

"IT DEPENDS ON THE FELLA. AND THE CAT.": NEGOTIATING  
HUMANNESS THROUGH THE MYTH OF IRISH IDENTITY IN THE PLAYS  
OF MARTIN MCDONAGH

DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the work of the new Irish playwright, Martin McDonagh, and where he fits in the rich tradition of Irish drama. The specific focus is an exploration of each of McDonagh's five produced plays on Ireland: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara*, *The Lonesome West*, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. By tracing through the history of Irish drama from the establishment of the Irish Literary Theatre at the turn of the century to Friel and on to the present, this dissertation demonstrates how McDonagh's drama offers a new voice for Ireland. This dissertation focuses on a few key individuals and their "benchmark" plays which laid the groundwork for McDonagh: W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J. M. Synge, Sean O'Casey, Samuel Beckett, and Brian Friel. In addition, this dissertation examines the notion of Irish identity and what that has meant to the other Irish playwrights.

McDonagh's plays have developed a reputation for being dark and desperate comedies that shine a light on the wickedness of the human spirit. This dissertation takes issue with those misinterpretations and focuses on the empowering nature of McDonagh's message. Within each play, McDonagh creates exaggerated worlds in which the people defy tradition and invent their own moral codes. These exaggerated communities exist to teach the audience—and, more specifically, the Irish people—that they are no longer required to let the traditional power structures control their lives. In the worlds created by McDonagh, the people truly are the masters of their fate and the captains of their soul. McDonagh's plays explore what it means to be human through the centering of the following four binaries: faith and reason, autonomy and responsibility, humans and nature, and individual and community. While the Irish drama of the past has illustrated how the Irish people have always privileged one side of each binary, McDonagh's characters have negotiated these binaries and found the peaceful center.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my nana,  
Margaret Higgins, who came over to the United States from  
Ireland when she was a teenager to find a better life. I  
am a product of her courage, and I will miss her deeply.

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## FIELDS OF STUDY

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation investigates the work of the new Irish playwright, Martin McDonagh and where he fits in the rich tradition of Irish drama. It will explore, in depth, each of McDonagh's five produced plays about Ireland: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara*, *The Lonesome West*, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (there is a sixth that completes the Aran Trilogy, *The Banshees of Inisherin*, that has yet to reach production and a seventh, *The Pillowman*, currently in production in London that does not directly deal with Ireland).<sup>1</sup> By tracing the history of Irish drama from the establishment of the Irish Literary Theatre at the turn of the century to Friel and on to the present, this dissertation demonstrates how McDonagh's drama offers a new voice for Ireland. While the tradition of Irish drama is rich and includes many playwrights, this dissertation focuses on a few key individuals who laid the groundwork for McDonagh specifically, W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J. M. Synge



and the creation of the Irish National Theatre, as well as the work of Sean O'Casey, Samuel Beckett, and Brian Friel. While each of these playwrights has many plays from which to choose, this study will focus on a handful of "benchmark" plays: *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (Yeats and Gregory), *Purgatory* (Yeats), *Riders to the Sea* and *The Playboy of the Western World* (Synge), *Juno and the Paycock* (O'Casey), *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett), and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (Friel). In addition, this dissertation explores the notion of Irish identity and what that has meant to other Irish playwrights. In order to explain how McDonagh shatters the myth of Irish identity, it will be necessary to explain how other playwrights viewed this topic. However, this dissertation in no way attempts to explore identity construction in a theoretical sense but only to investigate the ways in which Irish writers of the past have used their literature as tools to unify the nation. It is not the actual construction of identity, but rather, the attempt through art to discover identity, that is the focus of this dissertation. There are many works on the construction of post-colonial national identities, but they are not a focus of this study.<sup>2</sup> The

issue here is how artists believed they could, as Murray suggests, hold a "mirror up to a nation" and, in turn, tap into a collective unconscious of the Irish soul. This dissertation is a literary, not a critical, analysis of Irish identity.

Irish drama can be, and often has been, divided into three parts, or waves. The first wave encompasses the founders of the Irish Literary Theatre as well as the work of such playwrights as O'Casey and Beckett. These writers were revolutionary and writing around the first half of the twentieth century. The second wave involves fewer celebrated playwrights and is most often associated with Friel. Even though there were other playwrights writing in the second half of the twentieth century, Friel has taken his place as the most significant and prolific of these writers.

McDonagh and his contemporaries help to make up this third wave of Irish drama, which critics have hailed as the new Irish Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> The third wave began, with Anne Devlin in the 1980's, although her importance has only recently been associated with the new Renaissance. Even though Friel was still writing some of his best plays, Devlin's presence signaled the beginning of a new

voice for Irish women. Continuing in that vein in the 1990's, Marina Carr came onto the Irish scene and found success.

Anne Devlin was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, to a Catholic family. Her first play performed on stage, *Ourselves Alone* (1985) received critical acclaim. Her other plays including *The Long March*, *A Woman Calling*, and *After Easter* also deal with the issues of growing up in Northern Ireland as a Catholic and a woman. In *Ourselves Alone*, the action centers around three women who are sisters, Frieda, Josie, and Donna, and how they cope with the pressure of living with three men who are in the Irish Republican Army (IRA). A feminist look at war, the play also deals with the issue of the war itself.

*After Easter*, which debuted in 1994, focuses on the character of Greta, who has cut herself off from her Irishness and her religion. After a breakdown, Greta is called by visions back to Ireland to confront her identity. Compared to Strindberg's *Easter* because of its dream play nature, *After Easter* is a further exploration of the female consciousness so important to Devlin's plays. Just as Irish writers have always searched for

the ever-illusive Irish identity, Devlin and her characters attempt to find a female identity that is not only Irish, but also Northern Irish and Catholic.

Marina Carr also examines the notion of what it means to be a woman in Ireland. Born in 1964, Carr's brand of theatre has been labeled as *avant garde*. She had great success in Dublin with her first play, *Low in the Dark*, staged in 1989 at the Andrew's Lane Theatre. Her other plays include *Ullaloo*, *The Deer's Surrender*, *This Love Thing*, *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *By the Bog of Cats*. Her earlier plays adopted a type of Beckett-absurdism. For instance, *Low in the Dark* subverts the patriarchy by allowing men to get pregnant. In *This Love Thing*, Carr assembles Jesus, Michelangelo, Da Vinci and their female counterparts Mary Magdalene, Mona Lisa, and Eve to explore how the culture represents women. Carr does not want to be looked at as just a feminist playwright even though she deals with women's issues. Her latest play, *By the Bog of Cats*, is a retelling of the story of Medea. Despite her early leanings toward the *avant garde*, Carr is popular and widely accepted in Ireland. She was named the Abbey Theatre writer-in-association in 1995.

Both of these female playwrights delve into the themes of the role and representation of women in Irish society (both north and south), the concerns of Irish women, and the role of religion (primarily Catholicism) in the lives of Irish women. Both bring to the table a unique style, calling on some of the great playwrights of the past, such as Beckett and Strindberg. They are significant not only because they have had success in the Irish theatre for the past 15 years, but also because they have brought a female perspective to what has previously been viewed as a boys' club. (Devlin also brings voice to the situation of the Northern Irish Catholic). In the great tradition of Lady Gregory, Devlin and Carr give a new spin to Irish drama, accepting the responsibility of female representation. While there were some female voices before Devlin and Carr, none has been heard with such power. They are revolutionary, not just because they are women, but because they write powerful plays that combine the best of the past with the new vision of the future.

Conor McPherson has also had great success at home and abroad. Born in Dublin, where he received his Masters Degree, McPherson first gained massive critical

success with his play *The Weir*, which went on to receive a Tony award nomination. His other plays include *The Good Thief*, *St. Nicholas*, *This Lime Tree Bower*, *Rum and Vodka*, and *Dublin Carol*. McPherson is known for his use of long narrative monologues. Most of his plays involve the telling of a story from one or more points of view in monologue form.

Like McDonagh, McPherson also deals with the themes of reconstruction, societal codes, religion, and identity. He also infuses his stories with the fantastical and the mythic. In *St. Nicholas*, for instance, the narrator tells the audience of his tale of vampires. McPherson has said that he prefers a play with narration rather than action because there is more room for "mischief" when the audience has only the narrator's story to go by. He explores levels of meaning through narration.

Of course, there are other playwrights who are associated with this new Renaissance, such as Marie Jones, Sebastian Barry, Frank McGuinness, and Billy Roche. Each of these playwrights has made and continues to make a significant contribution to the dramatic landscape of Ireland. Highlighting three of McDonagh's contemporaries

shows that Ireland's rich tradition is not being carried on by McDonagh alone. It is McDonagh, however, and, to a lesser degree, MacPherson, who have brought Irish drama back into the public consciousness. Not that Friel, McGuinness, Devlin, Carr, and Barry had not been having success before these two young playwrights surfaced, but their new voices shook the very foundation of what audiences had come to expect from Irish drama. Their successes reinforced the work of other playwrights of this new Renaissance and allowed them to get the attention they deserved.

McDonagh's plays have earned a reputation for being dark and desperate comedies that shine a light on the wickedness of the human spirit. This dissertation takes issue with those interpretations and focuses on the empowering nature of McDonagh's message. Within each play, McDonagh creates exaggerated worlds in which the people defy tradition and invent their own moral codes. These exaggerated communities exist to urge the audience—and, more specifically, the Irish people—that they are no longer required to let the traditional power structures control their lives. In the worlds created by McDonagh,

the people truly are, as W.E. Henley suggests, the masters of their fate and the captains of their souls.<sup>4</sup>

Irish drama has come and gone in waves since the founding of the Abbey Theatre and the Irish Literary Revival. Yeats, Gregory, Synge, and O'Casey wrote of an Ireland searching for a national identity, believing, in part, that there was something called Irishness that defined the Irish people. If they could find that identity, then the country could come out from under its shell of oppression and be a free and independent nation.<sup>5</sup> Friel and other playwrights of his generation wrote of an Ireland that was searching for an identity in the rubble of the aftermath of both the figurative and literal wars for Irishness. With all of these playwrights, frustrations with the Irish people informed their work. They all dealt, in their own specific way, with the sorrows and struggles of the Irish, hoping against hope that the people would see their potential as a community to overcome the oppression. All of these playwrights looked to Irish identity as the cure-all-the magical elixir that would part the dark clouds of the stormy past and shed light on a new and more hopeful future. They were certainly not alone. This illusive



and elusive search has been the holy grail for many, if not all, Irish artists for at least a century. Martin McDonagh's plays are his attempt to put to rest the illusions and explode the myth.

McDonagh understands the past—the playwrights who have come before. He understands their frustration but does not share it. For McDonagh, the answer is simple—Irish identity does not and never has existed. It was a dream created to give an oppressed people a reason to believe in their own importance. It served a valuable purpose, but it can no longer be considered useful or helpful. Ireland is beginning a new chapter and must do so without the chains of the past. History, war, and religion have plunged the country into a state of constant oppression, and the only savior has seemed to be finding the key to Irish identity. Through his plays, McDonagh is attempting to alter the consciousness of the Irish people. They must still search for identity; however, it is individual identity, and not a collective one that will free them from the weight of the past and restore humanity. In McDonagh's world, tragedies can happen, but nothing is ever viewed as tragic. The only tragedy to McDonagh is passivity, while to other Irish

writers of the past, passivity is the only response to tragedy. McDonagh is rejecting the passive resignation of the old Irish writers, illustrating what can happen when his characters take a more active role in their own destinies.

In his plays, McDonagh's characters refuse to allow any of the traditional oppressors, God, country, and history to affect their lives. Their decisions may not be moral by societal standards, and they may be viewed as a kind of madness by some; however, what McDonagh is saying through these characters is that the Irish should stop believing that their destiny is a result of some force outside the scope of their own actions. In the final analysis, the characters in McDonagh's plays will not recreate the stoic picture that Maurya creates in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*—the martyr mother, mourning for Ireland—but, according to McDonagh, the time for martyrs and mourning is over. The community can only right itself once the individuals within that community start looking to themselves for the answers.

In 1931, Synge scholar, Daniel Corkery, in his book *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, noted that "The three great forces which, working for long in the Irish

national being, have made it so different from the English being, are: (1) The Religious Consciousness of the People; (2) Irish Nationalism; and (3) The Land" (19). In order to allow his characters to discover their individual identities, McDonagh operates within these forces but examines them using established binaries: faith and reason, autonomy and responsibility, humans and nature, and individual and community. While, according to McDonagh, the Irish people have been privileging one side of each binary for too long, in his plays, he achieves perfect balance with all of the binaries. This balance, occurring within an exaggerated allegory, allows the characters to be fully human and truly alive. He hopes this lesson will resonate with and empower his Irish audience, but can also be empowering to any audience as well. Exploring these binaries in relation to McDonagh's work will help answer the question that lies beneath any quest for individual identity—what does it mean to be human?

Before examining McDonagh's work, it is necessary to situate him both within the contemporary and the traditional worlds of Irish drama. McDonagh, now in his early thirties, has achieved phenomenal success in the

short time he has been on the theatre scene. Born in England, the son of Irish parents, McDonagh has been credited with revitalizing Irish drama around the world. McDonagh's first play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* premiered in 1996 at the Town Hall Theatre/Druid Theatre Company in Galway and then at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs later that year. McDonagh's next two plays (belonging with *Beauty Queen* as part of a trilogy) *A Skull in Connemara* and *Lonesome West* opened the following year. His next play *The Cripple of Inishmaan* also premiered in 1996. At one point, all four of McDonagh's plays were playing in London—an unprecedented feat. He was named the Royal Court Playwright-in-residence. Sometimes denounced as non-Irish because he has lived his life in England (his parents are Irish and now live in Ireland), McDonagh has been the most celebrated and most criticized of the new playwrights. McDonagh's plays went to England and then New York. *Beauty Queen* received the Tony award for best play in 1998 and also won the best director award for Garry Hynes (the first woman to ever win for directing a play), and *The Lonesome West* received a Tony award nomination the next year. *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* played in the West End to rave reviews, winning

the Olivier Award for best comedy in 2002. (*The Pillowman* just received the 2004 Olivier for Best New Play).

With such an impressive list of accomplishments, it is hard to believe the playwright is so young and relatively inexperienced. The way McDonagh tells it, he started writing plays because he dropped out of school at 16, went on the dole, and failed at writing radio and television scripts. He claims to have written *Beauty Queen* in less than two weeks. McDonagh has proved to be an elusive character, but despite having no traditional education past the age of 16, he admits to a love of reading, which includes the plays of his predecessors.

Despite McDonagh's early success, he has not yet received the critical acclaim he deserves. Often compared to filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino, McDonagh and his plays have been dismissed as superficial and violent. Despite McDonagh's early success, many scholars have yet to acknowledge the playwright's importance to Irish drama. McDonagh's plays often polarize the critical world: "McDonagh has been hailed and damned by critics. 'I am willing to make the rash claim,' wrote Robert Brustein in *The New Republic*, 'that

McDonagh is destined to be one of the theatrical luminaries of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.' Other critics see McDonagh as subverting and exploiting his genre" (Kroll 73). It is true that McDonagh counts Tarentino, as well as other filmmakers as his influences. He really likes Mamet, and he loves Al Pacino. His influences go far deeper than *Reservoir Dogs* and *American Buffalo*, however. Those who dismiss McDonagh are failing to recognize that there is more to McDonagh than meets the eye. He has been compared to O'Casey and Synge, and those comparisons hold up to scrutiny. Synge, after all, had his naysayers, too—so much so that his *Playboy of the Western World* started a riot.<sup>6</sup> He was not appreciated as a playwright in his own country until well after his death.

Because McDonagh and his plays are relatively new, there has not been a lot of critical response to his work thus far. It seems as though critics are unsure of where to place him in the grand tradition. Most of the articles about McDonagh focus on his biography. In addition, there are hundreds of reviews of the various productions of McDonagh's plays<sup>7</sup> which discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this cutting-edge playwright. There has been little work done on the significance of

his plays to the history and tradition of Irish drama. Some critics (who will be mentioned throughout the course of this dissertation) have pointed to his importance, but no scholar has done an extensive study of his body of work. Those who have attempted to impose meaning on McDonagh's work have, for the most part, been off the mark. While critics are split on whether or not McDonagh's plays are even worth the attention, the main interpretation seems to be that McDonagh's violent portraits are bleak and pessimistic, offering an angry look at communities lost in confusion and despair. Aleks Sierz, in his book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, argues that McDonagh's work exemplifies "pessimism about humanity" (219). Sierz continues, "The fragmentation of modern society, implies McDonagh, encourages violence: people lash out because they no longer control their lives" (224).

Fintan O'Toole, one of the most prolific writers on McDonagh, describes McDonagh's work as "essentially pessimistic. Nothing much is going to change. It is impossible to imagine that these people will be transformed by their experience into confident agents of change" (*Shadows* 18). In truth, McDonagh's plays are not

pessimistic at all, nor are the characters in the plays lashing out because they have lost control. The plays are extremely optimistic, and the violence that occurs is a symbol of the characters' complete control over their own lives. The change to which O'Toole refers has already occurred. The characters, unlike Irish characters of the past, have moved beyond the moment of epiphany and are leading proactive lives.

McDonagh is ultimately trying to define humanness with his characters and, in turn, prove to the Irish people that their humanity as a people lies in their individual destinies. Inherent in Corkery's forces of Irish literature is the notion of what makes the Irish people, quite simply, Irish. McDonagh takes those concepts and places them at the heart of the four binaries, not to define the Irish as a people but to define what it means to be a human being in a nation which has never privileged individuality.

In order to achieve his goal of empowering the Irish audience, McDonagh uses allegory—a device that many of the Irish writers of the past have employed as well. In his article "Writing Ireland: Literature and Art in the Representation of Irish Place," Patrick Duffy states that



Yeats is "the supreme example of an artist setting out to construct a deliberate, symbolic landscape allegory of identity" (66). Synge and Friel have also used allegorical tales to instruct the Irish audience. Allegory is specific in its definition and purpose. As Christopher Murray suggests, in *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to a Nation*, "In the theatre allegory, or the use of narrative to convey a specific coded meaning, is always intentional. When the allegory is foregrounded it becomes parable" (Murray 184). While the use of allegory may not be new, the lessons McDonagh wishes to impart in his parables are. He is a storyteller, in the great tradition of the storytellers who have come before him. As McDonagh, himself, states "'I'm a story-teller. Ireland had a great tradition of story-tellers roaming the countryside. I'd like to get back to the bare essence of that'" (Kroll 73).

Using elements from all five of McDonagh's plays, the four chapters will each establish one of the binaries and illustrate where McDonagh's characters in each of his plays have negotiated them. Rather than privileging one side of the binary (faith over reason, responsibility over autonomy, nature over humans, community over

individuals), the characters in McDonagh's plays have restored balance. Drawing on the benchmark plays of Yeats, Gregory, Synge, O'Casey, Beckett, and Friel, each chapter will make comparisons and illuminate contrasts to further illustrate why and how McDonagh's work is revolutionary.

Chapter 1 will focus on faith and reason. While the Ireland of the past has privileged faith—primarily because of the influence and power of the Catholic Church—the characters in McDonagh's plays have replaced blind faith in the institutions of religion with faith in themselves and in their ability to arrive at the answers through reason. The members of McDonagh's communities, even though their behavior seems outrageous, deliver a model for restoring order to a country that has been in disorder for centuries. Neither God nor the Church takes precedence here—only faith in one's own ability to reason remains.

Chapter 2 will focus on the binary of autonomy and responsibility. While most humans struggle with issues of self and issues of responsibility to others, the Irish have become a nation whose autonomy is subservient to its responsibilities—to religion, to history, to country, to

the fight for independence, to the matriarchy and patriarchy, and to the past. If there is truly a thing called "Irish Identity," then one's own individual autonomy is less important than one's responsibility to the Irish community. McDonagh's characters do not see life in those terms, however. For the members of McDonagh's communities, autonomy and responsibility are concepts that meet in the middle and create the idea that one's responsibilities cannot and will not comprise autonomy.

Chapter 3 will focus on humans and nature. Whereas the Irish people of the past have privileged nature over humans, the characters in McDonagh's plays have found the peaceful center of the dichotomy. Whether in the form of the natural world, the land, or the concept of the Motherland, the Irish of the past have been controlled by these outside forces to the point of oppression. In McDonagh's plays, the humans regain their own power, refusing to let the forces of nature and the land usurp their identities.

Chapter 4 will take the elements of the first three chapters and focus on the binary of individual and community. In the search for Irish identity, the idea of

an Irish community has taken precedence over the individual's place in society. Because of the overwhelming denial of individual autonomy, Ireland has been a nation searching for "Irishness." In the worlds of McDonagh, the two elements create a symbiotic relationship. The individual's desires meet the community's head on. It is by creating strong individual identities that the community can develop. It may be an outrageous community of murderers and liars (as outsiders might view Leenane), but it is a community that has adopted the individual notions of morality and not the other way around. The community is no larger than the people who live in the town. There is no sense of being part of a larger Irish context. Again, examples from all five plays will illuminate this shift.

In order to proceed with this line of argument, it is first necessary to define *Irish identity* and *Irishness* and to explore how these concepts have shaped Irish drama for over a century. To show how McDonagh explodes these myths, it is first essential to examine the concepts and determine how they became elusive myths. Irish identity is not an easy term to define because it has been described by different people in different ways. Michael

Patrick Gillespie argues, in his article "The Fabrication of an Irish Identity," "Irish identity has as many definitions as individuals who are willing to discuss it. At the same time, anyone who considers Irish identity has an unerring feeling for its distinctness from other nationalities" (1). It is the notion that there is some sensibility or mode of being that is specifically and undeniably Irish. Often called Irishness, Irish identity assumes that there is a collective mind for the Irish people, something tangible and ultimately redeeming that holds the key to the liberation of Ireland. In his article "Writing Ireland: Literature and Art in the Representation of Irish Place," Patrick Duffy argues "To a very significant extent our past and present views of Ireland and Irishness have been shaped by readings of literature and art" (65).

