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Belonging and Becoming in Roddy Doyle’s A Star Called Henry

An Althusserian and Bakhtinian Analysis

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Introduction

Roddy Doyle’s *The Barrytown Trilogy* (1987-1991), *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993) and *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* (1996) are based on his familiarity with working class speech as an integral part of the daily lives of people living in the North Dublin area. Doyle’s subsequent work, *A Star Called Henry* (1999), is the first volume of a three-part series titled *The Last Roundup*. In *A Star Called Henry*, the narrator, Henry Smart Jr., is eye witnesss to some of the most dramatic Irish historical events. The second and third volumes, *Oh, Play That Thing* (2004) and *The Dead Republic* (2010), follow the same narrator’s adventures in New York, Chicago and his return to Dublin. The novels encompass the whole of the 20th century and at the end Henry Smart is 108 years old.¹

*A Star Called Henry* lends itself to a division into four parts and Henry Smart is the narrator of all four. In the first part, the father, Henry Sr., is a bouncer and hired killer who disappears early on, as does his alcoholic mother, Melody. Henry and his little brother, Victor, have no other choice than to fend for themselves as so-called “street arabs.” The second part of the novel describes one of the most important events in recent Irish history, the Easter Rising of 1916. Henry is only fourteen at the time but is one of the soldiers in the Citizen Army occupying Dublin’s General Post Office. The third and fourth parts are Henry’s portrayal of the five-year War of Independence which culminates in the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921. He traces his career in the Irish Republican Army, where he helps to train, supply and organize new rebel groups. Henry then carries out an increasing number

¹ In this thesis, the father will be referred to as Henry Sr. and the son and narrator as Henry. The title of the novel will be shortened to SCH in the text notes.
of violent acts “for the cause,” including assault, arson and murder. In committing these acts, he is often accompanied by his wife, Miss O’Shea. Henry is always in the middle of a fight or a murder. Nonetheless, he is consistently denied a place in the inner circles of national power. When he sees his own name on a hit list held by his former partner, Jack Dalton, he realizes that he himself will soon be murdered, as there will be no place for him in the new regime. Before going underground and fleeing to America, Henry, using his father’s wooden leg as a weapon, kills the gangster boss, Alfie O’Gandon (or Mister O’Gandúin TD as he later became known), says good-bye to his baby daughter Saoirse, “Freedom,” who he leaves with her grandmother, and to his wife, who is standing at an open window of the Kilmainham Gaol.

_A Star Called Henry_ is both a cultural and historical account of early 20th century Ireland and a fictional memoir. Henry’s own situation mirrors the social and economic indifference to and/or hostility towards the poor by the British military, the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, the Catholic Church and ordinary citizens. The novel itself was written during a future-oriented period of economic prosperity in Ireland known as the “Celtic Tiger.” During this period, many Irish writers chose fiction as a medium to critique and deconstruct Irish memory and to expose the purported historical exactness of Ireland’s traditional myths of collective identity. Writers concentrated “on the intersection of cultural history and personal memory” (Frawley ed. qtd. in Downum 76). The flexibility of the novel form in particular is considered to be an effective way to focus on other registers than those of traditional epic heroes. The result is a resistance to the monologic language of past epics in favor of creating space for more pressing issues, such as the plight of the poor and the need to reform social policies, such as women’s rights.
In his article “Between Displacement and Renewal,” Åke Persson re-introduces the term “third space.” It was originally used to describe the resistance or community action needed to influence economic planning in Dublin and the surrounding area and was a grassroots attempt to govern from the bottom up rather than from the top down (69). Persson uses the term “third space strategies” to refer to Doyle’s invention of “an imagined community” of characters in this space whose experience has been previously ignored in Irish history (62). He argues that even if individual characters in the space fail to change existing power structures, their story is still one of resistance to official Ireland and a questioning of Ireland and Irishness (Persson 64). Therefore, a literary text can become politically charged simply by the established myths and ideologies being challenged by characters in the margins of the mainstream culture, outside the sphere of national influence (Persson 62). By filling the “third space” with different modes of discourse, especially popular ones, on different semantic levels, the speech of Doyle’s characters promotes a flexibility of meaning that in turn can have transformative potential and reveal nationalist power structures (Persson 63).

