Martin McDonagh's freewheeling and slightly surreal Irish national theatre, *in- yer-face!*

*The life and work of Martin McDonagh until 2009*

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Martin McDonagh, brilliant playwright, for existing and writing his witty and fecking great plays.
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1 Introduction

Donny: It’s incidents like this that put tourists off Ireland.

Davey: Your son will be dead and them fecks will be gone, and Inishmore can get back to normal then.

(The Lieutenant of Inishmore, p. 42)

Audiences are advised not to sit in the front row to avoid being splattered with stage blood, spectators are warned against the play’s abrasive content and the abundant use of weapons on stage, critics condemn the playwright for using ‘shock tactics’ (Young 2003) on the one hand and call him ‘a dangerously prodigious master of theatrical form’ who has ‘a talent that goes far deeper than most people understand’ (Jones 2003) on the other hand. The success of this both cherished and reviled playwright speaks for itself: Martin McDonagh decisively conquered the stage with his violent, hilarious and seemingly politically incorrect plays. The divergent reactions bring about one certainty: McDonagh’s plays will hit you right in-yer-face.

This paper provides a discussion of the important literary influences on Martin McDonagh’s work. An Irishman living in Great Britain, McDonagh ingeniously intermingles the Irish national tradition of playwriting with the new British in-yer-face theatre. His oeuvre will be discussed closely, with special attention to the characteristics of both genres. Is the mixture of Irish national elements and in-yer-face characteristics homogeneous? Can an evolution be discovered in McDonagh’s work?

In the second chapter, the Heimat of the national Irish theatre is discussed, with a focus on its development, representatives, and the influences that can be found in the plays of McDonagh. Characteristics that appear in McDonagh’s plays are the realistic setting, the further challenging of the ideal image of ‘the Irishman’, and references to Irish heritage, politics and Ireland’s blood-spattered history. The third chapter then focuses on the new, violent British theatre form of which characteristics and representatives are given. In McDonagh’s work, the brutality and explicit cruelty are present, as well as the abrasive language and dark humour. Chapter four centres entirely on the playwright himself. The biography is pieced together of information of several interviews given by McDonagh. A separate section is dedicated to the Irishness of McDonagh: can McDonagh be called Irish? And how does this influence his plays? To conclude this chapter, McDonagh’s ideas about being a writer and what he wants to achieve is commented on. Chapter five and six focus on his plays. First, in chapter five, the trilogies, The Leenane Trilogy and The Aran Islands Trilogy, are thoroughly discussed and placed in the tradition of Irish national thea-
tre and in-yer-face theatre. In chapter six, finally, his last play to date, *The Pillowman*, is tackled. Chapter seven provides a conclusion with the findings of this paper.

2 National (anti-nationalistic) Irish theatre: its development, representatives and its influence on Martin McDonagh

2.1 The development of cultural nationalism in nineteenth and twentieth century Ireland: the Irish Literary Revival: 1898-1939

Theatrical performance in Ireland has never been truly Irish: the early forms of drama were always ‘linked to the island’s colonization by England’ (Diehl 2001: 102). This changed when feelings of nationalism arose during the fight for an independent Ireland. As a consequence of the growing nationalism, only plays that glorified Ireland were produced on the nineteenth century stage. For the reason that theatre has proven to be ‘[i]n times of acute national consciousness […] the form of literature which makes the most direct impact on the people, becoming at times a means for propaganda, but ultimately the means by which the deeper life of the people is expressed’ (O’Driscoll 1971: 12). Irish theatre in the nineteenth century consisted primarily in melodrama. The task of a melodramatic play is to present the audience with a nice and easy alternative for their daily lives. Stereotypical battles between good and bad forces are fought, always rushing to a happy end. Melodrama presented life ‘[i]n a time of political, social, and artistic deprivation as [the nation] would want it to be rather than life as it was’ (O’Driscoll 1971: 13).

At the end of the nineteenth century, the interest in folklore and folk music grew: ‘the discoveries made by nineteenth century scholars and antiquarians resulted in the translation and interpretation of the early sagas and the publication of a host of novels and poems set in a mythical heroic age or in a romantic Irish landscape’ (Fitz-Simon 1983: 133). Through the study of Irish folklore, an interest in the Irish language revived as well, acted out with ‘deep nationalistic fervour’ by the members of the Gaelic League (founded in 1893). These elements added even more feelings of proud nationalism to the melodramatic plays.

The predominantly melodramatic tradition did not give way until 1898, when the Irish Literary Theatre was formed by Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats and Edward Martyn. Although they wanted to create a national theatre, they did not want to produce nationalistic plays; they did not want to lionize Ireland. Lady Gregory, Yeats and Martyn shared a passion for Irish
language and folklore and on their first meeting, in 1898, they started discussing the possibility of establishing an Irish theatre. Especially Yeats was an ardent supporter of the cause of a national drama. In 1886, when he was about twenty-one Yeats declared: ‘I turned my back on foreign themes, decided that the race was more important than the individual’ (Fitz-Simon 1983: 135). Lady Gregory wrote in her autobiographical memories *Our Irish Theatre* that ‘things seemed to grow possible as we talked, and towards the end of the afternoon we had made our plans’, which existed in forming a little theatre to produce, among others, some of their own plays. These three founders all belonged to the ‘Anglo-Irish Ascendancy’\(^1\). It is remarkable that they of all persons ‘should have been responsible for the foundation of a theatre which in due course would express the spirit of an Ireland quite different from that known to other members of their social class [i.e. the Ireland of the peasantry]’ (Fitz-Simon 1983: 134). The Irish Literary Theatre broke dramatically with the political and melodramatic traditions that occupied the stage in Ireland (O’Driscoll 1971: 13). Lady Gregory declares in *Our Irish Theatre* their ‘desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland’ and states that they ‘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’. They ‘are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside the political questions that divide us’ (Lady Gregory 1914: 8-9). She was wrong; the audience did not like the new nationalist plays at all. Through the new playwrights, J.M. Synge in particular (cf. 3.2), the Ireland they adored suddenly became the land of drunken, violent and brawly peasants.

Most of the productions of the Irish Literary Theatre’s first three seasons were staged by English actors. Not only were the actors non Irish, but also did the ‘literary and theatrical strains which had their bearing on what was to become Ireland’s national theatre [come] very much from outside Ireland’ (Fitz-Simon 1983: 136). Irish playwrights tried to find an intermediate position between ‘the followers of Ibsen and the realistic drama of everyday life,’ and ‘the followers of Maeterlinck and the symbolic drama of the inner life’. Thus, the Theatre became one of opposites and presented rich, varied and very original plays – though not intrinsically Irish.

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\(^1\) ‘Anglo-Irish’ is a term to describe a privileged social class in Ireland, the Anglican social elite. Its members were the descendants of the Protestant Ascendancy, and belonged mostly to the Anglican Church of Ireland (the state church of Ireland until 1871). The ‘Protestant Ascendancy’ refers to the political, economic, and social domination of the former Kingdom of Ireland by a small group of wealthy landowners, establishment clergy, and professionals. (Blackwell and Hackney 2004: 93-94).
Only in the third season, in 1901, a play was produced on the stage of a professional theatre for the first time in the Irish language. It was the play *Casadh an tSugáin* by Douglas Hyde (1860-1949). While Hyde is called one of the most influential and inspiring figures of the Irish Literary Revival, he was never recognized as a good playwright even though his plays were nice, unpretentious comedies. The most important Irish plays of the nineteenth and twentieth century were written in English; plays in Gaelic simply remained unnoticed regardless of their quality and despite the fact that the State encouraged them actively (Fitz-Simon 1983: 138). Not only were influential Irish plays written in English, they were also performed by English actors. This situation came to an end when Yeats met the brothers William and Frank Fay, two Irish actors that ran the Ormond Dramatic Society and had experience in devising plays and sketches. The brothers had already performed professionally in small halls in Dublin and elsewhere. Yeats convinced them to use their talents for the cause of the development of the national drama. The Fays enthusiastically participated and renamed their group the National Dramatic Society.

The Irish National Theatre now had a group of Irish actors and playwrights; what they still needed was a theatre building of their own. An answer to this problem came in May 1903; the Irish Literary Theatre gave two performances in London and impressed the London critics who described their show as if it had been the theatrical event of the year. The style of writing and acting was totally new, and the themes were unexpected for those who thought they would be shown some stereotypical Irish melodrama. A.B. Walkley of *The Times* wrote (Fitz-Simon 1983: 140):

> Stendhall said that the greatest pleasure he had ever got from the theatre was given him by the performance of some poor Italian strollers in a barn. The Queen’s Gate Hall, if not exactly a barn, can boast none of the glories of the ordinary playhouse; and it was there that, only a day or two ago, a little band of Irishmen and women […] gave some of us, who for our sins are constant frequenters of the regular playhouses, a few moments of calm delight quite outside the range of anything which those houses have to offer […]

William Archer, the Nestor of the English critics, wrote about the company (Fitz-Simon 1983: 140):

> In almost all of them there was a clear vein of talent, while the work they presented was all of it interesting, and all of it exquisitely and movingly beautiful […]

Annie Horniman, an enthusiastic English theatre manager, was also part of the audience and liked what she saw. Horniman had already designed costumes for a play of Yeats in the past and
had also financed some other plays. She was impressed by the Irish Literary Theatre and offered
to ‘provide and equip a small theatre in Dublin and maintain it free of charge for a number of
years’ (Fitz-Simon 1983: 140). This small theatre happened to be a concert hall in Abbey Street.
Since then the Irish Literary Theatre has been referred to as the ‘Abbey Theatre’. Horniman con-
tinued to finance the theatre until 1910. After the positive critiques in London, the Dublin audi-
ence felt that they could not stay behind and that they had to learn to like the new and truly Irish
theatre.

2.2 Characteristics and famous representatives: Synge and O’Casey

Only with the imminence of independence, writers could begin to confront their audience with
the truth about their nation. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Irish national writers ‘ini-
tially upset their countrymen’s preconceptions and propaganda, for they presented Ireland, not as
her political apologists would wish her to be seen, but as she was’ (O’Driscoll 1971: 9). The
playwrights abandoned the melodramatic genre and wrote from personal experience. In doing so
they developed an exceptional style that contradicted with the demand and expectation of their
nation (O’Driscoll 1971: 9). The Irish audience reacted acutely sensitive to this new kind of Irish
theatre and it ‘felt called upon to do battle for what it believed to be the honour of the nation’
(O’Driscoll 1971: 10). The honour of the nation consisted in what the Irishmen believed in their
hearts to be true; ‘that the Irishman combined in his nature a set of unique virtues: piety, loyalty,
tenacity, love of his hand, love of country, concern for his family and friends’ (Boyce 1982:
254).

Typical of the new Irish theatre was that it rebelled against this belief and that it often
took themes from traditional forms of peasant and rural life. Also the artistic style of the com-
pany was revolutionary: ‘in order to ensure that the play itself was the focus of attention, the em-
phasis was on beauty and simplicity in all aspects of stage presentation’ (Worall 2006: 12). This
minimalism contrasted with the commercial English theatre staging of the time with elaborate
sets and costumes and celebrity actors. The plays also presented a more realistic approach of the
image of the peasantry, in opposition to the image of the ‘stage Irishman’: ‘the Catholic peasant
as the repository of noble qualities’ (Worall 2006: 14). Another typical feature of the new theatre
was that the characters were cruel and violent, yet also deliberately presented with lots of hu-
mour. Not a romantic view of the peasant class was now staged, but a rather satirical presentation
of an enclosed community. In the plays constant balance existed between realism and the ‘poetry’ inherent in the characters and the themes. Realism was present in the everyday speech and occupations of the peasantry in a rural atmosphere. Also characteristic of the new plays were the strong reactions they evoked.

Synge and O’Casey were two prominent Irish writers who dared to write about their own nation in non-muffled terms. In their plays, they presented ‘with uncompromising brutality the suffering of people who in the deprivations of their daily lives found little solace in nationalistic abstractions, whose only weapons for survival were not ‘fabricated’ idealisms but their own native cunning and their own native wit’ (O’Driscoll 1971: 14).

John Millington Synge (1871-1909), famous for the great Irish play The Playboy of the Western World, is seen, by Fitz-Simon, as ‘the figure for which the Irish Literary Renaissance had been waiting’ (Fitz-Simon 1983: 150). Synge’s writing is ‘a fusion of Gaelic and European traditions expressed in a language that is neither Standard English nor Irish’ (Fitz-Simon 1983: 150). In May 1898, Synge went to the Aran Islands, following a suggestion from Yeats. During his visit there, he took photographs and made notes on the way of life and language of the islanders. From then until 1902, he spent every summer on the Aran Islands. On the 27th of June 1898, he met Lady Gregory, Martyn and Yeats while they were planning to produce Celtic and Irish plays in Dublin. Seventeen years later, in 1905, Synge became one of the three directors of the Irish National Theatre Society (Martyn had left the society by then). Because Synge was the only one of the three living in Dublin, he began to play a very active role in the theatre management. At that time, he was already working on The Playboy of the Western World, and soon the society started the rehearsals of his most famous play. On 26 January 1907, The Playboy was staged for the first time and became instantly notorious. Synge’s plays were produced at a time of ‘intense nationalist ferment’; the nationalist agitators in the audience reacted hurt because they felt that the plays insulted the ‘Irish character or the Irish nation especially since Synge had a Protestant background’ (Fitz-Simon 1983: 145). It is true that ‘the characters in Synge’s plays are very close to the soil, or else they are vagrants, constantly speaking of the earth, of roadsides and ditches’ (Fitz-Simon 1983: 150). It was not only the audience who failed to recognize Synge’s genius, also the players and other members of the National Irish Theatre Society had

their doubts. Lady Gregory wrote about the script: ‘We were almost bewildered by its abundance and fantasy, but we felt, and Mr. Yeats said very plainly, that there was far too much “bad language”’ (Fitz-Simon 1983: 156). For the second performance of the play, the police was present to deal with the continuous uproar during the play. Because of these turbulent theatre nights, the Abbey Theatre got enormous publicity. The Irish critics reacted very sensitively to Synge’s view of Irish life; *The Evening Mail* \(^3\) dubbed him ‘the dramatist of the dung heap’.

The negative critiques were undeserved; *The Playboy* is a very complex comedy ‘interlaced with tragic feeling [a characteristically Irish trait]. A unique consistency. It contains elements that are in turn farcical, tragical, sentimental, melodramatic, romantic and wildly comic’ (Fitz-Simon 1983: 155).

Again, London provided recognition. In the summer of 1908, *The Playboy* was performed in the Great Queen Street Theatre, where it was ‘immediately recognized as a masterpiece’ (Fitz-Simon 1983: 158). In 1909, Synge died and a chapter of the Irish Literary Theatre was closed; also the Fay brothers departed due to disagreements on management policy and the end of the subsidies by Annie Horniman. Synge influenced two whole generations of playwrights in the usage of certain themes (peasantry, the ‘common’ people), realistic speech, and the humorous depiction of some characters.

After the death of Synge until the demolition by fire of the Abbey property in 1951, the ‘outstanding Irish achievements in the theatre are the plays of Sean O’Casey’ (1880-1964) (Fitz-Simon 1983: 160). O’Casey is said to dominate the history of Irish drama after the independence. His demythologizing attitude in the Dublin ‘trilogy’ initiates the stance taken by Irish playwrights after him.

