Pregnancy, Privacy, and Domesticity in The Snapper

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The back cover of the current Penguin paperback edition of *The Snapper* lauds the novel for its “wit, candor, and surprising authenticity” in its account of an unplanned pregnancy and its effect on family life, and many critics—charmed by Roddy Doyle’s supposed working-class authenticity—emphasize the realism and populism of the novel. Yet, *The Snapper* is hardly a warm story. A less compliant reading of Doyle’s story could characterize the plot thus: the acquaintance rape of Sharon Rabbitte, a young woman who braves neighborhood jibes as she carries her baby, is interwoven with the tale of her father, Jimmy, and his efforts to come to terms with her pregnancy. As she tries to conceal that the baby’s father is a neighbor and the father of a friend, Sharon must allay her own father’s fears of his personal humiliation, which he eventually represses through an intrusive and biologically explicit interest in Sharon’s pregnancy.

The text encourages oedipal readings, especially as the two men who force themselves on her body—her father and her rapist—are, demographically, almost identical. Sharon considers naming a boy after Jimmy, who, belatedly aware of his own lack of involvement in the births of his own six children, offers to be in the delivery room with her. Ruth Barton describes the dynamic: “in effect, the pregnancy becomes his and the threat of the single mother bringing up her child in a nonpaternalistic family unit is dispelled.”1 *The Snapper* effaces the horror of Sharon’s violation at the same time as it minimizes the impact of her pregnancy on her society. Rather than frankness or unsentimentality, *The Snapper* thus constructs a world in which the truth is buried or eradicated. Rather than a mere heartwarming tale of a gutsy working-class family, Doyle’s story raises uncomfortable questions about public and private space in contemporary Irish society.

Doyle shows a working-class family evading the traditional influences of nation and church, offers readers a pleasing view of collective identity, and

endorses the validity of a variety of linguistic registers—all sentiments in keeping with the postnationalist socialism he articulates in interviews. But, at the same time, Doyle’s choice of the father as the text’s main focalizer—it is, after all, usually his point of view that orients the text—as well as his portrayal of the pressures that economic stress places on domestic space in contemporary Ireland, undermine his reputed open-minded collectivism. Indeed, these aspects of the novel effectively sanction the middle-class constructions of privacy and privilege that Doyle is often read as wanting to resist.

The Snapper’s incestuous dynamics implicitly propose the behaviors and interactions of Doyle’s working-class urban characters as a metaphor for contemporary Irish society. The gender and class underpinnings of what is perceived to be normative political and social engagement are, therefore, necessarily highlighted in a contemporary Irish novel such as this; as Clair Wills notes, “the relation between the public and private spheres, while always complex, is particularly entangled in the case of Ireland.” Sharon’s willingness to take charge of her unwanted pregnancy becomes eclipsed, both structurally and narratologically, by Jimmy’s imperative to regain control of his household and his social milieu. Sharon can recapture her authority only through a public display of a simultaneously liberating and repressive social norm: deprecating humor. Only by submitting to public involvement in her private life is Sharon permitted to carry her child successfully to term. The Snapper discloses the logic by which what is private is converted to the public domain, suggesting that, for the working class, the distinction is not as hard and fast as domesticity theory would have it. Doyle’s family romance has implications beyond the merely domestic. He reveals contemporary Irish family life to be self-consuming and subject to the very strictures he seeks to deny: the traditional stranglehold of family, the inevitability of gossip and public critique, and the denial of individual will or mobility.

Clair Wills describes the cooperation of church and state in Ireland in advocating the adoption of middle-class nuclear family norms in the early decades of the twentieth century. “[W]hat is crucial in the Irish context,” she writes, “is that while the middle class ideals of domesticity were deployed in the service of Catholic nationalist hegemony, the concomitant ideal of privacy within the home was decried.” The Rabbitte household exists outside of and is

4. Wills, p. 46.
unfamiliar with bourgeois conceptions of privacy, while at the same time it strives to conform to models of appropriate domestic behavior. Throughout the novel, we see traces of class shame, efforts to better one’s situation, and discussions of space in language that accepts the middle-class status quo to which the family has, at best, limited access. Although Ellen-Raisa Jackson argues that “In Doyle’s novels, the family is no longer the inviolate space of freedom and solidarity which the 1937 constitution revered and sought to protect,” external pressures do push the Rabbittes towards the appearance of exactly that sort of family structure. 5 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 and for anxiety about family dynamics.

