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OF MARTIN MCDONAGH

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	5
2. McDONAGH IN THE CONTEXT OF IRISH DRAMA	7
2.1. Questioning McDonagh as an Irishman	7
2.2. McDonagh’s Place within the Irish Canon	9
2.3. “Ireland mustn’t Be Such a Bad Place”: The (Non)Representation of Ireland in McDonagh’s Work	13
2.3.1. The West Revisited: Setting of the Plays	14
2.3.2. Violence as a Means of Communication, Silence as a Product of Language	15
2.3.3. Touching (upon) the Irish Trinity: Dismantling the Family, Church and Law	16
2.4. The Changelessness of the Western World	17
3. McDONAGH’S IRISHNESS OUTSIDE IRELAND	22
3.1. Leaving the West: Distilling Irishness?	22
3.2. Language Lost in Transl(oc)ation	24
3.2.1. Losing the Form: Translating “Hiberno-English”	24
3.2.2. Language Losing the Function: Creating the Lonesome West	26
4. “YOU CAN BE EXCOMMUNICATED FOR THAT I THINK. I SAW IT IN A FILM WITH MONTGOMERY CLIFT”: McDONAGH’S CONTEMPORARY REFERENCES	29
4.1. Counting the Cans, Minding the Mintios, Complian Complaints: Food in McDonagh	30
4.2. Spreading the News: Isolated Islands, Limited Leenane	32
4.3. Soapy Silver Screen: McDonagh and Film	35

4.3.1. <i>The Cripple of Inishmaan</i> Meets <i>Man of Aran</i>	36
4.3.2. The Connemara Soap Opera	38
4.3.3. Horror Pulp Fiction of the Emerald Isle: McDonagh and Film	42
5. CONCLUSION	48
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY	51
7. SUMMARY	55

1. INTRODUCTION

Thirteen years ago, in 1997, the theatrical community around the world was for the first time amazed by the new emerging persona of European drama, Martin McDonagh (1970), who made a spectacular debut by his play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in 1996. This work was followed by three more pieces in quick succession, further confirming McDonagh's status as a rising star. The author has to date publicly produced seven plays which quickly found their way from Great Britain and Ireland into the whole world and enjoyed tremendous success everywhere they were performed. The appearance of a new persona naturally invited a large amount of attention and sometimes very heated criticism; the core debate focuses mainly on the most prominent and shocking aspects of McDonagh's plays – namely violence, emotional vacuum, authenticity and alleged misrepresentation of Irishness.

In its introductory contextual part, this thesis would like to illuminate McDonagh's status as an Irish writer, try to place him within the Irish dramatic tradition and provide a comparison with some of his predecessors, namely J. M. Synge and his *Playboy of the Western World*. This chapter of the thesis will equally concentrate on major themes and means of representing Irishness in the plays and on features connecting McDonagh to other Irish playwrights. Furthermore, the following chapter will attempt to touch upon the (un)necessity or even redundancy of the afore-mentioned clichéd Irish stereotypes in translating McDonagh into various cultures of the contemporary world. However, it cannot be argued that the undisputable Irishness of his plays is curiously blended with contemporary influences, events and pop-culture. This work is also aiming to analyze the contrast and pulsating mixture created while merging the once-traditional image of western Ireland with these modern allusions in three of McDonagh's plays, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (BQ), *The Lonesome West* (LW)¹ and *The Cripple of Inishmaan*² (CI). Therefore, last, but not least, the final body chapter will bring to light various elements by which the modern world, pop-culture and events are projected into the dramas. All in all, this thesis wishes to explore the blend of old and new in McDonagh and what statement this mixture makes about (presumably not only) Ireland. The core of the argument consists of the indispensability of the Irish

¹ Martin McDonagh, *Plays:1* (London: Methuen, 1999). All subsequent quotations come from this edition.

² Martin McDonagh, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (London: Methuen, 1997). All subsequent quotations come from this edition.

dramatic tradition for the works of McDonagh and the distance and independence that the contemporary allusions and issues allow him to take from his predecessors.

2. McDONAGH IN THE CONTEXT OF IRISH DRAMA

2.1. Questioning McDonagh as an Irishman

Martin McDonagh is conventionally considered to be an Irish playwright, together with Marina Carr and Dermot Bolger representative of the new literary generation emerging in the eighties and nineties. However, upon closer scrutiny, already this simple statement becomes highly problematic. Though branded as a writer of such provenience, McDonagh is technically not even Irish to begin with – born to a Sligo mother and a Galway father in Elephant and Castle, London³, he would officially fall under the label of a British, or even more specifically (and with Irish history in mind ironically) an English citizen, yet his Englishness is curiously suppressed. On the contrary, the choice of his topics and settings (seven of his eight plays to date⁴, with the exception of *The Pillowman* and *A Behanding in Spokane*, take place in Ireland) would distinguish him as an Irish playwright. Nevertheless, according to his critics, his experience of Ireland as a second generation emigrant can be considerably deviated. As Benedict Anderson puts it “‘home’ as it emerges for the second generation is ‘less experienced than imagined, and imagined through a complex of mediations and representations’”⁵. The biographical data of McDonagh could easily support this thesis of the lack of evidence of the true shape of Ireland on his part, putting his status as an Irish playwright at stake once again; although growing up “steeped in the emotive stories of Irish nationalism”⁶ his first hand experience of his parents’ native country was limited to summer holidays annually spent in Sligo and Connemara. Later on, when his parents moved back to Ireland, McDonagh together with his brother refused to join them, choosing to remain in London. Thus, we could indeed suppose that McDonagh lacked the thorough experience of the Irish reality that for example J. M. Synge gained through numerous lengthy sojourns in the west of the country, namely on the Aran Islands⁷. On the other hand, we cannot easily relate to a perhaps rather harsh criticism by Aidan Arrowsmith claiming that “McDonagh’s plays revolve around

³ Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan, “Introduction”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 2.

⁴ The eighth play being *A Behanding in Spokane*, set in the US, with the world premiere produced on Broadway in March 2010. Another play, *The Banshees of Inisheer* is finished but still unproduced and not announced.

⁵ Benedict Anderson, “Exodus”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Winter, 1994), 319.

⁶ Fintan O’Toole, *Martin McDonagh: Plays 1: Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1999), 9.

⁷ Synge indeed captured this experience in his monogram *The Aran Islands*.

misinterpretation, misrepresentation, and the distortion of reality”⁸. This argument can be agreed with under the condition that it is taken as a fact rather than a piece of criticism. In their essence, McDonagh’s plays are primarily not intended to be realistic as much as their predecessors – e.g. Synge’s works – are not intended to be such either. Synge undoubtedly in a way captured the Irish west more accurately than the idealistic Irish revivalists; however, on the other hand, he did not either intend to persuade his audiences that his Ireland was uniquely a place where sons murder their fathers with a spade and build their reputation upon this “dirty deed”. In both cases, one of the major literary devices is deliberate hyperbole, a literary figure stressing an aspect to the point of exaggeration, which makes any such criticism irrelevant; nevertheless, Fintan O’Toole states that even these apparent exaggerations “inflate a recognizable truth”⁹. Furthermore, we might even argue with the critics about the indispensability of McDonagh’s perfect knowledge of the setting of his plays – after all, the universe he creates is his own and using devices such as imagination or exaggeration belongs to undisputable rights of an artist.

Fintan O’Toole comes up with a handy compromise concerning the problematic classification of McDonagh as based on his nationality – he considers McDonagh a crucial member of the generation of the new “Anglo-Irish”. In his view, this term no longer defines, as Brendan Behan would have seen it “a Protestant on a horse¹⁰”, but rather emigrants (or in McDonagh’s case descendants of emigrants) “finding or making their own connections with Irish culture¹¹”. The time and distance spent away from the country they focus on gives them an objective viewpoint from which they can provide a new image of the “state of the play”. Liam Greenslade goes further, bringing up some of the negative features of this duplicity of mind, arguing that “isolation, in the sense of a deeply felt or experienced, classical alienation is ... characteristic of these people. They belong completely to neither one culture nor the other and are caught between their parents’ heritage and their present context, rendered invisible and inaudible from the point of view of

⁸ Aidan Arrowsmith, “Genuinely Inauthentic: McDonagh’s Postdiasporic Irishness”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Caysfort Press, 2006), 240.

⁹ Quoted in Clare Wallace, *Suspect Cultures: Narrative, Identity & Citation in 1990s New Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 181.

¹⁰ Fintan O’Toole, *Martin McDonagh: Plays 1: Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1999), 9-10.

¹¹ Fintan O’Toole, *Martin McDonagh: Plays 1: Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1999), 10.

recognition¹²". This statement, probably implying the sense of the lack of self-definition, uneasiness and loss, does not however seem to be entirely valid for McDonagh. Although he would fulfil the formal criteria of belonging into two cultures and fully to neither, he personally certainly does not struggle uncomfortably with the issue of his own identity; on the contrary, his voice is loud and self-assured, certainly not husky with "dangerous nostalgia"¹³. As he put it in his own words after being questioned about his position in both Irish drama and identity context: "I don't even enter into it. I mean I don't feel I have to defend myself for being English or for being Irish, because in a way, I don't feel either. And, in another way, of course, I'm both."¹⁴ So we might conclude that although the question of his belonging is the subject of numerous criticisms, ironically enough, it is the author who is the least interested in such debates. So perhaps the reader/spectator should approach his plays unburdened by any presuppositions sourcing from attempts at classification of this "enfant terrible" of contemporary drama.

2.2. McDonagh's Place within the Irish Canon

However, branding Martin McDonagh as an Irish writer on the basis of his nationality and actual bonds with Ireland is the less problematic part of the matter. A greater question arises while we struggle to award McDonagh a place in the Irish literary tradition. Judging from his plays, different critics provide numerous authors from whom McDonagh allegedly draws inspiration and in whose footsteps he supposedly continues. For example, Karen Vandavelde states that McDonagh's theatre echoes with that of "Synge, Beckett, O'Casey and many more¹⁵"; Jose Lanterns compares the new star of the Irish drama to Synge and Tom Murphy¹⁶ and Christopher Murray sees an affinity with Lady Gregory¹⁷. From the Irish perspective, his work has also been treated in relation to his contemporaries such

¹² Liam Greensdale, 'White Skin, White Masks: Psychological Distress Among the Irish in Britain', *The Irish in the New Communities*, ed. P. O'Sullivan (Leicester: Leicester University Press 1992) 220.

¹³ Aidan Arrowsmith, "Genuinely Inauthentic: McDonagh's Postdiasporic Irishness", *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 237.

¹⁴ Quoted in Sean O'Hagan, 'The Wild West', *The Guardian* 24 March 2001, 32.

¹⁵ Karen Vandavelde, 'The Gothic Soap of Martin McDonagh', *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006), 293.

¹⁶ Jose Lanterns, "Playwrights of the Western World: Synge, Murphy, McDonagh", *A Century of Irish Drama, Widening the Stage*, eds. Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan and Shakir Mustafa (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2000) 221.

¹⁷ Christopher Murray, "The Cripple of Inishmaan Meets Lady Gregory", *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 79.

as Marina Carr and Conor McPherson. In a wider context, critics almost equally often mention his belonging to the “in-yer-face” type of drama.¹⁸

Ironically enough, and quite typically of McDonagh, such hypotheses are again uprooted by the author himself. With his typical arrogance, he himself claims that his previous experience with (leave alone Irish) drama had been virtually nonexistent and what is more, he impudently does not show a great amount of respect for the institution either: “I’m coming to the theatre with a disrespect for it. I’m coming from a film fan’s perspective on theatre. (...) Theatre bored the socks off me. I only ever went to see film stars, Martin Sheen or Tim Roth.”¹⁹ He goes even further saying that before starting to write, his literary knowledge amounted to no more than twenty pieces and none of them certainly were Irish. In this way, he defies Christopher Murray’s statement that “in modern Irish history (...) each successive writer rewrites his/her predecessors²⁰”; supposedly, McDonagh cannot live up to this presumption because he allegedly (if we choose to believe his version of the story) did not know any of the earlier material (although the fact that the titles of his two plays – *A Skull in Connemara* and *A Lonesome West* directly echo lines from two Irish classics, namely Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Synge’s *Playboy*, seem to be too conspicuous and even suspicious for a mere coincidence – (not only) Shaun Richards has demonstrated that the similarities are numerous and must be a result of McDonagh’s careful study of his predecessors²¹). And we may venture even further claiming that, judging from his own clearly demonstrated unwillingness to belong to any literary tradition (“It always struck me as kind of dumb, any kind of pride in the place you happen to be born in. Even culturally, I don’t think you can take too much pride in what your predecessors in the country have written. If you haven’t written it yourself, you’re as close to it as an Eskimo.”²²); he would have rebelled and chosen to stand apart even if he had known the Irish dramatic history. However, it has been proved that just like McDonagh likes to construct his own, not always true, image of Ireland, he also likes to construct the legend around his own persona; Clare Wallace even

¹⁸ See Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2000), who dedicates several pages to McDonagh’s BQ.

