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An Irishman in America: Irishness and Belonging in Roddy Doyle's *Oh, Play That Thing*

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The purpose of this article is to analyse Roddy Doyle's representations of Irishness and Ireland in *Oh, Play That Thing* (2004). The novel is the second instalment in Doyle's *The Last Roundup Trilogy*, a historical fiction describing the making of the Irish nation through the adventures and misadventures of Henry Smart, its protagonist. In the novel, constructions of Irishness are projected onto the outside world through Henry's picaresque travels in the United States. The article examines how Irishness is constructed in the book and how it becomes intertwined with identity construction in other minority groups.
Keywords: Ireland, Irishness, identity, postcolonial, nationhood, migration.

If, as Terence Brown and Joe Cleary suggest, there has been a creative struggle in the Republic of Ireland over the issue of Irishness since the 1980s, then Roddy Doyle has been at the forefront of this literary exploration of the idea, or ideal, of Irishness, contributing to fiction that can be seen as an attempt to re-discover and re-invent what Ireland and Irishness mean.[1] This continuing re-evaluation of Ireland and Irishness in Doyle's work has been prompted by the significant changes, both social and economic, that the nation has undergone over the past forty years.

Events in Ireland in the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century changed the fabric of Irish society and the impact of these events on ideas of the nation and of Irishness is reflected in the fiction of the time. In turn, fiction becomes a tool to revisit and reimagine the past by undermining historically normal views of Irishness and of the nation: Doyle's experience of contemporary events must have inevitably coloured his view of past representations of Ireland and Irishness. In this light, Doyle's historical fiction becomes a review of the past that is, at the same time, "direct" and inflected by the present.

Doyle's preoccupation with re-examining what it might mean to be Irish in the late twentieth century starts with his first novel, *The Commitments*, and continues in the rest of the *Barrytown Trilogy*, where Doyle gave voice to a section of society that had been silenced and ignored by a post-independent ideology which depicted Irish solely as rural, Irish- speaking, and Catholic (see Smyth). This process of rediscovery and reinvention continues in Doyle's *The Last Roundup Trilogy*, a sustained historical fiction describing the emergence of the Irish nation through the adventures and misadventures of Henry Smart, its protagonist. The three novels in question are *A Star Called Henry* (1999), *Oh, Play That Thing!* (2004), and *The Dead Republic* (2010). The *Trilogy* follows the life of Henry Smart from his departure from Ireland to his subsequent life in America, spanning a substantial part of

Irish society and historical events during the period from just before the Anglo-Irish war to the years that immediately followed. *Oh, Play That Thing* moves the action to the United States, at a time when the new Irish state is being formed. In the novel, we are given a view of Irish identity abroad while, at home, that identity was being strictly defined in de Valera's Ireland. *Oh, Play That Thing* provides a

[1] See Terence Brown's critical work *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922–2002* (2004) and Joe Cleary's contribution *Outrageous Fortune. Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (2007)

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striking object for the study of native identities, since it carries the protagonist into a seemingly different context, that of the United States.

This article will focus on the second instalment of *The Last Roundup Trilogy*. *Oh, Play That Thing*[2] purports to analyse Doyle's representations of Irishness and Ireland as they are reconceived from seemingly remote perspectives as constructions of Irishness are projected onto the outside world through Henry's picaresque travels in the States. Moreover, the article will examine how Irishness functions in the book as a result of the associations made in the narrative, and how it becomes intertwined with identity construction in other minority groups.

Oh, Play That Thing is narrated from the point of view of Henry Smart through his adventures in the United States of America, where he is forced to flee in order to avoid being killed by his former IRA comrades. When he arrives in New York on 16 March 1924, the day before St Patrick's Day, he is twenty-three years old. It is easy to see how Henry's migration can be regarded as a reference to historical Irish emigration to the United States. The protagonist himself roots his experience of migration within a more collective one when, on his arrival in New York, he reflects in the past tense that, unlike other people, "the Irish travelled alone" (1).

