

How do Paula's early experiences shape the way she develops as a person?

The *Woman Who Walked into Doors* by Roddy Doyle is a novel that tells the struggle of an abused woman called Paula Spencer, narrated by the victim as she tries to make sense of her past. The title comes from an incident when her husband asks her how she received the injury which he was responsible for. The narration describes her childhood, first meeting with Charlo and their marriage as Paula looks back upon her life. Readers are able to see how these events shaped the way Paula's negative experiences are responsible to how she views herself as an adult. At first, Paula is presented as a skittish and frightened character because mundane things such as a door bell make her feel "terrified". Doyle is preparing and creating expectation for the readers for Paula's traumatic past experiences because at this stage of the novel they are still unaware of her problems. The bell is the signal for the news of the death of Charlo, Paula's husband. However, the fact that Paula was afraid of the door bell suggests that she associates it with bad experiences. It also serves as a hyperbole, as it "lifted me off the floor" suggests that Paula is frightened of visitors due to her past experiences. This caused the reader to wonder what has caused Paula to become so skittish and frightened. Doyle soon provides the answer as he explores Paula's childhood.

The news triggers Paula to reminisce her past experiences. However, Paula recalls her memories in a non-chronological manner and in a stream of consciousness which suggests her fragmented mind. Possibly, due to Paula's agonising past or alcoholism as a means of self-protection from the abuse. The structure of the novel is told in a combination of flashbacks of her childhood, her first meeting, dates then marriage with Charlo and the present time of how she is dealing with the news of Charlo's death whilst at the same time exploring what really happened. Doyle starts the novel with this information making the structure of the novel reflect the importance of Charlo's death as having a tremendous impact on Paula's life. In the second chapter, Paula reminisces her first meeting with Charlo, the power struggle between them is shown as Paula enjoys making him "sweat" which suggests that he has to work hard to get Paula however Charlo is shown to be the one in control at the end as she believes that he "had" her. The word "had" suggests that he has complete control over her life ever since that time. It leads to believe that Charlo's abusive and controlling behaviour has turned Paula into a paranoid, depressed, alcoholic and emotionally and physically unstable after seventeen years of marriage. Nonetheless, Paula's paradoxical statements, "he was wearing what everyone wore back then but the uniform was made especially for him" suggest her contradicting feelings about him as it has been tainted by experiences she has had since.

Initially, Paula believes that she had a happy upbringing, although this might not be accurate as Paula has a habit of "making it nice". Doyle uses an unreliable narrator as Paula tried to create a blissful childhood for herself even though she knows that her memories might not be reliable as she confesses that "maybe I only

remember her dressing me because I dressed my girls". This shows that Paula recognises that her memory is not to be trusted. There is sexual abuse hinted in this novel as Paula recalls her childhood memory with her father when "he put me and Denise up on his knees and did hors ey-horse while stared at Carmel" the innocent action of "horsey-horsey" is being contrasted with Paula's father staring at Carmel as if she is to be left out of the childhood's play. It also conveys a menacing image of an abusive father. This could contribute to the formation of Paula's sexual identity as she provides negative perceptions of sex and she sees herself as "a dirty slut". It is possible that Paula got married to escape her home life but ended up with Charlo, who mirrors her own father, making her ending up like her mother; depressed and submissive. Doyle uses Carmel as a device to show the alternative point of view of Paula's childhood such as when she accuses Paula of "re-writing history" which Paula denies. In a way Paula is could be trying to make sense of her past as Doyle explores issue of "writing" or reliving as cathartic. The stronger Paula emerges as she began to tell the truth as she has to grow from her horrible experiences in the past. It is easy to see how Paula's unhappy childhood and abusive relationship have contributed to a skittish Paula we are introduced to in the first chapter.

The language use in this novel is simple, aggressive, informal and sexually explicit which suggests that Paula came from a low class social background and she is not very intelligent. In a way Paula's social background could contribute to how she develops as a person as their judgemental ideas create a dichotomy that forces Paula to choose between being a "slut" or a "tight bitch" which is a sexualisation of girls in a judgemental environment where women still objectified in 1970's . It is possible that Paula goes with Charlo because she wants to escape from this label. She feels that being with Charlo makes her feels like she is "someone" which suggests that Charlo is giving Paula an identity that had been taken away from her when she started High School. This would affect Paula's later relationships as she has been treated as a possession and causing her to lose her romantic ideology as the contrast between the movie Dirty Dancing's imagination with her love life emphasises her horrible reality.

