problems related to the infrastructure, like roads and sewerage, in what Allen refers to as “the decade of social

vandalism" (2000: 100). Similarly, Peadar Kirby examines the impact of the Celtic Tiger on Irish society and on people's lives, suggesting that "relative poverty [...] increased" during this period (2002a: 56), generating a "growth in social inequality" (2002a: 47). Summarising the consequences of the era, Kirby argues that Irish society saw

growing social polarization between those who [were] benefiting from it and those marginalised by it. Furthermore, across a range of issues relating to social provision and quality of life—housing and homelessness, public transport and traffic gridlock, declining quality of care and growing inequality of access to health services, a crisis in services for young people in need, entrenched inequality in access to education, environmental pollution—there is growing evidence that the Irish case involves a 'complex mixture of successes and failures' [...], reflecting a stark contrast between economic success and social failure [...]; the ratio of social security spending to GDP, for instance, fell markedly in Ireland while it was maintained or increased in most European countries. (2002a: 5)

Kirby is highly critical of the impact of the Celtic Tiger on large segments of the population, and discussing the era elsewhere, he firmly holds that "Ireland's embrace of globalisation has resulted in a more divided society" (2002b: 31). Ronaldo Munck agrees and sees in the period what he terms "class polarisation, namely that the gap between the top and the bottom of the social scale in terms of earnings is getting greater" (2007: 306).

Perhaps the most damning assessment, however, is voiced by the outspoken and highly respected sociocultural commentator Fintan O'Toole, who offers hard-hitting criticism of both the system and its raw cynicism as well as of corrupt and greedy individual politicians and businessmen. In his book *After the Ball*, for example, O'Toole dismisses the Celtic Tiger in no uncertain terms. If the alleged success of the Celtic Tiger were true, he argues, "Ireland would indeed be a very forceful argument for right-wing ideology. Most of it, however, is nonsense" (2003: 15). According to O'Toole, the financial and political élite played a ruthless game, at the expense of those less well off, asserting that "the people best able to bear the burden of reducing a catastrophic national debt were in fact able to opt out of the pain. The weight fell to a disproportionate extent on the shoulders of the weak, the vulnerable, the sick and the poor" (2003: 16).

O'Toole gives one example after another of greed, corruption and injustice. He suggests that this mentality and behaviour was part and

parcel of the system, and the consequences were devastating for very many people. For example, O'Toole draws attention to the fact that the large majority of tenants in Dublin City Council housing had "trouble keeping up with their rent," and just a third of rents was "fully paid up," meaning that "for many families, even at the height of the boom, the wolf was at the door". (2003: 67). In another example, O'Toole goes on to show that in the area of health services, a similar inequality can be found, as "Ireland operates a two-tier health system, in which those who can afford to pay generally get immediate or quick access to hospital treatment, while those who can't often face very long waiting lists" (2003: 76), and he concludes: "The reality is clear: wealth and poverty in Ireland are matters of life and death. And the lives of the poor are worth less than those of their betters" (2003: 81).

In many significant ways, then, due to a system where the rich were given vast tax-cuts and other advantages, accumulating often enormous private wealth, while those less well-off were not given the facilities they needed, since not enough was spent on public services, the Celtic Tiger was not as successful at the grassroots level as the élite was eager to claim; to a great extent it certainly did not benefit those at the lower end of the social ladder. As O'Toole holds: "The Irish experience shows with striking clarity that success in the globalised marketplace is not at all incompatible with social squalor" (2003: 166). Such squalor was the reality of mainly, although not exclusively, many working-class areas in the cities, particularly Dublin (O'Toole 2003: 67-68).

