

# An Analysis of Emigration and Religion in Martin McDonagh's Leenane Trilogy

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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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**An Analysis of Emigration and Religion in Martin  
McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy***

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and  
Literature and German Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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**Abstract:**

This thesis will offer an analysis of Martin McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy*. Special attention will be given to the topics of religion and emigration, focusing on *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Lonesome West*, while also discussing the plays in relation to a greater tradition of Irish dramaturgy, especially plays localized in the West of Ireland. Other topics will be discussed as well, providing the necessary context for a better understanding of the plays in question.

**Key words:** Irish studies, McDonagh, Leenane trilogy, Beauty Queen of Leenane, The Lonesome West, A Skull in Connemara, emigration, religion, Irish dramaturgy, the West of Ireland

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis aims to offer an analysis of Martin McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy* which includes the following plays: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West*. Special attention will be given to *Beauty Queen* and *The Lonesome West*. The thesis will focus on two major themes in the trilogy, namely emigration and religion, offering an analysis of each topic and comparing it to other plays within the tradition of Irish dramaturgy, especially dramas that use the West of Ireland as their main setting.

Emigration will be analysed in the next chapter, as one of the main topics of the first play in the trilogy, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. In order to provide a greater understanding of the play itself, as well as contextualize the treatment of emigration, issues such as globalization, pop culture, language, folk music and religion will be discussed as well. The thesis will also explore McDonagh's cultural background and relate his experiences to the trilogy's treatment of aspects of Irish culture. Ultimately, the ending of *Beauty Queen* will be compared to Yeats' and Lady Gregory's famous play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.

The subsequent chapter will deal with the issue of religion. Most of the discussion will be centred upon *The Lonesome West*, but due to the intertextual nature of the entire trilogy, examples from the other two plays will be employed as well. The play's connections to the style of drama known as in-ye-face theatre and John Millington Synge's famous play *The Playboy of the Western World* will be explored. Furthermore, the historical background will be provided in order to contextualize McDonagh's treatment of Catholicism in the plays. Special emphasis will be placed on the character of Father Welsh, the main spiritual authority in McDonagh's imagined Leenane, and his attempts at fostering a healthy community in the face of a religion that is crumbling apart under the weight of its crimes.

## 2. The Shadow of Emigration

The shadow of emigration looms over the first play in McDonagh's acclaimed *Leenane Trilogy*. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* begins in a single room (functioning both as a kitchen and a living room) of a rural cottage situated in the west of Ireland. Its décor is typical of rural Irish drama, including, as Lonergan puts it in his book, "several old-fashioned icons of Irishness." (Lonergan 2012: 8) The paraphernalia includes some shabby furniture and touristy-looking embroidered towels, an old TV set, a box of turf and, most notably, a crucifix and a picture of the Kennedy brothers hanging from the wall. Outside, of course, it is raining heavily, the water pouring down the artificial windows of the set.

When the play first premiered in 1996, in the newly built Town Hall theatre in Galway, the audience was sure they were about to witness just another Irish play, indistinguishable from the hundreds of Irish plays before it. (Lonergan 2012: 44-5) However, these stereotypes common to rural Irish drama were used in order to lull the audience into a false sense of security. The icons (the crucifix and photo of the Kennedy brothers) will quickly be exposed as "empty signifiers – as signposts pointing the audience in the wrong direction." (Lonergan 2012: 8) The play (as well as the rest of the trilogy) quickly takes a darker turn, dismantling the "old authorities of Irish life – church, state and family." (Lonergan 2012: 44)

"Most countries send out oil or iron, steel or gold, or some other crop, but Ireland has had only one export and that is its people." This is a famous quote by John F. Kennedy, the first Irish-Catholic president of the United States of America, on his visit to Ireland in 1963, months before his assassination. JFK's great grandparents escaped Ireland during the Great Famine sometime between 1846 and 1855, as part of a massive emigration wave from the Emerald Isle – approximately 1.8 million people left Ireland during the Famine. At a time when anti-Irish sentiment was on the rise in America, the Kennedys settled in Boston,

Massachusetts, where they worked as peddlers, coopers and common labourers. Quickly the Kennedys abandoned their menial jobs and managed to find more profitable positions, working as clerks, tavern owners and retailers. By the end of the 19th century, Patrick Kennedy and John Fitzgerald, the latter being JFK's grandfather, became successful politicians. John served twice as the mayor of Boston and as a Congress member. Within 4 generations, the immigrant Kennedy family managed to produce a president of one of the most powerful countries in the world. In the popular imagination, John F. Kennedy came to represent the embodiment of an immigrant success story. (John F. Kennedy - Presidential library and museum: John F. Kennedy and Ireland)

As Lonergan puts it, "McDonagh makes it clear even before the action begins that Maureen's existence is dominated by things that should belong to the past and which therefore prevent her from creating a future for herself." (Lonergan 2012: 8) Maureen has tried her luck abroad, only to be crippled by the abuse she suffered from her co-workers, an event which led to her to a mental breakdown and the subsequent admission into a psychiatric hospital. By utilizing this dreadful memory against her daughter, Mag is actively trying to prevent Maureen from creating a future for herself. The Kennedy-brothers photograph serves merely as a reminder that emigration now offers no promise of a brighter future: "just as the crucifix represents a barely remembered and increasingly irrelevant religion, so does the image of the Kennedys stand for a period of political optimism that is long past." (Lonergan 2012: 9)