Initially, Henry makes his living by carrying sandwich boards and selling bootleg alcohol in New York's Lower East Side during Prohibition. The people he meets here belong to the lowest social classes, being predominantly immigrants and gangsters. Henry has to run away again as he crosses a local gangster, Johnny No, and he temporarily, but crucially, settles in Chicago, where he enters the world of jazz and where he meets Louis Armstrong. He becomes reunited with his Irish wife and daughter, but unfortunately, with the IRA also.

The narration contains numerous flashbacks and quotations from the prequel novel, but adopts a different, more disconnected style. Ambiguity and fragmentation are not just a formal feature of the narrative; they reflect the fragmentation in Henry himself, in his life situation, and through this new context, in his search for a new identity and new possibilities whilst, at the same time, constantly reminding himself who he is. This broader issue of identity confronts him repeatedly, when he is identified with Ireland and Irishness. Right at the start, when Henry arrives in New York and goes through Immigration, he produces a fake passport describing him as an Englishman called Henry Drake, presumably because he would be more "acceptable" as an Englishman. However, while pretending he believes the document to be genuine, the official's parting remark is "Welcome to America … But you'd want to work on your accent sir. *Slán leat*" (4).

The ambiguous relationship Henry has with his past and his Irishness starts at the beginning of the novel, in an episode where he tries to change his identity and become a new person, with no past. As soon as he gets to the US, he tells us that: "I waved, turned and skimmed the passport onto the river. I watched it gather water and sink. I was a clean sheet" (5).

Just as when he emerged from the Liffey after escaping the guards in *A Star Called Henry*, he is ready to become someone else and, again, water becomes a symbol of his cleansing; he sheds one identity to assume another. It is significant that the passport he throws into the River Hudson is the one that defines him as the Englishman Henry Drake. Nevertheless, despite the effort to shed his past and become someone new, a few pages later, the protagonist states, once again, "My name is Henry Smart" (*Oh, Play* 8). There are several instances in the novel when the protagonist reminds the reader, and himself, who he is by repeating this sentence.

This tension between the attempt to reinvent himself, specifically as non-Irish, and the roots and past he carries with him, pervades the novel. He tries to retain his identity in spite of all the events and incidents, a reflection perhaps of the efforts made by those Irish who are part of the diaspora to preserve their sense of Irishness at

[2] "Oh, Play That Thing" is a song by jazz artist Joe "King" Oliver. Oliver had a profound influence on Louis Armstrong's music. Armstrong was his protegé and played in Oliver's band in Chicago.
For more information, see
https://www.naxos.com/mainsite/blurbs_reviews.asp?item_code=8.120666&catNum=120666&filetype=About%20this%20Recording&language=English, last accessed on 27 November 2019. Oliver and the song are briefly mentioned in the novel (p. 146; p. 173).

all costs, raising the question posed by Clair Wills in relation to Joyce's *Ulysses*, but very pertinent here as well: "to what extent a nation is the same people living in the same place" (44). Doyle's novel seems to ask this same question, as, for instance, when Henry is introduced by Armstrong to Zutty Singleton as "One of those Irish boys from Ireland" and the latter replies, "From Ireland genuine? Not like most of them Irishes, never been nearer Ireland than Coney Ireland" (245). Apart from being a reflection on whether geography defines identity, this might be also seen as a criticism of the American Irish who have never set foot in Ireland but still support armed struggle back home, "[d]espite Henry's hope that living in the US will enable him to live in the present I felt the freedom I'd really never known before. Because there was no past… at last. I wasn't Irish anymore" (133). Past and present merge, not just in terms of flashbacks and intertextuality, but also because Henry lives his present experiences through the filter of his past – for instance, when he starts looking for work, he reflects that "I'd seen it before, although the clock boss here was two feet taller than the dwarf with the eyes who'd ruled the Custom House dock, in Dublin… the familiarity of that routine – acceptance, rejection, daily pay and kickback – the Irish accents all around me" (12). We can see here that his present perceptions are shaped by his past experiences in Ireland, which are the experiences of people marginalized and belonging to the working class. Even the first thing he experiences on arrival in the US, his immigrant medical examination, reminds him of his experiences in Dublin

