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**‘Silence and Solitude: the absence of intimacy in Roddy Doyle’s *The Snapper*.’**

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A notable aspect of Roddy Doyle’s fictional locale of Barrytown is the dissolution of the boundaries that exist between public and private. Within both the Rabbitte household and the wider community, public and private are fluid. Doors are frequently ajar and bedrooms are shared within the home, while the details of Sharon’s pregnancy become matters of public consumption within Barrytown itself. Barrytown functions as a self-contained and seemingly insular space where the notion of public only appears to extend as far as Barrytown’s own geographical borders or to issues of immediate relevance to its natives. However, in spite of the apparent claustrophobia and the lack of privacy, there is a remarkable absence of intimacy, most notably among the female residents. The relationships of the female inhabitants of Doyle’s working class suburb are compromised by the fact that they are built on surface interactions as opposed to meaningful connections. To further understand the roots of the absence of intimacy, it is essential to look at the crucial silences within *The Snapper*.

Sharon directly laments the absence of meaningful intimacy among women in the novel. Her isolation and sense of solitude are apparent in her recognition of the superficial nature of her friendship with ‘the girls.’ She privately confesses her loneliness and how she would ‘have loved someone to talk to, to talk to nonstop for about an hour, to tell everything to’, but concedes that ‘there was no one like that.’ (Doyle, 2013, 182). The relationship between the girls is founded on its communal dimension, and it functions as a network of collective rather than individual bonds. Sharon fears revealing her pregnancy to the girls, and appears to regard their questions as to the father’s identity as intrusive and prompted solely by an interest in gossip. The girls do not trade serious confidences, and engage solely at the level of the comic. They ensure that their interactions remain superficial by censoring their discussions and maintaining crucial silences about

meaningful issues. This self-imposed censorship is seemingly sanctioned and ultimately accepted by the group, apparent in Jackie's silencing of the questions of the girls and deflecting attention from Sharon. However, the result of such diversion is the sacrifice of true connection and enduring friendship.

A lack of intimacy is also evident within the Rabbitte household, partially concealed by the apparent close-knit nature of the family unit. Much like Sharon's relationship with the girls, the Rabbitte family operates as a collective, and its members largely fail to engage with one another as individuals. The absence of individual connection is epitomised in the distanced relationship that exists between Veronica and Sharon. The development of the relationship between Sharon and her father has occupied much scholarly discussion of the novel, but the muted relationship between mother and daughter is equally significant and reveals much about the changing social and moral landscape of Ireland in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Given the subject matter of an unplanned pregnancy outside of marriage, the reader anticipates a renewed bond being formed between mother and daughter and an increasingly strained relationship emerging between father and daughter. However, this is just one of the preconceptions that the novel subverts. In *The Snapper*, it is Jimmy Sr who ultimately assumes ownership over Sharon's pregnancy, and it is Veronica that retreats. While Sharon informs her mother first of her pregnancy, Veronica does not intervene and maintains her distance. Veronica adopts a position that verges on disinterest in the actual pregnancy, while consumed with anxiety as to its symbolic power.

Throughout the novel, Veronica's character is marked by silence and suppressed responses. As Eve Patten writes, mothers are 'simply and painfully silent...in Roddy Doyle's *Barrytown Trilogy*.' (2006, 270). Veronica's characteristic response to confrontation or conflict is to retreat and to conceal her deeper feelings. Significantly, one of the only instances in which Veronica does not retreat from conflict is in her assault of Doris Burgess. However, Veronica's means of self-expression in this scene is physical and not verbal, and so her characteristic mode of silence is maintained. Her largely withdrawn nature is in stark contrast to the verbal directness of her family, and Sharon in particular. While Sharon challenges opposition, Veronica predominantly interiorises. A crucially poignant moment in the novel is the conversation between Veronica and an

emotional Sharon on the verge of quitting her job. In the straitened economic climate of the 1980s, Veronica tries to impress upon Sharon the importance of maintaining employment. The primacy of pragmatic considerations means that Veronica consciously suppresses her maternal instincts to comfort her daughter. When Sharon reacts with hostility, Veronica retreats to a space at a physical remove from the confrontation and ceases to pursue the issue.

Throughout the novel, Veronica seeks out and attempts to establish private space within the family home. The bedroom that she shares with her husband is a sacred space for Veronica, and her evenings tend to be spent within its confines. Many of her private interactions with Jimmy Sr make reference to her tired state, and she retires to bed most evenings while the family watch television together or Jimmy Sr attends the local pub. At times, Jimmy Sr appears sensitive to the internal conflict that she conceals, and her exhaustion at the demands that her family places upon her. This awareness is acutely expressed in his emotional appeal to Sharon to remain in the family home. 'Don't leave. We need you here. Your mammy – your mammy is not always the best.' (2013, 292). Veronica meets all of the familial expectations of her in that she cooks the meals and attends to every whim, but she largely retreats from more public or social engagement. It is significant that there is no documented instance of Veronica leaving the domestic space of the Rabbitte home throughout the novel. She repeatedly declines her husband's invitations to join him at the local pub, Hikers. The pub functions as the centre of the Barrytown community, and so Veronica's absence from this space is particularly important, as it symbolises her wider social disengagement. She lacks a true confidante both within and without the home, and she is not a direct participant in the wider life of the community. Veronica appears to share some of the characteristics of a person suffering from depression. However, in Veronica's case her withdrawal and disengagement are more a manifestation of her consuming discontent.