Although the play takes place in the Ireland of the 1990s, the whole set and its mise-en-scène are designed to remind the audience of the 1960s and 1950s. In the rugged rural west of Ireland the benefits of the Celtic Tiger are yet to be reaped – the characters seem to be living in complete poverty, both cultural and economic. They did not experience the would-be bliss of the economic renaissance of the mid-1990s. The banal instances of mass culture, however,

have flooded the character's everyday lives. Brand names serve as running jokes, and the characters frequently discuss trivial television shows. Feuds over potato chips acquire biblical proportions. The trilogy's only representative of the law is a police officer named Thomas Hanlon, whose idea of police work and criminal investigation is shaped entirely by the pulpy cop shows he watches.

Although it is clear that the play's world is experiencing the effects of globalization, the characters, as well as the set, seem to be stuck in the past. The rain, crucifixes and turf are all still there, yet now they are intertwined with elements of pop culture. The final result is a surreal image of western Ireland, where familiar tropes are subverted.

One of the superimposed pictures is a black-and-white still from an Abbey play of the 1950s: west of Ireland virgins and London building sites, tyrannical mothers and returned Yanks, family feuds, clerical crises of faith. But the other picture is a lurid Polaroid of a postmodern landscape, a disintegrating place somewhere between London and Boston, saturated in Irish rain and Australian soaps. (O'Toole 1999: 3)

The Irish language, along with religion and folk music, also becomes a relic – another half-remembered ghost that somehow still manages to rear its head into the character's lives. In one of the first debates between Mag and Maureen, the issue of Irish language is brought up. When Maureen turns the radio on, the station plays *The Spinning Wheel*, an old song by Delia Murphy, for the first time. "It sounds like nonsense to me", Mag complains, "Why can't they just speak English like everybody." (McDonagh 1999: 4) Maureen, however, has a different opinion. She believes Irish should be spoken in Ireland, to which Mag replies: "where would Irish get you going for a job in England? Nowhere." (McDonagh 1999: 5)



Almost instantly, the Irish language is associated with emigration. Mag equates Irish language with poverty and English with financial stability. Although they have different opinions – Mag is dismissive of Gaelic language, while Maureen seems to feel protective and patriotic – they seem to agree on one point: the only way of attaining financial security is through emigration. Ironically, the entire conversation is carried out in English. Neither Maureen nor her domineering mother speak Gaelic.

To Pato and Maureen the traditional Irish ballads, that is, the usage of Delia Murphy's song *The Spinning Wheel* throughout the play, sound creepy and old-fashioned, as is seen in the third scene, when Maureen is having Pato over for a mug of tea after the party:

Pato: This is a creepy owl song.

Maureen: It *is* a creepy owl song. (McDonagh 1999: 23)

The second time McDonagh utilizes the song is in order to comment the action on stage. The song narrates the story of a young girl and her attempts to escape her blind grandmother so she can spend the night with her lover. She successfully tricks her grandmother and manages to escape before the wheel stops spinning. Although Pato and Maureen dislike the song, its employment seems to suggest a happy conclusion to Pato's and Maureen's love story. Maybe Maureen will manage to escape the clutches of her overbearing mother and escape to Boston with her new lover.

Martin McDonagh's parents emigrated from Ireland in the aftermath of the Second World War. Poverty and dismal work opportunities forced them, and almost half a million other Irish emigrants, to seek financial security in Britain in the mid-twentieth century. Of course, there certainly are examples of the Irish choosing to leave their homeland, but the majority, including the McDonagh family, felt they were left with no alternative. Arriving in England, many of the Irish immigrants faced prejudices and struggled to find work that was

not menial. They felt lost and abandoned. (Lonergan 2012: 199) A yearning to return home developed which was characterized by Fintan O'Toole: "The melancholy allure of a lost paradise, where the sweet sorrow of parting will one day be transformed into the joy of homecoming, making London a bleak nowhere and Ireland a primeval fantasy." (O'Toole 1999: 1)

Martin McDonagh was raised in a working-class family in south London. Being born into a second generation of Irish immigrants, McDonagh found himself (dis)connection to both Irish and British culture; as he commented "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. That's exactly what the work arises out of" (O'Hagan 2001) For O'Toole this render McDonagh a "citizen of an indefinite land that is neither Ireland nor England, but shares borders with both." (O'Toole 1999: 1)

At the centre of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* lies a dysfunctional dynamic between Maureen, a lonely 40-year-old spinster, and her manipulating mother Mag. The already appalling relationship is further strained when a third party, Pato Dooley, a returned migrant, arrives. Pato Dooley offers Maureen the opportunity to escape the clutches of her mother so they can emigrate to Boston and start a life together.

