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# **Oppression, Silence, Reaction**

**A Psychoanalytical Reading  
of Paula Spencer**

**in**

**Roddy Doyle's**

***The Woman Who Walked Into Doors***

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## Introduction

*The Woman Who Walked into Doors* is Roddy Doyle's fifth novel. Published in 1996 and set in contemporary Ireland, it introduces a 39-year-old battered and alcoholic mother of four children, Paula Spencer, who lives in a suburb of Dublin. Emotionally scarred, Paula struggles to overcome the difficult times, both consciously and unconsciously. The novel is Paula's soliloquy and represents an attempt to reconcile with her past; it starts with the present tense and then through flashbacks and spiraling memories, her unconscious experiences and sufferings are explored. In an interview with Sbrockey, Roddy Doyle states that "the book could be somehow *her* exploration of what went wrong and what happened to her . . . she's using the novel in many ways to sort herself out" (Sbrockey 546-47, italics in the original).

Doyle's novel has inspired a significant body of literary criticism. 'Remarkable,' 'gorgeous,' 'powerful,' 'compelling,' and 'astonishing' are only some of the adjectives used by critics. There are various articles and reviews which analyze the novel based on different approaches. For instance, the critic Caramine White states in her book *Reading Roddy Doyle* that it has been "well received critically" and has "sold enormously well" (1). White claims that the novel "offers another variation of the hope/despair equation" (21) and observes that "one can discern at least four Paulas. When reinventing herself, the narrator Paula must take stock of the other three Paulas in order to understand how she became who she is. . . . Doyle shows us how these four separate identities are connected and how each has evolved into the next" (White 20).

Among the articles, dissertations and books, there are just a few literary scholars who partly deal with a psychoanalytical perspective when analyzing Doyle's novel. Åke

Persson's "Between Displacement and Renewal: The Third Space in Roddy Doyle's Novels" is one prominent example. Persson reads the novel as "a story of abuse and powerlessness" (66) which is "implicitly permeated with values and ideals that have dominated Ireland since Independence" (63) and claims that "Paula is surrounded, or entrapped, by . . . patriarchal dominance" (67). However, within such perspective, the connection between oppression and Paula's repression along with the defense mechanisms that her unconscious mind adopts remain unaccounted for. Therefore, despite the various articles and critical approaches to this novel, little attention has been paid to the protagonist based on psychoanalytical concepts and Freudian defense mechanisms.

Through the lens of psychoanalysis, this aim of this essay is to analyze Paula Spencer in relation to defense mechanisms in order to offer a different insight into her personality in relation to the existed studies. It will focus on how oppression contributes to Paula's repression and it will reveal Paula's hidden feelings. From this perspective, it will try to contribute to a better understanding of the connection between social oppression and individual repression as articulated in Doyle's novel.

Within the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis, this essay first explores the external forces of oppression that affect Paula's behavior and decisions and presents several incidents of her repressing unwelcome experiences. The second section starts with a brief theory of dreams and fantasies before analyzing Paula's dreams, which reveal her essential feelings. The following sections first present a brief definition of the defense mechanisms of screen memory, denial, and reaction formation and then discuss how they

can be applied to Paula. Finally, this essay includes an analysis of her silences and the stages towards her final awakening, rebellion and freedom.

### **Repression and Defense Mechanisms**

Understanding how unconscious fears and constrictions exert an influence on conscious actions will help reveal the underlying reasons for Paula's behavior. Michael Ryan mentions that the unconscious "is a record of all of our significant experiences. It is the repository of feelings and urges that get pushed out of consciousness. Significant experiences from the childhood remain filed away in the mind and exert an influence on our thoughts and behavior as adults" (93). Sigmund Freud postulated that unacceptable memories, phantasies, wishes, thoughts, ideas and aspects of painful events are pushed back into the unconscious through repression, along with their associated emotions (Holmes and Bateman 29). Therefore, the operation of putting unacceptable feelings and thoughts out of awareness by keeping them 'underground' is referred to as the defense mechanism of repression; its result is the development of a 'false self' (Cramer 7).

According to Freud, the mind "finds alternate ways of expressing urges, desires, and yearnings that are deemed unacceptable by society or that for some other more local reason have to be repressed" (Ryan 94). Such urges seek ways to elude the displeasure that the ego censor imposes on feelings and desires deemed unacceptable. It is possible, in other words, to find indirect expressions of unacceptable urges toward pleasure in seemingly acceptable personal behavior (Ryan 94). In line with the idea of repression and its indirect expression, for example, are the dreams which openly, rather than clandestinely, are an expression of the inner world (Holmes and Bateman 123).

Ryan also supports that, according to Freud, “the conscious mind often performed significant transformations on unconscious material that meant that its final expressed form little resembled the unconscious urge or conflict that inspired it. He called these the ‘defenses’ the ego mobilizes against unacceptable libidinal or unconscious material” (Ryan 95). Holmes and Bateman state that “[t]hese [the defenses] are psychological configurations operating outside the realm of consciousness which minimize conflict, reduce tension, maintain intrapsychic equilibrium, regulate self-esteem and play a central role in dealing with anxiety whether it arises from internal or external sources” (76). Therefore, they change the way in which we perceive ‘reality’ and think about ourselves. To recognize defenses “it also helps to have a ‘third ear’ with which to sense a disjunction, disruption, or a nonsequitur in the flow of discourse—something that hovers on the edge of illogicality or disbelief” (Cramer 13). The mind can invert a feeling into its opposite, so that a yearning for contact can become a desire to do violence. Ryan mentions that “conscious behavior can also be a negation or denial of the real urges that inspire it. A man who insists on “clean” relations with women may in fact be negating his real but feared desire to have “dirty” relations with them” (Ryan 95).

