

03. Spatial Practices and Urban Experience in Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*¹

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Abstract

Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993) offers a vivid depiction of childhood in 1960s Dublin, capturing both the joys and anxieties of growing up in a working-class urban environment. The novel narrates the experiences of ten-year-old Paddy Clarke within the specific social, cultural, and spatial realities of pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland, a period marked by economic uncertainty, social conservatism, and a lingering sense of historical memory. Doyle's narrative, filtered through the consciousness of a child, foregrounds the ways in which urban space shapes daily life, social interactions, and personal development. This study discusses the novel through the lens of spatial literary theory, drawing primarily on Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad that conceptualizes social space as simultaneously perceived, conceived, and lived. By examining how Dublin's physical and social landscapes are represented in the text, the paper explores the interplay between individual experience and collective urban reality, highlighting how spatial configurations mediate both memory and identity. In particular, the domestic sphere emerges as a site of tension and unpredictability, reflecting broader social and historical structures of the era. By situating Doyle's work within its historical moment and analysing the spatial dynamics of the narrative, this paper argues that *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* offers more than a nostalgic portrayal of childhood; it presents urban space as a dynamic lens through which the social, cultural, and historical conditions of pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland are articulated.

Keywords: Urban space, spatial representation, Roddy Doyle, Dublin novel, Celtic Tiger period, Lefebvre

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Roddy Doyle'un *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* Romanında Mekânsal Pratikler ve Kentsel Deneyim³

Öz

Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha (1993) romanında Roddy Doyle, 1960'lar Dublin'inde geçen ve işçi sınıfına ait kentsel bir çevrede büyüyen Paddy'nin çocukluk dünyasını hem kaygıları hem de neşesiyle canlı bir şekilde aktarmaktadır. Eser, on yaşındaki Paddy Clarke'in deneyimlerini, ekonomik belirsizlik, toplumsal muhafazakârlık ve güçlü bir tarihsel bellek duygusuyla şekillenen Kelt Kaplanı öncesi İrlanda arka planında anlatmaktadır. Çocuk anlatıcının bakış açısıyla kurulan anlatı, kentsel mekânın gündelik yaşamı, sosyal ilişkileri ve bireysel gelişimi nasıl biçimlendirdiğini görünür kılar. Bu çalışma, romanı mekânsal edebiyat kuramı çerçevesinde incelemekte ve özellikle Henri Lefebvre'in mekânın üretimi yaklaşımından yararlanmaktadır. Lefebvre'in algılanan, tasarlanan ve yaşanan mekân ayrımına dayanan bu yaklaşım, Dublin'in fiziksel ve toplumsal çevresinin metinde nasıl temsil edildiğini anlamak için verimli bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda makalenin amacı, bireysel deneyim ile kentsel gerçeklik arasındaki ilişkiyi ele alırken, mekânsal düzenlemelerin bellek ve kimlik üzerindeki etkisini de ortaya koymamaktır. Araştırmada, özellikle ev içi mekânın dönemin daha geniş toplumsal ve tarihsel yapılarıyla bağlantılı olarak, gerilim ve belirsizliğin yoğunlaştığı bir alan olarak temsil edildiği görülmektedir. Son olarak çalışma, yazarın romanda nostaljik bir çocukluk anlatısı sunmanın ötesine geçerek kentsel mekânı Kelt Kaplanı öncesi İrlanda'nın toplumsal, kültürel ve tarihsel koşullarını anlamaya imkân veren dinamik bir çerçeve olarak kurduğunu tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: kentsel mekân, mekansal temsil, Roddy Doyle, Dublin romanı, Celt Kaplanı dönemi, Lefebvre

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Introduction

Doyle's Barrytown occupies a distinctive and underexamined position in the literary geography of Ireland. As Joseph Brooker has observed, Doyle's fiction "cuts across standard categorizations of the country and the city," and creates an "urban pastoral" (203, 205). It is neither the historical city centre, with its Joycean monuments and colonial memories, nor the rural West with its mythic associations of authentic Irishness and Gaelic culture. It is instead the suburban periphery, the new Dublin of housing estates and industrial development, which is a space still in the process of being made. In Lefebvre's terms, it is a site of spatial contest rather than settled spatial meaning. The Barrytown estate, the Clarke family home, the building sites and fields at the neighbourhood's edges are spaces that are simultaneously concrete and contingent, material and meaningful, fixed in the landscape and fluid in representation. To read *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* spatially is to read it as a novel about what happens to identity, personal, familial, and collective, when the spaces in which it has been formed begin, quietly and irreversibly, to change.