Furthermore, Paula had a tough time growing up as she had to develop too quickly. This is due to her experience at school as she "ended up wanking a good-looking thick in the back of the classroom" because she needs to make a "name" for herself. This shows that Paula's life has not been easy; she has to do unpleasant things to get what she wants. Therefore, she sees growing up as a bad thing suggested by Paula's description of Nicola's growing up as being "robbed" from childhood. This could be because as a child, Paula's mother didn't reassure her that her development is normal as she believed that her mother was going to "lose her temper". Paula's memories about her school have been structured to appear later on in the novel which suggests that it could be a painful memory as she doesn't want to talk about it. Doyle conveys how High School shattered Paula's self-confidence as

she is labelled as unintelligent when she was put with "the thicks" this comes as a shock for Paula as it is a contrast to her life in Primary School. Without self-confidence, Paula loses all her power during this stage of her life which leads her to use her sexuality in order to gain power and control, as she believed that girls have the power to ask boys out. On the other hand they were actually conforming to male's expectations. However, Paula's sexual power can also be used against her as she realises that "there is something about me that draw them to me, make them touch me". This suggests that Paula feels a lack of control and is still ignorant to how she can use her sexuality to her advantage as she is afraid of being labelled. Paula believes that the school changed her as she was certain that she "wasn't like that before". This implies that Paula's behaviour at school plays a big part in how Paula developed as a person. Paula "had to act rough and think dirty" in order to fit in with her environment with her community judgement of girls and women. The use of "had" suggests that Paula felt that it is a compulsion and she had no other options but to oblige by their lower social standard, whilst the word "act" suggests that this is not the real Paula. Therefore she blames the school for her early exposure to the sexual world.

In support of this, Paula is shown to be innocent before she discovered her sexuality, as her early experiences suggest that she views the relationships with boys as merely "like a game of chasing". This shows that Paula had a really untainted view of the world as a child. Whilst Paula as an adult likes to romanticise as she chooses to watch Dirty Dancing with her daughter. Paula "thought it would have some nice sex in it". This reflects Paula's real sexual experience as she sees it as being "terrible" whilst her imagination would make it seem like it were "gorgeous" and refers to it as to "make love" instead of using the word "fucked" which suggests an animalistic action and lacks of romance. Her romanticising is also a reaction against her treatment and experiences. Nonetheless, during the early stage of Paula's life, Paula has the power without her sexuality as her early relationship seems romantic and passionate and she refers to it as being "all formal, very proper" which suggests that she likes the old-fashioned love style. Paula reveals her desire as she says "I wanted the power". Paula's use of repetitive "I" and "want" suggest that she desires to be in control unlike other stages of her life.

Paula's past experiences has helped to piece her identity however she becomes a "ghost" because people assume that because she drinks the bruises must be her own fault. The use of short sentences such as "I loved him. He was everything and I was nothing. I provoked him. I forgot. I needed him." Doyle uses short sentences to mirror the short, sharp bursts of violence experienced throughout Paula's marriage and it also shows Paula who is not educated and is not comfortable with fancy words, struggling to tell her story, to make herself understood to people who are cleverer than she is. People who will surely dismiss her, saying she should have left her abusive husband at the first slap, and will fail to understand the 'love him/hate him' dichotomy that prevents some victims of domestic violence from

walking away from their abusers. Furthermore, it also suggests that Paula doesn't want to talk about it as it is too painful for her and she doesn't want to go into details about her bad experiences. For example, when Charlo "killed" all of her, this might be one of the reasons why Paula is such a jumpy person as she tries to block out too many bad memories.

Nonetheless, Doyle's purpose of this novel is for the readers to understand the mind of an abused woman. We are able to understand that there are many issues contributing to the outcome of Paula's identity such as her community, family life, school life, early relationships and abusive marriage. Even though Paula is an alcoholic, the readers are able to sympathise with her as she uses alcohol to suppress her pain. However, Paula becomes stronger at the end as she decided to break up with Charlo as well as giving up alcohol causing us to believe that Paula has really changed from the skittish and frightened character that we have met at the beginning of the novel.