

The Dead Republic, by Roddy Doyle: The Wisdom of Comic Heroism

AÍDA DÍAZ BILD

Institution address: Universidad de La Laguna. Depto. Filología Inglesa y Alemana. Facultad de Filología. Campus de Guajara. 38071 La Laguna. Tenerife.

E-mail: adbild@ull.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-7543-5872

Received: 22/01/2018. Accepted: 14/06/2018.

How to cite this article: Díaz Bild, Aída. “*The Dead Republic*, by Roddy Doyle: The Wisdom of Comic Heroism.” *ES Review. Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 39, 2018, pp. 233–54.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.39.2018.233-254>

Abstract: Roddy Doyle is a writer who has reflected that human existence is an interplay between comedy and tragedy, and that therefore all kinds of evils—fanaticism, absolutism, dogmatism—result from cultivating only the tragic perspective. This becomes obvious in *The Dead Republic* (2010), a novel in which Henry Smart’s comic attitude to life allows Doyle to offer the reader a detached and non-sentimental view of contemporary Irish history. Both John Ford and the IRA want to reshape Henry’s story as a Republican hero to fit their own notion of Irishness and it is precisely in Henry’s response to this perversion of Irish history, politics and national identity that he reveals himself as the perfect comic hero and debunks all efforts to mystify the past.

Keywords: Roddy Doyle; *The Dead Republic*; myth; comic hero; tragic vision; subversion.

Summary: An approach to comic heroism. Subversion of Irish myth and identity in *The Dead Republic*. Henry Smart as the incarnation of the comic hero.

Resumen: Roddy Doyle es un escritor que ha reflejado cómo la existencia humana es una combinación de comedia y tragedia, y que, por tanto, todos los grandes males—fanatismo, absolutismo, dogmatismo—son el resultado de atender solo a la dimensión trágica. Esto se hace patente en *The Dead Republic* (2010), una novela en la que la actitud cómica ante la vida de Henry Smart permite a Doyle ofrecer al lector una visión objetiva en absoluto sentimental de la historia irlandesa contemporánea. Tanto John Ford como el IRA intentan adaptar la historia de Henry como héroe republicano a su noción de lo que es lo irlandés y precisamente en su respuesta a esta pervisión de la historia, de la política y de la identidad nacional irlandesa, Henry se nos revela como el perfecto héroe cómico que subvierte todo esfuerzo de mistificar la realidad.

Palabras clave: Roddy Doyle; *The Dead Republic*; mito; héroe cómico; visión trágica; subversión.

Sumario: Un acercamiento al heroísmo cómico. La subversión del mito y la identidad irlandeses en *The Dead Republic*. Henry Smart como encarnación del héroe cómico.



Bakhtin, one of the most relevant thinkers of the twentieth century, dedicates much of his work to examining the distinctive features of novelistic discourse. Bakhtin believes that the novel is the only genre which continues to develop and therefore has no canon of its own: “It is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is every questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 39). The novel parodies other genres exposing the stylization of their forms and language. This peculiar capacity for ridiculing another’s language and another’s direct discourse derives from the parodic-travesty genres of ancient Greek and Rome, such as the satyr plays and the Atellan farces, which prepared the ground for the novel. Bakhtin emphasises how these diverse forms of laughter transformed language from the absolute dogma into a working hypothesis for understanding and describing reality and thus forced men to experience a different and contradictory reality: “Such laughter paved the way for the impiety of the novelistic form” (59). All these serio-comical genres that are the authentic predecessors of the novel introduce the element of laughter to destroy fear and reverence before an object, before a world, bringing us close to them and allowing us to analyse, question and reevaluate them. Laughter liberates from censorship, dogmas, prohibition, violence.

Conrad Hyers, for whom to understand comedy is to understand humanity (1), agrees with Bakhtin that the absence of a comic perspective leads to intolerance, dogmatism, fanaticism. Tragedy leads to alienation, guilt, rage and horror, and celebrates certain virtues—courage, loyalty, duty, honour, pride, absolute devotion, uncompromising dedication—which, unfortunately, have coloured our common understanding of what constitutes to be heroic and have generated all kinds of evils.¹ By putting their lives in the defence of some good cause or ambition, by their blind obedience to certain noble concerns and sacred principles, tragic heroes have only produced death and destruction: “In the name of duty and loyalty, honor or prestige, God and

¹ Aristotle’s definition of comedy in *Poetics* as “an imitation of inferior people—not, however, with respect to every kind of defect: the laughable is a species of what is disgraceful” (9) has led to the belief that tragedy is more serious and profound than comedy and has become the basis for the theory of humour. In the last decades scholars from different disciplines have worked to eliminate the existing prejudices against comedy and vindicate its positive, creative and liberating character.

country, it sacrifices the very people involved on the altar of principle and virtue” (Hyers 50).