Doyle’s family stories—from *The Commitments* to *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*—regularly circle around questions of over-intimate relationships, inbreeding, and romance between a child and a parent substitute. Concerns about these sorts of ersatz incestuous families mark a number of Irish novels of the 1980s and 1990s, and in particular, novels about emigration. Underlying the desire for novelty and adventure (often figured through sex with someone of a different race) lurks the need to avoid incest, an anxiety about replicating the existing family and, hence, the status quo. Doyle’s novel represents a variation on the “ersatz incestuous family” that threatens but does not depict incest. Taken as a group, such texts—although individually disengaged from debates in the Irish public forum—may be seen to speak to fears that Ireland’s population, still reduced in the aftermath of famine and mass emigration, offers insufficient opportunity for change or diversity at a time when government and media alike portray the past as wrongheaded and continued progress towards modernity as crucial. 6

Concerns about modernization and the move to a secular state are frequently acted out within domestic scenes in contemporary texts. At times, this tendency can serve to attenuate or deflect the political and structural implications; as Pam Perkins, Nancy Armstrong, and other feminist critics have noted, the tendency to situate events in the home serves as a way to insist on their naturalness, their normality. The depoliticized domestic scene can then function as


6. Apprehensions about immigration to Ireland were not a concern at the time of the publication of *The Snapper*, but have become a major issue in Irish political life. Such debate has focused on whether or not Ireland—which in fact has one of the lowest population densities in Europe—has space to accommodate the arrivals. Such interest in the physical, spatial aspects of immigration may be seen as in keeping with historic attention to privacy.
a seemingly apolitical site where national conflicts can be resolved or depict a “despairing flight from politics” altogether.7

Historical and political conditions in Irish society require adaptations of the idea of the home as apolitical.8 In the Barrytown trilogy, an inescapable awareness of class also affects conceptions of the public and the private. In examining the ways in which Doyle suggests that Irish working-class resistance to traditional constructions of gendered domestic space arises, it is useful to consider both the novel and its film version. Unlike the film adaptation of Doyle’s first novel, The Commitments, which substantially altered the themes of the book, Stephen Frears’s 1993 movie addresses the same concerns as its source novel even when it adds or deletes scenes or shifts emphasis. The plot and dialogue are largely the same, though—because the producer of The Commitments holds the copyright on the original names of the characters—the film does not use the Rabbitte family name of the book, substituting Curley, and changing Jimmy’s name to Dessie. Doyle himself was the author of the screenplay, and the major revisions he introduced, among them the substitution of an older brother in the military for one trying to become a radio personality, effectively capture the tension between the novel’s interest in giving voice to a working-class family and that family’s own unconscious embrace of middle-class notions of privacy. Frears’s repeated framing of shots through opening and closing doors underlines those tensions. Considered together, both the film and the novel address contemporary concerns with space and privacy that may arise in lieu of class politics.

Most readings of domesticity ground themselves in the middle-class bourgeoisie, the group with the most vested interest in establishing a system based on nuclear family loyalties. But much as the novel may affirm such family structures, Roddy Doyle’s characters lack access to such public sphere-private sphere distinctions. Rather, The Snapper can be read as a series of ruptures and interminglings of the purportedly distinct public and private spheres. For instance, in a scene that appears in both film and novel versions of The Snapper, a drunken Sharon Rabbitte envisions the reactions of people in Barrytown to her pregnancy, which range from mocking disapproval to disgusted condemnation, all of which she responds to by laughing:

8. Such writers as Clair Wills and Siobhán Kilfeather have noted that “domesticity theory” translates only awkwardly onto Irish social life. Kilfeather has argued that Irish nineteenth-century novels feature open doors more than does English fiction of the same period; in English texts, the home is seen as more private and enclosed than in Irish ones. Siobhán Kilfeather, See Siobhán Kilfeather, “Sex and Sensation in the Nineteenth-Century Novel,” in Gender Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: Public and Private Spheres, ed. Margaret Kelleher, James A. Murphy (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997), pp. 83–92.
Sharon Rabbitte’s pregnant, did yeh hear?
—Your one, Sharon Rabbitte’s up the pole.
—Sharon Rabbitte’s havin’ a baby.
—I don’t believe yeh!
—Jaysis.
—Jesus! Are yeh serious?
—Who’s she havin’ it for?
—I don’t know.
—She won’t say.
—She doesn’t know.
—She can’t remember.
—Oh God, poor Sharon.
—That’s shockin’.
—Mm.
—Dirty bitch,
—Poor Sharon.
—The slut.
—I don’t believe her.
—The stupid bitch.
—She had tha’ comin’.
—Serves her righ’.

