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This thesis examines the postmodern confrontation of representation throughout the oeuvre of Martin McDonagh. I particularly look to his later body of work, which directly and self-reflexively confronts issues of artistic representation & masculinity, in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of his earliest and most controversial plays. In part, this thesis addresses misperceptions regarding The Leenane Trilogy, which was initially criticized for the plays’ shows of irreverence and use of caricature and cultural stereotypes. Rather than perpetuating propagandistic or offensive representations, my analysis explores how McDonagh uses affect and genre manipulation in order to parody artistic representation itself. Such a confrontation is meant to highlight the inadequacy of any representation to truly capture “authenticity.” Across his oeuvre, this postmodern proclivity is focused on disrupting the solidification of discourses of hyper-masculinity in the vein of postcolonial, diasporic, and mainstream media’s constructions of masculinity based on aggression and violence.
(Mis)representation & Postcolonial Masculinity: The Origins of Violence in the Plays and Films of Martin McDonagh

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Nicolas Evans, Author
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Introduction

Martin McDonagh was part of a wave of young Irish and English playwrights that would breathe new life into theatre in the late 1990s and early 2000s by finding novel ways of engaging with audiences, pushing boundaries of acceptability, disrupting theatricality, and forcing confrontation with artistic representation itself. Over the last several years, his oeuvre has received international critical acclaim despite the air of provocation that has accumulated around his celebrity-playwright-cum-director persona and his jarring, irreverent content. In part drawing from a mixed English and Irish upbringing and fascination with American cinema, his first five plays balance Irish cultural specificity with an overarching interest in deconstructing artistic representation. McDonagh’s *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (1997), and *The Lonesome West* (1997) pushed the formerly unknown playwright into the spotlight of Irish drama in the late 90s. Much of the initial critical dialogue regarding *The Leenane Trilogy* struggled with the use of both culturally specific references and clichés due to the playwright’s ambiguous cultural identity and his penchant for dramatic displays of caricature, politically charged irreverence, and brutal violence. This resulted in superficial interpretations, which focused on the easily accessible and controversial aspects of his dramatic representations without adequately addressing the intertwined subjects of post-colonialism, globalization, social inequality, nationalism, domesticity, Catholicism, and masculinity that are addressed through the lampooning of dramatic representation taken as “authentic” mimesis.

*The Trilogy, The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997), and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) confront histories of Stage-Irish, primitivistic, and idealized representations in order to cast a
critically irreverent lens on contemporary Irish social and economic issues through absurd exaggeration. Specifically, McDonagh aligns the clichés and caricatures of *The Trilogy* with England’s domination and oppression of Ireland, juxtaposing inadequate representations against neoliberal idealizations of Celtic Tiger Ireland and the subsequent denigration of the rural Irish. Additionally, the brutal violence of his characters is juxtaposed against less apparent forms of violence throughout the history of Irish misrepresentation and serves to disrupt audiences’ complacency, suspension of disbelief, and the faux-authentic theatrical frame by presenting them with an affectively jarring, extreme image or event.

His particular brand of provocative storytelling has a history of receiving mixed reactions; these were particularly condemnatory during the early years of his career when his reputation did not precede his work. His plays often walk a fine line between producing cathartic humor and disgust or unease simultaneously, while maintaining an overall degree of popularity that has resulted in his mainstream success. In this study, I am particularly interested in *The Trilogy* because those plays collectively represent the volatile beginnings of McDonagh’s career in which audiences struggled to understand his unique amalgamation of genres and various theatrical legacies of Irish (mis)representation. As I recapitulate in more detail further in this introduction, his drama is also heavily influenced by his interests in film. In part, I bridge the gap between his works by grounding my analysis with Affect Theory in order to examine how various theatrical, cinematic, and genre conventions are used to affectively manipulate and engage audiences while calling artistic representation into question.

Here I rely on Elena Del Río’s ethological approach to representations of violence and Josette Féral’s aesthetic of shock as frameworks for interpreting McDonagh’s use of extreme, disturbing scenes of violence. These instances are one of the most blatant forms of his affective
manipulation, and it is my argument that such jarring and disruptive moments are at the heart of The Trilogy\textsuperscript{1}. For example, exaggerations drawn from Irish and English literature and culture gain a new dimension of significance when they are treated as deliberate forms of provocative engagement. He is particularly interested in audiences’ visceral relation with his work, and his early drama in particular is marked by developing expectation, drawing in through exaggeration, only to then violently disrupt the “implicit contract” of the theatrical setting by introducing brief moments of disjunctive action (Féral 54). As this paper ultimately argues, his best works are always concerned with disrupting passivity through such jarring. While genres like horror, melodrama, and comedy traditionally play on affective manipulation, they often remain contained within their particular paradigms, making them generally predictable; i.e., individuals may choose to view a “scary” horror movie because they desire to experience a particular kind of engagement as opposed to those associated with an “emotional” melodrama. McDonagh’s plays and films combine elements from all three, disallowing any simple categorization.

His use of rural Irish clichés made him a subject of controversy because, for many viewers, he appeared as an outsider that used offensive caricatures to directly mock the Irish. Born in London to Irish immigrant parents, his childhood was spent primarily in London with annual family trips to western Ireland. This meant that he was steeped in English culture throughout his daily life, although regular trips to locations like Connemara would greatly influence his writing as his time there would give him both a limited view of Irish life altogether and an “intimate knowledge of rural Irish life” (O’Hagan, 2001) as an outsider with familial ties

\textsuperscript{1} Here I am referring to the complex, ephemeral combination of emotion, mood, and bodily experience that make up our unique affective states. I approach affect throughout this thesis as an overall mental and physical human disposition that cannot be simplified into any one of these constituent components. Del Río says: “Affect in this sense is not a discrete emotion, but rather a transitional event that marks the passage from one state of the body to another, thus bringing about a diminution or augmentation of the body’s powers. Affect is a qualitative experience that is felt, even while it may not be consciously registered. The concept of affect is inseparable from the body’s immersion in an “open field of relations”—open because virtual potentials may at any time be on the verge of actualization. . . . In short, affect is indivisible from transformation and experimentation.” (3)
to the people, spaces, and language of western Ireland. In an interview with Sean O’Hagan, McDonagh recounted the contradictory reactions that his first play evoked:

That’s what *Beauty Queen* was like when we performed it on Inisheer . . . it was a complete vindication. People loved it. Same all over Ireland. The only place I’ve had any grief is here in London from a few English punters going on about how I was taking the piss out of Irish people. (2001)

While *The Trilogy* certainly had Irish detractors, the strong opposition from English critics is humorously relevant given the plays’ direct confrontation of racialized representations that were once propagated by imperial English culture. Such reactions clearly reveal a misperception of his plays as “authentic” representations that depicted the reality of the rural Irish as facsimiles of Stage-Irish production. Féral examines methods that are explicitly connected to the real, but her conceptions of theatrical and affective disruption elucidate McDonagh’s use of extreme images and events. When such instances occur, the “stage suddenly loses the play of illusion, of the appearance, of the as if, and the spectators find themselves face to face with a reality that has emerged where they least expected it, a reality that modifies their initial contract, once implicit, surrounding the representation” (54). McDonagh disrupts illusion by revealing that any representation is inadequate, but the brief moments of disturbing violence in his works are always a visceral gesture towards the real in their intensity and affective engagement. Such moments evoke the historical and sociopolitical origins of violent manifestations.

Garry Hynes, the original director of all three plays in *The Trilogy* and an individual to whom McDonagh owes a great deal of his early success, identifies McDonagh as both “south Londoner par excellence” and inheritor of the legacy of the Irish diaspora:

He has that mix of influences and experiences that second- or third-generation Irish people often have . . . People who say he has no right to write what he does, or that it is not authentic, are missing the point. If you’re looking for authenticity, then do not go to the theatre. Period. (O’Hagan 2001)
Contemporary approaches to *The Trilogy* and his other Irish inflected works understand McDonagh’s artistic lens as the product of both Irish and English influences; this provides him with the capability of keeping one foot in Connemara and the other in London. Hynes’ disavowal of authentic representation as the purpose of theatre is paramount to interpreting McDonagh’s work as postmodern metafiction that deliberately engages with Irish and English literary canons and discourses of Irish representation. The very necessity of this disavowal is highly significant because it highlights the critical gap between audience expectation and artistic agenda. While he heavily relies on elements of realism to facilitate immersive world-building and politically charged criticism, the overall tone of his style is absurdity and exaggeration. *The Trilogy* is primarily built from the exaggeration of long-standing stereotypes within European art and culture. The purpose of engaging with these representations is to cast a critical eye on their racialized origin in order to reveal the absurdity of such simplistic, prejudicial representations. These are in turn juxtaposed with contemporary conceptions of the Irish during the plays’ initial releases.

His work does explore very real aspects of life in western Ireland, particularly regarding the lingering effects of colonial oppression and globalization as they influence economic stability and a general cultural paralysis that is interconnected with the erstwhile Catholicism of many of his characters. But any aspects of reality that he draws on in his plays are frequently twisted; his representations are true and untrue. *The Trilogy* is a combination of serious cultural and artistic criticism and absurd comedy that attempts to alleviate the pain of colonial oppression and racialized stereotypes through parodic mimicry rather than as “authentic” mimesis in order to

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2 Here I am largely referring to forced, mass Irish emigration as a result of lacking economic stability and opportunity within Ireland, which is a common theme throughout *The Trilogy*. These subjects have reference to McDonagh’s personal life as his parents emigrated from Ireland to London for economic reasons.
transform perspectives on reality and representation. However, the issue of authenticity and the right to engage with the Irish literary tradition, especially McDonagh’s problematic use of Stage-Irishry, was the main source of negative interpretations of The Trilogy. His relation to theatrical history is then vital to understanding how he deliberately uses caricature, stereotype, and generic conventions.

McDonagh plays with the Stage-Irishry of English drama by manipulating the genre of “Kitchen Sink Realism,” which was popular between the 1950s and 80s. This genre relies on a combination of melodrama and mimetic realism that traffics “in the domestic everyday, reveling in the use of household objects, often depicting people of limited financial means, and frequently featuring intense showdowns that favor psychologically credible acting, rather than, say, abstract, consciously poetic, or athletically physical styles” (Chansky 1). Initially growing out of England in the 1950s, the term was closely associated with the journalistic tag “Angry Young Men,” which broadly indicated playwrights whose work expressed disillusionment with English society. Most of these plays attempted to bring a mirror to impoverished or working-class realities by presenting a slice of life that revealed the banality and inadequacy of the status quo that was established by capitalist traditions. For some, this was all the more apparent given struggles in Northern Ireland where “Britain was, as Irish nationalists asserted, engaged in its last colonial conflict” (Chansky 12). While this genre would eventually become associated with socialist realism, it finds its roots in a popular and novel means of counteracting underrepresented and inadequate depictions of the English working-classes. McDonagh uses this to explore inequality and violence in an explicitly Irish context while lampooning racialized and prejudicial representations by playing into the expectations of realism.
He establishes theatrical and cinematic frames through associations with reality, such as utilizing the name of a real town, Leenane, or through the acting out of household labor. However, McDonagh also uses a more facetious mimesis by emulating stereotypical imagery of Irish cultural nationalism and revivalism of the early 1900s. The cottages and farmhouse that serve as The Trilogy’s three settings evoke an idealized primitivism that viewed the rural Irish as isolated from colonial modernity and thus somehow closer to a natural, pious, and simplistic state of being. This is certainly not to say that cottages never existed in western Ireland, but that they were twisted into folkloric idealization by middle class artistic Dubliners who sought to create Irish pride through the reclamation of Irish culture. While the distinction between “reality” and McDonagh’s use of stereotypical imagery becomes increasingly obvious as The Trilogy progresses, the initial realism suggests that these caricatures are reflective of “authentic” reality. Such an instance of representation that is initially based on a kernel of truth before being twisted by an ideological agenda may be referred to as “Stage-Irish” within drama:

a theatrical representation of something we recognize as truthful, but not completely truthful. It is a capturing and commodification of an element of our cultural response which occurred in the first place as an intrinsic element of authentic life, but which has been extracted and given an artificial life in cultural iconography and artistic representations. (Waters 40)

However, these plays are also filled with an irreverent humor that complicates any easy legibility in terms of characterization. This often results in a frustratingly ambiguous line between realism and absurdity that plays into exaggerated stereotypes. For instance, The Trilogy’s consistent reliance on both shocking and absurd violence messily intertwines with a stereotype of violent Irishness, which itself correlates to a real historical issue of domestic violence that has become exaggerated and interconnected with stereotypes of the Irish as drunkards. This is specifically dealt with in Lonesome, which features two quarrelsome brothers who seemingly spend their
days doing nothing but drinking “poteen” and arguing\(^3\). The key question for many critics then became whether or not these plays were a genuine form of artistic expression that utilized absurdity in order to cast a darkly humorous yet critical gaze on representations of the rural Irish or if they represented a manipulative cultural appropriation that mocked them as somehow barbaric, inferior, or simply as supposed facsimiles of dramatic caricatures. However, as Waters notes, *The Trilogy* should primarily be understood as “a reaction against an artistic rather than a sociological reality” (41). The plays ultimately confront their own absurd representations and the history of Stage-Irish production rather than attempting to authentically reproduce the reality of western Ireland on stage.

It is also important to understand that McDonagh’s characters are by and large exaggerations of the worst of humanity:

> 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)

Rather than expressing the particularity of a racial Irish nature, McDonagh sees cruelty, quarrelsomeness, and pettiness as universal qualities of human nature. Throughout his oeuvre, the majority of his characters, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, race, or gender, are deeply flawed, brutal “adult-children.” Even so, each character has some kernel of decency in addition to their absurdity, which is in turn usually associated with either playing out the ridiculousness of stereotypes or as exaggerated portrayal of postcolonial trauma. So while *The Trilogy* has been criticized for depicting the Irish as violent, the strain of violence that runs throughout is best

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\(^3\) Poteen is a trope in Irish literature that is particularly associated with the rural west and illegal, small scale distillation from potatoes. The word is slang, roughly translating to “little pot” and is a synecdoche for whiskey. The proper Gaelic form is “uisce beatha.” This is marked as the alcoholic drink of choice for the impoverished peasantry.
understood as a condition of humanity and as a dramatic tool. To McDonagh, the average individual is an absurdly cruel mess wrapped around one or two redeeming qualities.

Human cruelty in his plays and films is a confrontation of hypocritical audiences that easily become outraged by artistic representations of violence while real instances of transgression in everyday life or as legacies of colonialism are still felt today. The representations of disturbing events are meant to be juxtaposed to the inherent violence of misrepresentations that claim to be “authentic” depictions of reality. By drawing evidence from a variety of McDonagh’s works, part of my goal is to reinforce the division between the explicitly Irish context of The Trilogy and the exaggerated forms of violence that helped make these three plays so controversial. Paradoxically, his work both condemns and utilizes violence as a form of visceral entertainment, so it is necessary to disentangle his portrayals of cruelty in The Trilogy from the stereotype of a violent, working-class, ignorant Irish peasantry. Aggression is made complicated by his dual use of absurd and serious violence, which he uses in order to satirize the ambiguity of artistic representations.