¹⁹ Joseph Feeney, ‘Martin McDonagh: Dramatist of the West’, *Studies* 87, 1998, 28.

²⁰ Christopher Murray, ‘The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the ‘Nineties’, in *The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the ‘Nineties’*, ed. Eberhard Bort (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1996) 21.

²¹ Shaun Richards, ‘The Outpouring of a Morbid, Unhealthy Mind: The Critical Condition of Synge and McDonagh’, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 248.

²² Fintan O’Toole, ‘Nowhere Man’, *The Irish Times*, 24 December 1996.

speaks about his “showmanship”²³. Therefore, his statements need to be taken with a necessary amount of suspicion and reserve. Patrick Lonergan has drawn attention to this, observing that “confusion between intention and reception arises because scholars place excessive weight on comments made by or attributed to McDonagh in press interviews, which are frequently full of inaccuracies, exaggerations, omissions, and inconsistencies.”²⁴ He further continues saying: “When scholars are confronted with such obviously exaggerated claims—or with the existence of so many apparently contradictory statements by McDonagh—they seem to have concluded that the writer himself might be something of a fraud.”²⁵ However, again, the reality might not be quite this simple. No doubt we can perceive McDonagh as a notorious liar; nevertheless, we can also understand his self-presentation in media as a part of his creation (this time concerning his own artistic identity), dramatic work and above all, publicity campaign. As such, we should not straightforwardly dismiss him, but rather, as Lonergan concludes: “be cautious about using McDonagh’s media interviews as a way of interpreting his plays”²⁶. After all, art is always supposed to speak for itself.

However, later on, after having “familiarized” himself (or rather finally avowing the already existent familiarity) with at least Synge’s work, he admitted “I can see similarities now – I read it and the darkness of the story amazed me.”²⁷ Both writers have been, curiously (or maybe rather logically so) enough, reproached similar crimes against the Irish national image; to quote Anthony Roche: “the charge of stage Irishry, and in particular of racial stereotyping and misrepresentation of the Irish peasant as prone to violence, has been levelled at McDonagh, as it was before him at Synge. These writers, it is claimed, “do not know these people and substitute for their lack of understanding a wilful and calculated stage effect.”²⁸ The Abbey, Synge’s base, had in its time been dismissed as

²³ Clare Wallace, *Suspect Cultures: Narrative, Identity & Citation in 1990s New Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 133.

²⁴ Patrick Lonergan, “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 152.

²⁵ Patrick Lonergan, “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 153.

²⁶ Patrick Lonergan, “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 153.

²⁷ Fintan O’Toole, ‘Nowhere Man’, *The Irish Times*, 26 Apr. 1997.

²⁸ Anthony Roche, ‘Close to Home but Distant’: Irish Drama in the 1990s’, *Colby Quarterly*, 34, 4 December 1998, 287.

“degraded and anti-national theatre in which the country was held up to ridicule”²⁹; the opening night of *The Playboy of the Western World* by Synge has been immortalized in countless notorious accounts about the audience’s violent reaction resulting in several days lasting riots. However, it might be added that altering reality is the artist’s prerogative. Equally, the reader/viewer disposes of the privilege to refuse to consume the play so that neither side is harmed. It is the Abbey Theatre Garry Hynes who merits the credit for the *mis-en-scène* of McDonagh’s plays who has perhaps got closest to the heart of the matter: “There’s this issue about Martin and his authenticity – the response that his is not Irish life now and it’s not Connemara life. Of course it isn’t. It’s an artifice. It’s not authentic. It’s not meant to be. It’s a complete creation, and in that sense it’s fascinating.”³⁰ Patrick Lonergan is even more radical in dismissing all the reality projecting critics, saying “To require of McDonagh’s work such features as authenticity and accuracy in the presentation of political and social facts is to miss the point of his works entirely: McDonagh’s *Leenane*, *Inishmore*, and *Inishmaan* should not be thought of as similar to O’Casey’s or McPherson’s *Dublin*, Friel’s *Ballybeg*, Mitchell’s *Belfast*, or Murphy’s *Tuam*.³¹ Although McDonagh’s denying any previous knowledge of Irish dramatic tradition might come across as strange, it is not negation of a plagiarist; more likely, it is but another means of creating a certain image and cult.

This thesis would like to conform to this view, also pioneered by e.g. Patrick Lonergan, frustrated by endless disagreements concerning this subject³² and Sara Keating, that the question of the author’s background is irrelevant; the latter words the theory that this paper would like to relate to – she argues that McDonagh’s Irishness should not be the focal point of the discussion claiming that “Irish theatre scholars have immersed McDonagh’s work in a post-colonial discourse of national authenticity completely inappropriate to the postmodern politics of his plays³³”. Surely enough, the playwright himself would agree. José Lanterns speaks also

²⁹ Christopher Murray, “The Cripple of Inishmaan Meets Lady Gregory”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 82.

³⁰ Garry Hynes in an interview with Cathy Leeney, *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*, eds. Lillian Chambers et al. (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2001) 204.

³¹ Patrick Lonergan “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, Ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 158.

³² He argues this point for example in the following essay: Patrick Lonergan, “Martin McDonagh, Globalization, and Irish Theatre Criticism”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006).

³³ Sara Keating, “Is Martin McDonagh an Irish Playwright?”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 281.

about the “lack of definition”³⁴; McDonagh, with his typical ignorant pose ostensibly disregarding any critical efforts, characterizes himself as “somewhere kind of in-between” (presumably referring to several aspects at once) who struggles to escape “any kind of definition, any kind of -ism, politically, socially, religiously, all that stuff”³⁵, his aim, mouthed by Katurian Katurian in *The Pillowman*, being solely “to tell stories”.³⁶

2.3. “Ireland mustn’t Be Such a Bad Place”:

The (Non) Representation of Ireland in McDonagh’s Work

Consequently, one crucial question seems to emerge. Synge’s plays from the beginning of the 20th century are by no means meant to be a real representation of the western rural part of Ireland and neither are McDonagh’s works from the end of the same century burdened with these mimetic ambitions. Therefore a logical problem arises - how come that both playwrights, almost a century apart, managed to create an alarmingly similar image of the West? Shaun Richards even speaks of a separate dramatic category of a “western play”³⁷; Richards also stresses the contemporary aspect present in the plays of both authors when speaking about McDonagh “as in Synge, this is Ireland, this is now”³⁸; he prominently draws parallels between violence (“violence, deprivation and desperation span the century dividing them”³⁹), sexuality and blasphemy. All of these issues will be touched upon in the present thesis. However, as Fintan O’Toole put it, referring to McDonagh’s plays, “these are, of course, dramatic exaggerations. But they are not pure inventions. McDonagh makes sure that the action is continually brushing up against verifiable actuality.”⁴⁰ And it could be said that Synge proceeded alike. In what respects are their plays similar and in what do they correspond to reality, this

³⁴ José Lanterns quoted in “Playwrights of the Western World”, *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* eds. Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan and Shakir Mus (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) 221.

³⁵ Quoted in Fintan O’Toole, *Nowhere Man*.

³⁶ Martin McDonagh, *The Pillowman* (London: Methuen, 2003) 7.

³⁷ Richards, 247.

³⁸ Richards, 250.

³⁹ Richards, 253.

⁴⁰ Fintan O’Toole, *Plays 1: Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1999) xv.

verifiable actuality? What does the Irishness in them consist of and how essential is its place?

2.3.1. The West Revisited: Setting of the Plays

As it has been said countless times, the majority of McDonagh's plays (with the exception of *The Pillowman* set in an unspecified temporal and spatial coordinates) are set in the West of Ireland, more precisely into the emblematic retreats of the Irish nationalists. When struggling with the foundation of the Abbey theatre, Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats sent out a letter to potential patrons, in which they envisaged the mission and purpose of such enterprise. They yearned to "build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature" and to "find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and (...) desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland", ending their plea with the promise to "show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of ancient idealism"⁴¹. It is deeply ironic that a decade after writing this manifesto letter, the Abbey managed to produce Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, which, like McDonagh's plays in the eyes of many succeeded in ridiculing the supposed Eden-like Irish community. It is maybe symbolic that the *Playboy* was one of Abbey's earliest plays, although already Synge was aware that the western "myth of simplicity and endurance as the characteristics of Irishness at its best"⁴² was wishful thinking of the revivalists hungry for a flattering identity rather than reality seen in the named parts (Synge even wrote numerous articles on the subject of the West as suffering from terrible poverty). McDonagh metaphorically closes the circle almost a century later by "the culmination of a long demythologization of the West" and "final reversal of Romanticism"⁴³. McDonagh's appearance on the (not necessarily only) Irish dramatic scene has unconsciously responded to the concern for the future of Irish drama voiced by Thomas Kilroy in 1992, ironically enough only four years before McDonagh's debut:

"Certain stereotypes of Irish writing and the Irish writer have thereby become entrenched, the Irish writer as roaring boyo, for example, or as untutored, natural genius and Irish writing as a pure, natural flow of words, untouched by a contaminating intelligence. As traditional Ireland fades into the

⁴¹ Lady Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1972) 20.

⁴² O'Dwyer "Play-Acting and Myth-Making" 31.

⁴³ Fintan O'Toole, "Murderous Laughter – *The Leenane Trilogy*", *Irish Times*, 24th June 1997.

past these stereotypes become even more absurd and are best consigned to pulp fiction. And as it does, nostalgia may no longer be enough, indeed it may not even be necessary as Irish drama begins to locate itself more in the present.”⁴⁴

Both playwrights firmly set their works in the West of the Emerald Isle, into the traditional Gaeltacht area, seen as the cradle of pure unspoilt Irishness by the advocates of the Irish revival. In this respect, the two writers could not have aimed their poisonous arrows more accurately. However, while Synge prefers to fix his plays rather in terms of geography (in *Playboy* the characters several times refer to places in the vicinity of their village and the setting of the play can be traced with precision), McDonagh is more temporarily focused (although the geographical location is often present already in the title of the plays – e.g. *The Cripple of Inishmaan*); he creates the background by referring to sports events, Australian soaps or contemporary affairs (mainly he enjoys pointing to religious scandals, never particularly too flattering for Ireland). Thus, he brings into the Irish setting at least some aspect of today’s globalized culture and contemporary issues, which will be dealt with later on in the present thesis. Also, the temporal setting supports the thesis of several critics, e.g. Patrick Lonergan, that, like directors of the films that McDonagh often lists as a direct source of his inspiration (in this case, the parallel was drawn between him and Danny Boyle), he does not necessarily demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the setting and his illustrative bits of local colour are often erroneous (e.g. the Hiberno-English dialect) as it shall be visible in detail in what follows. He situates some of his plays directly into the present⁴⁵ (e.g. BQ or LW), but the village community, apart from the omnipresent TV blinking, is like a sleeping beauty, untouched by the material presence of the modern world (unlike Tom Murphy in his *Bailgangaire*, who places a Japanese factory across the road from the traditional “kitchen and style”⁴⁶ setting.

2.3.2. Violence as a Means of Communication, Silence as a Product of Language

Some parallel themes which aroused controversy are clearly pronounced in both plays. In the *Playboy*, Christy’s reputation is established primarily on the

⁴⁴ Thomas Kilroy “A Generation” quoted in *Playwrights of the Western World: A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) 141.

⁴⁵ The present of writing that is – the mid-nineties.

