

SOCIOLOGY OF GENDER RELATIONS THROUGH PAULA SPENCER'S FAMILY

SOCIOLOGIA DAS RELAÇÕES DE GÊNERO ATRAVÉS DA FAMÍLIA DE PAULA SPENCER

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Abstract: Unfortunately, the rates of violence against women have reached an alarming level and have become increasingly thematized in contemporary literature. Accordingly, in Roddy Doyle's novels *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and *Paula Spencer* (2006) the protagonist, Paula, represents the numerous victims of violent partners, reminding us of how family is an individual's first social contact as well as responsible for its family members' moral values and its children's education; and of how this will later have repercussions in society. In this way, our article is based on a sociological analysis that investigates the crime of violence against women as inherent to patriarchal society. We also argue that alcoholism is not only an individual or family problem, but a social problem that the Irish government has sought to fight against.

Keywords: Roddy Doyle. Paula Spencer. Family. Gender Relations. Female Empowerment.

Resumo: Infelizmente os índices de violência contra a mulher são preocupantes, sendo um tema cada vez mais abordado na literatura contemporânea. Assim, Roddy Doyle nos apresenta Paula, protagonista dos romances *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) e *Paula Spencer* (2006) para representar as inúmeras mulheres vítimas de parceiros violentos e nos lembra que a família é o primeiro contato social de qualquer indivíduo e o quanto ela é responsável pela construção dos valores morais de seus membros, pela educação de seus filhos e como tudo isso repercute na sociedade posteriormente. Portanto, nossa análise literária fundamenta-se em uma base sociológica, investigando como o crime de violência contra a mulher faz parte da história da sociedade patriarcal e como o alcoolismo não é apenas um problema particular, ou familiar, mas social, o qual o governo irlandês tem tentado combater.

Palavras-chave: Roddy Doyle. Paula Spencer. Família. Relações de Gênero. Empoderamento Feminino.

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The aim of the study we present here is to demonstrate through the works of Roddy Doyle, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) e *Paula Spencer* (2006), how Paula, the protagonist of both novels, has come to represent not only Irish women who live under masculine domination and suffer domestic violence but also other women around the world who experience a similar plight. Doyle is one of the foremost representatives of contemporary Irish literature. He transits with ease between academia and pop, and his Paula Spencer first appeared in the British fly-on-the-wall documentary series “The Family”, created by him for BBC television.¹ “The Family” has a total of twelve episodes, each one narrated from the point of view of a family member. After the last episode was aired, Doyle decided to give Paula prominence, and made her the protagonist of the two novels we will be examining in this article.

The Woman Who Walked into Doors was first published in 1996, and is narrated by Paula, who tells her story of years of domestic abuse and how she would cover up the truth about the bruises her husband inflicted on her body by saying she had walked into a door. The protagonist reappears in *Paula Spencer* (2006), now narrated in the third person, ten years after the death of her husband, and tells of Paula’s effort to suppress the memories of her married life and her battle against alcoholism.

Doyle is a writer who is concerned with working the most diverse situations experienced by women into his text. He was also deeply involved with the Divorce Referendum, in 1995, and publicly supported the decriminalization of Northern Ireland’s ban on abortion, in 2018. In view of this, we can perceive the author’s sympathy for women’s struggle for rights; also, he investigates the sociological reality between genders to construct his female characters.

Our research is dedicated to examining how inequalities between men and women continue to be of relevance for studies in the sociology of gender; and how Literature contextualizes the transformations in contemporary societies. In this way, based on our analyses in sections “Sociology in gender relations: the concept” and “Female empowerment: a trajectory of struggles for gender equality”, we seek to understand, through the trajectory of the female characters represented in Paul Spencer, how social transformations enable female empowerment and allow women increasing social participation. We also propose to demonstrate how Paula’s family stands out vis-à-vis the social transformations that occurred in Ireland with the advent of the Celtic Tiger, as Ireland’s economic boom came to be known.

Sociology of gender relations: the concept

We can identify the characters presented in these works as being directly related to the sociology of gender relations, considering that it is possible to notice through them the inequalities between men and women. Masculine domination, for example, is represented by Paula’s husband and her father, in that, besides being the father figures of their families, they display violent and authoritarian behavior. In the case of the female characters – the protagonist and her mother in especial –, these represent feminine subordination to patriarchy, since they are subjected to the violence of their partners, besides being financially dependent on them. According to Thaíse Rodrigues,

[t]he act of ignoring what goes on in the domestic sphere and the lack of reflection about the family are the main contributions to the perpetuation of patriarchal domination. It is the silence and negligence of the State that makes the endless reproduction of the public/domestic dichotomy and consequent relegation of women to the private sphere possible. The lack of questioning and intervention or reference to the unchanging historic situation naturalizes masculine domination instead of perceiving it as socially constructed (RODRIGUES, 2012, p. 5, our translation).