This explains why the tragic vision needs to be tempered and humanized by the comic vision which introduces a different spirit and other kinds of virtues: playfulness, childlikeness, humour, laughter, light-heartedness, meekness, humility, flexibility, moderation, willingness to compromise, sympathy and empathy, generosity, nurturing, affection, love. Unlike the tragic hero, the comic hero is not interested in retribution or justice, but in accommodation, compassion, forgiveness and mercy. The comic hero does not get trapped by frustrating aspirations and wrenching conflicts because his commitment is to life and the basics of life. His defence is of persons more than principles: “‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ might well serve as a comic motto. The ethic of comedy is situational” (Hyers 66). Because of his flexibility, which does not allow him to be destroyed by rigid principles or absolute seriousness, the comic hero is better adapted for survival. He is capable of standing apart from and adapting to whatever the circumstances: “It is a resilience of spirit which can reassert itself when life is coming up daffodils or coming up dandelions or coming up with nothing at all” (166). The comic spirit is always linked to a stubborn affirmation of life, despite its problems, absurdities and contradictions. Even in those comedies that end in defeat we are left with a sense of faith renewed and hope rekindled, because the aim of comedy is not to conquer death or ignore suffering but to renew and celebrate life: If the tragic hero is concerned with heroism, superiority, national pride, vengeance, tenacity at all cost, the comic figure pays attention to ordinary affairs and ordinary people: “Ordinary values are not superficial but basic; ordinary people are not ignoble, but the salt of the earth” (44). He knows perfectly well what life is mainly about: food, fun, sex, love, family, friends and a good night’s sleep.

Hyers emphasises that the comic vision possesses a greater appreciation for the muddiness and ambiguities of human nature: people and circumstances are not so neatly divisible into black and white, light and dark, right and wrong, as tragic heroism has always defended: “Basic to the various forms of comic heroism is the same thesis—comically understood—that we are creatures of very diverse, and often opposite tendencies” (60). The comic hero accepts the manyness of the self and others, destroying all the boxes and badges with which we label our lives and attempt to confine others. The result, according to Hyers, is a

renewed sense of freedom and a larger vision of humanity: “And if there is any ‘salvation’ forthcoming, it comes in the candid—rather than tortured—acceptance and even enjoyment, of this ambiguousness” (61).

John Morreall, an American philosopher who shares most of Hyers’s premises, points out that the ability to laugh at our own foibles and shortcomings is essential to the development of any moral perspective: “Seeing oneself objectively is also important in being honest with oneself, rather than rationalizing one’s shortcomings, and so humor can contribute to self-knowledge and integrity” (“Comic Vices” 19). This capacity to see our failures and mistakes makes us wiser, an idea brilliantly summarized by Marcel Gutwirth: “to laugh in the face of folly (our own) and lostness (our own), however wistfully, is to reach for the prize of wisdom” (187).

Morreall also underlines that whereas the tragic hero shows respect for authority and tradition and does not question the patterns of thought which he inherits, the comic protagonist is absolutely critical: “Comic protagonists... point out incongruities, in language, in people’s reasoning, and, more generally, in the established order of things” (“The Comic” 342).²

Roddy Doyle is a writer who has reflected that human existence is some interplay between comedy and tragedy and that therefore all kinds of evils result from cultivating only the tragic perspective. This becomes obvious in *The Dead Republic* (2010), the final volume in Roddy Doyle’s trilogy *The Last Roundup*, which aims to re-examine the history of Ireland in the twentieth century through its central character, Henry Smart. Smart participates in the 1916 Easter Rising and the Irish War for Independence, is forced by political circumstances to escape to America, and at the beginning of *The Dead Republic* returns to his country after nearly thirty years of exile as John Ford’s IRA consultant for a movie, *The Quiet Man*.³ The director has promised Henry that the film will be based on his revolutionary past. When Henry finds out that Ford is not

² On the social and subversive function of comedy, see Bergson, Freud, Frye, Gutwirth, Sutton and Sypher.

³ Doyle has explained that he got the idea of making Smart the IRA consultant after reading the biography of Ernie O’Malley, an Irish Republican Army officer during the Irish War of Independence and a commander of the anti-treaty IRA during the Irish Civil War: “The biography included the fascinating, almost absurd, detail that O’Malley had assisted John Ford in the making of *The Quiet Man* and was credited as the ‘IRA Consultant’” (McWay).

really interested in telling the truth about the Irish struggle for independence, but in offering the audience a sentimental version of Irish history, “the emigrant’s dream, soft and green” (*DR* 124),⁴ he gives Ford a beating, leaves the set and decides to go back to Dublin.⁵ For many years he leads a rather conventional and quiet life, first as a gardener and later as a caretaker at a boys’ school. This “idyllic” life comes to an end when he is caught in a bomb blast and the secret of his rebel past is revealed by the media. He is resurrected as a national hero by the Provisional IRA who uses him as a tool for their propaganda. In this final book of the trilogy, as most critics have pointed out, Doyle’s main aim is to explore the manipulation of national myths and, more precisely, how myth comes to supplant fact.⁶ Nathans-Kelly summarizes it very well: “The notion of mythology superseding history, of the abstract and vague and imagined replacing the concrete—and the perversion of Irish history, politics, and national identity that the myth engenders—is the prevailing theme that runs through all of *The Dead Republic*.”

