

## Trapped in Ireland: Violence and Irishness in McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*

Norma Alfonso

### Abstract

Together with "A Skull in Connemara" and "The Lonesome West", "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" (1996) is Martin McDonagh's first play in *The Galway Trilogy*. The world of the play shows an escalation of events which lead to an outburst of violence. McDonagh portrays, in a shocking way, the barbaric acts human beings are capable of when they feel that violence is the only tool they can employ in reaction to a miserable existence. Violence is also made evident in language since the characters engage in dialogues which not only tell a cruel story but also make directions for actions, character and space; they seem to be engaged in a never-ending vicious circle of brutality and despair. The purpose of this paper is to show how the characters' inability to define themselves in relation to their home and their country results into angry resentment at their own world, a place which seems to be both involved in and, at the same time, displaced from a globalized reality. This work is part of a research project on Irish literature that is being carried out at the Department of Foreign Languages, FCsHs, UNLPam.

Keywords: *in-yer-face* theatre, violence, language, Irishness.

### Atrapados en Irlanda: violencia e identidad en *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*

### Resumen

"The Beauty Queen of Leenane" (1996) es, junto con "A Skull in Connemara" y "The Lonesome West", la primer obra de teatro de Martin McDonagh en *The Galway Trilogy*. La obra muestra una sucesión de eventos que resultan en un estallido de violencia. El autor describe de manera horrorosa los hechos barbáricos de los que los seres humanos son capaces cuando sienten que la violencia es la única herramienta a utilizar ante una existencia despreciable. La violencia se manifiesta también en el lenguaje ya que los personajes mantienen diálogos en los que no solo cuentan una historia cruel, sino que refieren a acciones, personajes y espacios; ellos parecen atrapados en un interminable círculo vicioso de brutalidad y desesperanza. El objetivo de este trabajo es mostrar como la incapacidad de los personajes para definir su identidad en relación a su hogar y a su patria resulta en resentimiento hacia su propio mundo -lugar que parece estar inmerso en, pero a la vez desplazado de una realidad globalizada. Este trabajo es parte de un proyecto de investigación acerca de la literatura irlandesa que se lleva a cabo en el Departamento de Lenguas extranjeras, FCsHs, UNLPam.

Palabras clave: *in-yer-face* theatre, violencia, lenguaje, identidad irlandesa.

**Presos na Irlanda: violência e identidade em *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*****Resumo**

“The Beauty Queen of Leenane” (1996) é, junto com “A Skull in Connemara” e “The Lonesome West”, a primeira obra de teatro de Martin McDonagh em *The Galway Trilogy*. A obra mostra uma sucessão de eventos que resultam em um estalido de violência. O autor descreve de maneira horrorosa os fatos bárbaros de que os seres humanos são capazes quando sentem que a violência é a única ferramenta ante uma existência depreciável. A violência se manifesta também na linguagem já que os personagens mantêm diálogos que não só contam uma historia cruel, mas que se referem a ações, personagens e espaços; eles parecem presos em um interminável círculo vicioso de brutalidade e desesperança. O objetivo deste trabalho é mostrar como a incapacidade dos personagens para definir sua identidade em relação a seu lar e a sua pátria resulta em ressentimento em seu próprio mundo, lugar que parece estar imerso, porém ao mesmo tempo deslocado, de uma realidade globalizada.

Palavras chave: teatro *in-yer-face*, violência, linguagem, identidade irlandesa.

"The Beauty Queen of Leenane" (1996) is Martin McDonagh's first play, which he wrote after failing to have any success writing screenplays, radio plays or short stories. It is part of *The Galway Trilogy* together with "A Skull in Connemara" and "The Lonesome West". All three plays are set in the small village of Leenane, County Galway and depict three villagers' closely interwoven stories.