The film stages this scene so that the population of Barrytown lurks in Sharon’s bedroom, under her bed, along her walls. Early on, gossip and rumor are established as standard methods of circulating purportedly confidential information, but the community here is not seen merely as an agent of a collective morality. Not only do the different voices in this scene express divergent and even contradictory points of view, but the different accents—“Jaysis” and “Jesus,” for instance—also challenge any easy assumption that Barrytown is unified in any sense of working-class unity, or that the Rabbittes are meant to be stand-ins for any and every working-class northside family, much less any or every Irish family. The Snapper is suffused with such invasions of the private sphere, with

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10. The Snapper—in both the novel and its film version—has confounded the expectations of reviewers who look for a monolithic, authentic Irish identity. In an otherwise astute review, Adam Mars-Jones cannot seem to accept that perhaps the Catholic church really does not play a role in Barrytown family life, even in Sharon’s decision to keep her baby. Adam Mars-Jones, “Power and the pint; Pop culture plays its tune in Ireland in The Snapper,” Independent 6 August 1993, 16. Likewise, Stephen Leslie notes, “Religion is—unusually in an Irish novel—also forced to take a backseat,” a statement at odds with much Irish fiction, but conforming to received stereotypes. Stephen Leslie, “To probe or not to probe?” Times Literary Supplement, 4577, 21 December 1990, p. 138. Numerous other reviews refer to such conventional ideas as the nation of talkers, the gift of the gab, etc.—tropes that the novel and movie decline to engage with at all.
private matters aired publicly, and with a general dissolution of the public-private border, indicating that class-based practices shape the use of space.

Sharon, at twenty, shares a room with two younger sisters. Likewise, her older brother shares a room with his two brothers. The bathroom door is never closed enough, and portions of the novel make the Rabbitte household feel like a space of constant movement, a sensation that the film captures particularly well. When Sharon goes to confront George Burgess about his locker-room chat about her, the doors in his house further emphasize how hard it is to keep a secret within the family—Burgess’s wife disappears through one door as Yvonne, Sharon’s friend, pops out of another. Characters are constantly reminded that they can be seen at any moment; the supporting posts of the banister divide the frame to suggest the perspective through the bars of a jail. Kilfeather points out that “the house open to hospitality and community is also open to surveillance.” When there is so little privacy, the home itself functions as a public space. The endlessly opening and closing doors of Barrytown similarly show resistance to the candor they pledge.

It is not until Sharon finally quits her job, the week before she is due, that she experiences genuine physical privacy: “Sharon got Linda to open the window a bit before she went down for her breakfast. Now she was alone in the bedroom” (BT 324). She listens for a time to morning noises, straining to hear what she is missing. But solitude quickly loses its charm: “It had gone quiet outside. There were no cars. Everyone was gone” (BT 325). And with the cessation of external noise, anxiety sets in, and her response is to rush downstairs. Physical privacy makes room for mental solitude here, as throughout the novel, and solitude is perceived as threatening; it is too connected to memory. A crowded household and dense family life allow characters to avoid unpleasant musings. Jimmy and Sharon, the characters who focalize the novel for us, both spend most of their reflective energy trying to deny their own motives or wishing others would behave differently.

Jimmy’s denial evolves throughout the novel. Like many of the Irish fathers in Abbey Hyde’s sociological researches, at first Jimmy appears to accept Sharon’s news with neither pleasure nor displeasure. His concerns focus less on the practical impact of the upcoming birth than on such issues as who the father might be and whether or not he could be expected to marry Sharon. Jimmy’s initial responsiveness is followed by “a period of social disengagement with [his] daughter,” arising in his case once rumors begin to spread about his

neighbor, George Burgess, who is presumed to be the father. Hyde found that “Negative reactions were almost always expressed in terms of the father’s own personal hurt and disappointment.” Jimmy perceives Sharon’s situation in terms of its impact on him: “But, fuck it, his life was being ruined because of her. It was fuckin’ terrible. He was the laughing stock of Barrytown. It wasn’t her fault—but it was her fault as well. It wasn’t his. He’d done nothing” (BT 278–79).

Jimmy adopts a belligerent attitude in public, first threatening Burgess and later going so far as to punch someone. We do not witness the latter scene, but hear about it when Jimmy returns to the house with a bloody nose. Jimmy’s original narration of the story discloses that he had thought that a group in the pub was laughing at him, but when Sharon enters the room, he recasts the incident with himself as defender of her honor, “liking himself” as he tells her “I’m not goin’ to let them jeer yeh” (BT 277). Jimmy goes out of his way to make sure that Sharon sees his injury for herself, thereby forcing her to acknowledge that he envisions himself acting in her defense. Hyde notes that, “as the fathers saw it, in their inability to control fertility, daughters had in turn failed and exposed their fathers as inadequate protectors of the daughter’s sexuality.” It is not just Jimmy’s personal reputation at stake, but his masculinity. After Sharon is pregnant, he fights to compensate for his previous inattention to her.