2.3 Irish nationalism and Martin McDonagh

Synge and O’Casey smoothed the way for generations of young playwrights. Also Martin McDonagh is tributary to this literary inheritance. In McDonagh’s work the ideal of the melodramatic Irishman is challenged further and the melodramatic Ireland is further demythologized. Piety is exchanged for disrespect for priests, loyalty makes place for jealousy and treason, tenacity is still present but then in the state of being drunk. The love of the country is completely

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abandoned since almost every character in McDonagh’s plays wants to flee Ireland. This fleeing of the country also has a realistic resonance, since due to unemployment, a lot of Irish people moved to Great Britain or even America (e.g. McDonagh’s own parents). The concern for family and friends is non-existent: children slaughter their parents, brothers fight, a mother lies to her daughter …

In Synge’s work there was still a lot of realism, he ‘mimetically represents a stable, coherent sense of Irish identity [through the villagers]’ (Diehl 2001: 105), not so with McDonagh who ‘abandons the realist frame […]’ and opts instead ‘for a more open-ended and ambiguous narrative’ (Diehl 2001: 106). McDonagh’s plays often start realistically: the characters are real, everyday figures who talk their dialects and references to Irish history and heritage add to the realistic value. However, underneath the surface a surreal feeling starts to develop, strange events pop up and sudden absurdist twists diminish the realistic outset. McDonagh establishes ambiguity in his plays through shifts in characterization and the deliberate choice for an open ending. In doing so ‘he rejects the possibility that identity is either stable or coherent’ (Diehl 2001: 107). A very important element, which adds to the surrealist feel in McDonagh’s work, is storytelling. Lots of fairytale elements or folklore references are present. Asked about his choice for fairytale, McDonagh answers that it is the dark side of the tales that inspired and intrigued him. ‘In re-reading the Grimm’s, they’re pretty bloody dark. It was interesting to compare my memory, what I remembered about the fairy tales, and then to see the actual text. […] Little Red Riding Hood is a bloody dark story. And in the original it’s quite horrific at the end; they cut the wolf open. I like the details. They cut the wolf open, took out Little Red Riding Hood and her friend. They put rocks in the wolf’s stomach, and sewed him back up with green wire. They watched him as he awoke, and waited until he jumped out of bed in fright at everybody watching him, and dropped down dead ‘cause the stones were grating against his intestines! I would love to write something as horrific as that if I could’ (O’Toole 1998). Thus, the speed and violence in his plays (cf. 3. In yer-face theatre) stem partly from this obsession with storytelling and fairytale. The ultimate example of this balancing between realism and fiction is The Pillowman; storytelling lays at its basis. The Irish nationalist inheritance will be discussed in more detail in the context of McDonagh’s plays in chapter 5 and 6.
3 **In-yer-face theatre: characteristics and representatives**

In the nineties, a new form of British theatre emerged, which challenged the common boundaries by bringing taboos on stage. It is ‘drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message’ (Sierz, 2000: 4). This drama is called ‘in-yer-face theatre’ because its purpose is to shock the audience; the playwrights test how far they can go. Sierz (2000: 4) mentions the New Oxford English Dictionary definition of in-your-face: ‘blatantly aggressive or provocative, impossible to ignore or avoid’. He further sums up the distinguishing features of this kind of theatre: ‘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 (Sierz, 2000: 5).’ What is more, the playwrights mix their cruel stories with clever humour. The audience will at times be torn between horror and laughter.

In-yer-face theatre is thus not just about showing violence on stage or about using bad language. It is mainly about the relationship between stage and audience. In an interview in 2003, Sierz states that ‘[in-yer-face theatre] is about that relationship being communicated at a very heightened emotional level. It's a bit like punk rock. A lot of young writers I have spoken to say that they want theatre to be as exciting as a gig. That was their project.’ The powerful and shocking images are bound to cause extreme reactions: either people respond with disgust and indignation, or they are convinced that it is the best theatre they have ever experienced. That is what makes in-yer-face theatre that distinctive: it is theatre that gets under one’s skin anyhow. To see such a play is a baffling experience; it is a confrontation with one’s standards and values. It challenges the distinctions people use to describe their identity: human/animal, clean/dirty, healthy/unhealthy, normal/abnormal, good/evil, true/untrue, real/unreal, just/unjust, art/life (Sierz, 2000: 6).

All these aspects are even more striking because they are put live on stage; the story does not get to the audience indirectly like it does through films and books. The actor, a real person, is actually present; hence if this person is naked or if he/she is assaulted brutally, it evokes a stronger reaction than when the same thing is shown in a film. In-yer-face theatre compels the audience to look at ideas and feelings they would normally avoid, because those ideas remind them of the awful things human beings are capable of (Sierz, 2000: 6).

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Sierz\(^5\) lists the in-yr-face playwrights and splits them into two groups. He calls the first group ‘the big three of in-yr-face theatre’: Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Anthony Neilson. They were the most provocative new writers of the decade and had a big influence on British theatre. The second group includes Simon Block, Jez Butterworth, David Eldridge, Nick Grosso, Tracy Letts, Martin McDonagh, Patrick Marber, Phyllis Nagy, Joe Penhall, Rebecca Prichard, Philip Ridley, Judy Upton, Naomi Wallace and Richard Zajdlic. They were highly influenced by ‘the big three’, but each of them developed a personal style. Martin McDonagh incorporates in his brutal in-yr-face theatre some elements of Irish nationalist theatre. He mixes the brutality, the dirty language and the challenging themes with rural Irish elements. He portrays the Irish peasantry as violent and drunk aggressors. In blending in-yr-face theatre with Irish nationalist theatre, McDonagh carries the work of Synge and O’Casey to the next level. The result of this blend is a baffling exposure of men’s cruelty. McDonagh is very interested in the darkness in every human being; he does not believe in purely good people. He states: ‘Well, we're all cruel, aren't we? We're all extreme in one way or another at times, and that's what drama, since the Greeks, has dealt with. I hope the overall view isn't just that, though, or I've failed in my writing. There have to be moments when you glimpse something decent, something life-affirming even in the most twisted character. That's where the real art lies. See, I always suspect characters who are painted as lovely, decent human beings. I would always question where the darkness lies’ (O’Hagan 2001). The in-yr-face elements will be discussed in detail in relation to McDonagh’s plays in Chapter 5 and 6.

4 Martin McDonagh

4.1 Biography and work

Martin McDonagh was born in London in 1971 to emigrated Irish parents\(^6\). His mother is originally from Killeenduff, Easky, County Sligo and his father from Lettermullen, Connemara, County Galway. In 1989, when Martin was sixteen, his parents moved back to Ireland. After they left, Martin quit school and lived alone with his elder brother John in South London. Martin was deliberately unemployed for the following five years, which made it possible to spend a lot

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\(^{6}\) [http://www.irishwriters-online.com/martinmcdonagh.html](http://www.irishwriters-online.com/martinmcdonagh.html)
of time at home. He states: ‘I didn’t want to educate myself toward some kind of job. I didn’t even want a job. I didn’t want a boss’ (O’Toole 2006). Because Martin’s mother insisted that he find work, he would go on interviews and make his lack of interest so obvious that he never got any jobs. Martin survived happily on unemployment benefits (fifty dollars a week): he played snooker, watched television, and read books that John brought home. After a while, he started to experiment with writing through his brother John, an aspiring screenwriter\(^7\), and spent his time at home writing short stories, films and radio plays. Influenced by John’s talk about filmmakers and writers, an idea began to take shape in Martin’s head: ‘[h]ere was a job where all you had was your head, a pencil and a piece of paper. That's the coolest kind of job there is’. For a teenaged school drop-out, being a writer seemed the perfect excuse for sitting around the house all day and not doing anything in particular: ‘[i]t was unemployment with honour, I never thought I'd get anywhere’ (Lyman: 4). When McDonagh turned twenty-one in 1992, he lost his unemployment benefits and started working part-time for the Department of Trade and Industry. At that time he wrote television scripts and short stories. None of them worked out. He started writing radio plays and sent off twenty-two of them to the BBC and other stations. Only one Australian station wanted to produce two of his radio plays; his radio career was not a huge success either. In 1994, his brother John won a fellowship to study screenwriting at the University of Southern California and moved to Los Angeles. McDonagh quit his job at the Department of Trade and Industry and, alone in the house in Camberwell, began to write every day (O’Toole 2006). It was then that he wrote the drafts of all his plays that have been produced thus far. Convinced by the geniality of his plays, McDonagh started to send off copies to theatre companies. In the spring of 1995, Garry Hynes, the director of the Druid Theatre in Galway, read the script of *A Skull in Conne-{
mar}a*. She states: ‘[a]s soon as I read the dialogue, I wanted to hear it, to the degree that I started reading it aloud to myself. I very clearly remember reading it aloud and throwing myself on the floor in paroxysms of laughter’ (O’Toole 2006). She contacted McDonagh, and asked for more of his work. He sent her the rest of *The Leenane Trilogy*, and Hynes immediately bought the rights to produce all three.

\(^7\) John produced its first film in 2000, without much success, and wrote the screenplay of *Ned Kelly*, starring Heath Ledger and Orlando Bloom, in 2003. John was nominated for two awards for best screenplay: a Film Critics Circle of Australia Award, and an Australian Film Institute Award. All this happened after Martin already booked success with his plays.

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Nothing was heard of Martin McDonagh until the first of February 1996, when his first play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, opened at the Town Hall Theatre in Galway. Only a month later, the same play was produced at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in London. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* turned out to be a big hit. In 1996, it won three major awards: the George Devine Award and The Evening Standard for Most Promising Playwright, and the Writer’s Guild Best Fringe Play. *The Beauty Queen* also won four prestigious Tony Awards when it opened on Broadway in New York. McDonagh, not used to public attention and fancy occasions caused a scandal at the London *Evening Standard* Theatre Awards ceremony, which was held at the Savoy Hotel. He relates the evening as such: ‘I was so nervous at having to collect it that myself and my brother got tanked up on vodka, and the vodka really kicked in by the time we arrived at the Savoy. And we were a little bit rowdy when they started toasting the Queen [of England], good Irish boys that we were. And Sean Connery came over and told us to shut up and I told him to fuck off. He backed away and we left, and I can’t remember a single thing about the rest of the event. Apparently I kissed Jessica Lange, but I have no memory of that whatsoever’ (O’Toole 2006).

After the premiere of *The Beauty Queen*, with remarkable speed, other plays came, followed by more recognition and a celebrity status for the playwright. *The Daily Telegraph* declared McDonagh ‘perhaps the most promising playwright to have emerged in Britain over the past 10 years’ (Lyman: 2). At the age of twenty-seven, in 1998, Martin was the first playwright since Shakespeare to have four plays running in London at the same time – to which McDonagh answered ‘and mine were better’ (Lyman 1998: 3). McDonagh’s following plays are *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (December 1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (June 1997), *The Lonesome West* (July 1997, nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play in 1999), *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (April 2001, nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play in 2006) and, for the time being his most recent published play, *The Pillowman* (April 2003). *The Pillowman* won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play in 2004\(^8\), and was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play in 2005. The remarkable speed of the succession of plays is due to the fact that he wrote the first drafts of his entire dramatic corpus (all six of his produced plays and a seventh that he finds awful and forbids to be produced) in the nine-month period in 1994 during which his brother John was away.

After writing *The Pillowman*, McDonagh focused on his real passion: writing and directing movies. His first cinematic experiment resulted in the prizewinning action short film *Six Shooter*. In an interview (Abeel 2008) about his feature film debut *In Bruges* (2008), McDonagh states: ‘I was really scared of the move [from theatre to film] in lots of ways because I always had a healthy disrespect for theatre. I always tried to write plays that a film fan, which is what I was, would like. Plays for people who don't like plays. And because I had a disrespect for the form - at the outset, anyway - it was easy to write plays that were kind of different and shook things up a little bit. But then with film, I'd always loved everything about great cinema. So it was much harder to write a script […]. It took longer than the plays.’ McDonagh affirms that he prefers films and that he knows little about theatre. In his own words: ‘I only started writing for theatre when all else failed. It was a way of avoiding work and earning a bit of money’ (Sierz 2000: 222). And more: ‘I would be unhappy if I wrote ninety good plays and didn’t make a good film. But if I made one good film. If I made one brilliant film, one really, really good film, I’d be happy. One would be enough […]. [W]ith a film, if they get it right, it’s there forever. That knowledge that a work of beauty will always be there to inspire somebody’ (O’Toole 1998). Be that as it may, it is in the first place his body of plays that made him the famous artist he is today.

What is more, we should probably nuance his bold statements; it could be so that McDonagh only diminishes the art of playwriting to shock the enthusiastic theatre critics and create – in line with his offensive plays – an image of an enfant terrible or a new sort of angry young man. It is important for that matter to moderate McDonagh’s quotes, flip them around and look at them again. He has, plenty of times, said and done things merely to shock or entertain or even hide behind a persona.

Now, 2009, McDonagh has written a new play: *A Behanding in Spokane*. Unexpectedly, since it seemed that he had permanently exchanged theatre for films. Unlike his other plays (but like *The Pillowman*) this story does not take place in Ireland. *A Behanding in Spokane* is set

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9 In Six Shooter McDonagh tells a typical violent McDonagh-story about a cruel kid that is responsible for the death of his mother and the suicide of a woman. The kid dies during a gunfight with the police.

10 Diehl (2001: 107) talks about McDonagh in the context of the Angry Young Man movement: ‘Because McDonagh does not articulate visions of hope for an altered future, but instead remarks on the emptiness of older social structures, he shares some thematic concerns with the movement known as ‘angry young man’ drama. [T]his claim stands in direct opposition to McDonagh’s [statement]: “You don’t need to pay ten quid to be lectured to. As long as you tell good stories, people will be more interested than they will in whatever political question is going around that month or that year.”’

in Spokane, a small town in Washington, in the United States of America. The four-member cast includes a ‘man in mid- to late 40s who is missing his left hand’ and ‘a black man and a white chick’ (Schwartz 2009). The identity of the fourth person has not been revealed yet. Although the play is not set in Ireland, it is still very Martin McDonagh. The handicapped man wants his left hand back and the couple, trying to trick him, ends up getting tied to a radiator with a bomb that will go off if they stir. This will be another bloody, gore and hilarious McDonagh production. ‘It's brand new,’ McDonagh said when asked about the play. ‘It's still under wraps but it should be for the next season’. It is exciting to see what McDonagh will do with this new American element in the play and whether he will be able to pull off an American idiom.

Both in his first and last play and in his film, the in-yer-face characteristics are present: a lot of violence is shown, raw language is used in quick and witty dialogues, and the audience is challenged in many ways. These characteristics will be discussed within the context of McDonagh’s work in Chapter 5 and 6.

4.2 An Irish storyteller?

Martin McDonagh’s plays breathe out Irishness: the setting, characters, tradition of storytelling, speech and religion. Both of his trilogies are set in the Irish places he knows intimately: the Aran Islands and Connemara. According to O’Hagan (2001), these are ‘two of the most mythologized and elementally beautiful areas of rural Ireland’. Irish culture has a tradition of storytelling, an oral tradition and a whole body of inherited stories that pop up in contemporary culture. In an interview with Fintan O’Toole (1998), an important drama critic, McDonagh talks about the Irishness of his plays. On O’Toole’s question whether growing up in a mixed Irish-English background has had any influence on McDonagh’s work, McDonagh answered: ‘[t]hinking about being Irish only came into my life when I decided to write Irish plays. Before that, I tried to write a few re-workings of Irish fairy tales or myths I’d heard growing up. But none of them were specifically Irish at that point. The whole history of Irish storytelling didn’t really come into it, and has only come into it in the last two or three years’. Actually, McDonagh claims, there is not really much Irish influence at all: ‘[i]f I was Italian or Luxemburgian, they would be the same stories. It depends on the way you see the world, to me anyway, more than the way you’ve been brought up or your history of storytelling’. McDonagh claims that he did not even read many Irish works before. However, this bold statement should be questioned. Even though
there are much differences between Synge (who claims to be a realist) and McDonagh (who only claims the title of storyteller), there is a possibility to see some similarities between for example Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* and McDonagh’s *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, thematically (bold women, the acceptance towards violence, … ). It could be possible that McDonagh secretly or even unconsciously parodied Synge at some point (Diehl 2001: 104-105). Be that as it may, the playwright continues to give interviews in which he states that influences mainly stem from American culture and not in the least American movies: the films of Martin Scorsese, Sam Peckinpah and Sergio Leone. Alongside these films, McDonagh puts forward as his main source of inspiration the raw punk rock of *The Clash*, *The Sex Pistols* and *The Pogues* (O’Hagan 2001). *The Clash* had taught him to be sceptical of the established power, but *The Pogues*, a London Irish punk band that mixed the harsh violence of *The Sex Pistols* with the lyrical storytelling of traditional Irish ballads, offered a worldview that would become important for his work: they showed McDonagh that he did not have to abandon his Irish heritage; he could make use of it instead. McDonagh states about *The Pogues*: ‘Even while they were trying to destroy the crap side of Irish folk, they still had brilliant lyrics, brilliant tunes, and a love of music. Maybe not consciously, I was beginning to get the same idea: taking the parts you love and destroying the parts you hate’ (O’Toole 2006). Like *The Pogues* put raw new lyrics to old Irish tunes, McDonagh’s plays submit the devoutness of Irish Catholicism and nationalism to impertinent satire.

McDonagh admits that after he had written his first plays, he became more aware of the tradition of Irish storytellers. *The Banshees of Inisheer*¹², the third play in the second trilogy (i.e., *The Aran Islands Trilogy*), has as chief subject Irish storytellers in the countryside telling the myths, the stories and legends. Although McDonagh acknowledges the existence of such an Irish storytelling tradition, he adds (O’Toole 1998): ‘it would be phony of me to say I have anything to do with Irish storytelling. The plays are Irish stories, and I hope someday they’ll be recognized as Irish stories… But for me, now, I feel kind of phony. Maybe I’m just having a bad morning. I hope someday they’ll be regarded as true Irish stories, I don’t think they are at this minute.’ It is interesting that McDonagh feels phony when calling his work Irish. This feeling is deeply rooted in the still existing tension between Ireland and England. When the Irish press does not like his work, they tend to make him out to be more British – but when he does well, they claim his work

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¹² This play was never published.
as Irish. For example, he was nominated for “Best Irish Director” at the Irish Film & Television Awards this year for *In Bruges*, whereas other Irish journalists have accused him of mocking the Irish on stage. The Irish – British relationship remains a touchy subject.