Paula Spencer: Marginalised and down, but not out

As mentioned above, Paula Spencer first appeared in the four-part TV series *Family*. The last episode in the series was from Paula's point of view and seemingly inspired the author to continue her story and develop it into a novel, and two years later *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* appeared. As *Paula Spencer* is the sequel to *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, showing her life situation almost a decade later, it seems fruitful briefly to examine the main concerns in the first novel, since it arguably deepens the reader's understanding of Paula's predicament and struggle in the sequel. Hailed by Gerry Smyth as "his most ambitious novel to date" (1997: 84), *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* focuses on Paula's attempts at making sense of her life by writing her own story

in her own words two years after she threw her abusive husband out and after finding out that he has been shot dead by the police at a burglary gone wrong. In that act, she is writing herself into existence in what can be read as an act of empowerment. What gradually emerges in her first-person narrative is a story of physical and psychological abuse and victimisation. As I have shown elsewhere (Persson 2006), from very early on in her life, both in her family and in the state institution of the school, she is formed into believing that her only worth as a human being is as a sexual creature existing solely for men's needs and whims. As Stephanie Lehner suggests, Paula's background constitutes an entrapment that leaves her and her sisters with very few alternatives; "[f]rom a working-class background," Lehner writes, "and thus in a position of neither social nor economic power, for Paula and her sisters the only means of escape from paternal abuse is through marriage" (2011: 126). However, Charlo gradually turns her life into a living hell by regularly beating her and abusing her psychologically; therefore, in Lehner's words, "home is marked by the constant threat of violence, poverty and devastation" (2011: 126).

What makes Paula's situation even worse, though, is that when she seeks hospital treatment for her injuries caused by Charlo's physical assaults, the doctors and nurses instead seem to blame Paula herself, and her alcoholism, for what happens to her, implicitly forcing her to use the phrase in the title, a phrase used for hiding the reality of wife-battering, indicating, in turn, society's reluctance to acknowledge and reveal the true stories. Significantly, the novel suggests that this kind of abuse is deeply embedded in the very fabric of a patriarchal Irish culture, as state institutions indirectly endorse abusive behaviour, and it seems to accuse Irish society of systematic injustice in that it shows how "it is through the official silence and denial of those crimes that society at large is not only complicit, but actively contributes to their re-enactment" (Lehner 2011: 145).

Consequently, Paula is doubly trapped. Jennifer M. Jeffers argues that "Paula is trapped by her working-class upbringing" (2002: 57) as well as by rigidly patriarchal structures as "Charlo's behavior is sanctioned by the authorities and by Irish culture" (2002: 60). The consequence is that "Paula is trapped in this subaltern position of utter powerlessness that robs her of all agency" (Lehner 2011: 135). Still, Paula does manage to break free from her tormentor. When he looks at

their eldest daughter, Nicola, in a way that suggests that she may very well be his next victim of sexual and physical abuse, Paula has had enough and forcefully throws him out by hitting him with a frying-pan, which becomes an act of resistance to the forces that entrap her; or in Jeffers' words: "Paula does wipe out the heterosexual regulatory law that had been abusing her: in her action and resolve to fight back, she pushes back the border that was established to contain her" (2002: 56). Thus, the novel ends, opening up to the sequel.

Nine years later, at the height of the Celtic Tiger, we find that Paula has somehow survived and we find her in the same working-class environment. The two youngest of her children, Jack and Leanne, 16 and 22 years old respectively, are still living with her, while the two eldest, the steady Nicola and the ex-heroin addict, John Paul, have moved out and started their own families. Of course, one could read this novel without having prior knowledge of the first one; however, the sequel frequently establishes links between the two, indicating that it is important to know where Paula is coming from and what social and psychological baggage she has. This becomes particularly true regarding the long-term physical and psychological effect her husband's beatings have had on her. For example, quite early on in the novel, when she brushes her teeth, we find out that some of them are missing because of his brutal treatment of her: "She brushes for lost time. And teeth. Kicked out of her, some of them. Nights and mornings, when brushing wasn't a priority" (Doyle 2007: 10). It seems that no part of her body was spared when Charlo hit her, and her injuries will be with her forever, constantly reminding her of what she has gone through; indeed, the damage done to her makes her feel that "[h]er body is a map of his abuse" (Doyle 2007: 135), further suggesting that in order to know who Paula Spencer is, her past is of the essence. Her body, the text implies, is a site where a ruthless battle of patriarchal control has taken place, a battle that has nearly killed her.