Interestingly enough, some critics believe that Doyle’s subversion of Irish myth and identity is also present in his previous novels. Thus, Lorraine Piroux argues that in *The Commitments* (1988) Doyle already shows that “an Irish identity no less attentive to its past history can be preserved if conceived as a creative politics of solidarity rather than as a revival of a mythic and totalitarian tradition” (47). Piroux argues that Doyle wants to denounce the way in which symbolism and mythologies are used to create a national Irish identity. Lisa McGonigle also considers that in *The Commitments* Doyle does not celebrate nationalism, but “renegotiates the parameters of ‘Irishness’ by giving voice to the excluded, thereby undermining the concept of the ideologically homogenous nation” (170). Moynihan agrees that it is possible to view Doyle’s work as unfaithful to the nationalist artificially constructed Irish identity, starting with *The Commitments*, in which the characters feel marginalized because of “their regional positioning in a country that favours ‘culchies,’ and class” (52). In a similar line, Brian Cosgrove notes that Doyle is one of those disaffected Irish moderns who reject

⁴ *DR* will be used throughout when referring to *The Dead Republic* between brackets.

⁵ Moynihan asserts that by emphasising the way in which Ford’s film deviate from Henry’s story, Doyle is pointing out that “revisions to a source text can be as problematic as the source narrative itself” (61).

⁶ See Ron Charles, Brian Dillon (“*The Dead Republic*”), Elizabeth Grove-White and Steve Nathans-Kelly.

“the old Irish totems of Land, Nationality and Catholicism” (232). Of course, Doyle’s challenge of Irish myth and values becomes most obvious in *A Star Called Henry* (1999), a novel in which Doyle creates “his revisionist tale of Irish history” (Jacklein 129).⁷ In this sense, Donnelly’s comment on literary revisionism in *A Star Called Henry* is enlightening, because he links this novel to Doyle’s previous ones: “This interpretation of Irish history, that sees the outcome of the revolutionary period as a Catholic, bourgeois takeover is consistent with the political outlook that informed the early writings” (29).

Moynihan believes that in *The Dead Republic* Doyle is also denouncing the failed promises of post-Independence Ireland and the nationalist version of twentieth-century Irish history. But he argues that whereas in *A Star Called Henry* Doyle seems to be sympathetic to revisionist interpretations of Irish history, in *The Dead Republic* his position is neither nationalist nor revisionist, thus falling closer to the “postrevisionist” historiography that emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s and which endorsed some of the premises of the nationalist narrative that had been questioned by revisionists, while also recognizing the validity of many of the tenets of revisionism (53). In this sense, Moynihan claims that in *The Dead Republic* Doyle shows the limitations of both approaches to Irish history and points out that the very title of the novel suggests that nationalist and revisionist perspectives are paradoxically close: the notion of Ireland as “dead” is a revisionist position, while the introduction of the word “republic” acknowledges a nationalist point of view (53–54).

In “The Battle for the GPO” Brannigan argues that in *A Star Called Henry* and *At Swim, Two Boys* (2010) by Jamie O’Neill, the 1916 Rising is used as the image of contemporary social and cultural conflicts, which allows the writers to “articulate dissident and subaltern perspectives on Ireland in the 1990s” (132). Moynihan, on the other hand, emphasises that in *The Dead Republic* Doyle warns of the danger of replacing one set of myths with another. Our aim in this essay is precisely to show how in *The Dead Republic* as in *A Star Called Henry*, it is Henry’s comic attitude to life which allows Doyle to offer the reader what Donnelly calls an “iconoclastic dismissal of official Ireland” (29) and therefore a detached and non-sentimental view of contemporary Irish history.

⁷ John Brannigan and Dermot McCarthy also believe that in *A Star Called Henry* Doyle supports the project of historical revisionism.

In *The Dead Republic* both John Ford, whom Tim Adams quite accurately describes as “that part-time mythologiser of Irish heritage,” and the IRA want to reshape Henry’s story to fit their own notion of Irishness: “Ford boasts of giving Americans the history they wanted in his westerns, and the novel views the Provisionals’ complex claims to legitimacy—the theologically elaborate lines of descent from the ‘true’ republic—as an equally powerfully, equally bogus piece of myth-making” (Tayler). In fact, the man with the beard tells Henry that the War for Independence has never been about territory, but about what being Irish means, about “ownership of the definition of Irishness” (*DR* 313), about the copyright, about the brand.⁸ As Charles has asserted, the fight is not over “control of territory but control of ‘what being Irish means’.”⁹ And, of course, Sinn Féin has the power to decide what Irishness means. There is only one Ireland and it is theirs. This is why when after the bombing Henry’s identity as a Republican hero is revealed by the media, the IRA decides to use him as a symbol, an icon of the revolution.¹⁰

Henry is very well aware of the role he is playing for the IRA and cannot help being ironic about it. Thus, he describes himself as “the walking relic” (*DR* 194), as “Celtic mythology” and therefore “fuckin’ biblical” (*DR* 174), as their “living saint” (*DR* 250), who is going to give sense to the young men starving themselves and convince them that the armed struggle is the right path. Even the man with the beard realises how ludicrous the whole thing is and cannot help laughing after telling Henry that he is more than a prophet: “You’re our direct line. To God” (*DR* 193).