Doyle began writing in his late twenties, initially self-publishing *The Commitments* (1987), which follows a group of working-class Dubliners attempting to form a soul music band. Its commercial and critical success launched what would become the Barrytown Trilogy, completed with *The Snapper* (1990) and *The Van* (1991), all three novels subsequently adapted into successful films. Doyle's representation of Barrytown must also be situated within his broader literary project of redefining the spatial and cultural coordinates of Irish fiction. The trilogy established Doyle's signature style, which is dialogue-driven, formally spare, rooted in the textures of everyday suburban life, and brought the spatial world of Barrytown to an international readership. As Liam Harte observes, with *The Commitments*, Doyle consciously positioned himself against what he perceived as "the anachronistic realist fictions of an older generation of Irish novelists, collectively characterized as chroniclers of the miseries of a repressive Catholic ruralism and national traumas that were foreign to him and his generation" (24). In contrast, he turns to the experiences of an urban, working-class Dublin largely absent from the Irish literary canon, a "hidden Ireland" as Harte writes, located not in the rural west but in the expanding suburban landscapes of the capital's northside (24).

Doyle's literary career reached its peak in 1993 when he was awarded the Booker Prize for *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, after which he resigned from teaching and became a full-time writer. Unlike the predominantly comic register of the Barrytown novels, *Paddy Clarke* offers a darker and more introspective portrait of childhood, told through the fragmented perspective of a ten-year-old boy witnessing the slow dissolution of his family. The shift in tone marks a deepening of Doyle's spatial concerns. While the trilogy maps the collective social life of a community through its shared spaces, *Paddy Clarke* turns inward, examining the intimate, phenomenological dimensions of spatial experience, the way a particular house, street, or building site is felt and remembered by a single consciousness in the process of formation.

Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha is set in Barrytown like the three novels of the Barrytown Trilogy, but moves the story back from the 1990s to the late 1960s. It is a coming-of-age novel narrated entirely through the fragmented, episodic perspective of ten-year-old Patrick "Paddy" Clarke, whose voice shapes both the novel's structure and its emotional landscape. The lively first-person narration presents working-class life in late 1960s Ireland through a child's eyes, vividly rendering the everyday concerns of boyhood alongside encounters with an adult world that often remains opaque to him. In doing so, the novel reconstructs the social and historical particularities of its setting while also moving beyond them,

capturing both the sense of wonder and confusion in Paddy's life on the threshold of adolescence and Ireland's own position on the threshold of urbanisation.

The aim of this paper is to offer a spatial analysis of *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, examining how the urban and domestic spaces of pre-Celtic Tiger Dublin shape the narrative and the experience of its young protagonist. By contextualising the novel within the socio-historical framework of late 1960s Dublin as a city on the cusp of the post-nationalist transformations that would culminate, decades later, in the spatial crisis of the Celtic Tiger, the paper demonstrates how Doyle's text registers, at the level of a child's embodied spatial perception, changes whose full significance would only become visible in retrospect.

2. Lefebvre and Spatial Literary Analysis

Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (originally in 1974; English translation in 1991) discusses how space is produced through the interaction of economic forces, social practices, and symbolic meanings. For Lefebvre, space is "...neither a mere 'frame', after the fashion of the frame of a painting, nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it", but is actively produced through historically specific social and economic processes, because "space is social morphology" and "it is the lived experience what form itself is to the living organism" (93-94). Lefebvre conceptualizes space as a historical and political category, and emphasizes that "space is a (social) product" (27). If space is produced, generated by specific societies under specific historical conditions, then it bears the ideological and economic imprint of the forces that produced it.

The theoretical instrument through which Lefebvre analyses this production is his spatial triad, which identifies three mutually constitutive dimensions of every social space. These dimensions are dialectically interrelated, existing in dynamic tension rather than as separate categories, so that any full understanding of a particular space requires attending to all three simultaneously (42). The first, spatial practice or perceived space, refers to the material and bodily dimension of spatial production: the ways in which space is physically used, traversed, and produced through everyday activity and social routine. As he writes, "spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it" (38). Spatial practice is apprehended through the body, through the routes people walk, the buildings they enter and exit, the territories they claim and contest through daily movement. It refers to the ways in which individuals and social groups physically engage with and organize space, thereby producing and reproducing it over time. This process is inherently dialectical, as spatial practice both presupposes and generates social space. In modern capitalist societies, spatial practice manifests in the interconnected networks that link spaces of work, home, and leisure.

The second dimension, representations of space or conceived space, refers to the conceptual dimension of spatial production, to the ways in which space is imagined, planned, and officially represented through scientific, technical, and bureaucratic knowledge. This is "the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers" (38-39), that is the space of blueprints and development plans, zoning regulations and architectural drawings, maps and census data. Representations of space "are tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes" (33). In this sense, conceived space is closely aligned with dominant ideologies and forms of knowledge, as it seeks to organize space according to the needs of power and production.