If Charlo's abuse of her caused severe physical injuries, living in constant fear also gave her psychological scars. One consequence of the daily threat she was living under is that her self-esteem is extremely low. For example, her fear has cut her off from ordinary social intercourse with men and she feels deeply uncomfortable just going to a coffee-shop for a coffee: "She's getting nervous. It's ridiculous. She's only going for a cup of coffee. She used to be good at looking at men. She could look

straight back at any age, height, shoe size. Charlo knocked it out of her. That must be it. The confidence, the guts-gone" (Doyle 2007: 32). The text suggests that the psychological damage done to Paula by Charlo is as severe as is the physical damage. In fact, the psychological impact is arguably even greater, as it reaches into and affects her everyday behaviour. When Leanne and Paula are having an argument, Leanne raises her hand in a gesture not intended to strike Paula, and Paula does, too, but in order to protect her face (Doyle 2007: 69); and when John Paul comes to visit her, he does not ring the doorbell, since in her life with Charlo, it meant trouble: "She used to hate the sound of the doorbell. It lifted her off the floor, every time it rang. It was always the Guards or some butty of Charlo's-bad news. It was reality, the end, trying to get in at her, taking away her children" (Doyle 2007: 128).

While being victimised by her husband's abusive behaviour and by a culture that refuses to acknowledge such behaviour is part of who and what Paula is, she is also the victim of alcohol. Her constant fight against alcoholism is established on the very first page of the novel, when we are informed that she has not had a drink for "four months and five days" (Doyle 2007: 1). It is an hour-to-hour fight that governs her life and that is always present, as the novel begins: "She copes. A lot of the time. Most of the time. She copes. And sometimes she doesn't. Cope. At all. This is one of the bad days" (Doyle 2007: 1). Her alcoholism frequently rears its ugly head in different ways. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the novel regularly returns to Paula's own desperate struggle to stay away from the drink. Taking responsibility to free herself from her addiction takes considerable courage. For example, when Leanne brings home a bottle of vodka, suggesting that Leanne, too, is becoming an alcoholic, Paula resists the temptation and pours it into the sink in an act of enormous will power: "She went to the sink. She turned on the taps. She ran the hot and cold water, full blast, so the smell and the taste wouldn't lift up and grab her. She got the tap off the bottle. She poured" (Doyle 2007: 105). However, on other occasions, the novel hits home to the reader that even if Paula has been off the drink for several months, a recovering alcoholic can never relax, as if to show that several months' resilience can be gone and worth nothing in a brief moment of giving in to her need (Doyle 2007: 176-77).

What arguably makes Paula's struggle even more moving, though, is that she is also forced to face her own guilt, especially in relation to her

children, whom she neglected when alcohol was her main priority. In fact, regaining her children's trust becomes one of her principal aims in the novel. Her strong feelings of guilt appear in moments of brutal clarity, when she assesses herself as a mother:

Leanne often went to school with no breakfast or kiss goodbye.

It's in the past.

She knows that's shite. More than anyone, she knows. You can't leave things behind. They come with you. (Doyle 2007: 11)

Her heartbreaking neglect as a mother appeared in many ways; on one of her birthdays, for instance, she was drinking in the nearby pub, Finnegan's Wake, while her son Jack, then a small boy, was standing outside in the rain: "He stood outside that pub when he was a little fella, waiting for her to come out. He stood in the rain. He often did it. She brought crisps out to him, and Coke with a straw. Like it was a treat. There you are, love. More guilt. On her birthday" (Doyle 2007: 16). Therefore, by representing Paula as a victim of physical and psychological abuse as well as alcoholism, the novel carefully establishes the notion that Paula has lived her life on the margins, cut off, disconnected both from the world around her and from her children. Several years, indeed decades, have passed her by, as if she has lived in a bubble, while life outside has moved on. Contemplating the success of U2, she thinks: "She knows nothing about them. U2—she's never liked the name. They come from her part of the city, but she missed them. She was being hammered, battered to the floor, while they were becoming famous" (Doyle 2007: 192).