Other repressive defenses include projection, conversion, reaction-formation, isolation, denial (Madison 33) and screen memory (Madison 90). Projection, for instance, involves the attribution of unacceptable feelings to someone else (Cramer 70). In reaction-formation, “we move from one extreme to another as a way of dealing with strong emotions that either threaten to overwhelm the balance the ego seeks to maintain in the mind or are unacceptable in the culture in which we live” (Ryan 96). On the other hand, screen memories, Billig explains are “insignificant memories [which] have

survived the general oblivion” (148) because according to Freud “they expressed the earlier, repressed experiences . . . Such memories are like screens, on which earlier memories are projected in distorted form” (148). These screen memories are to be distrusted as the so-called earliest childhood memory is not a genuine memory-trace. They provide the route to recovering the forgotten and decisive experiences of early life. Interpreting, therefore, the hidden significance of screen memories helps “reach the psychological treasure” which lies in the unconscious (Billig 148). These mechanisms protect the individual’s ego as long as the person is unaware of their function. To conclude, defense mechanisms are psychological strategies which manipulate, or distort reality in order to handle the stress of a social situation and protect the self from anxiety or negative feelings.

### **Repression as a Result of Oppression**

When applying Freudian psychoanalysis, it is necessary to refer to important events that have affected emotionally the protagonist of the novel. *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* was written in 1996 in a predominantly patriarchal culture where women had learnt to subdue and accept values deemed to be traditionally Irish. External forces, such as patriarchal oppression, influence Paula’s conscious and unconscious mind. In his article about oppression in Ireland, Sean Ruth explains that oppression refers to “the *systematic* mistreatment of the members of one group by the members of another group or by the society as a whole” (434, italics in the original). He also states that “[t]he key to the maintenance of oppression . . . is *internalized oppression* . . . This is where people come to believe in their own inferiority and their powerlessness to change things” (435,

italics in the original). One aspect of “internalized oppression . . . is that because of the threat from the dominant group, members of the oppressed group learn to behave in ways that do not provoke retaliation or invite attention” (Ruth 437). Growing up in such a society, women – including Paula – frequently viewed marriage as an institution which involved the repression of their individual needs. Ruth mentions that “[g]iven that someone is female, or older, or gay, or working class, we can confidently predict what kinds of mistreatment they are likely to encounter in their lives” (434). Referring to the process of oppression, Ruth states that “[a]t the base of many oppressions lies the use of physical punishment or the threat of it to ensure co-operation from the oppressed” (434-45). Most women in Ireland, therefore, were obliged to both conform and repress their feelings.

The development of Paula’s personality is not untouched by the social conditions in Irish society and her family’s relationship mirrors the social circumstances in Ireland. No matter how strong her personality, social influences unconsciously dictate Paula’s life and behavior. Growing up in patriarchal Ireland, Paula inevitably faces oppression even in her childhood and adolescence. Her father had ‘supreme’ power over her and her sisters. The first area where Paula experiences oppression is, therefore, in her parental home. Persson states in his article that:

Abuse is at the core of Paula’s story, and what emerges from it could be read as a systematic denigration of her at all levels. As such, Paula may fruitfully be read as a metaphor for the experience of many Irish (working-class) women, who have been denigrated and victimised in a system arguably steeped in rigidly patriarchal, top-down values. One of

the most chilling aspects of the novel is the insight that Paula is surrounded, or entrapped, by this patriarchal dominance, so much so that she is brain-washed by it. (Persson 67)

Paula's father's strong patriarchal values cause severe psychic trauma to his daughters, especially Paula. There is a plethora of examples of paternal oppression. For instance, Paula recalls events happening between her sister Carmel and her father: "He tore clothes off her. He set fire to a blouse she'd bought with her first pay money. He dragged her up to the bathroom. He washed her face with a nailbrush. He locked her in our bedroom. He went after her when she got out. He took his belt to her in front of all her friends" (Doyle 46). Also, during a soliloquy regarding her childhood, Paula mentions "Daddy said he'd kill us [his children] if any of us tried to use it [an emergency toilet]" (13). Paula and her sisters, Carmel and Denise, had forgotten to warn their brother and her father "dragged him over to the toilets in the dark, and the ground was wet and muddy" (13). These events happen in Paula's house as a young girl and unconsciously influence her. However, when she mentions the bad experiences she had with her father (55-59), she refers mostly to those involving her sisters or brother but not herself, which is in itself a form of repression. Carmel's vain effort to make Paula recall such events is revealing:

Do you remember the times when we didn't want to go anywhere on Sunday? Do you remember what happened then? Do you remember what happened if you dropped your fuckin' 99? Well? D'you remember Mammy crying because she'd put too much vinegar on his chips, do yis? Ask her.

-- [Paula] He was nice then, I said.

--When it suited him.

--He was nice. At home. Watchin' the telly. We were always laughin'.

