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# “Addiction is a strange bastard”: Alcohol(ism) in Irish Fiction

## *Summary*

Although it is hard to challenge the claim that alcohol can be considered inherent in Irish culture, the common perception of the fact often feeds on clichés. What helps understand this question is Irish literature. On the one hand, it portrays jubilant festivity to be found in many literary works; on the other, it renders the drama behind alcohol dependency, shifting the focus from joviality towards the more murky aspects of drink consumption, mostly thematised in contemporary literature. This article takes a closer look at how Irish literature renders alcohol use and abuse, and how the literary representations offer a broader perspective, allowing to reconsider some of the stereotypical notions of the proverbial Irish propensity for drink.

**Keywords:** Irish fiction, alcohol in literature, national stereotypes

Dying in hospital, Paddy Quinn, an alcoholic character of Bernard MacLaverty’s short story “Just Visiting”, concludes that “addiction is a strange bastard” (320). Certainly, victims of alcohol dependence know this to their own cost, though personal experience does not necessarily ensure that one can successfully translate it for those who are abstemious or drink in moderation. Fields such as medicine, psychology or sociology aim to explain different aspects of alcoholism, all based on the results of research and empirical evidence. However, it seems that nowhere except for literature will one find representations of various intricacies concerning

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the problem of alcohol abuse, and, most importantly, those of its aspects which seem somewhat intangible. Examples are plentiful worldwide, but Irish literature, along with perhaps a handful of others, such as, for instance, that written in Scotland, is one that offers superb literary representations in this respect. This should not surprise, for after all it is hard to challenge the claim that (heavy) drinking is inherent in Irish culture. In terms of literary studies, which is the focal point here, the question this article attempts to address is how and where Irish fiction and Irish drinking culture converge, and how literary works represent its specificity.

It does not take much to realise the scale of the relationship Ireland has with drink. A flood of gadgets such as text T-shirts of the ‘Irish today, hung-over tomorrow’ type, or mugs with ‘10% Irish, 90% drunk’ computations cannot go unnoticed, if only because cashing-in on the national drink phenomenon, and to such an extent, is hard to be found elsewhere. Another interesting example is *Uisce Beatha*, an award-winning eight-minute film directed by Shaun O’Connor. Set in 1912, it tells a true story of a young man called Tom, who leaves behind his elderly father to start a new life in America. However, the night before Tom boards the Titanic he celebrates his departure drinking whisky and singing traditional Irish songs with a group of strangers he meets in a pub. As a result, he misses the boat, thus saving his life and returning to his father’s farm. The symbolic meaning of *uisce beatha*, Irish ‘water of life’, as a liberating agent is most obvious here.

Similarly telling is the plethora of nonfictional writings repeatedly accentuating the Irish penchant for drink. In *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Modern Ireland*, for instance, John Waters provides the following clarification: “Drinking in Ireland is not simply a convivial pastime, it is a ritualistic alternative to real life, a spiritual placebo, a fumble for eternity, a longing for heaven, a thirst for return to the embrace of the Almighty” (159). Much in the same witty vein, John Keane, in his essay “The Drinking Fields”, draws a cunning parallel between the climate of Ireland and the drinking propensity of its inhabitants: “It was the earth itself ... It was drinking. Earlier in the day there had been a number of heavy showers and the noise which sounded so like whispering was the squelchy earth swallowing copious draughts of refreshing rainwater” (121). John Ryan in his biographical *Remembering How We Stood*, mainly in the chapter titled “Distilled Damnation or Bacchus and his Pardners” (20–31), outlines the atmosphere of Dublin in the 1940s and 1950s, concerning the city’s drink aficionados, including a number of well-known writers, such as Brendan Behan, notorious for his bingeing: “Most of the Dubliners I knew then had an alcohol problem – *they couldn’t get enough of it*” (20). Ryan intersperses his book with numerous quips on the Irish drink phenomenon, as in the following droll remark: “The definition of an Irish ‘queer’ is supposed to be ‘a man who prefers women to drink’” (69).