Set in 1989, in the kitchen of a cottage in the west of Ireland, the play centres on the life of Maureen Folan, a forty-year-old spinster, and her brutal relationship with her clinging mother, seventy-year-old Mag. The highly demanding mother is a hypochondriac who abuses the daughter to a point where the daughter has become bitter and neurotic. Two sisters have escaped into marriage and family life, but Maureen, with a history of mental illness, is trapped in that cottage and in an excessively dependent dysfunctional relationship with her mother. In the course of the play, the Folan cottage is visited by the Ray and Pato Dooley brothers. An opportunity to leave this dead-end existence comes in the form of the oldest of these brothers, Pato, a former schoolmate of Maureen's, who has been working in England for the past fifteen years and is in love with her. Pato invites her to a family party but when she finds out that Mag hasn't told her about the invitation, she makes Mag drink lumpy Complan and eat dry Kimberley biscuits as a kind of torture. After the party Maureen brings Pato back home; he calls her "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" and stays the night. The next morning Mag is shocked to find him there, and tries to put him off by digging up a long-buried incident in Maureen's past - a nervous breakdown and her ending up in a 'nuthouse'. Soon afterwards, Pato, now a construction worker in London, writes to Maureen, asking her to accompany him to Boston with prospects of a better life. He sends the letter to Ray - his youngest brother - with instructions to hand it to Maureen, but the youth leaves it with Mag. She reads and burns it, but makes a verbal slip, and Maureen tortures her with boiling oil until she reveals the letter's contents. Then, Maureen recalls how she saw Pato off at the station, promising to join him in America. Mag is rocking back and forth, when suddenly slumps forward to reveal a 'red chunk of skull'. A few weeks later, Maureen, having got away with murder, plans to leave but Ray visits her and it emerges that her memory of seeing Pato off is a delusion. After telling her that his brother is engaged to another woman, Ray leaves with Maureen's message to him: The Beauty Queen of Leenane says goodbye. Maureen then sinks into her mother's rocking-chair. Mag's stepping in has subverted their growing relationship, driving Maureen to insanity, and thus making her become an image of herself.

The world of the play shows a series of events which lead to an outburst of violence. McDonagh portrays, in a shocking way, the barbaric acts human beings are capable of when they feel that violence is the only tool they can make use of in reaction to a miserable existence. Violence expresses real family hatreds and each character has her/his

own motivation to employ it. As Aleks Sierz expresses “the play’s violence is not just a comment on domestic life in a suffocating backwater; it also creates a world drenched in a nineties sensibility” (2000: 223). McDonagh depicts an exaggerated postmodern Ireland with a fragmented isolated society in a globalized world which leads people to violent reactions since they feel they can no longer control their lives. McDonagh’s style is characterized by a mix of savage irony and bizarre humour interspersed with an exuberant language drawn from the street-talks of English cities and the lyricism of rural Irish speech. The employment of Irish dialect, Gaelic patois, gives realism to the play. He draws on memories of Ireland based on recollections from summer vacations and on tales told by his Galway-born father to deal with Ireland’s uprootedness.

Adhering to Wallis and Shepherd’s (1998) guide as to the appropriate reading of a play, readers should know it has to be read differently since “plays tell their own story without the aid of a narrator. The narration is done through the way the scenes succeed one another” (91); the change of scene being tied to a change in situation. A profitable way of approaching it is to become conscious that the words have not been designed to function as the words in a novel, but to become a performance. Readers should not only consider those chunks of dialogue which are spoken by the main characters; it is crucially significant to read the bits in italics –the stage directions. Stage directions work in conjunction with dialogue to script what characters do or to explain dialogue. They provide “instructions regarding facial expressions, gesture and basic actions, costume, ‘kinesics’ (moving about the stage), ‘proxemics’ (blocking), space and props” (8). They may also reveal what a character really means or is thinking about when he says something. In “The Beauty Queen of Leenane”, stage directions set the scenes, give information about facial expressions, describe actions performed by some characters and tell about the characters’ attitude when talking.

Of equal importance, dialogue does more than simply tell a story; it creates “images, movement” and addresses “itself to the audience” (2). There are two lines of communication in theatre; one is between the characters and the other between the stage and the audience, the latter being a message by the writer. Information about characters is embedded in dialogues through which sociolect –a common way of speaking– establishes the character’s social origin. The audience easily imagine themselves in such a situation because “drama plugs into our [their] most basic desires, fears and wants” (40). Some plays, like “The Beauty Queen of Leenane”, are full of questionings or clashes and the management of dialogue works through a movement of holding back and releasing information about plot and characters. Besides, characters may possibly not refer to one another by name, but there is an act of naming and that does let readers know something. Maureen never calls Mag by her name but she refers to her as ‘oul’, ‘stupid’, ‘liar’, ‘daft oul bitch’, just to mention some.