The majority of Irish audiences that experienced The Trilogy in its coproduction between The Druid Theatre and The Royal Court Theatre found significant humor and critical engagement with the use of Stage-Irish elements. However, dissenting voices adopted the stance that McDonagh’s outsider status equated to an inappropriate cultural appropriation of the Irish literary tradition. I argue, along with Sean O’Hagan, that it is:

the remarkably enduring myth of an Arcadian Ireland that he, like Synge before him, has laid bare to reveal a dark, insular place of suppurating spite, internecine family feuding and simmering violence. He has set his plays in the only Irish places he knows intimately, the Aran Islands and Connemara, two of the most mythologised and elementally beautiful areas of rural Ireland. (O’Hagan, 2001)

4 Lieutenant stands out as the play that directly confronts extremist, Irish, militant nationalism.
His confrontation of a folkloric, pastoral, and pure Ireland indeed may be traced back to the work of Augusta Lady Gregory and William Butler Yeats’ Irish Literary Revival, and especially the most controversial playwright of his day, John Millington Synge. Like Synge, McDonagh denies both the “purity” of an idealized rural Ireland and the similar primitivism and racialization of colonial discourses. In addressing Synge, it is important to explore the particular kind of nationalist agendas that he reacted against and toward which McDonagh similarly gestures.

Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, George Moore, and Yeats’ Irish Literary Theatre strongly oriented drama towards fierce independent nationalism after its foundation in 1899. Many of these plays treated the Irish with a high degree of reverence that artists felt was necessary as a means of restoring respect to a culture that had long been oppressed. Yeats and Gregory’s *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), for instance, is a single act play in which the titular character is a personification of the Shan Van Vocht, the spirit of Ireland that traditionally takes the form of a poor old woman. She encourages men to leave the safety and complacency of the domestic space in order to sacrifice their lives in the fight for Irish independence from English imperialism. While positive nationalism in the face of oppression was an admirable goal, such plays positioned it as the highest purpose for the Irish to attain, equating death in battle with a form of immortality: “They shall be alive for ever / They shall be speaking for ever” (Yeats 10). The play problematizes the men’s sacrifice by suggesting that Michael’s abandoned family and fiancée will suffer without him, but it is still characterized as a more sacred duty. Going further, the play suggests that Michael is unable to resist the Shan Van Vocht’s call to arms as he is irresistibly compelled to follow the old woman’s voice regardless of familial protests. Taking into account that these characters are clearly marked as impoverished, rural citizens, the play

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5 Shan Van Vocht is the phonetic English spelling of Sean-bhean Bhocht, which is Gaelic for “poor old woman.” The Sean-bhean Bhocht is a poetic motif and traditional song that personifies Ireland and its struggles as an elderly woman, often in association with the promise of rebellion and a successful uprising to come.
suggests that this idealized Irish peasantry feels an intrinsic impulse to defend their sacred land through righteous and liberatory violence. By the play’s end, the Shan Van Vocht has undergone a physical rebirth into a “young girl” with “the walk of a queen,” suggesting the revitalization of Ireland that comes with nationalist violence. While certainly not the most egregious example of combining folkloric Ireland with the rural working-class, plays in this vein ran dangerously close to propaganda. Such representations fabricated an idealized rural identity of the peasantry for the enjoyment of the theatre’s predominantly Catholic, nationalist, middle-class, Dubliner patrons, who they were separated from both geographically and socially. Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh famously identified this as “the myth and illusion of “Ireland”” in which “classic” Irish cultural symbols such as priests, peasants, and rural cottages “did not exist in the way in which they were being presented, and did not have the meanings ascribed to them” (Waters 42). In other words, this idealization is Stage-Irishry writ large, reaching beyond the bounds of theatre into colonial cultural nationalism. However, the Irish Literary Theatre also produced many more complicated, or at least controversial, plays that engaged with its revivalist agenda without resorting to this particular brand of nationalist propaganda.

One of the most influential and original plays produced in the theatre was of course Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), which famously caused riots during its premiere. The reactions to *Playboy* revealed divisions within Irish nationalism, particularly between cultural nationalists and revivalists such as Yeats or Gregory and the more politically militant nationalists such as the Fenians of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Synge’s works, particularly *The Aran Islands* (1907) and *Playboy*, standout as attempts to incorporate nationalist pride with realist elements that would reflect the current state of the Irish as Synge had witnessed them in his travels around the islands. He identified as a nationalist, but his work is a reaction
against the mystification of Ireland that had become intertwined with nationalist movements of the time. Rather than the folkloric Ireland of beautiful landscapes and sacred peasants that other artists sought to both reclaim and manifest through art, Synge attempted to portray a more realistic, complex peasantry who lived separately from the political agendas of the Dublin artistic sphere. In other words, he was reacting against the growing trend of imaginatively constructing politically idealized figures by attempting to record an ethnography of rural life as he experienced it.

Primarily living abroad in France, Synge spent several summers on the Aran Islands in order to study the land and its inhabitants (Approx. 1898-1902). Aran was his attempt at recording a direct and objective account of his experiences, “inventing nothing, and changing nothing that is essential” (20). Yet Aran often goes too far in its ethnographic efforts by allowing Synge’s primitivistic orientation to bleed through in characterizations of the peasants that he encounters:

The absence of the heavy boot of Europe has preserved to these people the agile walk of the wild animal, while the general simplicity of their lives has given them many other points of physical perfection. Their way of life has never been acted on by anything much more artificial than the nests and burrows of the creatures that live round them, and they seem, in a certain sense, to approach more nearly to the finer types of our aristocracies—who are bred artificially to a natural ideal—than to the labourer or citizen, as the wild horse resembles the thoroughbred rather than the hack or cart-horse. Tribes of the same natural development are, perhaps, frequent in half-civilised countries, but here a touch of the refinement of old societies is blended, with singular effect, among the qualities of the wild animal. (Synge 48)

His comparison of the Irish to wild animals stands out as commentary of racialized inferiority despite the backhanded compliment comparing them to finer aristocracies. Such observations are presented as an objective experience of authentic Irish life, but value judgments are consistently made throughout that suggest that his sociological studies are from the perspective of an
enlightened artist watching a primitive or infantilized people. The peasantry and their way of life are depicted as simplistic and outdated above all. Synge also argues that superstition and pagan beliefs ruled their lives despite the ubiquity of Catholicism across the islands. Although his work attempts to contradict mystification, passages like this reveal an underlying idealization of the peasantry as the atavistic exemplars of the Irish race. Aran remains problematic as a significant corollary to popular ethnographic discourses that influenced Stage-Irishry. It begins with observations and accounts that are grounded in reality, yet twists them into ideologically fitting portraits. These observations are based on firsthand accounts and experiences in rural communities, but their presentation ultimately reveals an underlying condescension despite his intent to propagate a more complex cultural nationalism.

Synge’s experiences on the Aran Islands would greatly influence Playboy, which succeeds much more than Aran in its juxtaposition and contradiction with mystification despite its fictional construction. I revisit this work in chapter one as a significant analogue and influence for The Trilogy because its controversial representations of the peasantry are reminiscent of McDonagh’s use of rural characters when many viewed him as English. Just like Synge, he visited his ancestral home and was fascinated with the Irish and their unique social and political position in the world. And to a certain extent, both authors seek to portray a more accurate and complex reality. However, Synge believed that his personal experiences as an observer gave him the ability to produce authentic representations. McDonagh’s work gestures towards reality by critiquing and revealing the absurdity of artistic representations that are presented as facsimiles of reality.

McDonagh’s work is devoted to experimenting with expectation, comfort zones, visceral experiences, and affective engagement in the vein of In-Yer-Face Theatre. His work attempts to
force engagement with a degree of discomfort or irregularity by presenting them with exaggerated scenes of cruelty, violence, or aggression. Although they are largely absurd, the truly jarring moments within these plays are limited in order to maintain their intense influence.

While Aleks Sierz’s In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today (2001) is notably London-centric, critics have since expanded his original grouping to a diverse range of playwrights from around the world. The popularity of these rebellious and innovative playwrights led to his identification of In-Yer-Face theatre as a confrontational sensibility and series of theatrical techniques that work to greatly affect their audiences:

Often such drama employs shock tactics, or is shocking because it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what audiences are used to. Questioning moral norms, it affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown onstage; it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. Crucially, it tells us more about who we really are. Unlike the type of theatre that allows us to sit back and contemplate what we see in detachment, the best in-yer-face theatre takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative. (4)

In the case of The Trilogy, McDonagh consistently establishes expectation by using the conventions of Kitchen Sink Realism. His settings mimic stereotypical, melodramatic, domestic spaces in order to confront audiences with brief and unexpectedly disturbing scenes of exaggerated violence. These clash with the realist façade and break immersion with the initial theatrical frame. This forces reconciliation with the clashing elements of representation as they are viscerally drawn into the experience of the moment. By disrupting this faux-reality, the plays suggest that the characters/caricatures portrayed on stage are in some sense a false or inadequate representation. From another perspective, it is often the force of maintaining these representations that leads to some of the most violent outbursts.
For instance, Maureen’s scalding of Mag in *Queen* is the result of her mother’s attempts to keep her trapped within the oppressive cycle of domestic labor and postcolonial trauma that is her existence in Ireland. The moment of this disruption is meant to be affectively jarring and disturbing in order to express the culmination of Maureen’s lifetime of abuse at the hands of the society around her and the false promises of England and the American dream while simultaneously being too intense for audiences to maintain identification or sympathy. The break in identification is the result of the extremity of the event, which disrupts the quaint theatrical frame because such an action does not align with Maureen’s established caricature. While this is meant to disturb, the escalation of Mag’s torments from lumpy Complan to outright torture is also an absurd exaggeration that ultimately becomes the butt of a joke throughout *The Trilogy*. Everyone in Leenane is passively complicit in believing and accepting that Maureen brutally killed her mother. McDonagh thus attempts a certain degree of catharsis through irreverent comedy that both mocks Stage-Irishry and creates serious social criticism through caricature and the exaggeration of contemporary issues related to Ireland’s postcolonial condition. I approach his work in terms of its affective engagement, emphasizing the importance of his position within discourses of self-reflexive theatre and cinema.

This visceral style is indebted to a diversity of influences, but it is especially significant that his love of film has consistently oriented his professional trajectory towards cinematic creation. McDonagh has noted Terrence Malick and Martin Scorsese as specific influences, but films such as *Scarface* (1983), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and *Goodfellas* (1990) stand out as likely influences for a young McDonagh interested in American cinema. Additionally, the popularity of the buddy cop genre during the 1980s and 90s can easily be seen as a major influence for *In Bruges* (2008). These types of films all share an emphasis on models of hyper-masculinity that
rely on degrees of aggressive violence, and the buddy cop genre in particular combines these elements with comic relief. *Bruges* combines the buddy cop and gangster genres and has often been compared to *Pulp Fiction* in terms of tone (in this thesis, I refer to this often disturbing combination of comedy, violence, absurdity, and occasional discomfort as “grotesque”). The vast majority of McDonagh’s work is male-centric, so it often engages in discourses of hyper-masculinity associated with trivialized or gratuitous violence. This is most apparent in *Bruges* and *Seven Psychopaths* (2012).

Despite critical acclaim and success within the realm of theatre on both sides of the Atlantic, McDonagh maintains a certain amount of aversion towards theatre. An interview for the *New York Times* in 1998 aptly summarizes his very public attitudes towards his theatrical style: “I guess I try to bring as many cinematic elements into theater as possible, because I like films better than theater. . . . I was reduced to going into theater . . . Now it’s a leg up to get into films” (Lyman). His favoring of cinema significantly informs his construction and approach to his plays, although he has inarguably been praised more for his dramatic works than for his films. The presentation of visual stimuli in McDonagh’s plays is often reminiscent of mainstream cinema’s reliance on deliberately exaggerated and violent spectacle. This is most apparent in popular comparisons between McDonagh and Quentin Tarantino. Both directors use pop culture driven pastiche, copious amounts of fake blood, and spectacular displays of violence. His work does parallel Tarantino’s grotesque tone by attempting to balance seemingly incongruous elements of comedy, violence, and melodrama. However, the key difference between their aesthetics is in both the intent of each director and the affective impact on audiences.

McDonagh’s work purposefully incorporates violence into heavily melodramatic plotlines in

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order to disturb and provoke, which is in turn moderated by a consistent comedic strain. On the other hand, Tarantino’s corpus tends more towards a comedic, metacinematic commentary that revels in exaggerated spectacle, paying homage to cinematic predecessors while still remaining largely contained within a classic Hollywood style dichotomy of good vs bad.

McDonagh employs spectacle in his work with the specific intent of making audiences uncomfortable, shocking them out of complacency and often raising questions about the validity or appropriateness of violence itself. Considering this usage alongside his interest in film, Del Río’s study of artistic representations of violence in cinema as expressions of affective forces is particularly helpful in understanding McDonagh’s work:

If the force in the image is not diminished by any manner of moral containment or justification, the interval between perception and response is freed to do its work on us... The cinemas that adopt an ethics of immanence allow the interval to reach its creative/affective potential through a delayed response, or even the lack of a response. In these cinemas, destructive or negative images directly issue from the cinematic potential for the destruction of old values and the creation of new values. Mobilizing this destructive potential that transforms values and affects is the highest form of ethics the cinema can realize. Within Deleuze’s philosophical project, this ethics should also be seen as a politics that sets out to “transform our perceptions of the world.” (Del Río16)

While she is focused explicitly on extreme cinema, her ideas regarding intolerable images and Deleuze’s ethics of immanence translates well when addressing theatre that is deeply invested in affective engagement. When McDonagh crafts a scene of disturbing violence, it is done in an attempt to express the exaggerated or absurdly sustained caricature of a character, which in itself leads to the possibility of novelty. When applied to The Trilogy, this understanding of intolerable images allows us to move beyond questioning whether the violence on stage is morally either good or bad. Instead, his use of violence reveals the constructedness of form and representation by increasing audiences’ awareness of conventions and expectations. Relatedly, violent outbursts in The Trilogy are in conversation with the racialized legacies of Irish and English theatre.
Returning to the disruption in *Queen*, rather than accepting Maureen’s absurd levels of cruelty as an extension of the play’s kitschy, domestic realism as we might with Synge’s *Aran*, the act of scalding Mag violently breaks away from the Kitchen Sink Realism and sentimental melodrama that McDonagh has built up over the course of the previous six scenes. This is a more perverse and antagonistic manipulation of affect than Tarantino’s entertaining and pleasure-focused style. He engages audiences through the horror of Maureen’s actions in an attempt to jar them out of that representational frame. Instead of condemning Mag’s torture and murder as morally reprehensible, an ethological approach interprets these as an attempt to break down the conventions of Kitchen Sink Realism, melodrama, and idealized representations of the Irish peasantry, all of which do not typically employ violence to this visceral degree. In this particular instance, *Queen* suggests that theatre should not be limited by conventions as Maureen’s cruelty makes the play’s ending far more affectively engaging than a predictable, melodramatic ending that might see Mag pass away quietly in her sleep and Maureen gone off with Pato to live happily ever after in America. By remaining behind to take Mag’s place in the cottage, audiences are left to reconcile such an extreme representation of postcolonial struggle and desperation with their own perceptions of Ireland’s condition.