> To my left, another inspector drew a large L on a shoulder with a brand new piece of chalk. L was for lung. I knew the signs; I'd seen them all my life… an E on the shoulder meant bad eyes, another L meant lameness… H was for heart, SC was for scalp, X was for mental. (*Oh, Play* 2–3)

Henry says he has seen it all before, the "L" for lung being a reference to the spread of tuberculosis he had known in the Dublin slums. But there is also an element of ambiguity and the reader is led to think that Henry compares these degrading practices that immigrants are subjected to with the life he and those like him experienced in the streets of Dublin, where he was an outcast also. So, although from the start his aim is to shed his Irishness, his past and his Irishness mould both his own perceptions of the present and the way he is perceived; wherever he goes he is identified on the basis of his Irishness. Even when he finally thinks that "I was a Yank. At last" (134) people close to him, such as Armstrong, remind him that there is "[t]oo much of the Irish in you" (217). It is Armstrong who shows him that his view of the world is influenced by his roots: "That the Irish in you, Henry. Always the bad news… we are not heading into a whupping. We just got away from one" (223), seemingly referring to a perceived tendency amongst the Irish to see things in a pessimistic way.

Henry's constant travels, his "running," may be a metaphor for a search for the self. He may not know who he is because from the moment of his birth he has been a usurper. We are reminded that "[t]here was another Henry, the first and real Henry, up there in the sky, a little star waiting for his mammy… they never called me Henry. I was the shadow, the impostor" (110).

From birth, he has been trying to impersonate someone else, someone in the stars where lost souls are. It seems that, by constantly repeating to himself "I am Henry Smart" (see, for example, p. 306), Henry fights ironically over the ownership of a name, something that has some national overtones when it comes to Ireland, especially in the context of his nationalist background. Ownership of definitions of Irishness was possibly on Doyle's mind since he is acutely aware that "[c]ertainly the history of my part of Ireland, the living history, has been very much about who owns the definition of the country" (Giambona 256). Seen in this light, Henry becomes even more symbolic of Ireland's struggle to find itself; his feeling of usurpation might reflect the feeling of those who felt they did not belong in a nation whose sense of Irishness was too prescriptive.

In Henry we have, as with Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, an Irish Ulysses whose epic voyaging and return we witness. Henry walks through the American cities just as he walked all over Dublin, "I stepped out, every night. I walked. I covered the city, street by street, acre by acre … The Irish patches weren't Irish, the Italians weren't as Mediterranean – there was room for America here"

(*Oh, Play* 132). His peregrinations make him realize that identities have space to be reimagined in a new place, free from national burdens – it is as if the US, by relieving the burden of past nationalities and the traits associated with them, affords the opportunity to recreate identities. However, Henry never forgets, or is allowed to forget, his Irishness.

This connection to Ireland and Irishness is present at several stages in the novel. There is, for example, a whole section devoted to a consideration of literary representations of the Irish in the episode where Henry visits Brotman, a publisher, and all around him he sees

> [a] room full of books… I looked around for Granny Nash… *Ulysses*. James Joyce – Are you familiar with the work? – No. – There are those who are determined to copper-fasten that situation. They do not want that book read. By anyone. Except, perhaps, themselves. You *are* Irish… Freedom of expression, he said. – I am not a Bolshevik but I think I am entitled to know what its greatest exponent has to say. That is my fight… *Ireland and the Irish Question*… *Ireland and the Irish Question*… *Ireland and the Irish Question*… at the North-Western corner of Europe lies the land whose history will occupy us. (*Oh, Play* 84–85)