The idea of developing an Irish identity through art, and, more specifically, theatre and drama, came to the forefront when Ireland made its first attempts to win independence from England and became a part of the artistic consciousness when Yeats, Gregory, and Synge attempted to establish an Irish national theatre. In the history of Ireland, literature has played an important

role in the establishment of a national identity. When Yeats and Lady Gregory began their crusade for a national theatre, they believed that literature, theatre, and the arts could be a powerful, unifying force. The framers of the Irish Literary Revival were clear in their mission: "We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment as it has been represented but the home of an ancient idealism" (Gregory 20). They believed that in order to repair the Irish nation, the Irish people needed to be reminded of their collective spirit. As Yeats wrote to Gregory, "Indeed, I have Ireland especially in mind, for I want to make, or to help some man some day to make, a feeling of exclusiveness, a bond among chosen spirits, a mystery almost for leisured and lettered people" (*People's Theatre* 336).

Critics agree that the aim of this literary revival was to establish Irish identity through art. In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd states "That movement imagined the Irish people as an historic community, whose self-image was constructed long before the era of modern nationalism and the nation-state" (1). Yeats, Gregory, and Synge believed that there was something truly and mythically Irish that they could tap into in order to

establish a sense of Irishness. The Irish needed to believe that they had a place in the world and that they were not just a conquered nation, which had lost its own identity. As Murray states "a common purpose was formulated to locate and give voice to the soul of a people" (2-3). So, from the beginning, Irish identity and Irishness were constructs of these artists. Playing on the notion of "if you build it, they will come" these playwrights sparked the imagination of a people who surely would have found Yeats' notion of "Irishness" far more attractive than one characterized by "buffoonery and easy sentiment."

In *Ireland's National Theaters*, Mary Trotter posits that "Creators of a nation do not exactly identify a community out of which to build their state so much as they imagine one" (xi). She continues, "In Ireland's case, cultural nationalists sought this common ground by resurrecting and rewriting a body of national myths, thus promoting an ideology of common heritage, tradition, and belief. Every Irish person . . . needed to feel some sense of a common ground, a shared past, and an interrelated future" (xi). Getting the Irish people to

believe in their own importance in the face of a bitter fight for independence was essential. In her article, "Yeats, Synge and the Inheritance of Nostalgia," Oona Frawley agrees with Trotter: "The Revival is characterised by this tremendous nostalgia for the past and its reliance on past myths and metaphors to ascribe meaning to Irish culture" (56).

This quest to find Irishness became an obsession for the first-wave playwrights. It became the dream that was, sadly, never fulfilled. In *Irish Identity and the Literary Revival*, G.J. Watson argues "for the writers themselves 'Irishness' and their feelings about it is a major, even obsessive, concern" (15). Those members of the Irish Literary Revival remained unfulfilled. As Murray suggests "For Yeats . . . 'It was the dream itself enchanted me', and so it has always been. The dream is always waiting to be fulfilled; the nation is always awaiting completion" (Murray 247). By the end of the first wave, the nation remained incomplete. The experiment of establishing Irish identity through theatre had, it seemed, failed. Yeats, Gregory, Synge, and O'Casey had provided a model, but the question of



Irishness was left unanswered. According to Murray, "The Irish literary revival . . . created not just images of historical self-appraisal and expressions of individual experience within an invented community, but also a habit of mind and set of conventions and themes whereby the people might understand who they were" (Murray 163). The problem remained—who were the Irish? For those who came after these playwrights, the question of Irish identity became almost unbearable. Some, like Beckett, seemingly gave up on Ireland and Irishness, choosing exile. The burden became too heavy to bear.

From that wave of Irish writers to the next significant group in the 1960's—a group that includes Brian Friel—the writers continued to search for an Irish identity. In an increasingly fragmented society, still reeling from a divisive civil war, the second wave writers were not ready to give up on Irishness just yet. As Murray suggests, "The more problematic and fragmented identity becomes the greater the need for imagery of wholeness" (246). Finding no easy answers, Friel and his contemporaries examined and deconstructed Irish society until all that remained was a bleak, sentimental memory of the loss of an identity that was never truly realized.

These playwrights, with Friel at the helm, began to take issue with the work of their predecessors. Questioning whether the notion of Irish identity is even feasible, Friel played around with ideas of emigration—could leaving Ireland be the answer? As Friel and his counterparts soon learned, escaping Irishness was not so easy. As Murray suggests, "Collectively, they established a kind of movement which interrogated the older, established values but could not escape their impact" (164). As Friel continued to struggle under the weight of Irish identity, his writing changed.

Rather than attempting to repair the fragmented Irish society, he started to eulogize it, desperately clinging to the belief that the people could rise from the ashes and be "a nation once again." In Friel's later plays he "throws down a greater challenge to Irish audiences on the urgency of finding the means to live with some sort of rootedness among the ruins of a collapsed tradition" (Murray 228). The search for Irish identity, despite the noble intentions of the revivalists of the first wave, had become just another oppressive force, not only on the Irish people, but more specifically on the writers who felt responsible for the

nation's consciousness. As Friel states, "Perhaps this is an artist's arrogance, but I feel that once the voice is found in literature, then it can move out and become part of the common currency" (Delaney 147). Friel desperately tried to find a common voice but was left waiting. Friel continued to write, but his writing became more introspective and philosophical. Irish identity and Irishness seemed ever more elusive. Indeed, Friel and the playwrights of his generation had left Irish identity for dead. Whether it was the sad memories of a young man who had abandoned his aunts in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, or the stories of the tortured souls waiting for a ship that will never come in *Wonderful Tennessee*, Friel's characters wondered what went wrong. After every pretense had been stripped away, the search for a true Irish identity proved futile. The futility felt by the characters in the plays of the first Irish Renaissance was still present almost a century later. This resignation was perfectly justified. Ireland had come through two wars, and remained a country divided by religion, politics, and hatred. Ireland, the long suffering Other, could not come out from under the shadow of oppression that had plagued her throughout history.

Where could Irish literature, and, more specifically Irish drama, go from here? Was there a new vision of Ireland waiting in the wings?

It was not until the third-wave writers, and, most importantly, McDonagh, made their voices heard that the question of Irish identity resurfaced in a bold and shocking way. In his article "Shadows Over Ireland, " Fintan O'Toole discusses the emergence of the third wave of the Irish renaissance:

And, then, slowly, something rather strange started to happen. A new generation of playwrights began to pick up the pieces of the old, shattered, traditional Ireland and hold them up to the light. Unlike the first wave of Irish playwrights this century, they were not trying to revive this old world as part of a great nationalist project. Unlike the second wave, they were not locked in a struggle to the death with these old traditions. They were interested simply in looking at these peculiar fragments of a dead society. (18)

No longer feeling a sense of burden, McDonagh and his contemporaries could look at the history of this myth with fresh eyes. According to O'Toole, the new generation of Irish playwrights "don't see being Irish as either something that has to be self-consciously embraced . . . or as something to be avoided at all costs. . . . There's a kind of simple confidence in their work that

comes from being able to take for granted the idea that 'Irish' is an adjective that covers a multitude of differences" (*Shadows* 18).

For no playwright is this more true than McDonagh. By exposing the mythic search for Irish identity as just that, a myth, McDonagh can create worlds in which the people believe, not in their Irishness, but rather in their humanness. These worlds can then do what the playwrights before him had attempted to do but never accomplished—empower the Irish people. As Sierz argues, "A country, [McDonagh] implies, can only prepare for the twenty-first century by breaking the cultural myths of its past" (225). If, as Murray suggests, "The history of Irish drama in the twentieth century is thus based on a need for a narrative identity" (246), then the challenge for Irish drama in the twenty-first century is to find a narrative that incorporates a multitude of individual identities. These new Irish writers are the third wave of the Irish tradition, but their perspectives on what it means to be Irish in the twenty-first century are revolutionary. While women's voices are being heard in new and exciting ways, McDonagh is also at the forefront,

challenging the Irish people to self-empowerment—  
challenging them to focus not on finding their Irish  
identity, but on finding their individual identities.

## CHAPTER 1

### GOD, THE CHURCH, AND JURISDICTION:

#### FAITH AND REASON

For the Irish writers of the past, the question of faith has been an important element of their work. Whether it involves criticism of blind faith in the Catholic religion or an investigation of Catholicism as part of the Irish identity, writers from Yeats to Friel have grappled with the notion of religion and its influence over the Irish people. For some Irish playwrights, there has been a level of frustration over the privileging of faith over reason by the Irish people. Brian Friel always felt that the Catholic Church had utterly failed the people (Murray 177). Despite the failure, the Irish people still clung to the Church. Ireland is a very Catholic country, ruled for centuries by the tenets of the Catholic Church. Until 1997, divorce was against the law in Ireland, illustrating the close relationship between God's law and human law. As

Murray reiterates, "In spite of various crises which followed upon Vatican Two and *Humanae Vitae* church attendance remained inexplicably high" (175).<sup>8</sup> With the strong religious climate comes a great deal of faith—faith in God to know and do what is right by the Irish people. Irish writers since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have dramatized this overwhelming faith with characters who rely on God for answers to oppression, violence, and death. Even in comedy, such as Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, characters are constantly referring to the "will of God." Beckett's characters in *Waiting for Godot* are hopelessly waiting for someone, perhaps God, to come and save them from their lot in life. Friel's sisters in *Dancing at Lughnasa* try to hide the fact that their brother, Fr. Jack, has returned from his missionary work devoid of Catholic beliefs. Rather than examine why Fr. Jack has changed his religious beliefs, they see his conversion to pagan beliefs as an embarrassment to their faith.

In Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, the characters invoke God's name often, asking God for help and mercy. Even at the end of the play, Maurya is asking God to have mercy on her family, alive and dead. She prays, " . . . may



the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the soul of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn . . . and may He have mercy on my soul . . . and on the soul of everyone is left living in the world" (31).

Despite the fact that "God" has taken away her family, Maurya is still inclined to bend to God's "will," accept her fate, and continue to believe, as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* advises, that there is "nothing to be done." This faith in God seems to give the hopelessness a sense of hope. In a situation in which Maurya can make no logical sense of the forces acting upon her, she clings to God, accepts her fate, and asks for mercy. In the end, Maurya finds no recourse other than acceptance in God's plan. She observes,

They're all together this time, and the end is come. . . . Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely... What more can we want that that?... No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied. (31)

Many of the Irish playwrights who came before McDonagh were illustrating the dangers of blind faith. Synge, Beckett, and Friel all seem to be imploring the Irish

people to look in the mirror and understand that God cannot save them, and God's will must not replace the will of the people nor the people's ability to reason. Synge wanted the Irish to shout at Maurya, "We must not be satisfied—we must not be resigned to live a life of suffering." Beckett's characters, hopelessly waiting for a *man* who never comes, were supposed to inspire enlightenment in his audience. The Irish need to be active participants in life and stop waiting for God to intervene. Friel wanted his plays to be a wake-up call for the Irish to question how religion has been a corrupter, not a savior. In the end, however, the messages of these playwrights did little to offer alternatives. Yes, there was something wrong with the way the Irish had been living, but would banning religion make the world a better place?

Enter Martin McDonagh with a new idea for a new Ireland. Rather than rely on the audience's ability to make the connections, McDonagh decided to create communities in which faith is not privileged over reason, where people have more faith in themselves than in the institution of the Church. McDonagh paints a picture of the Irish people as they should be, not as they are. His

parables are meant to instruct. Unlike Synge, Beckett, and Friel, McDonagh shows his audiences people who are taking a more active role in their own destinies. He does not just tell them to do so; he shows them how. He illustrates what happens when faith and reason are equally emphasized. "We must be satisfied" is not a mantra of McDonagh's characters. Instead, the characters take a more measured approach to the whole idea of faith and reason. Rather than blindly accepting the laws of God, his characters constantly question the validity of those laws interpreted by an institutional church and, consequently, replace those old, standing edicts with precepts of their own.

"It seems like God has no jurisdiction in this town. No jurisdiction at all" (*Lonesome West* 175). This observation by Fr. Welsh in McDonagh's *The Lonesome West* is a perfect illustration of the shift that has taken place in the hearts, minds, and actions of the people in the communities about which McDonagh writes. While Ireland of the past has privileged faith—primarily because of the influence and power of the Catholic Church--the characters in McDonagh's plays have replaced blind faith in the institutions of religion with faith in

themselves and in their ability to arrive at the answers through reason. Gone are the constant pleas for God to save the Irish, as occur in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. Gone is the idea that God knows best and, most importantly, gone is the idea that God's law is the law of the land.

In *The Lonesome West*, Girleen illustrates this point perfectly. When talking with Fr. Welsh about Coleman's murder of his own father, Girleen tells Fr. Welsh, "Coleman's dad was always a grumpy oul feck. He did kick me cat Eamonn there once" (212). When Fr. Welsh protests that kicking a cat is not a crime punishable by death, Girleen instructs Fr. Welsh on the moral codes of Leenane: "It depends on the fella. And the cat. But there'd be a lot less cats kicked in Ireland, I'll tell ya, if the fella could rest-assured he'd be shot in the head after" (212). Girleen's point rests at the heart of the faith and reason dichotomy. While religion might say "Thou shalt not kill," reason might say "Unless thou hast a good reason" and, in this town, kicking a cat is a good reason. The members of McDonagh's communities, even though their behavior seems outrageous, deliver a model for restoring order to a country that has been in

disorder for centuries. Neither God nor the Church takes precedence here—only faith in one's own ability to reason remains.

In *The Lonesome West*, Fr. Welsh is the representative of the dominant Catholic religion and, more specifically, the clergy--the historical arbiters of who belongs and who does not, of what is right and what is wrong, and what is acceptable and unacceptable—but he does not enjoy a place of respect and dominance in the town of Leenane. Instead of being admired as the superior voice of God's truth, he is the outsider. Fr. Welsh finds that, in this town, it is he who does not belong; it is he who is wrong, and it is he who is unacceptable. To the people in the town, the outsider is no more than a pest who whines about grand concepts, such as immorality and the mortal soul. Those concepts have no place in this society. Grand concepts have been replaced by small and often petty ones. To the brothers in *Lonesome West* and the rest of the town, there is no greater meaning beyond the moment. Rather than cling to grand concepts about faith, the characters in Leenane have faith in themselves and their abilities to reasonably make decisions on a case-by-case basis.

Fr. Welsh cannot believe that two brothers, Coleman and Valene, have murdered their father nor that the whole town is filled with alleged murderers and violent individuals. The people of Leenane refuse to follow the rules and laws set up for them by those in power in Ireland and, more specifically, set up for them by the Catholic Church. In the world of this play, Fr. Welsh cannot understand this society; he cannot communicate within the society and, therefore, he cannot survive in this society.

Many times throughout the play, it is clear that Fr. Welsh does not understand the way in which the people of Leenane, and Valene and Coleman specifically, interact with one another. As a man of the Church, he expects that his admonishments and reprimands will be taken seriously, but he soon realizes that he has no control over his flock. Fr. Welsh believes (or believed when he arrived!) that, because he is a priest, the people of the town will acknowledge his authority.

Fr. Welsh is the character who undergoes a "crisis of faith" and blames himself for being a bad priest. As he states to Valene and Coleman, "I'm a terrible priest,

and I run a terrible parish, and that's the end of the matter. Two murderers I have on me books, and I can't get either of the beggars to confess it" (177). Valene, Coleman, and Girleen make fun of the priest for his constant questioning, jokingly asking one another, "He's not having another crisis of faith?" (178). Fr. Welsh feels as if he has failed the town rather than realizing that the whole Catholic religion has been forced out of its position of privilege here. Fr. Welsh takes as a personal failure the fact that God has no place in Leenane. God is irrelevant to the brothers and to the town, but Fr. Welsh takes the blame for that reality, rather than recognizing the larger implications of the revelation.

Throughout the play, Fr. Welsh tries to admonish the characters for their "inappropriate" behavior. He cannot understand why Valene and Coleman choose to fight one another on the very day of their father's burial. He is shocked that young Girleen goes around town selling poteen and joking about being a prostitute. There are rumors around town that one woman has murdered her mother (Maureen, *Beauty Queen*) and one man has murdered his wife (Mick, *Skull in Connemara*). Fr. Welsh pleads, "What kind

of town is this at all? Brothers fighting and lasses peddling booze and two fecking murderers on the loose?" (183).

Rather than realizing that his—and the Church's—brand of justice, peace, love, and understanding is unacceptable in this town, he blames himself for not being a good enough priest to reach his people. The mere fact that the people of Leenane can never remember Fr. Welsh's name and refer to him as Fr. Welsh-Walsh-Welsh should alert the priest to his insignificance. The Church's views on morality and decency have been replaced by the idea that morality can best be determined through reason and faith in one's self. Just as Girleen tells Fr. Welsh that perhaps Valene and Coleman's father deserved his fate because he once kicked her cat, the characters in McDonagh's plays are empowered and confident in their abilities to make their own moral decisions, according to their own moral preferences.

Fr. Welsh immediately dismisses Girleen's views as immoral, not understanding that his concept of morality is not applicable to the people of Leenane. He tells Girleen,



Maybe I am high-horse so. Maybe that's why I don't fit into this town. Although I'd have to have killed half me fecking relatives to fit into this town. Jeez. I thought Leenane was a nice place when first I turned up here, but no. Turns out it's the murder capital of fecking Europe. (212)

Fr. Welsh goes on to tell Girleen that "Nobody ever listens to my advice. Nobody ever listens to me at all" (213). In the town of Leenane, the advice of the Church is no longer needed or wanted. The characters are perfectly content running their own lives.

Another example of this ability to reason is the conversation that Fr. Welsh and Valene have about the Catholic Church's view on suicide. After Tom Hanlon kills himself in the lake, Fr. Welsh states, "Rotting in hell now, Tom Hanlon is. According to the Catholic Church anyways his is, the same as every suicide. No remorse. No mercy on him" (201). Valene then proceeds to discuss the rationality of this Church position with Fr. Welsh:

VALENE: Is that right now? Every suicide you're saying?

WELSH: According to us mob it's right anyways.

VALENE: Well I didn't know that. That's a turn-up for the books. (*Pause.*) 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: Not the blond one, now, the other one.

WELSH: I don't know the fella.

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

WELSH: Well if he killed himself, aye, he'll be in hell too. (*Pause.*) It's great it is. You can kill a dozen fellas, you can 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: That's sounds awful harsh. (*Pause.*) So Tom'll be in hell now, he will? Jeez. (*Pause.*) I wonder if he's met the fella from *Alias Smith and Jones* yet? . . . (201-2)

In this exchange, Coleman's logic reduces the Church's doctrine on suicide to the absurd, and Fr. Welsh seems to question the validity of the Church's stand.

Later in the play, after Fr. Welsh has killed himself, Valene discusses the issue with Coleman with the same kind of logic:

COLEMAN: "It's always the best ones go to hell. Me, probably straight to heaven I'll go, even though I blew the head off poor Dad. So long as I go confessing to it anyways. That's the good thing about being Catholic. You can shoot your dad in the head and it doesn't even matter at all.

VALENE: Well it matters a little bit.

COLEMAN: It matters a little bit but not a big bit. (240)

These conversations illustrate the ability of these characters to take a long-standing tenet of faith and dissect it until it seems unreasonable. Rather than believe in it because religion tells them to, Valene sees it as a harsh penalty and is more interested in whether Tom has run into the actor for *Alias Smith and Jones* than in the implications that suicide has on the immortal soul. Coleman sees the Church's teaching as a moral "out" for killing his father. The conversations are humorous and seem, on the surface, to be a rather absurd way of discussing religion and suicide, but the fact that the characters discuss the issue, rather than just accept the Church's teaching, is what is important.

Another incident that illustrates the balancing of the dichotomies is Coleman's melting of Valene's saint figurines. Not only does Coleman not respect the icons as religious symbols (he does, after all, melt them on the stove to get back at his brother), but he also uses them to make Valene so angry that Valene tries to shoot him. During the exchange that occurs after Valene finds out about the figurines, Fr. Welsh also learns that

Coleman has killed his father on purpose because he made fun of Coleman's hair. When Valene argues that "melting figurines is against God outright" (206), Fr. Welsh counters that killing one's father is against God as well. Coleman replies, "I don't take criticizing from nobody. 'Me hair's like a drunken child's.' I'd only just combed me hair and there was nothing wrong with it! And I know well shooting your dad in the head is against God, but there's some insults that can never be excused" (206). Even though the brothers continue to say their actions against one another are "against God," the admission does not stop them from acting. As Coleman says, there are some things that are just inexcusable and warrant such ungodly reactions. While the Church might say one should not shoot one's dad in the head, Coleman would argue that one might if that same dad made fun of one's hairstyle. Every action in this world of McDonagh has a reaction. There are no victims, here, left lamenting God's will. The people in McDonagh's world exert their own wills.