Ideology is another important aspect to consider when studying a play. Characters may speak from an ideological position and imagery and allusion may intensify discourse. The play assumes a certain amount of shared knowledge on the part of the audience as regards references, allusions, beliefs. The discursive frame of the play being analysed provides insight into the Irish people's fragmented identity in a globalised world and their inability to recover their true self.

Space and how dramatic texts script it are significant in the theatre. In "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" the set is a replication of the world which is represented as a single room with distinct areas in which the action will be focused. There is a limited space from which the protagonist may finally break free or else the space may work to entrap the protagonist, as in Maureen's case. Also, the characters' movements in and out of the main space are an important part. The space which connects with the outside world -the front door- is used by Maureen, Pato and Ray. The other door, which leads to the hall is the one Mag always uses since she is never out of her home during the play.

Playwrights may confer special significance upon some objects which must be taken into account when reading a play. The writer uses every day objects such as Complan, Kimberleys, cooking oil and a heavy poker which make meaning when they become instruments of torture and murder. The stove poker, which is admired in an early scene and is an object which typically signifies familial togetherness and warmth, is a theatrically highlighted future murder weapon. At one point, Maureen tells Pato that the only reason she buys the horrible Kimberleys is to torment her mother. Oil represents Maureen's abuse of her mother both in the past and in the present. The threat of real violence is there from the beginning of the play, and some other objects carry hints of death: the photo of John and Robert Kennedy, both victims of political assassination and the embroidered tea towel which reads 'May you be half an hour in heaven afore the Devil knows you're dead'. The old woman who was murdered in Dublin, Maureen's dream about her mother's death, Ray's comment about a film in which everybody is always killing each other also contribute to the idea of anticipating death.

"The Beauty Queen of Leenane" is one of those plays which, by means of theatrical innovation, represent a critique of modern life and shares features with a kind of drama called *in-yer-face*. But what is *in-yer-face* theatre?

The widest definition is any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. [...] Questioning moral norms, it affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown onstage; it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. Crucially, it tells us more about who we really are. [...] The best *in-yer-face* theatre takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. It is experiential, not speculative.

The phrase 'in-your-face' is defined by the New Oxford English Dictionary (1998) as something 'blatantly aggressive or provocative, impossible to ignore or avoid'. The Collins English Dictionary (1998) adds the adjective 'confrontational'. The phrase originated in

American sports journalism during the mid-seventies, and gradually seeped into more mainstream slang over the following decade. It implies that you are forced to see something close up, that your personal space has been invaded. It suggests the crossing of normal boundaries. In short, it describes perfectly the kind of theatre that puts audiences in just such a situation (Sierz 2000: 4).

### How can you tell a play is *in-yr-face*?

\* The language is usually filthy, characters talk about unmentionable subjects, take their clothes off, have sex, humiliate each another, experience unpleasant emotions, become suddenly violent. This kind of theatre is so powerful that it forces audiences to react: either they feel like fleeing the building or they are suddenly convinced that it is the best thing they have ever seen. It inspires us to use superlatives, whether in praise or condemnation.

\* The use of shock is part of a search for deeper meaning, part of a rediscovery of theatrical possibility. Writers who provoke audiences or try to confront them are trying to push the boundaries off what is acceptable -they want to question current ideas of what is normal, what it means to be human, what is natural or what is real.

\* Provocation in performance may take the form of a new tone of voice being heard for the first time, a question of sensibility or deliberate attacks on an audience's prejudices.

\* This kind of theatre has an unusual power to trouble the audience emotionally. Most *in-yr-face* theatre challenges the distinctions we use to define who we are: human/animal; clean /dirty; healthy/unhealthy; normal/abnormal; good/evil; true/ untrue; real/unreal; right/wrong; just/unjust; art/life. These binary oppositions are central to our worldview; questioning them can be unsettling.

\* It always forces us to look at ideas and feelings we would normally avoid because they are too painful, too frightening, too unpleasant or too acute. Taboos are broken not in individual seclusion but out in the open. Situations that are essentially private seem embarrassingly intimate onstage (5, 6).