However, although the relationship between the Irish and drink is represented in many sources, the most plentiful and interesting are literary texts, particularly fiction, which offers a multitude of texts thematising drinking, and to a great ex-

tent perpetuating the mythos of drink being indigenous to Ireland and its people. Humorous lines such as Spike Milligan's comment that "[m]any people die of thirst, but the Irish are born with it" (*Puckoon* 73) may seem a cliché, but the fact is there are multifarious literary texts which present drink as an inseparable element of Irish culture, and feed the reader with images corresponding to Milligan's, in which drink is a token of conviviality. This can be reflected on the phrase level, as in "play with this glass" (*The Hard Life* 79), and "light music of whisky falling into glasses" ("Grace" 122), or in more elaborate passages where lexical choice and collocations are most significant, a good example being the following excerpt from Samuel Beckett's story "Ding-Dong":

The bottles drawn and emptied in a **twinkling**, the casks responding to the slightest pressure on their **joysticks**, the weary proletarians at rest on arse and elbow, the cash-register that never complains, the **graceful** curates flying from customer to customer, all this made up a spectacle in which Belacqua was used to take **delight** and chose to see a **pleasant** instance of machinery decently subservient to **appetite**.  
(*More Pricks Than Kicks*, 42)

As can be seen here, the drink setting is very much embellished, as it were, with words connoting joy and pleasure.

It is also worth noting the word 'curate', meaning 'barman', indicative of how the Irish drinking jargon draws from the Catholic background, which should not surprise considering that drink seems elevated to an object of devotion. Other such examples, though not mentioned in Beckett's story, include 'the parish priest' (a pint of stout with its white collar), 'the cardinal' (a pint with a large white collar), or 'the faithful' (pub regulars). This peculiar semantic junction is reflected in various literary texts; a pub named "The Holy Drinker" (*Puckoon* 30), drinks "decanted with sacramental piety" (*The Hard Life* 51), or a philosophical reflection: "Wine,' the priest was saying, 'is liquid Christianity, there was never a bigger argument against the teetotalers than the Miracle at Cana'" (*Puckoon* 100).

The aura of alcohol-induced joviality presents drink as the fundamental pillar of Irish sociability, perfectly exemplified in the following excerpt: "Glasses were rinsed and five small measures of whisky were poured out. This new influence enlivened the conversation" ("Grace" 121). Another good example of drink lubricating conversational cogwheels can be found in Flann O'Brien's novel, in which drink helps Mr Collopy "attain great heights of eloquence" (*The Hard Life* 99). Very often, the drink-propelled talk concerns various personages, possibly legendary drinkers themselves ("a procession of names, hour by hour, corner to corner"; *Bird Alone* 18), followed by toasting, the objects being figures quite useful to justify alcoholic indulgence: "a drink to the men who swung for the agent they sunk in a bog near Tipperary: and a drink to His Lordship of Cashel who talked up to the

Pope when he went to Rome ad audiendum verbum ... (*Bird Alone* 18). The kernel of all this sociability is the pub, defined by Christy Brown as “home away from home” (*Down All the Days* 187), for the visitors do not simply frequent the pub, but belong here. More to the point, they proudly express a sense of bond and heritage of a sort, recreating what past generations have done, as reflected in Seán O’Faoláin’s “The Heat of the Sun” (1966):

They never said, ‘Let’s go down to Rodgers’, although it was old Rodgers who owned the pub; they said, ‘Let’s go down to Uncle Alfie.’ A good pub is like that, it is the barman who makes it, not the boss. They gave their custom to Rodgers, they gave their confidence to Alfie. He knew them all, some of them ever since they were old enough to drink their first pint in a pub. He knew their fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, girls, prospects, wages, hopes, fears ... (69)