¹ Produced by Paul Watson and directed by Franc Roddam, “The Family” first aired in 1974, and is considered by many to be the precursor to reality TV.

Through his character Paula, Doyle questions woman's condition in Ireland, mainly through the protagonist's difficulty divorcing from her abusive spouse. In this way, we can observe the importance of Literature for discussions on the differences between the sexes, especially concerning the struggle for equality, since the participation of women in society is a problem yet to be solved. Paula's story takes place during the second half of the 20th Century but could have happened during any other time and anywhere in the world; besides this, stories about abusive husbands continue to be a social problem that haunts women.

Let us begin by conceptualizing sociology of gender relations, which will serve as the basis for our discussion. Sociology *per se* is an important field, which helps us to understand the formation of society and how people think throughout the ages. Florestan Fernandes (1959, p. 15) defines Sociology as "the Science whose object of study is the social interaction amongst living beings in different levels of the organization of life" (our translation). Furthermore, the interest in this field goes beyond that of sociologists; it is also the object of interest to several areas, including literary studies which, through both its fictional and non-fictional texts, allow readers to examine human actions as well as promote consciousness-raising about different social facts. As Anthony Giddens writes,

[s]ociology is a generalizing discipline that concerns itself above all with modernity – with the character and dynamics of modern or industrialized societies. It shares many of its methodological strategies – and problems – not only with history but with the whole gamut of the social sciences. The more empirical issues it deals with are very real. Of all the social sciences, sociology bears most directly on the issues that concern us in our everyday lives – the development of modern urbanism, crime and punishment, gender, the family, religion, social and economic power (GIDDENS, 2012, p. 13).

Sociology is therefore capable of arising the capacity for reflection about different social problems, since it is a science that seeks to understand what happens in the world around us. It is worth mentioning that the word "sociology" was coined and organized as a science by the creator of Positivism, Auguste Comte. The French philosopher was also responsible for dividing the new field of study into two concepts: social statics and social dynamics, as outlined below by José Arthur Gionnotti:

The fundamental aspect of Comtean Sociology is the distinction between social statics and dynamics. The first is concerned with the constant conditions of a given society; the second investigates the laws underlying this society's progressive development. The fundamental idea behind social statics is order; the one behind social dynamics is progress. For Comte, dynamics is subordinated to statics, for progress originates from order while it perfects the permanent elements of any society: religion, family, property, language, agreements between spiritual and temporal powers etc (GIONOTTI, 1978, p. 9, our translation).

To summarize our exposition on the fundamental aspects of Comte's Positivism, the concept of social statics is based on the fundamental idea of order – family, language, religion etc.; and the concept of social dynamics develops from the idea of progress, which involves the law of three stages: (1) the theological stage, (2) the metaphysical stage, and (3) the positive stage.

Sociology consolidated itself throughout the years, as the existing disciplines did not have sufficient tools with which to describe the new social phenomena. Given this ascertainment, Ana Maria Augusta da Silva (2009, p.8) notes that "[...] Sociology remains as the only [discipline] that takes as its central theme the study of social interactions proper." (our transla-

tion) She goes on to argue that

[o]ther disciplines may study social aspects of human life; however, none approach the social fact in its entirety as its distinct object or subject matter. For the sociologist, social facts are studied not because they are economic, judicial, political, touristic, educational, or religious, but because all are at the same time 'social', regardless of their individual specificity, and despite this allowing for approaches from specific disciplines (SILVA, 2009, p. 8, our translation).

To this end, it is necessary that the sociologist work beyond Social Science's concepts, and observe different contexts people are immersed in, above all those in conditions of social subalternity. In the light of this, Silva underscores that

[t]he sociologist's act of asking herself about human actions as well as about her most commonly defined or accepted targets presupposes that the human facts are presented on different levels of meaning and that some may be hidden from the individuals' consciousness by the veil of everyday practices (SILVA, 2009, p. 6, our translation).

Sociology encompasses several fields, such as Economic Sociology, Political Sociology, Community Sociology, amongst others. Our study, however, proposes to highlight a field of Sociology that has currently been earning increasing space and important scholarly attention: Sociology of gender relations. According to Lucila Scavone,

[s]ocial issues and sociological problems go hand-in-hand. Therefore, work-related problems, besides problems involving health, politics, education, family, religion, violence, science, culture, identity, the body, productive and reproductive technologies, and sexuality are currently viewed through the "gender lens". This way of looking at sociological problems lent visibility to relations of domination and power that divide the social world into genders and questioned a naturalized sexual order (SCAVONE, 2008, p. 178, our translation).