O’Toole (1998) remarks that there is one aspect of Irishness that is the most powerful, that will be inherent in any Irish work: Catholicism. Is this element of Irishness present in McDonagh’s work? Did religion influence his plays? McDonagh answers that he ‘never set out to comment on Catholicism or priests’ but that ‘seeing The Leenane Trilogy again in Sydney […] was interesting. It was the first time I saw them without seeing through an English or Irish person’s eyes, it was completely new and fresh. But all the seemingly anti-clerical or anti-Catholic or anti-Christian jokes still came through. For me they seemed more a comment on the faith than they were when I was writing them. […] All the things that have been going on in Ireland in the last few years, the revelations about child abuse by priests, were at the back of my mind while I was writing. Having somebody representing a gang of people, some of whose members are vicious bastards who are defended by the same system - it is like the mafia, the church with the cappos.’ In the interview with O’Toole (1998) he talks about having been raised and educated by Catholics. He adds that he discarded religion at a certain age because of a personal disagreement with some aspects. At the same time he calls the priest in *The Lonesome West* ‘a Christ-like figure’ and interestingly, he admits that he worked his ‘childhood vision of Christ’ into his play unconsciously. In addition, he states that *In Bruges* is about Catholic guilt. Hence, even if he renounced his faith, it is interesting to see how much of an influence it might have still had on him, contrasting McDonagh’s typical ‘anarchist tough-talk’.

In the discussion of the plays, in chapter 5 and 6 will be elaborated on characteristics of Irish storytelling in McDonagh’s work. In chapter 5, which focuses on the trilogies, the language, the setting of the Irish country side, the stereotypical characters and the strong Catholic religion is commented on. The tradition of storytelling present in the fairytale elements will be discussed in the context of *The Pillowman* in chapter 6.

4.3 As a writer

Every interview with McDonagh shows the writer’s point of view about playwriting. It is not a nice picture of a passionate playwright, but rather the image of a jokey nihilist. He is very clear about his preference of films and about the fact that he only started writing plays as the next step,
after failures in radio and television. Also, writing short stories was not an option: ‘[t]hat didn't work at all - I have no prose style whatsoever’ (Lyman 1998: 3). Although he does not really care much about theatre, he has a special talent for it. Maybe it is just because he started without many hopes or much respect for the form that he can let thoughts and imagination run free, not bound by any formal restrictions. McDonagh claims that he writes plays in a few weeks: ‘Beauty Queen is a play I wrote in a week and a half, Cripple was a play I wrote in five weeks. I think I could do the same things again and better next month if I put my mind to it’ (O’Toole 1998). He has a regular writing ritual: ‘I begin by sharpening six pencils and laying them out. My first draft is done in pencil on a pad. I do three pages a day. I like the speed of a pencil. Then I type it up. That’s like my second draft, and I make changes while I type. Sometimes that's it’ (Lyman 1998: 4). After a few weeks of working on a play, he takes time off, not to visit friends or to go on a holiday, however. He did not even go to pubs: ‘I haven't been out for years, not really. My life is staying at home and watching TV. It really is. I sleep a lot. I sometimes just sit and look out the window. At birds, at nothing. For hours’ (Lyman 1998: 4). Although McDonagh does not seem to take theatre very seriously, he is very serious about his growth as an artist (McDonagh does not care much for the word ‘career’). He wants to move on and keep reinventing himself, keep on creating new things: ‘[it] would horrify me to still be going in twenty years’ time if I hadn’t written anything better than what I’ve done so far’ (O’Toole 1998). An evolution in his work becomes clear when comparing the trilogies with his last play The Pillowman.

5 The trilogies

5.1 A mixture of Irish national theatre and in-yer-face theatre

Through the sharp observational talent and humour of Martin McDonagh and the combination of elements of Irish nationalist theatre and in-yer-face theatre, the trilogies provide a unique theatre experience. Influences of the Irish nationalist theatre are present in the typical Irish setting, the realistic framework and the further challenging of the ideal image of the Irishman: McDonagh’s Irishman swears, gossips, is unfaithful, cannot be trusted and does not value his country. The plays start out realistically but the storyline features sudden twists. Tension is constantly bubbling underneath the surface and cruelty pops up in almost every character. Through McDonagh’s exaggerations, the plays get a surreal feel to them. In McDonagh’s own words: ‘I
suppose I walk that line between comedy and cruelty, because I think one illuminates the other. And, yeah, I tend to push things as far as I can because I think you can see things more clearly through exaggeration than through reality.’ In incorporating cruelty and comedy in his plays, McDonagh adds to the tradition of in-yer-face theatre. Cruelty is present in the characters, their actions, and the abrasive language they use, humour is present in the witty dialogues and in the extremely absurd situations. Humour is also inherent in the surreal situations or twists, for instance, a large part of what makes The Lieutenant of Inishmore a comedy is its ending – that final twist, where you realize that everyone pretty much died for nothing and you comprehend the universal irony of it all.

5.2 The Leenane Trilogy

The three plays of The Leenane Trilogy\textsuperscript{13} are The Beauty Queen of Leenane (BQL), A Skull in Connemara (SC) and The Lonesome West (LW). In this trilogy McDonagh draws a peculiar portrait of Leenane, a tiny village in county Galway in the west of Ireland. Western Ireland is known for its rural lifestyle, its thinly populated land, for its holding to old Irish traditions and for the green hilly landscape. Leenane is considered to have the smallest population of any village in Ireland. Its only source of fame is that it served as the location for the movie The Field (1990) starring Richard Harris and Tom Berenger. The Leenane of McDonagh is inhabited by murderers, torturers, aggressors and one self-pitying priest. The inhabitants live in a close community in which gossip and stories are told over and over again. Most young people experience the village as a suffocating ‘hole’ and not one of the characters gets away undamaged in the end. In what follows the characteristics of both Irish nationalist theatre and in-yer-face theatre inherent in The Leenane Trilogy are discussed. First, for the sake of intelligibility, a short summary of the three plays is given.

5.2.1 Synopsis

The Beauty Queen of Leenane, centres on the dysfunctional relationship between Maureen, aged forty, and Mag, her seventy-year-old manipulative mother. Maureen loathes her mother, and when she finds out that Mag has been sabotaging her future again as well as her last chance at

\textsuperscript{13} Passages from the play are taken from the edition of 1998: The Beauty Queen of Leenane and Other Plays, Vintage International: New York.
love, she batters her mother to death. Additional characters in the play are Pato, a good looking man in his forties, and his younger brother Ray Dooley. In *A Skull in Connemara*, the main plot revolves around Mick Dowd, who has been hired to empty specific graves in the churchyard. In the play, he has to dig up the bones of his late wife, Oona whom he lost in a drink driving accident. The ambitious but dumb police officer Thomas Hanlon creates his own evidence to prove that Mick killed Oona and his cruel little brother Mairtin helps Mick with the digging. An additional character is Maryjohnny Rafferty, aged seventy, who is an old friend of Mick’s. The brothers Coleman and Valene Connor in *The Lonesome West* have a lifetime occupation of quarrelling and hurting each other. Coleman killed his father, but none of them seems to have a problem with that. Nothing can change their violent lifestyle, even the efforts of the kind Father Welsh are in vain. Another character in this play is Girleen Kelleher, the prettiest girl of Leenane who is secretly in love with Father Welsh.

5.2.2 Characteristics of Irish national theatre in *The Leenane Trilogy*

5.2.2.1 Realism

The trilogies are realistic in their very precise description of the setting and Irish references. The use of dialect is close to reality; McDonagh creates his own idiom. In *The Leenane Trilogy*, McDonagh offers a slice of life of the inhabitants of his Leenane.

First of all, the playwright mentions the exact village where the action takes place. Further, in the description of the setting, a lot of details are given. For example on page three, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*’s opening scene is described at length:

*The living-room/kitchen of a rural cottage in the west of Ireland. Front door stage left, a long black range along the back wall with a box of turf beside it and a rocking-chair on its right. On the kitchen side of the set is a door in the back wall leading off to an unseen hallway, and a newer oven, a sink and some cupboards curving around the right wall. There is a window with an inner ledge above the sink in the right wall looking out onto fields, a dinner table with two chairs just right of centre, a small TV down left, an electric kettle and a radio on one of the kitchen cupboards, a crucifix and a framed picture of John and Robert Kennedy on the wall above the ranger, a heavy black poker beside the range, and a touristy-looking embroidered tea-towel hanging further along the back wall, bearing the inscription ‘May you be half an hour in Heaven afore the Devil knows you’re dead’ [...].*

The playwright leaves little room for the director’s ideas of what the setting should be. He even gives information about the state of the weather: ‘as the play begins, it is raining quite heavily’.
The characters’ speech in the plays is interlarded with Irish slang (not Gaelic Irish), vocabulary and syntax. Words returning throughout the three plays are for example: ‘a babby’ (a baby, e.g., p. 15 *There was a priest [...] had a babby with a Yank!*), ‘an eej’ (an idiot, e.g., p. 45 *She must have tipped the pan over, [...] the eej.*), ‘a gasur’ (a young boy, e.g., p. 222 *Didn’t as gasurs ye love each other?*), ‘a gob’ (a mouth, e.g., p. 194 *And you can shut your fecking gob too [...]*), ‘oul’ (old, e.g., p. 10 *[He] murdered the poor oul woman [...]*), ‘a tinker’ (a gypsy/travelling person/insulting term for a low-class female, e.g., p. 26 *Lying the head off you, like the babby of a tinker.*). Another characteristic of the Irish slang is the suffix ‘– een’ acting as a diminutive, e.g., ‘a biteen’ (a little bit, p. 7: *Is the radio a biteen loud [...]?*), ‘Girleen’ (affectionate term), ‘lettereen’ (*I’ve written them a little lettereen here [...]*). Also the word order is not standard English, e.g., p. 5: ‘And the hot water too I do be scared of.’ and p. 15: ‘That’s what I want to do is drive. I’ll have to be getting driving lessons.’ Pronouns get a different pronunciation, you becomes *ye*, your becomes *yer* … This language adds to the realistic value of the play: in Leenane people do not speak standard English. In addition to that, the characters carry typical Irish names such as Connor, Dowd, Dooley, Rafferty and Welsh.

McDonagh incorporates also other typical Irish elements to really make this a play set in Ireland. In the first play of the trilogy an important reference is the song *The Spinning Wheel* by Delia Murphy. Delia Murphy (1902–1971) was an Irish singer, who mainly performed Irish ballads. She was known as ‘the queen of Connemara’ (O’Hara 1997). Similarly, Pato calls Maureen ‘the beauty queen of Leenane’. The song *The Spinning Wheel* is the favourite song of Mag, Maureen’s mother. There are some parallels between the lyrics and the play. The song is about two characters: an aged grandmother and a young woman.

Close by the window young Eileen is spinning  
Bent o’er the fire her blind grandmother sitting

The young girl wants to leap off to her lover, who is waiting for her outside. However, the presence of her grandmother keeps her from doing so at first.

The maid shakes her head, on her lips lays her fingers  
Steps up from the stool, longs to go and yet lingers

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14 The meaning of words stem from an online Irish slang dictionary on: [http://www.irishslang.co.za/irisha_m.htm](http://www.irishslang.co.za/irisha_m.htm) visited on 09.07.2009.

15 Taken from the lyrics of *The Spinning Wheel* by Delia Murphy.
A frightened glance turns to her drowsy grandmother

In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Mag, the old woman (in this case the mother, not the grandmother), also plays a role in preventing her daughter Maureen’s leaving with Pato. However, Mag actively boycotts Maureen’s love life; in the song this happens passively since it is only the presence of the grandmother that makes the girl hesitate. Further on, Pato talks about the song and makes an important remark in questioning whether the grandmother is asleep or dead at the end.

Pato: Does the grandmother die at the end, now, or is she just sleeping?
Maureen: Just sleeping, I think she is. […] While the two go hand in hand through the fields. (BQL, p. 33)

Here Maureen is in an optimistic mood, she had a lovely evening with Pato and he seems truly interested in her. The flirty ending of the scene gives the audience some hope for a better life of Maureen. This hope will be crushed in the course of the play, when mother and daughter further destroy each other. The question about whether the mother is dead or asleep is exactly the question that will go through the audience’s mind during scene eight. In that scene, Maureen talks to her seemingly dead/sleeping mother in her rocking chair. Only at the end of the scene, when Mag falls heavily on the floor with a visible piece of skull hanging from the side of her head, the audience has the horrifying revelation that she is dead. *The Spinning Wheel* not only points towards national heritage, but the parallel with the storyline of the play helps to build up the tension (cf. 5.2.3 Characteristics of in-yer-face theatre in *The Leenane Trilogy*). Apart from Mag, none of the other characters likes the song, which already shows a minor disrespect for the national heritage.

Maureen: This is a creepy oul song. (BQL, p. 32)
Pato: They don’t write songs like that any more. Thank Christ. (BQL, p. 33)

Another frequently recurring Irish reference in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is the Kimberley biscuits. Kimberleys are commonly referred to as ‘the legendary biscuit of the Emerald Isle’ and are cherished by a lot of Irishmen. In reality, apart from the Irish, almost no one actually likes the biscuits. Similar to the appreciation of *The Spinning Wheel*, the characters in the play –except for Ray– do not like Kimberleys either, although they are considered Irish heritage.

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Mag: I’ll have a Kimberley so, although I don’t like Kimberleys. I don’t know why you get Kimberleys at all. Kimberleys are horrible. (BQL, p. 25)
Pato: I do hate Kimberleys. In fact I think Kimberleys are the most horrible biscuits in the world. (BQL, p. 28)

Poteen, another traditional Irish product that pops up regularly in the two last plays of the trilogy, is a highly alcoholic beverage. This seems to be the only element of the Irish legacy that every character in the plays embraces. In *A Skull in Connemara*, Mick, Maryjohnny and Mairtin get really drunk from poteen. In *The Lonesome West*, even father Welsh is drunk all the time, and the violent brothers, Valene and Coleman, have lots of drunken fights over poteen (and whether or not Coleman tops Valene’s poteen up with water so Valene would not notice that Coleman drank it). In making poteen the Irish traditional item every character likes, McDonagh enforces the image of the drunken Irishman (this will be further discussed below in 5.2.2.2 *The challenging of the ideal image of the Irishman and Ireland*).

Another national element that is clearly present in the plays is religion. Religion is materially present, e.g., in the descriptions of the living room of the characters.

> [...] a crucifix [...] on the wall above the range [...]. (BQL, p. 3)
> [...] a crucifix hangs on the back wall [...]. (SC, p. 87)
> [...] a long row of dusty, plastic Catholic figurines [...] line a shelf on the back wall, above which hangs [...] a large crucifix. (LW, p. 169)

The attitudes of the characters towards religion will be discussed below in the context of McDonagh’s challenging of the ideal Irishman.

5.2.2.2 The challenging of the ideal image of the Irishman and Ireland

As mentioned before, McDonagh is tributary to the Irish nationalist theatre tradition also because of the further challenging of the ideal of the perfect Irishman. The playwright fills his stories with anti-nationalistic elements such as disrespect for religion and priests (instead of piety and devotion), abandonment of love of country, family fights and murders (instead of cherishment of generations). Optimism seems completely absent, though the playwright himself believes in the good of his characters (cf. 5.2.3.3 *Malice and morality*). The confrontational portrayal is naturally present in the characterization. All characters, even if they start out seemingly good and empathic, end up revealing a dark side. In addition, they all are abrasively violent and cruel (this
cruelty will be discussed below, in the context of the in-yer-face elements) and most of them consume a lot of alcohol. An atmosphere of sneaky maliciousness is created through the constant references to the spreading of gossip and rumours by the characters. First, the dark characterization will be commented on, followed by a discussion on the spreading of rumours. After that, additional anti-nationalistic elements such as abandonment of religion and love of the country will be focused on.

In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the audience very quickly learns that Mag is a very egocentric woman, and thus cannot feel much empathy for her. Maureen, on the other hand, starts out as a victim of her dominant and bossy mother who does not even allow her to have a life of her own. Initially, the audience reacts with compassion; they feel sorry for Maureen and understand her irritation and anger. Maureen’s dark side, however, is fully exposed in scene seven where she consciously and seemingly unmoved burns her mother’s already scalded hand with hot oil.