⁴⁶ José Lanterns, “Playwrights of the Western World”, *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* eds. Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan and Shakir Mus (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) 209.

basis of him claiming to have killed his own father. At first, he is rightfully ashamed of his deed, but seeing that his crime inspires admiration in the natives, he depicts it accordingly, building his reputation on it (also the power of language is apparent in this deed). Even more frighteningly, the violence in McDonagh's plays seems to be a part of the everyday routine and a common feature of everyday life. In fact, a large amount of normal everyday communication is substituted by violence. The daughter tortures her mother (*BQ*); brothers, unable of communication of a different sort, spend their days in farcical bickering which eventually climaxes in a shooting match (*LW*) and a girl punches a boy in the nose out of fear of going too soft by accepting his invitation for a date (*CI*). The violence is not necessarily of physical sort – people can be hurt by words even more “effectively” than by fists and worst of all, the insults are uttered mindlessly, as a part of the routine rhetoric. As one of the characters in *LW* laconically observes “nobody’ll notice a biteen more hate, so, if there’s plenty enough hate in the world” (*LW*, 133). Shaun Richards sees violence as one of the most crucial points of convergence between McDonagh's plays and Synge's work (“matching the violence and madness of the plays is the pervasive sense of bodily functions, sexual desire, blasphemy and general degeneracy”⁴⁷): surprisingly, he sees the latter as more violent. This can be slightly problematic: the violence in Synge is more inherent and textual, in McDonagh, we see cats bursting into pieces (*LI*) and a matricide on the stage (*BQ*) – comparing the effects of the implicit and explicit presence of violence might prove rather misleading.

2.3.3. Touching (upon) the Irish Trinity: Dismantling the Family, Church and Law

Patrick Lonergan argues that McDonagh arouses such mighty controversy because he ridicules in his plays some of the most important Irish authorities; according to him, by presenting an on-stage torture and eventually matricide *BQ* (set, like *LW*, mockingly in a typically Irish drama setting – a kitchen of a village house) attacks the stereotyped notion of Irish family, whereas *LW* aims to lampoon the institution of the Catholic Church (the burnt and smelly plastic figurines supposedly standing for the religious meltdown); the symbolic trinity is being

⁴⁷ Richards, 251.

completed by exposing the law in *A Skull in Connemara*⁴⁸, haunted by a Garda with idealistic sense of justice copied from American detective series. Given the climate in which especially the second premiered (the scandal incident to the gradual child abuse within the Catholic Church institutions issue revelation culminant not until recently by the Ryan report in 2009) the plays must have addressed Ireland's sores spots; in this respect, the controversy is understandable. However, McDonagh does not represent the current Irish problems as they are; he shows them through a monstrously magnified looking glass, in concordance to what he claims to be his technique: "I think you can see things more clearly through exaggeration than through reality"⁴⁹. The afore-mentioned problem of child abuse is brought on the scene with many references, perhaps most prominently in Coleman's speech (LW) in which he attempts to comfort Father Walsh/Welsh who is worried about his priestly skills:

"The only thing with you is you're a bit too weedy and you're a terror for the drink and you have doubts about Catholicism. Apart from that you're a fine priest. Number one you don't go abusing five-year olds so, sure, doesn't that give you a head-start over half the priests in Ireland?" (LW, 135)

In addition, similarly to *Dubliners* by James Joyce, the idea of paralysis and stagnation is principal in at least two plays, namely physically impersonated in Billy in CI and Mag in BQ; its metaphorical parallel would be relevant to the majority of the characters as well as the space and time that does not seem to evolve anywhere; this impression is merely strengthened by repetitive, circular conversations with zero information value.

2.4. The Changelessness of the Western World

The three plays in question supposedly represent Ireland in the course of time, at least according to the stage directions – CI is set in the thirties, while e.g. BQ and LW should virtually epitomize the (at the time of writing) quite contemporary Ireland of early 1990s, a village on the edge of a globalized culture of

⁴⁸ Patrick Lonergan, "Martin McDonagh, Globalization, and Irish Theatre Criticism", *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 295.

⁴⁹ McDonagh quoted in Lonergan, "Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh", *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, Ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 158.

the Celtic Tiger ⁵⁰, a backwater virtually unaffected by it. Richards is further on even less forgiving, when he “sees the west as surviving on the leavings of more prosperous economies”⁵¹, including its own. However, audaciously enough, one could almost use the time specifications in the plays interchangeably, thus making an important statement about the state of Ireland today, as perceived by Martin McDonagh. Here, it is important to stress again that strictly realistic reading of his plays is problematic to say the least – McDonagh’s Leenane and Aran Islands are pure artistic invention created by exaggerating the real state of things (Michael Billington adds to this, describing the playwright’s method in the following manner: “McDonagh constantly plunders the past. But he has a talent for excess, for taking a situation and pushing it to surreal extremes.”⁵²) Fintan O’Toole summarizes it in an observation aimed at BQ, but it can be with great plausibility applied to all of McDonagh’s Irish plays:

“The country in which McDonagh’s play is set is pre-modern and postmodern at the same time. The 1950s is laid over 1990s, giving the play’s apparent realism the ghostly, dizzying feel of a superimposed photograph. All the elements that make up the picture are real, but their combined effect is that questions the very idea of reality.”⁵³

Of course, in BQ, a considerable amount of time is spent watching TV and discussing trashy cop series; but even more time is dedicated to listening to the outlived radio programmes and writing letters, an old-fashioned, almost extinct means of communication – in an average real community, the communication would more likely take place via phone. A trip to America, reminding of a common practice of escaping the Great Hunger some 150 years earlier, is passionately discussed in Leenane at the turn of the 21st century. All in all, McDonagh presents Ireland in an obvious hyperbole of commonly acknowledged Irish stereotypes as a retrograde community, peopled by tyrant alcoholics, abusive atheist priests and corrupted loveless relationships ignorant of the modern world surrounding it. José Lanterns affirms that the plays are set “in the west of Ireland”, correcting himself very significantly in the very same sentence to “rather, in familiar image of the West

⁵⁰ Shaun Richards, “The Outpouring of a Morbid, Unhealthy Mind: The Critical Condition of Synge and McDonagh”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 254.

⁵¹ Richards, 255.

⁵² Michael Billington quoted by José Lanterns, *Playwrights of the Western World: A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) 212.

⁵³ Fintan O’Toole, *Plays 1: Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1999) xi.

of Ireland⁵⁴”; we might conclude by stating that these few alternating words say it all. The statement can be perhaps further paraphrased, since McDonagh’s reality is even more accurately a parody of the familiar image of the West of Ireland. Surprisingly, one of the most interesting arguments concerning accuracy of representation would be one made just “by the way” by Laura Eldred: by carefully drawing parallels between slasher horrors and McDonagh’s plays, she is definitely asserting the extent to which we might take both of these genres as realistic: even if based on some true features, they are purely imaginative⁵⁵. On the other hand, the discrepancy between the stage West and its real, in all spheres more dynamic counterpart may indeed lull the domestic audiences into believing that “Ireland can’t be such a bad place”.⁵⁶

Aidan Arrowsmith, apparently reading McDonagh’s plays as a serious representation of the nation, grudgingly compares Leenane, (but it can no doubt be equally related also to his Aran Islands plays), using the quote by Fintan O’Toole, to a “black and white still from a bad Abbey play of the fifties”⁵⁷. Undoubtedly, the Abbey of the 1950s is vastly different from the contemporary scene and McDonagh’s plays – the underlying point fuelling Arrowsmith’s criticism aims at the alleged misrepresentation and stagnation present in McDonagh’s plays. However, even McDonagh’s predecessor on the Irish stage, J.M. Synge was not glorified from the very beginning, as visible from W.B. Yeats’ comments on Synge’s work, saying that they “did not set out to create this sort of theatre and its success has been to me a discouragement and a defeat”⁵⁸. On the other hand, Yeats initially “wanted a theatre which would truly challenge orthodoxies, including nationalist ones, and create an ‘unruly’ audience, which would, he wrote, include ‘zealous

⁵⁴ He characterized it thus, founding his definition on the most recurrent clichés of Irish drama: “His characters have names like Johnypateenmike and Maryjohnny; they live in cottages, burn turf, and drink poteen; they are surrounded by farm implements, crucifixes, holy statues, and pictures of the Kennedys; and they have relatives who work in England or America. This Ireland is a stereotype build around traditional clichés, a throwback untouched by even the feeblest of Celtic Tigers. (...) McDonagh’s world is stuck in an image of the past and unable to move beyond it”. Indeed, an audience going to the theatre in order to see an Irish play would (quite rightfully based on experience) expect at least some of the aforementioned characteristics. José Lanterns, “Playwrights of the Western World: A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage” (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000).

⁵⁵ Laura Eldred, “Martin McDonagh’s Blend of Tradition and Horrific Innovation”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 207.

⁵⁶ In a paraphrase of the probably most recurrent phrase in *The Cripple of Inishmaan*.

⁵⁷ O’Toole quoted in Aidan Arrowsmith, “Genuinely Inauthentic: McDonagh’s Postdiasporic Irishness”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 240.

⁵⁸ Quoted in José Lanterns, “Playwrights of the Western World”, *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) 205.

bricklayers´ and the ´odd corner boy or two´⁵⁹. The notion of challenging orthodoxies has worked perfectly in both Synge and McDonagh and it was, in the larger sense, precisely this controversy unleashed by Synge and equally applicable to McDonagh, being the engine of heated debates reaching far beyond the theatrical text is a proof that theatre is still alive and moves forward. Therefore, Yeats finally famously glorified Synge´s contribution to Irish culture while giving a speech at Nobel Awards reception:

“On 10 December 1923 Yeats went to Stockholm to collect the Nobel Prize for literature, and, in his address responding to the honour, spoke of the Irish theatre. He recalled Synge and invoked the presence of Lady Gregory, thinking, as he spoke, how ´deep down we have gone, below all that is individual, modern and restless, seeking foundations for an Ireland that can only come into existence in a Europe that is still but a dream.´”⁶⁰

McDonagh´s work will very probably not be one day hailed with quite such elevated words; nevertheless, the stream of criticism follows a similar tendency as that flooding Synge decades ago: the undisputable qualities of both works were initially overshadowed by shocked voices lamenting all the controversies - the praise came later.

The foundations that the Abbey laid are those same ones that McDonagh also builds on; regardless of what the playwright says, his plays would not be identical without Synge, despite the fact that he turned the afore-mentioned Yeatsian dream Europe into a contemporary nightmarish vision.

⁵⁹ Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre 1899-1999: Form & Pressure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 22.

⁶⁰ Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre 1899-1999: Form & Pressure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 86.

3. McDONAGH'S IRISHNESS OUTSIDE IRELAND

However, this supposedly “black and white still” is impressively capable of travelling and therefore giving people worldwide a specific taste of what is commonly perceived as “Irish drama”; unfortunately, this rather clumsy label encompasses such a heterogeneous body of works that the term would merit a redefinition or better a classification into various categories: in its present state it can mean anything from the nationalist Yeats to the contemporary Marina Carr. Also, as it will be seen later in this thesis, McDonagh’s plays are not solely representative of drama, but also of influences of other art forms such as film. The plays are not grounded on a true of Ireland of today, and transferring easily, they lend themselves to the contemporary globalized world to the extent referred to by Patrick Lonergan: “Their production and reception are nevertheless often determined by factors that have little to do with Irish history, culture or politics. Hence, the difficulty for critics is not with establishing the truth of McDonagh’s plays, but in our insistence on applying the term Irish to work that can be fully understood in a global context.”⁶¹ Nicholas Grene takes the argument perhaps even further, claiming that since at least the time of Boucicault, Irish drama has been “created as much to be viewed from outside as from inside of Ireland”.⁶² It has even been a commonplace routine for McDonagh’s much anticipated new works to open elsewhere than in Ireland, his latest play, *A Behanding at Spokane* was the first to open elsewhere than on the old continent. Therefore, one question presses the critical consumer of McDonagh’s plays – is the inherent much debated Irishness a crucial and indispensable part of his works or whether it is, as Karen Vandeveldelde nicely puts it a mere “icing on the cake”⁶³? Also, what are the difficulties to be overcome while opening producing his works around the world?

3.1. Leaving the West: Distilling Irishness?

⁶¹ Patrick Lonergan, “Martin McDonagh, Globalization, and Irish Theatre Criticism”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 299.

⁶² Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 3.

⁶³ Karen Vandeveldelde, “Martin McDonagh’s Irishness: Icing on the Cake?”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 349.