The concept of gender identifies and explains the differences between the sexes, i.e., it is used to discuss questions of inequality between men and women, as, for example, masculine domination. Joan Scott, one of the most important scholars in gender studies, discusses the use of the term,

[...] also used to designate social relations between the sexes. Its use explicitly rejects biological explanations, such as those that find a common denominator for diverse forms of female subordination in the facts that women have the capacity to give birth and men have greater muscular strength. Instead, gender becomes a way of denoting "cultural constructions" – the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men (SCOTT, 1986, p. 1056).

As we have commented, the history of humanity is marked by patriarchal domination – owed to the fact that men have historically occupied positions of power in society, i.e., women and children were historically submitted to dependency on the male gender. According to Pierre Bourdieu (2001, p. 23) masculine domination "comes from the fact that it combines and condenses two operations: it legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction". An example of this is that, from the beginning of civilization, men and women depended on hunting and picking fruit in order to survive, but with women's biological and social difficulties, such as pregnancy and caring for children, their role as per the division of labor became limited. As J. B. Libanio points out,

[l]ittle by little, the idea of man's superiority to women was created as being absolutely normal, natural. Women were destined to execute domestic tasks, whereas men were led to assume the challenges of dangerous hunting and violent warfare. Based on this biocultural given, a way of thinking became structural, and women became discriminated against, in a number of sectors, over the centuries (LIBANIO, 2004, p. 55, our translation).

Masculine domination is women's first socializing agent as well as their first contact environment with patriarchal authoritarianism. In other words, the family is at the root of problems involving gender differences. It was only during the first half of the 20th Century, when women were called upon to participate in the economy due to the two World Wars, that they began to occupy spaces outside the domestic sphere; but subordination and limited rights were still present in their lives.

Feminist movements, above all during the 1970s, began to vehemently question the role of women in society, as French writer Simone de Beauvoir had done in her groundbreaking 1949 treatise *The Second Sex*. Rodrigues (2012, p. 166) points out that the term "gender" "is a concept created by those who do not believe inequalities and sexual differences to be natural, but socially constructed", adding that "even Simone de Beauvoir wrote that '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman'". It is important to emphasize that the debate about inequalities between men and women are still on the agenda for the sociology of gender, for, despite all the advances achieved to date, woman's condition in society is still reason for concern, due to the high rates of femicide, domestic violence, and disparity in wages compared to the male population. As Maria Teresa Citeli remarks,

[a]lmost a century later, denaturalizing hierarchies of power based on one's sex have been one of the central axes of gender studies. Establishing a distinction between components – natural/biological in relation to gender – was, and continues to be, one of the resources used by gender studies to call into question essentialisms of all sorts that have supported biologizing arguments deployed over the centuries to invalidate women, physically, intellectually, and morally (CITELI, 2001, p. 132, our translation).

In this way, with the development of studies dedicated to women's history, especially through contemporary Literature, more attention came to be given to issues that had previously gone undiscussed, such as domestic violence and woman's condition in society. Linking Literature and Society has been an important tool for scholars, who have been increasingly more attentive to the importance of discussing themes that reflect the human condition. According to Antoine Compagnon,

Literature must thus be read and studied because it gives us a means – some would even say the only one – to preserve and pass on the experience of others, those who are far away from us in space and time, or who differ from us in terms of their living conditions. It makes us sensitive to the fact that others are very diverse and that their values are different from ours (COMPAGNON, 2006, para72).

We will now present a brief view of the history of feminist movements and the several transformations that occurred in Ireland that allowed Paula Spencer to become empowered in spite of her personal hardships.

Feminine empowerment: A trajectory of struggles for equality between genders

Notwithstanding the struggle on the part of social movements to permit women control over their own lives, equal rights were denied women for a long time. In a number of places around the world basic social activities like studying, working, or voting, continue to be exercised exclusively by men.

Feminist Lucila Scavone's work contributes an important reflection on the political and scientific implications of gender studies to the ongoing dialogue between social movements and theories. In her study, she notes that authors associated with contemporary Sociology, like Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and Bruno Latour, implemented important ruptures for the "[...] deconstruction of the traditional individual v. society dichotomy", and that they were open to the "study of social differentiation" (SCAVONE, 2008, p. 175, our translation). According to Scavone,

[a]ll these ruptures occurred concomitantly with the new theories that were emerging, in a context that was both propitious and contiguous with the "new social movements". Therefore, it is always worth remembering that the consolidation of "women's studies" as a field – as gender studies were then called – emerges alongside the eclosion of the contemporary phase of feminism, especially in post-1968 Europe and the U.S. It is possible to affirm that it was after this period that the field of scientific research about women expanded significantly, evincing the strong link social movements have to feminist studies (SCAVONE, 2008, p. 175, our translation).