Fr. Welsh cannot understand this new world order and eventually has to commit suicide in order to escape this topsy-turvy world in which the Church's power is limited;

however, even in the moments before his death, he writes a letter imploring the brothers to stop fighting and save their own souls from eternal damnation. He writes, "All I want to do is be pleading with you as a fella concerned about ye and yer lives, both in this world and the next. . ." (221). Fr. Welsh wants the brothers to love and forgive one another, so they can enter heaven, but what Fr. Welsh does not recognize is that achieving everlasting life in heaven is not the goal of the citizens of this town. It is the actions they take to improve their lives on earth that are of the utmost importance. Even in the end, when the brothers attempt to get along and practice forgiveness for the good of Fr. Welsh's soul, they turn this attempt into a game in which each brother tries to outdo the other. By turns, each tells the other of his increasingly heinous "sibling" crimes throughout the years. What starts as a friendly gesture toward forgiveness becomes a competition:

COLEMAN: . . . Okay, it's my go. I'm winning.

VALENE: What d'you mean, you're winning?

(244).

That competition escalates into a full-blown fight. Their efforts to save Fr. Welsh's soul fail because they

have no capacity or inclination to behave in a selfless and forgiving manner. The way the brothers, and the rest of Leenane, exist works for them. When Valene points out "Father Welsh is burning in hell, now, because of our fighting," Coleman counters "Well did we ask him to go betting his soul on us? . . . And what's wrong with fighting anyways? I do like a good fight. It does show you care, fighting does. That's what our sissy Welsh doesn't understand . . ." (256).

Whereas in the past, Irish plays, like *Riders to the Sea*, focused on the despair and suffering, and a looking-back with a resigned and heavy heart on Mother Ireland, invoking God to come and save the people of Ireland, McDonagh's plays take a new view of religion. The judgment of God has been replaced by humans' making judgments normally carried out by God--characters take matters into their own hands and take control of their own destinies. God may not be dead, as so many post-modernists have lamented, but God is certainly irrelevant.

While in *Riders to the Sea*, the characters constantly call on the power and mercy of God, God does not have that power over the characters in McDonagh's plays.

Nothing is more dangerous to the power of the Church in Ireland than people who begin to have faith in their own abilities and who begin to look at the world with reason. While *The Lonesome West* is the most obvious example of this faith and reason dichotomy because it puts Fr. Welsh and his Catholic sensibilities front and center, the balancing of this binary is also evident in McDonagh's other four published plays.

In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, the subject of faith in the Catholic Church is even more criticized. The characters in this play are cynical about the role of the Church, preferring instead to believe in themselves. They may discuss scripture in a purely philosophical sense, as does Johnnypateenmike when he claims that God has given Billy tuberculosis as a punishment and says, "Lord save us but from God I'm sure that TB was sent Cripple Billy, for claiming he had TB when he had no TB, and making Johnnypateen's news seem unreliable" (70); but no one really believes that God can do anything to make a difference. Johnnypateen uses this same argument when he defends against accusations about the reliability of his own gossip, but not because he believes that God has more power than humans.

This same cynicism carries over into every discussion about the clergy. Priests, as the conversation between Helen and Eileen illustrates, are characterized as men who spend most of their time fondling little girls and boys:

HELEN: I didn't drop them eggs at all. I went pegging them at Father Barratt, got him bang in the gob with fecking four of them.

EILEEN: You went pegging them at Father Barratt?

HELEN: I did. Are you repeating me now, Mrs?

EILEEN: Sure, pegging eggs at priest, isn't it pure against God?

HELEN: Oh, maybe it is, but if God went touching me in the arse in choir practice I'd peg eggs at that fecker too. (12)

As Helen suggests, the old way of thinking, that priests are instruments of God's love and mercy, has been replaced with a distrust of the religious. Later in the same scene, Helen, Bartley, and Billy continue this discussion of untrustworthy priests:

HELEN: Sure, look at as pretty as I am. If I'm pretty enough to get clergymen groping me arse, it won't be too hard to wrap film fellas round me fingers.

BARTLEY: Sure, getting clergymen groping your arse doesn't take much skill. It isn't being



pretty they go for. It's more being on your own and small.

HELEN: If it's being on your own and small, why so has Cripple Billy never had his arse groped be priests?

BARTLEY: You don't know at all Cripple Billy's never has his arse groped be priests.

HELEN: Have you ever had your arse groped be priests, Billy?

BILLY: No.

HELEN: Now.

BARTLEY: I suppose they have to draw the line somewhere.

HELEN: And you, you're small and often on your own. Have you ever had your arse groped be priests?

BARTLEY: (*quietly*) Not me arse, no. (14)

This lengthy exchange only further illustrates the total disregard for the clergy and for good reason—it appears as if they are pedophiles, groping both young men and women.

Helen goes on to say later that she has always “preferred Pontius Pilate to Jesus. Jesus always seemed full of himself” (58). The reverence for God and Jesus that has permeated Irish drama and Irish history, is now simply material for idle discussion. Siding with Pilate,

who is the man who condemned Jesus to death, seems like blasphemy; however, Helen relates more to the human struggle than to the divine one. In the same conversation, Bartley mentions that "Jesus drove a thousand pigs into the sea one time, did you ever hear tell of that story? Drowned the lot of the poor devils. They always seem to gloss o'er that one in school" (58). Bartley is distrustful of Jesus and his work because he logically cannot reconcile the good stories about Jesus with the story of the pigs.

Perhaps the most telling example of the lack of importance of religion in Inishmaan is the gossip Johnnypateenmike tells about the brother who throws the other brother's Bible into the sea. Later in the play, Bobby is standing on the shore and picks up a Bible that has washed up in the surf—presumably the Bible from Johnnypateen's story. As the stage directions indicate, "*BOBBY notices something in the surf, picks a bible out of it, looks at it a moment, then tosses it back into the sea and continues working on the boat*" (30). Bobby sees the bible as worthless, not something to be revered.

Without any blind faith in religion, McDonagh's characters no longer subscribe to the idea that one must be satisfied with and resigned to the will of God. Billy may be crippled, but rather than lament his lot in life, he actively lies in order to get off the island. Rather than complain about having to take care of his mother, Johnnypateenmike actively sets out to kill her. Rather than be destroyed and taken advantage of by the men in the community, Helen pegs eggs and kicks and screams. Rather than want peace in the community, Johnnypateenmike prefers feuding and fighting, illness and death, so that his gossip is more juicy and his rewards for that gossip are more handsome. Rather than accept Billy's apology for misleading Bobby, Bobby beats him with a lead pipe. None of the characters is allowing God to be a part of decision-making. McDonagh is saying through these characters that the Irish should stop believing that their destiny is a result of some force outside the scope of their own actions. In the final analysis, the characters in McDonagh's plays do not recreate the stoic picture that Maurya creates--the martyr mother, mourning for Ireland--but McDonagh is saying that the time for martyrs and mourning is over.

At the end of the play, Billy returns home to find that he does, in fact, have tuberculosis--the disease he pretended to have in order to go to the filming of *Man of Aran*. The irony of this diagnosis does not escape Billy when he says, "There's a coincidence" (97). In addition, Billy learns the "truth" about his parents' deaths. Johnnypateenmike tells him that his parents killed themselves to collect insurance money so that Billy could get the treatment he needed (103). This bit of good news is short-lived because Billy soon overhears the real truth: "The stories Johnnypateen spins. When it was poor Billy they tied in that sack of stones, and Billy would still be at the bottom of the sea this day, if it hadn't been for Johnnypateen swimming out to save him" (110). This news, coupled with the fact that Helen refuses to go out for a walk with Billy, instead laughing in his face, is enough to drive Billy to contemplate suicide.

Just when it seems that the story will become a tragic tale of a crippled boy who is unloved, McDonagh turns the tide. Helen returns and agrees to walk with Billy: "All right so I'll go out walking with ya, but only somewheres no fecker would see us and when it's dark and no kissing or groping, 'cos I don't want you ruining

me fecking reputation . . . . Or anyways not much kissing or groping" (111-112). She then kisses Billy, quickly, and exits. Billy's decision to ask Helen out has saved his life. His active participation in his destiny creates a new situation. Of course, this triumph does not last long as Billy coughs up blood and is reminded of his impending death. The stage directions describe, *"After the coughing stops he takes his hand away and looks down at it for a moment. It's covered in blood. BILLY loses his smile, turns the oil lamp down and exits to the back room"* (113).

Even though Billy's fate is sealed by his disease, he refuses to resign himself to living the last weeks of his life in mourning. As Matt Wolf, in his article "Martin McDonagh on a Tear," argues "To be sure, *Cripple* includes acts of frequently astonishing violence, but it also ends with a kiss; in its own perverse way, the play performs a blessing on its characters, in this case, islanders in 1934 Ireland who refuse to let blight have the last word" (49). If Maurya had been a character in this play, the end would be one of resignation, but, in spite of Billy's fate, the audience is left believing that Billy knows he is still in control of his life. God

has not punished him; it is not God's will that he die. It is his own will that will keep him alive and allow him to go walking with Helen.

In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, there is also evidence of this faith and reason binary at work. The same attitude towards priests that permeates *Cripple* is also evident in this play. Fr. Welsh, while not appearing in this part of the trilogy, still figures prominently in a discussion between Mag and Ray. No one in this play can remember Fr. Welsh's name, either:

RAY: Oul Father Welsh-Walsh-has a car he's selling, but I'd look a poof buying a car off a priest.

MAG: I don't like Father Walsh-Walsh-at all.

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

MAG: God love us!

RAY: Aye. Although, now, that was out of character for Father Welsh. Father Welsh seldom uses violence, same as most young priests. It's usually the older priests go punching you in the head. I don't know why. I suppose it's the way they were brought up.

MAG: There was a priest in the news Wednesday had a babby 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

babby with a Yank. If he'd punched the babby  
in the head, that'd be news. . . . (15).

Even though Fr. Welsh is less offensive than "older" priests, the citizens of Leenane still see the clergy, and, therefore, religion, as suspect. They are much more willing to trust their own abilities to reason than the Church's edicts on morality.

The same is true of *A Skull in Connemara*, another play in the Leenane trilogy. In this play, the whole notion of the sanctity of the dead and the ritual of burying bodies is called into question. As new people die, it is Mick Dowd's job to remove the old bones from the cemetery to make room. Fr. Welsh is the one who employs Mick to do this rather grisly job. There is a total lack of reverence for God, even by Mary, who seems to be the one holdout in this new world. Mary puts up a good fight, spouting the tenets of the Catholic faith. When Mick tells Mary she is too old fashioned because she disapproves of cursing, Mary responds "I'll tell you someone else who doesn't curse. (*Pointing to the crucifix.*) That man doesn't curse" (90). Mick, however, points out that Mary's own behavior may be less than Christian: "Oh, cadging off the Yanks a pound a throw

the maps the Tourist Board asked you to give them for free. Telling them your Liam's place was where *The Quiet Man* was filmed, when wasn't it a hundred miles away in Ma'am Cross or somewhere" (92). Even when members of McDonagh's communities seem religious, the truth is that they are more likely to believe that they are the arbiters of what is right and wrong in their own lives. Mary might be quick to parrot the traditional position of the Church, but she does not let it interfere with her capitalist ventures. Just because the Bible says "Thou shalt not steal" does not mean that an old lady cannot help pay for her retirement by taking advantage of some "eejit Yanks." Selling the free maps may not be Christian, but it makes good business sense to Mary.

When Mick convinces Mairtin to go and confirm with Fr. Welsh that it is "illegal in the Catholic faith to bury a body the willy still attached" (116), Mairtin returns with the priest's hand-print on his face. The lack of respect for the Catholic faith is further emphasized when Mairtin curses at Mick and Tom for laughing at him. Tom tells Maritin "Stop your cursing now, Mairtin. Not in the graveyard. Against God so it is" (122). Mairtin's response is perhaps the most



shocking statement in any of the plays: "Feck God so! And his mother too!" (123). Catholicism is not a set of rules to live by in Leenane. It is something to mention in order to win an argument or make a joke. It does not dictate anyone's behavior.

Finally, in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, the community has gone so far away from religion that it has been completely replaced by individual human judgment. The characters determine morality. Any mention of religion is passing and philosophical. When Christy, Brendan, and Joey are discussing their plot to kill Padraic, Christy recounts the way he set up Donny to be the murderer of Wee Thomas: "I said, 'The Jesuits say you should never tell a lie, boy, so I'll have to tell the truth on the subject'" (31). Brendan corrects Christy, saying "Except it isn't the Jesuits who say that at all" (31). Certainly, Christy invokes religion to make himself seem credible when setting up Donny, but he does not get it right. The belief itself is not important; it is how to use religion to one's advantage that is the "crux of the matter."

In the *Inishmore* of McDonagh's play, the characters act based on their own set of beliefs. Padraic loves his cat, Wee Thomas, so if someone kills his cat, that person deserves to die a horrible death. Padraic believes that selling drugs to kids is wrong, so anyone who sells drugs to kids should have his toenails ripped off and his nipple cut off. There is a perverted rationality to these theories that lends credence to the idea that "Thou shalt not kill" unless thou hast a good reason.

In his *A Modest Proposal*, Jonathan Swift suggests that the ideal solution for overpopulation and poverty is to eat babies. Many people were shocked by his suggestion in 1729 that "I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout." Many people took his proposal at face value and insisted that Swift was insane. He was, however, using the power of allegory to make a point. His extreme and ridiculous suggestion was not meant to be taken literally, but

rather to illustrate that the worsening conditions in Ireland, created by England's rule over the country, deserved more than a trivial solution. In the true spirit of his fellow Irishman, McDonagh has developed his own allegorical parables to shock his audience into enlightenment. Just as Swift was not seriously suggesting that people eat babies, McDonagh is not suggesting that it is acceptable to kill one's father because he makes fun of one's hairstyle or that it is reasonable to cut off the nipple of a person who sells drugs to children.

McDonagh's characters and the communities in which they exist are exaggerations to prove a point. Leenane citizens have so much faith in themselves that they commit murder, steal, and tell God to "feck off." They have the ability to reason (in a most absurd way), which helps them to break the strangle-hold of the Catholic Church and follow their own rules. The lesson here is an important one—the people of Ireland need to trust that they know what is best and that the institution of the Church has been oppressive and unreasonable. Each person has within himself the ability to make decisions and be

active participants in the world. It is only when they can "kill" the influence of the patriarchy of the Church that they will ever truly be free of oppression. The people in McDonagh's communities have freed themselves and learned to live lives not of desperation and resignation, but rather lives of active participation and empowerment.

It might be logical to assume that lesson is the same one that the Irish writers of the past, such as Synge, Beckett, and Friel, wanted the Irish to learn. Their tactics, however, were as passive as the people their plays represented. Holding the mirror up to the nation was not enough to get the nation to understand. The nation needs to learn by example how to be active citizens in their own destinies. It would be hard to imagine Girleen or Helen lamenting, as Pegeen Mike does in *Playboy*, that they have lost the playboy of the western world, or it would be hard to imagine Maureen living with her oppressive mother because that is the fate God has determined. Fr. Welsh could never be the voice of power for the town of Leenane, just as Valene and Coleman could never take Vladimir's and Gogol's place

waiting around for Godot. There is no waiting in McDonagh's world. Those who wait for God or religion wait in vain. The only solution is to have faith in one's self and take matters into one's own hands. If McDonagh had written *Waiting for Godot*, it might have gone something like this:

VALENE: Nothing to be done.

COLEMAN: Feck nothing to be done. I'm not waitin' anymore.

VALENE: Yeah, feck this. And feck Godot.

COLEMAN: Who is this Godot fella anyway.  
Let's go.

McDonagh's characters have come to the conclusion that there is something to be done and one cannot rely on God or the Catholic Church to do it. God has no jurisdiction here and that works out just fine for McDonagh's world.

## CHAPTER 2

### FIREPLACE POKERS AND SKULL CRUSHERS:

#### AUTONOMY AND RESPONSIBILITY

When Yeats and Gregory planted the seed of an Irish national theatre in 1897, the aim was to fuse together a sense of nationalism with an artistic sensibility. Ireland was ruled by England, and England had completely subsumed any sense of Irishness by imposing its own imperialistic laws on the small island country. Ireland was conquered, the language outlawed, and the people left devoid of their independence. Yeats, Gregory, and later, Synge, believed that art could be a conduit for restoring pride to the beleaguered nation and a clarion call for a renewed belief in national independence. The plays of these visionaries were benchmarks for the power of modern drama to change a nation. Art, in the form of theatre, could and would be transformative. The plays were celebrations of Irishness—myth and language—as well as criticisms of the state of the Irish nation. While

critical of the English and its rule over Ireland, the plays in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (primarily Synge's) were also critical of the Irish people, their resignation to their fate and their inability to rise above their oppressors and assert independence.

In Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Michael looks back at the tragedy that befell his aunts and wonders why it all went wrong. The sisters, and primarily Kate, are too tied to their responsibilities to exert any real autonomy, and it is that failure that ultimately leads to their downfall. For the sisters there is only one, truly autonomous moment that occurs in the play, and that moment, rather than being empowering, is terrifying. As the stage directions indicate: "*the movements seem caricatured; and the sound is too loud; and the beat is too fast; and the almost recognizable dance is made grotesque. . . . With this too loud music, this pounding beat . . . there is a sense of order being consciously subverted*" (21-22). This subversion of order is momentary and does not last long enough to elicit any lasting change. These sisters are too entrenched in their feelings of responsibility to be transformed by a moment of independence.

The same is true for Synge's characters. While many do seem to be early ancestors of the characters McDonagh creates, most of them never carry their autonomy into any permanent revolution. In *Playboy*, Christy does not ever actually kill his father, but rather just pretends to have. Pegeen falls in love with Christy, in a defiant shirking of her responsibilities to Shawn Keogh but in the end, fails to parlay that new-found sense of self into any kind of change. She mourns the loss of Christy but, will most likely end up marrying Shawn. Maurya may stand stalwart at the end of *Riders*, stating "Michael has a clean burial in the far north. . . . Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied" (99), but even though she has thrown off her oppressive sorrow and replaced it with relief that now all of the men have died and she will no longer have to be worried, the only lesson she learns is resignation. Rather than taking this independence from her responsibilities and making an active, empowering change, she will be resigned to knowing that life ends in death and that it will all be over soon.



While most humans struggle with issues of self and issues of responsibility to others, the Irish have become a nation whose autonomy is subservient to its responsibilities—to religion, to history, to country, to the fight for independence, to the matriarchy and patriarchy, and to the past. If there is truly a thing called "Irish Identity," then one's own individual independence is less important than one's responsibility to the independence inherent in this Irishness. McDonagh's characters do not see life in those terms, however. For the members of McDonagh's communities, autonomy and responsibility are concepts that meet in the middle and create the idea that one's responsibilities cannot and will not compromise autonomy. The characters in McDonagh's plays may have a sense of responsibility to others, but that responsibility is not paramount. It is responsibility to one's own self that takes precedence, and, since that shift has taken place, the characters are able to draw the line between obligation and oppression. When outside responsibilities become oppressive and infringe on personal autonomy, those responsibilities are erased—or, better yet, killed or destroyed.

Just as the characters have replaced blind faith in the institutions of the Church with a true faith in themselves and their abilities to reason, the characters in McDonagh's plays have replaced overwhelming responsibility to everything outside of the self with a deliberate responsibility to the self. Unlike the characters in Synge's plays, such as Pegeen and Maurya, the assertion of autonomy is not fleeting. It does not come in the form of an epiphany that leaves the audience hoping for change. McDonagh's characters and communities are no longer at the threshold of enlightenment. Perhaps at some time in the past they were at the watershed moments that face some of Synge's characters, but these plays show what happens when a community learns its lesson and institutes change.

In *Leenane*, *Inishmaan*, and *Inishmore*, the people have found a balance between the binary of autonomy and responsibility. While many have duties to others, their accountability to themselves ultimately dictates their behavior. They are not governed by their responsibilities to anyone or anything; instead, they are governed by their obligations to self. They are not the

selfless, mourning mothers who suffer out of a sense of duty, nor are they the sisters who are so frightened of their independence that they design a life around their responsibilities to one another. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the one moment when Kate and her sisters assert their independence is the primal dance in the kitchen; however, this outburst ultimately frightens Kate, and she retreats into her life of obligation. She is shocked by her own boldness and cannot translate that momentary freedom into permanence. In McDonagh's world, the boldness is also shocking but not to the characters who exhibit it. It is shocking to the outsiders—the Fr. Welsh's of the world and, by extension, the audience. For those consumed by responsibility, such autonomy can be frightening and seem like anarchy; however, it is the norm for the characters who live in these towns. The balance is not resigned acceptance of or escape from life. These characters achieve balance when they meet life head on and worry more about self-actualization than the world around them.

In *Beauty Queen*, for example, Maureen is responsible for caring for her mother—a responsibility she does not necessarily welcome, but which she accepts. Her two sisters have escaped Leenane. They, unlike Maureen, have

foregone all responsibility in favor of their autonomy. In many ways, they are the very image of their mother, Mag. Mag is an example of a character with no responsibility—she is completely autonomous and operates under her own agenda. Mag gives no consideration to Maureen and is only concerned with her own fate. Mag demands complete attention and devotion from her daughter. She, like the oppressive institutions that have ruled the Irish people, demands that Maureen fulfill her expectations of Maureen. To Mag, Maureen's sole purpose is to serve her mother without any regard for Maureen's own happiness. When Ray comes to deliver the message inviting Maureen to the party for his relatives from America, Mag destroys the message so Maureen will never see it, and the stage direction show how deliberate her destruction is:

*As RAY's footsteps fade, MAG gets up, reads the message on the table . . . finds a box of matches . . . strikes a match, lights the message, goes to the range with it burning and drops it inside. (18)*

Maureen, however, knows her mother's agenda and, over the years, has been able to remain independent in spite of her mother's efforts. Rather than being resigned to her mother's control and oppression, Maureen violently

asserts herself. Mag may try to hide the message, but Maureen knows just the right bit of torture to force her mother to acknowledge her crime. With violent words and actions, Maureen manages to keep her mother's behavior from oppressively canceling out her "self." A good example of the violent way Maureen keeps her mother from total control occurs when Mag tells Maureen of a man in Dublin who murdered an old woman he did not even know.