The sanctity of the family is paramount to Veronica, yet it is also possible to question the extent to which Veronica is an active participant in the life of her own family. She is active in the sense that she is the primary caregiver and the one that attempts to establish boundaries within the home. It is Veronica that insists on some form of order being preserved. She attempts to uphold linguistic order in reprimanding the use of obscenities by her husband and children, and correcting

their poor grammar. Her insistence on correctness is also apparent in the fact that she alone never employs the hypocoristic versions of her children's names. She never refers to Leslie as 'Les.' It is also significant that her name is never shortened within the text – she is always 'Veronica'. However, in the case of issues of greater import such as Sharon's pregnancy, Veronica ultimately silences herself and fails to actively impose her views.

For Veronica, Sharon's pregnancy is 'the worst thing that had ever happened to the family.' (2013, 151). Veronica is concerned with propriety, and with how she and the family are perceived and regarded in Barrytown. She appears overwhelmed by feelings of shame that she is unable to articulate. 'She thought that Sharon's news deserved a lot more attention, and some sort of punishment... But she couldn't really explain why, not really.' (2013, 150-151). However, when she realises that her husband does not share her views, Veronica adopts a passive position and ceases to pursue the matter. 'She couldn't finish. There was no tidy way of saying what she thought. She gave up.' (2013, 189). Doyle's use of language is important in these two instances from the novel, as he directly foregrounds Veronica's resignation and inarticulacy. She actively yields to muteness and submission. Throughout the novel, Veronica appears to uphold a traditional paternalistic family model. She is clearly the functional head of the Rabbitte household, but her actions serve to reinforce the perception of her husband as the figure of authority. When he fails to understand or support her perspective, she defers to him and retreats to silence.

Persson suggests that *The Snapper* is 'implicitly permeated with values and ideals that have dominated Ireland since Independence, values that have been propagated by the Catholic Church and dominant political forces...' (2006, 63). This is evident in the traditional and conservative value system that Veronica attempts to uphold, a value system that prompts her husband to label her 'a bit ol' fashioned' and 'set in her ways.' (2013, 153). Veronica believes that Sharon's actions were 'wrong' (2013, 189), and is anxious that Sharon does not become a role model for her female siblings. She believes that the twins should be told that 'they should only have babies when they're married' (2013, 189), yet is seemingly unconcerned with imposing such views on her equally impressionable son Darren. Significantly however, Veronica's views are presented free from the binds of religious dogma, and religion is absent in forthright terms in the

novel. There are no references to religious practice within the Rabbitte home, and Sharon is unable to recite the 'Hail Mary.' Veronica then appears as a lapsed Catholic that remains psychologically bound to the principles of the faith. It is possible that the lapsed nature of her religious practice could be the product of discomfort with some of the Church's former practices. Veronica is insistent that she does not desire to turn the twins against Sharon, perhaps indicative of her distaste at the historical shunning of unmarried mothers by the Church. It appears that part of the source of Veronica's retreat from actively imposing her traditional moral values within the family is her awareness that the values to which she is apparently psychologically bound are losing currency in the emerging Ireland of the 1990s. The decline in the influence of the Catholic Church among the working class in the 1980s (White, 2001, 14) resulted in the gradual erosion of its values within this sector of Irish society. However, Veronica psychologically struggles to keep pace with such change and surrender the value system that once dominated Irish life. Her self-imposed exclusion from the wider Barrytown community where these values are actively contested also helps to account for her struggle to adapt. Within Barrytown, pregnancies outside of marriage are accepted and normalised as Sharon's comments make clear. 'The baby was nothing. It happened. It was alright. Barrytown was good that way. Nobody minded. Guess the daddy was a hobby.' (2013, 253).

The changing moral code is apparent in the decline in influence of the Catholic Church and in the loosening of the social mores surrounding sex and sexuality. In his discussion of Sharon's pregnancy outside of marriage with Veronica, Jimmy Sr insists that 'Times've changed.' (2013, 189). However, it is important to question the extent to which this statement is valid or representative. Veronica's views can be seen as symbolic of the wider persistence of traditional value systems in Ireland as a nation, evident in the resistance to attempts to liberalise legislation around abortion and divorce in the referenda of 1983 and 1986 respectively. Traditional values also persist in that the family is still regarded as sacrosanct. Sharon is treated negatively when she is suspected of having breached Barrytown's normative codes surrounding the family through a liaison with a married man. The importance of family is further echoed in Sharon's own wishes for her unborn child. Contemplating life as a single mother, Sharon expresses her desire for her