This is a clear reference to the traditional version of Irish history and to the socialist ideas Henry seemed to favour, as exemplified in his admiration and respect for James Connolly in *A Star Called Henry*. There is also a clear reference to censorship. It is interesting, although not surprising, that Doyle chooses to mention *Ulysses* and James Joyce. Apart from another connection with Joyce, which perhaps suggests a parallel in terms of what Doyle thinks he is doing with his fiction around challenging conventions, the history surrounding the censorship of *Ulysses* is revealing. Although never officially banned in Ireland by the Censorship of Publications Board, the government used a customs loophole which prevented the book from being allowed into the country. It was first openly available in Ireland in the 1960s. *Ulysses* went through a very public censorship controversy in the US. Prior to being published as a book, Joyce's novel was serialized between 1918 and 1920 in the Chicago-based *Little Review* whose foreign editor was Ezra Pound. Due to the "offensive" nature of the novel, the US Post Office refused to handle three numbers of the *Little Review* – the January 1919 issue (containing the first section of episode eight, "Lestrygonians," during which Bloom recalls an early sexual experience with his wife Molly); the May 1919 number (which included the second half of episode nine, "Scylla and Charybdis"); and the January 1920 issue (containing the third instalment of episode twelve, "Cyclops"). It all came to a head, however, when Margaret Anderson distributed some copies of the July-August 1920 number (which included the thirteenth episode of *Ulysses*, "Nausicaa," in which Leopold Bloom masturbates as Gerty MacDowell shows off her leg) and one of the copies fell into the hands of a New York lawyer's daughter. The lawyer brought it to the attention of both the New York County District Attorney and John S. Sumner, the secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. A trial took place and in February 1921 the serial publication of *Ulysses* in America came to an end. Ten years after its first appearance, the American publisher Random House challenged the ban on *Ulysses* by openly importing a copy. The publishing company was taken to court and the outcome was that the book was not deemed obscene. In 1936, following America's lead, *Ulysses* was also published in the United Kingdom for the first time in its entirety. The US became the first English-speaking country to both ban the book and publicly reinstate it.[3]

By including references to the censorship of books, in the guise of *Ulysses* in this specific instance, Doyle appears to be drawing a parallel between the US and Ireland by showing that the US, for all its self-proclaimed modernity, can be as socially conservative as Ireland. The banning of books also

[3] A few instalments of *Ulysses* also appeared in the London-based magazine *The Egoist* in 1919, but British printers subsequently refused to handle it in any form. Nevertheless, in February 1922, the novel was published in its entirety by Sylvia Beach's Paris-based Shakespeare and Company, from where it was furtively exported to subscribers on both sides of the Atlantic and around the world. But it was frequently intercepted, confiscated, and incinerated. For a more exhaustive account of censorship and Ulysses, see Paul Vanderham, *James Joyce and Censorship* (NYU Press, 1998) and Kevin Birmingham, *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce's Ulysses* (Head of Zeus, 2014).

becomes an implicit acknowledgement of the power of literary and cultural representation and books become associated with the "freedom… to drink and to read… to think different" (*Oh, Play* 86). There is, then, an explicit connection between reading and the power of books to change minds, perhaps another conscious, or unconscious, reflection on Doyle's part on the power of fiction to reshape conceptions, and self-conceptions, of Ireland and Irishness.

However, aware that he cannot escape his roots and his Irishness, Henry realizes that, in New York, as in Dublin, he has become a target, and he must start running again. He conceives a plan to start his own business by stealing Johnny No's advertising boards and employing his own boys. The plan fails and Johnny No threatens to kill Henry. He compares Johnny No to Jack Dalton, the man who sentenced him to death back in Ireland, "For a second back in [Johnny No's] office, for less than a second, less than the time it took to blink his yellow eyes, I'd seen Jack Dalton behind that desk, just after he'd let me read my own name on a piece of paper and sentenced me to death" (*Oh, Play* 19). Again, Henry experiences the present through the lens of his past. Despite his claims to a new life and identity, he knows this is just a façade that masks a different core identity. He muses, "I was Henry Glick these days. *Glic*, clever, cunning, smart. An American name, invented to be remembered, and easily thrown away" (28). The surname "Glick" recalls "Smart," but it is interesting to see how Henry sees his American name as a disposable one. So, despite flirting with the idea of America as emancipatory and modern, a place that has no memory because "it gets in the way of progress" (229), Henry also seems to suggest that this is a transitory phase for him and that his identity remains that of the Irish Henry Smart.