--Yeah yeah, maybe. (55)

This is one of the discussions that Paula has with her sisters which shows that disturbing material disappears from her conscious mind. Only occasionally does Paula accidentally inform the reader of her own past traumatic events. Besides revealing her sisters' suffering, she discloses some details of her own suffering in relation to her tyrannical father. For instance, the first time that she puts on mascara, her father "called . . . [her] a slut" (46). After hearing his words, Paula "had to go back to the bathroom and take it off. . . . [Her] tears had ruined it anyway. . . . [she] came back down and . . . [her father] inspected . . . [her]" (46). Her father's oppression is rigid and his crude words are kept in Paula's unconscious mind and affect her later adult behavior in certain areas such as her future attitude towards men. She does not fight with her father; she does not argue with him; she simply retreats to the bathroom and takes off the mascara. She "remembers being terrified" (46). Paula suffers and puts aside her own needs and desires in order to compromise with her father's expectations. She knows what she is obliged to do and she acts accordingly. Her immediate retreat and crying in order to obey her father's rule is an outlet in order to cover her sentiments. Paula's silent obedience sheds light on the existing sense of inferiority that Irish women of that time felt towards dominating males. Instead of love and affection, Paula's upbringing involves pain and constrictions. Her use of defense mechanisms makes her successfully repress her fears and her desire for affection.

The paternal oppression that Paula faces is also evident on her wedding day. For Paula, getting married to Charlo is her “great escape” (134) from patriarchal oppression. In her own thoughts, “[her] father, [and] Carmel . . . were bitter and warped. They hated happiness. I [Paula] was finished with them, gone” (134). She is struck by her father’s indifference and hatred on her wedding day. She reveals: “Daddy’s chance to bury the hatchet, to wish me luck, to say that the weather had stayed nice for us; anything. No, though; nothing” (133). Her father’s oppression damages her self-esteem. He does not care whether his daughter finds satisfaction and affection in this marriage. He never asks, he never says a word. Paula’s speech reveals her repressed thoughts towards her father as she says “the grumpy old fucker was paying for it [the wedding]” (134). She desperately searches for a speck of love. Her father’s rigidity is too painful for Paula to comprehend.

Having suffered her father’s psychological abuse repeatedly in her childhood, Paula writes that she “couldn’t wait to stop being Paula O’Leary, to become Paula Spencer” (134). Her great desire to get married and avoid any connection with her parents is a result of oppression. However, unconsciously she has some fears about her marrying Charlo. At Charlo’s first meeting with Paula’s father, she states: “I hadn’t told Charlo to be nice; I was hoping he’d put on a bit of a show” (116-17). Deep in her unconscious mind, the ambition to alter the situation is the reason that makes Paula think that by changing her name she will achieve happiness. These thoughts make her escape from reality and feel that she is a different person. Being with Charlo’s family, Paula feels that they are “a real family” as she is now “one of them” (139). She feels “safe” and “welcome” as they are “funny and impressive” (139). Paula’s positive feelings towards the new family are an indication of a repression of her need for love because of years of

oppression. In order to cope with the traumatic experience stemming from her father's oppression, Paula unconsciously represses her feelings and tries to pretend that life from now on – after her marriage – will become much better. In her conscious mind, however, her desire for love and affection is manifested as sexual desire. Charlo's external macho appearance has attracted her from the beginning. The need to feel loved and desired, which lies in her unconscious, explains her sexual attractions and choices.

At the same time, her mother's attitude does not compensate for the lack of paternal love. Being a woman herself, she has suffered and endured the same demeaning patriarchal values that her daughters have to confront now. She has learnt to subdue and hide her feelings, both positive and negative. This is the reason why she never takes sides in the case of a fight between her husband and her children. For instance, after a fight with her father, Paula confesses that "My mother stayed out of it" (46). Another time Paula remembers:

She never yelled. Would I remember if I'd seen or heard her crying when I was still a baby? It really shocked me. She'd hidden it. She was always so gentle; she'd always had room for me. Carmel says it wasn't like that. She says she knew; she heard Mammy crying in their bedroom. She says that Daddy was never there. Maybe I only remember her dressing me because I dressed my girls . . . the same way . . . Maybe that's all I remember . . . and I'm imagining the rest. (8)

This is one of the few incidents mentioned about her mother which offers several clues. First of all, it shows that her mother is also oppressed and that is why she internalizes her feelings and suffers alone. As White states, Paula's mother "enduring her own dismal

marriage to Mr. O’Leary, has become a nonentity with no opinions or life of her own, and consequently can offer no consolation” (118). Secondly, Paula’s unconscious mind seems to distort her unwelcome memories. She remembers her mother being “so gentle.” But Carmel’s clear memories challenge this image. She firmly states that “it wasn’t like that.” After their long conversation, Carmel tries to trigger Paula’s thoughts:

-- [Carmel] I know what you’re up to, she said.

-- [Paula] what?

--I know.

--What?

--Rewriting history, she said. (56)

It seems that Paula does not even know herself what her unconscious mind is doing at that moment. She denies her sister’s accusations by stating: “I’m doing the opposite. I want to know the truth, not make it up” (57). In fact, that is exactly what her unconscious is trying to do; it is trying to rewrite the past to suit and comfort her. In this way, her unconscious helps repress past events and traumas which upset her conscious mind.

Besides paternal oppression, Paula also faces the domineering attitude of teenagers, especially boys in school. The systematic sexual oppression by both teachers and students makes Paula behave in a different way than she would normally behave under other circumstances. For instance, she recalls an incident between her and a male teacher at school: “He pressed his thumb into me. He dragged it over my bra-strap . . . There was nothing exciting about it, a grown-up man feeling me, feeling me while he was correcting my mistakes. The thumb said that he could hurt me, that was all” (34). Paula does not react; she confesses that “the only good thing about the women teachers . . .