Another important strand in thematising drink in Irish fiction is the ever-present masculinity attached to drinking. The ‘home’ in *Down All the Days* is not a mere substitute for the hearth, but, as explained further in the passage, a refuge, “a trap-door” needed by a man to escape “domestic warfare” (188). Obviously, this remark quite clearly demarcates the gender boundaries, with drinking, especially to excess, immediately connoting the male realm. In *Angela’s Ashes* by Frank McCourt this is only signalled, “The men lift their pints, nod, drink, and there are creamy lines on their lips and moustaches” (339), but in *Down All the Days* one will find whole passages linking drink and virility, as in the following example, which is also a reflection on the past, when drinking certified real manhood: “Pale amber whiskey or the black velvet pints came all as one to him and the men like him. Hard they lived and hard they died. Hard grafters, hard drinkers, hard men in bed with their women ...” (188). Another good example in this context is crime fiction, where alcohol can be an element of professional camaraderie, as well as a distinguishing feature of a hard-boiled detective, Ken Bruen’s *Jack Taylor* series being a case in point: “The gardaí [the police] and drink have a long, almost loving relationship. Indeed a teetotal garda is viewed with suspicion, if not downright derision, inside and outside the force” (*The Guards* 1).

However, in most instances the drink and masculinity intersection is manifested in experience and endurance (“in and out of every pub in the city of Cork, and rain, hail or snow”; *Bird Alone* 17), often depicted in a picaresque style, with the character(s) forever touring various drinking dens:

Next week I have to give a retreat at Kinnegad. After that, other retreats at Kilbeggan and Tullamore.

– Hah! Kilbeggan? That’s where my little crock here came from, refilled a hundred times since. And emptied a hundred times too, by gob. (*The Hard Life* 51–52)

The inseparable part of such depictions is the emphasis on the drinking prowess, the pace and volume being a proof, almost a badge of a seasoned drinker, a good example to be found in Spike Milligan's *Puckoon*: "They all drank. They drank again. Then, several more agains, then a series of agains followed by one long permanent again" (100). In the very same novel, Milligan elevates pub drinking to something almost ritualistic, the male customers resembling brothers in arms, oblivious to danger, even if it means facing cirrhosis of the liver caused by habitual alcohol consumption:

The air was immediately machine-gunned with a rapid series of orders – 'Guinness – Whiskey – Stout – Gin – Beer – Rum Port – Beer – Stout – Stout –'. There followed a silence as the day's troubles were washed away with great liver-crippling draughts of alcohol. (*Puckoon* 31)

The drink-fuelled machismo is not only revealed in singular vignettes, but often in whole narratives. A good example here is Flann O'Brien's story "Drink and Time in Dublin", which opens with a discussion on the film version of Charles Jackson's *The Lost Weekend* (1944)<sup>1</sup>, most of which one of the characters involved in the discussion considers as "tripe", because, as he boasts, he has experienced "far worse weekends" of which he could tell "yarns" (6). This is a point of departure from which the story develops into his vaunting about drinking feasts, all in an epic-like aura:

Then up to a certain hotel and straight into the bar. There's a whole crowd there that I know. What are you going to have and so on. No no, have a large one. ... Of course I don't remember what happened me but I was in the flat the next morning with the clothes half off. I was supposed to be staying with the brother-in-law, of course, when the wife was away. But sure it's the old dog for the hard road. Drunk or sober I went back to me own place. As a matter of fact I never went near the brother-in-law at all. Be this time I was well into the malt. Out with me again feeling like death on wires and I'm inside in the local curing meself for hours, spilling stuff all over the place with the shake in the hand. Then into the barber's and after that off up again to the hotel for more malt. (7–8)

All the above-quoted excerpts can lead to the conclusion that Irish literature generally comprises texts in which drink functions as an ambience booster and a social lubricant. This can certainly be inferred from the contents of two available anthologies on the theme of alcohol in Irish literature, Peter Haining's *Great Irish Drinking Stories* (2002) and Laurence Flanagan's *Bottle, Draught and Keg: An Irish*

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<sup>1</sup> Directed by Billy Wilder, premièred in 1945.