⁸ The man with the beard is obviously Gerry Adams, but Doyle plays a joke on the reader by telling him that he is wrong if he thinks so: “(You think it was Adams. But it wasn’t. It was a different man. Adams was in Long Kesh, in Cage 11, becoming Gerry Adams. He’d be in there for another three years)” (*DR* 182).

⁹ Roddy Doyle himself has claimed that what is of vital importance now in Ireland is just who will decide what it is to be Irish (Neary). He has also emphasised that his emotional attachment is not to Ireland, but to Dublin (Dillon “An Interview with Roddy Doyle”).

¹⁰ In her article on *A Star Called Henry* Jacklein shows how Doyle’s systematic use of music demonstrates the negative influence of a mythologized past and identity: “The songs interwoven throughout *A Star Called Henry* glorify the exploits of past heroes and ‘martyrs’ in a manner that continues to influence Irish values and ideals to a dangerous degree” (131).

The IRA is not interested in the real Henry Smart, but in using him as a tool for their propaganda. Thus, they do not hesitate to reproduce in the *Irish Independent*, just after the bombing, “an old, grainy photograph of a skinny kid in a Volunteer uniform” (DR 173), who is supposed to be Henry, but is not; or to falsify his revolutionary past asserting that he had been elected to the First Dáil. They present this fraudulent Moses as “our republican dead” (DR 182), “the real thing” (DR 183), because thus they can prove that they are the legitimate government of Ireland: “I was an old, rediscovered fact. The eleventh commandment” (DR 186).¹¹ Of course, as Moynihan suggests, these allusions to religion highlight “the extent to which the discourses of nationalism and Catholicism are mutually reinforcing” (55). The urge to mystify the past in order to achieve their aim is acknowledged by the man with the beard at the end of the novel. He asserts that they could not let Ford shoot a film that described things as they really happened because “it would have been the last nail in the coffin of republicanism” (DR 316). Instead, Ford produced *The Quiet Man* to show a place worth fighting for, something beautiful that was going to be destroyed: “Ireland was *The Quiet Man*. Not Dublin or Belfast, or the slums or the queues for the boat out. Or the true story of Henry Smart. That’ll be a different day’s work. A different film altogether” (DR 317).

It is precisely in Henry’s response to this perversion of Irish history, politics and national identity, that the creation of myth generates, that he reveals himself as the perfect comic hero and thus debunks all efforts to “sanitize” reality. Henry sticks to reality and to his own experience and refuses to be transformed into a legend: “But three books and a full century later he’s no ghost, and he’s no myth—in spite of all those who want to turn him into both. He’s Henry Smart. And he’s still too real for fiction” (Nathans-Kelly).¹² Goodstein has asserted that Henry is a

¹¹ Whelan has explained that the state decided to support revisionism when it realised that revisionism could be an antidote to the way in which the Provisional IRA was using the traditional nationalist narrative as a recruitment device: “For the revisionists, the Irish nationalist tradition, exemplified by militant republicanism, suffered from an addiction to violence, derived not from an accurate analysis of Irish-British relations but from a flawed atavistic populism that worked as an evil catalyst for a psychopathic blood-lust” (190).

¹² Jacklein has pointed out that although Henry’s life is a metaphor for Irish history, “his shift from empty hero to independent individual becomes particularly meaningful”

complex round character, both idealistic and practical, “not perfect, a character who like most of us is flawed.” Thus, Henry becomes the incarnation of the comic hero, who, unlike the tragic one, has no aspiration to godlikeness and refuses to be destroyed by violent conflicts. Our hero, who “ricochets off history’s grand narratives like a pinball” (Grove-White), does not reduce life to a set of abstract ideas or gets trapped in any kind of rigid principles. In fact, Doyle makes the reader aware of what the novel is denouncing by choosing the following introductory quotation by Gilles Deleuze: “If you’re trapped in the dream of the other, you’re fucked.”¹³ Thus, when Henry hears words such as “Irish Republic,” “Prime Minister,” “Costello,” he does not feel anything, because they mean nothing to him; or when Ford affirms that he loves his country, Henry indignant asks him: “How can you love a fuckin’ country?” (DR 119) or, in other words, how can you worship something which is merely an abstract notion? He gets even angrier when Ford acknowledges that in *The Quiet Man* he is offering the audience an idyllic vision of rural Ireland, because he knows that, like others before him, Ford is manipulating the truth in order to achieve his aim: “That’s the shite they said they wanted, I told him.—Jack Dalton and the boys. A rural Ireland, the simple life, spouting fuckin’ Irish. That’s what they hid behind” (DR 127). Henry refuses to see people as mere representatives of the different sides of the tragic paradigm: “I’d never hated the English. I’d never killed a man because he was English, or British. It would never have made sense” (DR 258).

Already in *A Star Called Henry* Henry is presented as a hero who, unlike most of the rebels, does not fight for the defence of a set of abstract ideas, but for the people he loves, so that they will be able to live in a better world. The first time he gets in touch with the rebels his answer to the question “Do you love Ireland?” is not that of a fanatic but of a very human and compassionate man: “I loved Victor and my memories of some other people. That was all I understood about love”

(139). Doyle himself has asserted that in *A Star Called Henry* “the history came after the character” (Taylor).