In “Revisioning of Cultural Memory and Identity;” Kristina Deffenbacher uses the concept dialogic to mean that, instead of rejecting or ignoring past narratives and claiming that the present one is the “true” one, Doyle juxtaposes the old and the new, thereby imagining a more inclusive mythology of Irish history and identity, where nationalist songs and iconic myths co-exist with magic realism, grotesque figures and places (Deffenbacher 150). She observes that the nationalist narratives are extremely powerful and cannot be ignored, a lesson that Henry learns the hard way. Readers understand long before he finally does, that the strategies of the Republican propagandist Jack Dalton undermine the lives of the urban working class, of women and of ethnic and racial minorities. Henry’s memories and experience become part of nationalist ideology and he is prepared to risk his own life and that
of others by failing to recognise its strength (Deffenbacher 149). Henry is duped into believing romantic myths about himself, and in doing so, ignores the working-class anger that he fought for in 1916 (Deffenbacher 152). Despite this, Henry’s story serves to open up and extend the question to which every Irish person wants an answer, namely “Who are we?” (Deffenbacher 150).

In his book *Writing Ireland’s Working Class: Dublin After O’Casey* Michael Pierse’s principal criticism of the novel centers on Doyle’s depoliticized, often irrational protagonist, Henry Smart, “... a passive being, incapable of ‘discerning,’ reacting and pre-programmed by highly personal grievances and traumas” (Pierse 233). According to Pierse, Henry is a nationalist protagonist who fails as a political hero of the working class and instead becomes the victim of his own environmental determinism. Pierse writes that although Henry struggles against and challenges traditional stereotyped views of Irishness and political martyrdom, the novel fails as a proletarian historical account and “It glibly reasserts many debilitating, hackneyed historical discourses ‘from above’” (222).

According to Pierse, Henry’s determinism is in direct conflict with Marx’s dialectical materialism where Marx argues that working-class consciousness is not tied to a mechanical base structure as claimed by orthodox Marxists, but can be reversed through the actions of human agency (Erik Olin Wright in Pierse 235). As such, structure does not totally control agency but both are interconnected and consist of “complex dialectical phenomena” which are not always interdependent (Anthony Giddens qtd. in Pierse 235). Doyle’s superficial portrayal of Henry’s person and motives are no substitute for a closer historical analysis or examination of hegemonic intricacy (Pierse 234). Pierse argues that “Doyle parrots a depoliticized discourse of undifferentiated barbarity” which leads to the inference that working-class agency is useless (246). The result is Doyle’s “liberal-humanist denunciation” (Pierse 238-9) of violent killers of
the likes of Alf Gandon, Jack Dalton and Ivan Reynolds, criminals waiting in the wings for a chance to play a decisive role in an Irish bourgeois government resurrected after the departure of the British.

To support his arguments on Henry’s material determinism, Pierse refers to one of the oft-quoted passages from the 1916 Rising where Henry is awaiting the British arrival at the G. P. O.. He fires his first bullets not at a British soldier but at a department store window where children’s clothing is displayed “I shot and killed all that had been mocking me and other hundreds of thousands behind glass and locks, all the injustice, unfairness and shoes—while the lads took chunks out of the military” (SCH 105). In the end, the real enemy is not the British, but the objects he has been deprived of, especially the shoes which his parents could not afford. Pierse maintains that Henry remains a nationalist subject, adverse to change, and that his present behavior and consequently his future actions are solely determined by his experience of previously deprived social and material conditions.

This thesis will argue against Pierse’s claim that the protagonist Henry Smart of *A Star Called Henry* can only live his life one way, a victim of his deprived material and social conditions. Furthermore, it will argue that *A Star Called Henry* is not meant to be solely an historical account of the time, nor is Henry simply a failed proletarian hero, as Pierse claims. Althusser’s structured theories on Belonging are analysed in relation to Henry’s need to belong as a nationalist subject. At the same time, Doyle uses the freedom of the novel form to create a dialogic mixture, a “third space,” of historical events and storytelling devices, such as magic realism, the grotesque, music, myth and more. The inclusion of Bakhtin’s spirit of the carnival further emphasizes Henry’s Becoming as a state of flux and ambivalence which is active unto the very end of the novel. As Doyle is not intent on debunking one or the other, the “third space” embraces interaction in which other voices and other versions than the socially accepted are heard
and even given priority. In this space, everyone has equal dialogic status and ideas are accepted, tried and tested there by all in the counter-culture of a Bakhtinian world. The different theoretical perspectives of Althusser and Bakhtin provide an interesting and original sounding-board for the actions and reactions of the novel’s characters, as well as a parallel political and historical criticism of Ireland’s past, and by extension, its present and future. This thesis will maintain that the novel ends with Henry suspended between Belonging and Becoming in a context whose significance has not yet been evaluated and that this conclusion is in line with the free form of the novel.