The third dimension, representational spaces or lived space, refers to the symbolic and experiential dimension of spatial production, the ways in which space is inhabited, imagined, and invested with meaning through everyday life, cultural practice, and personal memory. Lived space is “alive; it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: go, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or square, church, cemetery. It encompasses the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations” (42). Unlike conceived space, which is produced by specialists according to abstract plans, lived space is produced by ordinary people through the accumulation of experience, memory, and symbolic association. It is “essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic” (42), and it often exists in tension with the conceived spaces that surround it, providing sites of potential resistance to the dominant spatial order. Representational space is, crucially, “the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’, but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who describe and aspire to do no more than describe” (39), which positions literary fiction precisely as the medium through which lived space is articulated and preserved against the abstracting force of conceived space.

Lefebvre suggests that the relationship between the lived, the perceived, and the conceived can only be understood through their spatial manifestations, which reveal both their interconnections and their tensions. Thus, the production of space not only underpins the material existence of society but also provides a methodological framework for reading and analysing the interplay between experience, representation, and knowledge. Applied to literary analysis, this model allows for a reading of space as both material and experiential, structured and contested. In *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, urban space emerges as a layered and dynamic system in which social structures, everyday practices, and subjective experiences intersect. This framework makes it possible to trace how Dublin’s suburban environment is simultaneously designed, inhabited, and felt, revealing the complex processes through which space is produced in the narrative.

3. Conceived Space: Barrytown and Suburban Transformation

The suburban landscape of Barrytown exemplifies Lefebvre’s notion of conceived space as a domain shaped by planning, order, and institutional logic. Set in 1960s Dublin, the novel reflects a period preceding the Celtic Tiger period, when urban expansion and suburban development began to transform the physical and social fabric of the city. Barrytown appears as a constructed environment, defined by uniform houses, newly built roads, and an emerging infrastructure that imposes a sense of spatial order. This planned environment reflects broader socio-political structures, including class organisation and conservative social norms, which regulate how space is organised and experienced. However, this order remains partial and unstable, as the encroachment of new developments gradually alters the familiar landscape. In this sense, conceived space in the novel is not fixed but marked by transition, revealing the tensions between imposed spatial structures and the lived realities that resist them.

Paddy’s opening description of the suburb establishes the tension between conceived and lived space immediately. The building sites are simultaneously the conceived space of developers, whose presence is registered in the workers’ huts, the locked ladders, and the overnight security measures, and the lived space of the boys, who appropriate them for adventure and play. What the developer has planned as a managed construction zone, the boys inhabit as a territory of freedom: “Today, we were coming home from the building site. We’d got a load of six-inch nails and a few bits of plank for making boats, and we’d been pushing bricks into a trench full of wet cement when Aidan started running away” (2). The nails and planks stolen from the construction site, the bricks pushed into the wet cement are the spatial practices through which Paddy and his friends produce their own version of Barrytown, one that exists

in direct tension with the version being produced by the developers. In Lefebvre's terms, their bodily engagement with the building sites is a form of spatial practice that actively transforms conceived space into lived space, investing the developer's abstract grid with the qualitative, emotionally rich meanings that the plan cannot accommodate.

The transitional nature of 1960s suburban Barrytown, where new housing estates coexist with raw construction zones, becomes a site of play, improvisation, and low-level transgression such as stealing nails, pushing bricks into cement. As Paddy observes, "There wasn't only one building site; there were loads of them, all different types of houses" (5). For the children, these sites represent freedom and excitement. For the adult world of planners and developers they represent something entirely different, the material realisation of post-independence Ireland's modernisation project. This is what Lefebvre calls representations of space that is the conceived, planned, institutionally produced space whose abstract logic is being imposed on the landscape regardless of the living spatial practices it displaces.

The building site keeps changing in ways that unsettle the boys' sense of place and continuity, reflecting the unstable character of suburban Dublin during the pre-Celtic Tiger period. As Paddy observes,

The building site kept changing, the fenced-in part of it where they kept the diggers and the bricks and the shed the builders sat in and drank tea... We'd go down to the building site and it wouldn't be there any more, just a square patch of muck and broken bricks and tyre marks. There was a new road where there'd been wet cement the last time we were there and the new site was at the end of the road (5).

It is not merely the change that is significant, but the rapid and unpredictable manner in which it unfolds, disrupting the children's sense of continuity in space. Spaces the boys know disappear or change, replaced by new roads and new construction. This produced space that is the conceived space of planners create a landscape that never quite settles, where familiarity is constantly disrupted and unfinished.