¹³ Gilles Deleuze’s quotation is from his essay “What is the Creative Act.” Alison M. Gingeras gives us a slightly different translation: “Beware of the other’s dream, because if you’re caught in the other’s dream you are screwed” (Deleuze 103). Deleuze argues that there is a fundamental affinity with the work of art and the act of resistance: “In a certain manner, all works of art are not acts of resistance, but in another way, they are” (106).

(*SCH* 69).¹⁴ Years later, when he wonders whether all his revolutionary activity, which includes cycling all over the country through rain and wind, killing those who are a threat to the goals of the rebellion and training others to kill, makes any sense, he thinks of the people he cares or has cared for and decides that it is for them that he must go on. Thus, when he comes back to Ireland in *The Dead Republic* what depresses him most is not the political situation—in fact, till he gets caught in the bomb blast he totally ignores it—but the feeling that the ideals of the Revolution have been betrayed, that Ireland has not become the paradise he dreamt of, in which poverty and suffering would have been totally eradicated and people’s welfare would have been improved. Although it does not surprise him because he knows what politicians are really up to, it angers him: “Thirty years after I’d freed it, parts of Ireland still didn’t have electricity” (*DR* 101). He visits the slums of Dublin and realises that nothing has changed:

The slums were still there, like broken teeth in a rotten mouth, but far worse now because I’d been away and seen different . . . I heard the noises, laughter, the bawling, the final coughs, exactly as I’d left them, still floating around in there, and constantly kept fresh. Consumption was killing some man on the second floor . . . I made my mind up: I’d stay away from old places. I’d stop feeding the anger. (*DR* 131–32)

When he moves to Rathen and sees that “there were shoes . . . the black prams were pushed by well-fed mothers, and they were pushing babies, not coal. No one begged, no one hugged the walls” (*DR* 133), he feels a little relieved and wonders whether his fight had not been a total waste. He is happy that young mothers can afford being idle and are still attractive after three or four children, whereas old men and women in their sixties, seventies and eighties are not crippled, toothless or broken-lunged. Henry feels proud because he believes that they are his victory, they “were walking success stories, written by me” (*DR* 228). But he soon discovers that underneath this beautiful surface lurks a bleaker reality: “It took me a while to calm down, to notice the shivers and malnourishments, the ringworm, the bruises. It took me a while to accept that poverty could also be suburban. And it was a while before I noticed

¹⁴ *SCH* will be used throughout when referring to *A Star Called Henry* between brackets.

the disappearing boys. That last lesson came with a cough” (*DR* 142). The years of prosperity are now over and economic depression has turned everything upside down: “The country became the old place again, killing everything young . . . decided that the place was worse than it had been when I was the young, hungry king of Dublin’s corners” (*DR* 228–29). The fact that Henry is of very humble origin, a child of the Dublin slums, which at the beginning of the twentieth century were “an inferno of social degradation” (Tierney 140) makes him especially sensitive to misery, squalor, destitution.¹⁵ As Moynihan has explained, the title of the novel refers precisely to the fact that promises of post-Independence Ireland were never fulfilled due to the conservatism of the nationalist project, that only generated unemployment, emigration, poverty and heroin addiction (54). Henry is struck by the indifference with which the young men who have no work and whose wives are off cleaning houses face their predicament: “Shrugging was what dying slowly was all about. I could have told the priest that. And I could have told the men at the school gate and the kids on the other side of the gate. Not understanding, or pretending not to give a fuck, the whole country was shrugging, killing the time that was left” (*DR* 215). As Hagan has pointed out, Henry Smart’s accurate critique of Irish behaviour seems to validate Vincent Buckley’s claim in *Memory Ireland* that the Irish have “a national inclination toward willed apathy” (130).

For Henry it does not make any sense to fight for abstract ideas if people’s needs are not taken into consideration. For Henry it is not a matter of being wrong or right, but of feeling compassion for those whose life is a path of thorns. This is why he decides to declare a guerrilla war at the boys’ school where he works as a caretaker, intimidating those teachers who brutally slap the students. He institutes his own republic, “the Republic of Henry” (*DR* 160), and patrols the corridors of the school to make sure that the teachers do not lose control of themselves and give vent to their fury: “For fifteen years the boys’ national school in Ratheen was the most civilised place in the country” (*DR* 151). Interestingly enough, like the comic hero, Henry is very realistic about his “republic.” He knows that he “couldn’t ban reality, the hard knocks and grief that were waiting beyond the railings,” but he can show the kids that “[t]here was another way and they went through their

¹⁵ Donnelly has drawn attention to the fact that Doyle shows a preoccupation with characters who are powerless or marginalised by birth or environment (29).

lives knowing that” (*DR* 151). In other words, he wants the children to be flexible in their outlook on life, to realise that there is more than one reality, that no law is immutable and no ideal eternal, that, as Hyers puts it, “[t]here are other ways of playing the game, and other games to be played” (39).