In the play under analysis, most of these characteristics can easily be traced. Violence is made evident in language, since the characters engage in dialogues which not only tell a cruel story but also make directions for action, character and space in a never-ending vicious circle of brutality and despair. Examples of violence expressed through language abound. Maureen, who repeatedly scolds and chastises Mag, tells her rudely "you're oul and you're stupid and you don't know what you're talking about" (McDonagh 1996:368). Maureen tells Pato, "Look at this. The radio left on too, the daft oul bitch" (382). Mag is worried about an old woman's murder in Dublin and Maureen speaks her mind and says "that sounds exactly the type of fella I would like to meet, and then bring him home to meet you, if he likes murdering oul women" (368). She adds

that “for the pleasure of me [her] company he’d come. Killing you [Mag] it would just be a bonus for him.” Then she says that “if he clobbered you [Mag] with a big axe or something and took your [her] oul head off and spat in your [her] neck, I [she] wouldn’t mind at all, going first” (369). Violence is used as a dramatic device since the writer’s desire to shock the audience is evidenced when Mag unexpectedly pitches forward and reveals her battered skull. Similarly, he creates suspense when Maureen approaches Ray from behind, carrying the poker in her hands.

Theatre is a site of narration and the narratives are confessional self-representations. There are two monologues in the play which, in Nicolas Grene’s words, represent “a conservative continuation of the tradition by which the playwright and language have dominated Irish theatre to the exclusion of movement and visual effect” (in *Kaleidoscopic views of Ireland* 2003: 72). One of the monologues, which takes up the whole of scene five, contains Pato’s letter to Maureen in which he expresses his wish that she goes with him to Boston given that his isolation between Ireland and England along with his desire for America become crucial to his identity and shape even his most intimate relationships. In reference to his feelings, he says “when it’s there I am, it’s here I wish I was, of course. Who wouldn’t? But when it’s here I am ... it isn’t there I want to be, of course not. But I know it isn’t here I want to be either” (McDonagh 1996:385). There is another letter from Pato to his brother asking him to deliver his bunch of letters but giving special importance to Maureen’s letter which he wants his brother to “go over there the day you [he] get[s] this and put it in her hand” (400). The second monologue, scene eight, makes reference to Maureen’s encounter with Pato at the station as he was leaving the village. This is a crucial point in the story since at the beginning of the monologue Mag is sitting motionless in her chair, which is rocking by its own, and Maureen idles very slowly around the room with the stove poker in her hand. At the end of it, the chair has stopped moving, Mag falls heavily to the floor, dead, and Maureen contemplates her. She makes clear to everybody that her mother has tripped over a fence and fallen down the hill. Maureen has suffered a second breakdown.

In his essay “Irish Culture in a Globalised World” (in *Kaleidoscopic views of Ireland* 2003:80), Fintan O’Toole states that even though geographically and politically, Ireland may be a fixed space, that space has been culturally open to invasion, immigration and influence. Ireland is a country redefining itself. The place is also part of the global village: Australian soap operas and American cop shows on the television, reference to Spiderman comics and Cadillacs, constant travelling to London and Boston, a picture of the Kennedy brothers. Yet, through its great number of emigrants, it has also poured out to other parts of the world such as Britain, the US, and Australia. But in the new context of Irish globalisation, there arises the question of authenticity and relationship to tradition. The characters in the play are painfully aware of their unstable national

identity, and their discussions of Irishness display disapproval of economic hardship and inferiority to the rest of the English-speaking world. The main theme in the play -the longing for rootedness- is revealed in the characters' attitude who, even when aware of their impossibility to define themselves in relation to home, region and nation, consistently return to them. As they look back and reflect on what these sites once meant, their desires for a return become angry resentment against a world irrevocably changed by increasing forms of uneven globalisation. As Mag complains about not being able to understand an Irish singer, Maureen turns off the radio angrily since she thinks it is right that people speak Irish because they live in Ireland and adds that the crux of the matter is that "if it wasn't for the English stealing our language, and our land, and our God-knows-what, wouldn't it be we wouldn't need to go over there begging for jobs and for handouts?" (McDonagh 1996: 367).

The male characters project a second important theme in the play, that of the Irish emigrant mentality. As it has already been mentioned, Pato, a middle-aged man, has moved to London and then to Boston in search of better living conditions. Likewise, Ray, many years apart in age, is thinking of going to London or Manchester. Maureen and Pato's talk about the sending-off party for their American friends and Pato's imminent return to London to work illustrate the permanent migration of Irish people who sense they are caught between two lands and feel identified with, but at the same time reject, both England and Ireland. Maureen says "that's Ireland, anyways. There's always someone leaving" (384). Even Maureen had her own experience cleaning offices in Leeds when she was twenty-five, which ended up in her first nervous breakdown and her stay in a nut-house in England.