**Louis Althusser’s Ideology of Belonging**

Louis Althusser is interested in how language in different contexts is used to create subjects that will accept and repeat the ideas of the state. He develops his ideas on how nationalist power is attained in his essay “Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses.” Althusser argues that ideology is the imaginary relationship between an individual and his/her conditions of existence. An individual is convinced to unconsciously accept and reproduce the status quo of the ruling class. State power is exercised with the aid of two repressive structures which strive to reproduce society’s organization while maintaining and protecting the interests of the ruling class. *Repressive state apparatuses* or RSAs, such as the police, prisons, the army and the courts, intervene when required, either violently or even non-violently, to control the subordinate classes (Althusser in Rivkin and Ryan 701).

However, the ruling class cannot maintain its hegemony only by physical force; it must at the same time exercise control over minds in order to create a sense of nationalism. To accomplish this, the controlling group uses ideology in the form of a second system called ISAs, *ideological state apparatuses* (Althusser in Rivkin and Ryan 701). Ideology is a
structural phenomenon, and therefore has always been present in the unconscious of human beings (Althusser in Rivkin and Ryan 696). Furthermore, its content can be anything the ruling class decides. However, because ideology always works unconsciously, it is also illusory, as it gives the impression of free will. People imagine that they are in charge, that they are freely choosing what they believe in, and that they can justify why they believe it (Althusser in Rivkin and Ryan 694).

ISAs organize social life so that the dominant ideology can create subjects which reproduce the social order, the status quo. According to Ieva Zake, the institutions that contain the values of the status quo are religious and educational institutions, the family, the legal system, political organizations, trade unions, mass media, culture including the arts and literature, and even sports (222). These institutions create subjective consciousness through socialization and interpellation, whereby an individual is addressed as a subject, by reflecting his world and thereby activating him or her so that a specific individual imagines that he or she is part of something that corresponds to this mirrored vision of himself (Goldstein 24). ISAs invent a shared collective memory, that is, nationalist history, language and cultural identity, where subjects “know, speak and practice the nation” (Zake 243) and can be motivated and manipulated in political struggles (Zake 236). Subjective consciousness is encouraged in both dominant and subordinate constellations, resulting in the co-existence of nationalist ideology in different groups and even their co-operation in the same social framework: “… elites can see themselves as executing a historical project of national liberation, while subordinate groups can interpret themselves as important agents of social change” (Zake 224). In this way, ideology establishes a link which appears to be real and authentic between individuals and social, political and economic systems. Ideology then interprets group experiences and applies them to their different social positions (Zake 224).
Belonging in *A Star Called Henry*

Throughout *A Star Called Henry*, the British control the country through the police: “They had their own spies and other spies, touts and stool pigeons; the country was covered in a close mesh of whispers, all sliding back to Dublin along voice-made wires, to G Division headquarters in the Castle” (SCH 192). RSAs active in the novel include the “rozzers,” (The Dublin Military Police), “the “peelers,” (British detectives), the RIC (Royal Irish Constabulary), the Black and Tans, (a brigade of British soldiers sent in 1920 by the British government to control rebel activity) and G-men (G-division), an anti-rebel police operating from Dublin Castle. At the same time, other repressive groups and individuals from the lower echelons of Irish society form unofficial RSAs who safeguard and maintain capitalist interests through an underground mafia-like world of criminality. Towards the end of the Civil War, former underworld assassins such as Alf Gandon, Jack Dalton and Ivan Reynolds magically reappear as cynical bourgeois entrepreneurs and/or government dignitaries of the “new” Ireland.

At the beginning of the novel, Henry Smart Sr., “the king of the bullies,” (SCH 15) protects the capitalist interests of the unofficial criminal RSAs. In order to survive, he is employed to keep the peace as a bouncer and hired assassin outside a brothel so that it can continue as an important meeting place for those who are in direct or indirect control of the society: “There was privacy inside for those who needed it and license for those who wanted to whoop. The rozzers and clergymen could come and leave under the cover of night. The sailors could come at any time they wanted” (SCH15). Clergymen, sailors, soldiers, butchers, politicians, aldermen, bankers met there. The madam, Dolly Oblong, “… ran a house for all men. All men with the money and the manners” (SCH 15). From time to time, Henry Sr. receives a note from Alf Gandon with the name or names of someone he wanted Henry Sr. to
silence forever. When he is no longer needed, Henry Sr. is murdered from the same list which contains the names of the men he himself is supposed to kill.