More than Jimmy’s lax involvement as a parent is at issue. Because daughters in patriarchal systems are seen as somehow belonging to fathers as both children and as females, Sharon’s pregnancy can be read not just as a consequence of Jimmy’s inadequate masculinity, but also as a larger threat to the status quo. Hyde notes that there are “clear threats to patriarchal structures when a breakdown of traditional relations between men and women occurs, and the daughter’s ‘dangerous fertility’ bypasses the male-controlled route of marriage.” Though the family lists other out-of-wedlock pregnancies as a way of diminishing the social significance of Sharon’s, Jimmy’s behavior throughout the novel—as well as that of other male characters—reveals an ongoing crisis of traditional male roles and masculinity.

Unemployment in Kilbarrack, the Dublin neighborhood on which Barrytown is modeled, exceeded 60 percent for men throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. Manhood could no longer be defined in terms of earning and providing. Jimmy has not yet been made redundant—an event that occurs between The Snapper and The Van—but one of his sons and several of his friends are looking for work and submitting to pointless and demeaning employment training. The Snapper’s male characters are absorbed into what had tradition-


ally been a feminine world, but lack the power of the female characters. Unemployed men are forced into front gardens, kitchens, and other spaces typically regarded as women's domain. The film takes particular pains to evidence the emasculation of the Barrytown in a foreshadowing of *The Van*. When Sharon’s oldest brother Craig (a character not present in the novel) arrives home from time in the armed services—apparently the UN peacekeepers—he is predictably macho, declining to embrace Dessie, showing affection only to the women of the family, then stereotypically flaring up at the news of Sharon’s pregnancy. But Craig’s bluster is derided in an innuendo-laced scene when his friends in the pub scoff at hearing that his gun had no bullets. “But you had to look ’em in the eyes—the Arabs,” says Craig in his own defense, this eye contact substituting for aggression. Later in the scene, Craig flails under the gaze of Sharon’s friend Yvonne Burgess. Similarly, Yvonne’s father George Burgess is a shell of a man, mocked even by his slighted wife. Late in the movie, Sharon stares him down on the street, forcing him to cross. Bullets and manly control have been replaced by eye contact.

The absence of privacy further weakens traditional male roles. In a scene added to the screenplay, when Craig hears that Burgess is the likely father of the baby, he throws a trashcan through the Burgess front window, calling Burgess out and yelling to Sharon, “I’m doing this for you, you slut!” In his rupturing of the boundary between outdoor and indoor, public and private, Craig seeks to draw Burgess into the public sphere, yet he is unable to push Sharon’s condition back into the private. David Lloyd has referred to the need for authenticity as the basis for “nationalism’s consistent policing of female sexuality by the ideological and legal confinement of women to domestic spheres.”16 As the entire block watches Craig’s impotent gestures—including the way he passively waits for the Gardaí to arrive but begins to struggle when they touch him—the futility of divisions of public and private within the working-class community becomes clear. This futility, in turn, implies the failure of both traditional masculinity and of traditional definitions of nation in contemporary Barrytown.

Fintan O’Toole has written that Doyle’s writing is “firmly located within an Irish tradition” of “fatherhood and its failure.” In print and on screen, the Barrytown trilogy depicts “a working-class father’s attempts to come to terms with the loss of his traditional role.”17 Indeed, Doyle’s paterfamilias makes all sorts of futile parenting gestures throughout *The Snapper*, from wanting to tell his younger daughters that what Sharon did was wrong to trying to discipline a son

clearly alienated from the rest of the family. O’Toole argues that through Dessie’s active interest in the baby, the film avoids stereotypes of nation and class; he recaptures fathering, paradoxically, through grandfathering.

Yet, even when the Jimmy-Dessie character overcomes his own shame, his method of coming to terms with Sharon’s pregnancy is one of roundabout avoidance. Sharon gets herself a book about pregnancy from the library; later, Jimmy checks one out as well. He talks to her about the baby in the book’s clinical and technical terms: “it’ll take some o’ the pressure off the oul’ diaphragm” (BT 303), he tells her as he props her up in bed. His dialect blends with the terminology he learns as he makes medicalspeak his own. But Sharon finds his knowledge intrusive: “He was becoming a right pain in the neck. He’d be down again in a few minutes with more questions” (BT 302). Even during her labor, he tells her to time her contractions so that “They’ll be impressed” (BT 338) at the hospital. While Doyle characterizes this interest as positive, the product of the supposed benefits of reading and family togetherness, in fact Jimmy seeks both to avoid and to control the reality of Sharon’s pregnancy. In this sense, his involvement in the pregnancy can be read as a defensive reaction to threats to the patriarchy and as an effort to claim typically female space as his own.