Neither Pato nor Maureen found happiness in Britain and both were ostracized due to language. Maureen admits she did not even understand half the swearing directed at her. "I had to have a black woman explain it to me. Trinidad she was from." (McDonagh 1999: 31) Similarly, Pato struggles to spell the colloquial term gangerman (meaning foreman on a building site) in a letter to Maureen. "It is not a word we was taught in school" (McDonagh 1999: 34), he explains, revealing his trouble to use English grammar correctly, as well as difficulty understanding the slang of his co-workers. As Lonergan notes: "Even though Pato

and Maureen have abandoned Irish, the language lingers on in their use of English. Like traditional Irish music, like Catholicism - like so many other forms of Irish culture ... – the Irish language has a zombie-like presence in the lives of McDonagh's characters: it should be dead, but it continues to exert an influence." (Loneragan 2012: 11) They seem to be stuck between Ireland and England, not feeling at home at either place. However, there is no yearning or melancholy for a lost home in the worldviews of Pato and Maureen. (Loneragan 2012: 11)

I do ask meself, if there was good work in Leenane, would I stay in Leenane? I mean there will never be good work, but hypothetically, I'm saying. Or even bad work. Any work. And when I'm over there in London and working in rain and it's more or less cattle that I am, [...] when it's there I am, it's here I wish I was, of course. [...] But when it's here I am... it isn't there I want to be, of course not... But I know it isn't here I want to be either. (McDonagh 1999: 21-2)

Pato knows that the Ireland he daydreams about in his derelict lodgings in London does not resemble the real Ireland whatsoever: there is no "melancholy allure of a lost paradise" (O'Toole 1999: 1). A longing exists, but is undermined by Pato's nihilism, the realization that the home he longs to return to is beautiful, but its people are vicious, violent and vindictive: "Of course it's beautiful here, a fool can see. The mountains and the green [...] But when everybody knows everybody else's business [...] You can't kick a cow in Leenane without some bastard holding a grudge twenty year." (McDonagh 1999: 22) It seems that the Ireland he wishes to return to exists only in his daydreaming.

Another way of contextualizing the theme of emigration, apart from obvious social commentary, is by taking a closer look at the mother-daughter relationship between Mag and Maureen. Maureen's emigration attempt ended rather abruptly. She was committed to a

psychiatric ward after suffering a mental breakdown the first time she went to England. The breakdown was prompted by the physical and verbal abuse she suffered from her English colleagues, while working as a cleaner. Mag reveals this piece of embarrassing information to Pato after the night he spent with Maureen, in order to spite her daughter and deter her potential suitor.

McDonagh intertwines the two major themes of *Beauty Queen*: emigration and the relationship between parent and child. In the play, the feelings of migrants for their home country and the feelings of children towards their parents are placed into a synecdochial relationship with each other: [...] we learn something about the emigrant's attitude to Ireland by observing the relationship between Mag and Maureen – but their relationship in turn allows us to think of emigration from Ireland in almost Oedipal terms. (Lonergan 2012: 7-8)

Mag is portrayed as a “Joycean sow who eats her farrow, the devouring Mother Ireland who drives her children away or drives the only one who returned to hatred.” (Burke 2014: 205) The character of Mag seems like a grotesque parody of W.B. Yeats' and Lady Gregory's most famous drama, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, which premiered at the height of Irish Literary Revival.

*Cathleen ni Houlihan* takes place during the failed rebellion of 1798. In the play, the title character, an old woman functioning as a symbol of an Ireland devastated by colonization, ‘crashes’ the preparations for a young boy's wedding, demanding him to sacrifice his life at the altar of the nation-to-come. Ultimately, Cathleen persuades the young lad, named Michael, to go fight for his country's independence. Having accomplished her mission, Cathleen morphs into a beautiful young queen, symbolizing a reborn and independent Ireland.

In McDonagh's take on the trope of anthropomorphic national personification, the nation-as-woman image acquires grotesque and sinister overtones. Mag is a manipulating monster who pretends to be invalid and torments her own daughter. By burning Pato's letter, she destroyed Maureen's only opportunity of finding love. In response, a desperate Maureen, who is now sentenced to spend the rest of her life in Leenane, violently murders her mother with a poker. Subsequently, echoing both *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), Maureen morphs into her own mother. Sitting in her mother's rocking chair, we observe her ordering Ray the same way her mother did. This is Mag in one of the first scenes:

Mag: Goodbye to you, Ray.

Ray: Goodbye to you, Mrs.

Mag: And pull the door.

Ray: I was going to pull the door anyways... (McDonagh 1999: 12)

In the final scene, Maureen repeats the exact words of her mother, rendering the transformation complete:

Maureen: And pull the door after you...