After Henry Sr.´s death, Henry and his little brother Victor have no other choice than to try to survive as “instant street arabs” (SCH 45), belonging nowhere and to no one. During the day, they beg for or steal food and at night they sleep under the tarpaulins along the canals. As Henry grows, he becomes cognitively aware of the injustice of poverty but equally of the permanence of his plight as a subordinate despite his life skills:

We survived but never prospered. We were never going to prosper. We were allowed the freedom of the streets-no one gave a fuck-but we´d never, ever be allowed up the bright steps and into the comfort and warmth behind the doors and windows. I knew that. I knew it every time I jumped out of the way of a passing coach or car, every time I filled my mouth with rotten food, every time I saw shoes on a child my age. I knew it every time a strange man would offer us money or food to come with him. I knew it, and the knowledge fed my brain. I was the brightest spark in a city full of bright and desperate sparks. (SCH 66)

One day, in an attempt to “better themselves” (SCH 72), the two boys enter a school building and meet a teacher, Miss O´Shea, for the first time. Their socialization as subjects begins as they are simultaneously confronted with both Irish education and religion, as virtually all schools were under the control of the Catholic Church. Henry reports that they learnt “off by heart” to “sing holy songs, … that the best toilets come from Stoke-on-Trent and that God was our father in heaven, creator of heaven and earth” (SCH 72-3). After two days, they are discovered and expelled from the warmth of the classroom by a grotesque Mother Superior, “an old crow ... two black eyes divided by the white beak” (SCH 77), who
also functions as an RSA. She threatens to send them to an orphanage and has the power to do this, as both institutions are controlled by the Church.

Further on, during a period of working on the docks, Henry is recruited into Sinn Féin by Jack Dalton, one of the rebels from the Easter Rising. Dalton has just returned from serving time in English prisons and now sees himself as one of the architects of the “new” Ireland (SCH 170). Henry is in the process of rejecting all the politics, violence and killing he has been involved in, when he meets Dalton in a pub. Dalton then lures Henry into accepting him as a surrogate family, thereby cultivating a sense of Belonging in the form of a warm place to sleep and good food, something that Henry has never had: “The night before I’d been homeless and alone and now I was warm and full, in the wild and generous company of Jack Dalton, my new friend and old comrade in arms” (SCH 171). In order to further maintain and strengthen Henry’s level of nationalist Belonging, he must imagine that he shares the collective memory.

Dalton then “hails” or interpellates Henry by “feeding” him, line by line, a frayed Gaelic mythic ballad with Henry’s name inserted, pretending that it had been personally written for him by the “people.” The song is pivotal in persuading Henry to swear loyalty to the rebel cause. In addition, it provides a chance for Doyle to take an anti-nostalgic swipe at the negative effect clichéd folk songs can have on the collective memory:

_He fought like a lion with an Irishman’s heart_

_The pride of all Gaels was young Henry Smart,_

_To give up my gun, they’ll need tear me apart,_

_The heart of a Fenian had the bold Henry Smart_

_Oh he slipped through the night, did the bold Henry Smart (SCH 170, 175, 183)._
In addition, Dalton takes Henry to céilís, Gaelic dancing competitions, and parades with banned hurleys, a kind of club used in Gaelic sports and also to “crack heads” when necessary. In a pre-arranged meeting, Dalton accompanies Henry to a secret pub to be introduced to Michael Collins, one of the surviving rebels of the Volunteers during the Easter Rising who has reappeared as leader of the I.R.B. With a look, Collins shows Dalton that Henry is ready for initiation. Henry proudly reveals: “Before I went back to my bed that night, I’d been sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the secret society at the centre of the centre of all things. I was a Fenian. I was special, one of the few. And before the end of the week, by late Saturday afternoon, I’d murdered my first rozzer” (SCH).