Though mostly devastating and tragic, the play is funny at times. McDonagh's use of humour has the purpose of distracting the audience before a new cruel deed strikes them. Mag wants her Complan without lumps and watches Australian soap operas while waiting for the news. She pours the potty of wee away in the sink every morning but when Maureen asks Pato to smell the sink, Mag says "nothing to do with it, sinks have!" (392). Some jokes involve social comment: the priest is 35 and he finds himself adopting the less desirable qualities of his parishioners: exasperated outbursts of violence. Ray tells Mag that while young priests seldom use violence, "it is usually only the older priests go punching you in the head. I don't know why. I suppose it's the way they were brought up" (372).

Violence is also made evident in Maureen's dreams. In her struggle to break free from her mother's demands and from her monotonous life, Maureen dreams "of anything! Of anything. Other than this" (378). Readers can realize the intensity of Maureen's frustration in scene two when she tells Mag about a "day-dream [...] something happy to be thinking of when I'm [she's] scraping the skitter out of them hens" (379) in which she is standing beside Mag's coffin with "a fella beside [her] there, comforting [her], the



smell of aftershave off him, his arm around me [her] waist" (379). In scenes three and four Maureen's dreams are on the verge of becoming true with the appearance of Pato Dooley. Pato represents the possibility of escape -possibility which is quickly frustrated when Mag reveals to him that Maureen has scolded her hand and that, due to a nervous breakdown fifteen years before, spent some time at a nuthouse. Twice in scene four Mag asks Maureen to be "more in your [her] line" (393, 397). After Mag's revelations, Maureen asks Pato to leave and the first act of the play ends.

What is striking all through the play is the utter lack of moral values. In the town of Leenane, no one is easily shocked. Casual discussions of violence fill the play -the characters are more upset by insignificant complaints than by news of manslaughter or murder. They seem to live by their own individual moral codes and violence usually erupts when those codes collide. Maureen is not punished for her mother's murder; her acts escape any clear moral judgement. From the opening of the play, readers can witness Mag's unreasonable demands and incessant complaints. Thus, readers identify with Maureen who appears as the voice of truth and, by the time they know about Mag's murder -the most repulsive act which shows absence of familial rootedness, readers cannot decide if they should be horrified by this act of matricide given that Maureen looks as if she has been driven to murder. Then, Maureen exhibits some of her mother's personality traits -becoming confused and disoriented during an exchange with Ray, forgetting Ray's name and calling him Pato. At the beginning of the play, Mag is waiting for her absent daughters' radio request for her birthday but it is just at the end, when Maureen takes Mag's place, that the request can be heard.

There is a moment of revelation at the end of scene eight where the dead Mag topples out of her rocking-chair; the uselessness of the murder is pointed up in the last scene when the readers conclude Mag's murder doesn't free her, but imprisons her more. Maureen has already taken her mother's place in that same chair and, as Ray says, she has become *the exact fecking image* (424) of her mother. Yet, the play supports a need to destroy the mother as it stands for the motherland with all its mythology of the rural west: with a mother like Mag, and with a home like Leenane, matricide is seen as wholly justified.

Writing from within that interstitial space -Ireland and England- McDonagh traces the issue of national identity in a globalised context and highlights the value of ethnicity for a community that feels their depletion is due to their Irish origin. By means of a shocking form of art, the writer gives a convincing portrait of wild rural Ireland, making people aware of the reality of violence in parts of the country. Given the collapse of traditional spaces -home, region, and nation- and identities -mother, daughter, Irish citizen, emigrant- the characters share unconventional relationships characterized by isolation, betrayal and brutality. In their inability to define themselves, these unstable identities are always in a permanent process of becoming.

**Works cited**

- Greene, N. (2003). The Spaces of Irish Drama. *Kaleidoscopic views of Ireland*
- McDonagh, M. (1998). The Beauty Queen of Leenane. En *The Beauty Queen of Leenane and Other Plays*. Vintage: New York.
- Mutran, M. H. & Izarra, L. P. Z. (Ed.). *Humanitas*. Brazil: FFLCH/USP.
- O'Toole, F. (2003). Irish Culture in a Globalized World. *Kaleidoscopic views of Ireland*.
- Sierz, A. (2000). *In-Yer-Face Theatre—British Drama Today*. England: Faber & Faber Limited.
- Wallis, M. & Shepherd, S. (1998). *Studying Plays*. Great Britain: Arnold.