However, her marginalisation is caused not only by her husband's abuse and her alcoholism, but also by poverty and long-term unemployment. The labour market has been closed to her, and as she realises at one point, the chances of getting an official job are slim, to say the least: "There's other work. There's real work, with stamps and pensions. But how does she get one of those jobs; how does she explain? She hasn't worked since 1975? What does she say? She doesn't know" (Doyle 2007: 247). It could perhaps be expected in the new economic climate that she and Ireland find themselves in, that her marginalisation would be reduced and that the poverty restricting her life would be alleviated, thereby improving her standard of living. Frequent references are made to the Celtic Tiger and the change it has brought. Paula's sister,

Carmel, we read, is buying a holiday flat in Bulgaria as an investment (Doyle 2007: 28), and both Carmel and Paula's other sister, Denise, have bought mobile homes, also as investments (Doyle 2007: 25), indicating that the Celtic Tiger means that people of previously humble income can now spend more money on leisure. Paula's friend, Rita, herself an eager consumer and seemingly embracing the new Ireland, is aware of the change in a way that Paula is not:

–It's the first thing I noticed, Rita said that day. –The first sign that the country was changing.
–What was that? said Paula.
–The clothes shops for kids, said Rita.
Paula nodded.
–They were the proof, said Rita. –People had more money than they needed. It's great.
Paula nodded. She agreed.
–I noticed them before all the new cars, said Rita. –And the talk about house prices. Even all the cranes.
–Jesus, Rita, said Paula. –All I noticed was the price of vodka going up.
(Doyle 2007: 166)

Thus, there is an affluence visible in the fact that people have become part of capitalist consumerism not seen to such an extent in Ireland before. The novel addresses the ways in which affluence and a new kind of wealth seem to have improved the Irish economy and the standard of living for some segments of the population, but it also suggests that the Celtic Tiger has had negative effects, which implies that increased social division affecting people's everyday lives is also part of the era. Since there are now fewer children in Paula's area, Jack's school runs the risk of being closed down (Doyle 2007: 28), and when Leanne has to be treated in hospital, Paula witnesses a seemingly inadequate health care not worthy a thriving state:

It was a long time since Paula had been one of the women alone or John Paul had been one of the unconscious young lads. But the place was still the same. A war zone—worse now, when she was sober. She'd been hearing people on the radio, on Joe Duffy['s radio show], giving out about people having to lie on trolleys for days because there were no beds. Now she saw it when she went to the toilet. All along the corridor, women, old men, people who might have been injured at work earlier that day, the day before, on trolleys. In rows, like a weird queue for the bus. There was a smell of smoke in the jacks, dirty toilet paper on the floor.
(Doyle 2007: 83-84)

In addition, John Paul and his family are told by their landlord to leave their home, since its closeness to the new tram-line, the Luas, has dramatically increased the value of the houses in the area (Doyle 2007: 113).

The Celtic Tiger economy, then, has not benefited under-privileged groups, mostly in deprived areas, and the supposed improvements have not, it would seem, trickled down to them in any significant ways. When Paula thinks to herself that “[s]he’s one of the tigers now” (Doyle 2007: 40), it is meant, I would argue, as deeply ironic, since we are told that her ‘tiger-hood’ simply means being “in charge of two floors” (Doyle 2007: 40) in the block of offices she is cleaning, earning her an extra 30 euro a week. In other words, her own weak financial situation is juxtaposed to the affluence of the Celtic Tiger. True, as a cleaning-lady she can clean a few more homes of the middle-class, who can now afford that kind of domestic help; however, as mentioned above, she is outside the official system, hence vulnerable and marginalised. Similar to Doyle’s earlier novel, *The Van*, in which the unemployed Jimmy Rabbitte Sr is excluded from the wealth in late 1980s South Dublin (Persson 2005), Paula does not have access to the success of the new economy.

Indeed, it could be argued that much of the novel revolves around Paula’s fear of being short of money and her struggle to obtain enough of it through work to get by; it is made clear that this fear colours her everyday existence as much as her alcoholism does: “She’ll never get over the terror of having no money, the prison of having nothing. Putting things back up on the supermarket shelves because the tenner in her pocket turned out to be a fiver. Stopping at the front door because the fiver she’d felt in her pocket was gone” (Doyle 2007: 52). As a further consequence of her frequent shortage of money, where every euro counts, she is vulnerable to the whims of her middle-class employers whose homes and offices she cleans. This vulnerable financial situation becomes evident when one of the houses she has cleaned for three years is suddenly empty; the owners have moved out without having the decency to inform her:

They didn’t owe her anything. It’s not that. The money had been on the kitchen table for her last week. She hardly knew them. She hardly ever saw them. She was American, the wife; that bouncy type of way about her. She’d never seen the husband. But she’d ironed his shirts and sorted his socks.