On one level, then, Jimmy’s acceptance of Sharon’s pregnancy functions as an acceptance of a collective family identity, a heartwarming development that binds a family together; on another, it speaks to the larger problems of contemporary Irish society. In a scene that emphasizes Jimmy’s difficulties in making the suggestion, he offers to be with Sharon in the delivery room. “There wasn’t even a car going past. The pipes upstairs weren’t making any noise” (BT 327), as Jimmy approaches the subject in a roundabout manner, finally tentatively saying that he “wouldn’t mind stayin’ with you when——you’re havin’ it” (BT 328), to which Sharon replies “Ah no,” and the matter is dropped. The absence of noise renders this one of the few truly private moments in the novel, and as usual, Sharon retreats. Jimmy’s concern is portrayed as touching, but Sharon and her mother Veronica both feel that it is excessive: Sharon thinks, “It was her pregnancy and he could f**k off and stay out of it” (BT 303), and the usually serene Veronica sarcastically mimics Jimmy by saying, “We don’t want you bursting your waters all over the furniture, isn’t that right, Jimmy dear?” (BT 326) before storming out of the room. Both women’s objections are phrased in terms of physical space, and both view Jimmy as infringing on their domain. In making Sharon’s pregnancy his own through his reading and his conversations in the pub with friends, Jimmy relocates it in the public sphere.

The story of a pregnancy serves as an ideal site to explore such negotiations as the place where private acts are rendered visible to the public. For a normative middle-class couple, a pregnancy visually affirms their implicit bond, at
once asserting their link and forging it. But for a single mother, a swelling belly signifies the opposite; it raises questions about who the father is. Not until her condition is on the brink of visibility does Sharon resolve to tell her friends. “She felt her stomach. It was harder and curved, becoming like a shell or wall. She’d definitely have to tell the girls” (BT 175). The decision to do so triggers a series of thoughts about her lack of intimacy with anyone, the fact that she’d like to confide but confines herself to the level of “slagging.” Such slagging, which also triggers Jimmy’s discomfort with his daughter’s pregnancy, is one of the most remarked-upon features of The Snapper, as it opened up the film in particular to the charge that, in the words of Charles Foran, it was “stage-Irish distortions to please foreign editors...reinforcing the image of the working-class Irish as happy-go-lucky slobs with sharp tongues and gutter vocabularies.”

To be sure, Sharon’s relationship with her girlfriends shows the imposition of public, “gas” narratives in place of any real intimacy. “She’s 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” (BT 183). Rather than merely dismiss their relationship as shallow, we can see the superficiality as an indictment of Barrytown social patterns, especially given Jimmy’s emotional reticence and the absence of any confidant for Veronica. Jimmy finds himself unable to express his emotions in front of any male characters. “He wondered if he should kiss Veronica on the cheek or something...But no, he decided, not with the boys there. They’d slag him” (BT 180). The public face not only differs from private reality, but also stifles and changes that reality. In Doyle’s Barrytown there is almost no such thing as the private sphere; similarly, his characterizations of Jimmy and Sharon show them unsure how to reveal the self, except through accepted public behaviors and in prescribed gender roles. In this way, far from promoting an appealing portrait of a carefree working class, Doyle actually proffers a critique of an Irish society grounded in familiarity without intimacy, a paradox that is most clearly signified in Sharon’s apparent rape itself.

Ireland as a nation has a long and complex association with imagery of rape. Critics from Declan Kiberd to Roy Foster have noted the ambivalence of Irish interpretations of English colonization: sometimes Ireland is the virgin raped by an aggressive invader, sometimes the slut that lifts her skirts, complicating it in her own violation, what Elizabeth Butler Cullingford calls “the familiar background of the gendered analogy that aligns England with the powerful

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18. Foran, 64. The presumption that the story would be seen abroad as Stage Irish shows a cultural community with concerns that outstrip the sophistication of non-Irish reviewers, who, by and large, were so interested in the absence of the Catholic church that they overlooked any commentary on Irish identity that the novel makes.
male, Ireland with the weaker female, and tells the story of the Union through
the metaphor either of rape or of heterosexual marriage.”19 The self-loathing
willingness to blame the victim may be part of the reason that Sharon feels
shame and culpability here.20 While Sharon does not acknowledge that she has
been raped, she remains passive as rumors circulate in the public sphere. To
maintain control of the story and to erase the suggestion of intercourse with
Burgess, Sharon begins to tell everyone that an anonymous Spanish sailor who
had been docked in Dublin is the father of the baby. Because “guess the daddy
was a hobby” (BT 253) in Barrytown, an Irish father would have been too trace-
able, decipherable—and, perhaps, too incestuous.