[was that] they didn't mess around with you [girls]" (34). In an interview with White, the latter mentions how Doyle reveals that "[t]he negatively portrayed teachers in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* are based on some of his own teachers" (White 28). Sexual harassment was then a reality that most girls had to deal with daily. Paula confronts male oppression and controls and represses her feelings towards the humiliation she is exposed to. She internalizes oppression and believes that it is she herself who is provoking it. She confesses:

There were things about me that were wrong and dirty. I thought that then; I felt it. I didn't say it to anybody; I wouldn't have known how to and I wouldn't have wanted to. I was a dirty slut in some way that I didn't understand and couldn't control; I made men and boys do things. I used to smell myself to see if it was that, some sort of a scent that I could wash off and they'd leave me alone and it could all go back to normal. (35)

Being called "a slut" was a common term of abuse against women, regardless of their behavior. White refers to "the rigid societal codes that girls followed for fear of being labeled a 'slut'" (117). Therefore, the existing oppression towards especially Irish girls in public areas and institutions is closely connected to Paula's experiences as a young girl. This sexual oppression is also evident in other more intimate spheres. She reveals: "My brother called me a slut when I wouldn't let him feel me. I was fourteen; he was twelve" (47). Her father's, her brother's, her male friends' and her male teachers' oppressive and humiliating behavior cause extreme psychic trauma to Paula. She represses the psychological trauma and insecurities by ignoring those unresolved conflicts and

traumatic past events and by marrying Charlo. She “was Charlo’s girl now and that made me respectable” (49). Linked with this idea is Paula’s escape from reality by marrying Charlo; Paula represses the oppression she suffers and feels liberated as she gains social recognition. White mentions that “dating Charlo commands such respect from the neighborhood that Paula feels free from societal restrictions—for the first time in her adult life” (117). Thus, Paula’s thinking only about entering a new life, her marriage, facilitates her mind to repress the oppression coming from her father or her male friends and teachers.

Paternal and sexual oppression are the factors that make Paula repress unwelcome thoughts and accept spousal oppression and mistreatment. Soon after her marriage, though, Paula realizes that her father’s rigid personality and oppression were nothing compared to Charlo’s. After so many years coping with her father, her brother, her male teachers or classmates, Paula now faces the violence of her husband. When Paula talks about the first incident of violence carried out by Charlo, her short sentences are connected with her mind’s effort to deal with and repress the negative experience. Making them short or abrupt is a way to diminish the event and make it look insignificant or trivial. She remembers: “He [Charlo] lost his temper. And he hit me. He lost his temper. It was as simple as that. And he hit me. He sent me flying across the kitchen. I hit the sink and fell. I felt nothing, only shock. And a spinning in my head” (162). Paula’s thoughts reveal her husband’s cruelty and aggressiveness: “Broken nose. Loose teeth. Cracked ribs. Broken finger. Black eyes. . . . Stitches in my mouth. Stitches on my chin. . . . He kicked me up and he kicked me down the stairs. . . . Hit me, thumped me, raped me. Seventeen years. He threw me into the garden . . . He tore out clumps of my hair . . .

He set fire to my clothes” (175-76). The possessive oppression first of her father and later of her husband leads Paula to push her negative thoughts into her unconscious mind. Marsh also observes that she “is not allowed quietly to inhabit the comfortable roles she desires for herself: the good daughter, the good wife, the good mother. From her early childhood her father and brother are abusive” (155). Having been denied parental love is the core reason that makes Paula repress her need for love and affection, which explains her continuous efforts to acquire pleasure through her relationships.

To summarize, social, parental and spousal oppression contribute greatly to Paula’s repression of her negative experiences. Her repression is expressed in the text in several ways. She distorts, omits and denies information which is part of her memories. She represses her most painful events; she doubts memories and isolates information in order to maintain her well being. In order to understand what repressed desires Paula is carrying around with her, it is vital to look at her dreams.

### **Dreams and Fantasies**

Dreams reveal what lies in the unconscious. Rivkin and Ryan mention that according to Freud, dreams “express wishes or desires that cannot find expression in waking life precisely because they are at odds with the requirements of the ego. . . . Unconscious wishes can find expression in dreams because dreams distort the unconscious material and make it appear different from itself and more acceptable to consciousness” (390). Freud believes that dreams “try to reestablish equilibrium by restoring the images and emotions that express the state of the unconscious” (qtd. in Holmes and Bateman 123). Billig also observes that “[i]f one is searching for the process of repression, then one

might imagine that the clues are always to be found in the obscurest places – in dreams, in the oddities of neuroses, in startling slips of the tongue” (38). Paula’s repressed desires and thoughts will therefore be revealed by paying closer attention to her dreams.

Interpreting her dreams which are an escape-hatch will reveal the origins of her problems. In chapter 18, Paula describes several dreams she has, most of which have to do with men and some “crushes” she has (98). It is necessary to point out that as she remarks, she “was never a slut in these daydreams” (100). Dreaming that she was “never a slut” suggests the extent of the trauma she had experienced as a teenager when she was constantly called one. In her conscious mind, she is made to feel like a ‘slut.’ Through her dreams, the reader realizes what she is missing the most; she says: “Most of what we did was talk. We held hands after a while. He put his head on my shoulder . . . it was always warm” (100). This suggests that she misses the intimacy of a loving relationship; she misses a warm hug; a sweet kiss. Neither her father nor her husband provided her with simple but humane sentiments. Sigmund Freud observes that “the dream is a *sort of substitution* for . . . emotional and intellectual trains of thought” (Chapter I, *n. pag.* italics in the original). The abuse she encountered as a child shatters her sexual identity and makes it difficult for her to achieve a coherent adult identity.