Maureen responds:

MAUREEN: Sure, that sounds exactly the type of fella I would like to meet, and then bring him home to meet you, if he likes murdering out women.

MAG: That's not a nice thing to say, Maureen.

MAUREEN: Is it not, now?

MAG (*pause*): Sure why would he be coming all this way out from Dublin? He'd just be going out of his way.

MAUREEN: For the pleasure of me company he'd come. Killing you, it'd just be a bonus for him.

MAG: Killing you I bet he first would be.

MAUREEN: I could live with that so long as I was sure he'd be clobbering you soon after. If he clobbered you with a big axe or something and took your out head off and spat in your neck, I wouldn't mind at all, going first. Oh no, I'd enjoy it, I would. No more Complan to get, and no more out porridge to get, and no more. . . . (10)

Maureen's reaction to her mother's oppressive behavior helps to maintain a balance that makes the relationship function. After she discovers that her mother was planning to keep Ray's message a secret, Maureen asks her mother why she insists on interfering. She asks, "Isn't it enough I've had to be on beck and call for you every day for the past twenty year? Is it one evening you begrudge me?" (22). When Mag tells her that she should not be out "gallivanting with fellas," Maureen retaliates by telling her mother about a dream: "I have a dream sometimes there of you, dressed all nice and white, in your coffin there, and me all in black looking in on you. . . . It's more of a day-dream. Y'know, something happy to be thinking of when I'm scraping the skitter out of them hens" (23-24). Mag wants to keep her daughter at home so that she can control her. Mag believes that if Maureen has a life of her own, she will no longer have to care for her mother. Maureen knows she may be stuck with this life, but she is not going to accept it with long-suffering Irish resignation.

When Maureen brings Pato home after the party, she blatantly flaunts her independence in front of Mag. In the morning, after Pato spends the night, Mag does everything she can to ruin the situation for Maureen. Before Maureen wakes up, she begins telling Pato about her scalded hand—which is later revealed to be the result of one of Maureen's violent acts against her mother. When Maureen enters the kitchen she kisses Pato, much to her mother's disgust. Mag goes on the attack and tells Pato it was Maureen who scalded her hand: "*She's the one that scoulded me hand! I'll tell you that, now! Let alone sitting on stray men! Held it down on the range she did! Poured chip-pan fat o'er it! Aye, and told the doctor it was me!*" (40).

Maureen is not to be deterred from enjoying her moment, however, and, in response to her mother's accusation, has Pato smell the sink. Maureen knows that her mother has dumped her urine pot in the sink as she does every morning and, by pointing it out to Pato, will embarrass her mother and be the necessary retaliation for her mother's accusation:

MAG: Nothing to do with it, sinks have!

MAUREEN: Nothing to do with it, is it?  
Everything to do with it, *I* think it has.  
Serves as evidence to the character of me  
accuser, it does.

PATO: What is that, now? The drains?

MAUREEN: Not the drains at all. Not the  
drains at all. Doesn't she pour a potty of wee  
away down there every morning, though I tell  
her seven hundred times the lavvy use, but oh  
no.

MAG: Me scoulded hand this conversation was,  
and not wee at all!

Maureen knows that her mother's accusation is meant to  
chase away Pato, but Maureen will not allow Mag to  
control her.

It is after this first thwarted attempt that Mag  
comes closest to destroying Maureen's autonomy by  
bringing up Difford Hall. Mag relishes telling Pato that  
Maureen was once in a "nut-house" in England. It is at  
this point that Mag's behavior begins to become  
oppressive. Even though Pato tells Maureen it does not  
matter that she once had a nervous breakdown, the event  
changes Maureen.

After Pato reassures Maureen about her time spent in  
Difford Hall, he suggests, "Be putting on some clothes  
there, Maureen. You'll freeze with no fire down" (45).



Shaken by her mother's behavior and Pato's sudden concern about her lack of clothing, Maureen turns on Pato: "'Be putting on some clothes'? Is it ugly you think I am now, so. . . . Be off with you so, if I sicken you" (46).

Maureen's mood has changed from defiance to defeat, and she takes it out on Pato. He promises to "write you from England" before he leaves, but Mag tells her "He won't write at all. . . . And I did throw your ould dress in that dirty corner, too!" (47).

Maureen has no violent response this time—she appears resigned and saddened. She asks her mother, "Why? Why? Why do you . . .?" (47). She picks up the dress she had worn the night before and exits into the hall. Mag, who has won this battle, feels no remorse. She shifts her attention to her porridge, sticks a finger in it and calls out to Maureen, "Me porridge is gone cold now!" (47). Mag has successfully returned the focus to herself; she is not the least bit concerned about her daughter.

Maureen, however, will not allow her autonomy to be threatened for long. When Pato does write to Maureen and ask her to move with him to America, he orders his brother to put the letter "in Maureen's hand" (51).

Unfortunately, when Ray goes to Maureen's house to deliver the letter, Mag is the only one there. Mag desperately attempts to find a way to get Ray to leave the letter with her—she wants to destroy it before Maureen reads it. Ray, after enduring Mag's nonsense for a good while, finally acquiesces and tells Mag, "And may God strike you dead if you open it?" (58). Once Ray is gone, Mag reads the letter and burns this message as well. Again, the stage directions underscore her agenda: *"She drops the first short page into the flames as she finishes it, then starts reading the second"* (59).

While Maureen sits at home, staying away from Pato's going away party, she seems dangerously close to accepting her fate. She knows nothing of the letter until Mag betrays herself by divulging that she knows Maureen and Pato never had sex—information she could only have heard from Pato. At this point, Maureen knows that something has happened, and she regains her footing and her "self" and reasserts herself into her relationship with her mother:

*MAG suddenly realises what she's said. MAUREEN stares at her in dumb shock and hate, then walks to the kitchen, dazed, puts a chip-pan on the stove, turns it on high and pours a half-bottle of cooking oil into it, takes down the*

*rubber gloves that are hanging on the back wall and puts them on. MAG puts her hands on the arms of the rocking chair to drag herself up, but MAUREEN shoves a foot against her stomach and groin, ushering her back. MAG leans back into the chair, frightened, staring at MAUREEN, who sits at the table, waiting for the oil to boil. She speaks quietly staring straight ahead. (65)*

The interrogation that follows brings the truth about the letter to light. Throughout the interrogation, Maureen tortures her mother into admitting what has happened: *"MAUREEN slowly and deliberately takes her mother's shriveled hand, holds it down on the burning range, and starts slowly pouring some of the hot oil over it, as MAG screams in pain and terror"* (66). Maureen repeats the torture until Mag blurts out, "Asked you to go to America with him, it did! . . . But how could you go with him? You do still have me to look after" (67). In spite of everything that is happening, Mag still thinks only of herself, even saying to Maureen, "But what about me, Maureen" (67).

Mag's torture session ends with Maureen's throwing the rest of the pan of oil on her and frantically racing to catch Pato before he leaves. There is still a chance she can realize her dream, so she leaves her mother writhing in pain but alive. She has taken control of her

own life again, and she has put Mag back in her place. However, she leaves her mother with this warning: "If you've made me miss Pato before he goes, then you'll really be for it, so you will, and no messing this time" (68). Completely oblivious to and disinterested in what her actions may have done to her daughter's future, Mag's final thought is still of herself. She whines, "But who'll look after me, so?" (69).

Maureen does not catch Pato before he leaves. Her mother has successfully infringed upon her autonomy and the responsibility for taking care of her mother has become unbearably oppressive. Rather than mourn her loss and live like a martyr, Maureen ultimately destroys the one thing standing in the way of her individual identity—Mag. She takes a fireplace poker to her mother's head and kills her; thus, ending the oppression.

As long as Maureen was able to assert her independence while at the same time being responsible for her mother, the relationship was not oppressive; however, when Mag crosses the line and tries to cancel Maureen's autonomy, Maureen recognizes that the binary has shifted

and she must right it—with one, swift blow from the fireplace poker. She may have lost Pato, but she has found herself.

Maureen's attachment to the fireplace poker reaffirms this point. When Ray asks to buy it from her, she refuses his offer, saying, "No. It does have sentimental value to me" (82). It is the symbol of her freedom from her oppressor and her renewed responsibility to herself.

If Mag exemplifies the dangers of complete autonomy, Fr. Welsh is exactly the opposite. Fr. Welsh, the representative of the powerful Catholic Church, suffers from overwhelming responsibility to everything outside of himself, and this play subverts the traditional position of the priest in Ireland. Fr. Welsh's responsibilities are his oppressors. Fr. Welsh is so consumed with his obligations to the Church and his priestly duties, the town of Leenane, and, more specifically, to Valene and Coleman that, when he fails in his responsibilities, he ultimately destroys himself. In *Lonesome West*, Fr. Welsh is already on the path to destruction from the beginning of the play. He is a heavy drinker now, but he has not

always been. He confesses, "I never touched the stuff before I came to this parish. This parish would drive you to drink" (171).

The town of Leenane is not a typical parish, at least in Fr. Welsh's view. Because the people are learning to negotiate their individual identities, any representatives of old, oppressive power structures will have no place or success here. Once Fr. Welsh comes face-to-face with his ineffectiveness, he undergoes one "crisis of faith" after another. When he attempts to exert any influence over Valene and Coleman at the beginning of the play, they need only bring up Fr. Welsh's past failures to stop him. As Valene tells Fr. Welsh, "A great parish it is you run, one of them murdered his missus, an axe through her head, the other her mammy, a poker took her brains out, and it's only chit-chatting it is you be with them? Oh aye" (175). Everyone in Leenane knows about Maureen and Mick, but Fr. Welsh can do nothing to get his parishioners to admit their sins:

WELSH: I'm a terrible priest, so I am. I can never be defending God when people go saying things agin him, and, sure, isn't that the main qualification for being a priest?

COLEMAN: Ah there be a lot worse priests than you, Father, I'm sure. 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 poor gasurs, so, sure, doesn't that give you a head-start over half the priests in Ireland?

WELSH: That's no comfort at all, and them figures are over-exaggerated anyways. I'm a terrible priest, and I run a terrible parish, and that's the end of the matter. Two murderers I have on me books, and I can't get either of the beggars to confess it. About betting on horses and impure thoughts is all them beggars ever confess. (177)

Fr. Welsh is a failure because he has allowed his responsibilities to take precedence over his commitment to himself.

Later in the play, Fr. Welsh learns that Coleman deliberately killed his father. Fr. Welsh does not want to believe this awful truth because he cannot accept that his parishioners do not listen to him. No matter what tactic he tries, he is unable to get Valene and Coleman to cease their fighting. He is so consumed with his responsibility for saving the brothers' souls that he injures himself:

*WELSH stares at the two of them dumbstruck, horrified. He catches sight of the bowl of steaming plastic beside him and, almost*

*blankly, as the grappling continues, clenches his fists and slowly lowers them into the burning liquid, holding them under. Through clenched teeth and without breathing, WELSH manages to withhold his screaming for about ten or fifteen seconds until, still holding his fists under, he lets rip with a horrifying high-pitched wail lasting about ten seconds. . . . (208)*

The irony of this situation is that his efforts do nothing to convince the brothers of anything other than that Fr. Welsh is insane. As Coleman states after Welsh leaves, "Sure that fella's pure mad" (208). Fr. Welsh's inability to broker peace between the brothers, and the fact that his first name is Roderick, is further evidence that there is more depth to McDonagh's plays than the surface readings will allow. The Catholic saint, Saint Roderick, was killed when he tried to interrupt a fight between his two brothers. The ironic parallel is that, while Saint Roderick's sacrifice gained for him great glory, Fr. Welsh's sacrifice produces no effect. He is no martyr.

Later in the play, Fr. Welsh articulates his feeling of hopelessness to Girleen and tells her that he is leaving Leenane. While Fr. Welsh admits that the three murders and one suicide had something to do with his decision to leave, he admits the real reason is "Nobody



ever listens to my advice. Nobody ever listens to me at all" (213). The truth is that no one in Leenane does listen to Fr. Welsh. No one in Leenane is even really sure or curious enough to find out whether his name is Welsh or Walsh. If Fr. Welsh cannot minister to his congregation, then he has failed in his responsibility to them. Because Fr. Welsh has no sense of self and is completely consumed by his need to save everyone else, he cannot cope with this reality. After making one last-ditch effort to save Coleman and Valene with his suicide note, Fr. Welsh walks into the lake and kills himself. He truly hopes that by sacrificing himself, he will finally get his flock to follow his advice. As Fr. Welsh states in his letter:

Valene and Coleman, I'm betting everything on ye. I know for sure there's love there somewheres, it's just a case of ye stepping back and looking for it. I'd be willing to bet me own soul that that love is there, and I know well the odds are stacked against me. (223)

Fr. Welsh has no autonomy. He is completely responsible, so much so that he would put the fate of his own soul in the hands of Valene and Coleman. Unfortunately for Fr. Welsh, thrusting this overwhelming responsibility on the brothers will never work because the brothers, like

Maureen, have achieved a sense of balance between their obligations and their autonomy.

Valene and Coleman, while constantly and violently fighting, do accept some responsibility for others around them. Even though they make fun of Fr. Welsh at times, when the priest undergoes one of his many crises of faith, the brothers do make some attempt to placate him. When Fr. Welsh worries over his inability to get Maureen and Mick to confess, Coleman tries to assuage the priest's fears and concerns by saying, "Too hard on yourself is all you are, and it's only pure gossip that Mick and Maureen murdered anybody, and nothing but gossip" (177).

In addition, up until the beginning of the play, Valene and Coleman had lived with their father and been responsible for him. By all accounts, their father seems to have been abusive—screaming at nuns and kicking cats. The brothers, like Maureen, were able to endure their father's behavior as long as it did not become oppressive. When their father crossed that line and made fun of Coleman's haircut, he infringed on Coleman's autonomy and, like Mag, had to be destroyed. Coleman asserts, "I don't take criticising from nobody. 'Me

hair's like a drunken child's.' I'd only just combed me hair and there was nothing wrong with it! And I know well shooting your dad in the head is against God, but there's some insults that can never be excused" (206).

Of course, the brothers feel a sense of responsibility to one another as well. Even though they fight constantly, they still look after one another—in a perverted way, anyway. After Coleman kills their father, Valene agrees to keep the murder a secret and tell the rest of the town that the killing was accidental. Valene does not do this out of some sense of overwhelming responsibility to Coleman. He agrees to protect his brother only if he gets something for himself in return. With Fr. Welsh listening in horror, the brothers recall their negotiations:

COLEMAN: I'll tell you another thing that's against God. Sitting your brother in a chair, with his dad's brains dripping down him, and promising to tell everyone it was nothing but an accident . . .

VALENE: Shut up now, ya feck . . .

COLEMAN: So long as there and then you sign over everything your dad went and left you in his will . . .

WELSH: No . . . no . . . no . . .

COLEMAN: His house and his land and his tables  
and his chairs and his bit of money to go  
frittering away on shitey-arse ovens you only  
get to torment me, ya feck . . . . (206-7)

Both brothers get something for themselves in the deal.  
And, even though Valene flaunts his victory over Coleman  
throughout the play, there is still a balance because  
Coleman retaliates in various ways in order to keep  
Valene's behavior from becoming oppressive: he eats  
Valene's food, drinks his booze, destroys his figurines,  
and takes the bullets out of his gun.

Another example of how the brothers have negotiated  
the binary is their reaction to Fr. Welsh's death and  
suicide note. After reading the letter, the brothers  
agree to try to follow Fr. Welsh's advice and get along.  
They feel some responsibility for Fr. Welsh's soul, so  
they attempt to forgive and forget. The final scene  
becomes a tit for tat litany of all of the wrongs the  
brothers have perpetrated against one another:

COLEMAN (*pause*): I do apologise for dribbling  
in your eye and I do apologise for stepping on  
your head, Valene. On Father Welsh's soul, I  
apologise.

VALENE: I do accept your apology so.

COLEMAN: Although plenty of times as a gasur I  
remember you dropping stones on me head while  
I was asleep and big stones.

VALENE: Only in retaliation them stones ever was.

COLEMAN: Retaliation or not. Waking up to stones dropped on ya is awful frightening for a small child. And retaliation doesn't count anyways if it's a week later. It's only then and there retaliation does apply.

VALENE: I do apologise for dropping stones on you so. (*Pause.*) For your brain never did recover from them injuries, did it, Coleman?

COLEMAN *stares at VALENE a second, then smiles.*  
VALENE *smiles also.*

VALENE: This is a great oul game, this is, apologizing. Father Welsh wasn't too far wrong. (238-9)

The exercise in forgiveness becomes a game in which the brothers compete for who did the worst thing to whom. It becomes obvious that the brothers are not at all sorry for what they have done, but they rather like the sport of the confession and forgiveness business.

For a while, the game is fun; however, when the confessions become too hard to forgive and the game becomes oppressive, the brothers no longer want to play Fr. Welsh's game. The litany of offenses destroys the balance when Coleman admits to being the one who cut the ears off Valene's dog. The brothers' game deteriorates into a violent confrontation, and not even the mention of

Fr. Welsh's soul will stop the fight. As Valene states, "Fr. Welsh is burning in hell, now because of our fighting" (256). What follows is the perfect example of the balance between one's responsibility to oneself and one's responsibility to others. The brothers will not allow the threat of damning Fr. Welsh's soul to change who they are, and, when the forgiveness starts to infringe on their individual identities, they abandon their attempt, putting things back in proper perspective:

COLEMAN: Well did we ask him to go betting his soul on us? No. And, sure, it's pure against the rules for a priest to go betting anyways, neverminding with them kinds of stakes. Sure a fiver would've been overdoing it on us, let alone his soul. And what's wrong with fighting anyways? I do like a good fight. It does show you care, fighting does. That's what our sissy Welsh doesn't understand. Don't you like a good fight?

VALENE: I do like a good fight, the same as that. . . . (256)

Fr. Welsh, rather than being responsible for his own soul, leaves the burden to Valene and Coleman—a burden they quickly find oppressive. As Valene states at the end of the play, pointing to Welsh's note, "And you, you whiny fecking priest. Do I need your soul hovering o'er me the rest of me fecking life?" (258). Valene and Coleman refuse to let anyone or anything impose on their

personal freedom—a lesson that could have perhaps saved Fr. Welsh. If Fr. Welsh had not been so consumed by his responsibilities, he might have been able to renegotiate his place in this new world.

The characters in the other of McDonagh's five plays also provide examples of this new-found balance between autonomy and responsibility. In *Skull in Connemara*, Mick, while never truly admitting that he killed his wife, implies his reasons for killing her:

Oona didn't have big faults really. She just had little faults. Niggly things, y'know. She'd never wrap up cheese properly. Y'know, when she was finished with it. She'd just leave it lying about, letting the air get to it. The same with bread. She'd never wrap up bread properly. Y'know, like after she'd made a sandwich or the like. And she was terrible at scrambled eggs, and I don't know why, because scrambled eggs are easy to do. Oona's scrambled eggs'd come out either grey or burned. (151)

Oona's *little* faults in some small way infringed on Mick's personal freedom, and, because her inability to make proper scrambled eggs seems to have become oppressive, Mick destroyed her.

Tom Hanlon provides another example. Tom is a police officer and has a responsibility to uphold the law. He is also Mairtin's brother and has a

responsibility to him. Throughout the play, Tom seems to take his responsibilities seriously until his job and his brother encroach on his personal autonomy. Tom wants desperately to be a detective like the ones on television, but his job has not allowed him to make his big break. So, Tom decides to exert his own will and see to it that he solves one of the town's biggest mysteries—the murder of Oona. Throwing off the responsibilities of being a police officer, Tom steals Oona's skull from her grave and tampers with the evidence. When Mairtin tells everyone, "Well why wouldn't I be on his fecking side, when it's me own blackguard brother I catch carving a hole in Mick's missus's skull there, the day after you'd dug her up on him" (159) he has crossed the line, and Tom must reassert his autonomy in order to achieve balance: "THOMAS *smashes* MAIRTIN *twice across the head with the mallet*, MAIRTIN *collapsing to the floor*" (160).

McDonagh continues this theme in both *Cripple of Inishmaan* and *Lieutenant of Inishmore*. In *Cripple*, Bobby feels a responsibility to take Billy to the film set because Billy says he is dying of the same disease that killed Bobby's wife. When Billy returns, however, he admits that he lied to Bobby about being sick. Because



Billy took advantage of Bobby's sense of responsibility, something must be done to restore the balance. Billy tells Bobby, "But, in the long run, I thought, or I hoped, that if you had a choice between you being coddled for a while and me doing away with meself, once your anger had died down anyways, you'd choose you being coddled every time. Was I wrong Babbybobby? Was I?"

(66). Of course Billy was wrong. In this society, one's responsibility to one's self is paramount and, Bobby must retaliate in order to restore his autonomy: "Bobby *slowly walks over to Billy, stops in front of him, and lets a length of piping slide down his sleeve into his hand. . . . Bobby raises the pipe. . . . Billy covers up as the pipe scythes down*" (66-67).