Ray (*shouting angrily*): I was going to pull the fecking door after me! (McDonagh 1999: 60)

McDonagh parodies the final image in *Cathleen*. In Yeats' and Lady Gregory's drama the eponymous queen (the anthropomorphic personification of Ireland) exits the stage once she persuades Michael to leave his wife and go fight, leaving his family in dismay. Michael's father asks his other son whether he saw an old woman crossing his path, to which the son replies: "I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen." (Yeats 1908: 10)

In McDonagh's version, Mag, who might be read as a symbol of Ireland, is violently murdered. "The Joycean sow" has eaten her farrow only to spawn a more grotesque version of the same mother. (Burke 2014: 205) In the final scenes of McDonagh's play, we see the 'queen' alone, rocking in the same chair of the mother she murdered, while Delia Murphy's song *The Spinning Wheel* is employed for the third and final time, suggesting a much darker message. Maureen is identifying with the past rather than trying to seek a new future for herself. Instead of escaping her mother, she has become her mother. (Lonergan 2012: 9-10) Mag used Maureen's past (the crippling experience in London) as a weapon against her, but by killing her mother she has destroyed any chance of a bright future. Employing Delia Murphy's ballad in the final scene, the song's message no longer offers hope: rather it, it suggests Maureen's entrapment. The stage directions support this idea as well: "Maureen gently rocks in the chair until about the middle of the fourth verse". (McDonagh 1999: 60)

Killing Mag proves to be futile. Pato escapes Leenane forever, settling in Boston with his new fiancée, Dolores Hooley. If, for Pato, emigrating to Boston seems to be a one-way-ticket to a fulfilled life, away from the violence of Leenane and the loneliness he found in London, Mag appears doomed to become "the exact fecking image" of her mother.

(McDonagh 1999: 60) However, despite the final scene's cynicism, a small, although ambiguous, flicker of hope is offered. After the fourth verse, Maureen stands up, picks up her dusty suitcase and exits the stage into the 'hall', casting a last glance at the rocking chair, which slowly stops rocking until the lights fade out. (McDonagh 1999: 60) Her intentions are uncertain: does she intend to leave Leenane, or is she planning to put the case away once and for all?

### 3. The Catholic Church in Melt-down

The Catholic Church and its clergy seem to be one of McDonagh's favourite targets for all sorts of irreverent and outrageous jokes, most notably in *The Lonesome West*, but also throughout the entire *Leenane Trilogy*. Indeed, *The Lonesome West* is full of anti-Catholic jokes, which become even more provocative once we take the historical background into consideration. *The Lonesome West* premiered in June 1997, at a time when Irish society was undergoing the process of liberalization. Divorce was legalized in November 1995 and homosexuality had been decriminalized in 1994. In 1990 Mary Robinson became the first woman to be elected as the president of Irish Republic.

However, these transformations “were being challenged by ongoing revelations of corruption, cover-up and systematic abuse of the vulnerable.” (Lonergan 2012: 44) The Irish public was learning of the fact that Catholic Church has been systematically abusing children for decades. The Church was powerful enough to “cover up” these cases and enabled further abuse by refusing to report these actions to the police, as well as moving suspicious priests from one parish to the other. (Lonergan 2012: 40) Nevertheless, victims began to speak out. Various government enquiries and criminal cases established that there were hundreds of priests abusing thousands of children. According to the Murphy report, which was published in 2009 and focused on the Archdiocese of Dublin, allegations of sexual abuse of over 320 children were examined in detail, covering the timespan between 1975 and 2004. As a result, 46 priests were investigated, out of which eleven confessed or have been convicted. (Summary of clerical sex abuse scandals in Ireland) The Ryan report, an investigation of child abuse in the reformatory and industrial schools run by the Catholic Church, revealed the massive scope of systematic molestation, detailing the physical, sexual and psychological abuse of children by “over 800 known abusers in over 200 institutions during a period of 35 years.” (The savage reality of our darkest days) In media, the Ryan report has been described

as a “map of an Irish hell” (The savage reality of our darkest days), while the abuse scandal was referred to by some as Ireland’s Holocaust. (Moore 2009) The extent of clerical abuse and Church’s power is apparent even today, as there are over 1,000 members of the Irish Catholic clergy – against whom credible allegations of child abuse have been made – whose identities are still being kept secret by highly restrictive laws regarding data-protection. (Drohan 2018) Pope Francis has written a letter condemning the crimes in 2018, yet no new legislation was proposed from the Vatican in order to combat the issue more efficiently.

McDonagh refers to these events throughout the *The Leenane Trilogy*. In a rather trivial conversation between Ray and Mag in the first scene of *Beauty Queen*, Ray expresses his desire to purchase a used car and explains that the local priest, Father Welsh, is selling one: “I don’t like Father Walsh – Welsh – at all” (McDonagh 1999: 9), Mag is quick to offer her opinion of the priest, setting the template for the main recurring joke of the trilogy – the constant struggle to remember the priest’s family name. Further gossip ensues immediately:

Ray: He punched Mairtin Hanlon in the head once, and for no reason.

Mag: God save us! (McDonagh 1999: 9)

This rumour is later confirmed in *A Skull in Connemara*, although most of the audience members would not agree it was, as Ray puts it, “for no reason”, as the ensuing *slap*, and not *punch*, was a result of the most gruesome joke in the entire trilogy. However, the validity of the slap is not the issue here. As the conversation between Mag and Ray develops, we learn that the barrage of insults and jokes is not limited to Welsh exclusively. Mag provides further bits of gossip:

Mag: There was a priest in the news Wednesday had a baby with a Yank.