The oil has started boiling. Maureen rises, turns the radio up, stares at Mag as she passes her, takes the pan off the boil and turns the gas off, and returns to Mag with it [...]. Maureen slowly and deliberately takes her mother’s shrivelled 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. (BQL, p. 66)

The characterization of Mick in *A Skull in Connemara* follows a similar pattern. Mick lost his wife Oona seven and a half years ago in a drink-driving accident and is a victim of malignant and persistent town gossip. Aspersions go around the village that he actually murdered her first, and then drove his car into a wall to make the murder look like an accident. Throughout the play, Mick is holding on to his innocence. As a reader or a viewer you slowly get convinced of his innocence although the matter stays rather ambiguous until scene four. At the end of scene three it is suggested that Mick is about to murder Mairtin. Scene four opens with a description of Mick, wearing a shirt covered in blood and holding a bloody mallet, which suggests that he succeeded in killing Mairtin. It does not look too good for Mick further on in scene four, when Thomas provides some so-called evidence for the murder on his wife: the skull of Oona, marked by a large forehead-crack. Thomas makes Mick write down a confession to the murder of his wife.

Mick: Now, what exactly do you want me to be saying, Thomas?
Thomas: Well, the *truth* Mick. (SC, p. 153)
The audience gets a confirmation of Mick’s innocence; he really did not kill Oona, since it is not the murder of his wife he confesses to, but the murder of Thomas’ brother, Mairtin. Mick, who started out as a victim now becomes a perpetrator.

Mick: I didn’t butcher my wife. Just like for seven long years I’ve been saying I didn’t butcher my wife. I never butchered anybody ‘til tonight […]. A pure drink-driving was all my Oona was, as all along I’ve said, but if it’s a murderer ye’ve always wanted living in yer midst, ye can fecking have one. (SC, p. 156)

The spectators witness the birth of a new piece of gossip as Mairtin staggers into the room, somewhat confused and with a bleeding head wound, a crack in his skull. Mairtin is convinced that he got his wound through a drink-driving accident and tries to persuade Thomas and Mary of that belief. Meanwhile Mick burns his confession. Similar to the story of Mick as a ‘wife butcherer’, this is a piece of gossip in which an ambiguity exists whether or not it was a drink-driving accident or a murder (attempt). A parallel to the story of Mick is that both he and Mairtin really had been drinking and driving. However, the difference is that Mairtin does have a crack in his skull, while the crack in Oona’s skull was carved by Thomas who dug her up from the grave. Similar to the first piece of gossip, there is no real proof, since the only witness, Mairtin himself, is convinced of Mick’s innocence. One can imagine that this incident will start to lead a life of its own in the Leenane of McDonagh.

Gossip is a very important element in McDonagh’s portrayal of Leenane as a community in which rumours and hatred become a legacy. A piece of gossip will circulate for years on end and a grudge against a family is held forever. McDonagh very cleverly establishes links between the plays in the trilogy by making characters and stories return. He uses the trilogy’s intertextuality to create a gossipy atmosphere. An illustration of this ever-present gossip is Pato’s remark that you ‘can’t kick a cow in Leenane without some bastard holding a grudge twenty year’ (BQL, p. 31). Ironically, five minutes earlier, Maureen and Pato indulged in discussing a local piece of gossip themselves, namely if Coleman would or would not really have cut off the ears of Valene’s dog (a story which returns in The Lonesome West). In The Lonesome West, Coleman refuses to help Father Welsh to drag Thomas Hanlon’s body out of the lake, because of a feeling of resentment.

Coleman: Ah I never liked that Tom fecking Hanlon. He was always full of himself, same as all fecking coppers … (LW, p. 192)
Coleman: [...] a dead policeman used to laugh at me press-ups in PE? I don’t fecking think so, now.
Valene: You forever bear a grudge you. (LW, p. 197)

Also in *The Lonesome West*, Valene refers to the happenings in the first plays of the trilogy:

Valene: A great parish it is you run, one of them murdered his missus [the story of Mick murdering his wife in *A Skull in Connemara*], an axe through her head, the other her mammy [Maureen murdering her mother in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*], a poker took her brains out [...]. (LW, p. 175)

In *A Skull in Connemara*, Mary makes a statement which sums up the gossipy character of Leenane. Mick tells her that she should forget about an incident that happened twenty-seven years ago, that she 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! (SC, p. 90)

McDonagh presents most of his main characters as untrustworthy people with a very dark side. Other than that, they have a disrespect for religion and their country. Although the characters seem to care about their religion outwardly (cf. the crucifixes in their living rooms and Valene’s plastic Catholic figurines), they certainly do not experience it internally. The material presence of the crucifixes contrasts ironically with the characters’ inherent cruelty (Pocock 2007: 60). This contrast is the source of humorous moments in the play (cf. 5.3.3.3 Black humour). The materialistic faith versus honest belief is juxtaposed in the characters of Valene and Father Welsh (Pocock 2007: 61). After Coleman melted Valene’s figurines, Valene wants to kill him. Father Welsh tries to stop him, and the following discussion clearly shows the difference in belief between the two characters.

Valene: I’ll blow the head off him! The fecking head off him I’ll blow! I tell him not to touch me figurines and what does he do? He cooks me figurines in me stove! [...]
Welsh: You can’t go shooting you brother o’er inanimate objects, Valene! […]
Valene: Inanimate objects? Me figurines of the saints? And you call yersel’ a priest? No wonder you’re the laughing stock of the Catholic Church in Ireland. And that takes some fecking doing boy. (LW, p. 204–205)

Proof of the characters’ lack of honest faith can be found in general remarks and in their unchristian behaviour: swearing and cursing, stealing, cheating, lying and murdering. Mag easily promises ‘may God strike me dead if I do open it’, to open the letter, read it and burn it only a few
minutes later. Thomas, who actually swears a lot himself, prohibits Mairtin—not very effec-
tively—to curse in the graveyard.

Thomas: Stop your cursing now Mairtin. Not in the graveyard. Against God so it is.
Mairtin: Against God, is it? […] Feck God so! And his mother too! (SC, p. 123)

Maryjohnny very proudly boasts she never curses, but some minutes later speaks out her hopes
that the three boys she ‘caught weeing in the churchyard’ twenty-seven years ago should ‘burn in
hell’ (Pocock 2007: 62). In The Lonesome West, Coleman remarks that the good thing about be-
ing Catholic is that ‘you can shoot your dad in the head and it doesn’t even matter at all. So long
as I go confessing to it’ (LW, p. 240). This can be seen, in a way, as a similarity with Synge’s
portrait of Irish morality in The Playboy of the Western World, when Christy is welcomed with
open arms after confessing that he killed his father.

The characters show disrespect for the Catholic clergy as well. In The Beauty Queen of
Leenane, Mag and Ray discuss in a highly entertaining dialogue the kinds of abuses priests in-
dulge in.

Ray: It’s 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.
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 that babby in the head, that’d be news. (BQL, p. 15)

The light–hearted way in which the abuses are being discussed does not entail that they are not
taken seriously. The reality behind these jokes highlights the more serious sub contexts of the
plays; the lightness of the discussion enhances the gravity of the matters (Pocock, 2007: 63). In
putting this matter forward, the playwright effectively comments on the value of religious belief
and clerical practice.

An important figure in the trilogy is Father Welsh¹⁷, the priest. McDonagh introduces
him in the first two plays through dialogues between the characters. Thus the audience will al-
ready have formed an image of father Welsh before he appears in the last play, The Lonesome
West. None of the characters show much respect for the priest, they do not even make the effort
to remember whether his name is Welsh or Walsh and constantly make mistakes.

¹⁷ The importance of father Welsh is thoroughly discussed in Stephanie Pocock’s essay ‘The “ineffectual father
Welsh/Walsh”?: anti-Catholicism and Catholicism in Martin McDonagh’s The Leenane Trilogy.’
Even though initially this seems rather absurd(ist), in fact it adds realism exactly because real people make mistakes in their speech – only Shakespearean characters say everything perfectly without mixing things up, the artificiality of which is exactly what McDonagh wanted to avoid. Straight away, from the first reference to the priest by Ray in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Father Welsh is associated with violence.

Mag: I don’t like Father Walsh – Welsh – at all.
Ray: He punched Mairtin Hanlon in the head once, and for no reason. (BQL, p. 15)

In *A Skull in Connemara*, it is suggested that Mairtin Hanlon indeed got a slap in the face of Father Welsh. Mick sends Mairtin to the priest to ask whether ‘they snip [the willies] off in the coffin and sell them to the tinkers as dog food’ (SC, p. 116). When Mairtin returns from his inquiry, he is angrily rubbing his cheek.

Mairtin: A back-fecking-hander the fecker gave me, you fecking bastard ya! (SC, p. 122)

Father Welsh thus is already introduced before he himself appears as a character in *The Lonesome West*. The other characters in *The Lonesome West*, Valene, Coleman and Girleen, never treat the priest with respect. They do not care about his function or about whatever he tries to achieve, namely to teach them some morality.

Girleen: You’re the king of stink-scum fecking filth-bastards you, ya bitch-feck, Valene.
Welsh: Don’t be swearing like that now, Girleen …
Girleen: Ah me hairy arse, father. (LW, p. 181)

Coleman: And you can shut your fecking gob too, Welsh or Walsh or whatever your fecking name is, ya priest! (LW, p. 194)

Other than a violent man, Welsh is depicted as an alcoholic, who drinks to forget about his failure as a priest. And still, Father Welsh seems very idealistic, which only adds gravity to the fact that he breaks moral codes and drinks so much. McDonagh does not deny that Father Welsh is a truly religious man with good intentions per se – he almost suggests that you can be very reli-
gious, but it is still impossible to be any holier than human. So he is distancing religion from any reality by even making it difficult for friendly Father Welsh to be good enough.

The characters feel that they can get away with everything and just say whatever they want to him. When Coleman tells Welsh right in his face that it is very clear that he is addicted to alcohol, Welsh sadly replies: ‘I never touched the stuff before I came to this parish. This parish would drive you to drink’ (LW, p. 171). Although Welsh really tries to give the characters a moral sense, he drastically falls short since they always react with sarcasm and indifference. Gradually, Welsh grows more depressed and mauldinly remarks that ‘it seems like God has no jurisdiction in this town. No jurisdiction at all’ (LW, p. 175). The characters react apathetically to Welsh’s depression. When he asks them to stop fighting, cursing and making shameless remarks, Girleen sarcastically comments: ‘he’s not having another crisis of faith is he? That’s twelve this week. We should report him to Jesus’ (LW, p. 181). Coleman offers Welsh the “comforting” thought that far worse priests exist.

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? (LW, p. 177)

Father Welsh sinks deeper and deeper into his depression when he learns that Coleman killed his father on purpose. He feels that there is nothing he can do (since the police declared Coleman innocent). Before he moved to Leenane, Welsh thought that it was a nice village; he now realizes that ‘it’s the murder capital of fecking Europe’ (LW, p. 212). Only after Father Welsh commits suicide, Coleman and Valene finally start to confess their past sins and forgive each other. Welsh sacrificed himself hoping he could save Leenane. McDonagh makes a serious anti-catholic statement in creating this drunken, inefficient, self-pitying priest (who commits suicide, which is an act against God). However, while it is so that McDonagh does undermine Catholic ideals with Father Welsh, he also portrays, in a way, a much more human Christ figure, which can also be seen as a renewal rather than destruction of Catholicism. What is more, he adds a positive element, because it seems that the death of Father Welsh did make a small difference (this positive note will be further discussed in 5.2.3.3 Malice and morality).

The inhabitants of McDonagh’s Leenane are clearly deficient in their respect for the national religion. Apart from that, they lack the love for their country and the country’s traditions
People want to flee the unemployment in Ireland, and go to England to find a job. This drain from Ireland to England is criticized in *The Leenane Trilogy* and is fittingly summarized by Maureen’s remark: ‘That’s Ireland, anyways. There’s always someone leaving’ (BQL, p. 31). In the opening scene of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Mag wants the radio turned off because all she hears is ‘nonsense’ (i.e., Gaelic) and she asks herself ‘why can’t they just speak English like everybody?’ because ‘where would Irish get you going for a job in England? Nowhere.’ (BQL, p. 7–8). Further on in the play, Pato explains to Maureen why he wants to leave Ireland and hypothetically asks himself whether he would stay if there was good work in Leenane18.

Pato: […] I mean, there never will be good work, but hypothetically, I’m saying. Or even bad work. Any work. And when I’m over there in London and working in rain and it’s more or less cattle I am, and the young fellas cursing over cards and drunk and sick, and the oul digs over there, all the pee-stained mattresses and nothing to do but watch the clock… 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. (BQL, p. 31)

In an amusing dialogue between Ray and Maureen, they discuss the programs on television. Maureen complains that ‘it’s only Australian oul shite they do ever show on that thing’. Ray affirms that he likes the programs, because ‘who wants to see Ireland on telly?’

Ray: All you have to do is look out your window to see Ireland. And it’s soon bored you’d be. ‘There goes a calf.’ (*Pause.*) I be bored anyway. I be continually bored. (*Pause.*) London I’m thinking of going to […]. To work, y’know […]. Or else Manchester. They have a lot more drugs in Manchester.

Maureen: […] Drugs are terrible dangerous.

Ray: [T]here are plenty of other things just as dangerous, would kill you just as easy. Maybe even easier. […] This bastardising town for one. (BQL, p. 76)

The only sane characters of the trilogy, Pato and Father Welsh, leave Ireland. Pato moves to Boston in the United States and Father Welsh commits suicide to escape Leenane.

McDonagh certainly disputes the ideal of the honest Irishman through incorporating elements such as gossip, murder, torture and disrespect for Catholicism and Ireland.

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18 This might be rooted in his own background – McDonagh’s parents came to London and kind of fell back into a community of Irish immigrants in east London. He grew up around people who left Ireland to work in London.
5.2.3 Characteristics of in-yer-face theatre in *The Leenane Trilogy*

The playwright abandons the initial realistic framework through surprising twists and evolutions in the story. In that context the in-yer-face elements are important. The audience is growingly confronted with lots of unexpected cruelty, abrasive language and dark humour. Throughout the plays, a constant building up of tension is present. First, some examples of the rude language are given. Then, the building of tension is commented on, followed by a discussion of the cruelty and the possible presence of morality. To finish, the sarcasm and irony in the plays is focused on.

5.2.3.1 Language

Characteristic of McDonagh’s idiom in the trilogies is the Irishness, but also the hilarious dialogues in a fast-paced rhythm. Apart from Irish words and structures, the characters’ language is interlaced with swearing and cursing.

Maureen: Just a [...] blessed fecking skivvy is all I’m thought of! (BQL, p. 6)
Ray: I should’ve fecking written it down in the first fecking place, I fecking knew! And save all this fecking time! (BQL, p. 17, my emphasis (RV))
Mairtin: You’re a bastard of a bastard of a bastard of a feck, Thomas Hanlon! (SC, p. 130, my emphasis (RV))
Thomas: Don’t you go calling my granny a cheapskate fecking lump, ya murdering oul ghoul, ya. (SC, p. 153, my emphasis (RV))

In the context of McDonagh’s film *In Bruges*, an interviewer asked what would happen to the dialogue without the word ‘fuck’ (or in the case of this peculiar Irish-English speech ‘feck’). McDonagh responded that ‘[t]he word is more about rhythm. I listen to a character talk in my head and that's what they say, that's what I hear.’ And indeed, because of the recurrent use of the word ‘feck’ his script has a strong rhythm. However, the word is not just used for rhythmic purposes. It also emphasises the aggression and anger, hence it helps building up the tension in the plays. For example, Ray’s above mentioned quote would be a much weaker statement without the word ‘feck’, his frustration would not be that obvious.

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19 interview by Erica Abeel (February 6, 2008) on [http://www.indiewire.com/people/2008/02/indiewire_inter_136.html](http://www.indiewire.com/people/2008/02/indiewire_inter_136.html) (visited on 07/07/08)
5.2.3.2 The building up of tension: distrust, cruelty and murder

Throughout the plays one gets a constant feeling of layering: something is happening underneath the surface on which one cannot really lay ones finger on.

In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, tension is building up already from the first scene onwards. Violence and cruelty pop up regularly and finally result in a brutal murder. The play commences rather innocently without much violence. However, it becomes clear immediately how annoying Mag can be. Maureen reacts understandably with a lot of angry irritation. The first scene is built up of a constant succession of complaint and reproaches. The first dispute between Mag and Maureen is about Complan. Mag tells Maureen she took her Complan to which Maureen answers: ‘so, you *can* get it yourself’, which alludes to all the times Maureen had to prepare it for Mag. The second quarrel centres on Maureen’s accusation of Mag being a ‘hypochondriac’. Mag objects: ‘don’t I have a urine infection if I’m such a hypochondriac?’ Maureen then remarks that a urine infection does not have to prevent Mag from cleaning the house a bit. Mag rebuts that she has a ‘bad back and bad hand’ (*BQL*, p. 4-5). After these seemingly bearable irritations, Maureen bursts out in anger. It becomes clear that Maureen cannot deal with her mother’s egocentric dependence anymore.