Karen Vandeveldel discusses the topic of the translocation of McDonagh's plays in her essay entitled "Martin McDonagh's Irishness: Icing on the Cake?"⁶⁴; by analysing a 2000 Dutch production of the Leenane trilogy, which merged the three pieces into one four-hour spectacle, she hopes to distil elements constituting Irishness in McDonagh's work. Two dramaturges, Kurt Melens and Paul Slangen⁶⁵, adapted the play for Dutch audiences by omitting the typically Irish place names (replaced by vaguer terms such as "village"), left out names of products either unintelligible for local theatre-goers or pointing directly to Ireland (Taytos, Kimberly biscuits) and even attempted to use a Dutch dialect for the special Anglo-Irish *mélange* spoken in the original.

The results of this experiment are of considerable relevance and present a substantial counterargument to all critics endlessly accusing McDonagh of mercilessly butchering Ireland's identity and mocking its very central values. According to Vandeveldel, the Dutch production proved that the Irishness of the plays is certainly not peripheral, but also not crucial to understanding the message intended by the author. The Dutch production is not the sole generic proof of this claim; we do not need to look too far for yet another piece of evidence of McDonagh's success beyond Ireland – the often sold out running productions of four of the author's plays (and the announced fifth) in Prague, where the common knowledge of Ireland in the majority of cases amounts to naming a few (predominantly alcoholic) products and vague placing the country on the map, is proof enough. Therefore, we might say that the mockery of the Emerald Isle is only secondary and peripheral to the universal meaning of the plays, as opposed to the widespread view forged by those numerous critics; the worldwide success of the plays is a sufficient proof on its own right. Productions located in Ireland can surely enjoy positive responses to more subtle references indicating certain concrete events, self-referential humour and nuances, but the Irishness (the locale, elements of reality, references) does not prevent the plays from travelling; the meaning of interpersonal relations, violence, love and hate being boundless, it can indeed be perceived as the proverbial icing on the cake – preferable, but not indispensable. Patrick Lonergan supports this idea by providing different examples of how staging

⁶⁴ Karen Vandeveldel, "Martin McDonagh's Irishness: Icing on the Cake?", *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 350.

⁶⁵ He examines this in his essay "Martin McDonagh, Globalization, and Irish Theatre Criticism", *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006).

McDonagh's plays in different countries under different circumstances and contexts produced varied understanding of some aspects, but left the main ideas of the works intact⁶⁶. This also partly accounts for the mobility of the plays in today's globalized world – every production, despite the text being universal, can be slightly modified by mere change of place and interpreted as aiming at particular issues of its host country. Lonergan dares even further, stating that the stories “travel well because they are largely independent of language”⁶⁷; even this can be adhered to, although maybe with some reserve – it is a truth universally acknowledged that a translation can be always pessimistically viewed as an effort to limit the loss to an inescapable minimum – although, in the case of McDonagh, the linguistic translocation becomes slightly more painful due to the elaborate Anglo-Irish dialect largely spoken by the characters. This characteristic, reaffirming the provenience of the plays and being one of the most pronounced features of the Irishness is unfortunately inevitably lost in any translation. Distilling Irishness in form of names, place-names and other references before shipping the plays abroad in order to make them more graspable for foreign audiences does not seriously impair them – at least not as much as one would expect, judging by the critics claiming the plays' core consists of ridiculing Ireland.

3.2. Language Lost in Transl(oc)ation

3.2.1. Losing the Form: Translating “Hiberno-English”

Lady Gregory believed that Ireland was inclined towards drama rather than the novel as an art form supposedly because “it is a great country for conversation”, drama being “conversation arranged”.⁶⁸ This quotation might foreshadow the importance of language, conversation and communication even in the contemporary plays of McDonagh. They are also building on the fact that language is one of the most important means of definition of a nation's identity, and therefore also one of the markers of the plays' Irishness. In this respect, McDonagh, willingly or not, echoes his predecessors, namely Synge and Lady Gregory, allegedly the creators of this hybrid mix of English influenced by the native Irish Gaelic. The strange dialect

⁶⁶ Patrick Lonergan, “Martin McDonagh, Globalization, and Irish Theatre Criticism”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 308.

⁶⁷ Patrick Lonergan, “Martin McDonagh, Globalization, and Irish Theatre Criticism”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 305.

⁶⁸ Quoted in José Lanterns “Playwrights of the Western World: A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage” (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) 207.

they both ascribe to their characters has been nicknamed “Hiberno-English”. Synge has notoriously elaborated the language constituting his most famous play in the preface to the *Playboy*, claiming that in a good play, “every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or an apple”; furthermore, he equally insisted on using “one or two words only that (he) had not heard among the country people of Ireland or in his own nursery before he could read, or spoken by the servants he overheard through a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where he was staying.”⁶⁹ However, by no means did Synge claim that the regular rhythm of his plays was authentic. The country dialect stood only in the beginning of the creation process as a source of inspiration – Synge merely argued that in the country and in its language, the imagination was still thriving and that it was reality that stood at “the root of all poetry”.⁷⁰ Finally, he equally believed that it was due to their lack of joy and reality that modern dramas failed.

McDonagh was also seeking for a specific way of expression for his characters: in his first interview, he spoke about his indebtedness to American dramatist David Mamet and the British writer Harold Pinter; indeed, he confided in Fintan O’Toole that his use of the “Irish” voice in his first plays arose from a deliberate decision to disguise the influence of those two writers⁷¹. In the course of searching for his own dialect, he also told Dominic Cavendish: “Writing in an Irish idiom freed me up as a writer. Until then, my dialogue was a poor imitation of Pinter and Mamet. I used to try and write stories set in London, but it was just too close to home. Now I’ve shaken off those influences, I can move back”.⁷² Nevertheless, McDonagh’s claiming that he has based the language in his plays on the experience of the way people speak in Connemara (together with Donegal and Kerry one of the three remaining major Gaeltacht areas), where he used to spend his childhood summer holiday must again, as any statements of his, not be necessarily taken at face value as a fact. Moreover, like Synge, (who, familiar with rural dialects of the West clearly allows in his Preface for the language to be perceived as an artistic creation inspired by - not directly based on – reality), he admits that even the language, like numerous other aspects, in his works is a distortion from the reality, heavily hybridizing the slight differences of Irish English

⁶⁹ J.M.Synge, *Playboy of the Western World: Preface* (London: Routledge, 2003) 11.

⁷⁰ J.M.Synge, *Playboy of the Western World: Preface* (London: Routledge, 2003) 11.

⁷¹ Patrick Lonergan “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 153.

⁷² Richard Rankin Russel, “Introduction”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 2.

as opposed to the Received Pronunciation standard – “In Connemara and Galway, the natural style is to invert sentences and use strange inflections. Of course, my stuff is a heightening of that, but there is a core strangeness of speech, especially in Galway.⁷³” The extent to which this is true, is definitely debatable; the influence of Irish is palpable, most conspicuously in copying the syntax of Irish phrases which produces curious results in English, immediately catching the audience’s ears. The distorted inflections are less visible, except for the striking –een endings, derived from the Irish diminutive –ín. But otherwise, the presence of Irish is very limited, restricted for example to random addressing boys as “gasurs” by elderly characters. Some critics reproached McDonagh that he does not know the local dialects well enough to reproduce correctly; however, the truth is probably rather different. McDonagh did not hesitate to construct his own world of savage stories⁷⁴, why could not he invent his own language (or at least adopt and alter that artificially created by someone else)? The parallel between an unreal world based on a real model and an unreal language inspired by an equally real existing pattern seems to confirm this deliberate deviation from reality.

3.2.2. Language Losing the Function: Creating the Lonesome West

Nevertheless, rather than examining the shape of McDonagh’s Hiberno-English, it is probably more interesting to at least briefly scrutinize what the language does and what it therefore communicates a propos of his mythological Irish (Wild)West. One of the most basic definitions of a language would describe it as a means of interpersonal communication. Even a rough insight into McDonagh’s plays undermines even this simple concept; his Ireland is certainly not Lady Gregory’s “great country for conversation”⁷⁵. The dialogues between the characters are often either separate monologues making use of the most trivial vocabulary and frequently aiming at different topics, suggesting the real relationships, or rather estrangements of the people inhabiting McDonagh’s fictitious universe; or even worse, it demonstrates the impossibility to communicate at all.

⁷³ Martin McDonagh quoted in José Lanterns “*Playwrights of the Western World: A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage*” (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) 212.

⁷⁴ A paraphrase of the collection of criticism *Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006).

⁷⁵ Quoted in José Lanterns, *Playwrights of the Western World: A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) 207.

Moreover, if the characters succeed at addressing the same topic, their conversations are a circular chain of repetitive statements, stating the obvious and/or stuck in the past (whose embracing is nevertheless also problematic), literally epitomizing a paraphrase of Kearney's description of McDonagh's theatrical paysage as "leaping into the Future, but replaying quotations from the past".⁷⁶Therefore, the language in Leenane and on Inishmaan has lost the capacity of capturing the reality around the protagonists. However, the worst case scenario appears when the already dubious informative value of the language is replaced first by violent speech and then physical violence in its own right. Valene and Coleman ridicule the power of language (and at the same time the liberation of confession, apology and reconciliation) in the very end of LW, when their "great owl game of apologising" (LW, 185) an attempt to carry out Father Welsh's last wish, gradually transforms into an aggressive fight with a gun, very nearly resulting into the death of one of the brothers. Lamely enough, the fighting is interpreted as a sign of attachment ("It does show you care, fighting does" LW, 148). Language is not only a means of violence, but also its cause – Coleman may have murdered his father on the pretext of his parent ridiculing his hairstyle. The extent of violence present in McDonagh's plays is such that Father Welsh dubs Leenane "the murder capital of fecking Europe" (LW, 162).

Language in McDonagh's plays loses also another of its primary functions – that of defining an identity. This is particularly significant in the case of Father Welsh in The Leenane Trilogy – his posh-sounding first name Roderick (indeed seeming very misplaced considering the Irish context) is mocked by Coleman and Valene upon reading his farewell letter; moreover, his surname is never really properly learnt by the villagers, oscillating between Welsh/Walsh throughout the trilogy, symbolising the disinterest of the people in Welsh/Walsh's identity and mission. A similar case is to be found in BQ, where Mag confuses Pato and Ray and Ray is unable to remember Pato's fiancée's name, measuring the change in her identity by the number of letters that differentiate her maiden name from that acquired from her husband. Furthermore, language is also destined to transmit information – the silence (or rather nonsensical speech spirals) can suggest that there is simply nothing to talk about, that Leenane, as McDonagh sees it, is dead to the contemporary world. Also, the (again, not only) Irish culture and Irishness has

⁷⁶ Kearney, quoted in José Lanterns "Playwrights of the Western World", *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) 216.

always been strongly associated with storytelling (very conspicuous for example in Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire*, where it constitutes one of the very central themes); however, this tradition, in a way a vehicle of connecting not only the present to the past, transferring one's personal experience, but also reinforcing of interpersonal relations and one's own identity, is entirely absent from "McDonaghland".

Equally, language and words in McDonagh's Ireland no longer compose themselves into the basic form of a prayer; the role of truly spiritual religion, supposedly a central Irish value, has been, just like that of language, diminished to the point of cynical non-existence; posthumous entering of Heaven is not granted by prayer and confession, but by the number of plastic figurines decorating one's kitchen.⁷⁷ José Lanterns also claims that, unlike for example in Murphy, the language in McDonagh's world neither offers healing through singing and talking⁷⁸; language itself is in a state of crisis, and therefore it cannot provide any comfort.

The reasons for the degradation or even impossibility of communication can be numerous, one of them possibly being the crisis caused by the omnipresence of mass media (mainly television) representative of the globalization in the plays; the one-way passive emotion-free communication of the flickering screen had largely replaced the more demanding dialogue and by proxy interpersonal relationships as such. Fintan O'Toole summarizes the shape of McDonagh's Ireland in a very concise, ironic and yet very exhaustive manner as "a disintegrating place somewhere between London and Boston, saturated in Irish rain and Australian soaps, a place in which it is hard to remember anyone's name, in which news of murders floats in through TV screen, in which blurring of personal identities makes the line between the real and the unreal dangerously thin".⁷⁹ Laura Eldred thinks that McDonagh "seeks to update that (Irish) tradition through integration of contemporary violent films and horror entertainment"⁸⁰. However, rather than deliberate seeking to incorporate certain elements, we are more likely facing a very natural way of projecting and admitting one's influences and sources of inspiration.