Henry falsely believes that he will become accepted in the inner circle centre of power. However, the center is already occupied by an economically self-interested elite, headed by the same Michael Collins, the son “of a brainy Cork family” (SCH 229). While Collins takes the train, Henry is forced to cycle in the rain to his “assignments:

I was excluded from everything. I was on a bike in the rain, all alone on the road. I was never one of the boys. I wasn’t a Christian Brothers boy, I was unlucky enough to miss Frongoch, I’d no farm in the family, no college, no priest, no past…And none of the other men of the slums and hovels ever made it on to the list. We were nameless and expendable, every bit as dead as the squaddies in France. We carried guns and messages. We were decoys and patsies. We followed orders and murdered. (SCH 208)

In this quotation, Henry again reveals that his social origins make it virtually impossible for him to share the same collective memory as the ruling class, whose primary goal is to legitimize its own future goals: The history-producing ISAs must not only create a stable society and state to establish the dominance of an elite group, they must also aim at creating a firmly rooted,
distinct and unique national subconscious, embedded in notions of historically continuous identity and national future aspirations (Zake 229).

Because of the “street arab” he has been, Henry is excluded from the self-named clique of leaders like Jack Dalton and Michael Collins. When Henry meets Collins after the Rising, he observes that the leader has undergone some changes: “He had the startings of a moustache that already added years to him; he was a businessman, a family man on his way home” (SCH 203). Henry gradually begins to understand that the rebel leaders are cynical, chameleon-like creatures: one moment they are hired assassins like himself, the next they are respected ministers in the new government, positions which are beyond his reach. The head gangster, Alf Gandon, is described by old Missis O´Shea, Henry´s mother-in-law: “-He´s a changed man…A Shinner and a Minister no less. Talking about important things beyond in the Mansion House. Changing his name to O´Gandúin” (SCH 239).

Until the very end of the novel, Henry is exposed to just enough nationalist ideology to create a manipulated sense of Belonging which will ensure that he will unconsciously support nationalist ideology, but not enough to be accepted into the inner circle of leaders. While he remains at a standstill, other former rebels like Michael Collins and Jack Dalton are in constant movement, changing clothes and political beliefs when needed, to suit the “new” Ireland. However, the novel does not end here and a strong dose of the counter-culture of the carnival could save the day for Henry.

**Mikhail Bakhtin´s Dialogic of Becoming**

Mikhail Bakhtin develops his ideas on language and social power in three essays. In “Discourse and the Novel,” he states that language is inherently *dialogic*, popular,
multiaccentual, something that is formed and reformed through social interaction (Bakhtin in Rivkin and Ryan 684-5), while authoritative language, as in epic poetry, “does not merge . . . but remains sharply demarcated, compact and inert” (Bakhtin qtd. in Rivkin and Ryan 683). While Althusser describes how nationalist hierarchy is created, Bakhtin outlines a world of freedom, where everyone has equal dialogic status and where ideas are accepted, tried and tested by everyone.

In a second Bakhtinian essay, “The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,” the translator Caryl Emerson, in a footnote, outlines a number of intrinsic dialogic characteristics of the novel which, according to Bakhtin, free it from the epic. The novel is open to the future and “novelistic heroes are never exhausted by their plots; there is always some other way they might have acted and some other way of understanding their actions. Epics can prophesy; novels only predict” (Emerson 263-4). Emerson then quotes Bakhtin on the characters of the novel: “These are heroes of free improvisation and not heroes of tradition, heroes of a life process that is imperishable and constantly renewing itself, forever contemporary--these are not heroes of an absolute past” (Bakhtin qtd. in Emerson 258). Bakhtin’s dialogical view is that human existence is not a fixed state of being; on the contrary, existence emanates from negotiation with those in the world. The novel form allows the author to develop, to play, to come and go, to manipulate, to connect, to distribute the word at will. In fact, he can create not just characters, “but full-fledged subjects” (Emerson 259).

In a third essay “Rabelais and His World,” Bakhtin exemplifies François Rabelais as a writer who creates a second world where language, literature, and political life combine in a carnival spirit or carnivalesque sense of the world; where the human body is the eccentric body, the grotesque body which is constantly in flux. In this counter-culture, the inhabitants are not so much fully-developed characters as carnivalistic comical and/or sinister grotesques, each one
having his or her own distinctive voice and character. The grotesque body is incomplete, collective, rather than individual. In a Bakhtinian world, a jester can be proclaimed king and a clown elected abbot, bishop or archbishop. “In the churches directly under the Pope´s jurisdiction, a mock pontiff was even chosen” (Bakhtin qtd. in MacMillan 260). The spirit of the carnival thus creates a “third space” where voices normally excluded from dialogue with authority are permitted to be heard (Robinson 2011 in MacMillan 260).