Maureen: Feck… *(Irritated.)* I’ll get your Complan so if it’s such a big job! From now and ‘til doomsday! [...] I’m expected to do everything else, I suppose that one on top of it won’t hurt. *(Slams a couple of cupboard doors.)*

Mag then asks the already severely irritated Maureen to prepare her porridge. Maureen jumps up and prepares the porridge as noisily as she can. Mag wants the radio on, Maureen ‘bangs an angry finger at the radio’s ‘on’ switch’. Mag complains that the radio is too loud, and Maureen angrily turns it off. This kind of minor quarrels between Maureen and her needy mother continue through the first scene. Maureen visibly suffers and tries to re-establish her self-control. At the end of scene one, Mag tells a story about a man in Dublin murdering old women and concludes that Maureen should be avoiding that kind of men. Maureen replies: ‘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 oul women’ (*BQL*, p. 10). The scene ends in a hospitable atmosphere, when Mag disrupts Maureen’s narrative once again, now to ask for sugar in her tea.
Maureen stares at her a moment, then takes the tea, brings it to the sink and pours it away, goes back to Mag, grabs her half-eaten porridge, returns to the kitchen, scrapes it out into the bin, [...], giving Mag a dirty look on the way [out]. Mag stares grumpily out into space.

Already in the first scene, McDonagh sketches out the broken relationship between mother and daughter; it feels like things will get seriously out of hand. In scene two, the audience has a preview of how untrustworthy Mag and how cruel Maureen can be. In that scene, Mag burns a note for Maureen with a party invitation of Pato. When Maureen enters the house, Mag acts nervous. The tension rises because of the knowing of the audience of what happened, and the lack of knowledge of Maureen. The uneasiness is emphasized through structural repetition.

Maureen: Nobody rang while I was out, I suppose? Ah no.
Mag: Ah no, Maureen. Nobody did ring.
Maureen: Ah no.
Mag: No. Who would be ringing?
Maureen: No, nobody I suppose. No. (Pause.) And nobody visited us either? Ah no.
Mag: Ah no, Maureen. Who would be visiting us?
Maureen: Nobody, I suppose. Ah no. (BQL, p. 19)

Then very subtly the torture starts: Maureen puts on the kettle and looks in Mag’s direction. As a reaction to the staring, Mag nervously admits that Ray came by. Later on in the play it is suggested that Mag got her shrivelled hand through Maureen pouring deliberately hot oil over it.

Here, some spectators might already establish that link. The tormenting is apparent nonetheless in the continuation of the scene. Mag persists in her story that Ray did not have any news for Maureen. Maureen then deliberately prepares very lumpy Complan for Mag. When Mag asks for a spoon to stir the mixture, Maureen answers ‘there’s no little spoons for liars in this house. No little spoons at all. Be drinking ahead.’ (BQL, p. 21). Maureen then reveals that she met Ray on her way home and that he already told her what he had to say. Maureen forces Mag to drink the ‘sickly brew’, Mag refuses at first, but after some more threats of Maureen she gives in. Further on in the play, in scene three, Maureen invites Pato to drink some tea and offers him Kimberleys. Pato refuses the Kimberleys because they are ‘the most horrible biscuits in the world’ to which Maureen rather light-heartedly answers: ‘The same as that, I hate Kimberleys. I only get them to torment me mother.’ With the former scenes in mind, the audience cannot simply laugh it away and worries if Maureen will continue her torturing.
In scene four, Maureen, wearing only a slip and a bra, confronts her mother with the fact that she spent the night with Pato. She constantly makes direct references to having sex with him and kisses him at length in front of her mother. To get some attention, Mag finally bursts out that Maureen is the one who scolded her hand (which Maureen denies by telling Pato that Mag was trying to cook chips on her own and tipped the pan over). Maureen and Mag get in a big fight in which all the skeletons are let out of the cupboard. Mag really tries to put Pato off Maureen. In the end of the scene, Pato goes off to England and promises to write. Mag continues with insulting Maureen and bossing her around. Maureen reacts sadly and despairingly and quietly leaves Mag alone. Of course Maureen never receives Pato’s letter (in which he offers her a marriage and a house in Boston), because Mag burns it. When Maureen finds out, she tortures her mother by pouring hot fat over her already scalded hand. Finally, Maureen brutally smashes her mother’s skull with the fire poker. From the first scene until the murder, the violence has been boiling under the surface and has grown more obvious to the end.

Another element adding to the building up of the tension is the focus on the fire poker throughout the play.

Ray: This is a great oul poker, this is. […] Good and heavy and long. A half a dozen coppers you could take out with this poker and barely notice and have not a scratch on it and then clobber them again just for the fun of seeing the blood running out of them. (Pause.) Will you sell it to me? […] Sure, that poker’s just going to waste in this house. (BQL, p. 55–56).

The parallel in story line between Mag’s favourite song *The Spinning Wheel* by Delia Murphy and the play, with some notable differences (cf. the discussion of the song in 5.2.2.1 *Realism*) also adds to the tension. Namely, in the song, the old woman sleeps peacefully while the two lovers go hand in hand, and in the play the old woman is murdered brutally, while Maureen stays in Leenane and Pato gets engaged to another girl in Boston.

In *A Skull in Connemara*, the main tension stems from whether or not Mick is guilty of murdering his wife and of the approaching event when Mick has to dig up her skeleton. Adding to the tension are the constant references to aspersions and Mick’s reaction to them.

Mary: Leave Oona to somebody else, now.
Mick: To who? To [Mairtin]? He’d probably crack her head in two, so he would.
Mairtin: Oh. Crack her head in two, is it? […] I heard that’s already been done.
Mick (pause. Standing, advancing): What did you hear? (SC, p. 105)
Thomas: What I was going to say was … some insinuation along the lines of … not that I’m making any accusations, mind … but maybe your wife’s head injuries all those years ago weren’t especially conducive to only having been in a car crash at all, and maybe …

(SC, p. 128)

In The Lonesome West, the tension is mainly created by the discrepancy in knowledge between Father Welsh and all the other characters and even the audience. Everyone knows that Coleman killed his father on purpose, and that Valene thus gained money and a house, except for Father Welsh. Since Welsh is such a depressed and meek character, one fears for his mental state when he will find out. Also the violent relationship between the two brothers is alarming since they easily point guns and knives at each other.

5.2.3.3 Malice and morality

All characters in The Leenane Trilogy are cruel and violent, except for Father Welsh, Pato, Girleen and Maryjohnny. In The Beauty Queen of Leenane, Mag is cruel in that she does not grant her daughter a life of her own and denies her every chance on happiness. Maureen, on her part, sees torture as the only way to find out the truth, and she batters her own mother to death. Ray, the youngest character, seems not that cruel and violent in his deeds, but it is clear from general remarks that he is a violent boy. An example of this violence is his interest in buying the fire poker to go ‘battering the police’ (BQL, p. 56). In A Skull in Connemara, Mairtin indulges in a lot of cruel talk. He tells a story about two girls who got ‘a bottling’ in the disco. When asked why girls would ever deserve a bottling, Mairtin answers: ‘Every why. Maybe the piss out a fella’s trainers they took, when all he did was ask them for a danceen, and polite.’ and adds that ‘stitches aren’t good enough for them sort of bitches, and well they know. As ugly as them two started out, sure stitches’d be nothing but an improvement, oh aye’ (SC, p. 97). Mairtin’s cruelty becomes apparent also when he talks coldly about when he cooked a hamster alive.

Mairtin: I’ve only cooked one hamster. It’s not all it’s cracked up to be. You stick him in alive and he comes out dead. The feck hardly squeals… […] If the oven had had a see-through door it would’ve been more fun, but it didn’t, it had an ordinary door. My mistake was not planning ahead. I was egged on. But this [battering of the skulls] is more fun. Is skull-hammering more fun than wife-into-wall-driving, Mick? (SC, p. 140)

Mick tries to kill Mairtin out of pure resentment and maliciously assures Mairtin’s brother that he has done so.
Mick: Sure, if down the disco Mairtin was, how would I have ended up with his bastard brains dripping down the bloody front of me? [...] His body is hanging halfway out the windscreen of my Anglia a mile away there. (SC, p. 156)

Thomas desperately wants to find evidence on Mick murdering his wife, so that when he could not find any he decided to create some himself. He dug up Oona from her grave and carved a crack in her forehead. When Mairtin lets this information slip, Thomas smashes his already damaged and concussed brother with a mallet. In *The Lonesome West*, Coleman killed his father over a remark on his hairstyle. Valene witnessed the murder, but promised to keep quiet if he got the inheritance: the house with all the belongings, the land and the money. The two brothers constantly make each other’s life a misery by damaging things the other loves (e.g. Coleman snipping off the ears of Valene’s dog).

Why does McDonagh create such cruel characters? Does he have no imaginative empathy at all? In an interview McDonagh states: ‘I always like a dark story that’s seemingly heartless, but where there’s a heart, tiny and camouflaged as it might be. I care about the characters an awful lot’ (Cavendish 2001: 26). And indeed, there might be a camouflaged heart in *The Leenane Trilogy*, though it is likely that not one spectator will notice it. When seeing the plays for the first time, one gets blown away by the cruel brutality, by the hopeless situations and the dark characters. Only after a really close look, one can find a sparkle of hope that it is not all lost.

Mairtin proves his cruel side by telling his abrasive stories and by keeping silent about his brother’s betrayal. However, in the last scene he defends Mick against Thomas.

Mairtin: Oh Jesus, can’t you just leave poor Mick alone and in peace [...]? If he said he didn’t kill his missus that’s good enough for me, and let it rest. (SC, p. 159)

Here Mairtin shows his good side, although his motives are debatable since he angrily adds ‘I won’t shut up, because not even a fecking pound would the Galway pawn give me for that rose locket, and you said it’d get me at least ten’. Thomas gave Mairtin Oona’s jewel to keep him silent, so maybe it is only because it was worthless that Mairtin spoke up. Further in *A Skull in Connemara*, Maryjohnny cheats with bingo, makes lots of rude prejudiced remarks on the local youths, but she shows true compassion when she learns that Mick will have to dig up his own wife.

Mary (quietly): You can’t go digging up Oona, Mick. That’s not right. Leave Oona to somebody else, now. (SC, p. 105)
Further on in the scene she comforts Mick who is upset because of the aspersions that still exist seven years after the accident, with the words: ‘there’s been no other aspersions, Mick. (Pause.) Sure we all know the type of man you are.’ (SC, p. 109). In The Lonesome West, just before Welsh will commit suicide, Girleen speaks out her positive beliefs in happiness in a very powerful monologue.

Girleen: [E]ven 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 of being happy, and even if it’s a real little chance, it’s more than them dead ones have. And it’s not that you’re saying ‘Hah, I’m better than ye’, no, because in the long run it might end up that you have a worse life than ever they had and you’d’ve been better off as dead as them, there and then. But at 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. They say ‘Good luck to ya.’ (LW, p. 218)

However positive Girleen’s monologue (and her warm feelings for Welsh), she does not manage to give him a reason to live. Father Welsh, the only truly moral person in the play, hands Girleen his (suicide) letter and asks her to give it to Valene and Coleman. Welsh really cares about the inhabitants of Leenane, and everything he did was out of love. He tried to establish a better future, for example by encouraging Coleman to find a partner on the day of his father’s funeral: ‘are there no lasses on the horizon for ye, now ye’re free and easy? Oh I’ll bet there’s hundreds’ (LW, p. 172) or by middling in a recurrent fight between the brothers about Valene’s dead dog: ‘there’s plenty enough hate in the world as it is, Valene Connor, without you adding to it over a dead dog’. The following dialogue proves that Welsh’s honourable attempts are in vain.

Valene: Nobody’ll notice a bit of more hate, so, if there’s plenty enough hate in the world.
Welsh: A nice attitude that is for a …
Valene: Feck off and sling your sermons at Maureen Folan and Mick Dowd, so, if it’s nice attitudes you’re after, Walsh. […]

Welsh bows his head and pours himself another drink.
Coleman: That shut the fecker up. (LW, p. 174)

Pocock (2001: 65) sees the suicide of the priest as an ironic reference to the confession ritual. Indeed, Father Welsh hopes that his sacrifice will bring Valene and Coleman to confess their sins and finally find peace.
Welsh [reciting his letter]: [...] I would take that pain and pain a thousand times worse, and bear it with a smile, if only I could restore to ye the love for each other as brothers [...]. I do think that yere love is still there [...], in fact I’d go betting everything that’s dear to me on it, and may I rot in hell for ever if I’m wrong. [...] Couldn’t the both of ye, now, go stepping back and be making a listeen of all the things about the other that do get on yere nerves, and the wrongs the other has done [...] and be reading them lists out, and be discussing them openly [...] and be forgiving each other them wrongs, no matter what they may be? (LW, p. 222–223)

Only after Girleen tells Valene and Coleman what happened, they read the letter carefully and finally feel some honest positive emotions.

Valene (pause): Father Welsh going topping himself does put arguing o’er Taytos into perspective anyways. (LW, p. 234)

They feel sorry for Welsh and speak out their wish to really try to change their lives. In the last scene of the play, and of the whole trilogy, it seems that something actually changed. Valene and Coleman treat each other kindly, and even share food and poteen. Then they start confessing their past sins, ‘taking a step back’ and forgiving each other. For the first time, Coleman expresses his feelings about the murdering of his father.

Coleman: I do know it wasn’t right. Not only in me heart but in me head and in me everywhere. I was wrong for shooting Dad. I was dead wrong. And I’m sorry for it. (LW, p. 243)

However, after a while it becomes clear that it is only a game to them.

Valene: This is a great oul game, this is, apologising. (LW, p. 239)
Coleman: Okay, it’s my go. I’m winning. (LW, p. 244)
Coleman: [...] Your go now. (Pause) You’re too slow. (LW, p. 247)
Valene: Well it’s your go now, Coleman. Try and top that one for yourself. Heh. (LW, p. 248)

Little by little, the light–hearted atmosphere of the beginning of the scene disappears, and the confessions result in a serious fight in which they threaten to kill each other. Coleman finally dashes out through the front door, leaving a raging Valene behind. Valene takes Father Welsh’s letter and is about to burn it.

Valene: And you, you whiny fecking priest. Do I need your soul hovering o’er me the rest of me fecking life? How could anybody be getting on with that feck? He strikes a match and lights the letter, which he glances over as he holds up. After a couple of seconds, the letter barely singed, Valene blows the flames out and looks at it on the table, sighing. I’m too fecking kind-hearted is my fecking trouble. (LW, p. 258)
Valene, the materialistic brute, is not able to burn the letter. This small sign of moral sense proofs that Father Welsh’s efforts did make a difference. The brothers still fight, and Leenane remains rotten, but at least Father Welsh’s sad story is preserved so that the inhabitants might be able to think their deeds over. The play ends with a focus on the letter to make sure its meaning sinks in with the audience.

Lights fade, with one light lingering on the crucifix and letter a half second longer than the others. (LW, p. 159)

5.2.3.4 Black humour

In *The Leenane Trilogy*, McDonagh’s dark humour is ever present; he succeeds in making the audience laugh despite the cruel actions happening on stage. Humour is inherent in the quick and funny dialogues (cf., 5.2.3.2 Language). In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the misunderstandings and endless discussions with Mag are a source of hilarity. Additionally funny is the image of the old woman who repetitively lies about the smallest things. Two times in the play, Ray finds Mag watching some Australian soap on television. Mag pretends that she is just waiting for the news.

Ray: What’s on the telly?
Mag: I was waiting for the news.
Ray: You’ll have a long wait.
Mag: I was combing me hair.
Ray: I think it’s *The Sullivans*.
Mag: I don’t know what it is. (BQL, p. 14)

Throughout the play, the audience learns that Mag pours her pee down the sink in the kitchen. In scene six, Ray remarks ‘this house does smell of pee’ to which Mag answers ‘Em, cats do get in’ (BQL, p. 57). At the same time, in this scene Ray has to wait for Maureen to arrive, this takes too long and he is saddled with having a conversation with Mag. Ray very obviously wants to leave the house. However, he has to stay and they further discuss the possibility of cats entering the house in an entertaining dialogue.