*Drinking Anthology* (1995). Whether they genuinely mirror this particular aspect of Irish culture or merely preserve various clichés is a matter for a separate debate; however, just a quick look at some of the chapter titles, for instance, “Pub Stories”, “Tales of Revelry”, “Drinking Songs and Toasts”, or “Balls, Feasts and Banquets”, signals the predominant focus of both anthologies. Out of 600 pages the books run to, only about 10 are actually devoted to representations of alcoholism. Does it mean then that there are no serious renditions of alcoholism in Irish literature? Ones comparable to, for instance, *The Lost Weekend*, or Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* (1947), as well as his novella *Lunar Caustic* (1968), published posthumously. Both Charles Jackson and Malcolm Lowry were alcoholics, much as many other writers thematising alcoholism in their novels. The answer is negative, though one has to admit that unlike in the case of the above-mentioned literary classics it is not easy to point out one particular novel which could be considered iconic, or at least well-recognised within the context of fictionalising alcoholism.

Anyone looking for representations of alcoholism in Irish fiction will find that there are, in fact, works which are most relevant in this context. The scope of this article is limited to fiction, but one should perhaps mention in passing nonfictional writings, because non-fiction, not just Irish, of course, offers excellent examinations of alcohol dependence. Thus, one should acknowledge John Healy’s autobiography *The Grass Arena* (1988), an extremely graphic depiction of homelessness and alcoholism; Robert Welch’s *Kicking the Black Mamba* (2012), an account of his son’s addiction and subsequent death; or Emilie Pine’s *Notes to Self* (2019), whose first chapter “Notes on Intemperance” (3–32) is a harrowing account of her alcoholic father’s “shutting down” in Corfu hospital, as a result of “four decades of alcoholism” (13).

As far as fiction is concerned, there is certainly a disproportion between the number of texts in which drink functions in all contexts but alcoholism, and those which actually focalise alcohol abuse itself. More to the point, if the latter is the case, the alcoholism strand is usually marginal, as in one of the earliest examples, George Moore’s *A Mummer’s Wife* (1885), whose main character, Kate Ede, takes to drink, and when things become serious she is diagnosed by her doctor in the following way:

I’ve seen you through what I must specify as a serious illness; dangerous I will not call it, although I might do so if I were to look into the future and anticipate the development the disease will most certainly take, unless, indeed, you will be guided by me and make a vow against all intoxicating liquors. (376)

In fact, an alcohol-dependent family member is a recurrent theme in Irish fiction, and can be found in numerous texts, representing both genre and literary fiction. The alcoholic figures are usually fathers, as in *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Mar-*

ried (1996) by Marian Keys, or in a young adult novel *A Swift Pure Cry* (2006) by Siobhan Dowd<sup>2</sup>, but mothers do occasionally appear on the scene too, a good example being Lucy Caldwell's *Where They Were Missed* (2006). Much the same applies to nonmarital relations. In MacLaverty's *Grace Notes*, the alcoholic character is Catherine McKenna's partner, Dave, quite obviously a burden to Catherine, who realises that part of her daily routine has become "waking a man with a hangover and sending him out to work and later receiving a drunk back in her house" (232). Similarly, in *A Goat's Song* (1994) by Dermot Healy alcohol is a destructive factor in the love affair between Jack Ferris, a playwright, and Catherine Adams, an actress. More complicated familial relations can be observed in Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007), one of whose characters, talked-about only, is Liam, an alcoholic who has committed suicide. His sister, Veronica, is a furtive drinker, very unsocial in her drinking habits, much as the rest of the family, who seem most un-Irish in this respect: "Although the Hegartys all drink, we never drink together" (208).

However, the level of 'literary alcoholicity' of the above-mentioned examples is a far cry from a handful of novels which, to a lesser or greater extent, focalise alcohol dependence. Brian Moore's *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1955) cannot be omitted in this context. The main character, the eponymous Judith Hearne, is a piano teacher largely incapacitated on a professional and personal level by alcohol: "drink, hateful drink that dulls me, disgraces me, lonely drink that leaves me more lonely, more despised" (175). Moore's novel, though, is a special category in itself, if only because of its thematic complexity, owing to which it deserves a separate, and extensive discussion. There are at least two novels which undoubtedly call for a thorough examination as far as fictionalising alcoholism in Irish fiction is concerned. These are Bernard MacLaverty's *Midwinter Break* (2017), and Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996). The reason is twofold: both are virtually 'alcoholism-soaked', and, which is an added value in setting them beside, they depict two utterly different facets of alcohol-dependence.