**Becoming in A Star Called Henry**

In *A Star Called Henry* there are at least two Dublins: one is above ground and is a surreal, dystopian vision of Dublin as a city of slums, poverty, consumption and horrifying squalor. As mentioned above, the center of activity in the city is a brothel where shady businessmen decide who lives and who dies and all of the girls are called Maria. Below ground is a dark Hades-like system of rivers and sewers which rinse the city of unwanted rubbish, including the corpses of murdered policemen and criminals. For the two Henrys, the system serves mainly as an escape route from the police.

Doyle´s novel is full of eccentric grotesques. Henry writes that “I flooded the room with my stinks and waxes. I roared and screamed my right to be named” (SCH 34). His mother Melody goes insane by imagining that her dead baby, Henry, is a star in the sky. His grandmother, Granny Nash, a leathery old banshee, is at the same time a feminist and bookworm after she miraculously learns to read from the newspapers which served as bedsheets during Henry´s birth. In the midst of the battle of the Rising, the soldiers are attacked by crow-like “shawlies,” poor women demanding their allowances from the Post Office (SCH 101).
Material objects are also part of the carnivalesque. Excrement mediates “between the living body which gives birth to the dead body and the dead body which gives birth to the living one” (Lachmann 147). An example of the power of excrement can be found in Henry’s comical narrative: “There was the one about Lady Gregory’s head gardener knocking on the door wanting to buy whatever fell into my nappy to spread around Lady Gregory’s rose bushes; there’d be a man with a carriage and bucket to carry my shite west to Coole” (SCH 23). A political point that Doyle symbolically makes here is that the aristocracy flourishes at the cost of the working class. Alternately, that the working-class defecates on the revered Gaelic myths and culture of the aristocracy.

In the impoverished Smart family, a cooked meal is an occasion for carnivalistic gluttony. In this case, a dead rabbit, which the midwife Missis Drake seemingly magically conjures up, brings new life to the Smarts: a stew becomes “an orgasmic depiction” (McMullen 128), an orgy of eating. The death, disemboweling and cooking of an animal takes on the cosmic proportions of a sacrificial carnival rite of a life/death opera where the rabbit dies so that the Smart family can live. The music of the spheres, where celestial bodies make music, becomes in the words of Henry Jr. “the music of the forks on plates” (SCH 28), accompanied by the instrumentals of: sucking, coughing, groaning and gulping. The music is further enhanced by the accompaniment of the humming of Melody’s breasts which miraculously become filled with milk:

They sucked the soup off carrots, swallowed chunks of the bunny. They coughed

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2 Lady Gregory was an Anglo-Irish promoter of Gaelic identity. The rose is a traditional symbol of sacrifice and its red color symbolizes the bloodshed in the Irish cause for freedom.
and filled their mouths with bits of spud that melted to wonderful slush on their tongues. There was no room for talk. I listened to the music of the forks on plates and to the ferocious, happy groans and gulps as they shoved Missis Drake’s grub down pipes that had never known anything like it. My mother’s Breasts hummed to me. My lips searched for her (SCH 28).

The life/death binary is also present in Henry Jr.’s depiction of the Easter Rising of 1916. For Doyle it is a chance to parody the false piety and morals of the conflict. Above ground at the General Post Office, death is constantly present: the soldiers’ say their rosaries as the British increase the bombardment. Store windows are destroyed and the population begins to loot. Henry describes the line of looters as a mad carnival parade:

A gang of women wore pots as headdresses. They clanged their hats with wooden spoons and spatulas ... a kid skidded by with four tiers of a wedding cake ... Four more women went by with a bed on their backs. A man was trying to stop them; he was asking them to take the stuff back where it had come from. One woman started fencing with him, ladle versus umbrella. (SCH 116)

Declarations of freedom are typical of the carnival in its attempts to parody and upset the status quo. Bakhtin also emphasizes the importance of equality in which all the participants demand equal dialogic time. He thus, according to Catherine MacMillan and in agreement with Persson and Deffenbacher, “creates an alternative social space characterised by freedom, equality and abundance where the masses, normally excluded from dialogue with authority, can make their voices heard” (Robinson 2011 qtd. in MacMillan 260).