Ray: Do cats get in?
Mag: They do. (Pause.) They do go to the sink.
Ray (pause): What do they go to the sink for?
Mag: To wee.
Ray: To wee? They go to the sink to wee? (*Piss-taking.*) Sure, that’s mighty good of them. You do get a very considerable breed of cat up this way so.
Mag (*pause*): I don’t know what breed they are.
Pause. Ray lets his head slump down onto the table with a bump, and slowly and rhythmically starts banging his fist down beside it. (BQL, p. 57)

The best example of dark irony pops up in the skull battering scene in *A Skull in Connemara*, when Mick decides there has to be music to accompany the action. He puts on the sugary love song ‘All Kinds of Everything’ by the Irish singer Dana. This song is cherished by the Irish, since it won the Eurovision Song Contest in 1970. Dana’s high sweet voice and the loving words she sings (*wishing-wells/wedding bells/early morning dew/all kinds of everything remind me of you*), contrast sharply with the brutality of the hammering, although it has to be said that, ironically, the song has a fine and steady work rhythm to it. McDonagh thus sarcastically combines national heritage with this macabre task. This is similar to *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in which the song *The Spinningwheel* is associated with the death of the violently murdered Mag. In *The Lonesome West*, irony is found in the serious and violent arguments Valene and Coleman have about childish matters. For example, they argue at length about whether Taytos or McCoys are the best crisps (Coleman saying that ‘Taytos are dried fecking filth’ in LW, p. 187) and if crisps should or should not have grooves. Sometimes just one word is enough for them to start another childish argument, mostly followed by violent action.

Valene: Fibreglass.
Coleman (*pause*): Feck fibreglass.
Valene: No, feck you instead of feck fibreglass.
Coleman: No, feck you two times instead of feck fibreglass ... (LW, p. 172-173)

The absurdity of fighting for the smallest things, of smashing skulls with accompaniment of a love song, the endless conversations with the manipulative egocentric old Mag, combined with the cleverly constructed dialogues is characteristic of McDonagh’s humour.

5.3 *The Aran Islands Trilogy*

The three plays of *The Aran Islands Trilogy* are *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (CI), *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (LI) and *The Banshees of Inisheer*. The last play was never published, and therefore it will not be discussed. The trilogy is set on the Aran Islands, a remote island group belonging to County Galway. J.M. Synge described the islands as ‘possibly the most primitive place left in Europe’ (quoted in O’Neill 1998: 257). Similar to the discussion of *The Leenane Trilogy*, both
the characteristics of Irish national theatre and of in-yer-face theatre will be focussed on. First, a short summary of the plays is given.

5.3.1 Synopsis

The coming of the filmmaker Robert Flaherty influences all characters of *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. The young characters, Cripple Billy, Helen and Bartley desperately want to get a part in Flaherty’s movie. Against the will of Cripple Billy’s aunts Kate and Eileen, Babbybobby, the handsome sailor, brings the threesome to Inishmore where the filming takes place. An important role is played by Johnnypateenmike (Johnny), the fervent gossip collector of the town.

In *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, Davey and Donny try everything to conceal the death of Padraic’s cat Wee Thomas. When Padraic, a violent member of the INLA, arrives home to check on Wee Thomas and finds him dead, his fellow members of the INLA come to claim the murder. All of this leads to a violent and bloody end in which Mairead, sister of Davey, lover of Padraic, and a fervent cat worshipper, plays an important role.

5.3.2 Characteristics of Irish national theatre in *The Aran Islands Trilogy*

5.3.2.1 Realism

McDonagh creates a realistic framework through the language, the setting, and references to Irish heritage and actual happenings in Irish history. The language of the characters is very similar to the language used in *The Leenane Trilogy*. They use the same typical Irish words and structures, such as *babby* (CI p. 16 ‘you were just a babby at the time’), *eejit* (e.g., CI p. 14 ‘eeijt fecking brother’), *gob* (e.g., LI p. 22 ‘He’s pure orange on his gob’), *praitie* (potato, e.g., CI p. 17 ‘I gave [him] a cheesy praitie’), …

The setting is described in detail, and McDonagh even gives a temporal indication. In doing this, he links the plays to actual happenings in the history of Ireland. *The Cripple of Inishmaan* is set in 1934 and the plot evolves around the filming of the fictional documentary *Man of Aran* by Robert Flaherty. Flaherty wanted to depict the essence of the ancient Irish life in focusing on the struggle between man and his rough surroundings. In the play, the characters see the movie as an opportunity to flee Ireland and build up a life in Hollywood (this will be discussed further in 5.3.2.2 *The challenging of the ideal image of the Irishman and Ireland*).
Other specific references contribute to the realist quality of the play. For example in his briefing on the film, Johnny gives information about the director and mentions Colman King, who played the head part in the movie in real life.

Johnny: From Hollywood, California, in America they’re coming, led be a Yank be the name of Robert Flaherty, one of the most famous and richest Yanks there is [...] Colman King I know already they’ve chosen for a role, and a hundred dollars a week he’s on, and if Colman King can play a role in a film anybody can play a role in a film, for Colman King is as ugly as a brick of baked shite and everybody agrees [...]. (CI, p. 10)

The looks of Colman King would be in line with Flaherty’s intention to show the rough life of the islanders; he did not want to show a handsome film star, but a man formed by his lifestyle. 1934 is the year of Hitler’s rise to power; this fact is also briefly mentioned in the play when Johnny reads aloud the newspaper to his mother.

Johnny: There’s a fella here, riz to power in Germany, has an awful funny moustache on him. [...] You’d think he’d either grow a proper moustache or else shave that poor biteen of a straggle off.
Mammy: That fella seems to be caught in two minds.
Johnny: Ah he seems a nice enough fella, despite his funny moustache. Good luck to him. (CI, p. 34)

The playwright thus creates a solid realist basis on which he can unfold his own fictional plot.

In The Lieutenant of Inishmore, the time indication is 1993 and the plot centres on the Northern Ireland troubles and the INLA, one of the many armed republican splinter groups in Ireland. Because of the topic, many references are connected with important happenings of that time, e.g., ‘Bloody Sunday’ (CI, p. 26). Mairead, the violent girl obsessed with the INLA, sings two songs in the play, namely The Dying Rebel and The Patriot Game. The Dying Rebel is an Irish revolutionary song about a man who finds a dying Irish rebel from County Cork in Dublin.

Mairead (singing): “the last I met was a dying rebel [...] Kneeling low I heard him say, God bless my home in dear Cork City, God bless the cause for which I die.” (LI, p. 20)

The Patriot Game is written by Dominic Behan, a famous member of the Fianna Éireann, the youth organisation of the IRA. It is a traditional Irish ballad about the atrocities during the struggle for independence. Central to the song is the story of Fergal O’Hanlon, who was an ardent

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20 http://www.thebards.net/music/lyrics/Patriot_Game.shtml
fighter for the unification of the Six Counties and the Republic\(^{21}\) and was killed at the age of seventeen. This ballad is said to be the most famous of all rebel songs. Mairead sings the song while she is waiting for Padraic to arrive, for whom she even put on lipstick and a little make-up. When he enters, she keeps on singing the song as if to impress him.

Mairead (singing): “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.” (LI, p. 29)

In choosing this immensely popular song, McDonagh easily connects with his audience, and evokes a lot of different feelings: pride, fear and maybe disgust. Further on, Mairead asks Padraic on a date, and offers to go together to a film about the Guilford Four. The Guilford Four\(^{22}\) were four young people wrongfully imprisoned for the IRA bomb attacks in a pub in Guildford in 1974. After fifteen years, ‘The Four’ were finally released out of prison. No proof at all existed that any of them had a link with the Provisional IRA. The undeserved imprisonment for fifteen years destroyed their lives. Representative for Padraic’s cruelty is his insensitive and heartless reaction to their story.

Padraic: Ah, feck the Guilford Four. Even if they didn’t do it, they should’ve took the blame and be proud. But no, they did nothing but whine. (LI, p. 30)

Mairead’s cat is named Sir Roger, after Sir Roger Casement. Sir Roger Casement was a British conspirator and an Irish nationalist hero, who had a part in planning the Dublin Easter rising of 1916. For this high treason, he was hanged by the British during the same year (O’Brien and O’Brien 1999: 136-140). McDonagh’s oddly light or seemingly uncaring treatment of serious Irish history is commented on in 5.3.3.3 Black humour.

All these elements are part of Irish national history and add to the realistic framing of the play, though the absurdist treatment of the elements grants a surrealistic quality to the whole of the plays.

\(^{21}\) The Six Counties, i.e., Northern Ireland, belonged to Great Britain, not to the Republic of Ireland.

\(^{22}\) Information found on the website of The Guardian: [http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/guildford-four](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/guildford-four). (visited on 21.07.2009)
5.3.2.2 The challenging of the ideal image of the Irishman and Ireland

In his second trilogy, McDonagh continues the Irish national theatre tradition of challenging the stereotypical ideal of the honest and faithful Irishman. Since every character in the plays possesses some moral sense, the dark characterization will be focussed on in the context of morality (in 5.3.3.2 Malice and morality). First, the abandonment of love of the country, the disrespect for religion, and the neglect of the caring for family in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* will be discussed. Further, the importance of gossip is reflected on. This is pursued by comments on the extreme love of the country in the fervent nationalism of Mairead and Padraic in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*.

In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, repeated assurances that Ireland is not a bad place point out an underlying feeling of inferiority.

Johnny: Ireland mustn’t be such a bad place so if the Yanks want to come to Ireland to do their filming. (CI, p. 11, this exact phrase repeated by Bartley on p. 15)
Helen: Ireland mustn’t be such a bad place if French fellas want to live in Ireland. (CI, p. 15)
Bobby: Ireland mustn’t be such a bad place, so, if coloured fellas want to come to Ireland. (CI, p. 25)
Mammy: Ireland mustn’t be such a bad place if German fellas want to come to Ireland. (CI, p. 34)
Johnny: Ireland mustn’t be such a bad place so if sharks want to come to Ireland. (CI, p. 50)
Bartley: Ireland can’t be such a bad place, so, if cripple fellas turn down Hollywood to come to Ireland. (CI, p. 56)

In scene four of act one, after Johnny’s failed attempts to extort information about Billy’s disease and after the audience witnessed the constant state of drunkenness in which he keeps his mother, Johnny and Mammy reflect on the reason why ‘they all want to come to Ireland’ (CI, p. 34). Johnny responds that ‘in Ireland the people are more friendly, […] isn’t that what we’re famed for’, ironically followed by the remark on Billy’s disease: ‘I’d bet money on cancer’ (CI, p. 34). The inferior position of Ireland towards England is made clear in a humorous dialogue between Helen and Bartey, in which Helen wants to play ‘England versus Ireland’. Helen assigns herself the role of England and Bartley the role of Ireland. In what follows Helen breaks three eggs on Bartley’s head with the words: ‘I was giving you a lesson on Irish history, Bartley […]’. There’ll be worse casualties than eggy hair before Ireland’s a nation once again’ (CI, p. 46). Here McDonagh effectively points out the lasting Anglo-Irish tensions.

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The young characters in the play consider the movie business an escape route from Ireland to America. Helen, Bartley and Billy all try to get a part in the film, but surprisingly, only Billy takes off to America for a screen-test. The monologue Billy performs for the test is interlarded with Irish stereotypes such as love of country, piety and pride: ‘I hear the wail of the banshees’, ‘An Irishman. With a decent heart on him, and a decent head on him, and a decent spirit not broken by a century’s hunger and a lifetime’s oppression!’, ‘Farewell Father and Mother too, and sister Mary I have none but you.’ (CI, p. 48). At first, Billy seems to live out this stereotype when he tells his aunts he was not rejected at all, but just longed to return home, for he missed ‘Inishmaan, with the people who love [him], and the people [he loves] back’ (CI, p. 56). However, later on, Billy confesses to Bobby in a gloomy, desperate monologue that he did not get the part and that he would have loved to be away from Inishmaan forever.

Billy: […] I’d hoped I’d disappear forever to America […]. I had to get away from this place […]. Going drowning meself I’d often think of when I was here, just to … just to end the laughing at me, and the sniping at me, and the life of nothing but shuffling to the doctor’s and shuffling back from the doctor’s […]. The village cripple, and nothing more. Well, there are plenty round here just as crippled as me, only it isn’t on the outside it shows. (CI, p. 58)

The disrespect for religion is mainly expressed in Helen’s remarks on her experiences with abuse by priests. When Eileen points out to Helen that her pegging eggs at Father Barratt is an act against God, Helen answers that ‘if God went touching [her] arse in choir practice [she]’d peg eggs at that fecker too’ (CI, p. 14). Further on, Helen refers to the incident again, when she outs her firm belief that she will get a part in the film because of her looks.

Helen: […] If I’m pretty enough to get clergymen groping me arse, it won’t be too hard to wrap film fellas round me fingers. (CI, p. 15)

In the further discussion of clergymen’s straying hands, it is suggested that Bartley had to deal with abuse as well.

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: […] You’re small and often on your own. Have you ever had your arse groped be priests?
Bartley (Quietly): Not me arse, no. (CI, p. 16)
The abuse by priests also pops up in the conversation between Billy and Helen about who has seen whose genitals, Jim Finnegan’s daughter knowing everybody’s and Helen evidently only the ones of priests.

Helen: Me, the only ones I’ve seen belong to priests. They keep showing them to me. I don’t know why. (CI, p. 19)

Apart from Helen’s expressions of abuse, disrespect for religion is not really explicitly present in The Cripple of Inishmaan. Implicitly, the characters’ unchristian behaviour (violence, gossip, unchastity) challenges the virtuous ideal of the Irishman.

Instead of cherishing the generations and taking care of elder family members, McDonagh’s characters want to get rid of them (cf. Maureen killing Mag in The Beauty Queen of Leenane). In The Cripple of Inishmaan, Johnny tries to kill his ninety-year-old mother with alcohol, e.g., he gives her whiskey for breakfast. Everyone on the island is well-informed of his project, even the doctor, who is unable to change it.

Eileen: Are you still trying to kill your mammy with the drink, Johhnypateen?
Johnny: I am but it’s no use. A fortune in booze that bitch has cost me over the years. She’ll never go. (CI, p. 38)

Same as in The Leenane Trilogy, gossip plays an important role in The Cripple of Inishmaan, primarily present in the figure of Johhnypateenmike. Johnny acts like the island’s local newspaper. Always thirsty for local gossip, he inquires everyone. In doing so, Johnny collects the strangest trivial stories, which he recounts for payment in kind (e.g., eggs, ham, bread …). The most persistent gossip throughout the play is the story of how Billy’s parents found their deaths (cf. 5.3.3.2 Malice and morality).

The Lieutenant of Inishmore condones the extreme love of the country in fanatical organisations such as the IRA and INLA that use violence to make their statements. This judgement is further discussed in ‘Malice and morality’ below. Interesting in this context is that the ideal of loving your country is placed in a dark atmosphere of murder, torture and extremely violent minds.
5.3.3 Characteristics of in-yer-face theatre in *The Aran Islands Trilogy*

5.3.3.1 Language

Like in *The Leenane Trilogy*, the characters in *The Aran Islands Trilogy* fill their language with lots of swearing, the quantity of curses reaching a summit in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, which is, not surprisingly, also the most violent play of the trilogies. The audience not only has to deal with the cruel plot of the play, but also with the rude and violent language use of the characters. Apart from the brutality, the dialogues are often hilariously funny. Frequently, the characters doubt the words of the others and start a discussion which seems trivial in the present circumstances. In the scene when Padraic’s fellow INLA members, Christy, Brendan and Joey, discuss Padraic’s dead cat, Joey outs his anger about the cat-murder. However, the men end up discussing totally different matters.

Christy: […] And like the fella said, “Don’t the ends justify the means?” Wasn’t it Marx said that, now? I think it was.
Brendan: It wasn’t Marx, no.
Christy: Who was it then?
Brendan: I don’t know, now. It wasn’t Marx is all I’m saying.
Christy: Oh, Brendan, you’re always cutting people down and saying who didn’t say things. A fool can say who didn’t say things. It takes intelligence to put your neck on the line and say who did say things. (LI, p. 25-26)

McDonagh has three hard-core INLA members discussing at length about the subject of quotes. The focussing on small details of each other’s speech adds to the absurd quality of the play. The characteristic in-yer-face mix of humour with live violence is thus also inherent in the characters’ language.