In *Lieutenant*, Mairead illustrates this binary when, at the end of the play, she kills Padraic. Throughout the play it seems that Mairead is fascinated with and in love with Padraic. She wants to join his IRA splinter group, and, when she saves Padraic from being killed, she seems to have gotten her wish. When Mairead realizes that Padraic has killed her cat, however, he has crossed the line and must be destroyed; thus, "*She shoots Padraic in the head with both guns*" (65). Her

responsibility to Padraic and the cause of freeing Ireland cannot take precedence over her own personal freedom. Her cat represents her autonomy and, when it is threatened, she must retaliate.

In all five of McDonagh plays, the characters are negotiating and renegotiating the fine line between responsibility and autonomy. Whereas the Irish characters of the past allowed their overwhelming responsibilities to dictate their lives, McDonagh's characters refuse to allow their obligations to become oppressive. Again, in order to achieve this message, McDonagh must present the audience with exaggerated worlds and exaggerated behavior. McDonagh is using the guise of realism as the setting for his allegorical tales. McDonagh is not suggesting that the Irish should kill their overbearing mothers and fathers; however, he is suggesting that the Irish destroy their blind allegiance to the matriarchal and patriarchal systems that have subsumed their autonomy. Like Mag and Valene and Coleman's father, these systems have operated with complete autonomy and demanded that they be the number one priority of the Irish people. These systems are oppressive and must be destroyed.

For these characters, violence is often the best way to reassert autonomy. McDonagh's allegories use violence because it is the most visual and immediate manifestation of the empowerment of humans when exerting their will. He does not advocate for violence; violence is a means to an end. That end is the lesson that one must find the middle ground between responsibility and autonomy. One gets the sense that the characters in these plays are constantly renegotiating just where that middle ground lies, and, one also assumes that more people will die in this quest for self-actualization. The body count may be high, but the allegorical deaths are necessary if the Irish people are going to realize their own importance as individuals.

For Friel and characters such as the Mundy sisters, the idea of asserting one's autonomy is frightening. Friel mourns the inability of the sisters to overcome their oppression, and that inability leads to eventual tragedy. Synge's characters exert independence only to find, in the end, the things they lost are more important than the freedom they might have gained. Like Maureen, Pegeen Mike has lost her playboy, but unlike Maureen, Pegeen's last thought is of that loss. Maureen, whether

she wins Pato or not, is content because she has gained her independence. For Maurya, freedom comes in the form of resignation. She will no longer mourn for her loss because she now understands that death is inevitable and inescapable.

For McDonagh's characters there is no comfort in resignation because the societies in which they live leave no room for mourning. A martyr is a "sissy," and forgiveness is a game. If McDonagh were in charge of Friel's world, the dance of independence would be an everyday occurrence and the sisters, rather than being consumed with responsibility, would be living their own lives. Of course, some of the weaker-willed ones would most likely be murdered along the way. If McDonagh were in charge of Synge's world, Christy would actually have killed his father; the Widow Quin would be the town hero, and Shawn Keogh would have long since walked into the lake.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE FORCES OF NATURE, THE POSSIBILITY OF HAPPINESS:

#### HUMANS AND NATURE

In Irish drama of the past, nature, the land, and the Motherland have always been sacred. Totally subservient to wills greater than their own, acquiescent to their Church, and resigned to their foot-soldier roles in the causes of the motherland, these characters find themselves equally powerless in their place in the natural world. Nature is just one more force over which the Irish have no control and to which they must pay obeisance. *Riders to the Sea* opens and ends with death. At the beginning, the audience learns that one of Maurya's sons, Michael, is missing and feared dead and that the sisters must identify some clothing found on the seashore to determine whether or not it belongs to Michael. Maurya reveals that she has lost her husband, her father-in-law, and four other sons to the sea. At the end, Maurya learns that Michael is, in fact, dead,

and her one remaining son, Bartley, has also drowned. All of this death she meets with mourning, relief, and silent resignation. Despite the fact that the sea has taken away her family, Maurya is still inclined to believe in the sacredness of the sea, accept her fate, and continue to believe, as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* advises, that there is "nothing to be done." In a situation where Maurya can make no logical sense of the forces acting upon her, she clings to God, accepts her fate, and asks for mercy. According to Robin Skelton, in her article "J. M. Synge: *Riders to the Sea*," Synge was "portraying a world in which people, insecure and desperate for help against the forces of death and the tyranny of the natural world, seized upon any belief or superstition that might give them comfort and hope" (449). In his article "An Aran Requiem: Setting in 'Riders to the Sea'," Daniel J. Casey further illustrates this acceptance of the will of the sea: "Human opposition to the cosmic design is futile; resignation is all that is left to man" (95).

The same is true of the characters in Yeats's and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. In this short play, Yeats and Gregory illustrate the dangers of blind faith

in the fight for Ireland. Michael is preparing for his wedding day, but, when the Old Woman (who represents Ireland) appears, the young man's focus shifts from his own life to his duty to his country. Eerily reminiscent of Jesus' enjoinder to the disciples at Emmaus, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mt 16:24), the Old Woman reminds Michael's family, "If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all" (55). No match for the call from the deified Motherland, Michael's family and bride-to-be are powerless to stop him from throwing his life away for the cause of Mother Ireland. As the stage directions point out:

*Michael breaks away from Delia, stands for a second at the door then rushes out, following the Old Woman's voice. Bridget takes Delia, who is crying silently, into her arms. (57)*

As is the case in Synge's play, the self is less important than one's duty to one's country, and for those left behind, the only response is mournful resignation. In Yeats's *Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness*, Marjorie Howes reiterates this point: "Michael changes from an individual preoccupied with his own personal

happiness . . . to a selfless, boundary-less element in a larger whole . . . in which he has no meaningful individual existence" (74).

In O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, the same resignation to the forces of nature exists. When Johnny is killed because of his allegiance to the fight for Ireland, Juno can do nothing but grieve. She moans, "What was the pain I suffered, Johnny, bringin' you into the world to carry you to your cradle, to the pains I'll suffer carryin' you out o' the world to bring you to your grave! Mother o' God, Mother o' God, have pity on us all. . . . Take away this murdherin' hate, an' give us Thine own eternal love!" (72). The duty to the Motherland has cost her son his life, but there is nothing she can do but resign herself to the futility of the struggle. No one's life is his own. As Murray says, "O'Casey can offer no redress, no way out of the 'chassis' into which the country, mirrored in civil war, has descended" (103).

In the sixties, Friel projects his own view of the land and the forces of nature. For Friel, emigration becomes the only source of escape. Murray suggests, "Emigration lies behind many other Friel plays as a



metaphor for the alienation he sees at the heart of modern [Irish] life" (169). His characters are constantly attempting to leave Ireland in order to avoid the pitfalls that have plagued the Irish in the first part of the century. Friel recognized that the Irish needed to exert their own human will over the will of nature, but rather than do so at home, they had to leave. The leaving, however, is never easy, even though it seems to be the only answer. In *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Gar feels he must leave, but, as the last lines of the play illustrates, he is not sure why. He is constantly conflicted, and this conflict plays itself out in the conversations between Private Gar and Public Gar. Private Gar asks Public Gar, "God, Boy, why do you have to leave? Why? Why?" (99). Public Gar's only response is "I don't know. I-I-I don't know" (99).

The same conflict exists in the character of Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Created in the nineties, Friel's characters are now looking back at the way emigration has shaped them. As narrator looking back, Michael feels guilty for abandoning his aunts and his country. He feels that, even though he had to leave the land, his leaving was not the answer. As he says, "But much of the

spirit and fun had gone out of their lives; and when my time came to go away, in the selfish way of young men I was happy to escape" (107). Tony Coult, in *About Friel: The Playwright and the Work*, reiterates this point: "Finally, the play works because it . . . speaks for all adolescents who yearn to escape from a dull, authoritarian historical legacy to find their freedom, at the same time as fearing to lose contact with roots, with security, with locality" (36). For the characters in Friel's plays, emigration seems the only escape, but the escape is never complete. Even though they leave for their own good, the leaving does not free them enough to be individuals. As Seamus Deane suggests, in the Introduction to *Brian Friel: Plays 1*, "The central figures in these plays find themselves torn by the necessity of abandoning the Ireland which they love . . . because, they realize that they must bow to this necessity for the sake of their own integrity as individuals" (13).

McDonagh takes a fresh view of nature and its power over the people of Ireland. Like Synge, Yeats, Lady Gregory, O'Casey, and Friel, McDonagh is aware of this privileging of nature over humans. He knows that the

land has had an overwhelming influence over the people. Unlike the aforementioned playwrights, however, McDonagh breaks out of the resignation and offers a community in which humans take back their wills and dictate their own destinies. While at times it seems that nothing is sacred in McDonagh's world, the truth remains that the individual is sacred. The balance returns as humans no longer see nature as an overwhelming force impossible to combat. Whereas the Irish people of the past have privileged nature over humans, the characters in McDonagh's plays have found the peaceful center of the dichotomy. No longer focused on the deification of land and motherland, which required them to ignore their human nature, McDonagh's characters refuse to see their struggle as a collective one for the motherland of Ireland, and they no longer see the land as something overwhelmingly sacred. Instead, McDonagh's humans are on equal footing with the land, causing the characters to invest in their own sacredness.

In *A Skull in Connemara*, the land is anything but sacred—especially the land reserved for the dead. The grave is not the final, hallowed resting place. Every seven years, Mick Dowd must dig up the bones in the

graveyard in order to make room for the bodies of the newly dead. As Mairtin tells Mick, Fr. Welsh wants Mick "to make a start on this year's exhuming business this coming week. The graveyard shenanigans" (97). When Mary asks Mick what he does with the old bones, Mick tells her "I hit tem with a hammer until they were dust and I pegged them be the bucket-load into the slurry" (99). Because Mick realizes Mary's horror, he recants, telling her "I seal them in a bag and let them sink to the bottom of the lake and a string of prayers I say over them as I'm doing so" (100).

Mick's story about putting the bodies in the lake is untrue, however, because in Scene Three, he and Mairtin get drunk and smash the bones with a hammer. As the stage directions illustrate, "*He brings the mallet crashing down on the skull nearest him, shattering it, spraying pieces of it all over the room*" (137). When Mairtin inquires, "Ease them in the lake you said," Mick replies, "In front of the fat one I said, aye. Batter the shite out of them is nearer the mark. And why not?" (137). The bodies of the dead, once treated with care

and reverence by the Ireland of old, are now just playthings battered into dust and at the mercy of human will. The gravedigger, not the grave, controls fate.

When Mick and Mairtin are in the graveyard, they do not treat the moment with any solemnity. They smoke cigarettes, joke around, curse, and insult one another. At one point, Mairtin picks up two skulls and plays with them:

*MICK tosses MAIRTIN the skull with the lock of hair on it, then starts placing the bones from the grave into the sack, keeping a quiet eye on MAIRTIN all the while as he idles around with the skulls, placing them against his chest as if they're breasts at one point, kissing them together at another. (115)*

Death and nature have no sacred power. It is humans who can manipulate both and find entertainment in them.

Another example of the lack of reverence for nature, death, and the land is the exchange that occurs between Mick and Mairtin when Mairtin asks what happens to the penis when one dies. Mairtin asks, "Where does your thing go? When you die, I mean. None of them have had their things at all. And I've looked" (116). Mick responds by having a joke at Mairtin's expense:

*MICK: Don't they snip them off in the coffin and sell them to tinkers as dog food.*

MAIRTIN (*horrified*): They do not!

MICK: And during the famine, didn't the tinkers stop feeding them to their dogs and all and start sampling the merchandise themselves?

MAIRTIN: They did not, now, Mick . . .

MICK: You would see them riding along with them, munching ahead.

MAIRTIN: No . . .

MICK: That's the trouble with young people today, is they don't know the first thing about Irish history. (117)

No subject is off limits, even when digging up the dead. When Mairtin returns from asking Fr. Welsh about the truth of Mick's "Irish history lesson," his brother, Thomas, and Mick find it hilarious that Mairtin has been slapped for asking the question. When Mairtin curses at them, Thomas tells him "Stop your cursing now, Mairtin. Not in the graveyard. Against God so it is" (122). His apparently sincere reminder, however, is meant more to "cod" Mairtin and increase his anger than to return solemnity to the proceedings. Thomas has no real reverence for the sacredness of the graveyard; he is just attempting to make further fun of his brother. Thomas is echoing the traditional belief in the sacredness of the "holy ground" and the "looming specter of death" in order

to control his brother's behavior—more out of a sense of competition than anything else. As the following exchange illustrates, the graveyard and the forces of nature are no more important than the force of humanity:

THOMAS (*pause*): Don't be cursing God in a graveyard, anyway, is the crux of the matter.

MAIRTIN: Aye, and don't be invading people's human rights is what the other crux of the matter is. . . . (123)

Humans regain their place of importance in this newly balanced society.

In *Lieutenant of Inishmore* the same principles hold true. The notion of duty to the motherland, which was once considered disproportionately sacred by the Irish people has been rebalanced by individual, human concerns. McDonagh's only play, thus far, to deal with the conflict in Northern Ireland, *Lieutenant* offers a violent allegory to illustrate this shift from duty to one's country to duty to one's self. Padraic has a sense of responsibility to the cause of a free Ireland, but it is not the same blind obligation that we see carrying Michael away in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Padraic's devotion to the cause is self-centered and based on his own "lights" and vision. Too "mad" to join the IRA, Padraic

is a lieutenant in the INLA, a splinter-group of the IRA. On the surface, Padraic and the other members of the INLA seem to be fighting for the traditional cause—a free nation. It becomes increasingly clear, however, that these rebels follow the dictates of their own self interests above those of Ireland. Their fight is not the same as that of O’Casey’s Johnny Boyle, and those who join the cause are more concerned with pushing their own agendas than the good of the country.

Christy, Joey, and Brendan, Padraic’s cohorts in the INLA, no longer want Padraic to be a part of their rebel group because his agenda has begun to conflict with their own. Padraic believes that his mission is to torture and kill drug dealers who sell drugs to “the schoolchildren of Ireland” (12). In the beginning of the play, Padraic is in the middle of a torture session, and, with his captive dangling upside-down from a rope, he delivers his *apologia*:

Oh, let’s not be getting into the whys and wherefores, James. You do push your filthy drugs on the schoolchildren of Ireland, and if you concentrated exclusive on the Protestants I’d say all well and good, but you don’t, you take all comers. . . . Keeping our youngsters in a drugged-up and idle haze, when it’s out on the streets pegging bottles at coppers they should be. (12)



While it is noble to want drug dealers off the street, Padraic's rationale is a little suspect. Not only has he decided he must take up the cause of the drugged, Catholic school children, Padraic is also upset with the current situation in his splinter group and is thinking of forming yet another splinter group. In a phone conversation with his father, he complains,

I put bombs in a couple of chip shops, but they didn't go off. . . . I was pissed off, anyways. The fella who makes our bombs, he's fecking useless. I think he does drink. Either they go off before you're ready or they don't go off at all. One thing about the IRA anyways, as much as I hate the bastards, you've got to hand it to them, they know how to make a decent bomb. . . . I'll tell ya, I'm getting pissed off with the whole thing. I've been thinking of forming a splinter group. . . . I know we're already a splinter group, but there's no law says you can't splinter from a splinter group. A splinter group is the best kind of group to splinter from anyways. It shows you know your own mind. (14)

In past Irish plays, characters were not motivated by knowing their own minds. The fight for the land was always about a collective mind. In this play, the characters splinter whenever the mood strikes them.

Padraic wants to separate from the INLA, and the rest of his organization wants Padraic out of the group, too. They have very different ideas on drug dealers. As Christy asserts,

It won't be so quick then he'll be to go forming splinter groups, and knocking down fellas like poor Skank Toby, fellas who only do the community a service. . . . And don't they pay us a pound on every bag they push to go freeing Ireland for them? Isn't it for everybody we're out freeing Ireland? (29)

The group gets money for their organization from the drug dealers, so they do not want Padraic torturing the dealers. The fight for Ireland is no longer sacred and noble—it is a fight in which each person chooses the cause for which to fight, which Christy illustrates as he continues, "That's what Padraic doesn't understand, is it isn't only for the schoolkids and the oul fellas and the babes unborn we're out freeing Ireland. No. It's for the junkies, the thieves and the drug pushers too!" (29). Ireland, the Ireland needing to be "free" has become, not the motherland, but its people in all of their splintered, re-splintered, and yet to be splintered forms!

Because their agendas are their own individual ones, Christy, Joey, and Brendan disagree about how to fight for Ireland. Joey is disgusted that Christy and Brendan killed Padraic's cat in order to lure him home to Inishmore. Joey tells them that he did not sign up for this type of brutality: "I'd've never joined the INLA in the first place if I'd known the battering of cats was to be on the agenda. The INLA has gone down in my estimation today. Same as when we blew up Airey Neave. You can't blow up a fella just because he has a funny name. It wasn't his fault" (29). Joey's fondness for cats is more important than the fight for a free Ireland. When Christy warns, "You want to get your priorities right, boy. Is it happy cats or is it an Ireland free we're after?" Joey responds, "It's an Ireland free, Christy. Although I'd like a combination of the two" (30). Christy tries to resolve the situation with a compromise: "For won't the cats of Ireland be happier too when they won't have the English coming over bother them no more?" (30).

When Christy, Joey, and Brendan confront Padraic, Christy tells Padraic,

Skank Toby was the last straw. . . . Messing around teasing your marijuana gobshites is fine. But when you drag one of the big-time boys into the equation . . . and not only to cut the nose off him . . . but to then feed it to his cocker spaniel . . . and choked himself to death on it. (45)

For this outrage, they are going to execute Padraic, but they want to make it clear that the execution is nothing personal—just business. Thus Christy explains, "For there's no terrible hard feelings in this execution. You was always a good soldier, Padraic. Just overenthusiastic" (47).

The goal of a free Ireland seems to get lost in the petty dealings of the individuals involved. Padraic says he wants a free country, but he spends his time cutting off the noses of drug dealers. Christy, Joey, and Brendan say they want a free Ireland, but they are willing to kill Padraic because he is too enthusiastic a soldier. Individual causes dictate the larger cause of freedom for Ireland, but it is these individual causes and their individual champions that will finally free the

people of Ireland from their collective subservience and allow them to find individual identity. The balance of power is righting itself once again.

A further illustration of individual causes trumping more grandiose, noble ones is the exchange between Padraic and Mairead after they kill the three INLA men and decide to form their own splinter group. They discuss their plan of action for the new group:

MAIREAD: We should make a list of valid targets. From one to twenty. Like *Top of the Pops*.

PADRAIC: I used to have a list of valid targets but I lost it on a bus. Who would be at the top of your list?

MAIREAD: People who brain cats for no reason. . . .

PADRAIC: Ah, Mairead. Y'know, all I ever wanted was an Ireland free. Free for kids to run and play. Free for fellas and lasses to dance and sing. Free for cats to roam about without being clanked in the brains with a handgun. Was that too much to ask?

MAIREAD: It seems it was, Padraic. It seems it was. . . . (60)

Even though Padraic expresses his desire for a free Ireland, he wants the freedom to come on his own terms. Drug dealers and cat killers are the "valid targets" to him and Mairead. They want the free world to be one of

their own making, as opposed to one homogenized into a communal ideal housing what Alexander Pope called "a Mob of Metaphors" (*Dunciad*, Bk I). The only cause worth dying for is one catering to one's personal preferences.

After Mairead kills Padraic for braining her cat, she decides that she no longer wants to be a rebel, even though she has dreamed of being one for a long time. Fighting for a free Ireland does not hold the romance it once did, and she would rather be satisfied with her life than to fight for a purpose she no longer finds stimulating. When Davey asks her if she still intends to join the INLA, she states, "No, David. I think I'll be staying around here for a biteen. I thought shooting fellas would be fun, but it's not. It's dull" (66). The Motherland does not hold the same power it once did. Fighting for Ireland has become just another way for individuals to push their own agendas. Humans are the force behind the cause and not the other way around.

Humans are also not powerless to forces of nature in Inishmaan, and Donny and Davey take on nature with their attempt to paint an orange cat with black shoe polish and pass him off as Wee Thomas. Even though Davey can find no black cat to use as a decoy, he believes that he can

manipulate nature and change Sir Roger from an orange cat to a black cat. The plan will never work, of course, but it is the fact that Davey believes he can do it that illustrates the point. In direct contrast to Beckett's, "there's nothing to be done," Davey's conversation with Donny shows that doing nothing is not an option:

DONNY: He'll suspect.

DAVEY: He won't.

DONNY (*pause*): He will, now.

DAVEY: I amn't half finished yet. Don't be criticising until you've seen the finished job now, Donny. . . .

DONNY: As soon as he walks through the door he'll know that isn't his cat. Sure that cat's orange.

DAVEY: He won't be orange by the time I've finished with the feck. He'll be black as a coon.

DONNY: You should've got a black cat at the outset, never minding coons. . . .

DAVEY: If you don't like the cat I got then I'll take the fecker and go. We didn't come here to be criticized. (23)

The ridiculous situation shows a shift from the powerless resignation to nature of the past to the empowering active participation in one's own future. Davey's plan may not work, but the lesson is clear—destiny is what an

individual makes of life not what life makes of an individual. It might not be nice to "fool mother nature," or Padraic, but Davey is willing to "give it a go," and his willingness signals an end to passivity to the inevitable and a shift to human ingenuity.

Mother Nature is no longer sacred; neither is the Motherland. Knowing one's own mind and using one's own wit has become far more sacred to McDonagh's characters, and Padraic's contempt for the traditional rebel songs underscores this shift in focus.