This process of transformation also provides a precise depiction of what Gerry Smyth calls the "New Dublin" that took shape in the 1960s and 1970s; Dublin as a city was defined by rapid outward expansion into extensive working and middle-class suburbs encircling the city, coupled with a centralisation of power inward toward key southbank institutions, political, civic, educational, and economic (22). The construction of new Corporation estates constitutes an important aspect of the novel's concerns. In Lefebvrian terms, this is the advance of conceived space, as housing developments pushing outward from the city, consuming the fields and open land that had previously shaped the edges of Barrytown. In Doyle's depiction, the rural image of the land with cows has disappeared now:

The new road was straight now, all the way. The edges of Donnelly's fields were chopped off and you could see all the farm because the hedges were gone; it was like Catherine's doll's house with the door opened. You could see all the being-built houses on the other side of the fields. The farm was being surrounded. The cows were gone, to the new farm. Big lorries took them. The smell was a laugh. (111)

In the world of the children, suburban development accompanies the spatial and symbolic dispossession, as the fields that once defined the boys' territory are progressively consumed by housing construction and transformed into fragmented "patches": "Our territory was getting smaller. The fields were patches among the different houses and bits left over where the roads didn't meet properly. They'd become dumps for all the waste stuff, bits of wood and brick and solidified bags of cement and milk bot" (146). As the construction proceeds, the landscape that once surrounded Barrytown is now entirely consumed. As Donnelly notes, the Barrytown of Paddy's childhood is under construction "as it eats into

the green fields of north Dublin, providing the playground for the local children" (24).

The new road also restructures the existing landscape in ways that the boys experience as loss: "The old railway bridge wasn't big enough any more for the road to get under it. They built a new one, made of huge slabs of concrete, right beside the old one" (111). The replacement of the old bridge with the new one offers a clear image of how the existing landscape is reorganised and, in the process, diminished. The old bridge had been a site of spatial practice: "it had been a great place for hiding under and shouting. It only fitted one car at a time" (113). Its physical limitations created opportunities for play, turning it into a space of interaction. The new bridge, however, is wider and more efficient, designed to facilitate traffic rather than accommodate human presence, exemplifying the novel's contrast between conceived and lived space.

The spatial transformation of Barrytown is closely intertwined with broader shifts in Irish cultural and social life. The expansion of roads, housing estates, and planned infrastructure signals not only a reorganisation of the physical landscape but also the gradual unravelling of forms of identity shaped in the decades following independence. The fields in which the boys play sustain a particular mode of collective life, which is local, working-class, and embedded in shared practices and routines. As these spaces are replaced by Corporation housing and new roads, the conditions that supported this form of social cohesion begin to erode. What is displaced, therefore, is not only a physical environment but also a way of inhabiting and understanding that environment.

The novel registers this convergence of spatial and ideological change with considerable subtlety, showing how transformations in the built environment are inseparable from shifts in everyday experience and identity formation. This dynamic becomes especially visible in the school, which occupies a position between the boys' outdoor world and the domestic interior. As a structured and regulated space, the school reflects emerging forms of social organisation while simultaneously reshaping the behaviours and perceptions associated with earlier, more informal spatial practices. In this sense, it functions as a key site where the tensions between continuity and change, and between inherited identities and their ongoing reconfiguration, are both enacted and made visible.

4. Perceived Space: Children and the Production of Everyday Space

If Barrytown is initially defined as a conceived space, it is through children's spatial practices that it becomes meaningful and dynamic. The novel foregrounds the everyday movements of children through streets, fields, and neighbourhood spaces, transforming these environments into sites of play, conflict, and social negotiation. Activities such as roaming, playing games, and testing boundaries constitute spatial practices through which children actively produce space. These practices are repetitive and embodied, generating a form of spatial knowledge rooted in experience rather than design. The streets function as social arenas in which hierarchies are established, alliances are formed, and identities are negotiated. In this way, perceived space in the novel is characterised by movement, interaction, and constant redefinition, standing in contrast to the fixed logic of conceived space. Through children's engagement with their surroundings, space is continually reshaped and reinterpreted.

From the novel's opening pages, Barrytown's geography is established entirely through children's bodily movement across it. Paddy and his friends do not observe the suburb from the outside; they produce it through their spatial practice. Their routes, from the building sites at the north to the Corporation houses at the western boundary, from the field behind the shops to the new road with its absent bridge

constitute the mental map that the novel gradually assembles. Paddy knows Barrytown through his body before he knows it through any other faculty: how long it takes to run from one point to another, what the ground feels like underfoot, what can be heard from different positions. The novel's famous sensory density is the formal expression of this proprioceptive spatial knowledge.

The novel introduces the boys' anxiety of spatial loss early on, linking it directly to the temporary traces left by the boys to reclaim the land as their own. They write their names whenever they find wet cement: "Our names were all around Barrytown, on the roads and paths. You had to do it at night when they were all gone home, except the watchmen. Then when they saw the names in the morning it was too late, the cement was hard" (5). However, their small acts of interference to reclaim space is ineffective, once the cement sets, the surface becomes fixed again. When Paddy returns to check on his inscription, he sees it is undone: "We went over to where we'd written our names with sticks in the cement, but they'd been smoothed over; they'd gone" (5). The boys' decision to use only their first names- "just in case the builders ever went from door to door" (5)- is humorous, but it also signals their awareness that they are transgressing the spatial and social boundaries that regulate everyday life in Barrytown.