McDonagh manipulates affect by consistently destabilizing the forces that bombard audiences. The grotesque tone of his plays often remains ambiguous and difficult to categorize because his work blends conventions from multiple genres. The overarching tonal shifts occur primarily by alternating between the expectations of comedy and melodrama. By beginning a scene with a comedic tone, for instance, audiences are primed to engage with that particular scene through that lens. However, McDonagh consistently delights in establishing the frame of a scene only to jarringly derail expectations through distinct genre mixing or through the sudden
introduction of over the top violence. His work typically employs a grim, comedic strain that runs throughout a predominantly melodramatic center, which allows work like *The Trilogy* to simultaneously dwell in the harsh subject matter of postcolonial struggle and domestic oppression while his provocative irreverence has the ability to either intensify the drama through the use of exaggerated caricature or to diffuse tension with clownish dialogue or slapstick antics. One of the most striking examples of this technique may be seen throughout *Bruges*, which likely suffered commercially due to frustrations over categorizing the film. Although it was marketed as an action comedy, it is filled with intense melodrama surrounding the very serious moral and ethical crisis of a hitman who has accidentally murdered a child while on his first assignment to assassinate a priest. This somber film is interspersed with consistent interludes of irreverent comedy that often feel out of place or disruptive of the central plotline, which is the planned execution of the protagonist by his own organization. Here, comedic interjections are used to diffuse the tension and seriousness of the hitman’s guilt and existential crisis in order to balance the moral and ethical quandaries that the plotline raises with the film’s additional interest in metacinematic and postcolonial discourses of hyper-masculinity. Comedic interjections in the film are also a minor form of violence because they are often inserted at unexpected moments in order to deny expectation and thus disrupt audiences’ complacent mode of engagement. So while McDonagh’s work often uses comedy to diffuse tension, disrupting passivity also creates room for novelty as audiences that have been made aware that they cannot rely on the easy legibility of convention are primed to engage with an emphasis on its ability to express something new. While novelty may often be appreciated for its own sake, the disruption of passivity or cohesive immersion may be unwelcome. This is supported by the mixed reviews of the film. Similarly, McDonagh also consistently relies on
harsher disruptions in the form of over the top depictions of physical and verbal violence. Without much warning, comedic or melodramatic scenes are abruptly interrupted with a violent or cruel interjection that often purposefully pushes the boundaries of acceptability and squeamishness. Such disruptions in Bruges are exaggerations of the gangster genre’s conventional hyper-masculinity.

Unexpected tonal shifts maintain a consistent ambiguity that affectively distances audiences from the film or play. This focuses attention on the constructedness of violent representations and masculinity while simultaneously drawing them into the visceral experiences of the brief disruptive moments themselves. Affective intensity, novelty, ambiguity, and deconstruction of representation are key elements of his work that are perhaps the most appealing cross culturally: as Patrick Lonergan notes, “[his plays are] often inconclusive or ambiguous: but rather than frustrating his audiences, those features explain why his work is so popular. . . . this openness to interpretation is the major reason why McDonagh’s work has so effortlessly crossed national and cultural boundaries, making him a truly global playwright.” (xvi). I move beyond an interpretation of McDonagh that emphasizes the split between Irish and English identification for an examination based on his diasporic position and the increasing saturation of globalization at the turn of the twenty-first century. In this manner, my analysis maintains an interest in how McDonagh’s work engages with postcolonial discourses that place Ireland in relation to England and America in particular, but also in how these works appeal to a global audience through their ambiguity and affective engagement.

McDonagh’s critical engagement with Stage-Irish, racialized, and idealized representations is the main focus of Chapter 1. I interpret The Trilogy as a project that confronts and destabilizes easy, categorical signification or representation in a fragmentary, postmodern
world through the use of absurdity and exaggeration. The division within McDonagh’s works between his early Irish plays and his more recent work, which notably distances itself from a specifically Irish context, is highlighted. By drawing from theatrical tradition, cultural stereotypes, and temporality through an absurd lens, McDonagh manipulates audiences’ affective states, challenging notions of authenticity, purity, and identity implicit in representations of a folkloric, idealized, or racialized rural Ireland. The Trilogy exaggerates stereotypes and caricatures of the Irish, holdovers of English colonialism and primitivism, to absurd levels that reveal their constructed-ness and distance from reality. The deconstruction of Stage-Irish elements coincides with an intense engagement between audience and play, particularly in regard to representations of violence, which are juxtaposed against the everyday violence that is inflicted through the perpetuation of the very kind of Stage-Irish representations that The Trilogy implode. These representations are further juxtaposed against the neoliberal idealization and prejudice of Celtic Tiger Ireland during the plays’ premieres.

Chapter two expands on my examination of McDonagh’s style with an increased emphasis on his movement towards film. This allows me to analyze the differences between McDonagh’s highly Irish inflected early plays and the increasingly global appeal of his later works. Here I briefly highlight McDonagh’s first non-Irish play, The Pillowman (2003), which I read as a self-reflexive response to criticism that failed to understand his use of violent representations. While I draw examples from several of his works, I focus my analysis on Bruges because it is his most compelling cinematic work. I trace the development of McDonagh’s confrontation of representation through Bruges’ subtle postcolonial and diasporic discourses of hyper-masculinity. Also of note is Psychopaths, which directly engages with contemporary main
stream cinema’s, especially Hollywood action movies, reliance on mindless depictions of violence.

It is my hope that examining McDonagh’s career through the lens of affect studies will help to reveal the complexity of his work, which has often been dismissed as superficial due to his occasionally childish irreverence both in his work and public life. After winning Most Promising Newcomer at the 1996 Evening Standard Theatre Awards, “it looked as if McDonagh would be known primarily not as a major new writer, but as the man who told James Bond [Sean Connery] to “fuck off’,” resulting in a silence “as every head in the room turned in his direction” (O’Hagan 2001). His postmodern sensibilities often lead him to juxtapose serious subject matter with inconsequential banalities or crassness, which at times also works against his desire to be taken seriously because he is willing to provoke and antagonize audiences for seemingly no other reason than his own enjoyment and to disrupt the boring monotony that he believes the theatre-going experience can often be. Despite the problematic aspects of his career, McDonagh is an important contemporary playwright and filmmaker who continues to influence and shape theatre in Ireland, England, and the United States with his affectively engaging, provocative style.
Chapter One
Fraught Representations: The Postcolonial Condition of *The Leenane Trilogy*

McDonagh’s trilogy consists of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane, A Skull in Connemara,* and *The Lonesome West.* These belong to his purported massive writing spree, spanning a ten month period between 1994 and 1995, which also resulted in *Cripple, Lieutenant,* and the unpublished/unproduced *The Banshees of Inisheer.* By grouping these plays together within a particularly contained period of his life, McDonagh reveals a distinct shift in content between his early plays and his subsequent theatrical and cinematic works. All of these plays are set in western Ireland, specifically Connemara and the Aran Islands. They engage with the various idealized and racialized representations of the Irish peasantry that are specifically connected to a space that has historically been conceived of as isolated from modernity. All of his later works, with the exception of *Shooter,* have been set abroad of Ireland, although his films feature Irish protagonists. This division is indicative of a personal reaction to the critical dissent and controversy against his early plays. While this hurdle has largely been overcome in recent years as critical and academic attention has moved beyond both the question of his right to represent and the perspective that the representations within *The Trilogy* are purely mimetic or “authentic,” a 2015 interview with Sean O’Hagan suggests that McDonagh still feels lingering pressure from that pushback:

I think there’s still an undertow of that in Ireland: ‘Who the fuck is this English guy criticizing us?’ They find it hard to take from someone who doesn’t actually live there. A lot of Irish journalists and commentators haven’t quite gotten to grips with the diaspora, that we can be as critical as people who live there. While he has more confidently and publicly laid claim to his Irish ancestry in recent years, the Irish characters that populate his later works are clearly associated with his own diasporic

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7 This final play is meant to be the capstone to the Aran Islands Trilogy.
position and issues of artistic representations of violence and masculinity rather than the Irish in Ireland. This is further indication that McDonagh’s later works were significantly influenced by accusations of gratuitous violence in his early plays. Such a shift is also indicative of his overarching postmodern interests. His consistent confrontation of representation, specifically of overdone stereotypes, through absurd exaggeration and repetition across his oeuvre provides a unique orientation for approaching *The Trilogy* that was unavailable during its initial run.

*The Trilogy* is highly concerned with the historical stereotyping of the rural Irish, particularly dramatic representations of Stage-Irishry that are presented as “authentic.” These are inseparably tied to colonial and postcolonial relations between Ireland, England, and America in terms of transnational economics, immigration, and cultural oppression. Such representations are amalgamated with contemporary stereotyping and the idealized peasantry of Yeats and Gregory’s revivasthis strain of cultural nationalism, all of which is meant to reveal their constructedness and inadequacy. These signifying elements clash together in a contradictory presentation that uses repetition and exaggeration to ultimately twist offensive caricatures into absurdity. Such a method is a direct juxtaposition of audiences’ own ideological representations of the Irish given the gap between McDonagh’s faux-“authentic” characters and the reality of theatre patrons. In this regard, the affective outrage of several audience members should be understood as a key component to *The Trilogy’s* successful complication as it propagated discussions of “appropriate” or “authentic” artistic representations of the Irish. The overall portrayal of Ireland across the plays may be described as poly-temporal due to the various symbolic and historical threads that they draw inspiration from, but this liminal locale is also caught between past portraiture and an idealized advance towards modernity.
The Kitchen Sink Realism style cottage settings are suggestive of a dormant Ireland of
the early 1900s and both the folkloristic symbolism of cultural nationalism and colonial
primitivism. The portrayals of violent, clownish, ignorant, self-destructive, rural poteen drinkers
is a racialized stereotype of the Irish that reaches well into the history of English drama, playing
into discourses of Irish inferiority by appropriating comic figures from Irish drama:

English playwrights boiled these stereotypes down with gusto into the comical,
bibulous, colourful eejit of a stage-Irishman. Fitz-Simon identifies two types of
Irish stage-archetypes stretching back at least to the seventeenth century: the
parasite-slave, a lazy, crafty rogue—or the drunken fighter-braggart, which
conforms to the miles gloriosus of classical comedy. (Maroney 257)

Alongside these Stage-Irish caricatures stands the idealized peasantry of folkloric Ireland that is
evoked through the plays’ domestic settings and the ostensible Catholicism of the central
characters. This peasantry was crafted as a means of reappropriating racialized conceptions of
the Irish as inferior, including propagandistic Stage-Irishry, by casting the rural Irish as “pure” in
their relative isolation from colonial corruption. However, such representation is still based on a
disturbing tinge of racialized primitivism.

Queen’s references to The Pogues’ “The Body of An American” (1986) and reruns of the
television show The Sullivans (originally broadcast 1976-1983) combined with radio broadcasts
of Delia Murphy’s “The Spinning Wheel” (1950) to complicate the temporality, suggesting a
slow transition into the late 1980s or early 90s. The mixing of temporal signifiers is an
exaggeration of racialized portraits of the Irish as trapped in the past. This is particularly evident
in the case of Mag in Queen, who struggles to understand modern technology and the complexity
of the historical, political, social, and economic relations between Ireland, England, and
America. For instance, Mag does not understand how to change the radio or television stations
and complains when the programs feature Gaelic instead of English. These gestures to
backwards or underdeveloped Ireland became particularly contentious for some audiences because the plays were originally produced during the upswing of the artificial economic boom known as the Celtic Tiger.

Beginning in the late 1980s, but reaching fever pitch in the 90s and early 2000s, the Celtic Tiger was the result of foreign direct investment, which was incentivized by temporary legislation that granted tax cuts to foreign businesses. Alongside capital investment came an “unprecedented flow of immigrants now coming to Ireland in search of work” (Quigley 175). This period saw a massive increase in “ethnic diversity” and a “reveling in interchangeability” with any other globalized space (especially England and America) that finally allowed for the development of a “notion of the historical transcendence of empire . . . and nationalism . . . was increasingly seen as an embarrassing relic” (Quigley 175). As a result, the optimistic myth of utopic transnational cooperation between England, the United States, and Ireland temporarily flourished as Ireland was thrust into economic modernity. A significant portion of this capital stemmed from American businesses as tax incentives temporarily made Ireland a hotbed for industrial expansion. However, Ireland’s dependence on foreign investment became all too apparent when this economic bubble burst in 2008. Unemployment and emigration skyrocketed back to levels unseen since the 1980’s, which provides a nice mirror to some of the economic realities that McDonagh highlights and skewers by bringing them into extremes during a period of unprecedented economic growth.

Before the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, Ireland experienced a renewed sense of optimism for revitalization that paradoxically bolstered nationalist pride due to newfound economic success and a proliferation of domestic opportunities that was simultaneously tempered through the awareness of direct reliance on foreign capital. McDonagh’s plays exaggerated Ireland’s lack
of economic independence as a legacy of English oppression at a time when most of the Irish population seemingly sought to leave that condition and its history in the past. I interpret this as a direct confrontation of audiences’ personal ideals and conceptions of how the Irish should be represented. When taken as an attempt to depict “authentic” representations, the plays cause significant outrage because they are purposefully constructed to contradict the pure and pious stereotypes of old while also revealing the inadequacy and constructedness of both Stage-Irishry and the neoliberal, transnational modernity of the 1990s. It is through this irreverent provocation with various stereotypical signifiers that The Trilogy affectively engages, which is in turn heightened by McDonagh’s use of disturbing violence.

Playing on a growing distaste for extreme nationalism, due in large part to the Northern Ireland conflict and the Celtic Tiger’s optimistic nationalism of transnational cooperation and globalization, McDonagh’s plays reveal and mock any sense of idealized representations of the rural Irish. Synge’s Playboy is particularly insightful here as an analogue because of its (perhaps unintentionally) explosive engagement with audiences’ conceptions of theatre and representation. Playboy is a distinct movement away from Synge’s ethnographic attempts in Aran. Additionally, it is also indicative of his rejection of the Literary Theatre’s revivalist folk drama. These plays heavily relied on dutiful retellings of traditional Irish “folkore, myth, and legend” that were recorded through cultural fieldwork and that attempted to avoid “the partisan, polemical, and propagandistic tendencies of various nationalist factions” (Castle 135). Such drama was meant to cast the peasantry as the “pure” Irish, which Synge complicates through the representations in Playboy.

Playboy is a three act play that follows the exploits of Christy Mahon when he comes to a town on the western coast of Ireland in his flight from the authorities. He artfully tells the tale of
murdering his father, which earns him the respect of the townspeople. Christy’s father eventually shows up in search of his son, revealing that Christy has lied and ruining his reputation with the town. Christy and his father fight, resulting in the apparent actual murder of the father. Given the potential ramifications of complicity with this act and Christy’s loss of respect, the townspeople turn on Christy and restrain him for punishment. His father reappears again, revealing that Christy has still not murdered anyone, and the two leave the town behind.

The *Playboy* Riots famously occurred during and after the initial performance of the play in January of 1907. The play was denounced for its immoral and inaccurate representations, particularly in regard to the pious townspeople’s acceptance and praise for Christy’s patricidal tale and the “indecency” of the Irish women in the play who became infatuated with Christy. The source of this conflict can be understood through the context of Synge’s rejection of “colonialist and anthropological attitudes and stereotypes of the Irish” in addition to the revivalist “projects of ethnographic redemption” that Synge had initially helped establish alongside Yeats (Castle 141). Synge’s desire to strip away the constructed representations of the peasantry in favor of a more complex or “authentic” representation is paradoxically achieved through his dramatic fiction rather than his ethnographic work because his exaggerated realism clashed with the mimetic realism that audiences expected. It is around this time that popular ethnographic representations of the rural Irish, couched in a history of colonial oppression and discourses of Irish inferiority, conceptualized them as “the last bastion of a [white] primitive race” (Castle 151).

