

Why do we hear so much about family these days? Perhaps it is because relationships between family members are assumed to be the prototype for all other social relations. In the novels, *The Commitments*, *The Snapper* and *The Van*, Roddy Doyle shows his support of the family as an institution. Each character demonstrates strength and direction within the family unit. However, when the stability of the family is threatened, each character breaks down along with the family itself.

When we think of family life we associate happiness, a life of sharing memories and developing unbreakable friendships. It is easy to create a family that is make believe, we just tend to leave the ugly side of the relationship out. It may be true that there is a family that lives like the "Cleavers" in our society today, but speaking realistically every family will breakdown eventually. In an interview about his novels the author said, "I didn't set out to capture the good in every family, or bad for that matter, I just wanted to show a typical Irish family."¹ Doyle's writing is real--he deals with issues that might not hit home with every reader however, they are events that confront many people every day. The Rabbitte family is used in all three novels that make up the "Barrytown Trilogy." While the times are both good and bad for the eight members of this Irish family, in some way they find a way overcome every problem that faces them.

One of Doyle's strengths is his feel for personality: his characters are neither devils nor clowns, dolts nor wits, but wobble between the extremes. "They're fish gutters and mechanics, young knockabouts and unemployed workers who spend a lot of time watching T.V. drinking Guinness and jawing at the pub, trying to stave off the feelings that they are nondescript people in a nondescript world."²

The Commitments is Doyle's first full-length novel. The main character Jimmy Rabbitte, the eldest son, puts together a band. It is almost every teenager's dream, at some point, to be famous playing music in front of large groups of people. In fact, this is how this book started off. In the end, however, it turns out to be the complete opposite. Doyle captures the emotions of his characters when they are weak and leaves an impact on the reader with his humorous wit. He describes his writing as "a challenge that's the enjoyable part. To an extent, that's what happened with all my books because I've never experienced any of the subjects I write about. I used to be a ten-year old boy, but I certainly didn't watch my parents marriage disintegrate. I was never in a band, I've never been pregnant and I've never been unemployed for a day in my life."³ It is shown that Doyle has strong family values. In his writing he clearly demonstrates that if one family

member falls, it effects the rest of the family. In *The Commitments*, throughout the entire novel, the band acts like a family. As the manager, Jimmy plays the role of the father figure and trys to keep the band reaching higher levels, together. But, as members begin to fight Jimmy finds it more difficult to keep the group together.

"Now, said Jimmy-tell your Uncle Jimmy all about it.

-I just.

-Jimmy could see Billy thinking

It's just- I hate him, Jimmy. I hate him -- I can't even sleep at night"⁴

The drummer, Billy's leaving was because of Deco, the lead singer of the band who he couldn't face. Because they never talked, working out their problems was never accomplished. *The Commitments* worked as a team to reach its success but when the group was on the brink of acheiving stardom individual motives began to cause problems. When the band stopped acting like a family unit the fights broke out. "Somewhere in the quarter of an hour Jimmy had been negotiating with Dave from Eejit Records, *The Commitments* had broken up." Jimmy came to the conclusion that it was over. He moved on and kept his mind off the band. Success had in fact destroyed the once harmonious group.

In *The Snapper* Doyle uses a interesting topic: pregnancy. Sharon, the eldest Rabitte daughter accidentally gets pregnant. In the end, the father turns out to be her own father's best friend. The beginning stage of her family breaking down is when she finally confronts them about her being pregnant. While the family accepts the fact that she is unmarried and pregnant, they have several fights over the identity of the child's father. Sharon is stubborn and won't reveal any names and the rest of the family is hurt and angry because it feels that it deserves to know who the father is.

"Jimmy Sr got down to buisness

-who was it

-wha?- Oh I don't know

-Ah now, jaysis

-No, I do know

-well , then

-I'm not telling

-Jimmy Sr could feel himself getting angry now"⁵

Whether the problem is little or big the Rabitte family always muddles through and deals with it. Sharon had put herself in the middle of the biggest problem yet. She feels hurt and while she never wanted to put her family through pain or suffering, that is what she was doing. At the same time, she was trying to deal with the changing of her own body and working on making herself come to terms about what she had done. In

effect everybody was suffering.

-Wha' kind of a house is this at all? he asked the table.

-He looked at Veronica. She was deciding if she'd throw the marmalade at the twins.

-A man get's up in the mornin', said Jimmy Sr.-an'-an'

-Oh shut up, said Veronica.⁶

It is now clear that as a result of tension in the house the two parents in the family were developing a negativity against each other. It was Sharon's decision to hide the truth, but it was also up to her to become realistic and tell the truth before it tore the family apart anymore.

The final novel in the trilogy is *The Van*. It focuses on the dad, Jimmy Sr. The fun-loving father of the Rabbitte family had been recently laid off work. So, Jimmy Sr. and his best friend, Bimbo open a portable fast-food restaurant called Bimbo's Burgers. It is located in a greasy old van that would never pass an inspection. The father's role can't be left unmentioned. Jimmy Sr. has a lot of control over his family. Throughout the series he is viewed as the descision maker, a role model and as a source of family strength. As soon as the father shows a little bit of unhappiness the rest of the family start to lose hope. Doyle once said "Friendship is something that is understood the world over, and unfortunately, so is unemployment." Doyle makes his belief clear in *The Van* by showing the pain that is put on the family when one bread-winner loses his job. Coming from a family whose income is not very high, unemployment could possibly be one of the worst thing to ever happen. There is no money for Christmas presents, so the kids are upset. Darren the youngest boy in the family has learned all about unemployment and welfare. One night when the family is eating Darren says something to upset his father whose reply is:

"Darren, don't you forget who paid for tha' dinner in front of you, son, righ'

-I know who paid for it, said Darren. -The state did."⁷

This reaction not only made Jimmy Sr. upset but, he came to terms with the fact that he was going nowhere and if he wanted things to get better he had better get a job soon.

The Rabittes may have gone through times when they wanted to kill each other, but other times they cared. Doyle is a down-to-earth writer, he shows the way of life for many families with the use of slang in his writing and his abillity to capture humour when the times are hard. The Rabbitte family shared many bonds, they had many memories and of course many fights, but they are a family. They may be fictional

but
they represent a modern family. It is true that when the stability of the family
is
threatened, each character breaks down along with the family itself.

Endnotes