Doyle chooses Henry to counter stereotyping of clear-cut depictions and identifications of political and community allegiance within Ireland's past through the lens of contemporary changes and events. By virtue of his previous associations, Henry's picaresque figure can represent both the IRA and Sinn Féin. Yet, despite condemning British colonial power, Henry is also critical of IRA killings. So, although the British voices in the novel represent the Irish as all being "Shinners" and IRA-sympathizers, Henry does not support the armed struggle believing instead that "I'd been the expendable fool for years, the man who'd hopped when his better called. No more" (6). Through Henry, the novel carries out a critical dissection of simplistic accounts of historical events in Ireland and of simplistic views of allegiance. In fact, we come to suspect that Henry is, in a way, Doyle's *alter ego*, as Doyle himself believes that things were much more multi-layered:

> What isn't really shown very often is that a lot of the English Army or British Army is actually Irish. They were Irishmen, working class Irishmen. The picture was always more complicated than was given. It was probably a necessity in the early days of the new state, particularly a state that was born out of violence. (Giambona 257)

Henry's more nuanced approach appears to reflect these authorial senses of complexity. He readily acknowledges the horrors committed by the colonial power:

> The sweepings of England's jails, Jack Dalton had called the Black and Tans, back when they landed and declared war on every man and woman in Ireland, with the secret blessing of their government. They burnt towns. They took people from houses and shot them. They shot livestock. They murdered priests and mayors. – Sounds like the Klan, said Dora… They burnt the creameries. They stole wedding rings. They declared all Irish people Shinners and made terrorists of them all. They'd been promised good money… to sort out Ireland. They were foreign and savage, and their presence in the country was proof that we were winning. (*Oh, Play* 148)

At the same time, he is also haunted by the killings he has committed: "I put the gun to the back of his head and shot him. Obeying orders. I was a soldier. Shot as a traitor and a spy. His name was on a piece of paper, and I'd killed him" (*Oh, Play* 264). This is a flashback that he helplessly experiences, as if to say that the memories took over when he least expected them. The far from clear-cut picture of allegiances in Ireland is in the spotlight again when Henry is confronted with his IRA past, in the person of

Ned Kellet. Kellet, who at first glance is seen in the novel as a prominent IRA figure, seems to represent a much more complex scenario:

> I [Ned Kellet] was a spy. There's a difference… I was never *involved*. I was never in. So I couldn't have informed… There I [Kellet] was… doing my duty for the Empire. I was no Republican… did you ever meet a Unionist before?... I served… for King and country. And I came home to a different country, and I didn't like it… I knew that it was all over for King and Empire and the time had come for a change. So I just kept being what they thought I was. (*Oh, Play* 324–6)

But when Henry asks "So what? You're not with the IRA?" the answer is "I didn't say that" (324). It is not easy to establish which side Kellet was/is on. Roles are fluid, identities shift easily, who one is depends on what other people expect, think, or believe, from their perspective, and this is true of Henry, too. One becomes many and, ultimately, none.

Along with fragmentation, the novel contains many instances of repetition. There are phrases which are repeated throughout the whole novel without any obvious context, for example "Get out when you smell the cordite" (88, 95), or a refrain from Thomas Ashe's poem "Let me carry your cross for Ireland, Lord" (33, 79), or the narrator's cry that his name is Henry Smart. These repetitions can be compared to the musical phrases that help unify the fabric of a musical composition and are appropriate in a novel immersed in a specific musical world – jazz – from its title onwards. Appropriately, the author uses within the narrative texture a lot of colloquialisms, slang, vulgarisms, and American and African American English. Irish English is used in the speech of Henry's wife and an IRA hitman. Again, the interweaving of specific types of language is part of Doyle's effort to give his protagonists, who are often part of a marginalized section of society, their own voices. It is worth bearing in mind that, when we look at its origins, jazz represented the "folk ballads" of the African American community, an expression of Black history. It originated in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century mainly in New Orleans, incorporating African and slave folk songs and the influences of west African culture, improvisation being one of its main features (see Gushee). This then seems to be another way of drawing a parallel between Henry and the African American community, a way of linking the two communities, as Henry himself is embedded in, and is the subject of, popular stories. For example, he is led to believe that he has become the hero of popular ballads about the Easter Rising (Doyle, *A Star*) and Henry himself reminds us that, when he was born, he immediately became the subject of popular stories,