⁷⁷ "I'm sure to be getting into heaven with this many figurines." Martin McDonagh, *Plays:1: The Lonesome West* (London: Methuen, 1999) 156.

⁷⁸ José Lanterns, *Playwrights of the Western World: A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) 222.

⁷⁹ In his Introduction, O'Toole might be (un)consciously paraphrasing the famous quote from Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, elaborating the difference between a "gallous story and a dirty deed". Fintan O'Toole "Plays 1: Introduction" (London: Methuen, 1999) xi.

⁸⁰Laura Eldred, "Martin McDonagh's Blend of Tradition and Horrific Innovation", *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 198.

Furthermore, as Patrick Lonergan observes, McDonagh is different from other Irish dramatists in that his work crosses more easily not only the state boundaries but also “boundaries between high and low cultural forms”⁸¹; the apparent ease of this undertaking is probably linked to the genuineness of the author’s London experience of modern globalized world contrasted with the more traditional Ireland of his holidays.

⁸¹ Patrick Lonergan “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 154.

4. “YOU CAN BE EXCOMMUNICATED FOR THAT I THINK. I SAW IT IN A FILM WITH MONTGOMERY CLIFT”⁸²: McDONAGH’S CONTEMPORARY REFERENCES

The impact of globalization and Ireland’s contact with the rest of the world is conspicuous in an inescapable and omnipresent way. As Fintan O’Toole says in the Introduction to the trio of McDonagh’s plays “post-modern Ireland is shaped by media imagery, by multinational companies and by tourism⁸³”. However, even though both BQ and LW supposedly take place in the present⁸⁴, the second element - multinational companies - is almost entirely absent from McDonagh’s world, apart from frequent mentions of alimentary products; quite significantly, the allusions concern solely the products (strengthening the consumerist nature of the characters), the large companies are never related to any economic value – e.g. opportunity to work in them. The last phenomenon – tourism - can be with a little bit of imagination identified with the filmmakers from America in CI (or, in a very fantastic manner with Darkies – the immigrants of African descent and the aim of a bunch of racist verbal attacks of Connor brothers in LW). The first element – media imagery - is present abundantly, although it is almost exclusively defined in terms of trashy soaps and cop series flooding the Irish TV. McDonagh’s Ireland is also partly viewed in terms of consumer culture, most visibly represented by the most primitive instinct – the desire to be fed. All this corresponds to one of the few notions of postmodernist texts that is subject to a consensus of a prevalent number of critics – the citational strategies and allusions of various sorts; McDonagh uses them to an extent that has led Clare Wallace to speak about “manic intertextuality and citation-driven spectacle”.⁸⁵

4.1. Counting the Cans, Minding the Mintios, Complaining Complaints: Food in McDonagh

⁸² LW, 135.

⁸³ Fintan O’Toole *Plays 1: Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1999) xii.

⁸⁴ In the present of their first appearance, that is. The intense work on the plays according to McDonagh dates back to 1994, the theatre premieres coming a few years later.

⁸⁵ Clare Wallace, *Suspect Cultures: Narrative, Identity & Citation in 1990s New Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 146, 155.

Food and brand names of alimentary products seem to have an important role in the plays and in the lives of the protagonists. In today's perspective, the author's plays could even be cynically perceived as a perverted example of product placement, although strongly negative in most cases (namely the Complan in BQ, whose name bears a significant nomen-omen resemblance to the main action connected to it – complaining – and whose appearance is without a single exception associated with the word “lumpy”). McDonagh's Ireland is persistently food-centric from the initial lines: In *LW*, the brothers constantly fight over packets of Tayto crisps; in BQ, the first mention of lumpy Complan comes already in the fourth replica and CI's frequent setting is a small country shop stocked with numerous tins of canned peas; in addition, some of the first dialogues discuss eggs and sweets. Mag's world in BQ seems to be literally revolving around food; regardless of who the newcomer is, she invariably asks her visitors for food. Also, complaining about lumps in Complan seems to be a part of daily routine and in fact, in Leenane's eventlessness, her only occupation. However, the food often has a more morbid aspect – Maureen buys biscuits to torture her voracious mother with the intent of her avowing the truth about Pato. Likewise, the discussion of Ray and Mag concerning various kinds of biscuits is echoed in the violent dispute of the Connor brothers over McCoy's or Taytos being the best brand of crisps; this bickering about various products is the negative echo and distorted mirror of omnipresent advertising campaigns streaming from our TVs, flooded with positive superlatives.

In CI, the notion of food is predominantly associated with Bartley – his repetitious endless tirades whose aim is to map the available stock of sweets elicit laughter from the audiences. Nevertheless, there can be a graver principle underlying the whole procedure – even stupid questions are a representation of an act of communication and manifest the will to communicate. This can be supported by the fact that the scarce goods that are available are visibly displayed as Eileen tiredly repeats over and over again.⁸⁶In that sense, the inquiries just change into senseless words reminiscent of absurd dramas of Beckett or echoing the Beckettian idea pronounced in Stoppard's play “words, words. They're all we have to go on”⁸⁷; on Inishmaan, they have only brand names to go on. Being less forgiving, we can

⁸⁶ The extreme case of this intention to communicate and of lacking an adequate counterpart is demonstrated in the character of Kate and her talking to stones which reappears in the moment when she undergoes a crisis grieving over the departed Billy.

⁸⁷ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967) 31.

interpret Bartley as a food-obsessed figure – for him America is not represented by means of its history, location or culture - it is only epitomized as the source of Mintios and Yalla mallows; accordingly, after Billy’s homecoming, Bartley’s inquiring does not encompass curiosity about Billy’s newly gained experiences and feelings, but solely the presence of sweets in Billy’s luggage. Also, Billy provides Bartley with a major disillusionment – America is not the great country that Bartley knows from myths of the West (this time the American West), it is “full of women with beards”.

Furthermore, an even more morbid notion appears in LW – the main and widely discussed impression obviously left in the two brothers after attending a funeral is the quality of offered *vol-au-vents*; the chance of there being another funeral later on in the play is then equally immediately associated with eating. Finally, more laconically, eggs seem to be an ideal means of expressing disgust at a priest, who abuses girls (CI) and potatoes ironically bring onto the stage one of the very few relicts of Irish (*praities*, echoing Scottish *taities*, being a mutilated form of the Irish word for potatoes – *prátaí*).

4.2. Spreading the News: Isolated Islands, Limited Leenane

Moreover, not only food serves to represent the consumerist and most importantly limited nature of McDonagh’s Irish society, standing, except for CI, on the edge of globalization. The relationship of the characters to the surrounding world subject to changes is also significant. In CI, depicting McDonagh’s imagined Ireland of 1930s, the function of media and news is represented by Johnypateenmike, a local drunk, spreading repetitive stories of minor disputes and thus letting the villagers know “what’s going on in the outside world” in exchange for an egg or two. The outside world is therefore limited to Johnypateenmike’s walking range - Inishmaan and the neighbouring island at its best, disconnected from the rest of the planet dealing with economic crisis and more immediately, a slow rise of fascism (with Hitler being present in one single laudatory (!) allusion⁸⁸; even if an islander in a very wild fantasy attempted to read a serious newspaper, he would beyond doubt be mocked with the same persistency

⁸⁸ It is true that a part of Irish society was supportive of Hitler, but it is unlikely that McDonagh’s villagers would be interested in political aspects of Germany – they would be more likely to analyze the aesthetics of his moustache rather than his political programme.

as Billy is laughed at for reading books. On Inishmaan, reading books is considered an activity equally “enriching” as watching cows. The same disconnectedness is present in all of the plays, which is, especially in those taking place in the 1990s, sadly ironic: in the times where globalization tendencies create clones of one universal culture and in a world where even the biggest distance can be covered in a plane within the matter of hours, McDonagh’s dystopic Ireland remains an isolated island with one-way (outward) flow of migrants where the peak of literacy is represented by males reading women’s magazines (*Bella*, *Take a Break* and *Woman’s Own* appearing in LW).

However, the informational vacuum does not improve in the plays set in a later period; in terms of chronology, they succeed CI, taking place several decades later. Apart from the flickering TV screen and an old radio, there is no major difference in comparison to CI to emphasize the stagnation and changelessness of the environment. Computers and Internet are unheard of and the photograph of the Kennedys of the wall (BQ) shows when the time had stopped; nonetheless, this relict of popular iconography also shows the shallowness of modern idols – Mag and Maureen had not probably put up this picture out of admiration for Kennedys’ political achievements, but rather (like undoubtedly the majority of their contemporaries) due to the physical attractiveness of the protagonists. Moreover, Mag often claims to be waiting for the news, but we never get to hear any; she is locked in a circle of endless trashy radio programmes; this vicious circle is paraphrased in the paralysis and decay of her body as well as in Maureen’s becoming a tragic spitting image of her mother in the end of the play (“The exact fecking image of your mother you are, sitting there pegging orders and forgetting me name” BQ, 60). From the beginning of the play, Mag is also waiting to hear a song on a radio programme where callers can in a theatrical gesture dedicate a song to someone they love and miss: ironically enough, when the message is finally broadcast, Mag is dead and Maureen, rocking in her chair, is slowly changing into her mother’s gruesome form; the change is primarily manifested by her equal obsession of food. Nonetheless, we can assume that McDonagh is mocking this sort of radio tabloid-like entertainment: this type of programme, which can be found all over the world, usually exploits people who are exhibitionist enough to call in a radio and share their private lives with all the listeners; rather than on real emotions, it builds on spectacular (and often empty) gestures. The song is sent by Maureen’s sisters and their families, who are very careful to avoid their annoying

senile relative: instead of coming to see her in person to wish her happy birthday, they choose a very elegant escape.

The “news”, if they indeed do appear, feature either abnormalities from around the world (a girl born with no lips in Norway – LW 153) or Ireland’s own dirty deeds (“There was a priest on the news Wednesday had a baby with a Yank.” “That’s no news at all. That’s everyday. It’d be hard to find a priest who hasn’t had a baby with a Yank”. BQ, 10). Ironically enough, the characters talk about Norway and Yugoslav Civil War (LW), but if requested, they might face serious difficulties trying to find these countries on the map; on the contrary, the situation in Ireland (taking into account that 1990s would fall into the Celtic Tiger era) is, apart from the mocking remarks concerning the religious scandals, largely ignored. Karen Vandeveld noticed that, throughout the Leenane trilogy, whenever the characters approach an issue of major importance and relevance for the Irish history, immediate present or identity, they are quick in abruptly dismissing it⁸⁹. All in all, the pieces of information, starting with gossip stories of CI and ranging to people suffering from bodily abnormalities in foreign countries are those that modern tabloids consist of: short bits with catching headlines, emotion-draining, forgettable, distorted and entirely stupid “news”. Even if they were not such in the beginning, the characters’ rendering transforms them in the basest “culture” imaginable, reflecting the low level of education in McDonagh’s Ireland, also epitomized in the lack of abstract thinking.

Shaun Richards perceives, drawing a parallel with *The Playboy*, that the underlying “absence of social purpose and social significance produces an often perverse desire for sensation, particularly among the young”⁹⁰. He furthermore adds also the “lack of emotional and economic opportunity”⁹¹ to the causes of Leenane’s stagnation. He concludes that “Leenane (and for that matter, also Inishmaan) may be a part of a post-modern world which is open to all the images of the global economy, but its condition is as functionary rather than beneficiary.”⁹² It is a world locked in an endless repetitive cycle where the only blessing of escape is death or emigration. However, the obvious discrepancy between reality and McDonagh’s artifice is in that sense relieving: as Merriman says about the plays “in each belly

⁸⁹ Clare Wallace, *Suspect Cultures: Narrative, Identity & Citation in 1990s New Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 167.

⁹⁰ Richards, 252.

⁹¹ Richards, 252.

⁹² Richards, 255.

laugh which greets the preposterous malevolence of their actions there is a huge cathartic roar of relief that all of this is past – ‘we’ have left it all behind.”⁹³ Nevertheless, although we might perceive ourselves as victorious, McDonagh offers us an unflattering alternative vision of the present – one that is distant, but at the same time close at hand – in that sense his plays can be beneficiary and justify Fintan O’Toole’s assertion that once the laughing stops, the thinking begins.