But with the bombing his quiet life, Henry’s “own contented republic” (*DR* 165), comes to an end. He decides to become involved with the IRA again, but not because all of a sudden he has changed his mind and believes in the ideals they are fighting for, but because he has witnessed how the brutality of the confrontation between Catholics and Protestants destroys lives: “It was worse than anything I’d seen. It made no sense” (*DR* 163). For Henry people come before ideas and he is going to use the rage the killing of thirty-three civilians has generated in him to help bring about a change. Whereas the members of the IRA, like the tragic heroes, are committed to a set of values without taking into consideration the suffering their rigid determination and extremism are causing, Henry shows sympathy and affection for the people who are being sacrificed in the conflict.¹⁶ Thus, when the man with the beard tells Henry that he is there for their own religion and their martyrs, Henry has to remind him of the victims, the ones they should really be fighting for. Henry is aware of the fact that what they try to sell as triumphs in their ongoing struggle are merely Pyrrhic victories not worth the blood that has been shed: “The race against death, trying not to acknowledge the pointlessness, the obscenity of it, especially when the election was over and the victories were followed by nothing” (*DR* 275). When one of the riots ends up in a rout and he is covered in the lads’ blood, he wants to be photographed to show the world the real and tragic consequences of a war in which all of them are involved: “Photograph me, for fuck sake. Look! I’m drenched in blood. An old man! It’s fuckin’ scandalous” (*DR* 276). But the IRA will not allow him to be photographed, because myths or legends do not bleed: “You’re not flesh and blood” (*DR* 276), an idea which really revolts Henry.

Henry differs from politicians in that he does not have a tragic vision of life; he does not see reality in terms of polarities, confrontations:

¹⁶ Interestingly enough, although Henry does not like the hunger strikes, he admires the strikers because they are not destroying others for their ideas, but giving up their own lives to save their own people and create a better world: “Now, again, I felt it; men I admired were dying for me” (*DR* 257).

“Accommodation is not viewed as weakness or treason, but as fairness, generosity, magnanimity. Confrontations are to be avoided in favour of consensus” (Hyers 28). He is far away from both Catholics and Protestants, each of them believing that theirs is the just cause and, therefore, have the right to sacrifice people for their ideas. Any kind of compromise or reconciliation would be considered a sign of cowardice: “Reprisal and counter-reprisal became tit for tat—murder was trivialised” (DR 211).¹⁷ One of the G-men expresses it very clearly when he asserts, not without certain irony: “Changing your mind. It’s the mortal sin. It’s worse than compromising, sure” (DR 267). The defence of what both sides consider to be noble principles has not only led to destruction and sorrow, but to poverty and the economic and social death of the country.

Henry’s defence of individuals more than principles becomes especially obvious when he decides to become a double informer, working both for the G-men and the IRA. Henry is not proud of what he is doing, but he is not willing to sacrifice the people he loves on the altar of honour or virtue. He decides to go against everything he believes in because both the G-men and the IRA are threatening him with killing his wife and daughter. In fact, when the G-men tell him the IRA will whack him if they tell them that he was not in the First Dáil, Henry says that he “couldn’t give a shite” (DR 268), but when they tell him that they will hurt him by blowing his daughter’s brains out right in front of his eyes or raping her, he gives in. The only reason why he goes on collaborating with the IRA, attending every commemoration, is explained thus: “I was keeping my daughter alive. That was what held me. The chance that they’d kill her if I refused, kill her and call her an informer, put the cardboard sign around her neck” (DR 319).¹⁸

Henry’s love for his wife and daughter shows that, like the comic hero, he knows that what makes life worth living are not the great quests or deeds of the tragic hero, but the ordinary pleasures of existence: food, fun, sex, love, family, friends.¹⁹ The first thing he does when he returns

¹⁷ Doyle has explained that the bombing, the reprisals, the counter-reprisals, the kneecappings, the ugly, were part of everybody’s life and that it was hard for normal citizens to cope with it: “if you were Irish you had to live with either trying to ignore the violence and feel guilty about it or to confront it and feel guilty about it” (Neary).

¹⁸ His daughter has also been hiding because they have told her that they would kill Henry if she talked.

¹⁹ Henry’s belief that the purpose of life is to enjoy the simple pleasures becomes evident in *A Star Called Henry* in his attitude towards sex. Henry is a very attractive

to Ireland is go to Roscommon to see the house where his wife was brought up. When he discovers that it is not there any longer, “it felt like another death” (*DR* 6), because he wanted something as simple as to sit in front of the wall where in the past he had hold his wife’s hand. In fact, it is the love for his wife which makes him say for the first time that he likes living in Ireland and vindicate the importance of feelings over any political claims: “The thought was mad—Irish history was all about *me*. I let go of the thought, and it scurried away happily enough. I wasn’t going after it. Irish history could fuck off; I was in love” (*DR* 205). Doyle himself has asserted that, for Henry, Miss O’Shea is the love of his life and this is why she is depicted in a romantic way (Tekin 116). Interestingly enough, one of the reasons why he is so delighted that he is going to be called into political action again is because “Miss O’Shea was going to be proud of me” (*DR* 212). Henry’s acknowledgement of his wife’s intellectual and moral superiority is very revealing because a true comic hero refuses to fit into the established conventions or accepted categories with which we approach reality. When in *A Star Called Henry* Ivan, one of the leaders of the rebellion, asks Henry if he has any control over his wife, he answers proudly “No” (*SCH* 312); and when he urges him to convince Miss O’Shea to stop killing the British:

I’ll talk to her, I said.—That’s all I can do. She’s her own woman.
 She’s your wife.
 I’m her husband.²⁰ (*SCH* 317)

As Morreall has pointed out, in the anti-heroic comic vision women often play a leading role and even outwit men, as happens in *Lysistrata*,

young man who does not hesitate to have sexual relationships with different women when sent on important missions during the revolution. In fact, when they are attacked by the British Army during the Easter Rising, Henry is in the basement of the General Post Office with Miss O’Shea: “I was stuck there with my britches nuzzling my ankles as Miss O’Shea grabbed my knees and climbed on top of me” (*SCH* 119). Henry’s commitment to life rather than abstract ideas can be linked to Bakhtin’s notion of grotesque realism: “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; and it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (*Rabelais* 19–20).

²⁰ Doyle has explained that the character of Miss O’Shea is based on the extraordinary women who founded Cumann na mBan, an Irish republican paramilitary organization (Drewett 345).

by Aristophanes, in which a group of women go on a sex strike to end the war between two cities (“The Comic” 351). Actually, Moynihan has explained that the fact that Miss O’Shea, who he thinks is reminiscent of Nuala in Walsh’s *The Quiet Man*, is buried as a republican hero is highly relevant, since the national narrative has historically marginalized the role of women in the struggle for Irish Independence (59).

Henry knows that for an old couple like them, being able to wake up in the morning is all that matters, because life is not about heroic deeds but about surviving and enjoying the magic of daily existence. And when Miss O’Shea has a stroke and has to be taken to a nursing home he goes to see her every day, sits beside her bed and holds her hand. She cannot move, she cannot talk, but his devotion for her never falters. Again and again, he whispers in her ear that he loves her, although he does not know whether she can hear him, and tells her that she is still a beautiful woman. It is precisely because he loves his wife and daughter that Henry believes that life is worth living. For a moment he tries to convince himself that he is life-tired and should put an end to his wife’s agony and his own, but he realises that “[i]t was sentimental shite; I didn’t want to die. I wanted to see Saoirse and I didn’t want to leave my wife alone” (*DR* 311). In fact, he feels happiest not when he is attending a meeting or being celebrated as a legend, but when he has the opportunity to talk to his daughter or be with his wife. This explains why instead of telling Ford the truth about his life, he invents another Ireland: “There was no blame. My daughter had kissed my forehead. I’d invented a place where that could happen” (*DR* 124).

Henry also proves to be the comic hero described by Hyers in his openness to experience, which allows him to distance himself from most situations and enjoy the many incongruities of life. Henry is not blind to the reality of suffering and failure in life, but refuses to take matters with absolute seriousness. He is aware of the necessity of the tragic vision to be tempered by the comic one if we do not want to fall into fanaticism, absolutism, dogmatism, as history, and especially the history of Ireland, has shown us again and again. In fact, when Henry shouts “A cunt is a cunt is a cunt” (*DR* 258) on meeting Margaret Thatcher the first time, thus making fun of her “Crime is crime is crime,” the crowd’s reaction is very revealing: “It got a cheer and—a rare thing in those months—it got a laugh” (*DR* 258). The man with the beard, whose fanatical tenacity is causing the suffering of so many Irish people, gets very angry: “Four men have died. That’s four good friends of mine . . . The thought that we

are killing our own. It's horrible. So, don't you dare joke when you're up on the platform representing republicanism, d'you hear me?" (*DR* 260). What the man with the beard, like all tragic figures, does not understand is that humour allows us to see even the darkest and most painful situations in more than one way without trivialising them: "In laughter we transcend not only the animals but also ourselves and our circumstances. We transcend disappointment and suffering. We transcend the jumbled contradictions of our lives" (Hyers 133). In fact, Berger, who, like Hyers, believes that tragicomedy does not annul suffering or sadness, but makes them more bearable, goes so far as to say that laughter fulfils a redeeming function and establishes a very interesting comparison between the comic as a signal of transcendence and Christian sacraments: "However, perceived in faith, the comic becomes a great consolation and a witness to the redemption that is yet to come" (214–15).

Of course, as we have seen, to be able to laugh and take on the world requires a lot of courage and Henry throughout the novel proves to have it. Thus, when he is nearly killed by the bomb he cannot help laughing at the puzzlement his wooden leg is producing in the people who are trying to assist him:

—Over here! Jesus, his leg!

I tried to tell him. He was forty years too late if he wanted to save it. But I couldn't talk—there was no real air.

...

They grabbed my feet and shoulders and started to lift me—the leg slid out of my trousers.

—Oh, fuckin' Christ—

—It's grand, I said.

I could talk; I sounded fine.

—It's a wooden one. I've had it for years.

—Are you serious? said the poor fucker holding the leg.

—Yeah, I said.—A train went over me.