Mairead is always singing lines from traditional rebel songs, but McDonagh's use of these songs is ironic because the nature of the fight has shifted. When Padraic first sees her, Mairead is singing *The Patriot Game*. This sad song is reminiscent of the feelings stirred up by the Irish writers of the past:

Come all ye young rebels and list while I sing.  
The love of one's land is a terrible thing. It  
banishes fear with the speed of a flame, and it  
makes us all part of the patriot game. . . . Oh  
my name is O'Hanlon, and I've just gone  
sixteen. My home is in Monaghan, there I was  
weaned. I was taught all my life cruel  
England's to blame, and so I'm a part of the  
patriot game. (32)



The song echoes a time when young men had a duty to fight for Ireland—a duty that superceded all else. The moment when Mairead sings this song, however, loses its solemnity and nostalgic allure when Padraic talks about the song's authors: "If they'd done a little more bombing and a little less writing I'd've had more respect for them" (32).

Later in the play, Mairead sings *The Dying Rebel*:

The night was dark and the fight was  
ended . . . The moon shone down O'Connell  
Street. . . . I stood alone where brave men  
perished. Those men have gone, their God to  
meet. . . . My only son was shot in Dublin,  
fighting for his country bold. He fought for  
Ireland and Ireland only. The harp and  
shamrock, green, white and gold." (65-67)

While this song talks of a rebel's dying nobly for his country, the message is undercut by the fact that Mairead shoots Padraic in the head in the middle of the song. She does not shoot him for the cause, and he does not die for the sake of a free Ireland; she shoots him because he killed her cat and called the cat unhygienic. The songs of Ireland, which have been used to tell the sad story of the fight for freedom, are no longer sacred. Their function in this play is ironic and illustrates the shift from a focus on nature to humans. No one in this

community holds the values that the songs reflect; they are not patriots because their love of self (or their cats) trumps their love of country.

Traditional rebel songs are not the only tool McDonagh uses to drive his point home. Characters make references in the play to the Guildford Four and Sir Roger Casement. The Guildford Four were wrongly accused rebels who served fifteen years in prison for bombings in Guildford. They were finally exonerated in 1989 when the British government found out that the police were lying. A symbol of the fight for a free Ireland and the corruption of the British, the Guildford Four is a sacred reference. In the play, when Mairead asks Padraic if he wants to go and see a movie about the Guildford Four, Padraic scoffs, "Ah, feck the Guildford Four. Even if they didn't do it, they should've took the blame and been proud. But no, they did nothing but whine" (33). Padraic has no time for the martyrs of the past. In addition to the Guildford Four reference, Mairead's cat is named Sir Roger, alluding to the Irish rebel Sir Roger Casement, who helped plan the Easter Rising of 1916. When Mairead brings up her cat, whom Padraic has killed, Padraic does not realize what she is talking about. He

mistakes her reference to the cat as homage to the historical Sir Roger Casement and says, "What has that owl poof got to do with dead cats, Mairead?" (65). Even one of the most respected and revered Irish patriots is, to Padraic, a "poof."

McDonagh not only tackles the issue of blind duty to the Motherland, but also the subject of emigration. Like Friel's characters, McDonagh's characters take on the issue of emigration. In *Beauty Queen*, Maureen once tried to leave Ireland, but the attempt made her go insane. She tells Pato of her emigration experience:

In England I was, this happened. Cleaning work. When I was twenty-five. Me first time over. Me only time over. Me sister had just got married, me other sister just about to. Over in Leeds I was, cleaning offices. Bogs. A whole group of us, only them were all English. 'Ya owl backward Paddy fecking . . . The fecking pig's-backside face on ya.' The first time out of Connemara this was I'd been. . . . Half of the swearing I didn't even understand. I had to have a black woman explain it to me. . . . And a calendar with a picture of Connemara on I showed her one day, and 'What the hell have you left there for?' she said back to me. (44)

Maureen's attempt at leaving Ireland was disastrous, and, unlike Friel's characters, she finds that living in Ireland allows her to have the personal freedom she could

never get anywhere else. When Pato talks about his experiences in England, he also echoes Maureen's sentiments about freedom and identity. Maureen confides to Pato, "That's Ireland, anyways. There's always someone leaving." When Pato says, "What can you do?" Maureen's response is "Stay?" (31). Staying has become a viable option for McDonagh's characters because in these communities it has become possible to establish one's own identity. Ireland is no longer the place that overshadows personal freedom in the name of community definition. Pato, rather than enjoy the freedom, goes to England to become anonymous. In Leenane, he feels that people are too much in one another's business. The individual identities are too strong. In England "they don't care if you live or die, and it's funny but that isn't altogether a bad thing" (32). While Friel's characters leave to find themselves, Pato leaves to escape himself. The ones who escape these communities are the ones unable to reconcile the human forces that operate within it. Unlike Maureen, Pato cannot deal with the increased freedom that Ireland affords.

Another character who cannot live in Leenane is Fr. Welsh. In *Lonesome West*, the battle between humans and nature rages on in the guise of the lake in which Fr. Welsh and Thomas Hanlon drown themselves. Unlike the sea in *Riders to the Sea*, the water is not an uncontrollable force, taking away the men of Ireland. In *Riders*, Maurya loses her family to the unforgiving sea or, more specifically, to the overwhelming and unstoppable forces of nature. The men drown because nature is too powerful. In *Riders*, Nora illustrates the power of the sea when she tells Cathleen, "There's a great roaring in the west, and it's worse it'll be getting when the tide's turned to the wind" (86).

In *Lonesome West* the water has no power. While the lake is the scene of two deaths, the power lies with the humans who choose to walk into its depths. Thomas Hanlon and Fr. Welsh deliberately walk into the lake and commit suicide. They control their own destinies, and they use an element of nature to do it. Ultimately, the characters in McDonagh's plays have a choice. They can manipulate nature to fulfill their desires or they can harness it to diminish its effect. What they will not do is wait passively for nature to have its way with them.

Fr. Welsh's chooses to commit suicide, but he demonstrates there is always a choice. When he asks Girleen why she is not scared of cemeteries, she says:

It's because . . . even if you're sad or something, or lonely or something, you're still better off than them lost in the ground or in the lake, because . . . at least you've got the chance to be happy. . . . But as least when you're still here there's the *possibility* of happiness, and it's like them dead ones know that, and they're happy for you to have it.  
(218)

Because Girleen and the people of Leenane see life and death as choices, there is always the possibility of happiness. The characters in the plays of past Irish writers saw no possibilities because they saw no options. Fr. Welsh chooses to die, others choose to live—nature has less power over humans if they have choices.

In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, McDonagh introduces the traditional image of the powerful sea, but it is not the same sea as that of Synge. The sea, in McDonagh's play, has the ability to take lives. It takes the lives of Billy's parents; however, his parents choose to venture into the sea in order to kill their crippled son. As a consequence, Johnnypateenmike saves Billy, but his parents die. Johnnypateenmike, not wanting Billy to continue to believe that his parents' death was his

fault, tells Billy an alternative, albeit phony, story about noble sacrifice:

JOHNNY: It was on the sands I met them that night, staring off into the black, the water roaring, and I wouldn't've thought a single thing more of it, if I hadn't seen the sack full of stones tied to the hands of them there, as they heaved it into the boat. A big old hemp sack like the one of them there, it was. And they handed you to me then, then started towing, to deep water.

BILLY: So they *did* kill themselves o'er me?

JOHNNY: They killed themselves, aye, but not for the reasons you think. D'you think it was to get away from ye?

BILLY: Why else, sure?

JOHNNY: Will I tell him?

EILEEN *nods*.

JOHNNY: A week before this it was they'd first been told you'd be dying if they couldn't get you to the Regional Hospital and medicines down you. But a hundred pounds or near this treatment'd cost. . . . I know you know it was their death insurance paid for the treatment saved you. But did you know it was the same day I met them on the sands there they had taken their insurance policy out?

BILLY (*pause*): It was for me they killed themselves? (73-4)

Johnny's story seems to suggest the same type of powerless sacrifice that the characters of Yeats, Synge, and Friel make. There seems to have been no escape from

the forces of the universe, so Billy's parents made the ultimate sacrifice. In truth, however, Billy's parents drowned, not to save Billy, but rather, in an attempt to kill him. As Kate later reveals:

The stories Johnnypateen spins. When it was poor Billy they tied in that sack of stones, and Billy would still be at the bottom of the sea to this day, if it hadn't been for Johnnypateen swimming out to save him. And stealing his mammy's hundred pounds then to pay for Billy's hospital treatment. (80)

Unbeknownst to the Eileen and Kate, Billy's aunts, Billy has overheard Kate. In that moment, Billy feels, as the stage directions demonstrate, that he must commit suicide:

*The two smile and exit. . . . After a pause, BILLY comes in from the back, sniffing, and turns the oil lamp up, revealing his bloodshot eyes and tear-stained cheeks. He quietly takes the sack down from the wall, places inside it numerous cans of peas until it's very heavy, then ties the cords at the top of the bag tightly around one of his hands. This done, he pauses in thought a moment, then shuffles to the door. . . .* (81)

The truth is that Billy has a choice. Helen's entrance moments later and the kiss that follows, reaffirms what Girleen told Fr. Welsh in *Lonesome West*—every moment always contains the possibility of happiness. The stage directions show Billy recognizing,



even in his suicidal despair, an opportunity may be knocking:

HELEN kisses BILLY briefly, winks at him, and pulls the door behind her as she exits. BILLY is left standing there stunned for a moment, then remembers the sack tied to his hand. Pause. He unties it, replaces the cans on the shelves and hangs the sack back up on the wall.  
. . . (82)

For the moment, Billy will live to fight another day, even if his tuberculosis gets the better of him, he chooses, at this moment, to live anyway.

The characters in McDonagh's plays take action and make choices. Johnny's dose of sentimentality, while providing temporary comfort to Billy, is more comic than comforting. Clearly Billy has a choice, and he chooses to hang up his suicide attempt while he ventures to find out if the kiss and the wink mean anything. Billy has time. His destiny is his to determine. He can choose to die or choose to live. Either way, he is the master of his own fate. In McDonagh's world, everything happens because the characters operate in the world as active participants, not passive victims.

In *War is Kind*, Stephen Crane tells the following story:

A man said to the universe:  
"Sir I exist!"  
"However," replied the universe,  
"The fact has not created in me  
A sense of obligation."

From Yeats to Friel, in the history of Irish drama, this tension between man and nature has been a perfect illustration of the relationship between the Irish and the universe. Characters such as Michael in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Johnny in *Juno and the Paycock*, Gar in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*, and Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa* have all been victims of the universe's lack of obligation to them as humans. Their existence is of no consequence to nature, and, because of this fact, they feel they have no control over their own destinies. The best they can hope for is the peace of death, the glory of war, or the resignation of escape. When Michael blindly follows Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the other characters feel powerless to stop him. He is overcome by a force outside of himself to die for Ireland. When Johnny is killed, Juno can only ask, "Why?" Maurya only asks for peace as she resigns herself

to the power of the sea. Michael looks back on Lughnasa as one who escaped but who cannot overcome his guilt over leaving. All of these characters illustrate the destruction of a world unbalanced—a world in which nature holds all of the cards and is unconcerned with the fate of humans.

McDonagh's characters exist loudly and boldly, no longer privileging nature or its forces. Humans regain their sacredness through active participation in the world. Nature, the land, and the Motherland no longer elicit any sense of unflinching duty or obligation. Characters operate under the idea that humans play an equal part in the world and that it is the element of choice that makes life worth living. In the worlds McDonagh creates, Crane's anecdote does not seem to apply. It appears that in the new Ireland, the universe's cold indifference does not affect the way in which these characters live their lives. For the characters in McDonagh's plays, Crane's story appears reversed:

The universe said to man:  
"Sir I exist!"  
"However," replied the man,  
"The fact has not created in me  
A sense of obligation."

Humans must be on equal ground with nature if there is ever to be any possibility of happiness. Humans are no more obligated to the universe and nature than universe and nature are obligated to the human race. McDonagh makes this point in hopes that the message will empower the Irish people to believe in the power of the human being. As Cripple Billy states, "There comes a time in every fella's life when he has to take his heart in his hands and make a try for something, and even though he knows it's a one in a million chance of him getting it, he has to chance it still, else, why be alive at all?" (78). The Irish are not pawns, bowing to the whim of nature. They are people who have the power to take chances, make choices, and live, knowing there is always the "possibility of happiness."

## CHAPTER 4

### EMBRACING THE CAT AND KILLING THE MOTHER:

#### INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY

In this final chapter, all the elements of the first three binaries come together in order to show how the balancing of the scales has created an individual-centered community. In previous dramatic searches for Irish identity, the idea of an Irish community has taken precedence over the place of individuals in that community. Because of the overwhelming denial of individual autonomy, Ireland has been a nation searching for "Irishness" in all the wrong places. The search had become all-consuming; it certainly consumed the writers of Ireland's past. Irishness and Irish identity have, themselves, become oppressive because they are forever elusive. To believe that a community can define itself before individuals have a chance to find themselves is already a recipe for failure. A community cannot be Irish if the people within that community are not first

allowed to be humans. Clearly Yeats, Gregory, Synge, O'Casey, and Friel knew the perils of defining Irishness. In their attempts to identify that which is truly Irish, most of these writers found themselves urging the people to also find their own identities: "The Irish literary revival . . . created not just images of historical self-appraisal and expressions of individual experience within an invented community but also a habit of mind and a set of conventions and themes whereby the people might understand who they were" (Murray 163). The reasons their plays were not effective in showing the Irish what needed to be done is that they only offered a look at "what is," when they should have offered a paradigm of what could be. They were, as Murray argues, holding a "mirror up to a nation." No matter how these playwrights dramatize their messages, the individual characters in their plays remain controlled by the communities in which they live. The community establishes behavioral codes and imposes them upon the individuals who live within them.

In *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Yeats and Gregory are illustrating what happens when a young man has no sense of himself—when he is so overcome by his sense of obligation to the idealized Motherland community that he

puts those needs above his own and those of his bride-to-be. When the Old Woman tells Michael, "I have my thoughts and I have my hopes. . . . The hope of getting my beautiful fields back again; the hope of putting the strangers out of my house" (55), Michael, consumed by the Old Woman's lure, agrees to go with her and help. When his mother says, "It is not her friends you have to go and welcome, Michael; it is the girl coming into the house you have to welcome" (55), it is too late. Michael's desires have been subsumed into the needs of the larger, mythical community. When his mother shows him "the clothes you are going to wear when you marry Delia Cahel to-morrow," Michael confesses, "I had forgotten that" (57). In this case, Michael must fulfill his duty to the many rather than fulfill his duty to himself or his wife-to-be. The country is calling and, if Ireland is to be saved, Michael and all men like him must answer this call. The sense that Yeats and Gregory give the audience is that Michael, by his sacrifice, will save Ireland. As she walks away, the Old Woman is no longer old. When Peter asks if Patrick saw an old woman on the path, Patrick responds, "I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen" (57).

Ireland is saved; no longer an old, decrepit nation, she is transformed by Michael's sacrifice back into a lovely queen.

Yeats paints a very different picture in *Purgatory*, written thirty-seven years later. In this play, the hope of saving Ireland has proven futile. The sacrifices have done nothing to change the situation—there is no Irishness, no communal identity. The Old Man tells the Boy how Ireland, represented by his grandmother and her house, has been killed by his grand-dad who "had loved the house, had loved all/ The intricate passages of the house,/ But he killed the house: to kill a house/ Where great men grew up, married, died,/ I hereby declare a capital offence" (432). At the end of the play, the Old Man stabs the Boy because he sees it as the only way to stop the endless cycle of grief and anguish that has plagued Ireland. He admits, "I killed the lad because had he grown up/ He would have struck a woman's fancy,/ Begot, and passed pollution on. . . . O God,/ Release my mother's soul from it's dream!/ Mankind can do no more. Appease/ The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead" (435-6). A very different Yeats is mourning the loss of hope that he once celebrated in *Cathleen Ni*



*Houlihan*. Duty to one's community has created a community of misery. As Murray observes, "*Purgatory* was a provocative call to the Abbey audience to wake up to the full consequences of Irish freedom. Mother Ireland had been traduced and could never again be entirely at peace" (32). The community's values have destroyed the individual.

Synge also dealt with this notion of individual and community. In *Playboy of the Western World*, Synge's contribution to resolving this binary, more than any other Irish playwright, seems in tune with McDonagh's message, if not completely with his method. Synge, like McDonagh, wanted his audience to understand the importance of the individual in a free Ireland. His characters are often faced with revolutionary choices. The difference between the two playwrights is execution. For Synge, the choice may happen, but the audience never sees the consequences of that choice, or, the moment of choice may be fleeting; the characters are not permanently changed by their experiences.

*Playboy's* setting in a village on the coast of County Mayo, serves as a backdrop for inhabitants who seem to be a community living according to the dictates

of the oppressive powers that have been holding Ireland down. These powers impose codes of behavior, determining what is right and wrong, and the characters have adopted and adapted to these codes. Shawn Keogh, for example, will not allow even the appearance of impropriety in his relationship with his fiancé, Pegeen. Because Pegeen is afraid when Michael is away, Michael asks Shawn to stay at the house with her. Shawn refuses and his "horror" at being asked demonstrates his fear of the forces who judge him:

SHAWN (*in horrified confusion*): I would and welcome, Michael James, but I'm afeard of Father Reilly; and what at all would the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome be saying if they heard I did the like of that?

MICHAEL (*with contempt*): God help you! Can't you sit in by the hearth with the light lit and herself beyond in the room? You'll do that surely, for I've heard tell there's a queer fellow above, going mad or getting his death, maybe, in the gripe of the ditch, so she'd be safer this night with a person here.

SHAWN (*with plaintive despair*): I'm afeard of Father Reilly, I'm saying. Let you not be tempting me, and we near marriage itself. (12)

Even if Pegeen's life is in danger, Shawn will not violate the codes set up by the Church. With Shawn Synge shows the stereotypical Irish adult male who lives firmly and mindlessly in the grip of a powerful institution. He

has no idea how to distinguish between "staying" in the house with a woman to provide protection and "staying" in the house with a woman who will lure him into "premarital sin." He doesn't have to make the distinction; he has only to defer to the "authority" of Fr. Reilly, thus freeing himself from needing a mind of his own.

When Christy, a mysterious stranger, enters the village, however, Synge shows how the town changes. Christy claims to have killed his father—a deed that *should* horrify the people he encounters. Instead, the characters in the play mythologize him into being a hero. Christy seems to play by his own rules, favoring his individual rights above those imposed upon him by the community. To Pegeen and the rest of the villagers, this kind of individuality is strange and exciting. A man who kills his "da" is surely a special type of man. When Christy comes on the scene, Michael should be wary of him, but he has no qualms about leaving him to look after Pegeen. As his friend Jimmy states, "Now, by the grace of God, herself will be safe this night, with a man killed his father holding danger from the door, and let you come on, Michael James, or they'll have the best

stuff drunk at the wake" (20). These characters are used to stifling their individuality, the marginal are magnificent.

The Widow Quin is another character who operates on the margins of this society. She, herself, is accused of murder, as well as other questionable moral actions. The widow is a member of the community, but because she plays by her own rules, she is gossiped about and disliked. When Christy enters the scene, the Widow Quin sees a kindred spirit:

WIDOW QUIN (*peaceably*): We'll be walking surely when his supper's done, and you'll find we're great company, young fellow, when it's of the like of you and me you'd hear the penny poets singing in an August fair.

CHRISTY (*innocently*): Did you kill your father?

PEGEEN (*contemptuously*): She did not. She hit himself with a worn pick, and the rusted poison did corrode his blood the way he never overed it, and died after. That was a sneaky kind of murder did win small glory with the boys itself. (26)

The Widow Quin and Christy both seem to be the embodiment of individualism, although the widow, because she lives among them, has never been heroic to the villagers. She

is unapologetic and truly a McDonagh-type character. In McDonagh's world, the widow would be the norm, not the exception.

When the town finds out that Christy has lied, that he is not the brave soul who killed his father, they turn on him. They admired him when he was a hero and apparently everything they were not, but when it turns out that Christy is as cowardly as the rest of them, the community codes take over. As Pegeen states, "I'll say, a strange man is a marvel, with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back-yard, and the blow of a loy, have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed" (72). The town then attempts to hang Christy for his crimes against the "law." The town is intrigued by this playboy when they think he is governed by his own codes, but the town cannot escape the obligations and outside forces of its own community to emulate Christy. As Pegeen laments, "Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only playboy of the Western World" (75). What Pegeen fails to realize is that Christy need not be an exception. What Synge hoped the Irish audience would see is that within each individual is the ability to choose the self over

the forces outside of self. In *Synge and Irish Nationalism*, Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel suggests, "As in Ireland's history up to 1907, the rare hero truly and intelligently serving Ireland had failed to truly materialize, but Synge defined how he *could* emerge" (49).

McDonagh is taking Synge's play to the next level. He is showing what could happen if the people really lived the lives they admire in *Christy*. In *Playboy of the Western World*, Synge's intention is to shock and implicate the audience. Murray explains Synge's technique:

The audience watches in varying degrees of disbelief while the absurd situation is established. . . . A moral issue is brazenly made fun of and the audience is implicated in the conspiracy. This technique is used repeatedly. Synge was thus elaborating a joke at the audience's expense. (85)

Synge's hope was that the audience would be jolted into recognition—that the audience would see past the illusion of reality and see through the mirror's perceptions. Initially, the experiment failed—at least it did in Ireland. The audience took the play at face value, accepting what was represented as "real." In his article "*The Playboy of the Western World*," Zack R. Bowen states,

"Synge's language and images had such a dramatic and telling effect upon its audience that they saw the play as a representation of reality, rather than as a work of art" (71). In her introduction to *The Playboy of the Western World and Other Plays*, Ann Saddlemyer writes, "But it is clear also that the Dublin audience, trained on traditional melodrama . . . and led to expect another 'Celtic' play in the Yeatsian tradition, were hardly prepared for the shock . . . to which Synge subjected them" (xiv). McDonagh's method is not to implicate the audience, but rather to empower the audience to see in themselves the bravery and personal freedom of his characters. He offers a solution, not just an illustration of the problem.