4.3. Soapy Silver Screen: McDonagh and Film

Curiously enough, as it has been noted by Patrick Lonergan⁹⁴, McDonagh consistently denies the theatrical influences of his predecessors (namely Irish), but he is willing to openly avow his being indebted to e.g. stars on and behind the silver screen⁹⁵ and even provides the journalists with concrete names. As it is apparent from his afore-mentioned quote “I’m coming from a film fan’s perspective on theatre”⁹⁶, films and movie industry altogether have had a major effect on his dramas. Nonetheless, not only Lonergan (for a similar reproach to McDonagh’s critics can be found in Laura Eldred’s critical essay)⁹⁷ also notices that literary critics are eager to analyze McDonagh’s work in contrast to every Irish playwright imaginable, but they are somewhat reluctant to treat the relationship between the plays and the sources (usually beyond Ireland) that McDonagh openly acknowledges. Thus, surprisingly enough, the parallel between McDonagh and e.g. the American playwright Sam Shepard and his play *True West* is strangely often ignored by most critics, stubbornly parroting the names of Synge, O’Casey, Murphy, etc⁹⁸. Nonetheless, the similarities are astounding – both plays present two unsuccessful (both in terms of relationships and work-wise) brothers in their thirties or forties; both take place in the course of a few days in quite isolated

⁹³ Vic Merriman quoted in Richards, 255.

⁹⁴ Patrick Lonergan, “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 152.

⁹⁵ Yet, whereas McDonagh denies being influenced by Synge, he has consistently spoken of his indebtedness to Australian soap and Tarantino. Kevin Whelan “The Cultural Effects of the Famine”, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, eds. Joe Cleary, Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 151.

⁹⁶ Martin McDonagh quoted in Werner Huber, “The Early Plays: Shooting Star and Hard Man from South London”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006).

⁹⁷ Laura Eldred, “Martin McDonagh’s Blend of Tradition and Horrific Innovation”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 198.

⁹⁸ For instance, Shepard’s name does not appear a single time in a quite exhaustive collection of published criticism *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*. There is a single mention of Shepard in *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*.

houses and most importantly, both depict escalation of violence peaking in the respective couples by trying to shoot each other. The parallel in the plays' names are but the proverbial icing on the cake just like the dazzling careers of their respective authors who both disclaim any theoretical background in playwriting.

The names of filmmakers that are discussed most often in connection to his work (either these are elaborated by critics or occasionally by the author himself) are those of Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino or Danny Boyle.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, before analyzing the direct influences of these filmmakers, the immediate physical presence of the filmmaking industry in CI should be scrutinized. Here, the plays imminently intersect with reality – *Man of Aran*, a “documentary” film shot by Robert J. Flaherty was indeed made in 1934¹⁰⁰ on the neighbouring island.

4.3.1. *The Cripple of Inishmaan Meets Man of Aran*

The director Flaherty appears purely as a textual character responsible for Billy's career of “a little cripple star” (CI, 20), epitomizing an entirely different galaxy contrasting with the backward Irish country – that of supposedly glamorous Hollywood and wealthy film stars.¹⁰¹ Very significantly, although according to the refrain-like parody statement that “Ireland can't be such a bad place”, also because the American filmmakers “from the entire world they chose Ireland” (CI 13), the presence of the American group is immediately connected with the idea of the possibility to escape; very likely, it is not only the vision of wealth, but maybe primarily the dream of leaving the rocky islands behind oneself for forever that attracts Bartley, Helen and Billy to the set. The idea of heading to the US with the ideal of a better future is echoed in BQ (where Pato indeed manages his great escape); to a lesser degree, the same idea of escaping from the Emerald isle, underlies the time spent by Pato in the UK. However, it is precisely in Pato's speech where we sense ambiguity in the approach to his country and potentially some relicts of love for it.

⁹⁹ Patrick Lonergan, “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 152.

¹⁰⁰ Luke Gibbons, “Projecting the Nation: Cinema and Culture”, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, eds. Joe Cleary, Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 209.

¹⁰¹ However, as we can see later on in the play, even the Hollywood reality, as described in the stage directions in Scene Seven experienced by Billy is quite different – a draughty shabby room in a cheap motel appeal instead of glittering palace-like villas with armies of servants.

Moreover, the presence of filmmakers is a further proof of the characters' attitude towards their own country and their lack of but an almost parody trace of nationalism; whereas Helen and Bartley see the appearance of the film crew as a chance to escape, the actual opening of *Man of Aran* in 1934 "transformed its Dublin premiere into a state occasion and celebration of Irishry, attended by Eamon de Valera and his cabinet, members of the diplomatic service and dignitaries from all walks of life, including 'Dr and Mrs W. B. Yeats'." ¹⁰²It remains still deeply ironic that one of the first cinematographic representations of Ireland was orchestrated by the Americans "as an expression of romantic primitivism, the fascination in American culture with the struggle between man and the wilderness"¹⁰³. As it always is, the reality probably lies somewhere in between Flaherty's intentionally idealised romantic struggle and McDonagh's depreciative macabre contemporary vision; the clash of these two streams as well as the clash of pop-culture and tradition represents one of the many ironies connected with the play; *Man of Aran*, dismissed (and at the same time praised) by some as depicting "an archetypal struggle"¹⁰⁴ (deliberately not too concerned about accuracy) was hailed by the Irish nationalists, while McDonagh's plays, equally distanced from reality, were criticized not only by literary theoreticians. The contrast between the wildly different rhetoric between the "real" Irish (in this perspective the characters of the play) and American idealized Irish is present in the play itself: the characters wonder at the presence of sharks "off Ireland"; but, above all, the film speech rehearsed by Billy in the dim hotel room satirizes the American pathos, featuring a dying boy singing and quoting traditional clichés surrounding Ireland; as soon as Billy comes home, he dismisses his replicas as "the arse-face lines they had me reading for them in a hotel room" (CI). Here, the satire and McDonagh's mockery is multifocal: at once, it is aimed at the Celtic revivalists' vision of their flawless country, the multiple (and stereotyped) identities of Ireland, at the fake veneer of Hollywood and also at the audiences (especially those not entirely familiarized with the author's other works and therefore maybe suspecting nothing malevolent in Billy's soliloquy). However, the connection of mass media represented by a cinema quasi-documentary and issues

¹⁰² Luke Gibbons "Projecting the Nation: Cinema and Culture", *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, eds. Joe Cleary, Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 210.

¹⁰³ ¹⁰³ Luke Gibbons "Projecting the Nation: Cinema and Culture", *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, eds. Joe Cleary, Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 210.

¹⁰⁴ Pettit quoted in Margaret Llewellyn Jones, "Dreams and Diaspora: Exported Images and Multiple Identities", *Contemporary Irish Drama and Cultural Identity*, ed. Margaret Llewellyn Jones (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2002) 123.

of all time relevance partially echo Fintan O'Toole's observation that "the country in which McDonagh's play is set is pre-modern and post-modern at the same time"¹⁰⁵, accounting for CI's success on modern stages. Sometimes it is difficult to straightforwardly brand certain elements as "pre- or post-modern"- they mingle indistinguishably and originally just like the multiple Irelands present in the story.

4.3.2. The Connemara Soap Opera

In the absence of films¹⁰⁶ (and when they are indeed present, like in CI's public screening, the Inishmaan audiences entirely ignore the fact that the screening is solely for them, depicting their own country and dismiss the film as a "pile of fecking shite"), McDonaghland is literally flooded with pulp pop culture, namely cop series wildly distanced from and distorting reality and endless Australian soap operas – indeed, as it is explicitly said in BQ "everything is Australian nowadays". Ironically enough, the world of television is blended with reality in an almost indistinguishable *mélange* – after Father Welsh/Walsh's death, the Connor brothers lead an extremely nonsensical dialogue discussing whether Father Welsh/Walsh is going to meet in his afterlife (be it in heaven or in hell) their favourite series character, who is, of course, purely fictional; this fusion is further embittered by the fact that despite their being perfectly familiar with the series probably watched all over again and again, its plot and characters, they do not know names of real people living around them. It is the real, material people that matter in a sane world, but in McDonagh's Ireland, people are deprived of their names (Welsh/Walsh, Dooley/Hooley/Healey) and therefore consequently of their identities. What is nevertheless most abominable is the fact that nobody seems to be interested in the difference between Welsh and Walsh, between Hooley and Dooley (BQ); the identity of one person is encompassed in a random succession of letters ignored by their surrounding and a marriage, conventionally metaphorically viewed as one of the most important steps in one's life is reduced to a difference between two letters, dehumanized and universal. People lose their individuality and become a part of the anonymous globalized crowd. Also, their empty dialogues (if

¹⁰⁵ Fintan O'Toole *Plays 1: Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1999) xi.

¹⁰⁶ The absence of films is again another slight paradox, taking into account that McDonagh names many directors and films as his direct source of inspiration.

they communicate at all), equally reminiscent of Theatre of the Absurd¹⁰⁷ or farces, are banal and repetitive as those of really bad soap operas.

McDonagh has been countless times reproached painting an unflattering image of Ireland by connecting its inhabitants with the shallow world of trashy TV productions; Michael Billington saw the characters as victims “of history, of climate, and of rural Ireland’s peculiar tension between a suffocating, mythical past and the banalities of the global village where American soaps hold sway”¹⁰⁸. However, the presence of especially soaps in the plays is a somewhat double-edged weapon. Lonergan notices that in McDonagh’s plays, it is not rare to have a supposedly passed out character “rising from the dead”¹⁰⁹. The obvious Syngean parallel is here accompanied by another one: Lonergan speaks about “the surprising return of apparently dead characters in soap opera (such as Harold Bishop in the Australian serial *Neighbours*, “Dirty” Den Watts in the BBC’s *Eastenders*, or Bobby Ewing in the American soap *Dallas*). It might also be compared to a scene in Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), in which Mr. Orange (a character presumed to be unconscious by the audience) shoots Mr. Blonde.”¹¹⁰ John McDonagh, the playwright’s brother, discloses that it was their period of unemployment in Britain that would be partly responsible for these influences:

“We’d get up at 12:00, 1:00,” John McDonagh told the American media in 1997, describing the lifestyle he shared with his brother in their London home in the early 1990s: “We’d have breakfast; we’d watch Australian soap operas on the television; and then he’d go to his room, and I’d go to mine, and we’d twiddle our thumbs, and maybe we’d write something, and then come down and have something to eat at 6:00, and start watching television again”¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁷ One of the introductory dialogues Between Kate and Billy in CI could without a minor doubt form a part of e.g. repartees of Gigi and Didi in *Waiting for Godot*, be it in terms of the content-lessness or in terms of the endlessly repetitive circular exchanges that give the characters something to do to have at least the impression that they are still alive: K:”A sit-down and did what?” B:”A sit-down and did nothing.” K:”Did nothing at all?” B:”Did nothing at all.”

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Marion Castleberry “Comedy and Violence in The Beauty Queen of Leenane”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 56.

¹⁰⁹ Patrick Lonergan “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 151.

¹¹⁰ Patrick Lonergan “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 151.

¹¹¹ Patrick Lonergan “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 159.

Thus, this account might at least weaken the one-sided McDonagh critics: firstly, apparently, McDonagh does not only ridicule his characters, but he also mocks himself by returning to an era where his amazing success might have been only dreamt of and when he was an avid consumer of afternoon TV soaps - in fact, this excerpt is saying that not long ago, McDonagh was very similar to his own characters – an unemployed man, with no clear perspective in his life, wasting day after day in front of the TV screen, trapped in endless cycles of imaginary comings and goings, weddings and divorces, for the lack of anything better to do. Secondly, this evidence also supports claiming that this cultural decadence is not applicable solely and primarily to Ireland – after all, the inspiration came from over the sea – from London. And it is almost sure that similar situations are no doubt to be found all over the world, be it in Prague or in Canberra. Last but not least, by re-introducing the soaps on the stage (and namely their lowest and cheesiest moments), McDonagh is once more showing their stupidity and naiveté; the series and trashy films are not represented directly, but the characters invoke them by falling back on them as on a judgemental measure (“You can be excommunicated for that I think. I saw it in a film with Montgomery Clift” LW, 135) and by using the endless information-free patterns of communication; McDonagh thus ridicules one of his main sources of inspiration – and, by proxy, ridicules himself again for engaging with such a degraded form of culture. All in all, he parodies (not only) Ireland by connecting it to soaps.