Ray: 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. If he punched that baby in the head, that'd be news. (McDonagh 1999: 10)

The "Yank" in question is the famous former Bishop of Galway, Eamonn Casey, who had an affair with an American citizen, Annie Murphy, in the 1970s. The affair resulted in Annie's pregnancy, but Casey wanted nothing to do with the child, so Annie returned to America with her new-born son where regularly received Casey's payments. In 1992, however, she revealed the real identity of the boy's father to the Irish Times, starting one of the first scandals that rocked the Catholic Church in Ireland.

Furthermore, in the first scene we see Welsh lamenting his failures as a priest to Coleman. Trying to console the maudlin priest, Coleman says: "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." (McDonagh 1999: 135)

McDonagh's influences are vast and cover different media. From the violent films of Peckinpah, Scorsese and Tarantino, to cheap Australian soap operas and the Pogues' mix of punk and traditional Irish music. In terms of literature and drama, while his work shows the influence of Nabokov, Borges, Pinter and Mamet, it is most often compared to the plays of John Millington Synge. (O'Toole 2006) The titles of both *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West* were borrowed from two significant Irish plays. The title of *Skull* is taken from Lucky's long abstract monologue in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, while the title for *West* was found in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*.

The line in question, the inspiration for the title of *Lonesome West*, is uttered by the pub owner, Michael James Flaherty. When Christy Mahon staggers into Flaherty's pub on the

west coast of county Mayo, claiming to have killed his own father, Flaherty offers him a job instantly, admiring young Christy's "heroic" deed. Pegeen, Flaherty's daughter, falls in love with Christy (as does almost every other woman in town), much to the dismay of Shawn Keogh, Pegeen's fiancé. Flaherty offered the job to Christy so he can get drunk at a friend's wake, which was originally Shawn's job. Shawn, however, escaped when asked to do the job, believing that a respectable young man should not be left alone with a woman who is about to be married, even if he is the one to marry her. More so, he fears the disapproval of the local priest, revealing his fear of religious authority. This prompted Flaherty's response: "Oh, there's sainted glory this day in the lonesome west, and by the will of God I've got you a decent man!" (Synge 1982: 65)

Flaherty's response is sarcastic to say the least and this "skewed sense of morality" (Lonergan 2012: 31) reveals a discrepancy between the appearance and reality of the Catholic faith in Ireland. Although the Hiberno-English language in Synge's *Playboy* is poetic and abounds in religious allusion, the characters "have failed completely to understand and internalise the central tenets of Christian faith." (Lonergan 2012: 31) The teachings of Catholic Church linger only in the catchphrases, exclamations and greetings of the villagers. The Church still represents spiritual and moral authority, but manages to exercise this authority only over the God-fearing coward that is Shawn. Shawn quickly becomes the main target of the villagers' ridicule, while the man who committed patricide is worshiped by the entire village and appears to be a more appropriate husband for Pegeen. The villagers are enchanted with Christy's poetic language and storytelling abilities, which also play a significant role in the attainment of Christy's heroic status.

Although Christy is celebrated for patricide in the beginning, the villagers quickly turn on him when the supposedly killed father returns and Christy threatens to finish him once and for all. By witnessing the act of patricide in person, they become determined to hang Christy

for doing the exact deed they had celebrated him for earlier in the play, thus revealing their hypocrisy.

Regarding the portrayal of priesthood, the only representative of Catholic Church is absent for the entire duration of Synge's play. Father Reilly's absence from the play seems to suggest that he is more concerned with the enforcement of Christian decorum through fear of religious authority, rather than he is with fostering a proper God-loving neighbourly community. This has a contradictory effect on the villagers, who are seen discarding Christian decorum, revelling in violence and drunkenness.

None of the characters in *The Leenane Trilogy* express fear of religious authority the same way Shawn Keogh in *Playboy* does. In McDonagh's work, we see a world in which Christy's dad had not shown up in the final act and revealed himself not to be as dead as was thought. The regions in which McDonagh's plays operate are ones in which "God has no jurisdiction". (McDonagh 1999: 134)

While everyone still identifies as Catholic in McDonagh's trilogy, there is little evidence of profound faith. Each of the plays begins in a run-down cottage with a crucifix hanging from the walls – a prop used ironically in order to expose the remnants of a once powerful religion reduced to trivial superstitions. Likewise, the tenets and principles of Christianity are reduced to hilarious, postmodern-pseudo-musings. In *The Lonesome West*, Valene is able to understand the blasphemous sin of suicide only through the lens of pop culture. After they dragged the body of Thomas Hanlon, who drowned himself in the lake earlier, back home, Valene and Welsh return to the cottage for a drink:

Welsh: Rotting in hell now, Tom Hanlon is. According to the Catholic Church anyways he is, the same as every suicide. No remorse. No mercy on him.

Valene: Well I didn't know that. [...] So the fella from *Alias Smith and Jones*, he'd be in hell?

Welsh: I don't know the fella from *Alias Smith and Jones*.