Sharon’s attempts to control the scandal are well-matched by Barrytown’s
sense of humor: community forces are more powerful than individual will.
Two conflicting stories battle for dominance—the one that Sharon can tell so
she is not raped or disgraced, and the one that is funny. The “bigger piece of
scandal and better gas” (BT 267) of a Sharon-Burgess alliance is too funny for
gossip to discount. Sharon realizes she herself would hope for the funnier story
except that “she was the poor sap who was pregnant” (BT 267). Sharon’s admis-
sion here exonerates the community; at the same time, readers are reminded of
the problematic encounter behind the “funnier” story, and Barrytown is impli-
cated, not for its repression through laughter, but for its laughter-induced blind
spots. The community’s sense of humor glosses over the awkward or the
painful, a pattern we see replicated within Sharon’s own behavior as well.

Doyle contrasts Sharon’s limited understanding of emotional intimacy to
the norms of public behavior in a manner that implicates community and
social norms in what can be seen as rape. Doyle has stated that, in his view,
Sharon is not raped. “I wouldn’t personally consider it a rape. I do believe that
he behaved very wrongly in taking advantage of a drunk woman. But again,
does that make it illegal? . . . I suspect that it is not the first time she has had sex
against the car when she has been drunk. I wanted the circumstances to be left
open to interpretation.”21 Indeed, the text allows for the interpretation that
Sharon is raped—among other things, she “wondered a few times if what had
happened could be called rape. She didn’t know. That was as much as she

19. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, Ireland’s Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Pop-
20. We do find a veiled allusion to Ireland’s imperial past in Sharon’s encounter with George
Burgess. The fact that “George” is the name of England’s patron saint, and of four kings during the
cementing of England’s hold over Ireland, is suggestive. Burgess is also a distinctly non-Irish sur-
name, underlying his invasiveness. Even Sharon’s own name is one that sounds more English than
Irish—unlike most of Doyle’s characters, whose names are clearly Catholic if not Celtic in origin—
and thus blurs the line between victim and culprit.
remembered. She wished she didn’t remember more” (BT 185). The first sentence here implies that we have been told the full story, but the second sentence lets us know that we are not being informed of everything. Whether Sharon can decide what to call it or not, lack of consent is evident: “they were kissing rough—she wasn’t really: Her mouth was just open” (BT 185). One more disgusting detail is then offered to us: “what he’d said after he’d put his hand on her shoulder and asked her was she alright. —I’ve always liked the look of you Sharon” (BT 185–86), one of the numerous clichés that mark Burgess’s speech. When she staggers home, “She wanted to sleep. Backwards. To earlier” (BT 185). Memory is revealed to be something created, much like a baby, or, more telling-ly, the story Sharon invents to replace the awful memory.22

Sharon’s story skirts both rape and Burgess in favor of an invented Spanish sailor, and in doing so, reveals the slipperiness and dangers of memory by calling attention to the way that narratives are molded into conventional storylines. Such shaping of the past is of particular interest in Ireland, a nation that is itself struggling to shake off stereotype and cliché without denying its history entirely.23 Sharon’s possible rape raises the larger question of Ireland’s contemporary engagement with the past, and suggests that interpretations are not easily fixed. When Sharon hopes to return to “earlier,” we can read this moment as one of regression—although that the past she wants to return to is not so idyllic—or we can read it as an indication that memory is not fixed or reliable. In either case, Sharon’s unwillingness to confront the past does not equal Doyle’s. In The Snapper, he asserts the unfixability of memory, emphasizing how expectations and assumptions render some stories impossible. Because Sharon cannot conceive of rape, the forced jocularity of pub culture sculpts her story. In revealing the dynamics by which the men in the novel delineate public space as a means

22. The film’s background music and shots of Sharon weeping in her bedroom make clear that the experience was traumatic, if not legally a rape—all we hear is the muffled “no” when Burgess has already penetrated Sharon her. But reviews in the mainstream press, like far too many rape trials, usually note instead Sharon’s drunkenness, her perceived availability, call this a mistake she made, and so on. For instance, the scene is described as a “seduction” (Vincent Canby, “Pregnant, Unmarried And Smiling,” New York Times, 8 October 1993, C21); as taking place in “less than romantic circumstances” (Jay Carr, “The Snapper: Family Values, Irish Style,” Boston Globe, 17 December 1993, p. 98); and Sharon is characterized in one review as “submit[ting] one night to . . . impromptu ardor” (Susan Stark, “The Snapper Is Subversion With a Bite,” Detroit News, 13 January 1994).

of attempting to control women—whether through paternalism or by sexual advances—Doyle shows that private memory becomes public as it takes shape through story.