Furthermore, Lonergan draws a parallel between the setting of McDonagh’s plays and the setting of various soap operas, e.g. *Brookside*, *Texas* or *Neighbours*; concerning the settings, he says that “these locations give audiences a sense that the stories being presented are credible because the action is situated in an ostensibly authentic setting that will be recognizable to audiences.”¹¹² He further says that the producers “conform (the locations) to outsiders’ expectations”¹¹³; in that way, we can say that McDonagh proceeds alike by using and further exaggerating all the widespread funny stereotyped clichés about Ireland that spectators all over the world greet as conventional. Equally, if *Dallas* was set in an ordinary Texas family instead the exclusive environment of the Ewings, its

¹¹² Patrick Lonergan “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 159.

¹¹³ Patrick Lonergan “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 160.

popularity might steadily decrease – it is the often unknown and slightly unreal that attracts attention. However, there is an interesting paradoxical mechanism at work here: people can perceive soaps (as well as theatre) as a means of escaping from their everyday routine existences to a distant universe, be it into a Liverpool working environment or into the world of oil magnates – that universe has to be, nevertheless, different only to the extent that allows for it to be still believable and sufficiently “real”. In a way, the lives of the characters take the audiences to alternative spaces, if not fantastic then at least different.

On the one hand, Lonergan argues the truth-resembling setting which allows for perceiving even the stories as realistic. However, a somewhat relative and distorted perspective is at work here: how can an average American (let alone European) judge the degree of verisimilitude of depiction of the “upper-ten – thousands” life in Texas or accuracy of the hopeless existence of people on rocky infertile Irish isles, having no direct experience with it? Therefore, the borders between reality and imagination (although the places can be effortlessly traced on a map or at least based on existing locations) are blurred. In other words, the community presented has to be seemingly authentic to a limited degree, but imaginative and imaginary at the same time, the secret is finding the right balance. If the consumerist audiences perceive the locations as realistic (being unaware of the true shape of the presented environments and trusting the producers blindly), they are likely to accept the probability of the actions and believability of the characters as such as well (how are we supposed to know what happens to an American millionaire on a daily basis?). There is great irony from which McDonagh must take enormous pleasure, connected with this observation – the critics who are endlessly blaming him for the inaccuracy of his depictions lure themselves into the trap set by the author like all the “victims” of soaps. Thus, critics such as Aidan Arrowsmith, reading the plays realistically (“Leenane is an apparently conventional image of authentic, if backward, rural Ireland”)¹¹⁴ unfortunately in this case seem to forget the judgment central to their profession: disregarding the obvious incongruencies with reality and hyperboles (undoubtedly partially present due to the influence of the soaps often stressing just a single aspect of reality) and seeing

¹¹⁴ Aidan Arrowsmith, “Genuinely Inauthentic: McDonagh’s Postdiasporic Irishness”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 240.

McDonaghland realistically can be, to show the ridicule, compared to seeing soaps in an identical manner.

Although the McDonagh's image in the media is often distorted thanks to the author himself, the influence of (Australian) soap operas is, apart from him, equally confirmed by the director Garry Hynes: "Australian soaps have made a very big contribution to these plays, and to the writer generally"¹¹⁵Hynes further confirmed and even accentuated this link by casting an actress known from Australian soaps in the 1999 production of BQ.¹¹⁶

However, the parallel with soap operas is not always to McDonagh's benefit: as both Clare Wallace and Ondřej Pilný notice, action in the plays dominates over contemplation, characters grow increasingly schematic (approaching to farce especially in LW), the dramatic formula never changes and shows almost no development¹¹⁷ (maybe partly due to the fact that in reality, the four plays have been written more or less simultaneously around 1994¹¹⁸). This lack of depth and stagnation is a common diagnosis for the majority of soaps, especially those running for several seasons, whose authors recycle their own successful ideas over and over again.

4.3.3. Horror Pulp Fiction of the Emerald Isle: McDonagh and Film

Laura Eldred argues in her essay that McDonagh's two plays, *The Pillowman* and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, demonstrate the influence of horror films by following a scheme featuring a violent, yet somehow effeminate murderer and a slightly masculine "final girl".¹¹⁹ However, we can apply some of these

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Patrick Lonergan "Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh", *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 159.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Patrick Lonergan "Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh", *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 159.

¹¹⁷ Clare Wallace, *Suspect Cultures: Narrative, Identity & Citation in 1990s New Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 163, Ondřej Pilný, *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 158.

¹¹⁸ A quite commonly known or suspected fact, mentioned e.g. in Clare Wallace, *Suspect Cultures: Narrative, Identity & Citation in 1990s New Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006, 134.

¹¹⁹ In her essay she argues that there is a changeless scheme which inevitably leads to a final confrontation between the murderer and the aforementioned "final girl" who unavoidably cunningly defeats the villain with his own weapons. Laura Eldred, "Martin McDonagh's Blend of Tradition and

characteristics of a minor gender reversal even to other plays – the blurring of genders is omnipresent in the world of McDonagh – the Connor brothers in LW are with all probability still virgins (and if not, thanks to their obsession and business with bickering and tactlessness, there is no woman in their lives or in sight – a parallel concerning repressed sexuality manifested in violence can be drawn to Norman “*Psycho*” Bates) and avid readers of women’s magazines; the sensitive Billy in CI is a counterpart of Helen (whose first replica “Are you fecking coming, you, fecker?!”(CI, 11) abundant in swear words, representative of her rather masculine features, inspired Aisling O’Sullivan to speak about her “scatological language” and “violent suggestive behaviour¹²⁰); the *Beauty Queen* Maureen, forced to look after her mother and the whole farm is also quite masculine – she owns one single dress and her virginity is definitely not due to religiosity or virtue. All of the above mentioned characters’ traits would also correspond to Eldred’s notion of sex being replaced by torture and sadism.¹²¹In McDonagh’s world, a successful loving relationship is unheard of and maybe even impossible – Pato’s romance with Maureen is marred by Mag and even if Billy’s walk with Helen (no doubt embellished by her swearing) leads to the desired outcome, it will be interrupted by the unbeatable latent threat of TB. Also, like in soaps (or even in simple horror films), the characters do not display any deeper psychology – they can be easily described with one dominant and a few complementary adjectives, thus representing stereotypes rather than real people. Laconically speaking, in some horror films, we do not know anything about some of the characters except for the chronology in which they are wiped out of the scene; in soaps, the characters, apart from generally being drawn around one single character trait, often represent rather a function (means of bringing a certain issue or person) on the scene. Equally, in both of these genres, the rather strict division between positive and negative characters (“the good and bad guys”) is present: this determining and firm border is rarely crossed. However, the situation in McDonagh’s plays is never this straightforward and clear; the shallowness of the people invoked in his theatrical space definitely has a different cause: due to the usual scarcity of characters in the plays (CI, being the most populous, features nine personas, but the worlds of both

Horrific Innovation”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carylfort Press, 2006)

¹²⁰ Quoted in Margaret Llewellyn Jones, “Dreams and Diaspora: Exported Images and Multiple Identities” *Contemporary Irish Drama and Cultural Identity* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2002) 125.

¹²¹ Laura Eldred, “Martin McDonagh’s Blend of Tradition and Horrific Innovation”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carylfort Press, 2006) 204.

BQ and LW are respectively inhabited by only a quartet of characters), McDonagh's villagers cannot complain about the lack of space for self-presentation: it is abundant and yet filled with repetitiousness. Therefore, their one-dimensionality as well as their moral indecisiveness (for none of the people can be described simply as "good" or "bad") must with all probability be ascribed to a lack of formative opportunities and events; their emotional and psychological underdevelopment (apart from being another direct imprint of film industry into the plays) are yet a further consequence and proof of the paralysis reigning in McDonagh's West. In that sense, we can claim that even the characters serve as mere motives; the characters in this case rather characterize the world they inhabit rather than being characterized and characteristic themselves.

Eldred also offers an interesting parallel with the setting of an ordinary slasher horror; she speaks about "regional Gothic"¹²² exemplified by *Leatherface* (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), the villain being "a member of an isolated and impoverished family that lost its livelihood when the local meat packing plant began to use machines to slaughter cattle".¹²³ This definition can be equally valid for all McDonagh's plays – the "family" can sometimes be substituted for "village" or "community", the meat packing industry innovation is in McDonagh's Ireland echoed by rather unspecified "tragedies" (often hyperbolically exaggerated trifling events) causing the characters' passivity; nonetheless, the cause and effect relationship has the same result: violence. Of course, this does not intend to suggest that McDonaghland is full of serial killers running around with a sharp blade, murdering their neighbours at full-moon; however, sifting through his plays in order to find a reasonably "normal" (no matter how relative this label is) character with no significant physical or mental drawback might prove a vain search: one could perhaps succeed in CI, but certainly not in BQ or LW. This might also epitomize McDonagh's vision of the tendency of Irish development: the relicts of sanity in CI (after all, we might laconically say that the characters are "only" uncaring, selfish and vulgar) are replaced by incapacity of a meaningful everyday

¹²² Laura Eldred, "Martin McDonagh's Blend of Tradition and Horrific Innovation", *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 207.

¹²³ Laura Eldred, "Martin McDonagh's Blend of Tradition and Horrific Innovation", *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 207.

dialogue, paving the way to the loss of judgement and several murders that do not even arouse too much interest.

Eldred also notices the increasing brutalities claiming that “the trajectory of his plays moves toward more violence, more bodies and more gore”¹²⁴ copying the tendency of current horror films that offer young teenagers what would be unthinkable for adult audiences ten years ago: for today’s hardened audience, a cat exploding on the stage in *Lieutenant* is certainly not a cause of riots like the innocent shifts almost a century ago. However, although the resemblance to horror films is undeniable, we still need to bear in mind that what is the norm in film is not necessarily the norm on the stage – very simplistically said, the stage does and probably always will lag behind the film in the quantity and intensity of gore, partly due to technical possibilities and inhibitions available to the respective media. Thus, a cat exploding in a movie is not the same as a cat exploding on the stage. Again, Eldred attaches her statement to *Lieutenant* and *Pillowman* only; however, it is also valid for McDonagh’s career in its entirety; “only” one corpse (and several suggested ones) are to be found in the examined trio of plays, which precede both *Lieutenant* and *Pillowman* in the chronology of production. Therefore, McDonagh is indeed heading to “nihilism and gore”¹²⁵ as Eldred proposes, fearing for “McFuture”; nevertheless, there is one major difference between slashers and McDonagh’s plays: although this far indeed, following the horror films’ example “plots seem to be more variations on a theme than individual and distinct texts”¹²⁶, McDonagh has the advantage that drama offers him a great amount of flexibility; we can hardly expect from him a sentimental romantic melodrama (at least not one meant seriously), but unlike the horror genre with given rules to obey and thus limited space for imagination, his work can at least theoretically evolve into various imaginable directions.

Several critics (in particular, Patrick Lonergan) have ventured to cover McDonagh’s extra-theatrical film influences. Concerning this branch of

¹²⁴ Laura Eldred, “Martin McDonagh’s Blend of Tradition and Horrific Innovation”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 207.

¹²⁵ Laura Eldred, “Martin McDonagh’s Blend of Tradition and Horrific Innovation”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 207

¹²⁶ Laura Eldred, “Martin McDonagh’s Blend of Tradition and Horrific Innovation”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 204.

entertainment industry, the names of Martin Scorsese, Sam Peckinpah, Danny Boyle, John Woo, David Lynch, Terence Malick and George Lucas have been mentioned¹²⁷ and creep up most often. McDonagh in his earlier interviews expressed the wish to get “as much John Woo and Sam Peckinpah into the theatre as possible”¹²⁸. The similarities and relations between films and McDonagh’s plays were discussed in detail by Lonergan; however, maybe the most crucial thing we can say about the connection to films is that McDonagh’s plays would rather represent a theatrical counterpart of the works of these directors. An increasing number of critics have classified McDonagh as a representative of “in-yer-face theatre”; Pilný describes it as a type of drama that “has also transposed into the popular theatre features of American independent cinema of the urban underworld, resuscitating their shock value in another medium and reviving the ‘coolness’ of the unabashed comedy of assorted violent, foul-mouthed losers and simpletons.”¹²⁹

Like Quentin Tarantino, McDonagh seems to be balancing on the thin border between jokes and cruelty creating very black humour – this has even gained him the nickname of “Tarantino of the Emerald Isle”¹³⁰; both their works are accompanied by cynical laughter from the audiences with more profound questions emerging afterwards – as McDonagh himself says, “one illuminates the other”¹³¹ – humour is a counterpart to cruelty. Both e.g. Quentin Tarantino’s films and McDonagh’s plays use the strategy of deliberate exaggeration that nevertheless inspires thought; the author himself explains his method thus:

“I tend to push things as far as I can because I think you can see things more clearly through exaggeration than through reality. It’s like a John Woo or a Tarantino scene, where the characters are doing awful things and, simultaneously, talking about everyday things in

¹²⁷ These names, with the exception of George Lucas, are mentioned equally by both Lilian Chambers in their Introduction to the collection of studies *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: a World of Savage Stories* and in Patrick Lonergan’s essay “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

¹²⁸ McDonagh quoted in Lonergan, “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 153.