The wet cement, sewage pipe, and manholes form part of the developer's technical infrastructure, yet in Paddy's account they become some of the most vivid and ritualised spaces of the boys' shared life. The pipe is introduced gradually: first through the digging of trenches, then through the pipes stacked along the roadside, and finally through their installation, which produces the trench-world the boys come to inhabit. As Paddy recalls,

We got down into the trench; it was really deep, like in a war. The men that were digging it had wooden ladders to get in and out. They locked them in their hut. We used planks. We lowered the plank into the trench and ran down along it. It was better than a ladder. You ran into the far wall of the trench and shouldered it and got away fast before the next fella came down the plank. (109)

The boys immediately take possession of these construction spaces through physical action, replacing the workers' locked ladders with improvised planks, transforming what has been dug for sewage into a site of speed, competition, and risk. Therefore, the building sites represent spatial practice in its most active and most socially produced form. The boys' appropriation of the construction materials, their running through trenches and pipes, their writing of names in wet cement, these are bodily spatial practices that produce a version of the suburb entirely different from the one being produced by the developer's plan. When Paddy and his friends write their names in wet cement, they are enacting the most literal possible version of Lefebvre's argument that spatial practice produces space: they are leaving the bodily trace of their presence on the material surface of the conceived suburb, marking the developer's abstract grid with the evidence of their own inhabitation.

5. Lived Space: Cultural Identity and Emotional Geography

The third dimension of Lefebvre's triad which is lived space or representational space is the most complex and the most directly relevant to the analysis of the novel. Unlike conceived space, which is produced by specialists according to abstract plans, and perceived space, which is produced through the bodily routines of everyday life, lived space is produced by ordinary people through the accumulation of memory, imagination, and symbolic association. In the novel, such lived space does not exist as a separate or clearly bounded domain but emerges within and through spaces already structured by authority and regulation. It becomes visible precisely at moments when imposed meanings are reinterpreted, internalised, or subtly resisted in everyday experience.

One such moment occurs in the school, where institutional space is overlaid with symbolic and affective significance. The classroom is the novel's most clearly organised conceived space: its arrangement of desks according to academic performance, its spatial inscription of hierarchy, its deployment of the leather strap as the instrument of bodily discipline that enforces the conceived order. The spatial logic is immediately visible: "The best marks sat in the desks along the windows and the worst were put down the back beside the coats. I was usually in the middle somewhere, sometimes near the front. The ones at the back got the hardest spellings... and you were never sent on messages" (62–63). Each boy's position in the room is determined by his performance, and that position in turn structures what is available to him. Teacher Henno's claim that "Whispering is impossible in this school. I'll hear every little thing" (97) extends this logic beyond the visible. Discipline is sustained through the suggestion that the space is constantly monitored, shaping the boys into subjects as much as correcting their behaviour.

Yet the conceived space of the classroom cannot fully contain the lived space that forms within and against it. This is most clearly visible in the tea-towel scene, in which Miss Watkins introduces a tea-towel printed with the Proclamation of Independence to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising. She pins it above the blackboard and asks the boys to move past it one by one. Several of them bless themselves as they pass, as they would before a religious image: "-Nach bhfuil sé go h'álainn, lads? she kept saying after every couple of boys went past. -Tá, we said back" (20). She then has the boys march beside their desks while she reads the Proclamation aloud. Toward the end, the performance breaks down entirely and the boys cannot sustain the disciplined march the lesson requires, leaving Miss Watkins "annoyed and disappointed" (21). The most immediate spatial detail is the setting. The founding document of the Irish state is being transmitted in a prefab, a temporary structure placed behind the main school building. As they march, "the walls of the prefab wobbled...We could feel the boards hopping under us""(21). The instability of the structure materially undermines the authority of the "august destiny" proclaimed on the tea-towel, revealing the gap between the institutional claim and the lived reality of its reception. The conceived space of the classroom cannot produce the lived space of national identification the lesson requires, because lived space is not generated by institutional command but by the accumulated social practices of those who inhabit the space.