However, as Scavone (2008, p. 175) reminds us, research on the situation of women had already been undertaken before this, by sociologist Madeleine Guilbert and anthropologist Margaret Mead, in 1946 and 1948, respectively. Nevertheless, it was in Philosophy and Literature, through Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, published in 1949, that feminism was theorized.

With the outbreak of feminist movements throughout the 20th Century, the role of women in society began to be interrogated worldwide. This owes itself to the fact that women had been historically denied the right to assume positions of power in society and that, in several places, governments abused their power in order to subalternize women. Feminist activism became part of the feminist theoretical production being studied in Literature courses that discussed gender, especially women's condition in society. Céli Regina Jardim Pinto notes that

[o]ne can become familiar with the feminist movement through two streams: the history of feminism, i.e., the action of the feminist movement; and the theoretical production by feminists in the fields of History, Social Sciences, Literary Criticism, and Psychoanalysis. Because of this double inscription, both the feminist movement and feminist theory overflow into each other, provoking an interesting clash and a reordering of all sorts in the history of social movements and Social Sciences theories in general (PINTO, 2010, p. 15, our translation).

Feminine empowerment is a process of struggle to achieve gender equality. The word empowerment, translated into Portuguese as *empoderamento*, came into use and gained visibility with women's mobilization, mainly through feminist movements, to convey the revindication of equality between men and women. Having gender equity in the work environment as their aim and well aware of the role of corporations for human development, UN Women and United Nations Global Compact joined forces as the founding partners of Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPS), in 2010:

- **Principle 1:** Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality;
- **Principle 2:** Treat all women and men fairly at work – respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination;
- **Principle 3:** Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers;
- **Principle 4:** Promote education, training and professional development for women;
- **Principle 5:** Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women;
- **Principle 6:** Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy;
- **Principle 7:** Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality. (WEPs: <https://www.weps.org/>)

Through this collaborative guidance for the practice of empowering women in the workplace, marketplace and community, UN Women has proved to be an important resource for the fight against gender inequality. According to Mariana Santos (2017, n.p.), “[f]eminine empowerment is not just a woman’s internal movement but a social movement. In order for this movement to be truly effective, so as to achieve gender equality, the contribution of all women and men is necessary.” (our translation)

With these considerations in mind, we will now proceed to analyze the situation of Irish women as represented by the characters in Roddy Doyle’s *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and *Paula Spencer*, through the observation of the difficulties they are faced with in a male dominated society. We will also examine the process of Irish feminine empowerment at the turn of the 20th Century.

Ireland had a number of laws that created barriers to the participation of women in the workforce, relegating them to the status of guardians of the home. The ban on divorce and barriers such as legislation and policy which required women to leave their jobs once they married are just two examples. Simone de Beauvoir (2009, p. 341) stated that “the passivity that essentially characterizes the ‘feminine’ woman is a trait that develops in her from her earliest years. But it is false to claim that therein lies a biological given; in fact, it is a destiny imposed on her by her teachers and society”.

In Ireland, feminist movements came to the forefront during the fight for Irish rights, pronouncedly during the 1960s and 1970s, when women began to organize to combat gender inequality and to overturn laws affecting reproduction and social rights that were harmful to women. Caroline EufRASINO briefly historizes Irish women’s movements:

Among the most relevant touchstones in the history of feminist movements in Ireland are: the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement, which produced a manifesto in 1971, demanding legislative equality, equal wages, access to education and contraceptive methods, and justice; and, in May of the same year, the movement that became known as the “Contraceptive Train”, when a group of women took a train to Belfast (in Northern Ireland and, therefore, UK territory) in order to buy contraceptive methods, at this time illegal in the Irish Republic. The use of contraceptives was legalized in 1979, but only for married couples and with a physician’s prescription. So, their use was extremely restricted and very few women had legal access to these methods. The legal sale of contraceptives only became possible through the Health (Family Planning) (Amendment) Bill of 1992. Only after this were individuals above the age of 18 allowed to purchase contraceptive methods over the counter (EUFRASINO, 2016, p. 31, our translation).