Three years. Near enough. [...]

She feels like she's been sacked. It's not fair. [...]
She needs the money. Sixty euro a week, always on the table.
There's no table there now.
For fuck sake. (Doyle 2007: 173-74)

That the couple is apparently American is not insignificant, as they could be read as a metaphor for American influence in Ireland. American multinational companies have been criticised for not having a genuine interest in the welfare of Ireland and its citizens, instead only looking after its own economic interests and moving its business, or closing down, if the capitalist owners find it more profitable to do so, which in turn might have devastating consequences for those left without work.

Establishing Paula as vulnerable and dependent on this kind of work that is both highly insecure and outside the system, the novel places her in the category of low working-class, indeed underclass, the lowest of the low, exploited and far removed from the basic security and comfort that is necessary for decent living. Yet another consequence of her being under severe economic pressure is that she is forced to go to work even if her body is in pain and even if her work exhausts her. There are no margins in Paula's life, as it were, that would allow her to stay at home if she has to. On several occasions, Paula has work-related physical problems. In the very beginning, she is going home from work, and the reader immediately understands that her work situation is heavy: "She's on her way home from work. She's walking from the station. There's no energy in her. Nothing in her legs. Just pain. Ache. [...]" (Doyle 2007: 1). Throughout the novel, Paula's aching body makes itself known, implying that she is marked by her work, which becomes an integral part of her life, so much so that it literally takes over her body, gradually wearing her down:

She feels it when she picks up the bucket. Her back. She's already walking crooked, to give it room, avoid admitting it. [...]

It's happened before. It goes away. Like a threat, something that'll come back when it wants to. A nerve, just gently tapped. It's horrible. It's playing with her.

She feels like a cripple already. The last time, it hurt every time she put her foot on the stairs. She can feel herself now, shifting all her weight away from the twinge.

(Doyle 2007: 245)

However, despite the fact that Paula is on the very margins of the labour market, or technically outside it, and despite the fact that her work

seems to wear her down physically, I would argue that work, and the idea of work, also operates as a positive force in Paula's life. Parallel to her fight against alcoholism, marginalisation and struggle for survival, work is part of an opening up to the possibility of a new Paula, that is, part of a recovery and a reclaiming of her life. Viewed in this light, work has what could be termed a therapeutic value, in addition to that of empowerment, and becomes part of a transformative process in that it helps Paula to re-shape the negative image she has of herself and to re-connect to the world around her. That work is indeed central in her life is emphasised by the fact that there are at least 29 references to Paula thinking about work, having to go to work, going to work, being at work, or going home from work. Paula herself seems to be aware that work has this important function for her:

She'd be in trouble if she didn't work. It isn't just about the money. She doesn't hate her work. She doesn't like it either. It keeps her going. The buses and trains, the hours.

The panic attacks, whatever they are, don't come if she's busy.

They do come. But not as often, not as badly. She can't go too mad if she has to go to work. She measures it out in steps. One day at a time, sweet Jesus. Whoever wrote that one hadn't a clue. A day is a fuckin' eternity. (Doyle 2007: 200)

While functioning as a stabilising element in her everyday life, work can also be said to function as normalising, if normalising is defined as having a job as a means to lead a life as a social human being, that is, to participate in life and the society in which one lives. It is not unimportant that by working she has an income that not only opens up some possibilities for her but also gives her a sense of pride: "Tomorrow is payday. Always a good day. Excitement, a bit. Pride, a bit. New clothes, maybe. Food. A good dinner. A half-full fridge. A video" (Doyle 2007: 5). She regularly comes back to this aspect of work and she is thrilled that she is able to save some money to buy everyday things to improve her life. For instance, she is able to buy domestic items that are often taken for granted in a household, such as soup spoons (Doyle 2007: 101), a stereo (Doyle 2007: 191) and a new corkscrew (Doyle 2007: 237). Equally importantly, perhaps, with her money she will also open her own bank account, her first:

Another thing she wants, a bank account. [...] She'd like that. A bank account. She's never had one. It's always been cash, or none of it. She's always clung to money.