daughter to be reared within the same traditional family structure that she experienced. 'She didn't want to be by herself, looking after herself and the baby. She wanted to stay here so the baby would have a proper family...' (2013, 187). As Mary McGlynn writes of the novel, 'Though it depicts a community comfortable with out-of-wedlock pregnancy, *The Snapper* can be seen as a site for the suppression of non-normative family structures...' (2005, 143). While Sharon asserts her right to independence and denies any obligation to marry, she remains committed to a conventional family structure. The novel then highlights that some traditional vestiges remain even amongst the emerging generation. *The Snapper* thus demonstrates that the social and moral landscape of Ireland is shifting, but it also makes clear that this process of change is by no means complete. The novel then authentically captures a society in transition. The lack of defined boundaries at the centre of the novel reflects the fluidity and slipperiness of this liminal state between traditional and emerging values.

The velocity of change and the fact of change ultimately create a sense of distance among and between the different generations of female characters. In the case of Sharon's relationship with Jackie, intimacy is partly sacrificed due to Sharon's passive acceptance of the influx of new cultural messages that accompanied the modernisation of Irish society. Sharon devalues her relationship with the girls based on negative comparison with the cultural models of feminine friendship offered through television and magazines. 'She'd often read in magazines and she'd seen it on television where it said that women friends were closer than men, but Sharon didn't think they were. Not the girls she knew.' (2013, 183). As a result of the overexposure to such ideas, Sharon fails to recognise the potentially enduring nature of her relationship with Jackie. Sharon acknowledges the fact that they were once 'best friends,' and that they stalwartly 'defended one another when the slagging got a bit serious.' (2013, 181). However, Sharon believes that her continued relationship with Jackie is rooted more in proximity and convenience than something deeper. 'Jackie had been her best friend for years but now that was only because she saw her more often than the others, not because she knew her better. She'd never have been able to tell Jackie all about what had happened.' (2013, 182). The weight of expectations established by the changing cultural norms means that Sharon fails to recognise the relationship in terms of genuine friendship

and so does not confide in Jackie about her violation by George Burgess and instead chooses to remain silent. However, the novel makes clear that Jackie views their relationship in more intimate terms. On two separate occasions, she raises the fact that Sharon did not confide in her, and appears deeply wounded and affected by Sharon's self-imposed silence. Perhaps more significant is her offer to move in with Sharon. In spite of the humour that is used defensively to undermine the seriousness of the proposal, Jackie's pledge of allegiance strikes the reader as genuine, and contrasts with Mary's more superficial claim earlier in the novel that Sharon's baby will have 'four mothers.' (2013, 206). Through Jackie, Sharon is offered the same supportive network and genuine friendship that hallmarks the more enduring relationships among the male characters, such as that of Jimmy Sr and Bimbo. Toward the close of the novel however, it appears as though Sharon may be moving more toward a realisation of the potential intimate friendship on offer through Jackie, as she muses on what she terms the 'realler truth' that 'we are not that close, or weren't anyway.' (2013, 274).

Sharon's relationship with her mother is damaged by Veronica's resistance to the changing society, and what Veronica perceives as Sharon's ready acceptance of it. However, there are some signs that a move toward greater intimacy may be possible through subtle changes in Veronica's character as the novel develops. While Veronica is concerned that Sharon may be a negative influence on her siblings, she fails to recognise the positive impact of aspects of Sharon's character on herself. Sharon's independence and forthright manner act as somewhat of a catalyst for Veronica's personal awakening. The pronouncement of the twins that they are quitting ballroom dancing triggers an uncharacteristic verbal reaction from Veronica. She not only externalises her frustration, but uses a profanity that she has consistently censured the use of within the home. The verbal release can be interpreted as the signifier of a moment of wider realisation on her part, and it is depicted in the novel in epiphanic terms. Veronica is described as a woman 'just woken up with a fright.' (2013, 297). She announces that she will not be cooking for the family that evening, and this can be read as an indication that she has partly awoken to a realisation of an identity beyond her role as mother and beyond the domestic realm. This change in Veronica's character is more explicit in *The Van* as she seizes her independence and returns to education. In the later novel,



Veronica's engagement and interaction beyond the domestic sphere is emblematic of her altered character. Within *The Snapper*, Veronica's reaction to the twins is significant, as she is no longer silent and her retreat is from perceived duty and not self-expression. It is in this movement away from silence toward externalisation that the opportunity to build more meaningful relationships can be perceived.

From the time of its initial publication, Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper* has invited much comment in relation to the linguistic license that it seizes. However, in spite of the linguistic freedom to seemingly say the unsayable, even the most vocal of the characters retreat to silence and withdraw in relation to certain issues. It is in exposing this muteness that the novel builds a more intimate connection with its readers than exists between the characters. However, Doyle foregrounds the potential for transformation at the level of the individual and the collective in capturing a people and a nation in the process of change and transition. The possibility of reinvention and rebirth is as central to the novel as birth. *The Snapper* suggests that all of the characters can be reborn into a greater intimacy and connection with one another, and so the solitude of their silence may one day be surrendered.

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