In part responding to this internalized inferiority, cultural nationalist discourses of revivalism developed around a pre-colonial peasantry that could cleanse both the oppressor and those oppressed by colonial modernity through a racialized naturalness, “purity, piety, and
simplicity” (Duffy 12-13). Synge’s rebellion against the “purity” of the rural Irish combined with significant elements of realism drawn from his ethnographic work in Aran to produce a distortion of reality that was accused of “scandalous misrepresentation” (Castle 155). Such representations are similar to Stage-Irishry in their exaggeration and simplification of Irish characters, which explains the outrage of audiences who viewed the play as “authentic” realism. However, Synge’s exaggerations go beyond mere realism, implicitly revealing the constructedness of Playboy’s own representations through absurdity. It is a rebellious use of mimicry that plays into stereotypes in order to mock them and force reconceptualization of any assumptions of dramatic representation or “authenticity” that is built upon them. For Synge, this was primarily aimed at exposing the inadequacy of nationalism that is constructed out of artistic representations without adequate concern for the reality of the social and historical conditions of imperialism. Rather than constructing yet another representation of the Irish to be accepted, Playboy reveals the inadequacy of “authentic” depictions of the “pure” peasantry on stage. Such a contestation has obvious parallels to McDonagh’s use of realism, stereotypes, exaggeration, and affective engagement with an audience that expects “authentic” mimesis. As Castle and several others have noted, “Reactions to the first run of Playboy generally assumed that faithful imitation was the raison d’être of Irish drama” (157). So the end result of the play’s performance in front of middle and upper class Irish audiences was to contradict their perceptions of the peasantry. Below, I provide a brief summation of all three plays in The Trilogy before continuing with my analysis.

Queen focuses on the relationship between the elderly Mag Folan and her middle-aged daughter and caretaker Maureen Folan, who live together, although quite quarrelsomely, in a cottage in Leenane. Maureen suffers from an ambiguous degree of mental instability that is
attributed to her racialized maltreatment by English citizens during her time cleaning offices in Leeds. While Mag is Maureen’s official caretaker, her advanced age requires Maureen’s constant care in the form of housekeeping, food preparation, and shopping, making them codependent. Maureen finds potential romance and an avenue of escape through Pato Dooley, a Leenane native who ultimately asks her to move with him to America. Due to his livelihood in England, this offer is communicated through a letter that is intercepted by Mag, who burns the letter in order to stave off abandonment. Upon learning that Mag has concealed information from her, Maureen tortures Mag with scalding oil until she confesses the truth. She races off to meet with Pato before he leaves Ireland for the last time, thinking that she catches him at the last minute and has secured her escape. She returns home in order to murder Mag so that she has nothing to keep her in Ireland and away from Pato, disguising the murder as an accident. However, it is ultimately revealed that Maureen only imagined catching Pato before he left, and she remains as isolated and trapped in her home as her mother was before her.

*Skull* follows Mick Dowd, a man who fulfills the annual task, set by the town priest Father Welsh, of digging up old graves in order to make room for new burials. Rumors circulate throughout the play that Mick murdered his wife, whom he must coincidentally unbury this year. Upon reaching her grave, he discovers that her remains have been stolen. While he keeps it a secret from the community, Mick reveals his methods of disposal to his new coworker Mairtin: They get drunk and smash the remains into pieces with hammers on Mick’s living-room table before collecting the pieces in a sack and throwing them in the lake. Thinking that Mairtin stole his wife’s remains, Mick unsuccessfully attempts to murder him with a hammer. Mairtin reveals that his brother, the police officer Thomas Hanlon, dug up Mick’s wife in order to tamper with the remains with the goal of coercing Mick into confessing to her murder. This attempt
ultimately fails, and the play ends with strong suggestions that Mick did in fact murder his wife, but the truth remains ambiguous.

*Lonesome* focuses on two brothers, Valene and Coleman, and the priest of Leenane, Father Welsh. The play begins immediately after the funeral of the brothers’ father. It is eventually revealed that Coleman shot his father in the head because he insulted his haircut, and Valene forced Coleman to sign away his inheritance in return for his passive complicity. Father Welsh becomes obsessed with trying to save the souls of the Connor brothers after discovering the truth, in addition to finding out that everyone in the community believes that Maureen Folan killed her mother and Mick Dowd killed his wife despite the unsuccessful inquiries into their deaths. Approximately halfway through the play, Thomas Hanlon, the inept officer from *Skull*, commits suicide by walking into the lake. Welsh ultimately follows suit with his own suicide after becoming increasingly depressed at his inability to guide, save, or receive respect from anyone around him. Welsh leaves behind a letter that asks the brothers to reconcile with each other for the sake of his sacrificed soul. While their conflicts escalate to absurd levels, they ultimately seem to continue living together in their own unique yet extremely dysfunctional and aggressive manner.

*The Trilogy* is particularly interesting to examine altogether because the plays present a cohesive union through a shared location (The village of Leenane in County Galway), overlapping characters, and a chronological timeline in which events from each play build on one another. Most of the plays’ plots are set within the confines of domestic settings: *Queen* occurs entirely within the living-room/kitchen of the Folan’s cottage, *Skull* occurs largely within the living-room of Mick Dowd’s cottage, and *Lonesome* occurs almost entirely in the living-room/kitchen of the Connor brothers’ farmhouse. These settings are based on Stage-Irish
representations of domestic life in the vein of a folkloric peasantry with the home functioning as

the nexus of familial and social intimacies. The cozy cottages and farmhouse of The Trilogy are

reminders of an idealized division between the isolated west and the cities of modernity to the east, which was further propagated throughout the Celtic Tiger’s industrial expansion. The west also developed into a cultural stereotype of mystification and sanctification, which became

problematically fossilized in Irish domestic and diasporic culture as “the world they inhabited, and which seemed to trap them . . . a world saturated with nostalgic meanings for those who had gone away. They remained in poverty, but occupied a place which, in the memories of the departed, had a connotation of paradise” (Waters, 44). However, degrees of discomfort, violence, and absurdity that are directly related to Ireland’s postcolonial condition coalesce across The Trilogy into an omnipresent sense of foreboding: by the time one approaches the domestic sphere in Lonesome, there is no doubt that any sense of predictable functionality, nostalgia, or banality will ultimately come apart at the seams. It follows that Queen makes the most effort to initially appear as a quaint domestic sphere in the vein of Kitchen Sink Realism. Skull further perverts this by physically bringing the dead into the home and throwing traditional Catholic respect for the dead and nostalgia for the past into disarray by unceremoniously destroying remains. Lonesome escalates familial and religious dysfunction and violence even further by

exaggeratedly playing into the stereotypes of Stage-Irishry and hyper-masculinity in order to expose the absurdity of their constructedness.

The stage dressing for Queen is a careful recreation of a kitschy, pastoralized, nostalgic Irish kitchen:

*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 range, 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'. (McDonagh 3)

The majority of these objects are used by various characters in order to showcase traditional domestic labor. The cupboards contain dishes that are used throughout the play for eating and drinking, and the sink is used for dishwashing and rebellious urine disposal by Mag. The radio and television are often playing songs and reruns in the background that ground the play around the late 1980s or early 90s. The kettle is used to brew tea and hot water for Complan, which is an easily mixed in powdered nutritional supplement that Mag refuses to make for herself because it always comes out lumpy. The range is of course used to warm the house and heat oil to scalding temperatures.

These items are banal stage dressing that evokes a sense of piety, simplicity, and rurality, but most of them are slightly twisted as the plot unfolds to reveal the dysfunction and violence that this cottage’s appearance disguises. They contribute to a sense that what is presented on stage is an imitation of a real, lived-in home. The theatrical frame is based on an overdone stereotype, an image which is completed by the face-value appearance of cozy familial domesticity established by Maureen’s care over Mag, the comfort radiating from the glowing range, the attendant smells of home-cooked meals that the kitchen scenery summons, and the explicit disdain that Maureen holds towards both England and America within the first scene. This is the “pure” Irish, somehow functioning apart from, and despite, the oppressive influence of the English. The implicit contract establishes that this setting and its characters will stay within the bounds of domestic melodrama. However, the familiarity and complacency that such
touristy imagery conjures is quickly juxtaposed against the ennui, outrage, and desperation that such a picture of domesticity truly represents within the context of economic and societal imbalance: “as consistently shown in neo-realism, it is often the banal that fosters the accumulation of force and its eventual release” (Del Río 16). This dysfunction and frustration bubbles up through the ever-lumpy-Complan, the wretched, lingering scent of stale urine emanating from the kitchen sink, and, of course, the constant bickering between Mag and Maureen that eventually escalates into betrayal and unexpectedly gruesome violence.

Similarly, acting out menial chores such as dishwashing and food preparation are hallmarks of the genre that ground the play within quotidian life. While the stereotypical domestic space is repeated in Skull and Lonesome, repetitive labor is most applicable to Maureen, who out of all the characters in The Trilogy performs the largest amount of traditional domestic labor. As Mag’s unofficial caretaker, she is responsible for all of the household chores. She is effectively bound to her mother, her life dominated by a continuous cycle of inescapable domestic tedium that becomes increasingly unbearable as it keeps her from pursuing her own desires of achieving any sense of upward mobility, which in the world of The Trilogy has everything to do with being trapped in a poverty stricken Ireland that refuses to be idealized to the extreme.

The sparse, inessential ornamentation onstage, namely the photographs of Robert and John Kennedy, the crucifix, and the tea-towel, marks this space as simplistic, although they do own the modern luxuries of radio and television. Each of these artifacts has symbolic meaning that is specific to Stage-Irish representation. While the photographs may be interpreted as an expression of pride in the vein of loyal Irish nationalism, the Kennedy brothers notably achieved renown as members of the diaspora. Their success is specifically bound up in the discourses of
economically-necessary emigration and the promises of the American dream. They may also be read as American icons rather than diasporic idols, so the photographs within this rural cottage imply that there are no contemporary, native Irish figures worthy of nationalistic veneration.

The presence of the Kennedys watching over these events is a reminder of a pervasive attitude amongst the citizens of Leenane that success cannot be achieved within Ireland. This is the “crux of the matter” for Maureen (McDonagh 8): the Irish are trapped within the failing economic condition that they inherited through years of oppression by English colonialism, and the opportunities abroad that are presented as the sole means of economic and social mobility are always problematized by a prevalent racialized prejudice against the Irish. She equates this condition to raising subsequent generations of Irish children with the mentality that “all they’ll ever be good for is begging handouts from the English and the Yanks,” which is its own passive propagation of inferiority (McDonagh 9). Such representation is a sharp contradiction to the idealization of the Celtic Tiger, which promised equal cooperation between foreign investment and Irish participation. The lack of wealth, work, and general opportunity within Ireland are consistent themes throughout *The Trilogy*. What little work that is left to be had is either highly undesirable, as in the case of Mick Dowd’s cemetery clearing, or it is illegal, as in the case of Girleen’s poteen sales. While unemployment had historically been an issue throughout Ireland before the Celtic Tiger, this is brought into the absurd in *The Trilogy* as very few characters have any work at all, yet there is no hint of homelessness or serious financial struggle. Maureen, for instance, always has money to go grocery shopping, and the Connor Brothers always have money to purchase poteen despite the lack of income in both situations. It is through small contradictions such as this that the plays’ realist façade begins to crumble.
The crucifix and the tea-towel signify the contradictory relationships with Catholicism that characters express throughout the trilogy. A crucifix prominently hangs on the back wall in all three plays as a reminder of the ubiquity of Catholicism and the sanctification of western Ireland. This idealization is contradicted by almost every main character in *The Trilogy* through their rampant immorality and disregard for religious doctrine. Additionally, the lack of respect for Father Welsh ultimately drives him to alcoholism and suicide because he cannot cope with Leenane’s depravity. Similarly, the tea-towel signifies the faltering piety across generational divides that is evidenced by the increasing acceptance and acting out of violence that coincides with younger characters who disregard Welsh. This is complicated in *Lonesome* as the Connor brothers equally disregard genuine piety, show a penchant for murderous violence over petty squabbles, and reveal a surprising possibility for redemption that is directly tied to Catholic-based confession. Thus the crucifix signifies the ostensible Catholicism and piety of rural Ireland that is juxtaposed against the petty squabbling that frequently occurs between characters in all three plays.

The concepts of confession and forgiveness are common across *The Trilogy*, with Father Welsh functioning as a quasi-martyr. Each character has at least one immoral secret to keep, and the significance of confession escalates until the audience is eventually presented with the Conner brothers’ confession game in the final scene of *Lonesome*. In *Queen*, Mag’s most significant secret is that she reads and then burns Pato’s letter. Rather than confessing of her own volition, she is forced to divulge this information through Maureen’s psychotically serene torture. This event absurdly breaks any stereotypical conception of “pure” rurality and exaggeratedly plays into the Stage-Irishry of an overt, violent disposition. Similarly, Mick
repeatedly refuses to confess to the murder of his wife to both the authorities and Father Welsh, despite the popularly accepted belief that he is guilty.

It is easy to align the elderly Mag with a caricature of rural sensibilities given her age of 71. However, she may also be read as a twisted caricature of the Shan Van Vocht. She has little understanding of the world outside of Ireland; when asked what country she is living in, Mag replies with “Galway” (McDonagh 8). The misconstrued substitution of county for country is humorous, yet it also suggests that her world is truly confined. She is aware of America and England, but these are simply spaces where the Irish immigrate to find work and about which she has no personal interest. Her existence revolves around the codependency with her only remaining daughter. However, the abusive and dysfunctional nature of this codependency is foreshadowed from Mag’s first appearance onstage by her shriveled hand. Audiences recognize by the play’s final scenes that it is a sign of previous torturing sessions. Mag is often characterized as uncritical and accepting of the status quo, including a horrific acceptance of brutal domestic violence and religious disillusionment; she embodies the mentality of fighting to maintain what one has without seeming to dream of improving her situation. As this portrait already suggests, Mag as Shan Van Vocht is a sharp departure from such folkloristic nationalism as seen in Cathleen ni Houlihan. Mag is an abused and abusive cripple who constantly calls for aide from those around her, only to be seemingly disliked by everyone, particularly by the daughter who is forced to care for her on a daily basis.