While bombardments are destroying the city above, below in the basement, another battle is taking place: Miss O’Shea declares herself a free woman, free to do as she wants, free
from the traditional duties of women (SCH 122). Miss O’Shea, originally recruited by the *Cmann na mBan*, the Women’s Auxiliary, to make stew for the soldiers, refuses to follow orders. She declares that she too is there to fight for her freedom, like the men, to do what she wants (SCH 122). In order to stress the point, sex between them takes on grotesque as well as comical proportions in a “reverse” rape as Henry is more or less thrown on his back by Miss O´Shea, who reminds him that she is still his teacher. She totally dominates the sexual act in an exaggerated, animalistic rite, as she bites and slaps him, shoves and pulls, growls and hammers him into the stamps on the floor. She pounds, cuts his neck and gives him a hiding which he says he “never recovered from” (SCH 121). When stamps from the basement floor with the face of Edward VII on them become glued to Henry Jr.’s backside, the ambivalent violence of the sexual act becomes the laughter of the carnival.

Miss O´Shea consequently becomes a rebel assassin together with Henry. Of the two, Miss O´Shea proves to be the strongest and most proficient, qualities which earn her the nickname “Our Lady of the Machine Gun” (269), a carnivalesque title which, in its ambivalence, makes her both a benevolent virgin who gives birth to Jesus and a ruthless killer who roams the countryside, looking for Blacks and Tans.

Magic, comedy and grotesque realism are also apparent in Henry Sr.’s coat and wooden leg. He has no family connections and invents his life as he lives it, with the result that each story has many versions, depending on who he is telling it to. The following example, re-told by Henry, describes how his father lost his leg during a cannibalistic sacrifice, a rite which is taboo in “official” life but one that is an integral part of the carnivalesque (Lachmann 148):
He was the son of a Sligo peasant who´d been eaten by his neighbours; they´d started on my father before he got away. He hopped down the boreen, the life gushing out of his stump, hurling rocks back at the hungry neighbours, and kept hopping till he reached Dublin. He was a peddlar, a gambler, a hoor´s bully (SC7).

The character and appearance of Henry Sr. bear a striking resemblance to a peasant figure wearing a ragged coat sewn from many pieces of blue, black or green cloth and who was seen in the carnivals and folk festivals of the 1500s and onwards. The dark colors were important, as this grotesque character is meant to intimidate his enemies. He always carried a stick or small club, a slapstick, a symbol of freedom, freely used in the numerous peasant revolts. This character, which later became better known in the Commedia dell´Arte as Arlecchino or Harlequin, was originally a poor servant with no education, who lived day by day as a rogue or trickster (Widengren 123-133).

In the novel, Henry Sr.´s wooden leg is the club which, among other things, he uses as a deadly weapon to carry out the orders of his gangster boss. The ragged coat reveals his poverty, while its odors and blood spots tell stories of the men he has been ordered to kill. The transfer of the wooden leg and the coat after Henry Sr.´s death ensure that the son will continue along the father´s path of life. Besides identifying him as peasant like his father, the coat constantly absorbs all the smells of the wearer. The inhalation of the odors of Henry Sr.´s coat has a magical effect which not only addicts the present wearer but also future generations. For both Henrys, it is an object of remembrance of things past: of murder, blood, and violence. At Henry´s birth, his father uses the coat sleeve to tenderly wipe his son´s mouth, permitting the enfant to inhale its odor, thus ensuring the son´s dependence on the coat´s powers, even in the absence of the father (SCH 27).
In A *Star Called Henry*, the wooden leg and the coat are the only two material objects Henry inherits from his father. Both these objects are characterically ambivalent in their many uses and therefore contribute to the carnival atmosphere. As an example, the transfer of these two objects from father to son parodies a royal ceremony where a king bequeathes the sceptre and mantle to his successor and son. Here instead, Henry receives the right to remain where he is on the social scale, impoverished and dependent on the criminal underground in order to survive.

During the Rising, Henry, a foot soldier in the Citizen Army, is told by James Connolly, one of the rebel leaders, to rally the men and charge the British military using his father´s wooden leg as a banner: “I took my daddy´s leg from its holster. The Citizen Army had seen it before, and seen what it could do; it had broken heads and rozzers´ fingers during the Lockout. They cheered and laughed. –Up the Republic! I shouted” (SCH 133). The sight of a procession of ragged soldiers wielding a wooden leg as a substitute for The Starry Plough, the banner of Irish freedom, is a blatant as well as a subversive mockery of a sacred symbol. While the leg represents the Smarts´violent past, an equally bloody one is represented by the banner. However, it is at this moment in the hands of the workers, where it really belongs.