Besides this dream, she also has dreams about sex. She confesses: “I made up dreams about sex as well. Anywhere, any time. Mad things came into my head – men, Charlo, bits of fruit, everything. Mad things . . . I’d store up the sexiness, keep it away; rub against a wall, then stop and wait, store it up” (100). Sigmund Freud explains that dreams “*are concealed realizations of repressed desires*” (Chapter III, *n. pag.* italics in the original). Interpreting the symbolism of Paula’s dreams provides clues for her hidden

wishes. The “bits of fruit,” for example, may be connected to the idea of the forbidden, the seduction, or the temptation as in the case of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. Any immoral indulgence or pleasure is hidden in Paula’s unconscious and finds its way out through her dreams. Paula’s dreams can be interpreted as the repressed lack of intimate or sexual relationships. Therefore, her hankering for a loving experience reveals its absence from her marriage. The sexual act may also be a symbol of the union of opposites which leads to balance; the balance that she needs.

Describing another dream, she wishes she “didn’t have kids or a fucker for a husband and that a man maybe ten years younger than me would fall in love with me. In one version I met him at Charlo’s funeral” (100). These thoughts which are shocking or disturbing in real life reveal Paula’s deep urges, which are represented in her dreams. This dream is a kind of manifestation that she does not feel entirely well with her current situation and appearance. Her hidden desire to free herself from a tyrannical husband is what makes her dream of his funeral. These are feelings repressed in her unconscious that never come to the surface.

### **Mechanisms of Defense as Adopted by Paula**

In order to cope with oppression and abuse, Paula’s mechanisms of defense are triggered. Anna Freud maintains that there are variable factors which impel “the ego to resort to defensive measures. Ultimately all such measures are designed to secure the ego and to save it from experiencing unpleasure” (70). In Paula’s case, the main factor is the fact that she suffers from social and inner constrictions. The oppression surrounding her is the

cause of Paula's anxiety, stress and repression. Practicing defense mechanisms allows Paula's unconscious mind to create an outlet or a personal space in order to deal with the conflicts. These mechanisms which include screen memory, denial, and reaction formation, influence Paula in her behavior.

### ***Screen Memory***

According to Madison, imaginative falsifications rather than actual episodes are what Freud called 'screen memories' (90). Bruce Ross also states that repression and screen memories could "be stretched to cover any memory error, since *screen memories* dealt with the commission of errors and *repression* with memory omissions. Alternatively, as Fenichel has stated, . . . screen memories deal with compensating ideas, feelings and attitudes" (47, italics in the original). Paula's memory seems to be composed mostly of imaginative falsifications.

Paula's use of screen memory, which helps her deal with an intolerable reality, is present through her spiral soliloquy as she selectively remembers events that conceal the ones which cause her anxiety and stress. One obvious example is when she talks about her time in primary school. She "remember[s] the page; 157" where she was coloring in "a picture of someone famous from the French Revolution" (33) or that "it was raining" (38) but she "can't remember the name of the people who sat behind" her (38). These quotations are an example of a combination of various topics filled with trivial details. Her memories seem to be unimportant in content and neutral in emotional value. Billig reports that in Freud's view, "a trivial memory could only be preserved in conscious awareness if it expressed a deeper, repressed meaning" (149). Paying attention

to trivial details shows that her mind is trying to repress real events. In this way, Paula's distressing traumatic experiences are repressed in her unconscious.

Her thoughts about her parental home and her early childhood are also filtered through screen memory. Although she had a difficult and oppressive childhood lacking familial tenderness, these thoughts are repressed in her unconscious mind as she misremembers: "It was a happy home. That's the way I remember it" (6). However, this is proven not to be the case as "Carmel doesn't remember it like that and Denise won't talk about it at all" (6). Her imaginative thoughts and observations are indicative of forming opposing and less stressful sentiments. The intensity of those disturbing experiences provokes Paula's screening. She presents her life as a child as if they were a happy family caring for each other and provides information which is later contradicted. Her childhood memories, which are being recalled falsely, screen out other distressing events. In order to ward off horror memories, she finds her attention, for example, wandering instead to "a hill above the harbor and long grass and walking through it" (13-14). In another case, Paula recalls the old days with her parents by stating that "there were no surprises at home" (11). She happily remembers their having specific food on specific days and then also describes the bath she and her sisters had. But her sister Carmel contradicts Paula in their conversation:

-- [Paula] Mammy scrubbed, Daddy dried us.

--He didn't.

--He did, Carmel.

--Not me.

--Ah Carmel; he did.

--Uh, Uh. (11)

It is clear that imaginative falsifications rather than real events compromise her memories. Paula's paying attention to trivial events or magnifying their importance masks other more significant memories. The juxtaposition between her fond version of her childhood memories and her sisters' indicates her mind's attempt to deal only with positive experiences. Irrelevant details are stressed and her observations of the shocking past events seem to be unreliable. These are some of the instances that show how Paula's screen memory helps her deal with unwanted thoughts and repress the unsatisfactory memories and replace them by tranquil images and an ideal picture of her family, memories that are less painful to confront. In other words, Paula's invented vivid memories of her early childhood are belied by her sisters who insist that the recalled events, which are among her most significant memories, never actually happened. It is Carmel's account that fills the gaps in Paula's account of her childhood memories.

Paula's non-sequential narratives are also an indication of screening. The repeated exchange between past and present or good and bad memories indicates how her unconscious fights to repress events that cause her conscious stress and anxiety. Sitting and writing a memoir of her life is an indication that she is in a desperate need to organize her thoughts. Having the paper as a shield, as an aegis, she frees herself from the societal constrictions. It is what her mind does as a defense – screening the events. This memory game is evident in the first chapters. She remembers the Guard arriving at her house in order to inform her of her husband's death. Paula then experiences a flashback of an event that happened years earlier, when she first met Charlo. Chapter three refers to Paula's hidden thoughts. Its length (only eight lines) reveals her mind's effort to keep

memories of violence away and repress them by keeping them short. In chapter four, she recalls her parental house by focusing mostly on falsified positive images. These non-sequential narratives are an indication of Paula's attempt to ward off traumatic memories. Therefore, moving back and forth, and changing subjects seems to help her organize her mind in order to write her past the way she wants it to be.