Indeed, the pull toward convention is pilloried in the character of George Burgess, with an undertone asserting serious stakes. Importantly, the scenes between Sharon and Burgess disclose the way that the older man continually exhibits an attraction for the norms that Sharon repeatedly repudiates; Doyle links these social norms to the mindsets accountable for her violation. When Sharon confronts Burgess, repeating the coarse phrases he has been using around the town about her: “you said I was a ride. Didn’t yeh? . . . You got your hole, didn’t yeh?” Burgess flails in part because “he hated hearing women using the language he used” (BT 223). Burgess’s crass words may be formulaic, but they are made strange and new for him when spoken by a woman. Doyle shows Sharon relishing the power of bluntness, which she goes on to use to stand up to other male characters. Speaking directly violates Barrytown’s pattern of avoidance by means of gossip, and by moving away from pat phrases, Sharon claims power.

For the most part, Burgess’s responses to Sharon are predictable. “Sharon knew what he was going to say next” (BT 227), and, later, asks him “did you rehearse this, Mister Burgess?” (BT 261). Cliché blots out comprehension, just as local slagging obscures the possibility of rape. In using phrases like “we both made a mistake” (BT 226) and “I am, as the old song goes, torn between two lovers” (BT 251), and in his midlife crisis decision that he should run away with Sharon, Burgess represents the path of conventional narrative. To rely on received storylines and clichés makes it impossible to reveal the truth. When Sharon opts to conceal Burgess’s fatherhood, she removes from him a way to grasp what has happened, much as the suggestion of his rape of her is beyond either of their conceptual frameworks. Sharon’s own muted sense of violation suggests just how extensively the surrounding culture sculpts personal ideas, as well as pointing to her community’s accountability for her situation.

Throughout The Snapper individuals reveal shame about certain clear speech markers of Barrytown, and a number of subplots show the Rabbitte family eagerly working to efface their “Barrytownness,” reflecting a community in denial is reflected. Jimmy Rabbitte, Jr.—the star of The Commitments but only a peripheral figure in this novel—pays forty pounds for lessons to acquire a proper radio accent. In Doyle’s rendering of the new accent, Barrytown’s pronunciations become the orthographic norm. “Hoy there . . . this is Jommy Robbitte, Thot’s Rockin’ Robbitte, with a big fat hour of the meanest, hottest, baddest sounds around” (BT 316). Doyle’s choice to respell “Jimmy” in reference to the Northside accent locates The Snapper in a political literary tradition, as well
as in an experimental one. While Jimmy Jr. tries to elevate his speech through elocution lessons, his mother, Veronica, spends her time correcting the grammatical errors and demotic dictions of her profane family. When Sharon tells her parents the Spanish sailor story, she says, “Ah, look, I was really drunk . . . Pissed. Sorry, Mammy” (BT 264). Sharon explains in standard English, then slang. Ironically, Veronica receives apologies throughout the novel for language slips while she is leaned on and taken advantage of in every other way. “—It’s no wonder they talk the way they do, Veronica gave out to Jimmy Sr.” (BT 149). The narratorial “gave out” here is more informal than Veronica’s own language. Veronica claims both the moral and linguistic high ground of the novel, but it is made clear throughout that the Barrytown characters have access to a variety of linguistic registers that they may choose to deploy at different moments. Even the slang word of the title, “snapper,” challenges Veronica’s grammatical corrections.

Sharon herself refuses to accept the dominance of mainstream Irish English and the cultural hierarchy that it would imply. A prenatal visit she makes to the doctor stresses the difference between Sharon’s language and the educated speech of her doctor: “She said she wanted to know me menstrual history an’ I didn’t know what she talkin’ abou’ till she told me. I knew what it meant, like, but I was— . . . ” (BT 214). The difference in the voices of these two women is in part one of vocabulary: those who say “menstrual history” versus those who say “periods.” Frears’s film plays up the different accents of patient and physician, indicating that the doctor’s voice is a signature of her neighborhood and education, just as much as Sharon’s accent. Sharon goes out of her way to mention that the doctor looked young, further calling attention to the class, rather than age, difference. The Snapper, however, does not let this hierarchy stand unquestioned, any more than Sharon does. In the film, Sharon refuses to be cowed by the doctor; she gives sassy answers, even placing herself in the role of questioner. More important, however, is the fact that the scene is related by means of Sharon’s narration in a voiceover to her friends in the pub. Sharon and her friends interpret for us, undercutting the presumption of education and making a clever pun along the way: “Menstrual history, . . . I got a C on that in me Inter.”