[...] The weight of it, the reassurance. She needs to know how much she has, exactly how much, now. [...] She'll always want cash, but she wants to hold a laser card and join the queue at the Pass machine. I earned the money I'm getting from this wall.
(Doyle 2007: 52-53)

With a bank account, she becomes someone, suggesting the new dictum 'I have a bank account, therefore I exist'; to put it in another way, Paula setting up a bank account is crucial in the (re-)construction of the new Paula and her new identity.

Significantly, her plans of setting up a bank account is part of her seemingly new discovery that work and an income may not only help her in the here-and-now by allowing her to buy basic things for the household, so that her family can actually have something like a household, but also help her in making plans for the future, something that has been absolutely impossible before. Therefore, through her plans, she expresses a stronger sense of agency, where she has previously been passive. That she is slowly opening up to life and reclaiming it in this manner can be seen at different levels, and one crucial aspect, it seems to me, lies in an improved perception of herself as a human being. An indication that she is gradually reclaiming her life, indeed her identity, is the fact that she plans to "get herself a passport" (Doyle 2007: 44), a passport arguably being the evidence that you are a citizen in a particular country with certain rights. One such right is the right to vote in democratic elections, and Paula showing an interest in voting in the upcoming European elections suggests that she wishes her vote to be taken into account; interestingly, she would vote for the Labour candidate, indicating where her political affinities lie (Doyle 2007: 13-14).

It is noteworthy, then, that by intending to obtain a passport and to vote, Paula wishes to view herself in a new light as an individual and a human being. As mentioned above, at another level, this also includes planning for future purchases of things she needs and wants. Throughout the text, she makes a list of things to buy and do when she has saved enough, for example: "[s]he'd like duvets for the beds. They're on the list" (Doyle 2007: 10); "[s]he's thinking of getting a plunger-real coffee. Another thing on the list" (Doyle 2007: 14); "[...] she wanted to make a list of the things she'd need for Christmas. Different lists. The food she'd need, presents, things to be done" (Doyle 2007: 75); "[s]he'll get a handbag, too, when she's buying the coat" (Doyle 2007: 77); "[s]he'll

finish her list, then get going on the bedrooms. Butter, plain flour, eggs. She's making pancakes for tomorrow's tea. Tomorrow's tea. She's thinking ahead" (Doyle 2007: 167); "[s]he doesn't have a light beside the bed—that's something else for her list" (Doyle 2007: 234). While it could be argued that she is desperate to become a middle-class consumer, Paula's list, I would instead argue, constitutes an attempt at reconnecting to life. Separately, the various items on her list may not seem significant; taken together, however, and through the very act of writing such a list, it strongly suggests that she is eager to take control of her life. Just as she is literally regaining her sense of taste, which was lost in her years of severe alcoholism (Doyle 2007: 4), she is regaining her appetite for new experiences and for a widening of her horizon; put differently, "[t]he new Paula," as she thinks of herself (Doyle 2007: 27), this "new-old woman [is] learning how to live" (Doyle 2007: 136).

Taking control of life and learning how to live involve an opening up to life as well as an ability to locate oneself in the world. In that project, Paula is not all that different from the ten-year-old Paddy Clarke in Doyle's 1993 novel, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, in which Paddy tries to make sense of, or read, his environment by engaging in a linguistic and geographical mapping (Persson 2003). The difference, of course, is that while Paddy's perception of the world is that of a child, hence limited by inexperience, Paula's is that of an adult who has gone through considerable hardships; nevertheless, in many ways, she shows a curiosity similar to Paddy's to learn the world around her. For example, with Jack she is keen to learn how the Internet works (Doyle 2007: 122-25), a phenomenon that has previously been out of reach for her. Similarly, when Carmel is diagnosed with breast cancer, Paula goes to some considerable length to find out more about this disease and its consequences, looking up the term "Mastectomy" both in Jack's dictionary and on the Internet, demonstrating an urge to broaden her knowledge and to get a deeper understanding in what could be read as acts of mapping (Doyle 2007: 231-34): "She's learning nothing, but meaning is breaking through. She's fighting with the words, with the fuckin' snobs who wrote them" (Doyle 2007: 233). Also similar to Paddy, Paula, in her attempts at reading the world she occupies, engages in a geographical mapping. For a very long time, her environment has largely been that of her immediate, local surroundings: her home, her street, her neighbourhood, that is, the area of her own suburb.