5.3.3.2 Malice and morality

In McDonagh’s world, people’s nerves are always pushed to their limits with violence as a sure consequence. As stated before in the chapter on in-yer-face theatre (cf., 3. *In-yer-face theatre: characteristics and representatives*), McDonagh is suspicious when he watches or reads something with intrinsically good characters; he believes in the existence of a dark side. However, McDonagh continues, the art lies in the possibility of finding ‘something life-affirming even in the most twisted character’ (O’Hagan 2001). The audience might be able to catch some glimpses of goodness in the plays between all the cruel actions the characters undertake and the rude remarks they make. In *The Cripple of Inishmaan* the ‘darkest’ characters are Johnnypateenmike...
and Helen. Although the collecting and spreading of gossip might seem rather innocent, the level at which Johnny operates is not that innocent. He aggressively interrogates every villager, he calls the doctor under false pretences to be able to question him about Billy’s disease (regardless of doctor-patient confidentiality) and when he does not get an answer he reacts furiously. Throughout the play Johnny speaks out his hopes for a bloody feud to start and he adds: ‘a feud is starting and won’t be stopped ‘til the one or the two of them finish up slaughtered. Good.’ (CI, p. 38). In addition to being an ever-present collector of gossip, he is deliberately trying to kill his mother by keeping her in a constant state of drunkenness. Johnny plays an important role in the gossip about the death cause of Billy’s parents. According to Helen they drowned themselves when they found out that Billy was born a cripple boy. Johnny is seen as the authority of truth in this matter, for Billy remarks that it is ‘pure gossip that they had a sackful of stones tied between themselves, and even Johnnypateen agrees on that one...’ (CI, p. 17). Johnny’s kind heart is shown when he tells a relieved Billy that his parents did not kill themselves to get away from him, but out of love: they needed the insurance money to pay for Billy’s lifesaving treatment at the Regional Hospital. Only later we learn that Johnny told a white lie and that it was he who saved Billy’s life out of goodness. Throughout the play Johnny is falsely accused of stealing his mother’s money to buy the alcohol to kill her, but actually he used the money to save Billy. The false accusations provide him a martyr status which heightens his moral level in the play. Billy overhears his aunts talking about what really happened and decides to commit suicide.

Eileen: You missed the story Johnnypateen spun, Kate, about Billy’s mam and daddy tying a sack of stones to their hands and drowning themselves for their insurance money that saved him.
Kate: 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.
Eileen: And stealing his mammy’s hundred pounds then to pay for Billy’s hospital treatment. (CI, p. 69)

The boldest character in The Cripple of Inishmaan is Helen. She never ceases to swear and to insult the others (‘Why shouldn’t lasses be swearing when it’s an hour for their eejit fecking brother it is they’re kept waiting’ CI, p. 14), and she has no respect for anyone, e.g., she breaks all the eggman’s eggs on purpose (this explains her nickname ‘slippy Helen’) and kicks him in the shins. Helen is also responsible for the killing of a goose and a cat for the men on either side of the village-feud that Johnny encouraged.
Helen: [T]he goose I only had to stomp on him. It takes more than a stomp to polish a cat off [so I needed the axe]. (CI, p. 43)

Helen’s saucy nature keeps steady throughout the whole play, however, in the end, she is the one who saves the suicidal Billy. Billy had asked her out before, the idea of which made Helen sneer and run off. Just when Billy is about to commit suicide, Helen knocks on the door.

Helen: All right so I’ll go 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. (CI, p. 70)

Although Helen keeps using her offensive jargon, she shows a kind side of herself in her promise to go out with Billy. She even calls him just ‘Billy’ instead of ‘Cripple Billy’ for the first time in the play. However, McDonagh would not be the playwright he is, if there would not follow another cruel twist right in the end: there is no happy end for Billy.

*He shuffles over towards the back room, smiling, but stops as he gets there, coughing heavily, his hand to his mouth. 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.* (CI, p. 71)

In *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, Mairead and Padraic are the rudest characters. They are extremely violent and cruel, though they both show some softer sides of themselves. Padraic is fully characterized in scene two, when he tortures James by pulling out toenails and threatening to cut one of his nipples off. Absurdly, Padraic shows concern for his victim as well when he explains that he pulled some toenails from one foot, so that James suffers from only that foot. Another bizarre idea is that Padraic strongly advises his victim to visit the hospital to get a tetanus injection, since he did not disinfect the razor. Padraic has an emotional breakdown in the torture scene when his father calls to announce that Padraic’s cat, Wee Thomas, is ‘poorly’.

Padraic: […] Put Wee Thomas on the phone. He’s sleeping? Well, put a blanket on him and be stroking and stroking him and get a second opinion from the doctor and don’t be talking loud near him […]. (LI, p. 16)

This bizarre discrepancy between Padraic’s touching concern for his cat and the cruelty of the torturing is a source of hilarity (cf. 5.3.3.3 *Black humour*), but it also shows that Padraic is able to feel some form of love regardless of his cruel nature. His female double in the play is Mairead. Mairead practices her air rifle on cows and bullies her brother; she seems a weathered brute who
will never soften up and is obsessed with the violent INLA. However, when she is insulted by Padraic whom she admires, she shows she can be hurt.

Padraic: […] From a distance I thought “What’s a boy doing sitting there with lipstick on?” […]

Mairead (hiding hurt.): Is that a nice thing to say to a girl comes to meet you off the boat the early morning? (LI, p. 29)

Although *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is probably the most violent play of the trilogies, it is also the most moral one. McDonagh effectively combines humour with extreme cruelty to point out the absurd and pointless nature of the violence of the INLA. According to McDonagh, the play is written in a ‘pacifist rage’ after the failure in 1996 of the first IRA ceasefire. The play's deadliest critique is against the political hypocrisy that it is all right to murder innocent civilians for the greater good, in this case the repayment of a cat-murder (Hoggard 2002). The pointlessness of cruel violence shows clearly in the last scene, after the lugubrious work of chopping up the dead bodies is done and the real Wee Thomas walks in the room alive and well.

Davey: So all this terror has been for absolutely nothing? […] All because that fecker was after his hole? Four dead fellas, two dead cats … me hairstyle ruined! Have I missed anything?

Donny: Your sister broken-hearted. […] All me shoe polish gone.

Davey: That cat deserves shooting! (LI, p. 55)

Finally, Donny and Davey, the last characters in the play who have not murdered anyone, decide not to kill the cat and ironically conclude the play with the saying ‘home sweet home’ (LI, p. 56).

5.3.3.3 Black humour

In *The Aran Trilogy*, McDonagh’s humour is again a vital part of the plays. The two aunts in *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, Kate and Eileen, constantly worry about Billy. Their repetitive dialogue is wittily constructed and highly entertaining. However, in these funny dialogues they do talk about serious matters, e.g., Billy’s handicap. When Billy is late for the tea, the aunts discuss the reasons why he might be late. They suggest that he is probably looking at cows again and then that they should be relieved because there are ‘a hundred worse things to occupy a lad’s time than cow-watching.’ and indulge in a discussion of Billy’s unfortunate looks.

Eileen: Kissing lasses.

Kate (pause.): Ah, no chance of that with poor Billy.
Eileen: Poor Billy’ll never be getting kissed. Unless it was be a blind girl.
Kate: A blind girl or a backward girl.
Eileen: Or Jim Finnegan’s daughter. […]
Kate: She’d kiss a bald donkey. And she’d still probably draw the line at Billy. Poor Billy. (CI, p. 7)

Kate then puts forward that Billy ‘does has a sweet face if you ignore the rest of him’ and the aunts discuss a while until Eileen concludes: ‘Not being cruel to Billy but you’d see nicer eyes on a goat. If he had a nice personality you’d say all well and good, but all Billy has is he goes around staring at cows.’ (CI, p. 7). The more the aunts exaggerate Billy’s unattractiveness, the more the audience will laugh and feel embarrassed since they are laughing with a handicapped boy. When Billy is missing, the aunts are worried over their heads and give expression to their fears in their own ways. Kate starts conversing with a stone which she brings everywhere; Eileen frantically eats all the sweets of their shop. Although their worries are real, the crazy ways in which they enact them will sooner make the audience laugh than feel empathy.

In The Lieutenant of Inishmore, McDonagh creates a tense but hilariously funny scene when a jumpy and desperate Donny and Davey are trying to paint an orange cat black with shoe polish. The nervous dialogues about what to do and the uneasy clumsy way in which they act the solutions out all point out their anxiety for what will happen when ‘Mad Padraic’ arrives. The audience laughs at their fear, since it is completely absurd to be that afraid for the consequences of a dead cat. McDonagh demonstrates his genius by spinning ‘dramatic developments […]’, at the same time horrifying and comic, as a consequence of the simple fact of a cat’s death (The Financial Times London23). Why would McDonagh choose to attend to the serious matter of the Northern Ireland troubles through satire, through the medium of comedy? In an interview with O’Hagon, the playwright answers that he ‘kind of felt that this stuff had to be dealt with in the blackly sick way in which we sometimes react to it’ and that ‘a lot of the stuff that has happened in the past 25 years has been a sick joke. […] How else can you react to all that has happened through writing, or art or whatever you want to call it, if not through absurdity?’ (O’Hagan 2001). McDonagh does not just use mere shock tactics to entertain his audience, on the contrary, he very consciously reacts to the Irish violent nationalistic groupings with his political satire of the INLA. He states: ‘The violence has a purpose […] If people who’ve had violence inflicted on them on either side of the Troubles see this play, I hope they’ll see it as anti-violence’ (Rosen-

23 Quoted from the back cover of The Lieutenant of Inishmore, Dramatists Play Service Inc.: New York.
Lots of critiques were aimed at McDonagh’s reducing of Irish history to the ‘laughable absurd’ (Rees 2005: 31), examples of which are Mairead’s choice of calling her cat Sir Roger after Sir Roger Casement, Joey’s comparing of the cat-battering to the Bloody Sunday massacre, … The Lieutenant of Inishmore contains a lot of satiric scenes, e.g. the description of the romance of Padraic and Mairead.

Padraic and Mairead step over to where the two handguns lie on the table and Padraic picks them up. They move up behind Brendan and, with Mairead caressing the muscles in his back and shoulders, Padraic puts both guns up to Brendan’s head and fires, killing him instantly. […] Padraic and Mairead move slowly towards Joey, their eyes still locked in love. (LI, p. 43)

In fact, McDonagh creates larger-than-life characters that obsessively indulge in their nationalist beliefs. In using satire and absurd comparisons, he wants to point out the irrationality of these extreme movements while at the same time he knocks down the sentimentality attached to this fervent patriotism.

6 Something different: The Pillowman

By abandoning the Irish setting in The Pillowman, McDonagh moves away from his former work: no more Irish references and language. Although The Pillowman is in the first place an in-yer-face play, influences of the Irish nationalist theatre are still present in the political element of the totalitarian state (cf. the references to Irish unemployment, the Troubles, … in the Trilogies), and in the importance of stories; the whole play is built on the notion of storytelling. Using fairy-tale elements, McDonagh incorporates a lot of cruelty through which The Pillowman gets a surreal quality about it. Since The Pillowman is primarily situated in the in-yer-face tradition, it will be first discussed in the context of characteristics of that tradition. The Pillowman is a very loaded play; it mixes humour with dark violence, fairytale aspects with cruel torture scenes. The play shows in-yer-face characteristics in the use of bad language, the excess of violence on stage and the purpose to cause extreme reactions of the audience. First, the brutality of the language, the building up of tension and the challenging of values will be focussed on. This is followed by a discussion of the importance of storytelling in the play.
6.1 Synopsis

In a totalitarian state, Katurian, a writer of abrasive short stories, is questioned by the brutal police officers Ariel and Tupolski. They accuse Katurian of cruel child murders, on the basis of similarities between the real murders and the murders in Katurian’s stories. Katurian’s mentally handicapped brother, Michal, confesses to Katurian that he acted out the stories. Katurian tries to save his brother by smothering him with a pillow. In the end, the police officers find out that Katurian did not kill the children, but he is executed anyway for the murder on Michal.

6.2 Characteristics of in-yer-face theatre in The Pillowman

6.2.1 Language and intensity

The Pillowman can certainly be called an in-yer-face play, because of the used language and its intensity. The language in The Pillowman is direct, raw and explicit. The dialogue is very quick and witty, and interlarded with swearwords.

Ariel: I’ll say a fucking few. The first fucking twenty we picked up was ‘a little girl is fucked over in this way, or a little boy is fucked over in this way...’! (p. 11, my emphasis (RV))
Tupolski: [T]he person who wrote this story is a sick fucking scummy cunt. (p. 18, my emphasis (RV))
Katurian: I’ll beat the shit out of ya... (p. 41, my emphasis (RV))

The Pillowman makes audiences feel and respond through its intensity, brutality and exposure of cruelties. The intensity is acquired by the continuous search for the truth by both Katurian and the detectives. Throughout the play they constantly ask questions; it is one big inquiry. By using the same words or sentences a couple of times, the search for the truth becomes even more intense.

Tupolski: Anyway, so why do you suspect we have brought you here?
Katurian: I’ve been racking my brains, but I can’t think.
Tupolski: You’ve been racking your brains but you can’t think?
Katurian: [...] I’ve never done any anti-police thing [...].
Tupolski: You’ve been racking your brains but you can’t think of a single reason we might have brought you here? (p. 5)

According to Worthen and Worthen (2008: 166) this absorption of Katurian’s language in the detectives own speech happens because the detectives want to have complete control of the situation. They constantly insist on being in command of the narrative structure of the interrogation.
and on its aesthetic development. Indeed, the domination of the detectives can be found in almost every sentence they utter.

   Tupolski: ‘Should I have?’ Good answer. ‘Should I have?’ Kind of lily-livered and subservient on the one hand, yet vaguely sarcastic and provocative on the other. ‘Should I have?’
   Katurian: I wasn’t trying to be provocative.
   Tupolski: Were you trying to be subservient?
   Katurian: No.
   Tupolski: Then you were trying to be provocative. (p. 14)

The mysterious atmosphere created by fairytale aspects (cf. supra) fits this intensity perfectly. Brutality is present in the behaviour of the detectives towards Katurian. They question him with cruel sarcasm, torture him, confront him with atrocities, and falsely accuse him. Do they have a reason to treat him like that? They believe that Katurian committed the horrifying child murders, for the reason that the children were killed exactly in the way Katurian described it in his unpublished short stories. Because one of the detectives, Ariel, was abused by his father when he was a child, he feels a strong hatred to anyone who harms children. According to him, Katurian deserves to be shot dead just for writing these stories. When the detectives find out that it was not Katurian who killed the kids, they execute him anyway. This execution is pure malevolence and has an unexpected timing. It comes as a shock.

Further, brutality is of course present in the short stories, and also in every character of the play. Katurian’s mentally retarded brother Michal proves to be a relentless killer who acted out his brother’s most gruesome short stories without considering the consequences for his victims. Katurian is a murderer as well; he kills his parents and his brother Michal. The detectives kill Katurian, even though they know that he is innocent. While reading or seeing the play one gradually gets to know the past of the different characters. The audience will change its attitude towards them, feel pity and maybe empathy for those characters they found repulsive in the first place and vice versa. Throughout the play, the audience is exposed to violence and extremes, which provokes strong reactions.

6.2.2 Standards and values

Only mentioning the use of violence and bad language does no justice to the ingenious complexity of the play. The discussion about morals and values is far-reaching. The Pillowman confronts
the audience with their standards and values. As mentioned above (in In-yer-face theatre: characteristics and representatives), in-yer-face theatre challenges the distinctions people use to describe their identity. Some of these distinctions form the basis of The Pillowman, namely right/wrong, true/untrue, real/unreal, art/life.

6.2.2.1 Right/wrong

It is wrong to murder, to torture, to execute without a trial. These things happen in The Pillowman. Logically, the audience feels compassion for the victims of those crimes and anger towards the offenders. However, each character in the play is a victim of something: Michal has been tortured for seven years, Katurian is tortured psychologically by the detectives and brutally executed without a trial, Tupolski lost his child, and Ariel was abused by his father. And yet, these characters are not innocent; they are offenders as well. Michal murdered two children, Tupolski and Ariel treat Katurian very badly, Ariel murdered his father, and Katurian killed his parents and smothers Michal in the end of the play. However, in both cases, he murders to save Michal from further misery. He kills out of love for his brother. Is this wrong? In addition, did Katurian do the wrong thing by writing his horrible short stories?

In short, The Pillowman is no black-white drawing; there are no pure good and pure bad characters. The audience will have difficulty in deciding what is right and what is wrong. Will they still be able to feel disgust for Ariel when they learn the cause of his aggression towards Katurian? Will they still sympathise with Katurian as they get more insight in the atrocity of his short stories?

6.2.2.2 True/untrue

It is very difficult to know what is true and what is untrue in The Pillowman. Together with Katurian and the detectives, the audience constantly gropes in the dark about the truth. Worthen and Worthen (2008: 167) observe that every character is lying. Tupolski even asks Katurian the following question: ‘I am a high-ranking police officer in a totalitarian fucking dictatorship. What are you doing taking my word about anything?’ (p. 23). About Katurian’s stories, Tupolski says: ‘It is saying to me, on the surface I am saying this, but underneath the surface I am saying this other thing’ (p. 19). In other words, he thinks Katurian is lying about the fact that his stories are ‘just stories’.
In the second act of the play Katurian starts questioning every aspect of the interrogation when he learns that the detectives were lying to him about torturing his brother Michal (they only bribed him to scream).

Katurian: Why are we being so stupid? Why are we believing everything they’re telling us?
Michal: Why?
Katurian: This is just like storytelling. (p. 39)

Katurian points out that there is a similarity between the ways the detectives use storytelling for their lies and their investigation and the more formal processes of storytelling in his own short stories (Worthen and Worthen, 2008: 167).