This appropriation of official culture is not confined to national history. The boys bring the same improvisatory spatial energy to the rituals of Catholic practice in ways that quietly drain them of institutional authority without ever consciously challenging it. Paddy produces his own communion hosts from Vienna roll bread and stages a mock Eucharist in the garden shed: "Corpus Christi. -Amen, said Sinbad. -Close your eyes, I said... He lifted his head and stuck out his tongue. I gave him the mouldy one" (48). The scene is not consciously sacrilegious, Paddy genuinely questions whether making the hosts constitutes a sin and attempts to compensate by saying extra prayers. Yet the ritual of the Eucharist is absorbed into the boys' everyday practices with the same ease that characterises their engagement with any other form of cultural material. More dramatically, in the field behind the shops at night, Kevin appoints himself high priest of an invented deity he names *Ciúnas* which is the Irish word for silence used as a classroom command by both Henno and Miss Watkins. Stripped of its institutional context, the word is repurposed as the name of a pagan god whose authority Kevin wields through a poker rather than a leather strap: "I am Zentoga, the high priest of the great god, *Ciúnas*" (129). The ceremony that follows simultaneously parodies religious ritual and the Irish language, taking the linguistic and spiritual apparatus of school and church and converting it into the raw material of the boys' own spatial practice. The sacred formula "The word made flesh" is repurposed to announce the obscene name beaten into each boy's back:

- The word made flesh!
 My back was ripped. The bones exploded.
 — Fuck!
 — From henceforth thou will be called Fuck.
 It was over.
 — Cúinas the Mighty has spoken! (130–131)

In a single rite enacted in waste ground by firelight, the Irish language of the classroom and the sacred language of the church are simultaneously appropriated, stripped of their institutional authority, and turned inside out. The connection between the shrinking of the boys' territory and the weakening of these institutional narratives is not incidental. For Lefebvre, space actively produces social relations rather than simply containing them. Once the fields of Barrytown are built over, the meanings they carried become detached and open to parody. The Cúinas ceremony and the mock Eucharist can thus be read as residual forms of national culture which are still present, but emptied of their spatial grounding and sustained only as performance.

This spatial logic and the erosion of lived space by institutional and ideological forces extends from the public world of the school into the most intimate space of the novel: the family home. The novel's spatial focus gradually shifts inward, and what it finds there is not refuge but a mirror of the same pressures at work in the suburb outside. The home initially appears as a site of stability, but this stability progressively disintegrates as the parents' marriage deteriorates. The father's presence introduces a volatile and unpredictable form of authority, transforming the domestic space into an environment marked by tension and dread. Gaston Bachelard argues in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) that the house is not merely a physical structure but “our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (4). The house creates a space inscribed in the body through the accumulated repetition of domestic life. It is this bodily inscription that makes the signs of domestic disruption so immediately legible to Paddy, even before he can articulate what they mean.

The novel's earliest images of the domestic interior establish it as a space of exactly the kind Bachelard describes:

Under the table was a fort. With the six chairs tucked under it there was still plenty of room; it was better that way, more secret. I'd sit in there for hours...The lino had tiny cracks that got bigger if you pressed them. The sun was full of dust, huge chunks of it... I fell asleep in there; I used to. It was always cool in there, never cold, and warm when I wanted it to be. The lino was nice on my face. The air wasn't alive like outside, beyond the table; it was safe. It had a smell I liked. My da's socks had diamonds on them. I woke up once and there was a blanket on top of me. I wanted to stay there forever. I was near the window. I could hear the birds outside. My da's legs were crossed. He was humming. The smell from the kitchen was lovely; I wasn't hungry, I didn't need it. Stew. It was Thursday. It must have been. My ma was humming as well. The same song as my da. It wasn't a proper song, just a hum with a few notes in it... I stretched till my foot pushed a chair leg, and curled up again. The blanket had sand in it, from a picnic. (103-104)

This under-the-table scene, in which Paddy recalls lying on the cool lino beneath the dining table while his parents move and hum in the rooms around him exemplifies a Bachelardian sense of intimacy grounded in sensory detail. The coolness of the lino on the face, the smell of the air, the diamond pattern on the father's socks, the blanket placed over the sleeping child without waking him, the parents humming the same tune without knowing it, all of these are the sensory textures of the domestic interior in its most complete form. This is Bachelard's “felicitous space” in the novel (xxxv).

Crucially, the passage is introduced with a temporal marker that signals its status as memory rather than

present experience: “That was before my mother had Cathy and Deirdre. Sinbad couldn’t walk then; I remembered” (104). The under-the-table space is already lost when Paddy describes it, recalled from a distance that the novel never precisely identifies but makes structurally present throughout. Physically, Paddy has grown too large for the space: “I could get under the table but my head pressed the top when I sat straight and I couldn’t sit still; it hurt, my legs ached. I was afraid I’d be caught” (104). The body that once fit perfectly within the domestic shelter has outgrown it, and the outgrowing is registered not only as a physical fact but also as a psychic one. The space has not changed but the child has, and the change is the loss of the ability to inhabit domestic space without self-consciousness, without surveillance, without the awareness of being observed that the world outside the table has been steadily producing in him.