—Fuckin' hell, he said.—And now this. (*DR* 162–63)

The reference to the wooden leg is highly significant. In *A Star Called Henry*, as Farquharson has noted, the leg becomes a symbol of how the relationship between father and son affects identity:

His father's mostly absent presence in Henry's life is a ghost that haunts the developing man, and Henry clings to his father's wooden leg as not

only a reminder of the mythology surrounding his father's larger-than-persona but also as a diviner of violence and a token reminder of his heritage. (416)

Henry acknowledges how important the leg is for him when he affirms: "I had Victor, my father's leg and nothing else" (*SCH* 70). Both Henry and his father are survivors, who are reinventing themselves all the time. Both join the IRA and murder people because "cleverer men than me had told me to" (*SCH* 318). Both are working and killing for Alfie Gandon, who changes his name to O'Gandúin and becomes a national politician after the Rising, and they do not know it. Both believe that they are legends, unaware of their "tininess and anonymity" (*SCH* 209). As Henry's wise grandmother says: "You're just like your father. And that's no compliment" (*SCH* 289). But there is a huge difference between Henry and his father: whereas the latter is killed by Gandon and remains a slave till his death, Henry realises that he has been used by the leaders of the rebellion to fulfil the most horrible tasks and decides that his war is over:

There was no pretending now: I was a complete and utter fool, the biggest in the world . . . Everything I'd done, every bullet and assassination, all the blood and brains, prison, the torture . . . everything had been done for Ivan and the other Ivans, the boys whose time had come

...

. . . I'd been given the names of men on pieces of paper and I'd sought them out and killed them. Just like my father, except he'd been paid for it. (*SCH* 317–18)

At the end of the novel Henry pays tribute to the people he has killed and to his father by beating Gandon to death with the wooden leg.

In *The Dead Republic*, however, the wooden leg, which is Henry's because he lost his own leg in a train accident in America, has a different meaning. As Moynihan has explained, in *The Dead Republic* the wooden leg symbolizes adaptation, "a questioning of the process of consecration, of how a particular narrative came to be made holy in the first place" (55). Through the metaphor of the wooden leg Doyle shows the need to adapt the nationalist version to twentieth-century Irish history in the interests of getting a better understanding of the period: "In Part III, Henry has a new wooden leg crafted for him by none other than an IRA

bomb-maker, thereby closing the circle between the wooden leg, adaptation, the nationalist-revisionist controversy and republic violence” (60). Although Moynihan’s evaluation of the symbolism of the wooden leg is very interesting and accurate, we believe that Henry’s own attitude toward his wooden leg shows that he is a hero who not only challenges the myths that try to replace reality, but is capable of making fun of the contradictions of life.

Henry is clearly one of the wise men, since he is also capable of laughing at his own shortcomings, like when the man with the beard tells him that something big is on the way but he cannot give him the details: “*Your secret’s safe, I wanted to tell him. I’ll forgotten it before you’re back in your car. Just tell me*” (DR 213; original emphasis). He is also aware of how ridiculous he and Dinny, another “holy relic,” look when the IRA shows them at vigils and elections rallies: “Then we were side by side, like the chariots in *Ben Hur*. Two old men on the shoulders of the Republic’s sweating future, doing a lap of the square” (DR 265). Henry knows that even in the most serious and tragic events we can discover a spark of humour. Thus, when he gives the G-men the candidates’ names before the Sinn Féin makes them public and they ask him if he is sure about the information he is providing, he replies in a rather humorous tone:

- You’re sure about these?
- Yep. Unless they die in the meantime.
- Is that a stab of humour, Henry?
- Men who don’t eat die, I said.—That’s the tactic.
- He looked at me. The men in my life had started to look at me.
- You’re enjoying yourself, Henry, said the Clare man.
- I thought about this.
- Yeah, I said.—I am. (DR 261)

Doyle has admitted that he is worried about history repeating itself in the selling of Irish culture: “And I suppose while the bankers and politicians have let us down, culture really hasn’t, and suddenly the power of books and literature—and to a lesser extent, I suppose, film—has come to the fore again” (Neary). Evidently, if Ireland were populated by individuals who, like Henry Smart, do not get trapped in absolute seriousness or rigid dogmas, but show the freedom and flexibility of the comic vision, Doyle’s “premonition” would never become true. Because

the spirit of humour is incompatible with fear and hero worship, Henry is capable of subverting the main tenets of Irish myth and identity, showing the dangerous consequences of exploiting past heroes and martyrs. For Henry people come before ideas and this is why he always shows compassion and sympathy for the victims of political violence.

Henry also proves to be the incarnation of the comic hero in his celebration of life and his acceptance of the contradictions of the self and the world. Henry is not destroyed or disappointed by his misfortunes or the injustice and horrors of life, but takes life as a challenge and makes a game of it. In spite of all the suffering he has gone through, Henry insists on affirming life, delighting in life, celebrating life, and he does it till the end of his days. Even though he is tired and wants to die in order not to be a burden for his daughter, his last words show his passion for love and life:

This is the last time. The last time I'll let myself be picked up off the bed. She'll understand. She's tired too.

I'll close my eyes, finally, tonight. It's early afternoon, a nice day. I've seven hours left, maybe eight. I've lived a life. I'm a hundred and eight. I'm Henry Smart.²¹ (*DR* 329)

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²¹ As Moynihan has pointed out, the improbability of Henry being 108 years old shows Doyle's desire to blur the boundaries between the mythic and the realistic (51).

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