Valene: He killed himself, and at the height of his fame.

Welsh: Well if he killed himself, aye, he'll be in hell too. [...] You can kill a dozen fellas, you can kill two dozen fellas. So long as you're sorry after you can still get into heaven. But if it's yourself you go murdering, no. Straight to hell.

Valene: [...] I wonder if he's met the fella from *Alias Smith and Jones*. Ah, that fella must be old now. (McDonagh 1999: 153–154)

Coleman, on the other hand, takes Christy's attempt at patricide to another, more successful level: "That's the thing about being Catholic, you can shoot your father in the head and it doesn't even matter at all." Coleman is twisting the ritual of confession in a hilarious manner, believing absolution is granted as soon as one commits the act of confession – the severity of the crime bears no significance. He is misusing the sacrament without any sign of genuine repentance, in order to justify a gruesome murder.

McDonagh's dialogue is vulgar and confrontational, abounding with jokes referring to controversial issues, much akin to the practices of in-yer-face theatre, a style of drama which aims to shock and disgust, often presenting taboo topics and violence on stage. Aleks Sierz provides an excellent definition of the style:

The widest definition of in-yer-face theatre is any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message.

It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of the conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. Often

such drama employs shock tactics, [...] it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. (Sierz 2001: 10)

In-yer-face theatre emerged in Great Britain during the 1990s and it would not be wrong to attribute some of McDonagh's dramaturgical methods (cartoonish violence and dark, provocative humour) to this particular style of drama. However, beneath the facade of cheap, provocative jokes lies a deeper and more powerful critique of Catholic faith.

Echoing Synge's portrayal of Father Reilly, Father Welsh also remains absent in the first two plays of the trilogy. The audience is introduced to Father Welsh mostly through gossip in *Beauty Queen* and *Skull*. Before his character even appears on stage, the audience is drawn to negative assumptions. When his presence eventually does grace the stage, joining the brothers Coleman and Valene for a drink after he had buried their father, the negative assumptions are further asserted – the audience sees Coleman asking the priest whether he would care for a drink. Welsh agrees, to which Coleman replies: “A dumb fecking question that was.” (McDonagh 1999: 129) Father Welsh claims that it is this town that has driven him to drink, together with his own feelings of inadequacy as well as all the meaningless attempts he has made to foster a sense of community in the violent and materialistic landscape that is McDonagh's Leenane. “Only, some people don't need as much of a drive as others. Some need only a short walk”, Coleman responds, dismantling Welsh's justification. (McDonagh 1999: 130) The meaning of Welsh's alcoholism remains unclear; as Lonergan notes, it is an open question if “Welsh drinks because he is a bad priest or if he is a bad priest because he drinks. It is even unclear whether Welsh should be seen as a good priest.” (Lonergan 2012: 32)

Father Welsh functions as the main representative of spiritual authority in the imagined setting of Leenane. But, as Lonergan points out, Welsh does not even know scripture, inventing false quotations about sharing when in need of drink: “Thou shouldst share and share alike the Bible says. Or somewhere it says”. (McDonagh 1999: 154) When confronted with the fact that he was “chit-chatting” (McDonagh: 134) with two murderers on the loose (and by observing the hilariously violent bickering between Coleman and Valene, it is a fair guess that there will be at least one more), Father Welsh complains about the lack of excitement he gets in the confessional box: “About betting on the horses and impure thoughts is all the bastards ever confess.” (McDonagh 1999: 135) The embarrassed Coleman needs to remind Welsh that he is not at liberty to discuss the contents of his parishioners’ confessions: “You can be excommunicated for that. I think. I saw it in a film with Montgomery Clift” (McDonagh 1999: 135) Again, it is interesting to note that the characters are familiarized with the basic principles of Catholicism and practices of the Catholic Church only through instances of pop culture.

In other words, it is obvious from the hilarious jokes and ‘discussions’ on religion that the Catholic Church no longer enjoys the same level of respect it did before. However, it is interesting to observe that Father Welsh enjoys a great deal of respect from the other characters, even though his inadequacies, alcoholism and regular crises of faith are regularly mocked. Not a substantial amount, but larger than that of any other character in the notoriously gossipy world of Leenane.

In *Beauty Queen*, Ray Dooley recalls that hitting Mairtin Hanlon in the face was “out of character for Father Welsh. Father Welsh seldom uses violence, same as most young priests.” (McDonagh 1999: 9) In *Skull*, when Mary dismisses Father Welsh as “young skitter”, Mick is quick to respond: “Nothing the matter with Father Welsh.” (McDonagh 1999: 66) Later, in the same play, Mick brags how the priest brings him cups of tea and stays for a pleasant chat

while he is digging up the bones out of an overcrowded graveyard, so there is room for newcomers. (McDonagh 1999: 66) This is not such a strange occupation in a town like Leenane: taking all the violence, murder and suicides into account, only God knows how many mutilated corpses had to be buried by the past generations in McDonagh's imagined world.