MacLaverty's novel is subdued, as it were, in its treatment of alcoholism. It features Gerry and Stella Gilmore, a retired Glasgow-based Irish couple on a short trip to Amsterdam. Gerry is the epitome of a functioning alcoholic. A former architect who has travelled a lot in a professional capacity, unlike some of the characters mentioned earlier, he is not a pub-to-pub roaming type. He might be easily labelled as an alcoholic Odysseus, sailing the seas and oceans, and much as Odysseus uses wine to save himself and his men from Polyphemeus, Gerry resorts to Irish whiskey, a small bottle ("The Traveller's Friend" 12) always accompanying him in his travels. As he explains, it functions as "the rubber tyres between [him] and the pier" (27). Gerry's dependence is a low-profile one, seemingly only apparent to his wife, whose attitude towards Gerry's drinking is both disapproval and

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2 Siobhan Dowd was born in London to Irish parents.

resignation, quite conspicuous in their conversations, often tinged with a specific brand of humour:

Would you mind if I, or my ashes, was buried with you?  
If you're still drinking I don't want you next or near me.'  
'I'll definitely have given it up by the time I'm dead. (78)

The mood of the novel is generally contemplative, but as far as alcohol(ism) is concerned, it is full of reflections on drink and its meaning to an alcoholic: "The first drink brings a little distancing – a concentration on another world – an ironing around shirt buttons, a smoothing of wrinkles" (5). This feature can be found in quite a few novels, to mention *A Goat's Song* again, whose alcoholic hero comes to the following conclusion: "The drunk ... is the chief mourner at his own funeral. The drinker would like it all to happen in one day: his birth, his lovemaking, his death. So he speeds up the process." (76). However, in most novels such reflections are scarce, one exception here being Claire Kilroy's *The Devil I Know*, in which Tristram St. Lawrence, a sober alcoholic, makes frequent comments on the question of alcohol abuse, but even more so on the impact drink has on an alcoholic: "That mellow, impeccable stage when nothing can harm you. The log fire is crackling away on the inside and you are safe in your little snug" (290). This is exactly what happens in *Midwinter Break*, which is virtually pervaded with such observations, as in the following example, a reminder of Gerry's Irish origin: "The Jameson deserved his attention. He had nothing but praise for it. A whiskey made in the south, a Catholic whiskey. Bushmills was Protestant, made in the north. Black Bush. It was well named" (34).

However, and here MacLavery's novel is quite atypical in its fictionalisation of alcoholism, Gerry's views on drinking differ from the common perception, which he believes is limited to the "drunk or sober" dichotomy, disregarding what he defines as "the in-between" (5). This perfectly applies to Gerry's drinking: if not exactly a connoisseur, he appears to be a drink aficionado who is merely fond of drink ("Taste, texture, temperature. Perfect" 146), even if his liking for drink goes well beyond the average, is not only habitual, but also solitary, and often furtive. Here, once more, Gerry follows his line of reasoning that his drinking represents "the spectrum, the subtle gradation" (5), rather than any extremes. Thus, when Stella complains that alcohol has for years caused a gradual disintegration of their marriage, he easily defends and justifies his addiction: "Some people he knew were transformed by it into monsters. They became vicious, spiteful and, worst of all, violent creatures. But not him. With a drink or two in him, he loved people, wanted to hug them, not hit them" (146–147).

This last reflection seems a convenient point to turn to Roddy Doyle's novel. This is so because drink as a violence breeding factor, though present in Irish fic-

tion, is usually limited to alcohol-induced brawls, such as the ones to be found, for instance, in William Carleton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (Vol. I 1830 and Vol. II 1843), or John B. Keane's *The Contractors* (1993). Otherwise, one will come across novels in which alcohol functions as an agent conducive to degeneration combined with aggression, for instance, in Patrick McCabe's *The Dead School*, whose two main characters, Malachy Dudgeon and Raphael Bell, finally take to drink when their worlds fall apart. The latter, a school headmaster faced with the world he finds alien and hostile starts indulging himself to the point of an "explosive stupor" (244). For Bell, alcohol functions as a factor which additionally fuels his anger and feeds his twisted imagination.