The sale of contraceptives had already been legalized in several parts of the world since their appearance in the 1960s, whereas in Ireland their sale was only liberated in the 1990s,

due to restrictions on the part of institutions connected with the Catholic church, whose aim was to preserve women's roles as mothers and wives. Fintan O'Toole describes how the process of struggles eventually led to feminine empowerment in Ireland:

Paradoxically, the Ireland of the 1990s reaped enormous economic benefits both from the repression of women before the 1970s and from their subsequent relative liberation. The old culture produced a demographic boom – Irish fertility had been startlingly high well into the 1980s, with the result that there were a lot of youngsters around in the 1990s. At the same time, however, those fertility rates dropped dramatically as women gained more freedom, allowing ever larger numbers of the mothers to join or stay in the paid workforce (O'TOOLE, 2010, p. 18-19).

In 2018, the struggle for feminist and reproductive rights had an important victory, finally allowing women control over their own bodies: A referendum known as the Thirty-sixth Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland was passed, overturning the Eighth Amendment of the 1983 Constitution, which had ruled abortion illegal, even in circumstances where the life of a pregnant woman was at risk. Besides this, in 2019, a law against domestic violence, criminalizing emotional abuse and offering new forms of protection for the victims of “coercive control”², was approved.

Judith Butler theorizes that, for the liberation of the feminine subject to take place, it is necessary to subvert the identity of woman:

As an effort to think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity (BUTLER, 1990, p. 46).

Discussing the role of women in Society was the first step towards the debate on gender in Ireland. Although the situation of Irish women has improved, there is still a great deal of struggle to be undertaken in order to achieve equity between the sexes. As pertains issues associated with the feminine condition, Scavone stresses that

[d]omestic, sexual, and family violence; scarcity of women in the public spheres of institutional power; female responsibility over the private sphere; sexism, whether manifest or dissimulated; and both sexual and moral harassment constitute some of the social and psychological problems women are faced with, and that have come to be treated in Sociology under the lens of gender by way of both empirical and theoretical research (dissertations, theses, monographs, books, articles), shedding light on the social, political, and economic policies of masculine domination (SCAVONE, 2008, p. 178, our translation).

Literature plays an important role in promoting the work being written on gender studies. With this in mind, we may establish that through the feminine characters in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and *Paula Spencer* Roddy Doyle has contributed an important discussion to contemporary Literature, through his thematization of scenarios that portray feminine subordination and domestic violence brought about by masculine domination in Ireland. Burcu Gülüm Tekin (2017, p. 84-85) points out that, “[i]n Paula's case, male dominance is visible on physical, verbal, and psychological grounds. As far as verbal abuse is concerned, she remem-

² The term “coercive control” is used to describe a broad range of psychological abuse that uses intimidation, gaslighting, humiliation, surveillance, and isolation, stripping victims of their sense of autonomy and self-worth.

bers it from her childhood and it is sustained throughout her life.” The author also argues that the protagonist’s family home is “dominated by patriarchal gender codes” (TEKIN, p.85), as is made evident by the behavior of family patriarch Roger O’Leary.

An example of verbal and psychological abuse may be observed when the narrator-protagonist mentions that in her neighborhood as well as other places in Ireland women are treated as inferior beings and called names –

Where I grew up – and probably everywhere else – you were a slut or a tight bitch, one or the other, if you were a girl – and usually before you were thirteen. You didn’t have to do anything to be a slut. If you were good-looking; if you grew up fast. If you had a sexy walk; if you had clean hair, if you had dirty hair. If you wore platform shoes, and if you didn’t. Anything could get you called a slut. My father called me a slut the first time I put on mascara. I had to go back up to the bathroom and take it off. My tears had ruined it anyway. I came back down and he inspected me.

– That’s better, he said.

Then he smiled.

– You don’t need it, he said.

My mother stayed out of it (DOYLE, 1996, p. 45).

Paula’s narration presents the plight faced by Irish women, who, regardless of age, were subjected to sexist attacks. She narrates moments in her childhood which confirm that her problems with sexist behavior begin with her own father, who displays authoritarian behavior, especially towards her sister Carmel –

He put me and Denise up on his knees and did horsey-horsey – it was embarrassing; I was much too old – while he stared at Carmel. He said that we were girls, his great girls. He made Carmel go to the kitchen and make the tea; he told my mother to stay where she was.

– It’s for her own good, he said when Carmel was gone.

She nodded. She agreed with him even though she was shaking. I remember being terrified. Denise looked from him to her, from him to her.

– Kettle on? He said when Carmel came back.

– Yeah.

– Good girl (DOYLE, 1996, p. 46).