The mother occupies the house entirely differently from the father. She appears almost exclusively at the kitchen sink, at the mangle, feeding children, performing the repetitive circuits of domestic labour that sustain the household but confine her to its private sphere. In contrast, Paddy’s father moves between home, work, and pub, embodying the masculine privilege of mobility. Doreen Massey’s analysis in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) provides the framework for reading this condition. Massey argues that “the limitation of women’s mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination” (179), and that “the attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity” (180). In the Irish context, this logic acquired particular institutional force through the 1937 Constitution’s Articles 41 and 45, which located women’s primary role within the home and identified domestic labour as the foundation of social life. Caitríona Beaumont’s analysis in “Gender, citizenship and the state in Ireland, 1922-1990” provides a crucial historical framework for understanding the spatial confinement of the mother in the novel. Beaumont demonstrates that, despite the formal extension of political rights to women after independence, the state “identified women’s citizenship with domestic duty” (100). The state policy and constitutional discourse progressively redefined women primarily as wives and mothers whose proper place lay within the home. Through legislation such as the marriage bar, restrictions on women’s participation in public service, and the gendered language of the 1937 Constitution (particularly Articles 41 and 45, as she notes), the state effectively produced a social order in which domesticity became naturalised as women’s central civic function. The Clarke household operates within a constitutional spatial order that has become so deeply embedded in everyday practice that it no longer requires enforcement; the mother’s confinement is lived as an ordinary and unquestioned feature of domestic space.

The representation of Paddy’s mother demonstrates that domestic space in twentieth-century Ireland functioned not merely as a private sphere but as a politically charged space where economic pressures, Catholic morality, and nationalist ideals converged to regulate women’s everyday lives. While ten-year-old Paddy and his friends move freely through Barrytown’s streets, fields, and building sites, claiming public space through play, exploration, and minor acts of transgression, his mother remains spatially confined to the domestic interior. This contrast reveals that mobility within Barrytown is profoundly gendered, as boys learn to inhabit and appropriate the expanding suburban landscape, whereas women are expected to sustain the home, their identities defined through care, domestic labour, and emotional endurance. Viewed through Paddy’s partial and often uncomprehending perspective, the mother appears largely confined to routines of cleaning, cooking, childcare, and emotional mediation, her movements restricted to the repetitive circuits of domestic labour to sustain family life. She appears perpetually at the kitchen sink (“She was still cooking the dinner and stopping Catherine from climbing into the press under the sink with the polish and brushes in it”), preparing meals (“I heard Ma doing

things in the kitchen”), caring for the baby (“Ma was feeding the baby.”) or performing other household labours (“loved it in the kitchen - the steam and the heat - when my ma was putting the sheets through the mangle, and my da’s shirts”), her spatial orbit restricted to the private sphere.

In contrast, Paddy’s father moves between home and work, pub and street as Paddy recalls “Ma sat down. Da was at work”, embodying the masculine privilege of mobility that Massey identifies, “the limitation of women’s mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination” (1994, 189). This gendered spatial division intensifies as the marriage deteriorates: Paddy’s mother’s confinement becomes a form of entrapment, while his father’s mobility enables escape and evasion of domestic responsibility. One of the markers of his father’s privileged position in the domestic space was his chair: “He had a chair of his own. We had to get out of it when he came home from work” (180). His chair symbolizes how paternal authority operates through space with certain territorial markers. This authority extends beyond physical space into the space of speech itself. Paddy observes that his mother talks less:

She listened to him much more than he listened to her. Her answers were much longer than his. She did two-thirds of the talking, easily that much. She wasn’t a bigmouth though, not nearly; she was just more interested than he was even though he was the one that read the paper and watched The News and made us stay quiet when it was on, even when we weren’t making any noise. (202-203).

As the marriage deteriorates, the home ceases to function as a Bachelardian cosmos and becomes instead a space of fear and anxiety that must be managed through the body. The most extreme expression of this transformation is Paddy’s decision to stay awake all night after witnessing his father hit his mother. Unable to prevent the violence through any direct intervention, he disciplines his own body against the warmth and shelter that the house in its earlier form would naturally have provided:

I watched. I listened. I stayed in. I guarded her. Nothing happened. I didn’t know what I’d do. If I was there he wouldn’t do it again, that was all. I stayed awake. I listened. I went to the bathroom and put cold water on my pyjamas. To keep myself awake. To stop me from getting cozy and warm and slipping asleep. I left the door a bit open. I listened...Nothing happened. (191)

The child who once fell asleep under the table and woke to find a blanket placed over him is now wetting his pyjamas at midnight to prevent himself from sleeping. The shelter that Bachelard identifies as the house’s primary gift to the child has been converted into something to be actively resisted. The spatial logic represents Lefebvrian lived space. The family home, which was once a space of unconscious security, has been colonised by the anxiety and unpredictability of the conceived order of paternal authority. Paddy cannot afford to inhabit the house as shelter any longer; he must stay awake and shelter others. In this way, the domestic interior does not stand apart from the spatial transformations of the suburb outside, it reproduces them at their most intimate and most damaging scale. As a result, the house ceases to function as a unified or secure space and instead becomes fragmented, experienced through moments of fear, confusion, and bodily disorientation.