At the end of the novel, Henry Jr. holds his daughter for the first time and the baby turns her head towards his coat: “Her lips met months of dust and harder dirt. I held her out before she could suck at its history, and old Missus took her in her hands…I stood up and took off the old coat. I took it to the door and threw it in the yard” (SCH 330). The meeting with his daughter convinces him that his nor her life is pre-determined but free for him to change, to Become. However, first the objects of his past must be discarded. By extension, Ireland´s epic past history, with its blood sacrifice, must also be discarded as dead weight if change is to be brought about.
After supposedly “killing his past” (SCH 336), i.e. after discarding the coat but still gripping the wooden leg, Henry uses it once more to brutally murder the gangster Alf Gandon. He then goes by way of the familiar underground waters to say good-bye to his wife at Kilmainham Gaol, where he releases it: “I’d left the leg in the water, I’d climbed into the Camac from the Liffey. It was well away by now, out in the bay. And I’d be following it soon” (SCH 340). The end is true to Bakhtin’s concept of the novel which is open to the future and to the many alternatives available to the main character. This freedom is symbolized by the flux, the flow of the open water leading out to Dublin Bay and the Atlantic. In changing rivers, Henry also symbolically changes the course of his life. As such, the water acts as a baptism or resurrection from death to life, in which he becomes purified, signalising the promise and challenge of Becoming, At the same time, the carnivalesque is present in a kind of reversal of high and low, i.e. the blasphemous baptismal rite of a rebel assassin who has no other choice to escape than to swim through the sewers and polluted waterways of the Dublin area. The capriciousness and magical properties of the leg could lead him anywhere, as it seems to have a life of its own. Henry says that he will be “following it soon.” The ending is ambivalent and thus is open to a Bakhtinian dialogue, in which everyone can have a say. Henry does release the leg in the water before seeing his wife at the Gaol. This seems to indicate that he wants to discard it. However, the fact that Henry states that he intends ”to follow” the leg suggests the possibility that he will continue in the wake of his father. Perhaps the leg will instead lead him to new destinations on the other side of the ocean and protect him from new threats. As stated earlier, the significance and evaluation of his actions have not yet been negotiated.
Conclusion

*A Star Called Henry* concludes ambivalently with the hero, Henry, suspended in the gap, at the crossroads between Althusser’s Belonging and Bakhtin’s Becoming. Michael Pierse claims that the novel has a circular pattern where there is an imminent danger that Henry will continue in his father’s footsteps. The word Henry uses to describe his father is “gobshite” (60), a good-for-nothing, and Henry uses it also as a denigrating name for himself. At the end of Part Three, Granny Nash stares at Henry, and utters: “You’re just like your father. And that’s no compliment” (289). This determinist interpretation that there is only one way a life can be lived is reminiscent of the monologic discourse of the old Gaelic myths, a discourse Doyle clearly finds destructive, both for Henry and for Ireland.

However, the word “suspended” has the same root as “suspense,” meaning exciting or expectant, and that the ending is not yet revealed. This is the position that this thesis has taken and which is compatible with the novel form that Doyle himself has chosen for *A Star Called Henry*. One could also argue that the old myths of blood sacrifice are simply replaced by new ones in the murders which both Henrys commit for the gangster mob and the I.R.A.. Althusser has stated that ideology has always been present in the unconscious of human beings. As such, it is illusory and falsely gives the impression of free will. Their need to belong somewhere and to someone makes them easy targets of ideology through subjectivity and interpellation. However, if socially deprived people like the Henrys are provided with a space to speak, they are Becoming. By giving Henry and all the other characters a platform to tell their stories in the novel, change becomes possible and the risks of ideological subjectivity are reduced. So, in the end, Henry Smart is in fact a Bakhtinian hero of sorts. In the space opened by Doyle, the characters engage in dialogue with each other, the reader and by extension with the world, as they question the myths and ideological structures of Irish national identity. The characters are
on center stage, speaking and acting from a “third space,” which had previously been excluded from the collective memory of the nationalist narrative. By refraining from placing the “true” version on top of the old, Doyle confirms that there can be multiple versions of the same story, existing side by side, thereby interrupting uniform thinking and instead releasing potential and even bringing about social and political change. Bakhtin’s carnival spirit is an essential strategy in Doyle’s novel for upsetting the status quo of the ruling class. By playing a part in the unexpected, the shocking and the taboo, the characters in the novel can make a difference. However, only in a world turned upside down is Becoming possible.
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