In the worlds of McDonagh, the two elements of the individual and community binary create a symbiotic relationship. The individual's desires meet those of the community's head on. It is by creating strong individual identities that the community can develop. It may be an outrageous, allegorical community of murderers and liars (as outsiders might view Leenane, Inishmore, and Inishmaan), but it is a community that has adopted its own individual notions of morality, not the other way

around. The community is no larger than the people who live in the town. There is no sense of being part of a larger Irish context; however, by the very fact that they are active participants in their own individual destinies, they do create a new and exciting Irish context. All of the characters in all five McDonagh plays refuse to live by the codes imposed on them by religion, England, the Motherland, or history. They live by their own codes, and, those who do not oppress or impose on others, live happily and peacefully. Sometimes, these codes take the form of violent behavior; however, in McDonagh's allegory, violence represents the single, most self-empowering action one can take. Violence is the most extreme way in which an individual exerts control over people, places, or things. In these allegories, violence is the equivalent of a declaration of independence.

In his play, *The Lonesome West*, Martin McDonagh explores this notion of the balancing of individual and community in a small Irish society that has not only deconstructed itself, but also reconstructed a society in which the privileged are the powerless, and the powerless are the privileged. The profane has become sacred and



the sacred profane. Fr. Welsh best illustrates this shift of power. Fr. Welsh, as the representative of the dominant Catholic religion and, more specifically, the clergy--the historical arbiters of who belongs and who does not, of what is right and what is wrong, and what is acceptable and unacceptable--does not assume a place of respect and dominance in the town of Leenane. He is viewed as the outsider. Rather than a community of followers, the people of Leenane march to their own drummers. To the brothers, Coleman and Valene, and the rest of the town, there is no greater meaning beyond the moment. The "community values" of old hold no weight here.

As the outsider in this community, Fr. Welsh cannot function in the world because he does not understand the societal codes. When Fr. Welsh encounters this codified society, he is shocked and dismayed that the brothers fight and attempt to kill one another over petty differences. He cannot believe that the brothers have murdered their father or that the whole town is filled with alleged murderers and violent individuals. Fr. Welsh not only drinks to reconcile his civilized, religious beliefs with the violent codes of this town,

but he eventually becomes the society's ironic victim—committing two acts of violence against himself to try and change the brothers' violent behavior. Rather than the powerful having the power, the (traditionally) powerless dictate how the society functions. The rules of the weak have replaced the rules of the strong. Those who in the past have held no natural, national, or institutional power have the power in the town of Leenane. The people of Leenane refuse to follow the rules and laws set up for them by those in power in Ireland. In the world of this play, Fr. Welsh cannot understand this society; he cannot communicate within the society, and, therefore, he cannot survive in this society.

Many times throughout the play, it is clear that Fr. Welsh does not understand the way in which the people of Leenane, and Valene and Coleman specifically, interact with one another. As a man of the Church, he expects that his admonishments and reprimands will be taken seriously, but he soon realizes that he has no control over his flock. When he encounters a town that disregards the old organizing structures, he simply cannot grasp this idea.

Throughout the play, Fr. Welsh tries to admonish the characters for their "inappropriate" behavior. He cannot understand why Valene and Coleman choose to fight one another on the very day of their father's burial. He is shocked that young Girleen goes around town selling poteen and joking about being a prostitute. There are rumors around town that Maureen Folan has murdered her mother and Mick Dowd has murdered his wife. He asks, "What kind of town is this at all? Brothers fighting and lasses peddling booze and two fecking murderers on the loose?" (183).

Rather than realizing that his—and the Church's—brand of justice, peace, love, and understanding does not rule over the individuals in this town, he blames himself for not being a good enough priest to reach his people. The town of Leenane has shifted from being told what to do to privileging their own codes and beliefs. The Church's views on morality and decency have been replaced by the idea that morality is situational and relational. When Fr. Welsh asks Girleen if she knows that Coleman killed his father, Girleen explains:

GIRLEEN: Sure I'm no fecking stool-pigeon and Coleman's dad was always a grumpy oul feck. He did kick me cat Eamonn there once.

WELSH: A fella deserves to die, so, for kicking a cat?

GIRLEEN (*shrugs*): It depends on the fella. And the cat. But there'd be a lot less cats kicked in Ireland, I'll tell ya, if the fella could rest-assured he'd be shot in the head after.

WELSH: You have no morals at all, it seems, Girleen.

GIRLEEN: I have plenty of morals only I don't keep whining on about them like some fellas.  
(212)

Fr. Welsh immediately dismisses Girleen's views as immoral, not understanding that his concept of morality is not applicable to the people of Leenane. In this town, an individual's belief that kicking a cat is punishable by death usurps any community belief in "Thou shalt not kill." As Fr. Welsh begins to feel his Otherness, he begins to lament the fact that he does not belong in Leenane. He tells Girleen, "Maybe I am high-horse so. Maybe that's why I don't fit into this town. Although I'd have to have killed half me fecking relatives to fit into this town. Jeez. I thought Leenane was a nice place when first I turned up here, but no. Turns out it's the murder capital of fecking Europe" (212). As the Other, Welsh's views are secondary in this

town. Because Fr. Welsh does not understand the codes of the town and refuses to recognize his own and the Church's inferior place in it; he is ill equipped to communicate with the town. He is the outsider, and his institutional brand of language and system of beliefs have been replaced.

The other characters in *Lonesome West* operate quite happily with their new codes. For example, when Coleman is talking to Fr. Welsh about the "under-twelves" girl's soccer team the priest coaches, Fr. Welsh talks about the girls being too violent: "Ten red cards in four games, Coleman. That's a world's record in girls' football. That'd be a record in boys' football. One of the lasses from St. Angela's she's still in hospital after meeting us" (179). While the violence of these little girls shocks Fr. Welsh, Coleman explains: "If she wasn't up for the job she shouldn't've been on the field of play. . . . Sissy whining bitches is all them little feckers are" (179). Another example occurs when Fr. Welsh tells Coleman not to be swearing on the day of his father's funeral. Coleman responds: "I'll be swearing

if I want to be swearing" (170). The individual is in charge of his own actions, and not even the Church can tell him what to do.

The same brand of individual-centered codes carry through into *Beauty Queen* and *Skull in Connemara*. Since all three of these plays take place in Leenane, it is helpful to look at them all together. Clearly the characters in *Lonesome West* create a community of individuals, and the same is true for the other two plays in the trilogy. In *Beauty Queen*, Pato and Maureen discuss some of the behavior of the people in the town. They, like Girleen, comment on the violent events that have occurred, but they have none of the outrage of Fr. Welsh. They are more contemplative. When talking about Coleman's cutting the ears off of Valene's dog, they have the following conversation:

MAUREEN: Is it true Coleman cut the ears off of Valene's dog and keeps them in his room in a bag?

PATO: He showed me them ears one day.

MAUREEN: That's awful spiteful, cutting the ears off a dog.

PATO: It *is* awful spiteful.

MAUREEN: It would be spiteful enough to cut the ears off anybody's dog, let alone your own brother's dog.

PATO: And it had seemed a nice dog.

MAUREEN: Aye. . . . (29)

To most people, cutting off the ears of a dog is horrifying, but in Leenane, the inhabitants see it as merely "spiteful." Maureen and Pato offer no real condemnation, just a philosophical take on the incident. The codes of right and wrong have changed. Torture, whether of animals or humans has a new name: spite. Coleman cuts ears of a dog, and Maureen is constantly torturing her mother, but they do it out of spite. Morality in Leenane is relational. The individuals make the rules.

Even when the "law" tries to charge Maureen for the murder of her mother, it is to no avail. As Maureen complains to Ray, "When it could've been last month we buried her, and she could've got the last of the sun, if it wasn't for the hundred bastarding inquests, proved nothing" (74). Just like Fr. Welsh, the "polis" have no jurisdiction in this town, either. If Maureen says Mag "slipped," then no one will ever prove otherwise—even if everyone in the town knows the real story.

Everyone in Leenane also suspects the truth about Mick Dowd's killing his wife in *Skull in Connemara*; however, no one has ever been able to prove this murder, either. There is plenty of speculation and "aspersions" being cast, but that does not stop the people in the town from associating with these killers. Mick and Maureen are the talk of the town, but people will still share a cup of poteen with them. When Mary publicly discovers that Mick may have killed his wife, she feigns outrage; however, Mick knows the truth: "If you had known that you'd still've come up cadging booze off me all these years, ya cheapskate fecking lump" (153). The town may doubt the innocence of these people, but they understand that a person has to live by his own code—they may feign outrage, but it is only because their reactions are measured by what the individual wants and what the community is supposed to accept.

Throughout the course of *Skull*, the characters are constantly waxing philosophical about their individual codes. In the beginning, Mick and Mary are discussing three young boys Mary caught "weeing in the churchyard" (90). When Mary told the boys she would tell the priest on them, they called her "a fat oul biddy" (90). When



Mick points out that the incident happened twenty-seven years ago, Mary refuses to forgive the boys and argues:

MICK: You should let bygones be bygones.

MARY: Bygones, is it? No, I will not let bygones be bygones. I'll tell you when I'll let bygones be bygones. When I see them burned in hell I'll let bygones be bygones, and not before!

MICK: Hell is too harsh a price just for weeing. Sure they were only five, God bless them. (90)

Mary refuses to adhere to the traditional value of forgiveness—even if the ones who harmed her are five-year-olds. Mary also is known for cheating at the parish's bingo games. Mick asserts, "Out of the mouths of starving darkies Maryjohnny rips her bingo winnings." Mary counters with her own brand of morality: "Isn't it better to starve darkies than to murder missuses?" (154).

Mairtin also operates under his own personal moral code. When Mick asks him about an incident in which too young girls were "bottled" at a local disco, Mairtin denies being there but still explains why those two girls might have been hurt:

MARY: Why would poor girls deserve a bottling, sure?

MAIRTIN: Every why. Maybe the piss out of a fella's trainers they took, when all he did was ask them for a danceen, and polite. And then called their bastard brother over to come the hard. Stitches aren't good enough for them sorts of bitches, and well they know. As ugly as them two started out, sure stitches'd be nothing but an improvement, oh aye. (*Pause.*) But as I say, I wasn't there, now, I had a bad leg. (97)

Traditional community values might teach that men should not hit women; however, in this case, in Mairtin's opinion, there was good reason.

Another example of how the people of Leenane negotiate within their new moral codes is when Thomas, Mick, and Mairtin get in a fight in the graveyard. When Mick calls Mairtin an "eejit and a blackguard," Thomas explains to Mick why he must counter his insult:

THOMAS: Now, Mick, you've insulted poor wee Mairtin there, you've insulted family, such as it is, so now I have to go and something insulting back to you. That is the way these things operate.

MICK: You're the one who started with the insults.

THOMAS: No, Mick, no. I have to take you up on that. You're the one who started with the insults. I was the one who started with the vague insinuations.

MICK: It's the self-same thing. . . .

THOMAS: It's not the self-same thing at all, and if you knew anything about the law the you'd know it's not the self-same thing. So now I have to turn my vague insinuations into something more of an insult, so then we'll all be quits . . . (127)

The audience, and characters such as Fr. Welsh, may never understand how this town functions, but the people of Leenane have the codes all figured out. Even insulting each other is based on an intricate system of "tit for tat." At the end of the play, when Mick tells Mairtin that he will have to pay for crashing Mick's car, Mairtin tells Mick it is not fair. Mick replies, "Well life's not fair, Mairtin." Mairtin's response sums up the new codified society of Leenane: "It *is* fair. I like it anyways" (163). The town is fair now—fair and balanced.

In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, just as in *Skull*, the characters are constantly explaining and illustrating their new fair and balanced societal codes. The people of the community often commit violence against one another. Helen hits, kicks, and pegs eggs at everyone and anyone in town, including her brother. Babbybobby attacks Johnnypateenmike, Johnnypateenmike attempts to kill his mother by allowing her to drink herself to death; Billy's parents drown in an attempt to drown their

crippled son, and Babbybobby beats Billy with a lead pipe. In his article "Where Pain and Laughter Meet: The Irish Plays of Martin McDonagh," Joseph J. Feeney further explains this world of McDonagh's: "McDonagh's vision is darkly Irish and highly personal . . . . The Aran Islands . . . are home to a 90 year-old alcoholic mother, a son who's killing her with alcohol, a woman who talks to a stone, a girl who throws eggs at people and a tubercular cripple whose parents drowned themselves and tried to drown him" (20). Through all of these actions, the characters lay the framework of their individual codes. Each person has a set of beliefs, and, as long as those beliefs do not oppress another member of the society, the characters co-exist. It is these rules and laws of each individual that make up the community. For example, when Billy asks Helen if she has to be so violent, she responds:

BILLY: Do ya have to be so violent, Helen?

HELEN: I do have to be so violent, or if I'm not to be taken advantage of anyways I have to be so violent.

BILLY: Sure, nobody's taken advantage of you since the age of seven, Helen.

HELEN: Six is nearer the mark. I ruptured a curate at six.

BILLY: So couldn't you tone down a bit of your violence and be more of a sweet girl?

HELEN: I could, you're right there. And the day after I could shove a bent spike up me arse. . . . (76)

Helen illustrates McDonagh's point well, an individual is responsible for her own fate. If one allows the community to dictate behavior, she will be taken advantage of.

In this play, Johnnypateenmike loves to gossip. Rather than wanting peace in the community, Johnnypateenmike prefers feuding and fighting, illness and death, so that his gossip is more juicy, and his rewards for that gossip are more handsome. As he states, "That *is* an awful big piece of news. That goose might start a feud. I *hope* that goose does start a feud. I like a feud" (5). When Kate suggests that she hopes the two parties involved put the incident behind them, Johnny protests: "There's a woman speaking if ever I heard one. What news is there in putting things behind ya? No news. . ." (5). The individuals' concerns take precedence.

In *Lieutenant of Inishmore*, individual concerns (disguised masterfully as love of cats) also take precedence. In *Inishmore*, nothing deserves death more than the harming of a cat. In this play, the characters impose their own values on their society and take the same philosophical approach to moral matters. In the beginning, when Padraic is torturing a drug dealer, he is very reasonable about the torture. In his own moral code, torturing drug dealers is noble, but he has his limits. After pulling off two of James's toenails (the small ones on one foot), he asks the prisoner to choose a nipple to be sliced off:

Whichever's your favorite nipple I won't be touching that fella at all, I'll be concentrating on the other. I'll be giving him a nice sliceen and then probably be feeding him to ya, but if you don't pick and pick quick it'll be both of the boys you'll be waving goodbye to, and waving goodbye to two tits when there's no need . . . makes no sense at all as far as I can see. (12)

Even though Padraic is violently torturing James, there is still a method to his madness—a code by which he operates.

Later, when Padraic realizes that his cat, Wee Thomas, is dead, he blames his father and Davey. In Padraic's mind, the only punishment for such an offense is death, and he explains to his victims, "What I want ye to remember, as the bullets come out through yer foreheads, is that this is all a fella can be expecting for being so bad to an innocent Irish cat" (44).

Others in the play share Padraic's love of cats and his disdain for those who hurt them. Even those who are violent against other people cannot justify the killing of cats. When Mairead finds out that Davey may have been responsible for killing Padraic's cat, she shoots at her brother with her air rifle. When Davey asks "You'd have blinded your brother over a dead cat," Mairead responds, "I would. Without question" (18). After Mairead discovers that Padraic killed her cat, Sir Roger, by mistake, she executes him. Even though she is seemingly in love with Padraic, her love of Sir Roger and her individual values trump that love.

Padraic's two fellow members of the INLA are responsible for the death of Padraic's cat, but this fact does not sit well with the third member, Joey. He is outraged by the actions of Christy and Brendan and

states, "I've the balls to take on any feck. . . . But what I don't have, I don't have to go out of my way to pick on wee fellas I'm twenty times bigger than and who are unarmed, and who will never be armed because they have no arms. Just paws" (27). The love of cats is a symbol for the individual-centered codes of Inishmore. The cats represent those values that each individual holds as important, and if anyone attempts to trample or destroy those values, that person must be destroyed. The morality, however, as it is with the characters in the other four plays, is relational. Padraic once cut the nose off a drug dealer, fed the nose to the dealer's dog, and the dog choked and died. Padraic's only response to the incident is "I don't like dogs, I don't" (45).

In addition to the cat philosophy in this play, the characters also contemplate and discuss other moral issues. Padraic is interrupted in his attempt to kill his father and Davey, and he is led away to what appears to be his own execution. Davey asks Donny if the death of his son will make him sad:

DAVEY (*Pause.*): Are you sad, Donny?

DONNY: Sad, why?



DAVEY: Sad them fellas are to be shooting your head off him?

DONNY (*Pause.*): Not really, if I think about it now.

DAVEY: No. After your son tries to execute you, your opinions do change about him.

DONNY: You lose respect, d'you know? (49)

Each individual determines what moral code he will follow. Traditionally, a father should not want his son to die, but, in this case, if the son tries to kill the father, the respect disappears. In each situation, it is up to each person to determine the right course of action.

At the end of the play, when Wee Thomas appears unharmed, Davey and Donny, sitting in a room filled with blood and body parts (both cat and human), philosophize on what has transpired throughout the course of the play:

DAVEY: So all this terror has been for absolutely nothing?

DONNY: It has!

DAVEY: All because this fecker was after his hole? Four dead fellas, two dead cats . . . me hairstyle ruined! Have I missed anything?

DONNY: Your sister broken-hearted.

DAVEY: My sister broken-hearted.

DONNY: All me shoe polish gone.

DAVEY: That cat deserves shooting! (68)

They do not, however, shoot Wee Thomas. Their own moral codes, in this situation, lead them to ask "Hasn't there been enough killing done in this house for one day?"

(69).

In *Lieutenant*, as in all McDonagh's plays, the extreme violence is the characters' way of empowering themselves with their own beliefs. The allegories teach the audience that acting on one's own, individual moral compass is just as legitimate, if not more so, than following the codes set up by the oppressive institution of religion, government, and history. Unlike the characters in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and *Purgatory*, there is no losing one's identity to the expectations of the community of Ireland and, therefore, no desperation at the loss of individuality. While the characters in *Playboy* flirt with the idea of letting their own consciences be their guides, in the end, they cannot escape the community values. Pegeen laments the loss but cannot realize that she should have followed her own personal code. The character of Widow Quin, however, seems as though she belongs squarely in a McDonagh play.

She would easily hold her own with Maureen, Valene, Coleman, Mick, Padraic, and Helen because she has an "own." She is a revolutionary character for Synge; however, she resides in the margins of her own society. The Widow Quin's of the world are no longer marginalized in McDonagh's world.

Because the characters in McDonagh's plays have restored the balances between faith and reason, autonomy and responsibility, and humans and nature, they can also balance the scales with regard to individual and community. The Irish people in these plays are not ruled by the Church, by their responsibilities to their country, or by the sacredness of the land and Motherland. The people in these plays are empowered to find within themselves the faith in reason, the responsibility to their own autonomy, and the nature of their own humanity. In all of these plays, the communities that develop are made up of individuals who dictate the societal codes by following their own. For so long, the community of Ireland (those forces outside of the self) has set the rules. Now, McDonagh offers an alternative society in which the individuals create the community. The community does not create individuals. Instead of the

traditional, grand moral concepts, the people of Ireland can live by one simple mantra: "It depends on the fella. And the cat." If McDonagh's characters were ever to encounter Cathleen Ni Houlihan, they most assuredly would tell the old woman to "feck off" and call her a "loon." McDonagh creates his allegories in the hope that the Irish people will soon do the same to the Cathleen Ni Houlihans who have tried to keep them down—embrace the cat and kill the mother.

## CONCLUSION

In a paper entitled "Can We Go Back into Our Mother's Womb?" Synge "prophesied that a writer would soon appear who could 'teach Ireland again that she is part of Europe and teach Irishmen that they have wits to think, imaginations to work miracles, and souls to possess with sanity'" (Murray 87). Many critics could argue, and rightfully so, that Synge was the fulfillment of his own prophecy; however, Synge's comment may have larger implications because his prophecy can also be applied to McDonagh. McDonagh's plays, while being wickedly funny, are ultimately empowering, and the worlds he creates are meant to teach the Irish people how to celebrate their independence and to convince them of their own powerful humanity.

Rather than continue the tradition of Irish plays that lament the loss of Irish identity, McDonagh has created towns *lousy* with identity—not the mythic, collective identity, but rather individual identities. The people of Leenane, Inishmaan, and Inishmore may not

be the type of people the audiences of Irish drama are used to seeing, but they have the question of "who they are" figured out. They no longer need the Church or history to tell them what or who to be. They have reclaimed their independence. According to Mimi Kramer, in her article "Three for the Show," however, McDonagh "seems less interested in exhorting us to reinvent society than in showing us the different ways in which we try to reinvent ourselves" (72).