Increasingly, though, she is expanding her geographical awareness of the city, as she goes to places she has never gone to before. Visiting the city centre, “[s]he went into Trinity [College]. She hadn’t been there in years. She wasn’t sure she’d ever been there” (Doyle 2007: 102). She is beginning to view the world differently and her place in it; she is part of a larger whole, learning how to navigate in it:

South-facing, it said on the packet of seeds.

–Jesus, Jack, where’s the south?

And he knew. He pointed.

–How do you know?

–Well, he said. –The sea’s that way and–

–How do you *know*?

–It just is. So that means the south is behind us.

He pointed his thumb over his shoulder.

–But how do you know? she said.

She didn’t doubt him. She knew he was right.

–Geography, he said. –It’s easy.

She thought it was great. She watched Jack go to the back door, heading north. She could hear the Dart—and that was west. If she wanted a drink she’d have to head south. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d learnt something. Carmel’s house was that way, west. America was over the wall, a good long way past Carmel’s. It all made sense. She was in the world, surrounded by it. (Doyle 2007: 61)

Paula’s recovery involves a discovery at various levels, not least geographically, but it also involves a reaching out to those close to her from whom for a long time she has been alienated, a distance to a great extent created by her alcoholism; this reaching out, in turn, may open up the possibility of forming new and lasting social relationships. Possibly one of the most moving aspects of the novel is Paula’s desperate attempts at (re-)establishing bonds with her four children, and she does so by trying to understand them, to read them, in ways that she has never done before. Due to the fact that she has been off the drink for several months, she is able to see them and appreciate them. Still, it is not an easy task, as she has to earn their trust. Nevertheless, she does her utmost as a mother to reconnect, for example, by trying to create a homely atmosphere, or, more often, by chatting to Jack and Leanne in front of the TV in an attempt at communicating with them (e. g., Doyle 2007: 46-47; 66-67). Her attempts with Jack and Leanne are fumbling, implying that it will take some time to reconnect to them. Her attempts with John Paul and Nicola are also fumbling, but it seems that she manages to get further in

her relations with them. Because of his former heroin addiction, John Paul is honest in a way that Paula also tries to be; John Paul even becomes a kind of support for Paula, who needs confirmation that she is on the right track (227-28). Her ties with Nicola seem stronger than with the others, as Nicola has always been the one looking out for Paula, checking to make sure she is still alive. Towards the end, Paula allows her daughter to rub her shoulders, while Nicola allows Paula to touch her, in what I read as life-changing gestures of closeness and healing that would previously have been impossible and that signal a new direction in their lives:

She puts her hand on Nicola's shoulder. She feels a jab as she lifts her hand. She doesn't let it stop her. She doesn't let it run across her face.

She feels Nicola tighten, under her fingers. She sees Nicola staring at her arm—as if they're getting into a fight. She feels her bones relax. She sees her look at Paula now, and smile. They're both trying. They're trying to meet. And they know it.

(Doyle 2007: 254-55)

In addition to trying to repair her strained, or dysfunctional, relationship with her children, Paula's reclaiming of life includes moving closer to her two sisters, and gradually the three of them seem to be able to communicate at a deeper sisterly level than in the past. However, it is when Carmel's breast cancer is made known that Paula allows herself to show sympathy for, or empathy with, her sister. Carmel visits Paula, and again they end up having a personal talk, where Carmel pays tribute to Paula's stamina and new sense of purpose, summed up in Carmel's moving celebratory phrase "You're fuckin' amazing, by the way" (Doyle 2007: 243). Similar to Paula's reconnection with Nicola discussed above, it suggests a new direction in their relationship, as Paula thinks: "She doesn't think they've talked like this before. They're like two people getting to know each other—their first date. Or two old friends who haven't seen each other in years" (Doyle 2007: 239). Paula struggles, then, at a variety of levels, to open up to a life that has been closed to her in so many ways, and the text suggests that it is a battle she is slowly but surely about to win. Moving from a sense of marginalisation and victimisation in a culture blind to her suffering, she is taking the fight, planning ahead and beginning to reclaim her life by reconnecting to the world around her. It is fitting, therefore, that the novel, perhaps too much in the vein of Hollywood endings which Paula seeks but which she is