The most prominent example of Mag’s lack of critical engagement with her cultural surroundings is her view of the Irish language as annoying because “It sounds like nonsense . . . Why can’t they just speak English like everybody?” (McDonagh 7). Such a statement is a contradiction of the idealizations of cultural nationalism and revivalism, which claimed a parallel
between Irish ethnic and linguistic authenticity through the Gaelic reclamation movement. This is certainly a well-worn Stage-Irish element given that western Ireland has historically held the highest population of Gaelic speakers in the country, which becomes twisted and exaggerated as further isolation from the modernity of the English language. As Shan Van Vocht, she is indicative of Ireland’s degradation in the wake of imperial oppression without the traditional hope of liberation and cultural revival. After all, The Trilogy is set well after the establishment of the sovereign Republic of Ireland, whose official languages are both English and Irish. Mag’s acknowledgement of English as the dominant language is both realistic and a reference to the long history of English oppression that can be traced back to the likes of the failed rebellions against Tudor authority and the “Flight of the Earls” (approx. 1607), which, after significant bloodshed, ultimately signaled the official replacement of Gaelic with English as the dominant language of authority, trade, and the landed protestant gentry (Killeen 24). Mag’s lack of confidence in the importance of Gaelic is therefore a mixture of naive, anti-revivalist acceptance and genuine practicality because she accepts that the only places for the Irish to find work within The Trilogy are in England and America: “Except where would Irish get you going for a job in England? Nowhere. . . . If it was to America you had to go begging for handouts, it isn’t Irish would be any good to you. It would be English!” (McDonagh 8-9). This Shan Van Vocht implies that Ireland is crippled by past abuses, unable to help itself any longer, abandoned by two thirds of its children, abused by and abusive to those who remain, largely ignorant of the world outside of itself, and only ostensibly Catholic. What does remain from the folkloristic stereotype of the “pure” Irish is Mag’s simplicity, which can be interpreted as a mockery of the Shan Van Vocht as a nationalist symbol.
Maureen, on the other hand, is keenly aware of the injustice of colonialism: “If it wasn’t for the English stealing our language, and our land, and our God-knows-what, wouldn’t it be we wouldn’t need to go over there begging for jobs and for handouts?” (8). She understands Ireland’s postcolonial condition to be the direct result of the English stripping the Irish of land and wealth and warping Irish identity through discourses of racialized inferiority. She laments the necessity of seeking work abroad because the English left them with nothing. Of course, her awareness of this imbalance does not free her from its effects. Rather than a nationalistic call to reclaim and revitalize lost Irish pride, Maureen becomes obsessed by her desire for Pato and the possibilities for liberation that his invitation to join him in America represents.

In fact, Maureen attempted to fulfill the promise of economic mobility through emigration to England by cleaning offices in Leeds. Through her recounting to Pato, she reveals that she was met with prejudicial hatred because of her Irishness:

“Ya oul backward Paddy fecking. . . . The fecking pig’s-backside face on ya.” The first time out of Connemara this was I’d been. “Get back to that backward fecking pigsty of yours or whatever hole it was you drug yourself out of.” Half the swearing I didn’t even understand. I had to have a black woman explain it to me. Trinidad she was from. They’d had a go at her too, but she’d just laugh. (McDonagh 43-44)

The racialized hatred directed at Maureen, especially considering the similar hatred directed towards the woman from Trinidad, grounds the economic struggles expressed throughout The Trilogy as inseparable from histories of English colonialism. The Trinidadian reference functions to position the oppression of the Irish alongside the colonization of Caribbean sugar plantations and their legacies of slavery and indentureship. This juxtaposition gestures towards the intersectionality of the Trinidadian diaspora and the Irish diaspora. Rather than expressing these traumas and legacies of oppression as equivalent, this bridges a problematic gap in postcolonial studies that has historically been hesitant to include the Irish diaspora within its literature by
highlighting the similar racialization and treatment of these two characters. Expanding on this theme, Maureen’s cleaning job is a reminder that the Irish who decided to emigrate, while they likely had more economic opportunities, were still ultimately met with prevalent prejudice and limited positions whether it be in England or America. This maltreatment leaves her scarred, and she is admitted into a care facility due to a mental breakdown, which ultimately results in her codependency with a caretaker who in turn needs to be cared for herself. This rough sketch of postcolonial Ireland is an aging and helpless country that needs constant care from the racially traumatized citizens that it claims to protect while secretly conspiring against their interests to keep them at home. Such representation is the refusal of idealized nationalist pride and the appealing fantasy of a utopic transnational economy when they are taken out of historical context.

The stress of this postcolonial caricature leads to Maureen’s violent torture of Mag, which is the final exaggeration of desperation in Queen’s establishment of Ireland’s “reality” within The Trilogy. This trauma becomes so unbearable that she unremorsefully murders her mother for a chance at a life in America. Here Maureen’s melodramatic plot of romance, oppression, and liberation is supplanted for something akin to horror as she fulfills the role of villainous monster. It is perhaps this exaggeration (either the implication that Ireland itself is so foul and burdensome that it is worth committing matricide for a chance to escape or that contemporary audiences supporting the Celtic Tiger have committed a form of matricide in accepting America’s industrial investments as authentic growth and revitalization of the economy only to discover upon its inevitable collapse that it was always artificial) that clashed with the optimistic ideals of neoliberalism for Irish representation. English audiences would be sensitive to anything that appeared to resurrect their colonial past in the form of racialized
discourses of Stage-Irish violence just as the Irish who held faith in the Celtic Tiger took offense to Maureen’s exaggerated desperation rising out of poverty.

The brutality itself, the culmination of a slowly creeping sense of foreboding and discomfort throughout *Queen*, is meant to throw audiences into affective turmoil. The initial acts of dousing with oil are crafted to be shocking as Mag “*screams in pain and terror*” (McDonagh 66). Up until the torture, audiences are positioned to identify with Maureen’s struggle to balance her own desires with her duties to care for her incessantly difficult mother. Her brutality also becomes absurdly humorous at the scene’s conclusion as she enthusiastically steps over Mag, who lies in agony on the floor pleading for help, while worrying about her little black dress, forgetting her car keys, and returning briefly to turn off the lights in consideration of the electric bill. The cacophony of melodrama, comedy, and disgust is meant to overload and forcibly disrupt any remaining sense of realism through its sheer ridiculousness. By ending the scene with Maureen’s blatant lack of remorse in the wake of such a disturbing act, audiences are presented with a brief interval between scenes in which the mental portrait of Maureen’s brutality and Mag’s suffering is left to unfold without justification or explanation. Such a tumultuous interval is a denial of contemplative detachment as both the brutality and contradictory tones of the scene get under audiences’ skins, forcing an experiential rather than merely speculative engagement with Maureen’s postcolonial trauma. However, this is not a moment in which they identify with her suffering. Rather, Maureen’s “authenticity,” the contradiction and final exaggeration of Stage-Irishry and cultural stereotypes, breaks down and calls artistic representation itself into question because the violence is too disturbing to be easily reconciled and the play falls into absurdity for its duration.
The comedic and pessimistic ending to *Queen* leaves Maureen’s fate ambiguous upon the discovery that her reconciliation with Pato was imaginary, although she has already murdered Mag with a poker. Her inability to distinguish between reality and idealized, constructed memories is a reflective stereotype and indictment of audiences that is easily traced back to the *Playboy* riots. However, the majority of audiences enjoyed the play, as evidenced by *Queen*’s director Garry Hynes’s anecdote of a woman leaving the premiere while wiping tears of laughter from her eyes and saying, “I have a funny feeling that I shouldn’t be laughing so hard” (Waters 44). Accusations of offensive mimesis that were leveled against the plays suggest that critics did not allow McDonagh’s representations the potential of being carefully crafted constructs.

*Queens* matricide and the patricide of *Lonesome* are reminiscent of *Playboy*’s faux-patricide and the townspeople’s admiration of Christy Mahon. However, the citizens of Leenane merely accept the reality of such instances of violence without admiration or attempting to aid in official punishment, which separates most of the characters within *The Trilogy* from the Stage-Irish stereotype of drunken brawler. However, the main cast of Maureen, Mick Dowd, Valene, and Coleman all arguably engage with this representation to varying extents. This repetition is used to show the increasing absurdity of its construction across the plays as each character is progressively more ridiculous. The rampant violence, which often escalates to unpunished murder, is further representation of Leenane’s isolation from modernity. As the only authority figure in *The Trilogy* aside from Father Welsh, the inept Thomas in *Skull* is nothing more than an incompetent and corrupt officer whose primary involvement is to tamper with evidence in order to force a confession out of Mick. The ineptness of authority and the prevalence of crime create a sense of lawlessness, a feeling that is further compounded by the evocation of the Wild West in the title of *The Lonesome West*. This sort of representation is the exaggerated denial of racialized
“pureness” and piety. However, this is further complicated by the aforementioned drunken brawler stereotyping that was given new life as a distinction between the backwards, violent, and bigoted rural west and progressive urban east during the increasingly diverse population boom of the Celtic Tiger. Thus rural Ireland during the 1980s and 90s was paradoxically the nostalgic, elementally beautiful and sacred homeland of the diaspora as well as the heart of Irish bigotry.

Arguably the weakest play in The Trilogy, Skull does its most significant work in disrupting representations of sacred and pious rurality and in reinforcing the isolated lawlessness of Leenane following Mag’s murder. While the audience is never given conclusive evidence, it is heavily implied that Mick successfully disguised the murder of his wife as a car accident. This murder, combined with Mag’s murder, compounds with Thomas’ buffoonery in order to show that injustice and in-fighting are the general conditions of rural Ireland. While this apparently inherent violence plays into contemporary stereotyping, this is brought into even more of an extreme as it is repeated for the final time in Lonesome, wherein the bigoted and quarrelsome Connor brothers’ antics become so absurd that this representation is ultimately disrupted. However, Skull also sets up Lonesome’s confrontation of Catholic piety and confession. Mick and Mairtin’s unceremonious and irreverent destruction of Catholic remains on Mick’s dining room table is a complete contradiction of rural piety. This is iterated through Mick’s refusal of confession both to the authorities and Father Welsh, which is brought into relief at the play’s conclusion by Mary’s condemnation of Mick to “the stinking fires of hell . . . and may downhill from there for you it go” (McDonagh 165). The significance of confession and the ubiquity of ostensible Catholicism become central to Lonesome as Valene and Coleman throw stereotypical Stage-Irishry into further disarray by perhaps being the only main characters within The Trilogy with the potential for redemption or growth despite their highly stereotyped construction.
Like Mick in *Skull*, the Connor brothers begin *Lonesome* in a guilty state in terms of their professed, albeit highly uncritical and loose, Catholicism. Coleman has murdered their father over an insult, and Valene has taken all of Coleman’s inheritance as payment for his complicity. Coleman never shows remorse for murdering their father, although each brother confesses the crimes of the other to Father Welsh during a typically heated argument that results in Valene attempting to shoot Coleman in the head. As with all of their violent altercations, they are comically stopped from doing any lasting harm to each other. In this instance, Coleman provides the comic relief by allowing the situation to escalate to the point of Valene raising a gun to his head and pulling the trigger, only to then reveal that he has had the ammunition in his pockets the entire time and whining to Father Welsh that his brother was about to kill him over some melted figurines: “VALENE *tries to wrench the bullets out of COLEMAN’S clenched fist, COLEMAN laughing as he does so. VALENE grabs COLEMAN by the neck and they fall to the floor, grappling, rolling around the place*” (McDonagh 208). This type of clownish interaction, oscillating between slapstick, cruelty, and comedic deflation of tension amidst the constant imbibing of poteen and braggadocious banter is an exaggeration of the drunken brawler.

Furthermore, the brothers are a reflection of stereotypical machismo resulting from imperialist discourses “linking femininity as a racial trait with subservience” (Cairns 49). Such gendered racialization constructed English dominators as powerful paragons of masculinity and the Irish as racially inferior and impotent. Conversely, Irish nationalists attempted the reverse by creating compensatory, hyper-masculine characters. The Connor brothers represent this reversal in their constant displays of aggression. This is briefly brought to the fore in dialogue between the brothers, wherein overt racism and homophobia go hand in hand:

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8 This gendered discourse was a cornerstone of the construction of a racialized division between the English and Irish that played into a sexist binary of masculine strength and feminine weakness.
VALENE: Them’s Pakies. Not darkies at all!
COLEMAN: The same differ!
VALENE: Not at all the same differ! Them’s Paki-men, same as whistle at the snakes.
COLEMAN: It seems you’re the expert on Paki-men!
VALENE: I am the expert on Paki-men!
COLEMAN: You probably go falling in love with Paki-men too, so! Oh I’m sure.
VALENE: Leave falling in love out of it.
COLEMAN: What did you get shopping, Mister ‘I-want-to-marries-a-Paki-man’?
(McDonagh 186)

The casual usage of “darkies” here acknowledges the ingrained discourse of machismo and comparative inferiority; such an instance is an example of mimicry and complicity with gendered discourses of colonial oppression. Like the previous Trinidadian reference, the “Paki-men” position the oppression of Ireland in conversation with a more encompassing portrait of imperialism. However, the Connor brothers’ racist comments betray the potential intersectionality of postcolonial subjectivities in expressing their own masculinity by feminizing and denigrating Pakistani men. Coleman’s masculinity is more directly tied to overt sexuality and the conquest of women in place of financial virility: “It’s not only money can buy you booze. No. Sex appeal it is too” (McDonagh 190). So, his comment equating the postcolonial “other” with the “feminized” homosexual is a means of mocking Valene’s hyper-masculinity, which itself is more tied up in his economic domination of Coleman. His sense of power and masculinity is largely expressed through his constant spending, specifically of figurines and the new stove.

Valene’s figurines are highly significant throughout Lonesome as they represent his warped sense of Catholicism. The “long row of dusty, plastic Catholic figurines, each marked with a black ‘V’” line the back wall of the farmhouse and are placed directly below the shotgun and a large crucifix (McDonagh 169). Regardless of his transgressions or repentance, he believes that owning enough figurines of Catholic saints assures his ultimate salvation: “Forty-six
figurines now. I’m sure to be getting into heaven with this many figurines in me house” (McDonagh 226). It is the destruction of these symbols that acts as the catalyst for Valene’s attempt at murdering Coleman. After a previous fight, Coleman melts all of the figurines in a bowl using Valene’s new oven, which Coleman has been explicitly forbidden to touch. Valene flies into a murderous rage in which he equates killing his brother with the melting of the figurines as “against God outright,” which is tangentially equated with the murder of their father and the insult of Coleman’s hair: “I don’t take criticizing from nobody. ‘Me hair’s like a drunken child’s’. I’d only just combed me hair and there was nothing wrong with it! And I know well shooting your dad in the head is against God, but there’s some insults that can never be excused” (McDonagh 206). Welsh consistently attempts to stop the fighting whenever he is present, but he is never listened to and his name is frequently mixed up with Walsh. This running gag reaches its acme towards the conclusion of this scene when he is unable to successfully intervene. The horrified Welsh, who up until this point has served as comic relief due to his constant dismissal, compulsively burns himself with the melted figurines:

He catches sight of the bowl of steaming plastic beside him and, almost blankly, as the grappling continues, clenches his fists and slowly lowers them into the burning liquid, holding them under. Through clenched teeth and without breathing, WELSH manages to withhold his screaming for about ten or fifteen seconds until, still holding his fists under, he lets rip with a horrifying high-pitched wail lasting about ten seconds, during which VALENE and COLEMAN stop fighting, stand, and try to help him . . . (McDonagh 208)

This brief twenty-five second tableau is by far the most viscerally disturbing moment in Lonesome. The length of the exhibition is important to its affective manipulation, which encourages audiences to dwell on the juxtaposition of Welsh’s self-inflicted violence (which itself is reminiscent of Mag’s shriveled hand), the comic violence between the brothers that is made serious through Welsh’s horrific act, and the accreted violence of Leenane’s treatment of
Welsh that has driven him to depression and impromptu penitence. Such a moment disrupts the absurd comedy that defines the play and strips away the light-hearted nature of the brothers’ Tom and Jerry-esque quarreling, which is a particularly apt comparison as their violence does not carry the weight of real consequence. The sudden seriousness and discomfort of this scene is both affectively engaging for audiences and for the brothers, who show uncharacteristic concern for Welsh. This effectively disrupts the stereotypes of the drunken brawler and bigoted, machismo that is otherwise maintained to the extreme by the brothers all throughout the play. This contradiction reveals the highly constructed, absurd nature of those stereotypes when they are actually fulfilled. Rather than the anti-progressive menace that neoliberal Celtic Tiger discourses represent, the artistic realization of that ideological portrait reveals such representation to be cartoonish. The only way that it can be sustained throughout the entirety of the play is to reduce their violence to inconsequential clowning. Otherwise, as might be expected in *Queen* or *Skull*, Valene would have killed Coleman when he attempted to shoot him in the head.