> I was, remember, the miracle baby. I'd made women feel special, not that long ago, as they gazed down at me in my padded zinc crib… dead babies in unmarked holes, poverty, age, sickness, damp, husbands buried in the Empire's muck. One look at me had given them second thoughts, had brought back forgotten songs. (*Oh, Play* 110)

He was a symbol of hope that better things were still possible, a sort of a mythical saviour. In terms of layered perceptions of identity and contrasting stereotyping, the choice of popular ballads is significant here, as non-canonical narrative forms are valuable sites of resistance and vital moments of hybridity in Ireland, in that they "refuse the homogeneity of 'style' required for national citizenship" (Lloyd 5). Moreover, they offer an analogy with the origins of jazz music, another way in which, in the novel, Doyle draws a parallel between Henry, the Irish, and the African American community. Moreover, it is now Miss O'Shea and Saoirse, Henry and Miss O'Shea's daughter, that become the subject of numerous folk stories. In America, after they get separated due to a fortuitous incident, Miss O'Shea continues to fight by organizing strikes during the Depression, destroying farm equipment, and robbing banks in the name of the "Oklahoma Republican Army" echoing her previous exploits against the British in Ireland as part of the Irish Republican Army (*Oh, Play* 358–9). Henry learns of Miss O'Shea's and their daughter's adventures through the accounts of ordinary people:

> She was one of their own. She was their story. And I'd never find her, no more than I'd find Billy the Kid… *Kathline O'Houlahan… aka Dark Rosaleen… aka Lady O'Shea, O'Toole, O'Bannion, O'Neill… O'Moore, O'Carroll, O'Glick…* her poster was everywhere but I still didn't know her name… Saoirse was there… I listened out for Rifle… he wasn't on the posters. And he wasn't in the stories. (*Oh, Play* 358)

Miss O'Shea and Saoirse become local legends, firmly identified as Irish through their names. The characters are associated with folk tales and popular ballads. This is not a coincidence. We know, for example, that some Irish postcolonial theories see Irish ballads and folk songs as sites of resistance and a means of popular instruction. Once again, David Lloyd recommends that critics revalue the marginal elements of Irish culture and reinsert them into the dynamic of identity formation. He calls for an analysis of "cultural practices which have appeared discontinuous" and of "the developing state apparatus in Ireland which is at one and the same time the analysis of the hegemonic role of culture in the formation of citizen-subjects" in order to recover marginalized practices which have been read as incoherent or pre-modern (7). Like Henry, Miss O'Shea and her daughter assume multiple names and multiple identities so that they are both many and none.

As well as being the object of popular stories, Miss O'Shea is frequently represented as Ireland. Henry associates his wife with "Kathline O'Houlahan" and "Dark Rosaleen," names that have clear Irish nationalist connotations and that were used in nationalist literature as synonyms for Ireland by authors such as Yeats and Mangan (358). The parallel between Ireland and Miss O'Shea is made even more explicit when Henry recalls his "fight for Irish freedom, and Miss O'Shea" (*Oh, Play* 102). It seems legitimate then to assume that this struggle for a unique definition of Ireland is doomed to fail – like Miss O'Shea, who takes on multiple identities in folk stories depending on who tells and owns them, Ireland is what the different people who "own" it make of it: it can be many things to many people; there is no single, true, authentic essence.

When he is in the US, Henry seems to identify naturally with the Chicago Black musician scene. He gets close to Louis Armstrong and becomes Armstrong's passport into places where black people are not allowed. At the same time, Armstrong is Henry's passport within the black community

> I was tolerated because I was with the black man… I could have told them: I'm Irish, lads, one of the Empire's niggers, and I *know*. But they'd have stood back, and maybe nodded… no one was going to ask about my fight for Irish freedom, and the freedom to open our own doors. Being Irish here just made me a cop's cousin, and the men and women here had history of their own they wanted to get away from. (*Oh, Play* 252)

As well as the stereotypes linked to Irishness, there is also a sense of crossing racial divides. It is interesting that Doyle firmly places Henry within a black community where, for the first time since arriving in the US, he seems to enjoy a temporary respite from running. There is a reference here to some stereotyping and racist representations of the Irish in cartoons which were similar to racist representations of African Americans and other colonized people. Then, there is a hint that there is some sense of shared history between Henry and his Irish background and that of the African Americans. The parallel between Irish and Black history, Ireland and the Third World, which Doyle starts to construct right from *The Commitments*, has a historical as well as theoretical basis: for example, Declan Kiberd reminds us that both Edward Said and Fredric Jameson wrote pamphlets that drew cultural parallels between Ireland and the Third World.