In order to best illustrate his new ideas, McDonagh opts for the traditional. When an audience sits down to a McDonagh play, what they see is very familiar and similar to what they would see in any of the Irish peasant plays; however, what happens within that naturalistic setting is far from familiar. The audience for a McDonagh play is lulled into a false sense of security and then shaken from that safety and taken into a dark and violent place. The place is important because it truly emphasizes the allegorical nature of the stories McDonagh tells. The place (the settings) must be familiar in order to make the story the focus. While many scholars might argue that McDonagh is not doing anything different from what Yeats, Gregory, Synge,

O'Casey, Beckett, and Friel were trying to accomplish, the truth is that McDonagh has the luxury of potentially going farther and being more persuasive than any of the playwrights before him ever could. The world and, more specifically, Ireland may finally be ready to explore individuality and throw off the chains of Irish identity. Yeats and Synge never had a receptive audience to these kinds of revolutionary ideas. The Irish people were immersed in the fight of their lives, and national identity was paramount over all else. The playwrights, too, believed in the nationalist cause and believed that art could illuminate those things that were truly Irish, thus creating a sense of national pride.

If, as Murray suggests, the Irish playwrights of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were holding a "mirror up to a nation," then McDonagh takes the tradition "through the looking glass." Much like the fantastical worlds of Lewis Carroll, the worlds of McDonagh seem foreign to audiences. Whereas Yeats, Gregory, Synge, O'Casey, Beckett, and Friel wanted the audiences to see themselves in the dramatic mirror and make the necessary changes, McDonagh's characters have made the change. McDonagh has inverted the message from "stop living this way" to "live this way." His

dramas, like the characters in them, are proactive rather than reactive. McDonagh offers a model, not an indictment, for the people of Ireland. In addition, Irish identity is no longer the goal in McDonagh's drama. Whereas the writers that preceded McDonagh firmly believed that the people could look in the mirror, change, and create a nation, McDonagh is more concerned with the individual's own search for identity. Ireland is not a nation until it is a nation of individuals. In the end, what the playwrights of the past found was not Irish identity, but rather their own personal vision of what Ireland should be. They wanted the people to conform to their imaginations, which ultimately created a nation of frustrated writers. However, frustrated as they may have been, the search for the mythic identity did produce some of the greatest literary works the world has ever seen. McDonagh proves that giving up the search has not and will not harm that great literary tradition.

McDonagh's plays are revolutionary, but his plays are so often misunderstood that his place in the history of Irish drama is being underestimated. Seen not as the empowering parables that this dissertation suggests, critics insist that McDonagh's plays are pessimistic and



his characters are immoral and confused. In "Playwrights of the Western World: Synge, Murphy, McDonagh," José

Lanterns argues:

McDonagh shifts the moral center from the play to the audience; the plays are effective only because they rely on the audience to be able to perceive and feel what the characters do not. We know we are watching a gallous story about dirty deeds, and we know that there is something wrong with this world. (219)

In truth, there is nothing wrong with the world in a McDonagh play. The characters are extremely self-aware—an awareness that allows them to operate as empowered individuals rather than victims. The audience is meant to be inspired by these characters, not to feel morally superior to them. The world in which the audience is living is flawed because the people have not yet realized that they have the power to stand up to their oppressors.

O'Toole, while acknowledging the allegorical nature of McDonagh's work, still sees these worlds as immoral. He suggests "However grotesque the exaggerations, they inflate a recognisable truth so that it can be seen more clearly. But at another level, the world that is imagined in this way is also a version of one of the great mythic landscapes—the world before morality"

(*Murderous 12*). The world in a McDonagh play is not a mythic place before morality. It is a place no longer oppressed by institutionally-imposed morality. Morality exists in these plays. The characters know right from wrong. O'Toole continues, "What makes his characters so like old, mad children is that everyone has forgotten that adults are supposed to learn the difference between what matters and what doesn't" (*Murderous 12*). His characters, more than any other characters in Irish drama, finally do know what matters—the self. That is not to say that critics such as Laniers and O'Toole feel McDonagh's plays have no merit. In fact, O'Toole is one of the biggest champions of McDonagh, but to see these plays as anything other than empowering does a disservice to the revolutionary nature of this cutting-edge playwright.

McDonagh's career has been short but powerful. Exploding onto the scene in 1998, his meteoric rise has been almost unprecedented. Claiming to be nothing more than a storyteller, McDonagh has garnered a reputation for being aloof and ornery. He is the first to dismiss any analyses of his work, claiming that they are just

good stories. However, the playwright's own admission to reading the plays of his predecessors shows that there is not only more to the man's work, but also more to the man. He already has had five of his six "Irish" plays produced. The sixth, *The Banshees of Inisheer*, is ready for production but is, as yet, not slated for release. McDonagh has reinvigorated Irish drama, even if he has done so controversially. His latest play, however, is set, not in Ireland, but in a "totalitarian state." *The Pillowman*, which is taking the National Theatre in London by storm, signals a new direction for McDonagh. Or does it? The play, which was actually written *before Beauty Queen*, follows the story of a young writer who is taken in for questioning when some of his stories appear to have been the inspiration for actual child murders taking place in the state. Faced with the realization that his mentally-handicapped brother is the perpetrator of these crimes, the writer kills his brother and confesses to the crimes. While not set in Ireland, the play raises important issues about the role of a writer in society.

McDonagh, himself, denies any desire to stay solely within the Irish context. He has said "'I've always disliked the whole idea of nationalism. The next two or three plays I'm writing aren't Irish at all, so it will be interesting to see where that goes'" (Hoggard 13). Wherever McDonagh goes from here, he has already made his powerful statement about Ireland and Irish identity. Even if he never writes of Ireland again, it will do nothing to devalue the importance of his Irish trilogies. Synge only contributed six plays to the Irish experience (although death was the intervener there), and his importance is no longer debatable. As far as making a case for McDonagh as deserving of a permanent place of prominence in the Irish literary canon, time will tell that he is not just a "flash in the pan." There is a depth to his plays that have yet to be fully explored or acknowledged by scholars, and, once McDonagh's plays are seen for their literary merit, his place in history will be solidified. The themes explored in this dissertation are just some of the remarkable reasons McDonagh is an important playwright with a new voice for Ireland. Audiences and critics cannot help but be intrigued by these plays, but as for believing they have any literary

value, these juries are still out. Like Synge before him, McDonagh might take years to garner that kind of respect, but not many would argue today whether Synge belongs in the canon. In 50 years, few will argue about McDonagh's inclusion either.

## APPENDIX A

### Summaries of Plays

#### *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*

Set in Leenane, the first play in McDonagh's Leenane trilogy focuses on the relationship of Mag Folan and her daughter, Maureen. Maureen cares for her hypochondriac mother, who uses her "aches and pains" and guilt to control and annoy her daughter. Maureen's chance at freedom from her depressing life and her mother comes when she meets Pato Dooley, a local man who wants to marry her. Mag, not wanting to be left alone and not wanting Maureen to be happy, burns a letter from Pato to Maureen, thus cheating Maureen out of her life with Pato. When Maureen discovers what her mother has done, she kills Mag by taking a fireplace poker to her head.

#### *A Skull in Connemara*

Leenane is also the setting for this second play in the trilogy. Once a year, Mick Dowd earns extra cash by exhuming bodies from the local church graveyard in order

to make room for new arrivals. Along with his partner, Mairtin Hanlon, Mick is scheduled to remove the bones of his late wife, Oona, who was "killed" in a drunk driving accident. Two other characters in the play include Mairtin's policeman brother, Thomas Hanlon, and the Hanlon brothers' bingo-playing grandmother, Maryjohnny, who cadges poteen from Mick.

The bizarre circumstances surrounding his wife's death seven years ago lead to questions about Mick's own involvement in the crime. Thomas wants to examine the body to determine if the rumors are true. When they finally dig up the casket, Mick's wife's bones are not there. It turns out that Thomas has stolen Oona's bones in order to frame Mick. In the end, Thomas ends up getting Mick to confess, not only to murdering Oona, but to murdering Mairtin; however, when Mairtin shows up, not at all dead, Mick is able to burn up the confession behind Thomas's back. When Mairtin tells Mick about Thomas's involvement in the grave robbery, Thomas hits Mairtin in the head with a hammer.

*The Lonesome West*

Again set in Leenane, this play focuses on the relationship between Valene and Coleman Connor, two brothers who are constantly fighting over everything—from Taytos to property rights. Coleman has killed their father with a gunshot to the head and, in return for keeping the secret, Val gets both shares of the inheritance. The town priest, Fr. Welsh-Walsh-Welsh appears in this play as the beleaguered mediator between the two brothers. Fr. Welsh begins to lose his grip on his sanity and his religious beliefs as he realizes the full scale of what the brothers are capable. When he can no longer take the fighting and lack of remorse, Fr. Welsh writes a letter to Val and Coleman begging for them to get along and then kills himself. Girleen, a local girl who is infatuated with Fr. Welsh, blasts the brothers for killing the priest, and the brothers attempt to abide by Fr. Welsh's last wishes. After a few minutes of "playing nice," the brothers quickly turn forgiveness into a game and end up violently fighting once again.



*The Cripple of Inishmaan*

Set on the Aran Island of Inishmaan in 1934, this play centers around Billy, a crippled boy whose parents mysteriously drowned in a boating accident, leaving him orphaned and living with his "aunts," Eileen and Kate. Billy wants to escape his life in Inishmaan—a life which includes such characters as Johnnypateenmike, a man whose love for gossip is only outweighed by his desire to kill his aging, alcoholic mother; Babbybobby, the town bully; Helen, a young woman who pegs eggs at priests and will not give Billy the time of day; and Bartley, Helen's not-too-bright brother.

In an attempt to escape, Billy convinces Bobby to take him to try and get a part in *The Man of Aran*, which is being filmed on the neighboring island of Inishmore, and, eventually, be taken to Hollywood. In order to get Bobby to take him, Billy lies that he has tuberculosis and has not long to live. Billy makes it to America, but is discouraged by the portrayal of the Irish in Hollywood. When Billy returns and divulges that he is not sick, he is beaten with a crowbar by Babbybobby, he

learns the truth about his parents' death (they drowned while trying to drown the crippled boy), and finds out he does, in fact, have tuberculosis.

*The Lieutenant of Inishmore*

Padraic, a violent man and officer in a one-man splinter group of the IRA, seems to have no love for anyone or anything except his precious cat, Wee Thomas. As the play opens, however, Wee Thomas has been killed and Padraic's father, Donny, and a neighbor boy, Davey, are trying to keep that news from Padraic. Donny contacts Padraic and tells him that Wee Thomas is sick. Padraic races back to Inishmore. Davey rushes to find a replacement cat, and, when he cannot find another black cat, he uses his sister's cat and attempts to dye the orange cat with shoe polish. Davey's sister, Mairead, who wants to be a part of the fight for a free Ireland, is also in love with Padraic. She is very good at shooting out the eyes of cows with her air rifle, but Padraic tells her she is not ready for his splinter group. When Padraic arrives home, Davey and Donny are asleep, and he sees the cat covered in shoe polish. When

he learns that Wee Thomas is, in fact, dead, Padraic kills the orange cat and threatens to kill Donny and Davey.

Before he has a chance, Padraic's partners in the INLA (Christy, Brendan, and Joey) come to kill him because he is too extremist. Padraic is saved from his fate by Mairead and the two of them kill the three assassins. Davey and Donny are set to work dismantling the bodies while Padraic and Mairead plan their wedding. Eventually, Mairead finds out that the orange cat that Padraic killed was her cat, so she kills him. In the end, Wee Thomas saunters on the scene, not at all dead.

## APPENDIX B

### Play Reviews

#### ***The Beauty Queen of Leenane***

##### **Druid Theatre premiere:**

Nowlan, David. "Celebration Worthy of New Theatre. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Town Hall Theatre, Galway." *The Irish Times* 2 Feb. 1996: 13.

O'Toole, Fintan. "A New Force from Galway Again." *The Irish Times* 6 Jan. 1996: 8.

##### **Royal Court Upstairs premiere:**

Billington, Michael. "First Night: New Themes in Synge-Song Land." *The Guardian* 8 Mar. 1996: 2.

Hemming, Sarah. "Bleak, Black Comedy from Galway." *Financial Times* 12 Mar. 1996: 21.

Kingston, Jeremy. "The Mother of All Wars." *The Times*. 7 Mar. 1996 Features.

Taylor, Paul. "*The Beauty Queen of Leenane*." *The Independent* 7 Mar. 1996: 11.

##### **Atlantic Theatre Co. New York premiere:**

Brantley, Ben. "A Gasp for Breath Inside an Airless Life." *The New York Times* 27 Feb. 1998: E1.

O'Toole, Fintan. "Fiercely Funny 'Beauty' Hails a New Play-Boy of the Western World." *New York Daily News* 27 Feb. 1998: 53.

Simon, John. "Schmucks and Queens: 'Mizlansky/Zilinsky' is a Fun and Frisky Ride Over a lot of Potholes; 'The Beauty Queen of Leenane' is Not Really a Beauty (But Neither is the Play)." *New York* 9 Mar. 1998: 98.

**Walter Kerr Broadway premiere:**

Canby, Vincent. "Is the New Hot Playwright Profound or Just Slick?" *The New York Times* 26 April 1998, Section 2: 8.

***The Cripple of Inishmaan***

**Royal National Theatre premiere:**

Coveney, Michael. "Best Foot Forward." *The Observer* 12 Jan. 1997: 11.

**Public Theatre New York premiere:**

Brantley, Ben. "Twisted Lives in a Provincial Irish Setting." *The New York Times* 8 Apr. 1998: E1.

O'Toole, Fintan. "Yank Staging Finds Irish Writer Can Cross at the Green: B-way-Bound McDonagh Shores Up Rep at Public." *New York Daily News* 8 Apr. 1998: 41.

***The Lonesome West***

**Broadway premiere:**

Brantley, Ben. "Another Tempestuous Night in Leenane (Sure, It's Not a Morn in Spring)." *The New York Times* 28 Apr. 1999: E1.

O'Toole, Fintan. "A Great Play By the Irish 'The Lonesome West' Wrests the Crown from 'Beauty Queen'." *The New York Daily News* 28 Apr. 1999: 48.

Stearns, David Patrick. "'Lonesome West' Loses Its Way Exploring Familiar Dark Terrain." *USA Today* 28 Apr. 1999: 3D.

### ***A Skull in Connemara***

#### **ACT Seattle premiere:**

Berson, Misha. "ACT Digs Up Laughs, Suspense in Grisly 'Skull in Connemara'." *The Seattle Times* 31 July 2000: E1.

#### **Roundabout Theatre Co. Off-Broadway premiere:**

Brantley, Ben. "Leenane III, Bones Flying." *The New York Times* 23 Feb. 2001: E1.

Dominguez, Robert. "Outta Their 'Skull'—and Darkly Hilarious." *New York Daily News* 23 Feb. 2001: 56.

Gardner, Elysa. "'Skull' Ghoulish but Worthwhile." *USA Today*. 23 Feb. 2001: 10E.

### ***Lieutenant of Inishmore***

#### **The Other Place RSC premiere:**

Billington, Michael. "*The Lieutenant of Inishmore*." *The Guardian* 12 May 2001: 23.

Nowlan, David. "Reviews." *The Irish Times* 17 May 2001: 14.

#### **The Garrick Theatre West End premiere:**

Gardner, Lyn. "Martin McDonagh's Bloody Splatfest: *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*." *The Guardian* 29 June 2002: 21.

**Other relevant reviews:**

Berson, Misha. "A Completed Irish Trilogy Sings." *American Theatre* Feb. 2001: 60-4.

Hornby, Richard. "Ireland Your Ireland." *The Hudson Review* 51.3 (1998): 561-7.

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King, Robert L. "New Plays and a Modern Master." *The North American Review* Mar./Apr. 2002: 45-9.

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Trotter, Mary. "Martin McDonagh 'The Beauty Queen of Leenane'." *Theatre Journal* Oct. 1999: 336-339.

## APPENDIX C

### Chronology of Important Dates in Irish History<sup>9</sup>

AD	793	First Viking invasion at Lindisfarne.
	1536	Protestant Church of Ireland established.
	1690	Battle of the Boyne; William of Orange defeats James II's Catholic army.
	1691	Treaty of Limerick, restoring throne to Protestant rulers; Catholic lands again confiscated.
	1793	Catholic Relief Act; allows Catholics to vote but not to sit in Parliament.
	1829	Daniel O'Connell elected to Parliament; passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act.
	1845	Start of the potato famine.
	1899	Irish National Theatre founded.
	1907	Synge's <i>Playboy</i> staged.
	1916	April 24 <sup>th</sup> , Republican Easter Rebellion; Patrick Pearse declared president by the Irish Republican Brotherhood.  April 29 <sup>th</sup> , rebellion defeated and many rebels executed, including Pearse.
	1919	Sinn Féin declares republic and the IRA begins war for independence.



1920	Government of Ireland Act creates two Irish states.
1921	War ends; Anglo-Irish Treaty creates an Irish Free State in the South.
1922	IRA begins insurgency campaign.
1923	Yeats wins Nobel Prize for Literature.
1955	Republic of Ireland joins the U.N.
1969	Beckett wins Nobel Prize for Literature.
1970	Martin McDonagh born.
1972	Bloody Sunday in Derry; British direct rule begins in Northern Ireland.
1990	Mary Robinson elected president of Republic; highest position ever for a woman in Ireland.
1998	Good Friday Agreement signed; John Hume and David Trimble receive Nobel Peace Prize.

## APPENDIX D

### Martin McDonagh Biographical Information<sup>10</sup>

- 1970        Born in Camberwell, London to Irish parents.
- 1996        *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* first performed by the Druid Theatre Company/Royal Court Theatre, Town Hall Theatre, Galway. (February 1).
- 1996        *The Cripple of Inishmaan* first performed, Cottesloe auditorium, National Theatre, London. (December 12).
- 1997        *A Skull in Connemara* first performed by the Druid Theatre Company/Royal Court Theatre, Town Hall Theatre, Galway. (June 3).
- 1997        *The Lonesome West* first performed by the Druid Theatre Company/Royal Court Theatre, Town Hall Theatre, Galway. (June 10).
- 1998        *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* premieres in the United States at the Atlantic Theatre in New York. (February 26). The play moves to the Walter Kerr theatre on April 23.
- 1998        *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* wins Tony Award for Best Play and Best Director (Garry Hynes, who was the first woman to win that award.)
- 2001        *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon. (April 11).

- 2002      *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* wins Olivier  
award for Best New Comedy.
- 2003      *The Pillowman* first performed at the  
Cottesloe auditorium, National Theatre,  
London. (November 13).
- 2004      *The Pillowman* wins Olivier Award for Best  
New Play

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<sup>1</sup> Summaries of all of the McDonagh plays can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the works found in the bibliography of this document take up these issues, but the area of identity theory and postcolonial theory is discussed in almost any literary theory text. Because the issue of identity construction is so closely related to literary history in Ireland, many works are theoretical as well as literary analyses. This dissertation is not one of those works. A good overview of postcolonial theory and identity is *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* edited by Padmini Mongia. In this reader, several theorists, including Edward Said, address the issues of identity formation.

<sup>3</sup> The first wave of Irish drama is referred to as the Irish Renaissance. Because there has been such an increase in the amount of Irish plays being written, critics have called this movement the "new" Renaissance.

<sup>4</sup> From the poem *Invictus*.

<sup>5</sup> Ireland's history of oppression is well-documented but worth briefly repeating. The first Viking invasion occurred in 793 AD. After the Vikings, the British monarchy took control of Ireland. Predominantly a Catholic country, Henry VIII brought his own Anglican religion to Ireland by establishing the Protestant Church of Ireland in 1536. This religious shift started a long period in which Irish Catholics were stripped of land and rights. In 1829, the Catholic Emancipation Act allowed Catholics to sit on Parliament. The potato famine begins in 1845, killing 1 million people and forcing the emigration of 1.5 million. With the desire for home rule growing, the Irish National Theatre was founded in 1899. Tensions came to a breaking point in April 1916 when the Irish Republican Brotherhood declares Ireland an independent republic and names Patrick Pearse the president. Five days later, the British defeat the Easter rebels and execute many, including Pearse. The war for independence ends in 1921, with the Anglo-Irish treaty which establishes the Irish Free State in the south, leaving Northern Ireland still under British rule. (For a chronology of important dates in Irish history, see Appendix C).

<sup>6</sup> In 1907, the premiere of *The Playboy of the Western World* caused an audience riot. Not only did the audience object to the use of the word "shift" (when describing a woman's undergarment), but they also were offended by what they perceived to be a negative depiction of the Irish.

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<sup>7</sup> A listing of the reviews of the significant premieres can be found in Appendix B.

<sup>8</sup> The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was an ecumenical council of bishops convoked by Pope John XXIII. Vatican II was an opportunity for the Catholic Church to institute reform and make the Church more open. For example, before Vatican II, the priest would conduct mass entirely in Latin with his back to the congregation. Now, priests use the vernacular and face the congregation. *Humanae Vitae* was an encyclical letter written by Pope Paul VI in 1968. This controversial letter about the "regulation of birth" instructed Catholics not to use birth control. Catholics are meant to follow all encyclical letters, but the letters are not infallible.

<sup>9</sup> Information for this chronology taken from *The Oxford History of Ireland* and Hollis's *The History of Ireland*. Bibliographic entries can be located in the Bibliography.

<sup>10</sup> Information on McDonagh's biography can be found in many articles that are listed in the bibliography; however, some of the most interesting pieces on McDonagh include: "Most Promising (and Grating) Playwright" by Rick Lyman, "A New Young Playwright Full of Old Irish Voices" by Benedict Nightingale, and "Nowhere Man" by Fintan O'Toole. The bibliography contains complete entries for these articles.