### *Denial*

Repressing real experiences in favor of made up ones is connected to another defense mechanism; denial. Cramer mentions that "the concept of denial was expanded to include a warding off of certain internal stimuli, accompanied by a covering over, or a "screen," which substituted for the painful thought" (44). Another manifestation of denial may also be "reversal," which involves "changing the experience of the event into its opposite" (Cramer 45). Holmes and Bateman state that "[i]n contrast to repression, which aims to remove an aspect of internal reality from consciousness, denial or disavowal (Freud 1940) deals with external reality and enables an individual to repudiate or to control affectively his response to a specific aspect of the outside world" (88). Another component of denial that allows reality to be both perceived and rejected at the same time is negation (Cramer 45). Cramer also supports that denial, an "unconscious mental operation" (6), includes several components which

can be subsumed under two broad categories. First, some operations are closely tied to the perceptual system; they ward off reality through not seeing, through avoiding, or through distorting what is perceived. . . . A second form of denial occurs more on the cognitive level and involves

the construction of a personal fantasy. The individual's involvement in this fantasy rivals the perception of reality and replaces it in significant portions of her experience. (45)

In Doyle's novel, Paula exhibits denial as a defense mechanism in many different contexts and situations. Her failure to see or accept what exists in reality is present in her husband's early violent incidents where she denies her devastating reality. Finding the trivial excuse of walking into a door shows her mind's effort to deny the existence of a traumatic event. According to Persson "the expression of the novel's title ('walking into a door') refers to one common reason given by women, publicly and privately, when asked about a black eye or bruises, in an attempt to hide the real reason, namely physical abuse" (Persson 67). Fantasizing an event as a means of covering the real one is a form of denying the truth. Persson states that "the title draws attention to the fact that the true stories have not been told and that false stories have instead been made up, preventing real, lived experiences to be revealed" (66-67).

Denial is also present when Paula remembers her youth. Her denial of the truth, in addition to the defense mechanism of screen memory, as mentioned earlier, creates personal fantasies. True memories of her house or of her father, for instance, are denied in favor of falsified ones. She misremembers flowers in the curtains. She recalls: "I see flowers on the curtains—but there were never flowers on the curtains in our room . . . . [we had] never changed them, always stripes" (7). Flowers are mostly associated with beauty and tranquility – what she wishes for – in contrast to stripes, the actual pattern, which are mostly associated with masculinity and rigidity – what she represses. In this way, she denies and screens real events. Also, her repetitive insistence that her fantasy be

verified by her sisters is a frequent accompaniment of denial. When they do not, then her anger is unleashed and directed towards Carmel, calling her “a hard bitch” (7), as she is the person who challenges her fantasy. In this way, she shows a denial of reality which serves to avoid painful anxiety.

Finally, there are some other instances where Paula exhibits denial in the form of negation. Disturbing feelings relating to her alcoholism, for instance, register but are at once transformed into their opposite. She repeatedly says: “I hate it [alcohol]. I love it” (114) or “I’m in control” but her terror quickly changes into the opposite: “I’m crying, I’m shaking” (114). These are recurrent feelings which allow Paula to alleviate anxiety. Also, phrases like “I don’t care” which immediately change into “I care” (112) show how the defense mechanism of denial helps Paula deny the existence of reality.

### ***Reaction Formation***

Another defense mechanism that Paula’s unconscious mind triggers is reaction-formation. According to Anna Freud, reaction formation is “one of the most important measures adopted by the ego as a permanent protection against the id. Such formations appear almost unheralded in the ego” (Freud 8). Madison also maintains that in “reaction-formation the person is consciously preoccupied with thoughts that are opposite to the dangerous impulses. The effect is to distort consciousness as a means of controlling anxiety” (27). Holmes and Bateman mention that “[i]f an individual adopts a psychological attitude that is diametrically opposed to his conscious wish or desire, it is known as a reaction formation” (88). They also state that reaction formation may also

involve “showing excessive deference to some person one hates, or caring for others when one wishes to be cared for oneself” (Holmes and Bateman 88).

Paula’s desire to be cared for is, therefore, what triggers the defense mechanism of reaction formation which unconsciously makes her care for others, especially her children. This is also connected to her negative repressed feelings and her weak bonds with adults and with her husband. It also leads her to seek the unconditional love and affection of her children. She recalls: “I like giving out to them, rushing them and pushing them. . . . Making sure they have their lunches, checking they have all the right books in their bags. I’m on the case. It’s a happy time” (92). She pays attention and shows the love that she herself lacks to her children. She discloses in her soliloquy: “Whenever I feel really poor I always search for Jack [her son] and look at him; he looks well-fed and prosperous. Getting hugged by Jack is like nothing else in this world” (87). This shows how desperately she needs to feel loved and wanted. Consequently, she totally devotes her life to her children. She recalls: “I had to be alive, awake and doing things. . . . They had to be fed. They had to be hugged. They had to be cleaned. I had to be there. So I lived in the house and I was alive for them” (188). These feelings of extreme responsibility are a reaction that is triggered by her unconscious in order to deal with her anxiety caused by the mistreatment she receives from Charlo.