In some *Punch* cartoons that appeared around the middle of the nineteenth century, the Irish were depicted as apes. This reflected the Victorian view of the Irish and aligned it with representations of other colonized people (see de Nie). In their introduction to *Drawing Conclusions: A Cartoon History of Anglo-Irish Relations, 1798–1998,* Roy Douglas, Liam Harte, and Jim O'Hara note that images of the Irish in nineteenth-century British political cartoons tended to oscillate between their representations as homicidal apes and as simple, loyal subjects of Queen Victoria. In addition, the Irish were perceived

as emotional and prone to fancy; their lack of intelligence presumably turned them into easy victims of agitators and demagogues, such as the Pope and the Fenians. Cartoons portraying the Irish as ape-like, sub-human beasts became increasingly widespread in comic journals in Britain and the United States around the middle of the nineteenth century. The dominant Irish stereotype of the Irish Paddy as an amusingly idiotic peasant was eventually replaced by images of increasingly menacing and bestialized creatures, looking more like apes than humans.

The Irish were also variously portrayed as monkeys, Celtic Calibans, Frankenstein monsters, and Yahoos. Racial slurs such as "Black Irish," "Simians," "Paddies," or "Niggers of Europe" recall a colonial history of violence that positioned the Irish as an inferior race. It does seem then that Doyle is acutely aware of such stereotypical representations of the Irish when he pairs Henry with Louis Armstrong who, as a person of colour, had been subjected to similar stereotypical and racist representations, in what is one of the novel's more meaningful relationships. Stereotypically racist representations of the African American community had, for example, appeared in the same *Harpers Weekly* magazine that published the Irish cartoons. The magazine started publishing the Johnson family cartoon series during the World's Columbian Exposition which, coincidentally, was held in Chicago in 1893. Among other things, "Mr Johnson's facial structure, hair colour and ear shape are made to appear like an ape's" (Cocks 453).

The shared experience between the Irish and African Americans is epitomized by a personal experienced, shared by Louis and Henry and evoked in the book, in the episode where Henry recalls the first time when he saw Louis Armstrong:

> I turned and saw him. Louis Armstrong. His mother had died… he put the trumpet to his mouth; the crowd went wild… it was the blues, his grief crying out of the bell… it was the cry of a terrified child, left all alone, forever… – *What about meee!* – … his mother, mine – *she skips and she laughs, her black eyes shine happy*. (*Oh, Play* 155)

The association of Louis's grief and Henry's is made clear by the intersection of Henry's own cry and his memories of his mother so that Louis's grief for his mother becomes Henry's.

This shared experience between the two communities is also evoked when Henry tells Dora, a woman of mixed race, whom he meets in Chicago, about Ireland's oppression at the hands of the British government. Upon hearing of the Black and Tans' actions in Ireland, Dora compares them to the Ku Klux Klan, thus establishing a sense of shared experience (*Oh, Play* 148). However, the reader is reminded that this shared experience has its limits when Dora tells Henry that "You Irish and you are telling me you don't know the difference between black and white? You don't know the rules? You people wrote most of the goddam rules" (*Oh, Play* 140). Henry is thus made to realize that his experience of colonialism is not on the same level as that of African Americans, as he is still a white person. This might be a reference to the more complex status of the Irish during the colonial period: ruled by a foreign power yet also collaborators in the work of Empire in India and other overseas colonies.