However, all this is marginal compared with *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, in which alcoholism signifies complete social and emotional disintegration, even more striking when the novel is set beside *Midwinter Break*. While Gerry Gilmore is a middle-class, well-travelled professional, the characters of Roddy Doyle's novel are the underdog, unemployed, doing menial jobs, or involved in shady deals. Addiction in *Midwinter Break* is manageable, as it were, in Doyle's novel it is a gutter type of alcoholism, the background including a malfunctioning family and domestic violence. In *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* Paula Spencer is victimised by her husband, Charlo, hard-drinking and, more importantly, brutally abusive. Charlo's despicable cruelty is rendered in short lines which encapsulate the sense of imminence ("The fist was always coming towards me" 169), but there are also long graphic descriptions, as well as a continuous 'stocktaking' of the battering Paula is being exposed to on an everyday basis:

Broken nose. Loose teeth. Cracked ribs. Broken finger. Black eyes. I don't know how many; I once had two at the same time, one fading, the other new. Shoulders, elbows, knees, wrists. Stitches in my mouth. Stitches on my chin. A ruptured eardrum. Burns. Cigarettes on my arms and legs. Thumped me, kicked me, pushed me, burned me. He butted me with his head. He held me still and butted me; I couldn't believe it. He dragged me around the house by my clothes and by my hair. He kicked me up and he kicked me down the stairs. Bruised me, scalded me, threatened me. For seventeen years. Hit me, thumped me, raped me. Seventeen years. He threw me into the garden. He threw me out of the attic. Fists, boots, knee, head. Bread knife, saucepan, brush. He tore out clumps of my hair. Cigarettes, lighter, ashtray. He set fire to my clothes. He locked me out and he locked me in. He hurt me and hurt me and hurt me. (175-176)

Within the context of domestic violence, Roddy Doyle embeds alcoholism, which has at least three obvious functions here. Paula, whose life can be defined through the prism of a bleak suburban existence, with a vicious husband and four children to look after, seeks consolation in alcohol: "Drink helped; drink calmed

me. Drink gave me something to search for and do” (212). *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* is almost a textbook example of battered woman syndrome, with the typical initial denial, followed by the victim’s sense of guilt, which in Paula’s case is reinforced by alcohol: she blames and denigrates herself by defining her status: “A slut and an alco / Alco. Alco. Paula the alco” (84, 115). Paula’s drinking is also one of the reasons why her battering remains hidden. During medical check-ups, she is always diagnosed as an alcoholic, all scars and bruises being the result of her drinking: “The doctor never looked at me. ... He never looked at my eyes. Drink, he said to himself” (186). Paula’s misery is not limited to the here and now, battered and on an ‘alcohol drip’, sustaining her daily. She feels a failure as a mother, fully aware that the amalgam of violence and alcohol will most likely be a pattern inherited by her children:

I was their future. That was what they saw. The grown-up world. Violence, fat and empty fridge. A bottle of gin but no meat. Black eyes, no teeth; a lump in the corner. Do your homework, say your prayers, brush your teeth, say please and thank you – and you’ll end up like me. (204)

This is exactly what happens in the novel’s sequel, *Paula Spencer* (2006), now featuring Paula’s struggle to come to terms with reality. Charlo is no longer part of the picture, killed by the police during one of his criminal acts, and Paula lives a life which might be labelled as post-domestic violence, but also post-alcoholic, for she struggles to live sober. What remains is the permanent damage (as already concluded in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*: “He killed parts of me. He killed most of me. He killed all of me” 176). The perspective in *Paula Spencer* is painfully and inescapably one-dimensional, most conspicuous in Paula’s perception of reality: “Everyone’s an alcoholic / Everyone’s an alco these days” (20, 137), and the landscape seems a complete wasteland (“Every fuckin’ door’s a bar” 44). More to the point, she witnesses her daughter, Leanne, turn to alcohol, a fact echoing her own prediction quoted earlier, the inherited pattern of behaviour leaving her much as helpless as her own dependency did before: “What does an alcoholic mother say to her alcoholic daughter?” (20–21).