However, the play is immediately thrust back into a comedic mode as the brothers’ mistakenly refer to Welsh as “Walsh,” causing him to smash the bowl and run off stage while screaming “Me name’s Welsh!!!” and the brothers to continue their quarreling (McDonagh 208). Welsh commits suicide shortly thereafter, leaving behind a letter to the brothers begging them to forgive each other and learn how to get along as “true brothers again” (McDonagh 223). Such a plea is again a gesture to the stereotype of petty, violent in-fighters who are unable to reconcile their differences and come together, a sentiment all the more pertinent given the violent disagreements of the Northern Ireland conflict, Ireland’s history of militant nationalisms, and the division of those who supported the Celtic Tiger’s influence and those who did not. However,
the brothers spend the remainder of the play continuing their petty fights even as they attempt to follow Welsh’s advice to confess every transgression that they have ever committed against one another. This ultimately causes more fighting, which escalates fully into the realm of the absurd in a standoff that has Coleman with the shotgun to Valene’s chest and Valene ready to take the shot in order to stab Coleman with a raised knife. They both avoid death as Coleman switches to threatening Valene’s beloved stove, which causes him to tearfully plead with Coleman. He shoots the stove anyway, causing Valene to fall “to his knees in horror, his face in his hands,” which is far more emotion than either brother musters over either of the two suicides in *Lonesome* (254). Such an obscenely absurd standoff is also reminiscent of the play’s title, which refers to the ultimate outcome of truly violent in-fighting amongst the Irish in the west.

Despite their perseverance in fighting with each other, *Lonesome* ends with the brothers running off to a bar for drinks rather than the murderous outcome that their relationship suggests. This is one final, twistedly optimistic disruption of their machismo as they somehow continue to coexist in their highly dysfunctional way. Although *The Trilogy* uses significant repetition of stereotypical construction for its representations that gradually and tediously reveals its simplistic inadequacy, the brothers’ absurdity is perhaps the most blatant and repetitious cookie-cutter usage. By the end of *Lonesome*, *The Trilogy* has completed its transition from a realist façade of “authentic” representation that is built on Stage-Irishry and idealized nationalism to obvious absurdity and cartoonish separation from reality. Such a prolonged confrontation of various strains of representation is a minor form of violence that is directed at the audience, who are encouraged by this proliferation of constructed signification to question the worth of any artistic representation to communicate authenticity and the ability of any cultural discourse to fully capture authenticity as well.
Chapter Two
Violent Representations, Masculinity, and the Move to Film

McDonagh’s *Pillowman* and *Psychopaths* are both metafictional confrontations of artistic representations of violence; the former addressing fictional and theatrical violence as influences that shape reality and the latter confronting Hollywood cinema’s conventional use of gratuitous violence and hyper-masculinity. These are self-reflexive responses to misperceptions of the disturbing scenes in McDonagh’s works. It is in this respect that McDonagh’s public persona and disrespectful irreverence work against his desire for his plays and films to be taken seriously as he is split between an artistic and Hollywood-esque celebrity identity. When his work is taken at face value, the over-the-top aggression that he consistently employs is easily mistaken as akin to stereotypical action movie violence. There is a sharp distinction between this usage and the brief moments of affectively intense disturbance that punctuate McDonagh’s work. This is of course complicated by his additional absurd repetition of slapstick and hyper-masculine aggression, cornerstones of his artistic expressions that speak to his broader condemnation of real instances of violence. For instance, *Lonesome* is inundated with cartoonish violence, but it contains powerful moments of disruption in which audiences are made uncomfortable by staging a more realistic and serious portrayal of pain that is directly connected to the characters’ rampant reliance on, and acceptance of, quotidian violence.

*Pillowman*, the first of McDonagh’s plays set apart from an Irish context, is a problematically provocative satire that goes even further by confronting deliberately extreme depictions of violence within art and the relationship that forms between art, artist, audience, and critic. The officers who detain, torture, and question Katurian, the author of violent stories in this play, represent critics who argue that violence in art does nothing more than propagate cruelty in
reality as it provides examples to emulate. The play equates the mentally deficient and naïve murderer Michal, brother to Katurian, with an audience that is unable to tell the difference between artistic expression and literal instructions. Michal actualized the stories that his brother read to him, translating artistic representations into reality, which is ultimately horrific for everyone aside from Michal as he is unable to distinguish the difference. Several of Katurian’s stories are discussed in detail, and one is disturbingly acted out on stage for audiences. “The Little Jesus” is purposefully provocative in order to push the boundaries of McDonagh’s exploration of representation; it begs the question of what is truly acceptable as genuine artistic expression and when such a work may cross a line into egregious spectacle in the case of so-called “torture porn,” which refers to film series such as Hostel (2005) and Saw (2014). These franchises showcase elaborate torture as the premise for survival horror, subjecting audiences to a plethora of viscerally disturbing images. However, the detailed attention given to the sustained visuals here begins to take precedent over any significant meaning behind the depictions aside from catharsis that appeals to sadism and masochism. This is an important distinction to make regarding McDonagh’s work, which never prolongs its visceral engagement into spectacle or makes the attempt to depict hyper-realistic violence. Particularly in his drama, representations of cruelty are given just enough detail to present a tableau that engages through McDonagh’s grotesque tone.

Upon discovering that his stories were twisted into reality, Katurian murders his own brother over the injustice of his actions and to protect him from the wrath of authorities. These stories are inspired by the imbalance of sociopolitical agency in the experience of Katurian and Michal under an authoritarian state that frequently tortures and executes its citizens. They nearly

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9 Most of the stories feature violent deaths for children. The story of “The Little Jesus,” which is mimed for audiences, is particularly disturbing as it involves the torture, crucifixion, and live burial of a child.
all deal with some form of cruelty enacted against someone who is powerless to stop it and are a form of artistic rebellion that confronts the injustice and hypocrisy of “totalitarian fucking dictatorship” through repetition and exaggerated brutality (23). The absurdity of Michal’s inability to distinguish between art and reality is yet another way that McDonagh gestures to the inherent inability for representation to “authentically” capture and reflect reality. However, Katurian’s desperate bargaining to allow his stories to survive also signifies the ultimate agency behind artistic representation to both express something meaningful and to exist beyond the parameters of the individual. McDonagh’s work is consistently self-reflexive and disruptive of artistic conventions and the use of stereotypes because he is ultimately interested in questioning how inherently fictional artistic representation can express anything valuable. As he successfully transitioned into cinema, his films became increasingly focused on confronting the merits of utilizing representations of violence as an expression beyond mere spectacle and action in order to engage with discourses of postcolonial, diasporic, and Hollywood hyper-masculinity.

A prime example of violent action that revels in its own stylized aesthetic, with a similarly grotesque tone, can be drawn from Tarantino’s love-letter to samurai and western films, *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (2003). During the infamous fight scene between The Bride (Uma Thurman) and the Crazy 88’s, the screen is filled with an unrelenting stream of action that ends with several dead bodies, severed limbs scattered about, and a blood drenched protagonist and set. However, this is far from “torture porn” as the film relishes in cartoonish bursts of blood, and the sequence is so fast paced that no single moment of brutality is realistically emphasized. As such, this bloody exhibition of human cruelty is presented to audiences for their enjoyment and functions as a form of affective catharsis in which they identify with the perpetrator of that violence without crossing over into the sadism of torture: They overcome seemingly insurmountable odds
through superior physical might. The tone is appropriately handled through choreography and a musical score that emphasizes the action itself, reassuring audiences that they are meant to be swept up in it. The aftermath of this scene is easily comparable to the final scene of Lieutenant, which is inspired by militant Irish nationalism. Although this gruesome scene is darkly comical, it is ultimately made disturbing given its obvious references to real extremism and the final revelation that Padraic and Mairead’s massacre was truly pointless and unjust as Wee Thomas walks on stage. While the representations on stage are not meant to appear hyper-realistic, the visual is highly visceral in its evocation of real trauma and violence. There is no identification with the perpetrators of violence in this play, just as identification breaks down throughout The Trilogy when characters such as Maureen descend into absurdity. Here, terrorism is brought into the absurd, allowing for a degree of cathartic laughter that alleviates a portion of the trauma of extremist acts; this play in particular would indeed gain a new life in the United States after the attacks on September 11, 2001.

McDonagh’s first feature length film, Bruges, is a dark comedy about two Irish hitmen that confronts diasporic issues, Hollywood conventions of hyper-masculinity, and representations of violence, questioning whether audiences may maintain identification with a highly flawed character if they have a potential for redemption and transcendence. Bruges is filmed in the actual Belgian town of Bruges, which grounds the cinematic frame with realism just as Kitchen Sink Realism grounds The Trilogy. The protagonists, Ray (Colin Farrell) and Ken (Brendan Gleeson), spend the majority of the piece hiding out as they await instructions from

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10 In this scene, the stage is covered with buckets of fake blood, mutilated corpses, and dismembered limbs as a result of the violent torture and murder of INLA agents that attempted to assassinate Padraic for being too violently unstable. While some violence occurs onstage, it is not truly comparable to that showcased in Kill Bill, and more occurs out of audiences’ views.

11 Wee Thomas is Padraic’s cat, who is missing and assumed killed during the majority of the play. His “death” is the catalyst for Padraic’s return, which leads to his murder of Mairead’s cat (who has been poorly disguised to look like Wee Thomas), which in turn leads to Mairead murdering Padraic and proclaiming herself the Lieutenant of Inishmore.
their English crime boss, Harry (Ralph Fiennes). The very selection of Farrell and Gleeson is a postmodern break with the fourth wall that immediately expresses the Irishness of their characters due to their public profiles as the select few of Irish actors to find mainstream success. In the film, they are also clearly marked as Irish through their Dublin brogue and several instances throughout that indicate strong Catholic roots. It is particularly the scene showcasing Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Last Judgment* in the Groeninge Museum that brings the familiar concepts of confession and forgiveness to the fore. The camera’s framing of the triptych never reveals the entire work to audiences, which is a subtle indication that one cannot simply foretell a predictable or conventional plot for *Bruges* (Melnikova). However, Bosch’s emphasis on sin, judgment, and punishment is all ultimately played out by the film’s climax. This also suggests that judgment and redemption are ambiguous as audiences, or individuals in general, do not possess the clear cut, godlike perspective towards transgression that Bosch and Harry adopt. *The Last Judgment* raises concepts that Ray and Ken understand through their Irish Catholic roots in *The Trilogy*’s vein of faltering Irish piety. While they navigate the world primarily through their mimicry of Harry’s masculine code, their eventual disavowal and disruption of hyper-masculinity is directly tied to Catholic based conceptions of redemption, as Ken says: “I don’t know what I believe. The things you taught as a child, they never really leave you, do they? So, like I believe in trying to live a good life” (*Bruges* 00:27:30-00:27:40).

This is juxtaposed against the character of Harry, who delivers absolute orders as their authoritarian English crime lord and operates through a strict gangster’s code of honor that

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12 Both *Bruges* and *Psychopaths* feature Colin Farrell as the central protagonist. Interestingly, Brendan Gleeson is also the protagonist of *Six Shooter* and would go on to star as the protagonist in John Michael McDonagh’s *The Guard* (2011) and *Calvary* (2014). The McDonagh brothers’ consistent reliance on these actors speaks both to their fantastic capabilities and the lack of diverse Irish representation in contemporary cinema. Their very presence within all of these films marks the Irishness of their characters through their own publicly consumed identities.

13 *The Last Judgment* is a triptych, meaning that it is divided into three sections.
effectively binds Ray and Ken. As exemplified by Ray, transgressing Harry’s law is punishable by death. Forced into hiding, Ray often complains about his dislike of Bruges, his general lack of agency, and the seeming incomprehensibility of Harry’s mysterious orders. In this sense, the diasporic Irishmen are pushed into the mold of dispensable tools of the gangster movie genre with the specific goal of increasing the monetary gains of the English under a brutal capitalist system that only allows them limited agency through a hyper-masculine ideal of aggression.

The genre typically employs pyramid shaped crime organizations that operate as a “microcosm of the capitalist structure” (Wright 67) in which characters “must commit aggressive acts to survive” (Wright 68). This systematic aggression is typically contained by a code of honor, promising that men may rise within the capitalist hierarchy through aggression. The only explicit rules of Harry’s code in the film are unquestioning loyalty and that killing a child is categorically unredeemable. The end result of such systems is always an unstable structure because the top of the pyramid is necessarily vulnerable to the very violence that they rely upon, which is usually displayed through the story arc of a coup or rival authority. Thus the typical payoff for this genre is twofold: affective catharsis is achieved through the bootstrap fantasy of social and economic upward mobility by any means, but there is also reassurance in the inevitable death of criminals by their own violent and illegal actions. Like with the violence in Kill Bill, temporary identification with the perpetrator of violence is encouraged, but the gangster’s death allows audiences to take comfort in their own morally and ethically sound poverty or class despite their “own economic and social failure” (Wright 67). As a reinforcement of capitalism, the gangster genre “would never suggest that a different sort of social and political structure might allow for more humane possibilities” of existence (Wright 67). Through the relationship between the hitmen and their boss, Bruges gestures towards the injustice of the
economic subservience of the Irish as a direct result of the violent, capitalist structure of English imperialism. However, *Bruges* never completely buys into this capitalist structure as Ray’s story arc replaces the self-destruction of the gangster/colonial system with the possibility of redemption and transcendence of the hyper-masculinity that such a system typifies. Hyper-masculinity itself is made ridiculous through the films oscillation and juxtaposition of comedy and melodrama.

As I alluded to in the introduction, *Bruges*’ affect and genre manipulations begin before the film through its carefully constructed marketing by the cover art on the DVD jacket, theatrical posters, and official trailers. The Focus Features trailer shows highly edited clips of humorous quips interspersed amongst gunshots and chase scenes, emphasizing both comedy and action through the tagline, “Shoot first, Sightsee later” (*Bruges* Trailer)\(^\text{14}\). Significantly, there is no indication that Ray becomes suicidal after accidentally shooting a child. Rather, the killing of the priest and multiple shots of Farrell and Fiennes with guns suggest significant action with an ultimately predictable gangster-esque climax. Such advertisements establish *Bruges* as an action movie with the comedic twist of two hitmen as tourists, playing into the “wunza” dichotomy of the buddy-cop-esque relationship between Ray as the irreverent comedic relief and Ken as the straight man who is able to successfully blend in as a tourist (Ebert)\(^\text{15}\). While they may both be described as “fish out of water,” Ken also acts as an insider who escorts Ray through a cultural education of Bruges.