also suspicious of, ends by opening up to the possibility for her to dare to start a relationship with a new man, who can give her the sense of security and comfort that she has been deprived of. Significantly, the two meet at the humble, everyday place of the recycling station, a metaphor for their own situation which suggests that something new can be created and re-shaped from the old (Doyle 2007: 258-62). Indeed, the novel ends by hinting at a kind of rebirth for Paula, a new life with new opportunities and a sense of togetherness, signalling that she is on her way to recovery: "It's her birthday. She's forty-nine. She bought a cake earlier. It's in the fridge. They'll have it when she gets home" (Doyle 2007: 277).

Conclusion

Most of Roddy Doyle's novels and plays deal with the Irish, particularly Dublin, working-class and the often harsh conditions under which it has lived and under which it continues to live, in a country that has not been willing to acknowledge its existence. The experiences of this segment of the Irish population have until quite recently been silenced and suppressed by official Ireland, as they have not conformed to the official, dominant image of Irishness. As Michael Pierse holds in his exploration of urban Irish working-class literature, deprivation and social injustice, most notably in the shape of marginalisation, unemployment and poverty, so central to urban Irish working-class experience, have not been at the top of the political and cultural agenda, which instead has constructed Ireland as a rural Eden where social division does not exist. Furthermore, taboo issues like alcoholism and spousal abuse have also been avoided, indeed omitted, in the public arena, where instead they have been viewed as private rather than systemic problems, a situation which, it seems safe to argue, has made women particularly vulnerable in that they are most likely to become victims of violence in the home.

People of the urban Irish working-class, then, are victims of what Pierse terms "social invisibility" (2011: 248), and they are what Lehner calls "silenced subaltern voices" (2011: 186). Doyle's novels, I would argue, insist on uncovering this invisibility and unearthing these silenced voices, and in that process create what Lehner refers to as "counter-histor[ies]" (2011: 185), disruptive narratives that become alternatives to the dominant ones. As Linden Peach contends, much recent Irish fiction

brings “what has been silenced out of silence, and what has been marginalized out of the margins” (2004: 221), and Doyle has for some time been at the forefront of that cultural transformative process. *Paula Spencer*, the sequel to *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, is no exception. Focusing on a working-class woman, a victim of marginalisation, poverty, unemployment, alcoholism and spousal abuse, the novel brings to the surface a reality that is in stark contrast to the alleged success of the Celtic Tiger era. Interestingly, when asked in an interview about the success of his and Bisi Adigun’s 2007 rewriting of J. M. Synge’s play *The Playboy of the Western World*, Doyle states that “[i]ronically a play that’s steeped in deprivation and the parochial seemed to have more relevance in a time of plenty and globalism” (Allen Randolph 2010: 149). *Paula Spencer*, as I read it, also addresses deprivation at various levels at a time when, according to economists and politicians, capitalist globalism is hailed as the key to a better world. As Paula herself realises, the wealth of the Celtic Tiger has not trickled down to her in any significant manner; instead, there are signs that those groups on the margins of this social order are worse off, in that they have to rely on badly paid jobs outside the system. Moreover, they are at a greater risk at losing out, as social services, such as schools and public health service, may either be closed down or be of highly inadequate standard.

As I have shown, Paula manages to recover from her marginalisation, including her alcoholism and the effects of Charlo’s beatings, and to take control of her life, which, to echo Susan Cahill, opens up “the possibilities of radically new futures” (2011: 188). However, she does so despite a culture that has turned a blind eye to, and neglected, working-class experience such as Paula’s and despite the fact that she is a woman in a rigidly gendered, patriarchal society that refuses to see the abuse of which she has been a victim. Lehner holds that one of the aims of many recent Irish texts is to “articulate and negotiate experiences of disempowerment, marginalisation and oppression” (2011: 186). By insisting on bringing Paula’s hidden existence into the centre, Doyle’s novel *Paula Spencer*, I would argue, participates in such a negotiation, and by doing so, it is, as Pierse phrases it, “a literary disruption, contestation and subversion of the established order” (2011: 257).

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