¹²⁹ Ondřej Pilný, *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 156.

¹³⁰ Werner Huber, “The Early Plays: Shooting Star and Hard Man from South London”, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 20.

¹³¹ McDonagh quoted in Lonergan, “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh”, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 164.

a really humorous way. There is a humour in there that is straight-ahead funny and uncomfortable. It makes you laugh and think.”¹³²

The plays do not directly borrow film characters or plotlines, the similarity between *Pulp Fiction* or *Taxi Driver* and McDonagh’s plays is not direct – it rather lies in the mood, tempo, quick (although in McDonagh’s case often empty) repartees and atmosphere of the respective works. In their separate genres, the works of McDonagh and those of the previously mentioned directors would be ascribed similar characteristics and critics would evaluate them with same descriptive adjectives. However, drawing various parallels (as Lonergan does in his essay “Never Mind the Shamrocks: Globalizing Martin McDonagh” – he e.g. finds similarities between the plays and Boyle’s *Shallow Grave* - dismembering of bodies, usage of local colour, unnecessary knowledge of the real locations¹³³) seems to be extremely productive and yet somehow redundant. It is highly productive because the parallels with especially gangster movies seem countless, comparisons including characters, setting or dialects used. Nevertheless, this interdisciplinary scrutiny might look slightly out of place precisely because of the high number of these parallels: it shows that we are dealing rather with two parallel genres (thriller movie with comedy flavour and comedy flavoured thriller drama) separated by means of representation (the screen versus the stage), and at a larger time scope mutually influencing one the other, rather than with one being a source of direct quotation by McDonagh; equally, on the other hand, the genre can be seen as a single one, on the contrary subdivided by several means of representation (again, the screen and the stage). However, undeniably, McDonagh’s unbreakable bond with film industry is clearly demonstrated by his taking a break off writing (after *The Pillowman*) to have enough time to create first a short film *Six Shooter* (awarded with an Academy award) and later on, in 2006 for writing a script for and directing a full-length movie *In Bruges*, starring Colin Farrel, which was equally well received by both critics and audiences. Both of these films would again bear, like his plays, a significant resemblance to his proposed sources of inspiration and would probably constitute better material for critical comparison than the somewhat incongruent drawing parallels between film and theatre. All in all, McDonagh’s development

¹³² McDonagh quoted in Lonergan.

¹³³ He stresses the similarity with this particular film, because, according to him, “The resemblance of McDonagh’s work to this British film is worth highlighting because the area to which McDonagh’s works are most frequently compared is the genre of gangster movies, particularly those from the United States.

from playwriting to scriptwriting and directing seems as a very natural process, the core remains the same, only the means and techniques are changed.

However, even the connection with the world of films offers some slightly unflattering comments on McDonagh: when his fifth play, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* premiered in 2001 (after five years worth of a fruitless hunt for a theatre willing to produce it), McDonagh accompanied it with boastful announcements of it being “his best play to date”, promising “more gunshots and squibs going off on stage than any play you you’ve ever seen”¹³⁴. Yet, as Pilný says, the play directly embodies the “gradual fading of McDonagh’s theatrical formula”¹³⁵. In concordance with this claim, this advertising campaign for the play generated by the playwright himself is sadly reminiscent of the rhetoric of creators of expensive blockbuster movies, sequels or prequels to their successful originals, predominantly wishing to recycle firstly their financial and only subsequently their artistic achievement. Especially popular in thrillers or gangster movies (the precise genres that allegedly inspired McDonagh), the authors’ unchanging parrot-like exclamations gradating adjectives such as “expensive, dark, intriguing” are often foreshadowing of a variable extent of disappointment, of a fading formula, this time cinematic. It is difficult to say whether McDonagh’s copying of film-marketing strategies is intentional or not, the truth remains that in both cases, the bragging struggles to hide the diminishing qualities.

¹³⁴ McDonagh quoted in Ondřej Pilný, *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 158, 159.

¹³⁵ McDonagh quoted in Ondřej Pilný, *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 158.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we are obliged to state that, despite all the negative reproaches levelled at the author by his critics or even despite the image of a solitary genius independent of any particular theatrical tradition that McDonagh himself likes to propagate, his place in the Irish canon cannot be disputed. By making the initial decision to set his plays in Ireland, he stood no chance of escaping comparisons between him and other playwright depicting the identical environment, for, as Christopher Murray argues “an Irish dramatic text tends to assimilate other and earlier material”¹³⁶. Undoubtedly, this statement has more than a grain of truth in it; nevertheless, apart from assimilating earlier material, modern writers need to provide an input of their own artistic innovation, otherwise, (not only) Irish drama would be but an endless line of Synge and O’Caseys. The innovation in this case certainly does not concern the form: McDonagh does not challenge the basic unities of time, action, setting and characters; his chief experimenting lies elsewhere. As it has been proved by this thesis, McDonagh makes use of certain features of the works of his predecessors (especially those that do not present Ireland in the best light – setting in a rather backward rural godless location with an exaggerated speech pattern) to mix them with purely contemporary elements. Thus, to paraphrase Murray, his dramatic text also tends to assimilate other, very modern material.

Consequently, by adding references to contemporary culture or sports events, he achieves several aims: firstly, he provides the much needed innovation that would distinguish him from his predecessors (and disclaimed models) and push the Irish drama forward (although the sceptics could quite rightfully doubt whether this was one of the playwright’s chief ambitions) in the context of modern times of globalization. Furthermore, the telling nature of the modern references significantly helps McDonagh to characterize the world that he creates: using allusions to trashy cop series from the seventies form the picture for the audience more quickly and persuasively than sociological studies pointing at supposed material difficulties and educational gaps of the West (not to mention that sociology does not apply to purely imaginary universe with but very shady realistic base) –

¹³⁶ Christopher Murray quoted in Richards, 248.

they immediately give us the idea of intellectual simplicity as well as backwardness of the community; in a theatre production, at first glance, a well-washed T-shirt depicting Spiderman¹³⁷ prompts us more in a second about the character of Valene more than his lengthy curriculum vitae would in an hour. Moreover, and also very importantly, by encompassing contemporary references, the author himself is present on the stage: as it is apparent in McDonagh's case, he projects into his plays all imaginable sources of inspiration regardless of their origin – the echoes of soaps, films and sports are to be found on the stage melted seamlessly into the traditional kitchen setting of a typical (not only) Irish drama. Quite curiously, the audience can also this way appreciate both the work and the formative sources of the author which McDonagh seems to gladly display. Finally, the references not only bring the much needed fresh breeze, but, as Ondřej Pilný argues, crossing over genre borders can be responsible for audience fluctuation, attracting gangster movies mongers into the theatre or vice versa¹³⁸.

But as McDonagh shows, he himself is also capable of development to a certain extent – the two Irish trilogies depicting the western trademarks of national revivalists were succeeded by a geographically unspecified pessimistic play *The Pillowman*, set in a totalitarian state, that has kept some of the typical features, but adopted a certain amount of universality by leaving behind the testified setting in Ireland and venturing into new spaces. On the surface, it may have silenced critics claiming that he can uniquely level dirt at Ireland and depreciate the “oirish” country people. McDonagh further reinforced this outward tendency by setting his latest play in America, but as the titular “behanding” suggests, even here, some features have probably remained unaltered. However, upon a closer scrutiny, the optimistic cheer is somewhat silenced; at least in *The Pillowman*, the change of the outward setting does not affect the deeper layers; bringing to light slightly more philosophical questions of a writer's self-sacrifice and responsibility for the consequent effects of his or her work, it still balances on the tragedy/comedy edge and abounds in violence.

Even critics mercilessly whipping McDonagh for his equally unforgiving depiction of Ireland do not attempt to doubt his unquestionable talent. However, it

¹³⁷ In the Činoherní klub production directed by Ondřej Sokol, this costume was chosen for one of the Connor brothers in LW.

¹³⁸ Ondřej Pilný, *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 156.

remains the playwright's prerogative to decide whether to walk further on the well-trodden path, remaining faithful to his unchanging success-brewing formula, probably enjoying but only slowly gradually diminishing enthusiastic support of his avid audiences, coming to the theatre with very precise expectations. Nevertheless, by the mere effortless remaining on his present track, McDonagh inevitably falls back on the recycling of motives, justly reproached to his soapy sources of inspiration, ironically present as an inherent menace to the author himself in all his works. The second possible route is, according to an old cliché, full of thorns and it demands a certain amount of courage to break the chains of slowly settling routine; nonetheless, adopting a new approach might be artistically more rewarding; by not treading it, McDonagh risks gaining a reputation of a dramatist, who has written himself out; for a fresh quadragenarian, this sounds like a literary death sentence.

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7. SHRNUÍ

Hry irského dramatika Martina McDonagha se v posledních letech setkaly s mohutnou diváckou a kritickou odezvou. Předmětem diskuze se navzdory autorově britské národnosti nejčastěji stává jeho příslušnost k irské dramatické tradici a jeho vyobrazení Irska, kam zasadil většinu svých her. Jeho dramata vybočují z řady mírou násilí a útoky proti tradičním irským hodnotám, jakou je například náboženství nebo rodina.

McDonagh sám tvrdošijně popírá vliv svých irských dramatických předchůdců a jako svůj hlavní zdroj inspirace uvádí současnou popkulturu, zejména akční filmy a seriály. Pečlivé zkoumání jeho her však svědčí o něčem jiném – vliv J.M. Synge, Samuela Becketta a mnoha jiných je nezpochybnitelný. Tyto nesrovnalosti v prohlášeníh autora zmátly již mnoho kritiků – k stávajícím nesnadnostem při interpretování a zařazení McDonaghových her se tedy přidává i fakt, že často protichůdná slova dramatika samotného nelze ve většině případů brát za bernou minci.

McDonagh nerozlučně sepal většinu svých dramát s irskými reáliemi a stal se terčem mnoha kritiků, tvrdících, že své renomé založil na zesměšňování irského venkova. Avšak lehkost, se kterou McDonaghovy hry překračují hranice států a kultur svědčí o tom, že jádro dramatikovy práce spočívá hlouběji. Při translokaci jeho dramát sice zhusta dochází ke ztrátě typického dialektu, mnoha svébytných odkazů a reálií, ale úspěch u diváků zůstává stejný. Naopak, například Patrick Lonergan tvrdí, že hrám se dostává nových, původně nezamýšlených interpretací s místní relevancí.

K inspiraci moderní popkulturou se McDonagh hlásí o poznání ochotněji než k ovlivněnosti prací svých irských předchůdců. Nadšeně vyjmenovává filmy zejména anglosaské moderní kinematografie, včetně četných béčkových kriminalistických seriálů a mýdlových oper, coby své zdroje inspirace. Ve struktuře jeho her jsou tyto vlivy jasně patrné, stejně jako u postav, obývajících McDonaghův divadelní prostor. Nezastupitelnou roli mají též reference k moderní konzumní společnosti, McDonaghova dramata občas až hraničí se zběsilým product placementem. Tyto

reference se však neobjevují arbitrárně a bezúčelně, pomáhají dokreslit McDonaghův svébytný pohled na Irsko v průběhu historie.

Zároveň však tyto odkazy (zejména na nekonečné televizní seriály) upozorňují i na možná úskalí autorovy další práce – po šesti uveřejněných hrách se zhusta opakují kritické výtky na neměnnost vzorce, jež mu zajišťuje slávu a zaplněná hlediště.