On the other hand, the father’s eventual departure does not restore the house to its earlier security, but it marks a decisive transformation in Paddy’s own spatial and emotional consciousness: “I never got the chance to run away. I was too late. He left first. The way he shut the door; he didn’t slam it. Something; I just knew: he wasn’t coming back” (280). The front door which is used only for visitors and formal occasions, as the boundary between the domestic interior and the public world, is the threshold he crosses without return, and he crosses it with a quietness that is more devastating than his previous slams. The house is not destroyed; it is emptied of the spatial practice that made it a home.

The novel's final scene brings together the spatial and emotional trajectories, marking the irreversible transformation of both family and family home. Da returns on Christmas Eve for a visit: "He saw me. - Patrick, he said. He moved the parcels he had with him under one arm and put his hand out. -How are you? he said. He put his hand out for me to shake it. -How are you? His hand felt cold and big, dry and hard. -Very well, thank you" (282). The formality and the distance of "very well, thank you", represents Paddy's transformation in language as well as in their relationship. He is speaking to his father as one speaks to a visitor, because his father is now only a visitor. At the end, Doyle leaves us with only "an awkward nonending, a handshake between Paddy and his father" as McGlynn writes (128). The novel departs from the traditional Bildungsroman where would become Patrick and replace his father as man of the house. Paddy's position is left unclear in the final page and "the coming of age that we might expect from a conventional Bildungsroman is left uncertain" (McGlynn, 128). Although a form of transformation has taken place, the narrative withholds closure, as the conflict between self and society remains unsettled. Paddy's emerging awareness that adulthood lacks a clear or ordered structure offers recognition but not resolution. Therefore, the novel closes not with reconciliation but with a quiet reconfiguration of family life, as Paddy accompanies his mother into an uncertain future. The final image suggests that childhood innocence has given way to a new awareness of vulnerability, responsibility, and loss, revealing that growing up in Barrytown ultimately means learning to inhabit a space permanently altered by the fractures of family life.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, as Liam Harte argues in *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel 1987–2007*, Doyle participates in a broader reconfiguration of Irish cultural identity in late twentieth-century fiction, as novelists respond to the changing conditions of contemporary life. In particular, Harte suggests that these writers "strategically collapse the boundaries between the personal and the national in an attempt to capture the fractured, conflictual nature of contemporary Irish experience" and to interrogate the disjunction "between lived realities and inherited narratives of origin, identity, and place" (2014, 3). In *Paddy Clarke*, this collapse is spatial before it is anything else. The dissolution of the Clarke household and Paddy's dispossession from the collective spatial world of Barrytown mirror, at the scale of a single childhood, Ireland's own transition from the pre-Celtic Tiger world of incomplete suburban development and residual nationalist culture to the fully conceived, fully planned spatial order that the Tiger would complete. Rather than engaging directly with traditional markers of Irish identity such as rural life, nationalism, or religious authority the novel foregrounds the textures of suburban existence, thereby exposing the inadequacy of earlier cultural narratives to account for contemporary Irish experience. In doing so, it aligns with what Harte identifies as a broader literary movement concerned with history, memory, and belonging as contested categories, reimagined through fragmented, localised, and often unstable forms of representation. The spatial world of Barrytown, shaped by expansion, incompleteness, and constant change, embodies this shift, revealing a gap between the lived environment of the characters and the inherited frameworks through which Irish identity has conventionally been understood. As Eva Roa White observes "Doyle maps a new geography, a personal inner-scape that takes precedence to all socio-political and economic issues of modern Ireland through a series of small epiphanies" (39).

This article argues that *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* constructs urban experience through a complex interplay of conceived, perceived, and lived spaces, while its narrative form further reinforces this spatial logic. By moving from the planned environment of suburban Dublin to the embodied practices of childhood and the emotional intensity of domestic space, the novel reveals space as an active and

constitutive force rather than a passive setting. In doing so, it challenges readings that reduce it to a nostalgic account of childhood, instead positioning it as a nuanced exploration of the socio-spatial dynamics of pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland. More broadly, this analysis demonstrates the value of spatial literary approaches in understanding how narrative, memory, and identity are shaped by the environments in which they are embedded. Doyle's novel ultimately presents urban childhood as a spatially produced experience, marked by instability, negotiation, and transformation.

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