Katurian: [...] A man comes in to a room, says to another man, ‘Your mother is dead.’ What do we know? Do we know that the second man’s mother is dead? (p. 39)

Because the detectives are lying a lot, Katurian assumes that they are lying about everything. He now believes that they only told him a ‘story’ and that there were no actual child murders. The detectives use their violent and abusive ‘storytelling’ as an instrument for the discovery of truth. They use lies to find out what happened.

One of the detectives, Tupolski, is a writer as well. He wrote one allegorical tale, which – according to him – sums up his view on detective work. Both Tupolski and Katurian are artists who insist on ‘the force of the author’s intention as the final point of appeal in matters of interpretation’ (Worthen and Worthen, 2008: 168). However, the stories are not always interpreted as the writer intended them. Katurian’s stories may not have a specific ‘meaning’, they do have an echo in reality; Tupolski may insist on what his story is saying, yet Katurian finds it to say something else. Worthen and Worthen (2008: 168) see the detectives as artists who work on their own story. In this way The Pillowman articulates ‘a deeply sceptical vision of the relationship between narrative and truth’. Provided that although Tupolski seems to be searching for the truth – who committed those horrible child murders? – he was already determined to execute Katurian and Michal from the beginning. Like Katurian, the detectives find it important to have a ‘good story’ to tell. When they find out that Katurian made a false confession and did not kill the children at all, they still choose the ending they wanted and execute him.
Ariel: [...] I know you didn’t kill the children. I know you didn’t want to kill your brother, and I know you killed your parents for all the right reasons, and I’m sorry for you. [...] But at the end of the day, I never liked your stories in the first fucking place. (p. 100-101)

Tupolski promised Katurian ten seconds to think right before he was shot, starts counting backwards from ten and then shoots him on ‘four’. Worthen and Worthen (2008: 168) conclude: ‘[t]he detective is a storyteller who always gets the ending he wants and always lies.’ The audience will be searching for the truth as well, and as Katurian start to doubt everything the police says, they will do the same. During the play, it is never clear what is true and what is not; the story line twists and turns.

6.2.2.3 Real/unreal

Storytelling is of major importance in *The Pillowman*, because the play mainly evolves around nine provocingly brutal short stories24 in which children are often the victims of cruel torture. These stories have echoes in the real world within the play. McDonagh creates a peculiar effect with the mixture of fast-paced dialogues and sinister fairytales. Through this mixture the audience is confronted with a puzzle: what is real and what is an illusion? An elaboration on this subject follows in 6.4 *The aspect of storytelling in The Pillowman*.

6.2.2.4 Art/life

Art and life are closely interwoven in *The Pillowman*. The stories have their effect on reality (the child murders) and Katurian’s most important wish is that his stories are saved, even if this means he has to give his life. For this reason he lies to the detectives: he admits that he was the one who committed the murders. In doing so, he hopes that his stories will be sealed and put away together with his criminal file. In presenting Katurian as a psychically ravaged man who

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24 A. The Little Apple Men (p. 12)  
B. The Tale of the Three Gibbet Crossroads (p. 17)  
C. The Tale of the Town on the River (p. 21)  
D. The Autobiographic Tale (p. 31)  
E. The Pillowman (p. 43)  
F. The Writer and the Writer’s Brother (p. 95)  
G. The Little Green Pig (p. 63)  
H. The Little Jesus (p. 67)  
I. Tupolski’s story of the Little Deaf Boy on the Big Long Railroad Tracks. In China. (p. 86)  
J. The footnote to the Autobiographic Tale (p. 102-104)
values his work more than his life, McDonagh reflects not only on the value of art but also on its potential price.

Michal thinks that Katurian tells him what to do through the stories. This shows that stories are in fact more than mere things that are made up, and that they have consequences in real life. It illustrates that literature generates a lot of different interpretations, regardless of the author’s intentions. Although Katurian proclaims that his work does not refer to anything, for other people, it does. As a consequence, he gets arrested: the detectives consider his stories as an indication that Katurian is involved in the child murders. Michal believes that Katurian tries to tell him what to do and in consequence murders children. Every character focuses on a different part or aspect of a story and interprets it in a personal way. The writer’s intentions pale into insignificance from the moment his work is read and interpreted. This brings about the question: is a writer responsible for the consequences of his stories? The consequences of art and the responsibility of the artist are not further discussed in this paper.25

6.3 The aspect of storytelling in The Pillowman

Katurian’s stories are a vital part of The Pillowman. Although the stories have nothing to do with Ireland, they can still be accounted for as an Irish theatrical element, regarding the importance stories have in the Irish heritage. In The Pillowman, the stories take form of fairytales. In interweaving fiction and facts, McDonagh constructs a peculiar reality where everyone is looking for the truth, everyone is lying, and no-one can distinguish facts from fiction. In combination with the clever dialogue, Katurian’s stories provoke the right atmosphere: lugubrious, ambiguous, and tense. McDonagh creates a dark world in which children are brutally murdered, suspects do not get a trial, and cops are sarcastic and violent. The audience enters this world like Katurian does: they do not know what atrocities are ahead of them; they do not know if it is all a brutal joke or the awful truth. First, the balance between fact and illusion is commented on, followed by a discussion of the title story ‘The Pillowman’.

25 It is an interesting biographical parallel, that by creating this storyteller McDonagh actually responds to the critics who reacted very strongly against the easy use of violence in his plays.
6.3.1 The balance between fact and illusion

In mixing stories with harsh reality, McDonagh draws upon the boundaries of fact and fiction. On the one hand, he creates a fantastic, otherworldly atmosphere through fairytale features and the Kafka-esque setting. On the other hand, he confronts these fictive elements with actual happenings in the play through three elements: the silent enactment of two stories, links between the fictive stories and actual happenings in the play, and the way in which the characters relate to the stories.

The fairytale aspect takes shape in the typical opening of each story (*once upon a time in a land not so very far away*...), weird and wonderful elements (walking little men carved out of apples, speaking animals, green rain, unpaintoverable paint, ...) and the characteristic good-bad opposition in the personages of the detectives Tupolski and Ariel.

Tupolski: Oh, I almost forgot to mention… I’m the good cop, he’s the bad cop. (p. 12)

The play is set in a police interrogation room in an anonymous totalitarian state. The two detectives interrogate Katurian, the protagonist, in a rude and sarcastic manner. This setting and manner of acting breaths mystery: where are they, what are they doing, why are they interrogating Katurian who is convinced of his own innocence? The setting refers to Kafka’s *Der Prozess*, in which the protagonist Josef K. gets caught in an inscrutable legal system. Also the abundance of K’s in Katurian’s name (Katurian K. Katurian) refers to Franz Kafka (O’Neill, 2004: 689).

These fantastic elements are placed in another light through the silent performance of some stories. While Katurian tells the stories, four persons (a man, a woman, a boy and a girl) enact them. Words become concrete actions; stories become tangible. This makes the content even more striking: it is shocking to see a child smothering its parents, to see a child being crucified. The enactment gives a sense of reality to the stories and raises the question: did these things really happen?

The first story that is acted out, *The Writer and the Writer’s Brother*, turns out to be autobiographical. It is a story about two brothers. The parents encourage the youngest one with the utmost love to write. To make sure his stories would gain depth, they lock the older brother in an adjacent room and torture him at night. Influenced by the screams he hears at night, the stories of the younger brother become darker and better at the same time. After seven years, he finds out what his parents have been doing and smothers them with a pillow. It is not clear from the be-
ginning that this is an autobiographic tale, but as it develops, one gets hints that it could be. Later on, Katurian tells one of the detectives that this is the only story with autobiographical material. The second story that is acted out is *The Little Jesus*. This story is told after Michal confessed that he murdered a missing girl in the way that the girl in *The Little Jesus* was murdered. Not until the story is enacted, some fifteen minutes later, the gruesome content of the confession gets real: one sees how a little girl is nailed onto a cross.

The most obvious link between fiction and fact are the bizarre murders of which Katurian is accused. These murders are similar to murders in two of his short stories. Katurian rejects these absurd accusations by pointing out that fiction is made up and that he has no reason, apart from telling a story, for writing what he writes.

Katurian: A great man once said, ‘The first duty of a storyteller is to tell a story,’ and I believe in that wholeheartedly […]. That’s what I do, I tell stories. No axe to grind, no anything to grind. No social anything whatsoever. (p. 7)

Only in act two, it is revealed that his mentally handicapped brother Michal is the one who committed the crimes. Katurian is dumbstruck. They then have the following conversation:

Katurian: What did you do it for?
Michal: You know. Because you told me to.
Katurian: (pause) Because I what?
Michal: Because you told me to.
Katurian: (pause) I remember telling you to do your homework on time. I remember telling you to brush your teeth every night…
Michal: I do brush my teeth every night…
Katurian: I don’t remember telling you to take a bunch of little kids and go butcher them. […]
Michal: […] I wouldn’t have done anything if you hadn’t told me, so don’t you act all the innocent. Every story you tell me, something horrible happens to somebody. I was just testing out how far-fetched they were. ‘Cos I always thought some of ‘em were a bit far-fetched. (Pause.) D’you know what? They ain’t all that far-fetched. (p. 49-50)

Michal does not realise he did something wrong, it seems that he just acted out some of his brother’s stories. He was not able to see the difference between the fictive world and reality. This is exactly one of the difficulties with which the audience is confronted: where do the stories end and where does reality begin?
6.3.2 The title story: ‘The Pillowman’

Every character reacts differently to the stories. Katurian sees them as the most important thing in his life. In his own words:

Katurian [to Michal]: If they came to me right now and said, ‘We’re going to burn two out of the three of you – you, your brother, or your stories,’ I’d have them burn you first, I’d have them burn me second, and I’d have it be the stories they saved. (p. 53)

For Michal, they are mainly a source of entertainment as well as a source of all his misery: his parents tortured him for the benefit of Katurian’s writing skills and he sets off to kill children in the way it happens in the stories.

The two detectives, Tupolski and Ariel, are disgusted by them.

Ariel: I would torture you death just for writing a story like [The Little Jesus] […]. (p. 78)

The one link between the different characters is the story of the Pillowman. The Pillowman is a character invented by Katurian. He is nine foot tall and made of fluffy pink pillows. Whenever anyone wanted to commit suicide, he would sit with them and gently hold them. He then would go back in time to their childhood, to when the life of horror they were to lead had not quite yet begun. The Pillowman’s job existed in convincing that child to kill itself, so to avoid a life of pain that would end in suicide anyway. He always suggested a way in which it looked like a tragic accident: he would show them the bottle of pills that looked like sweeties, the place on the river where the ice was too thin etc. When the Pillowman was successful in his job, a little child would die horrifically. When he was unsuccessful in his job, a little child would have a horrific life, grow into an unhappy adult whose dreadful life would end up in the same way: killing him- or herself. Consequently, the Pillowman feels low and depressed. He visits his younger self to tell him about this terrible job that makes his life a misery. The Pillowboy understands him immediately and burns himself to death, after which the Pillowman gently fades away.

Each of the characters of the play relates somehow to this story, even the detectives who generally react with a lot of cynicism and sarcasm. There is one moment in the play when they become intimate: Tupolski tells Katurian that he lost his son. He drowned when he was fishing on his own. Tupolski finds comfort in the idea that his child was not alone during his cruel death.

Tupolski: (pause) There was something about ‘The Pillowman’ that stayed with me. There was something gentle about it. (Pause.) And the idea of, if a child died, alone,
through some accident, he wasn’t really alone. He had this kind, soft person with him, to hold his hand and whatnot. And that it was the child’s choice, somehow. Made it somewhat, reassuring, somehow. That it wasn’t just a stupid waste. (p. 92)

The other detective, Ariel, can be compared to a child from the Pillowman story. Ariel’s father abused him from the age of eight. Throughout the play Tupolski refers a couple of times to ‘Ariel’s unhappy childhood’. Ariel killed his father like Katurian killed his parents: he smothered him with a pillow.

Tupolski: Hey, I’d murder my dad if he crawled into bed with me every week from the age of eight, y’know? (Pause.) Mm. He held a pillow over his head while he was sleeping. I see you boys have a lot in common. (p. 82)

_The Pillowman_ is the favourite story of Michal, who even identifies with him.

Michal: [H]is main thing in life’s to get a bunch of little kids to, at minimum, set themselves on fire, so, y’know? And he’s the hero! And I’m not criticising. He’s a very good character. He’s a very very good character. He reminds me a lot of me.

Katurian: How does he remind you of you?

Michal: You know, getting little children to die. All that. (p. 52)

Michal justifies his actions by saying that all children are unhappy. He uses the childhood of him and his brother as an argument:

Michal: [A]ll children are going to lead horrible lives. You may as well save them the hassle.

Katurian: Not all children are going to lead horrible lives.

Michal: Erm, hmm. Did you lead a horrible life since you was a child? Yes. Erm, did I lead a horrible life since I was a child? Yes. That’s two out of two for a start. (p. 52)

At the end of the play, in the seconds before Katurian is executed he invents a ‘footnote’ to the autobiographical tale, _The Writer and the Writer’s Brother_, as a kind of prayer for his brother. He describes how the Pillowman visits Michal on the eve of the night that his parents were to start torturing him for seven years. The Pillowman tells the little Michal about the horrific life he was to lead and about the way it would end, with his brother smothering the life out of him on a cold prison floor. Michal replies that if his brother would never hear him being tortured, he might never write his characteristic stories. Hence, he decides to live his life, because he does not want to miss the stories.
Conclusion

Martin McDonagh is mainly tributary to two literary trends: the national Irish theatre and the new British drama form, the in-yer-face theatre. However, McDonagh’s plays are not a simple mix of both styles; the playwright’s unique talent for dramatizing shines through. The elements he borrows from the national Irish theatre are the realistic outset of the plays, the Irish setting, the characters, the specific language and the importance of telling a good story. Further, McDonagh continues the stance of demythologizing the melodramatic Irishman, by completely shattering his virtuous, proud, nationalistic, and pious image. Here, the in-yer-face characteristics are already inseparably intermingled with the Irish tradition: the playwright takes the demythologization a step further and creates the most outrageously brutal characters. In McDonagh’s Ireland, a gruesome daughter slaughters her mother, five men are brutally murdered because of one cat’s dead, and the only priest kills himself out of pure misery and powerlessness. The hope on any religious feeling is far gone: God is cursed and the love of one’s fellowman completely absent. Not surprisingly, the characters want to get away from Ireland and they often out their disgust for the country, which is contrary to the melodramatic Irishman’s absolute love for Ireland. These feelings have their origins in Ireland’s turbulent history. McDonagh ingeniously makes political statements through the use of satire, e.g., in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* he creates a farcical spiral of violence as a reaction to the death of an INLA member’s cat and thus comments on the absurd senselessness of the violent approach of extremist nationalistic groups.

Although McDonagh creates a horrible atmosphere in which pitiless characters enact their horrific deeds, he claims that it is possible to discover some glimpses of morality throughout the plays. Indeed, when one can overcome the shock of the whole experience, a little kindness here and there becomes clear and it seems that maybe the efforts of the kind Father Welsh were not completely in vain.

The Irish and in-yer-face elements find their ultimate mix in the specific idiom McDonagh creates. The characters’ speech is brutal, shocking and interlaced with swearwords and cursing, as well as full of Irish references and Irish slang. McDonagh also builds further on the already present humour in Irish national theatre. However, McDonagh’s humour does not remain that innocent. The hilariously funny dialogues interchange with satiric comments and ironic situations. The black humour bestows the audience with an uneasy feeling: are they al-
allowed to laugh while atrocities are shown? This uneasy feeling is typical for the challenging nature of in-yer-face theatre.

An evolution in McDonagh’s work becomes clear when looked at the differences between the two trilogies and his latest play, *The Pillowman*. Because of their setting, the trilogies incorporate many elements of the national Irish theatre. *The Pillowman*, on the contrary, is set in an anonymous totalitarian state and – apart from the political aspect – mainly the importance of storytelling can be called Irish. The in-yer-face characteristics, on the other hand, are dominantly present: brutal violence reaches a summit in the fairytale like stories, in the questioning of Katurian and in the enactment on stage.

McDonagh spoke out the wish to keep growing and inventing himself: he has managed to live out this wish thus far. The change in his work shows the power of his creativity. He keeps creating real hilarious and cruel McDonagh plays, even though he left some of the Irish inheritance behind in his most recently published play, *The Pillowman*. His new project, *A Behanding in Spokane*, which is set in the United States of America, will show how his evolution continues.

McDonagh cleverly and creatively combines two literary traditions and mixes storytelling, humour, witty dialogues, Irish heritage and strong images in all of his plays. He provokes, challenges, amuses, and intrigues; his plays keep shimmering in one’s mind. Martin McDonagh is a genuine master of the dramatic form.

8 Sources

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