Reaction formation also involves the adoption of opposing feelings. One prominent example is Paula’s repeated statement of her love to Charlo. Even though he is unfaithful and he has repeatedly hit her, her feeling of hatred turns into the opposite response of love and compassion. She keeps saying: “I still think of Charlo. I miss him. I want him to come back” (91) or “I loved him. My Charlo” (101). Since the feelings of

hate towards him make her anxious, Paula's ego adopts a markedly positive attitude in order to help Paula conceal her hostility. Another instance when this defense mechanism is triggered is the first time her husband hits her. Paula's reaction is the opposite of the expected one. What she remembers is Charlo being "worried. His face was full of worry and love. He was scared. . . . You fell, he said . . . I fell" (162). Talking to herself, she tries to justify her husband's wrongdoing and forget the event: "It wouldn't happen again. Anything. It wouldn't happen again. How could it? It had been a mistake. We'd laugh about it later. Remember the time" (163). Her laughing instead of crying shows her desire for tranquility and happiness. Although she knows deep inside that domestic violence is going to happen again and again, she represses these thoughts by admitting that it is just a solitary incident. Her reaction contributes to the reduction of her tension and helps towards the stabilization of her personality. Paula's reaction-formation shields her from painful and negative thoughts or experiences in order to protect her ego integrity.

### **Silence and Memory**

Mildrof argues that "[a]nother linguistic strategy which further victimizes women who suffer domestic violence is silencing . . . If women do not feel free to open up about their suffering in abusive relationships, if violence is never openly addressed, then there is a risk that the problem is swept under the carpet" (117). However, silencing cannot be considered as a passive acceptance of the norms or the oppression. It is actually an effective form of defense, a form of covering repressed thoughts. Madison observes that specific actions such as "remaining silent, giving absurd associations, avoiding certain topics, repeating certain themes in an unvarying way" are "indicators at the behavioral

level of a repression tendency at work” (45). According to Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger there are overt and covert silences (1104). By overt silences they refer to “a literal absence of speech and narrative. Covert silences, on the other hand, are silences that are covered and veiled by much mnemonic talk and representation. Such silences are not about the complete absence of talk, ritual or practice. Rather, they are about the absence of content” (Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger 1104).

Paula’s case is a representative example of how both types of silences repress other more significant memories. There is a plethora of overt silences with a literal absence of speech. For instance, whenever her father is arguing with her or with her sisters, she prefers to remain silent instead of answering back. It was her sister Carmel who “was always fighting with him [her father]” (46). At school, she was made to feel “wrong and dirty” (35) but again she “didn’t say it to anybody; I [Paula] wouldn’t have known how to and I wouldn’t have wanted to” (35). Another instance of overt silence is her attempt to avoid mentioning Charlo’s violence. She never utters a word about it. She repeatedly thinks: “Ask me. Ask me. Ask me” (Doyle 175). Either “[i]n the hospital” or “[i]n the clinic” or “[i]n the church”, she keeps thinking: “Ask me ask me ask me” (187). However, these remain just thoughts. She does not reveal the torture and the beatings. The doctors at the hospital do not ask her any questions. She reveals: “I’d tell them everything if they asked” (202); however, there is no disclosure, no talk of the topic at hand. Having experienced the existing inferiority of women, Paula’s attitude, which is an example of overt silence, seems to be the only reasonable one as it helps her unconscious to cover distressing thoughts.

There are also a number of occasions when she shows covert silences. These hidden and disguised silences are covered by much mnemonic talk but without content. Based on this, her talk is comprised mostly of trivial details which help Paula forget the past. For instance, her memories of her parental home are mostly about “a lovely big fire,” a “cot [which] was white [and] chipped,” “a picture of a fawn,” or “flowery curtains” (7). Then she talks about “the three sisters [who] went for a few drinks” (7). This is an indication of her mind’s effort to permanently sideline, or forget other, more important, issues of her life. In this way, instead of silencing and avoiding any kind of talking, she prefers to speak by giving irrelevant or insignificant details. This helps her avoid mentioning her father’s violence and oppression. Her mnemonic talk of trivial or insignificant memories veils Paula’s repeated covert silences by making them harder to decipher. Another example where her silence is not immediately apparent is in her mnemonic talk of her life with her husband; her memories include unimportant details which reveal an absence of content. She recalls:

I remember us moving into our brand new house with its lovely smell of paint; . . . I remember that it was Charlo who was carrying John Paul and I was holding Nicola’s hand. I remember that it was a hot day in the middle of a hot week and all the muck of the unfinished roads and gardens had turned into dust. . . . Nicola waved at the farmer in his tractor; I told her to. The man waved back. . . . There was a big chestnut tree . . . I remember being too warm and very excited (193)

These are probably invented memories as she later reveals: “And I believe everything I remember (195) . . . That’s the thing about my memories . . . *There were no good times*”

(197, my italics). The absence of content contributes to her forgetting or repressing real but unwanted events. Silencing the past, either overtly or covertly, is a mechanism her unconscious triggers in order to bury and make her forget disturbing events.

### **Awakening, Rebellion and Freedom**

In her book *Reading Roddy Doyle*, White states: “Paula lacks extraordinary abilities to handle her extraordinary difficulties, yet she does live, and she celebrates her successes, however small, when she has them” (140). Doyle also in his interview with White says “There is room for hope, however. This woman has gone through a brutal marriage for seventeen years and the husband is gone. She actively threw him out . . . [S]he’s going to make a stab at it” (qtd. in White 140). Paula’s reaction to her endless torture eventually reveals itself. Hitting and throwing Charlo out of the house comes as a surprise after so many years of passivity. Little by little, however, Paula unconsciously works towards liberation. There are several events that contribute to her independence, awakening and her final violent reaction towards her husband.