The reason Welsh has earned this respect is because, instead of blindly following the Church's practices or defending the Church against his parishioners' hilarious slander, Welsh's main desire is to foster a sense of community. This is most obviously seen in his attempts to reconcile Coleman and Valene, which also provide the narrative structure for *The Lonesome West*. Throughout the play he attempts to stop the constant fighting between the two estranged brothers. Almost every piece of helpful advice he offers gets either ignored or ridiculed, and the ensuing sense of failure to create a neighbourly community propels Father Welsh deeper into depression. (Pocock 2007: 65-6) He feels isolated because he is the only one who shows concern for his neighbours and is genuinely disturbed by all the mindless violence that surrounds him. Other inhabitants do not seem to care, other than gossiping about the disturbing events.

It is clear that Father Welsh takes his role as God's servant very seriously and yet there are not many distinct instances in which he has proven his clerical capacity. As Lonergan notes, throughout the *Lonesome West*, "Welsh proves himself to be able to talk about what he *should* have done, but is rarely able to act for anyone's benefit, including his own." (Lonergan 2012: 33) When Thomas Hanlon committed suicide, Father Welsh had to be hauled out of the pub in order to say a prayer over Hanlon's dead body. (McDonagh 1997: 147) Welsh's typical reaction is to blame himself, or, as will become apparent later, even harm himself. (Pocock 2007: 64) One failure is added on top of the other, leading Welsh to doubt the value of his own life.

Welsh's belief that community constitutes an important part of Catholic practice stands in stark contrast with Valene's materialistic view of religion. The confrontation between the two viewpoints is vividly expressed in one of the trilogy's most provocative scenes – Coleman's spiteful melting of Valene's beloved plastic figurines. The audience is well aware of the fact that Coleman killed his father because he insulted his hairstyle. Valene promised he would not notify the authorities if Coleman signed over to him everything his father left him in the will. During the play, we witness the fact that Valene has marked every single one of his possessions (which is everything in the cottage, from the poteen and crisps to the figurines and the stove) with the letter V. This provides the context for their bickering, which reaches a new boiling point in the melting scene:

Valene: I'll blow the head off him! The fucking head of him I'll blow! I tell him not to touch my figurines and I tell him not to touch my stove and what does he do? He cooks me figurines in me stove!

Welsh: You can't go shooting you brother o'er inanimate objects, Valene! Give me that gun now.

Valene: Inanimate objects? Me figurines of the saints? And you call yourself a priest? (McDonagh 1999: 156)

Although the argument has an obvious comedic function, it shows us how grotesquely individualistic and materialistic Valene's worldview is. Moreover, the scene could be read as an attempt to "reveal the extent to which the public appearance of Catholicism in Ireland – the use of religious statues, the public acts of faith – were disguising acts of hideous violence" (Lonergan 2012: 41) – that is, the clerical abuse of the youngest. McDonagh is presenting the audience with a picture of the Catholic Church in melt-down, once again exposing the clash between appearance and reality. A deeper and more uncomfortable truth lies behind the



appearance of Valene's figurines. A once powerful religion is being undermined by the hideous crimes its agents have committed. Church's authority in Leenane has literally melted away.

As the scene progresses, Welsh's inability to reunite the two brothers reaches a new low point, as Valene takes the gun off the wall and points it at his brother. In a desperate attempt to stop more bloodshed, Father Welsh submerges his hands into the bowl. Audiences might remember a similar scene earlier in the trilogy – Maureen scalding her mother's hand with hot oil out of a frying pan. However, in Welsh's instance, by scalding his own hands he is trying to transcend the violence and materialism of Leenane, as was manifested in acts such as, for instance, Mag's destruction of her daughter's last chance of love by burning Pato's letter. The effect becomes more powerful, once the trilogy's intertextuality is acknowledged. Suffering is central to the image of Christ and by burning his hand, Welsh's pain acquires symbolic meaning. This is revealed in Welsh's suicide note: "Every time the pain does go through them hands I do think about ye, and let me tell you this. I would take that pain and a pain a thousand times worse, and bear it with a smile, if only I could restore to ye the love for each other as brothers ye do so woefully lack." (McDonagh: 169)

This pain, together with his increasing despair, encourages him to commit suicide. By choosing to take his own life, Father Welsh is again demonstrating the difference between his words and his actions. (Lonergan 2012: 33) In the eyes of the Catholic Church, suicide is seen as a rejection of the gift of life and is therefore unforgivable. Consequently, a priest's suicide demonstrates a total lack of faith in God, a rejection of a religion he has vowed to teach and spread. Does Welsh's suicide mean that he has finally succumbed to the mindless violence of Leenane, to his own despair? Possibly.

On the other hand, his suicide does present a rather courageous act for a priest, as it will result in a one-way ticket to hell. Welsh's belief that his death will shock the brothers out of hate outweighs the unforgivable sin that is suicide. The ensuing reconciliation would redeem his failures as a priest. In his eyes, at least: "[...] couldn't ye just be trying it, now? [...] For a friend of yeres, who cares about ye, [...] who never achieved anything as a priest in Leenane, in fact the opposite, and who'd see ye two becoming true brothers again as the greatest achievement of his whole time here." (McDonagh: 170) So Welsh is trying to portray his suicide not as an act of despair, but an act of faith that would redeem his failure as a priest. Of course this interpretation is possible, but another question springs to mind. Is he simply misusing the practices of Catholicism the same way Coleman does when he justifies the murder of his father? One thing is certain: Welsh's suicide exposes the limits of Catholic faith and how its rhetoric might be used as a means to different ends. Welsh uses it to achieve something noble, Coleman uses it to justify murder.