To escape her father’s authoritarianism, Carmel decides to marry young in order to leave home. “Carmel hated him. She remembers nothing else. She got married when she was seventeen. – I’d have married any invalid that asked me. She got pregnant” (DOYLE, 1996, p. 47). Paula, who is also being harassed, starts to believe that having Charlo at her side is the only way she will win social respect. “I stopped being a slut the minute Charlo Spencer started dancing with me. I’ll never forget it. People looked at me and they saw someone different” (DOYLE, 1996, p. 53). She follows in her sister’s footsteps and marries young in an attempt to gain acknowledgment as a respectable wife. For Beauvoir (2009, p. 566), “Marriage incites man to a capricious imperialism: the temptation to dominate is the most universal and the most irresistible there is; [...] it is often not enough for the husband to be supported and admired, to give counsel and guidance; he gives orders, he plays the sovereign [...]. Beauvoir’s definition fits the figure of the husband in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, for Paula’s narrative exposes

her initial struggle against paternal authoritarianism and her brother's abuse, but also against the domestic violence perpetrated by her husband, once they are married.

– Slut.

My little brother.

– Slut.

My father.

– Slut.

Everyone. They were all in on it.

But it stopped when I started going with Charlo. God, it was great. I could have walked around in my nip with twenty Major in my mouth combing my pubic hair and nobody would have said a word (DOYLE, 1996, p. 49).

It is worth mentioning that, despite the plight of suffering masculine violence over the years, it is only after she suffers violence at her husband's hands that Paula makes the internal movement decisive to her empowerment: she chases him out of the house when she realizes his intention to violate their daughter Nicola.

was ready to hit him again. I looked at Nicola.

– Open the front door, love, I said.

His blood was drip-dripping again after all the water. He lifted one knee and tried to stand up.

– What are you –?

I hit him again, hard, as hard I as could let myself. There was no way I was going to give him the chance to talk to me, to even think. My mind was made up and he wasn't going to let him.

– Get out; go on. And you're not coming back (DOYLE, 1996, p. 219-220).

As Beauvoir (2009, p. 140) argues, "...in freely contracted work, woman wins concrete autonomy because she has an economic and social role." Accordingly, Paula's job, besides being a device to keep her away from drinking, is a source of economic empowerment, because she is able to support her family as well as become a respectable member of society. On the importance of women becoming independent, Beauvoir (2009, p. 164) stresses that "[i]t is through labor that woman won her dignity as a human being[...]". For Paula, work becomes her refuge as well as making her independent and giving her social visibility.

Throughout the narrative that is the sequel to *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996), *Paula Spencer* (2006), we become aware that the women in Paula's family become empowered in different ways – as in the case of her daughters, who don't consider marriage as an escape or a way of winning respectability. Nicola, her eldest daughter, in spite of having married and being the mother of two girls, sought to enter the labor market and has control over her own life. "Nicola's a rep for a sports clothes company. All those trainers and T-shirts and outfits. Nicola puts them into the shops. Or a lot of them. She has a company car and all. A lovely little car" (DOYLE, 2006, p. 49). As to Leanne, she has a job, still lives with her mother and youngest brother, and has opted for not having a relationship so far. "Leanne is dressed for work. That's something to clutch. She's going to work. She got up. She'll be going out the door" (DOYLE, 2006, p. 270). However, despite seeing her daughter leaving for work, Paula feels uneasy about Leanne due to her alcoholism – an addiction her daughter has inherited, and that

Paula is only too familiar with. It is worth remembering that Paula Spencer faces the dilemma of staying away from alcohol while at the same time regaining her family's trust.

As to Paula's Sisters, they have naturally also been affected by the changes brought about during Ireland's "Economic Miracle", and an example of this is that they are able to afford vacation mobile homes. "Her sisters both have mobile homes. Somewhere near Courtown, near the beach and that. [...] Carmel and Denise spend most of the summer down there. Once their kids get their holidays, they pack up and go" (DOYLE, 2006, p. 25). Besides her vacation home, Carmel also invests in real estate abroad, as the Irish commonly did during the socio-economic boom.

Carmel's buying an apartment in Bulgaria. So she said, this morning. Paula's second call.

– Bulgaria?

She told her after she'd wished Paula a happy birthday.

– Yep.

– Where's Bulgaria?

– Eastern Europe, Paula.

[...]

– What about Courtown? she said, this morning.

– What about it? said Carmel.

– Are you selling it?

– No. Why would I?

– Well. How many holidays can you go on in a year?

– It's an investment, Paula.

– Oh. Yeah.

– When Bulgaria joins the EU the value of those apartments will go through the fuckin' roof (DOYLE, 2006, p. 28-29).