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\(^{14}\) Theatrical posters emphasized the film’s action and disjunctive humor through a childish depiction of Ray with an ice cream cone and gun in hand; in other promotional work and DVD covers, Collin Farrell is depicted with a gun and a beer instead (in this depiction, hyper-masculinity is emphasized through beer rather than Ray’s parallel with the boy that he murders).

\(^{15}\) Ebert referred to the character conventions of buddy cop as “wunza” as in: one is “this,” which is opposed to the other one, which is “that.” Conventional buddy cop is constructed by pairing together two characters of incompatible characteristics, most typically in the form of the straight man and comedic relief.
All of this priming clearly misleads expectation towards a lighthearted, mindless, action film, which is in sharp contrast to the heavily melodramatic and affectively intense central plotline of Ray’s existential and moral crisis of forgiveness and redemption. However, this marketing is also significant because it does nicely establish the connection between hyper-masculinity and comedy, which are combined throughout the film in order to reveal the absurdity of the construction; hyper-masculinity is turned into a joke through the consistent pairing of the two. Roger Ebert’s description of “an endlessly surprising, very dark, human comedy, with a plot that cannot be foreseen but only relished” sums up audiences’ reactions to the film (Ebert)\(^\text{16}\). The content is upsetting because it is a grotesque mixture that disrupts expectation; it is simultaneously comedy, melodrama, and seemingly gratuitous violence. This ambiguity is a defining element to *Bruges*, and the oscillation contributes to audiences’ self-awareness that they are watching a film that refuses simple categorization. Additionally, Linda Williams’ understanding of genre in relation to gender and film as “a cultural form of problem solving” helps elucidate this oscillation (9):

> Their very existence and popularity hinges upon rapid changes taking place in relations between the ‘sexes’ and by rapidly changing notions of gender—of what it means to be a man or a woman. . . . Genres thrive, after all, on the persistence of the problems they address; but genres thrive also in their ability to recast the nature of these problems. (12)

*Bruges* is an expression of changing notions of masculinity that addresses the problematic models of hyper-masculinity in gangster films by deliberately manipulating convention.

\(^{16}\) The website IMDB (the Internet Movie Database), which collects information about films, including allowing registered users to comment their own reviews, has a wide range of negative reviews for *Bruges* that are similar to Ebert’s description. One reviewer aptly summarizes such commentary: “billing this as a comedy has to be the height of false advertising. The killing of the child, the shooting and the suicide off the bell tower, the unrelenting, unnecessary multiple shootings of Ray in the final scenes – just too, too much” (Bookworm222). This review reveals that the seriousness of these cited moments is unexpected within the genre of comedy as compared to the multiple instances of lighthearted, violent, slapstick.
Associating this masculinity code of honor with comedy strips it of power, allowing for serious melodramatic development that opens up Ray’s masculinity to new potentialities.

Cinematic construction is brought to the fore through the postmodern, reflexive technique of Mise-en-abîme with the subplot of a film that is being shot throughout Bruges while Bruges unfolds. Ray is highly interested in the filming, befriending an actor, Jimmy (Jordan Prentice), and becoming infatuated with a production assistant/drug dealer, Chloe (Clémence Poésy). It is a notable weakness of the film that female characters are uninspired stock characters that largely function to help develop the male centric plot; this further suggests McDonagh’s emphasis on masculinity, although that focus does not redeem such a flaw. In part playing into the rampant misogyny of hyper-masculinity, Ray’s struggle to transcend this archetype begs the question of Hollywood conventions’ potential for redemption. Because Chloe is largely defined by her role as Ray’s love interest, it is possible to interpret this as a misplaced affection for cinema. As a drug dealer, particularly to the film crew, she is also representative of the addiction of cinema, which itself is represented here by the “jumped-up Euro-trash piece of rip-off fucking bullshit” nod of the head to Nicolas Roeg’s Don’t Look Now (1973), set in Bruges with an American lead (Bruges 00:47:20-00:47:30)

17 Irina Melnikova has detailed the hypertextual relationship between Don’t Look Now and Bruges. While a deeper relationship is discussed, both significantly feature a dwarf character that is mistaken for a child as central plot points. I interpret this as McDonagh’s own acknowledgement of the highly constructed nature of his works in regard to the iteration of artistic expression, but his works have the key difference of iteration with the purpose of deconstruction and the creation of novel affective engagements.
reflexivity, *Bruges* is both guilty of a certain degree of complicity in the iteration of convention even as the purpose is to reveal and disrupt this trend.

Jimmy’s Americanness is a key connection to Hollywood-esque appropriation. Significantly, this “faux”-film is the first major film to be produced in Bruges, which speaks to the globalization of cinema. Here Bruges is representative both of traditional art and a bygone era in its historical sites, Bosch paintings, medieval architecture, and beauty comparatively unmarred by modernity; as Harry describes it: “all those canals and bridges and cobble streets and those churches and all that beautiful fucking fairy tale stuff” (*Bruges* 00:40:00-00:40:10). This is juxtaposed with the film industry as commodified repetition, which has a corollary analogy to the “globalization” of Pizza Hut in Bruges: “Yeah, it was alright. You know, it was Pizza Hut. It’s the same as in England” (*Bruges* 00:37:20-00:37:30). Harry heavily idealizes Bruges, which betrays an association with an era before modern globalization that, in the context of Belgium and Harry’s Englishness, references colonial oppression and its racialized discourses of hyper-masculinity. Perhaps ironically, Bruges is also a specifically Catholic city, which speaks to Ray and Ken’s Irish roots. This makes Bruges the perfect setting for Ray’s struggle with guilt and redemption.

However, Jimmy also helps to bridge the gap between colonial masculinity and Hollywood cinema’s reinforcement of such archetypes. He typifies the hyper-masculinity of an American film star, frequently snorting cocaine, taking horse tranquilizers, and hiring prostitutes. During a drug fueled party with Ray and Ken, Jimmy connects this to colonial discourses by revealing his intense racism in the form of white supremacy: “There’s going to be a war between the blacks and between the whites. You ain’t even gonna need a uniform no more. This ain’t gonna be a war where you pick your side anymore. Your sides already picked for you” (*Bruges* 00:37:30-00:37:40).
Beyond mere offensive ideology, this is an explicit desire to violently dominate others based on racialized inferiority, which is reminiscent of the implied inferiority complex in the subservient relation of Ken and Ray to Harry. His penchant for hiring prostitutes, and their uncomfortable and confidential glances at each other during this speech, also suggests Jimmy’s gendered complex of hyper-masculinity. Additionally, while Ray’s initial desire to befriend him may be seen as problematic, it is his growing obsession with dwarfs that commit suicide that makes Ray consistently think of him, as Ray says: “A lot of midgets tend to kill themselves. A disproportionate amount” (Bruges 00:13:22-00:13:27). Jimmy becomes a means for Ray to attempt to both displace his own suicidal feelings onto another character and as a potential means of minoritarian intersectionality. Significantly for Ray’s potential redemption, he leaves Jimmy’s room after his racist tirade and comically karate chops him in the neck. The humor of the scene is wrapped up in the absurdly easy defeat of overt racism with a maneuver that feels more slapstick than threatening. Similarly, Jimmy’s racism is evocative of ingrained discourses of inferiority that are reminiscent of colonial discourse in relation to the stereotypical racism of Ireland as I discussed with Lonesome. Both Jimmy as a dwarf and Ray as an Irishman are marked as minoritarian, historically oppressed figures, and the difference here is Ray’s openness for intersectional cooperation and learning compared to Jimmy’s perpetuation of essentializing discourses and stereotypical constructions. Although stumbling, this is shown through Ray’s immediate recognition of his own insensitivity after being corrected about his language: “Well, this is exactly my point! People go around calling you a midget when you want to be called a dwarf. Of course you’re gonna blow your head off!” (Bruges 00:14:10-00:14:20). In other words, Jimmy is somewhat malicious whereas Ray is simply naïve or ignorant as he still stereotypes all dwarfs as prone to suicide.
Harry is the epitome of hyper-masculinity in the film. Despite his admiration for him, Ken explains that he only has “the capacity to get fucking worse”: “I mean no disrespect, but you’re a cunt. You’re a cunt now, you’ve always been a cunt, and the only thing that’s going to change is that you’re going to become an even bigger cunt. Maybe have some more cunt kids” (*Bruges* 1:14:48-1:15:07). Significantly, the only insult that fazes Harry is the one directed at his children, who are representative both of innocence (mirroring the murdered child) and his own virility. There is a brief shot of Harry at his home in England that reveals his wife and three children. Tellingly, in his rage upon finding out that Ken has betrayed his orders, he smashes his phone into pieces on his desk as his immediate reaction to this “matter of honor” is to respond with a display of aggression, which results in the following exchange:

NATALIE: It’s an inanimate fucking object!
HARRY: You’re an inanimate fucking object! (*Bruges* 1:05:45-1:06:20)

This childish response humorously points to the connection between Harry’s hyper-masculinity and the subsequent lack of identity that his wife truly has. She functions only in relation to Harry. Similarly playing into the comedic absurdity of action-oriented construction is Harry’s use of “dum-dums,” bullets that make heads explode. This is both a plot device and a mockery of the separation of action movie tropes from reality.

The confrontation between Harry and Ken explores their strict adherence to the masculine code of honor. This leads them up to the top of a bell tower, which is meant to serve as the isolated battle grounds for one of the conventional shootouts that the plot has built towards. Ken disrupts this expectation by laying his gun down and professing his unreserved “love” and “debt” to Harry for his “integrity” and “honor” (*Bruges* 1:20:30-1:21:22). This leads to a series of oscillations between melodrama and comedic action as Ken becomes a martyr for the possibility of transcending hyper-masculinity. He states, “I’m not fightin ya. And I accept
totally everything that your gonna do. I accept it, totally” (Bruges 1:21:40-1:21:52). This is a highly comedic disruption of hyper-masculinity that appeases Harry through its appeal to honor and sacrificial loyalty, but the violent system still demands a form of punishment for Ken, so he is shot in the leg. Additionally linking Harry to cinematic masculinity, he compares Ken’s martyrdom to Robert Powell, an actor who portrayed Jesus, rather than directly comparing the act to the biblical figure.

Harry’s adherence to hyper-masculinity is immediately reinforced by shooting Ken in the neck when he attempts to prevent him from encountering Ray below the tower, moving from the comedic relief of their previous exchange back into melodrama. The wounded Ken jumps from the tower in order to reach Ray before Harry can descend the stairs. The film implicitly connects this moment to Ken’s Irishness by playing The Dubliners’ “On Raglan Road,” which itself is evocative of Patrick Kavanagh, who crafted the first version of this work as a poem. The lyrics of this song are edited, deleting several lines in order to connect a portion of the song as follows: Oh, I loved too much and by such, by such / Is happiness thrown away / When the angel woos the clay / He’d lose his wings at the dawn of day” (Dubliners). This edited version is suggestive of both of Ken’s loves, i.e. Harry and Ray. Idealizing Harry led him down the self-destructive path of hyper-masculinity just as his betrayal of that ideal, in order to support Ray’s potential for redemption, leads him to a similarly violent martyrdom. This also allows for a positive interpretation of “the clay” as representative of Ray’s potential for change and Ken as the angel who loses his “wings” in order to shape Ray into transcending hyper-masculinity.

Here McDonagh returns to the use of jarring violence by showing Ken’s body hit the ground, producing a mist of blood as the meaty sounds of his impact combine with the visual to

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18 As discussed in my introduction, Kavanagh is one of several Irish artists to have written about the mystification and misrepresentation of Ireland
produce a visceral moment that sharply stands out as the most serious and disturbing instance of violence in the film. This is juxtaposed against the several characters that are shot and beaten throughout the film as most of these instances are relatively inconsequential or played specifically for comedic effect as exaggerations of aggressive masculinity. By sacrificing himself for Ray, Ken effectively repents for living by this hyper-masculine hitman code, implicitly revealing the constructedness of Irish gendering related to the compensation of colonial feminization. Fittingly, this is the most affectively resonant moment of Farrell’s performance as he openly weeps for Ken in front of a growing crowd of horrified pedestrians.

This is the culmination of his two prior crying scenes, which escalate from Ray’s shame filled and silent tears in the secrecy of his hotel room, his breakdown in front of Ken after being stopped from committing suicide, to his public display of affective performance that is stereotyped as feminine and weak. These disruptions are significant as expressions of Ray’s crisis of identity, which is perhaps equally over the injustice of the innocent child’s death and his failure to fulfill the hyper-masculine ideal. These instances stand out as engaging moments for audiences, all of which involve Farrell’s successful portrayals of affective turmoil and the visible display of tears that clearly communicate his depression. Combining this performance with the violence of Ken’s death breaks down the constructedness of masculine representation and allows for the possibility of a novel or nuanced conception of masculinity apart from discourses of aggression and repressed emotions of grief and depression. Thus, tears are essentially reclaimed for masculinity as the main signifier of Ray’s potential for change that function to endear Ray to audiences and force identification with a murderous criminal.

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19 The vast majority of IMDB users enjoyed Colin Farrell’s portrayal of Ray. One negative commenter sums up this sentiment nicely: “On the plus side, Farrell (whom I really, really hate, normally) is extremely good” (Mrswing).
The self-destructiveness and inability of rigidly constructed hyper-masculinity to adapt or change is absurdly expressed through Harry’s own suicide, which he immediately commits out of principle in a situation that he misperceives. The final scenes of the film take place on the film set, which itself draws awareness to Bruges as filmic construct. As he shoots Ray, he accidentally kills Jimmy, destroying his head in the process due to his use of the gratuitous “dum-dums.” This scene replicates the positioning of the film’s earlier scene in which Ray murders the priest and child. Jimmy stands behind Ray and out of Harry’s line of sight. However, Jimmy’s death is far more disturbing than the child’s as the remains of his head are decimated and only briefly shown in a single shot to communicate how he could be mistaken for a child in his costume. The child’s death earlier in the film is more unrealistic because the bullet wound in his head is perpendicular to the path of the bullet, and his body fulfills a cliché by holding its position in prayer until Ray is able to stumble into the room and fully take in the scene of innocence. Jimmy’s death is more disturbing in order to throw the final moments of the film back into serious melodrama. Harry’s suicide is the final mockery of hyper-masculinity as simplistic, although this is also the fulfillment of gangster convention by allowing the comfort of the aggressive criminal’s death, which implicitly supports capitalism because it keeps us from descending into such chaos. Additionally, it is significant that Harry remains a paragon of hyper-masculinity; although he is incorrect, he is ultimately a man of honor within the criminal’s code. However, this may also be interpreted as the very death of convention in its absurdity. Ray’s ambiguous ending and the film’s final line of dialogue, “And I really, really hoped I wouldn’t die,” gestures towards the possibility of more complex conceptions beyond untenable models of hyper-masculinity (Bruges 1:40:48–1:41:00). This is also a hopeful gesture towards specifically Irish, diasporic masculinity.
in the death of the English authoritarian in an increasingly globalized world. As postcoloniality temporally extends and the diaspora spreads, the influence of gendered, colonial discourses fade. "Psychopaths," McDonagh’s most recent film, specifically emphasizes cinematic creation even more than "Bruges" by extremely playing into self-reflexivity and meta-awareness. It explores the relationship between reality and the construction of artistic expression by blending the reality of the filmic world with the plot’s development of the protagonist’s screenplay. Martin (Colin Farrell), a clear reference to McDonagh, is an Irish writer working on the screenplay for "Seven Psychopaths." While Irishness is typically highly significant to his works, this element has little interaction with the development of the character aside from playing into his caricature of an Irish alcoholic. However, his diasporic identity is generally meaningful due to his fascination with cinema. This allows an interpretation of Marty as a diasporic figure that desires to transcend the conventions of Hollywood cinema (connected to compensatory, hyper-masculinity) in order to find the ability to meaningfully explore issues of cruelty and injustice as they relate to lived experience rather than as spectacle. The film itself is roughly summarized by Marty halfway through as he discusses a change in direction for his screenplay:

"The first half should be like a perfect setup for an out and out revenge flick: Violence, guns, all the usual bullshit. And then, I don’t know man. The lead characters should just walk away. They should just drive off into the desert and pitch a tent somewhere and just talk for the rest of the friggin movie. No shoot outs, no payoffs, just human beings talking. (Psychopaths 00:58:08-00:58:42)"

By alluding to his own identity, McDonagh uses "Psychopaths" to address several issues relating to the creation of his own oeuvre, including his poorly written female characters, the historical inspirations for his artistic expressions, and his obsession with violence. However, issues are often unapologetically acknowledged or repeated without taking the opportunity to model nuance or growth. Given the film’s emphasis on audiences’ desires, as represented by Billy (Sam
Rockwell), for gratuitous violence, it is ultimately a criticism of McDonagh’s own work that so much of the film is dedicated to reducing such conventions into absurdity as it still reproduces the “stereotypical, Hollywood, murderous, scumbag type psychopath movies . . . about guys with guns in their hands” (Psychopaths 00:08:12-00:08:18). Although the protagonists do go off into the desert to talk, the climactic shootout still occurs in a traditionally McDonagh styled bought of absurd comedy that features mockery of an awkwardly jammed gun, a car exploding, and Billy surviving the bullet wound in his forehead long enough to receive the affection that he has always wanted from Bonny. Similarly, comically replacing the stereotypical love interest in distress with a Shih Tzu does not fix the film’s lack of complex women as expressed through Hans’ criticism:

HANS: Your women characters are awful. None of them have anything to say for themselves, and most of them get either shot or stabbed to death within five minutes, and the ones that don’t probably will later on.
MARTY: Well, it’s a hard world for women, ya know, and I guess that’s what I’m trying to say.
HANS: Yeah it’s a hard world for women, but most of the ones I know can string a sentence together. (Psychopaths 1:00:00-1:00:32)

Psychopaths has a touch of Lonesome in its cartoonish action and references to westerns as the characters end up in a deserted landscape for a final showdown that is evocative of the conventional Mexican standoff. In this respect, it may best be understood as an amalgamation of Bruges, Pillowman, and Lonesome that is set in and around Los Angeles. Billy is representative of this hyper-masculinity in his idolization and actualization of action movie tropes, which ultimately leads to his own self-destruction in a manner reminiscent of Harry. Similarly, he is reminiscent of Michal, but Billy explicitly feels compelled by the logic of action movies whereas Michal was unable to distinguish between representation and reality. Billy’s exploits and his involvement with the central plotline of Psychopaths are revealed at the end of the film as the

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20 The Shih Tzu that Billy kidnap from Charlie.
central plotline of Marty’s screenplay. However, the depictions of Hans (Christopher Walken) and Zachariah’s (Tom Waits) stories as fairly isolated shorts, acted out through younger casts, parallels Pillowman’s short stories, especially “The Little Jesus.”

Zachariah’s story becomes increasingly absurd as it approaches its end, wherein his murderous exploits escalate to grander levels until culminating with the infamous zodiac killer. After burning zodiac alive at his dining room table, the camera creates a brief shot that is reminiscent of a theatrical scene: Maggie (Amanda Warren) and Zachariah sit on a bench in an approximation of downstage, the house as the stage dressing in the background; framed in a window to stage left, the corpse and table burn in the background (00:35:35-00:35:40). The significance of this shot is to subtly disrupt the reality of the scene, which is completed by the subsequent mimed breakup of the murderous couple with overacting and exaggerated tears. This equates to approximately three layers of representation: the implied theatricality, Zachariah’s reporting, and Marty’s incorporation of the story into the screenplay. In fact, the theatrical influence indicates that the portrayal of Zachariah’s story is simply Marty’s vision of the film that he is writing. A similar effect occurs in Hans’ story, wherein an Iris-out transition calls attention to the separation of representation from the protagonists’ reality. As in the case of Billy, Charlie (Woody Harrelson), and the younger Hans, the violence in this story ultimately follows the logic of action movie aggression as laid out in the discussion of the gangster genre; physical might, or the ability to kill, is presented as the reasonable moral answer for “good guys,” and criminals that employ violence must be destroyed through similar means. However, both Zachariah and Hans leave this aggression behind in search for an alternative life. Significantly, both of their stories deal with extreme brutality enacted on innocent figures that have no power

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21 This allows the moment to remain absurd despite its reference to the actual zodiac murders, which are not the main emphasis.
to prevent their harm: Zachariah finds Maggie chained up in a Judge’s basement (clear implication of racism) and Hans’ daughter is randomly murdered (although it is possible that this is also racially motivated).

*Pillowman* stands out as a precursor to the film in its dual portrayal of representation and theatrical reality, i.e. “The Little Jesus” as a story within a play. Rather than a character actualizing Marty’s stories, his screenplay is a fairly faithful reflection of the experiences of the people around him, which he often appropriates as his own artistic creations. This speaks to a greater understanding of the relationship between McDonagh’s earlier drama and the lived history, specifically of the rural Irish, of those who experienced the violence of misrepresentation that he both iterates and mocks. By offending the characters whose stories Marty essentially steals, McDonagh seems to acknowledge how his attempts at cathartic irreverence—reducing the power of stereotype, convention, and misrepresentation through laughter—may also produce real affective harm. These tales are juxtaposed against Marty’s only fictional story, which is only finished through the inspiration and aid of Hans. This implies that it is only through channeling lived cruelty and injustice that artistic expression can utilize violence in order to encourage audiences to question the violence itself rather than to engage with cathartic spectacle or action.

Hans’ story introduces a religiously tinged sense of transgression, confession, judgement, and forgiveness, which by now are obvious hallmarks of McDonagh’s attempts to confront cruelty. His child is murdered, and the killer, out of immense guilt, confesses of his own volition. He becomes sincerely religious, which earns him an early release from prison. Hans and his wife, Myra (Linda Clay), stalk the killer everywhere he goes until their presence eventually drives the man to suicide. Upon watching him cut his throat, Hans follows suite in order to follow the man into Hell in order to remind him of his guilt forever. This is one of the more interesting
engagements with violence, which is reminiscent of Father Welsh’s martyrdom. Rather than violence enacted on another as revenge, this transforms suicide into a weapon for revenge. This event merely hospitalizes the character, and it is through his own regret over his choice that he motivates Marty into changing the content of his screenplay, providing the resolution to the story of a Viet Cong soldier, which Marty struggles with throughout the entire film.

Mirroring Hans’ attempted suicide, he changes Marty’s soldier into a Buddhist monk. While nameless in the film, this is a specific reference to Thích Quảng Đức, the Mahayana Buddhist who famously burned himself to death in Saigon as a protest against the government. Hans’ version of the story uses Marty’s beginning, which sets up a revenge plot of a soldier who travels to America in order to detonate a vest of dynamite at a convention for the “rights and wrongs of the Vietnam War” (Psychopaths 01:01:58-01:02:04). Upon arrival at the convention, the soldier’s hostage whispers “Desist, brother,” and he awakens in Saigon, drenched in gasoline (Psychopaths 01:38:09-01:38:14). Here, “he finally manages to push the thoughts of anger and hate out of his gentle mind” and proceeds, against the pleas of his fellow Buddhists, because his martyrdom “might” help them (Psychopaths (01:38:45--01:39:20). This is the closest that Psychopaths gets to a life affirming engagement with violence, which is a genuine sacrifice and martyrdom as juxtaposed with Hans’ vengeful suicide attempt. In the context of revealing the constructedness and absurdity of action movie violence, this gesture to reality is affectively powerful and both discomforting and comforting. The cumulative effect of sustaining a parodic tone throughout Psychopaths is to create a grand comparison of pointless aggression and the self-destructive logic of “an eye for an eye” with an alternative expression of meaningful cruelty and suffering that is directly tied to an explicit historical moment of sociopolitical turmoil. Rather than perpetuating the cycle of violence as the soldier’s terrorist evoking actions portray, such an
extreme act of resistance by the Buddhist presents a form of violent expression that is ultimately a desperate call for peace.
Conclusion

Martin McDonagh’s artistic legacy is still in-development, but his overarching contributions to postmodern expression ground him as an important diasporic playwright and filmmaker. His most recent play, *Hangmen*, won the Critic’s Circle Award for Best New Play and the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play. Similarly, *Six Shooter* won the Academy Award for Live Action Short Film. *Bruges* would go on to win the BAFTA for best original screenplay, the BIFA for Best Screenplay, and the IFTAs for Best Script for Film and for Best International Film. While he is most widely recognized by audiences and critics in Ireland, England, and the United States, McDonagh’s work has notably traversed the world and has been performed across several cultures and languages. However, these three mainstay locations are indicative of the significant Irish, English, and American influences that are present in most of his work.

His plays and films connect brutal histories together with more modern instances of violence through a form of pastiche that amalgamates stereotypical signifiers into absurd juxtapositions. The purpose of this is twofold. He absurdly reveals how little imperial discourses have been undermined since the early 1900s, fostering audience reflection on their own constructions, the inadequacy of representation, and the productive relation between audience and art. Second, the constructedness of these racialized and gendered discourses in his work is further made absurd as a cathartic means of stripping away their power. While he is always concerned with parodic mimicry, he is also careful not to let a comedic tone completely dominate his works because one of the key functions of his absurdity is to place violence in context with audiences’ own experiences. In gesturing to the constructedness of rural Irish stereotypes, both historical and contemporary, he reveals the seemingly evergreen endurance of
discourses of inferiority. In doing so, *The Trilogy* suggests an interesting reversal of nationalist idealization in the artistic embrace of flawed and complex identities. Here a willingness to cathartically laugh at one’s own cultural misfortune stands out as a strong presence throughout the Irish literary tradition, which potentially becomes problematic when such a cultural response ironically threatens to shift and solidify over time into a reflection of cultural stereotypes of inferiority. As I have discussed, McDonagh continues this tradition not only by transforming postcolonial trauma into comedy but also by extending the concept into a postmodern confrontation of artistic representation, thus working against further solidification.

The ambiguity and subtlety of his works allows for multiple interpretations from audiences, which range from outrage to laughter and has ultimately allowed his works to find unexpected international success. As McDonagh critic Patrick Lonergan has noted,

> most of the evidence suggests that his work is actually received very differently from one country to another. . . . The treatment of family in many of the plays has fed into countless local concerns – so that, for example, *The Beauty Queen* has occasioned debates about the care of the elderly in Washington DC, about respect for senior citizens in Japan, about emigration in Ireland, and so on. (228)

While a certain degree of openness gives these plays new life, I hope to have shown that such ambiguity is directly related to how audiences engage with his work. While issues of domestic abuse are certainly raised throughout *The Trilogy*, their exaggeration should be understood within a larger confrontation of both representation and the perpetuation of imperial discourses of violence that remain domineering forces in modern society as epitomized by global acts of hyper-masculine violence. To read into the relationship between Mag and Maureen as a serious and sustained examination of domestic abuse is to ignore their absurdity, and it betrays an expectation for authenticity. This is a notable issue when his dramatic works are performed abroad because they risk being misinterpreted the farther from their original context that they
travel. Rather, it is the more universal aspects of his work, the confrontations of artistic expression and violence through affective manipulation, that make McDonagh an important writer.

An excellent example of the intersection of ambiguity and universality is the unexpected resonance of Lieutenant in U.S. society after the events on September 11th, 2001\textsuperscript{22}. The play was nominated for 5 Tony awards upon its debut in New York in 2006. The play’s emphasis on making extremist terrorism laughable signified a stark change in the collectively traumatized zeitgeist of the U.S., which is a particularized context and approach to the play that maintains the true affective heart of the piece. All of McDonagh’s works are in some manner related to postcolonial trauma and identity construction, the fulcrum of which is violence as the ultimate expression of agential imbalance and misrepresentation. Recent escalations in the perceived threat and fear of terrorism throughout the West indeed suggest the further importance of McDonagh’s work for contemporary society. His work makes both nationalism and violence into absurdity, which is a call for realization and transcendence of identities that are built upon hyper-masculinity or vengeful ideological discourses. The cathartic humor of his confrontations of violence is a balm against xenophobic fearmongering related to terrorism.

However, this is significantly qualified by the dual argument for the importance of artistic representations of violence. His entire oeuvre is an attack on the popularity of sensational and gratuitous violence in art, although his primary target is akin to what Del Río sees as the blind complicity of mainstream cinema’s “generalized tendency to fetishize the phenomenon of violence” by “isolating the punctual, visible manifestations of violence not only from their historical preparations, and the biopolitical context of powers and institutions, but also from the

\textsuperscript{22} Lonergan in particular should be recognized for addressing this resonance, although it has since become a major focal point to show the international capabilities of McDonagh’s work to ease trauma through cathartic humor.
complex realm of vital affects and forces wherein aggressive acts emerge” (6-7). The constant repetition of cartoonish action is an absurd mimicry that is both necessary in order to provide juxtaposition against truly meaningful displays of cruelty and as a criticism of the “peaceful” gentrification of modern societies that threatens to warp violence into an indiscriminate and inconsequential everyday concept rather than as the blatant indication of disturbing sociopolitical imbalance that it is. This juxtaposition is meant as a minor form of aggression that is directed at audiences in an attempt to revitalize the concept as a multifaceted tool. Rather than condemning such representations entirely, his work serves as a reminder that the highest purpose of extremity and intensity in art is to disrupt complacency and force engagement with the ideas behind representation. Connecting violence with historical and sociopolitical contexts extends that engagement into the world in relation to real instances of violence that emphasizes its origins rather than the injustice or immorality of the events themselves. While he still utilizes cartoonish violence as a portion of his works’ appeal, it provides the necessary contextualization for an artistic confrontation that also confronts audiences with the moral question of why particular representations are disturbing.

For instance, both Lieutenant and Psychopaths play on the affective manipulation of animals as targets of cruelty, forcing a juxtaposition that implicitly asks why one would care more about the fate of Wee Thomas or Bonny as opposed to the numerous human characters that are killed when they are all equally fictional and absurd constructs. Such a response is indicative of a moral perspective on violence that is primed to see the good guy/bad guy dichotomy of violence enacted on an innocent figure; they epitomize hollow uses of violence as visible manifestation that has no meaningful historical or sociopolitical context. His oeuvre does significant work in attempting to force audiences to engage with the concept of representation by
revealing the gap between reality and artistic expression. While frequently disturbing, his representations of violence are purposefully not hyper-realistic. They are potent enough to impart a sense of affective intensity that still clearly remains within the realm of representation, allowing audiences to engage with the event and participate in the creation of meaning rather than passively receiving it.
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