## Conclusion

In her novel, *All Names Have Been Changed*, Claire Kilroy writes about “the great tradition of Irish fiction ... littered throughout with scenes fuelled by alcohol” (151). This is a reflection which inevitably comes to one’s mind after reading the novels mentioned in this discussion, and it most likely applies to many other novels not listed here. It seems that Irish novels are bound to feature at least one bibulous character; so much so, that Bernard MacLaverty in his *Cal* (1983), not having

a proper alcoholic character, 'borrows' for the purpose a non-fictional figure of Matt Talbot (1856–1925), once an alcoholic who chose sobriety, and who is often considered a patron of those Irish who struggle with alcoholism.

However, what seems to be indigenous to Irish fiction is not limited to drink references, passages, and inebriated characters which flood the pages of novels and short stories, but lies in the specificity of such portrayals, which reveals a traditional penchant for drink, an inseparable element of the cultural background. Drink reflects here the mental landscape, in particular the general air of sociability, where a good conversation and solid drink seem to go together quite naturally. Even if drinking is by and large habitual and excessive, the representations of inebriates is usually humorous. Consequently, the very few examples of a serious treatment of alcohol as a destructive agent seem particularly worth a closer examination. After all, it is only natural, considering the level of alcohol consumption in Ireland.

What one cannot fail to notice is that Irish fiction lacks the kind of literary dissections of alcoholism to be found in *The Lost Weekend*, or, to venture outside the Anglo-American literary tradition, classics such as Hans Fallada's *Der Trinker* (*The Drinker*, 1944), Joseph Roth's *Die Legende vom heiligen Trinker* (*The Legend of the Holy Drinker*, 1939), or Tom Kristensen's *Hærværk* (*Havoc*, 1930). All of them focalise alcoholism as such, whereas in Irish fiction it is used in broader contexts, usually concerning familial and social bonds which seem disintegrating. More to the point, Irish novels which thematise alcoholism seem somewhat unIrish, in the sense that unlike Irish fiction in general they not present the almost proverbial Irish ambience of drink-induced joviality.

This is exactly the case with Doyle's and MacLaverty's novels, which are not just standard case studies of becoming an alcoholic, depicting the subsequent stages of alcohol abuse, and, which is often the case, concentrating of the 'physicality of drinking'. In MacLaverty's novel dependency is almost imperceptible, yet it is nothing else but another type of alcoholism, and, what is worth emphasising here, one which is hard to find in fictional works. At the other end there is Roddy Doyle's novel, which is a harrowing 'fictional evidence' of how alcohol functions in settings far different from those of cosy pubs with their lively atmosphere, in which drink betokens gregariousness.

All in all, if any fiction can prove that "addiction is a strange bastard", it is certainly that written by Irish writers, both those whose novels and short stories were published many decades ago, as well as the contemporary ones, Roddy Doyle and Bernard MacLaverty being a case in point.

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## „Uzależnienie to zdradziecka bestia”: o przedstawieniach alkoholizmu w irlandzkiej powieści

### *Streszczenie*

Chociaż trudno jest odrzucić twierdzenie, że alkohol można uznać za nieodzowny element kultury irlandzkiej, w powszechnym odbiorze przekonanie to często oparte jest na stereotypach. Pomocna w zrozumieniu tej kwestii jest literatura irlandzka. Znaleźć tu możemy obrazy radosnego opilstwa, ale także, zwłaszcza w tekstach współczesnych, dramat uzależnienia alkoholowego i powiązane z nim problemy. Prezentowany artykuł podejmuje próbę przyjrzenia się, jak literatura irlandzka przedstawia kwestię spożywania i nadużywania alkoholu, a także w jaki sposób teksty literackie ukazują szerszą perspektywę, która pozwala na zrewidowanie stereotypów dotyczących przysłowiowej kultury alkoholowej Irlandii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** powieść irlandzka, alkohol w literaturze, stereotypy narodowe

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