Pregnancy, Privacy, and Domesticity in The Snapper

24. The reversal calls to mind the way that Maria Edgeworth, in Castle Rackrent, “does not convey regional speech through the Victorian convention of misspelling, devices which signals the speaker’s ignorance and linguistic incompetence.” Marilyn Butler, “Introduction” in Maria Edgeworth, Castle Rackrent (New York: Penguin, 1992). Rather, the new accent is the one that bears the marked quality. Both Edgeworth and Doyle indicate both the arbitrary nature of translating oral sounds into written language, as well as the class assumptions that underpin such adaptations. Ironically, The Snapper’s own comfort with Jimmy Jr.’s accent contrasts with his efforts to retool it.
Gerry Smyth has lauded *The Snapper* for being a “dialogue-based text, beginning and ending with spoken words rather than the narrator’s reflections and opinions.”25 Doyle cedes control of his narrative to his characters, replaces the governance by one narrative voice with the presence of multiple voices. But both the plot and the narrative structure of the story ultimately moderate—if not fully undermine—such positive heteroglossia. Although the novel is heavy with dialogue, Sharon and Jimmy alternate as focalizers throughout, as well as being the subjects of lengthy passages of free indirect discourse. The growth of Jimmy’s interest in Sharon’s pregnancy parallels the growth of his free indirect discourse in the novel at the expense of hers. By the novel’s end, we read far more from his point of view than we did at the beginning; Sharon’s perspective is eclipsed to the point that we see only a few seconds of her labor. Jimmy, motivated by his need to present a certain public face, ultimately oversteps his role.

“A strong active man in the house, a father figure, would be vital for Sharon’s snapper” (BT 320). And Jimmy’s solicitous involvement in Sharon’s pregnancy merely replaces the colonial invader with Irish paternalism. Sharon never contemplates raising the child without her family—a sweet gesture, on one level, but also indicative of the degree of her dependency. “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 and the garden and the twins and her mammy to look after it so she could go out sometimes” (BT 287). Here, we encounter the central problem of Doyle’s method and of Jimmy’s interest in the pregnancy: by rendering the individual the collective, the private is effaced by the public, a process that in the end, further reinforces the very culture of avoidance that Doyle critiques throughout.

Thus, rather than chronicling a move away from the sort of traditional family exalted in de Valéra’s Ireland—the sort of family that Doyle strives to reject—*The Snapper* actually shows the Rabbittes strenuously trying to integrate themselves into this conservative structure. For all of its efforts to portray Jimmy as a modern man open to being in the delivery room and to timing uterine contractions, the novel characterizes him as motivated by very traditional concerns. The power and language gains the family experiences they ultimately use not to resist the status quo, but to attempt to emulate or join it. The community’s expectations, and the concurrent absence of intimacy effectively bury the truth; in Barrytown, the public face is the only face. Doyle’s narrative sparseness, here and in his other novels, appears to withhold judgment of any sort by declining to comment on the right or wrong of his characters’ actions and behaviors. But in ceding control of the text to the multiplicity of voices in Bar-

rytown, Doyle reveals the power of middle-class norms toward which the family strives.

The seemingly comic high jinks of the Rabbitte family encompass both the value and the perils of working-class community for Doyle, revealing his wariness of private consciousness as well: as the author told one interviewer, “the family is inevitable . . . it’s just part and parcel of the Irish package, really.”26 The word “inevitable” suggests both the comforts and constraints of family life. Doyle liberates the Rabbittes, placing them in charge of a variety of discourses and revealing how deftly they manipulate them, and his novel highlights the change in traditional definitions of gender in the face of overcrowded housing and large-scale male unemployment in the working-class Ireland of the 1980s and 1990s. Simultaneously, Doyle explores the incompatibility of traditional distinctions between public and private in such an environment. Yet his progressive notes sound alongside Jimmy’s efforts to maintain a male-controlled household. Indeed, as Jimmy assumes the role of father the text connects with the past and endorses the ersatz incestuous model of Irish society that Doyle would resist. Even though The Snapper defies stereotypes while depicting the strengths of a working-class family, it reveals the downsides of collective identity and shows—however inadvertently—the irresistible appeal of privacy and middle-class status.