Interestingly, Dora, a mixed-race woman, seems to enjoy her hybrid status. Torn between her two identities, she finally decides that she

> Ain't interested in being a white woman no more… it ain't because I can never be one… I spent all my life… thinking I was better than most because I had some white man's blood… get my hair straightened, put bleach on my face [but] I was still… not white enough, not black enough… took a long time to get out of that white man's trap. (*Oh, Play* 140–1)

It was Armstrong, she says, who freed her from the misconception that being white was better, as she existed within a narrative built by whites. When Henry suggests that Armstrong has cured him of being Irish, Dora's reply is "No brother… ain't that easy" (*Oh, Play* 141). Interestingly, this exchange seems to suggest the colonized are prisoners of the categories, constructs, and stereotypes that the colonizer has created. Especially when internalized, such constructs become powerful tools of control.

At the end of the novel, having lost touch with his wife and daughter once again, Henry meets John Ford, the film maker, who promises him to make a film that tells "[y]our story. How'd an Irish rebel end up here? That's the real Irish story… and that's the story we are going to tell (*Oh, Play* 374). We infer from the above that, while making Henry believe that he was going to tell his story, it is Ford's version of the story that is going to be told, that it is Ford who has decided which aspects were important. Just like the set of the film he is currently shooting, where "[t]he desert was real, but the town was cut out" (*Oh, Play* 372), it appears that the story he wants to tell is partly illusory.

At the end of *Oh, Play That Thing* Henry leaves to go back "home," whatever and wherever that might be. He realizes that he had been fooling himself all along when thinking that he had started a new life in the US. This transpires when he reflects on his time with Louis Armstrong which, on the surface, had appeared as the time in the novel when he was at his most settled, when there was "no more running or hiding" for him (*Oh, Play* 135). However, on reflection, he realizes that "I hadn't joined anything. I was in because of what I wasn't. I wasn't black, I wasn't a player or an agent or a manager… I wasn't the things that the dangerous white men were. So I was useful… as long as I wasn't anything" (*Oh, Play* 245). It is as if he realizes that he has been a character in a plot larger than himself, an impersonator, his identity having been bestowed upon him by others. Again, this means he is nothing, just like the different names he assumes, and then abandons; he is defined by what he is not.

Oh, Play That Thing is a novel about journeys, about finding one's identity by dismantling it. Doyle explores how we are perceived and how we perceive ourselves. Ireland is projected onto the outside world through Henry's picaresque travels in the United States. It is clear that Doyle takes his protagonist to the States to represent the Irish diaspora, but also to establish a link with the Black community, which is a way of showing the cultural analogies between Ireland and other colonized people. The novel takes Henry to a "modern world" – the US – which represents possibilities to a character who wants to shed his past. But the US is not so modern: it is the place of prohibitionism, of censorship; it also has a hidden history of slavery and the marginalization of the Black community. In the US, Henry's questions about identity can come to the surface through his encounter with the Black community which could not have happened in Ireland or in Britain.

At the end of the novel, Henry has neither found answers nor shed his Irishness. In fact, just like Dora, he realizes that "I'd come out of hiding. And there was a woman who'd got there before me; she'd stopped hiding too" (*Oh, Play* 147). Dora is Henry's *alter ego*: as Dora tries to represent herself as white, Henry tries to represent himself as English. So, just as Dora had found herself when she had stopped trying to be someone else, it is not the running away that makes Henry reimagine who he is. It is confronting his past, in the guise of the IRA hitman who finds him, that makes the possibility of his going back "home" a reality.

In this novel, Doyle is mapping an aspect of the history of Ireland through the filter of the diaspora, and reflecting on the analogies between his lead character, who, as we have seen, stands for Ireland and Irishness and for other marginalized communities. Moreover, by making Henry's experiences the core of his narrative, by drawing parallels with a community that is marginalized and discriminated against, and giving agency to a character that represents largely forgotten voices in mainstream accounts of historical events, Doyle continues to broaden the perception of Irish history and Irishness in an "effort to rethink history from the perspective of the subaltern" (Prakash 1478). The elision of Henry's history, the purge of the identities of those like Henry from the political and identitarian landscape in post-independence Ireland, is one of the central achievements of the novel. Henry's questioning of his national identity and his attempt to shed it while always returning to it is a way to explicate the homelessness felt by him and those who, like him, have felt rejected by the nation's narrow definitions of Irishness.

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