The first event that is closely connected to her gaining independence is her job as a cleaner. Although it is a low-paid and a low-status job, becoming financially independent boosts her ego. She says: “I like the morning cleaning. Don’t ask me why. I’m doing something useful. I’m getting exercise. I’m getting paid” (Doyle 93). It is noticeable that the last reason she mentions is the money. Her desire to be economically independent is rooted deeply in her unconscious. She confesses: “I like the idea of me working . . . I earn money for my family” (106). Economic independence is an indication of personal independence. She also remembers: “He’d [Charlo] laughed when I told him

I'd get a job, that I didn't need his fuckin' money, that I could fend for myself better than he ever had" (209). She has started realizing that life after marriage is not different from the one before marriage as she reveals: "Him [Charlo] and my father were very alike. She [Paula] said – twenty-one years later" (121). This realization, however, is the key to her final freedom.

Another factor that is connected to Paula's reaction towards her husband is the domestic violence she has suffered in almost all the stages of her life. It seems that Paula has internalized the fact that violence is the normal pattern for marriage. Since Charlo has always vented his fury on Paula, it is Paula's turn now to do the same. Consciously or unconsciously, Paula's act of rebellion is connected to her desire to free herself and her daughters of any kind of violence and oppression condoned by dominant patriarchal structures.

The determining step towards her freedom comes after an incident between Charlo and one of her daughters, Nicola. She recalls "when I saw him looking that way at Nicola, when I saw his eyes. I don't know what happened to me – the Bionic Woman – he was gone. It was so easy. Just bang – gone. . . . The frying pan had no weight. . . . I lifted it. Down – gone. *His* blood on the floor. My finest hour. I was there. I was something. I loved" (213). In order to save her daughter from his hatred and brutality and, implicitly from being sexually molested, her unpredictable reaction is startling. White states that "this look forces her out of her fear- and alcohol-induced paralysis, and [she] hits him with a frying pan" (118). Saying that this is her "finest hour" suggests that she does not regret her actions. Her courage and determination make her reclaim her life. These hidden qualities in her personality help Paula resist her husband's oppressive

brutality. Having been brutally abused, Paula decides to put an end to it so her daughter never has to undergo similar suffering. She protects her daughter from oppression and does not allow her to be sacrificed. A revelation or awakening occurs in her mind, which makes her realize what has been veiled all these years. Persson states that

[i]n writing her own story, she takes control. It is fitting, therefore, that this text of resistance ends with Paula knocking Charlo out with a frying pan – a domestic utensil, traditionally seen as belonging to women’s sphere – and literally throwing him out of the house, opening up at least the possibility of transformation and renewal: ‘It was a great feeling, I’d done something good.’” (qtd. in Persson 69)

Paula’s positive feelings regarding her reaction reveal what is repressed all these years. The possibility of “transformation and renewal” is reinforced by this trivial but at the same time significant action.

## **Conclusion**

Doyle’s novel *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* provides ample material for discussion regarding the connection between social oppression and individual repression. White finds a “pattern of Doyle’s confronting graver and more serious social problems in his novels” (145) and Doyle has also stated that “his conscience has increasingly compelled him to bring social reality to light” (White 145).

This essay has focused on oppression, repression, dreams and a number of defense mechanisms, namely screen memory, denial, reaction formation and silence, triggered by the unconscious, and has shown how they help Paula repress her negative

experiences in order to maintain her ego integrity. It has drawn certain conclusions concerning Paula's behavior and explains that Paula's individual repression is linked to social, paternal, and spousal oppression. A predominantly patriarchal society defines and dictates Paula's actions and makes her internalize social and individual constrictions.

In Doyle's novel, there is a clear link between the oppressive patriarchal society and Paula's repression. This essay has discussed that her spiraling memories, flashbacks, fantasies and dreams reveal her psychological and emotional suffering during the important stages in her life. Paula's use of repression veils her fears and conflicts which are 'buried' in her unconscious. Her dreams reveal not only her lack of love and affection but also her deep hatred towards her husband. Her unconscious adoption of defense mechanisms helps her deal with her inner tension and anxiety. The defense mechanism of screen memory helps Paula remember trivial details and conceal traumatic memories. Her trivial and inconsequential memory is compromised of imaginative falsifications instead of actual episodes. Denial, at the same time, is shown to help Paula negate real events in order to ward off external reality. It is also argued that reaction formation unconsciously leads Paula to experience emotions that are opposed to the ones expected. Her feelings for Charlo are proved to be a result of reaction formation. Finally, overt and covert silences become a form of defense and help Paula's unconscious mind cover real thoughts. Accordingly, Paula's absence of speech and the absence of content in her speech are connected to the oppression she faces. However, after years of oppression and silence, Paula's awakening helps her towards a sense of freedom. This is achieved through a series of events that culminate with an episode that occurs between her husband and her daughter, Nicola.

In other words, repression and Freudian defense mechanisms help Paula ignore conflicts or desires and ultimately help her to overcome the patriarchal oppression and suffering and achieve a degree of freedom. Caramine White states that “Doyle manages to make his abused, damaged heroine a remarkable, believable woman who in a qualified way triumphs” (140). To conclude, this essay has attempted to offer a new insight to Paula’s personality and provides a better understanding of the connection between social oppression and individual repression. Future work could analyze how several other defense mechanisms influence not only Paula but also other members of her family. Doyle’s portrayal of Paula Spencer, who triumphs in the end, mirrors many oppressed Irish women who have learnt to veil their sufferings and remain silent in the face of male violence.

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