It is also important to note that Welsh's suicidal tendencies stem out of depression and despair, as much as they do out of self-sacrifice and redemption, resulting in a message that could be interpreted both positively and negatively. Welsh's suicide was deeply hurtful for Girleen, possibly the only positive character in the entire *Leenane Trilogy*. Girleen has been selling poteen for months, in order to buy a heart pendant for Father Welsh, with whom she's infatuated, only to toss "*the chain into a corner*" (McDonagh 1999: 177) once she hears the news of Welsh's suicide. Later in the play, audiences find out that Girleen is often seen wandering to the place where Welsh killed himself, screaming at the lake in which he drowned. The grim insinuation is that soon she will be put in a mental institution.

As for the two brothers, they eventually do try to make amends. Their confessions of crimes from the past, however, turn into a hilarious game of one-upmanship. The argument quickly escalates only to be broken up at its highpoint. The brothers drop their weapons and

conclude that they did not “ask him [Father Welsh] to go betting his soul on us.” (McDonagh: 194) Welsh’s suicide has not yielded any significant results and it does appear that the violence will stop only when the barbaric inhabitants of Leenane wipe each other out.

However, what Welsh has done is restore power to a narrative central to the Catholic faith – Jesus dying for our sins. In an interview McDonagh admits that father Welsh is the result of the fascination with the “suicidal Christ figure”: “He’s probably more a representation of my idea, or my faith in the Christ I was taught about as a kid. I guess it’s a suicidal Christ figure, which is a figure I’ve always been interested in. Somebody who kills himself for the sake of others.” (McDonagh qtd., O’Toole – ‘A Mind in Connemara’) The play’s ending confirms the doubt that there is little guarantee that the principles of the Catholic faith can alter the dreadful behaviour of the Connor brothers. It seems they will proceed to twist these same principles in order to justify their actions. However, Valene does not burn Welsh’s suicide note the same way Mag burns Pato’s love letter to Maureen. He pins the letter and Girleen’s pendant to the cross, signalling to the audience that there still might be (a very slight) hope for a change.

McDonagh taps into both Irish and British literary traditions. By fusing the punk attitude of in-yer-face theatre with the tradition of religion and Irish dramas set in the west of Ireland, McDonagh’s original and ambiguous work confronts the audience with the hideous crimes that have taken place beneath the facade of Catholic Church, while also offering a layered critique of the appearances and realities of the operations of the Catholic faith in Ireland. Although the situations, characters and the general setting of Leenane are grotesquely exaggerated, cruel and hilarious at the same time, it is the case, as McDonagh claims, that “you can see things more clearly through exaggeration than through reality.” (O’Hagan 2001)

#### 4. Conclusion

The Celtic Tiger seems to have jumped over McDonagh's West, a place lost between the past and the present. The inhabitants live in poverty and ignorance, but still have the means to enjoy popular TV shows. Religion and language loom over their lives and yet they do not speak Irish or practice Catholicism. The language lingers on in their syntax, creating a twisted version of English which brings them only ridicule and misery once they try their luck in London, as it is seen in Maureen's case. Maybe Maureen and Pato were faced with only two options – either emigrate to another continent, the USA, or succumb to the violence of Leenane.

Catholicism is still practiced, yet the Church seems to be crumbling apart. There is a crucifix in each of the three stages in the trilogy – it is a piece of furniture more than a symbol of Christianity. When a priest or the Catholic Church in general are mentioned, it is usually as the punchline of a crude joke. However, once one digs behind the facade of provocative jokes, a more meaningful critique of religion is encountered. The teachings of Catholicism are twisted in order to justify various actions. Murder and havoc rule, as fathers and mothers are killed over silly remarks or lost loves. Priests commit suicide in order to teach their parishioners lessons in love. The rhetoric of Catholicism is used to advocate murder and suicide, while its very tenets are reduced to interesting facts or trivial information seen in the reruns of an American TV series.

By using props and clichés typical of rural Irish drama, McDonagh proceeds to toy with the “old authorities of Irish life” (Lonergan 2012: 44), creating an original body of work indebted greatly to the tradition of Irish dramaturgy, most notably, to the plays that are localized in the West of Ireland. At the same time, his plays are also a part of the new wave of provocative plays which was sweeping across Britain in the 1990s – in-yer-face theatre.

(Lonergan 2012: 44) Reading *The Leenane Trilogy* in the light of dramas such as *The Playboy of the Western World* affords us a greater understanding of McDonagh's work. It becomes apparent that he engages with this tradition in a number of ways, parodying famous scenes and borrowing motifs, situations and characters, which he then subverts in order to shine a light on central issues in Irish culture – emigration and religion.

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