Denise, in turn, becomes sexually empowered, never giving people's judgement of her a second thought. The story of Denise's sexual empowerment contrasts with Paula's in relation to Charlo as well as their mother's in relation to their father. It's a new time and now the three sisters are able to nourish a relationship of closeness and trust, as can be seen when Denise confides in Paula and Carmel about her love affair.

When Denise speaks she's not looking at Paula or Carmel.

– Just because I've met someone, she says.

Paula watches Denise redden before she really understands what she's just heard. Denise's face – excitement, fear. [...]

Her sister is *having an affair*.

Her sister, whose husband isn't dead, is *having an affair*. [...]

Paula can't help it; she laughs (DOYLE, 2006, p. 139-140, our italics).

Paula's laughter reveals her conservative posture, already foreshadowed and emphasi-

zed by her thought, “she is having an affair”. In actual fact, Paula’s conservative behavior in relation to every situation she experiences is noticeable by the fact that, despite the many kinds of violence her husband submits her to, she was always reluctant to separate from him. It is evident that Paula’s personality resembles her mother’s more than Denise’s, for Hilda O’Leary had also endured her husband’s despotic behavior. It is then no wonder that Paula attempts to find out whether her sister’s extramarital relation would shock their mother, who is now a widow.

– Who has the car?

Fuckin’ everyone.

– That’s probably Carmel.

– Yes. Carmel.

She doesn’t look, to check who she’s talking to.

– And Denise.

– Yes.

Your daughter, Mammy. She goes to hotels in her car and fucks men.

– And Wendy.

Wendy’s dead, Mammy (DOYLE, 2006, p. 187).

Hilda’s health has been failing. “Her mother’s hands are twisted and savage. It’s the same at every corner of her body. She’s shaking. She never stops shaking” (DOYLE, 2006, p. 185). Hilda also suffers from memory loss, which makes her more and more in need of her family’s attention. “There are clear moments, like now. They’re longer than moments. They’re long enough to fool Paula. She wonders if her mother is playing with them” (DOYLE, 2006, p. 186). Paula clearly mistrusts her mother, as if she were reproducing her family’s wariness in relation to her alcoholism. Hence, Hilda represents Paula’s fragile and untrustworthy side.

Besides the family, another character who appears in the novel is Rita Kavanaugh, who ends up gaining space as someone Paula can trust, and even compare her life to.

[...] She knew Charlo. She’s seen Paula with her arm in a sling, with stitches in her lip. She’s seen Leanne struggling down the street. She’s watched Paula go through it all and she still smiles at her. And Paula’s seen her share. She saw Rita’s son getting himself into trouble. She saw the squad car. She saw him being walked out to the car, his hands cuffed, two Guards holding his arms. That’s Raymond. He’s the same age as Nicola. Paula can ask about him, how he’s getting on. She knows that the girl who calls Rita Mammy is actually Rita’s daughter’s child. Her name is Shelley, a lovely kid. She’s a few years younger than Jack. It’s no big deal. Everyone knows, including Shelley. But Paula knew. Paula and Rita can look straight at each other. She admits it. She likes Rita (DOYLE, 2006, p. 132-133).

Rita and Paula share similar adversities in relation to bringing up their children, and this awakens the latter’s trust in the former. Furthermore, Rita is present during Paula’s process of financial empowerment, and enjoyment of the Irish Miracle:

She’s going out with the presents. Six days before Christmas. That’s as near as she’ll get. The new granny. She has two of Rita Kavanaugh’s selection boxes. She has a Dougal, the dog from

The Magic Roundabout³, for Sapphire; a nice, soft one. There's a film of The Magic Roundabout coming out soon. Maybe she'll get to bring Sapphire to see it. [...]. She has a Tamagotchi⁴ for Marcus. Rita Kavanagh told her that it was that it was what all kids wanted this year. She'd been looking for a Tamagotchi for her own granddaughter (DOYLE, 2006, p. 106).

According to Reales and Confortin (2008, p. 19), "[t]he fictional character is susceptible to the social, aesthetic, and ideological transformations of each historical time". Doyle examines the social changes that were occurring at the time in his country, through his feminine characters. Indeed, Doyle

[...] depicts mothers as independent, empowered figures within their working-class society, a change which parallels the drastic social, political and economic transfiguration Ireland experiences at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century (TEKIN, 2017, p. 39).

To be sure, exploring sociocultural-historical themes has become one of the hallmarks of Roddy Doyle's fiction. Added to this is the fact that his work has become an important asset for gender studies, for its representation of the role of women in contemporary Irish society. Tekin notes how

Doyle has unearthed a subaltern reality on the margins of Irish society, whilst at the same time articulating it through a working-class colloquial, vernacular language. Not surprisingly, his novels have had a great impact on the contemporary Irish literary panorama (TEKIN, 2017, p. 4).

Despite being an Irish citizen, Paula had no formal education and had stopped contributing to Social Security for several years. "But how does she get one of those jobs; how does she explain? She hasn't worked since 1975. What does she say? She doesn't know" (DOYLE, 2006, p. 247). The protagonist acknowledges that she is unprepared to enter the labor market; yet, in spite of her difficulties, she feels relieved that she can earn a living cleaning houses and offices. "All of Paula's past is in her back. It's there, ready, breathing. One last kick from a man who died twelve years ago" (DOYLE, 2006, p. 247). Paula realizes that her lack of qualification owes itself to her unsuccessful marriage and to her alcoholism. Nevertheless, despite the hardships she has gone through, she feels emotionally supported by her family, above all by Nicola and Carmel:

She's never hated Nicola. Or Carmel. They've annoyed her and they've made her feel useless and so guilty she's wanted to main herself, to push the guilt in under her skin so no one can see it or smell it. But she knows. Without them she'd be dead. She's glad she's not dead and it's a good while since she felt different. She's not stupid; she'll feel that way again. But she'll know. She'll recognise it. She'll be able to deal with it. That's the plan (DOYLE, 2006, p. 136).

During a number of years, Paula was incapable of understanding the reason for her daughter's and sisters' tough love. Once sober and feeling useful to her family, she reflects on the importance of the support offered by these women, in order that she continue fighting for

3 The Magic Roundabout is a BBC TV program that ran from 1965 to 1977. It used the footage of the French stop motion animation show *Le Manège Enchanté*, but with completely different scripts and characters. There was also a 2005 movie adaptation of the series, also featuring Dougal as the main character. In the 2006 version, released in the U.S. as *Doogal*, the majority of original British voices were replaced by celebrities more familiar to the American public, like Whoopi Goldberg and Chevy Chase.

4 An electronic toy popular in the 1990s that displayed the digital image of a "pet", which has to be looked after and responded to by its "owner".

her economic empowerment and become free of the memories of her failed marriage.

Paula Spencer closes with a celebration – Paula’s birthday party, for which she buys the cake herself, with the anticipation of celebrating her forty-nine years of age surrounded by her family. “It’s her birthday. She’s forty-nine. She bought a cake earlier. It’s in the fridge. They’ll have it when she gets home” (DOYLE, 2006, p. 277). Celebrating one more year in her life, Paula demonstrates the desire to become transformed and to have a new life with her children.

Paula represents a period of change in the lives of a high percentage of Irish women. Her financial empowerment through work and her effort to fight her addiction serve as encouragement to other women who have yet to overcome the violence they suffer. In this way, Paula becomes the representation of women who, despite the many adversities they endure, continue to seek space in society.

Final considerations

In *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and *Paula Spencer*, Roddy Doyle represents gender difference through the story of Paula Spencer’s struggles and her process of rehabilitation from alcohol addiction, as well as her wounds caused by the Spencer couple’s violent married life, which affected the whole family. Through the deployment of references that highlight the role of the feminist movements that have historically fought for equal rights between the sexes and protection against gender violence, we have sought to discuss the process of social transformation occurred during the 20th and 21st Centuries in women’s lives; and how these transformations affected the lives of Irish women, as represented in these works by Roddy Doyle.

Accordingly, with an aim to establish a theoretical cross-reference with the discussion of the two novels, we have sought to theorize about ways in which the patriarchal system affects the lives of women and how the struggle for gender equality can lead to feminine empowerment.

It is important to note that, besides discussing and fighting for gender equality, the feminist movements also seek to socially emancipate women. Literature, in turn, is an important tool for women and men who fight and work against every type of violence detrimental to minorities. So, Paula’s liberation from domestic violence and her economic empowerment are without a doubt important examples of Doyle gives his readers who may be subordinated to systems that go against women’s rights, in that he demonstrates that it is possible for them to become empowered and to fight against adversities. However, when we analyze Ireland’s socio-historical-cultural context and Paula Spencer’s trajectory, we note that one needs to be brave in order to endure the symbolic violence that scars the feminine subject. In light of this, we observe that, through his work, Doyle lends a voice to the marginalized groups in his society, as is the case of Paula, who represents silenced women.

This study has made us all the more aware that there is still a long way to go in achieving gender equality and the effective empowerment of not only Irish women, but women all around the world. Doyle ends the story of Paula suggesting that she will rebuild her family – but in real life this is not always possible, so we need to be on our guard.

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