

Rewriting of the Irish Identity and Pastoral: A Case Study on *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* by Martin McDonagh

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Martin McDonagh, a descendant of Irish, is engaged in the creation of dramatic works in the UK, and his unique growth experience has a profound influence on his dramatic works. His first play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, explores the ambivalence status of characters, embodies the vague time image, the rewriting of the Irish western pastoral and the hybrid language of English and Irish, which is the embodiment of McDonagh's dual national identity and his rewriting of the Irish national identity.

Keywords: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Martin McDonagh, ambivalence, Irish identity

Though London-born, Martin McDonagh (1970--) is thoroughly Irish in his plays about Connemara and the Aran Islands. He is also talented and precocious: in the summer of 1997, at the age of 27, he had four plays running in London's West End. In *The Leenane Trilogy* at the Royal Court Theatre and *The Cripple of Irishman* at the National Theatre he showed himself a darkly funny storyteller and a smooth dramatic craftsman with postmodern leanings. He has won praise in both Ireland and Britain. The *Irish Times* celebrated the "rapturous standing ovation" after the Galway premiere of *The Leenane Trilogy*, calling the performances "undoubtedly one of the great events of the contemporary Irish theatre" (Feeney, 1998, p. 28). *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* had its first performance at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway, on 1 February 1996, and opened at London's Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 29 February 1996. By December it had won three major London awards: the George Devine Award for Most Promising Newcomer, the Writer's Guild Award for Best Fringe Theatre Play, and the Evening Standard Award for Most Promising Playwright. Also, the play received several Broadway and off-Broadway awards.

The story of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* set in Leenane, a small, dreary village in Connemara, western Ireland. It describes the morbid and distorted mother-daughter relationship between 70-year-old mother, Mag and her middle-aged daughter. The aging Mag is childishly selfish, demanding, and manipulative. Maureen, a frustrated forty-year-old virgin who cares for her mother, is mentally fragile and emotionally trapped. At a neighbor's party, she renews her acquaintance with Pato, an Irish immigrant who works in England. The meeting leads to a mutual attraction and an unconsummated one-night stand. But Mag uses all means to destroy the relationship between Maureen and Pato. As revenge for her mother's deception, Maureen tortures Mag by scalding her with boiling oil and even kills Mag finally. The plot is closely linked, and the scenes are gripping.

The Beauty Queen of Leenane, as McDonagh's most widely produced play, illustrates his skill in combining traditional storytelling with the "savage and ironic humor of the modern generation" (Fenney, 1998, p. 30) while employing several distinctive postmodern themes and devices-intertextuality with other Irish plays; the relationship between reality, fiction, and identity; the dehumanization of character; and the instability and ambiguity of language and meaning.

1. Ambivalence Status of the Characters in the Play

The fullness of the characters created by Martin McDonagh lies in his amazing insight, that is, the precise control of the emotional response of the characters under different moods. His details can promote the psychological development of the characters, broaden the social thought and personal experience behind the characters' actions, and deepen the depth of the play. McDonagh also accurately depicts the contradictory psychological state of the characters in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. For example, in the first act, when Mag and Maureen discussed language and Irish traditional music and a Gaelic song was playing on the radio, Mag and Maureen had the following dialogue:

Mag It sounds like nonsense to me. Why can't they just speak English like everybody?

Maureen Why should they speak English?

Mag To know what they're saying.

Maureen What country are you living in?

Mag Ireland.

Maureen So why should you be speaking English in Ireland? (McDonagh, 1998, p. 4)

Mag, a native Irishman, feels that "It sounds like nonsense" when she hears the song of her own national language. Instead, English, the language of the colonist, is considered as the language that everyone should speak and that everyone could understand. Mag, as the people of the colonized country, naturally expresses her sense of identity with the language of the colonial country, and conveys a yearning for the authority of the colonist. But her daughter Maureen takes the opposite attitude. She constantly questions her mother's absurd remarks, she says "It's Irish you should be speaking in Ireland", and She accuses that "If it wasn't 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?" (p. 5). Here she expresses her recognition of her own national culture and the rejection and criticism of British culture.

In the Scene Three, however, while the radio playing Delia Murphy's traditional Irish song "The Spinning Wheel", Maureen showed a state of ambivalence, "It is a creepy owl song", she says (p. 23). As a traditional female singer in Ireland, Delia Murphy, who represented, for that generation, "the importance of re-establishing cultural identity after the devastating period of Civil War in Ireland and the many years of English colonization. The song that Delia sang were decidedly Irish, many nationalistic and characterized by a strong sing-a-long ballad style" (Kieran, 2006). "The Spinning Wheel" is a very representative song of Murphy. Also, it is one of the representative works of Irish music in the first half of the 20th century, with its light Irish vernacular and Gaelic tune, accompanied by the harp. Irish folk singer Liam Clancy concurs:

Delia Murphy gave all of us a feeling of confidence and a feeling of value that there was something to our own traditions, [...] there was no need to be ashamed, because she wasn't. (Russell, 2007, p. 14)

For such a singer who represents the culture of Ireland and has an important influence on the Irish nation, the characters in this play consider that “she does have a creepy oul voice”, “she’s like a ghoul singing” (p. 23). It can be seen that they are extremely indifferent to and even disgusted with Irish music and culture. It is not only Irish people who show their disgust for their own language and culture in the drama, but also Clancy who has expressed his similar experience in real life:

I grew up in the height of what could be called The National Inferiority Complex in Ireland. Irish people were very sensitive to the “pig-in-the-parlour”, “dirty Irish” image, and they even became ashamed of their own music and songs. (Russell, 2007, p. 14)

As Karen Vandeveldt remarks, “The microscopic picture of Leenane becomes the macrocosm of modern life, at once emblematic of modern Irish culture and representative of any unsettled nation torn between dreams and despair” (Vandeveldt, 2000, p. 301). Maureen’s ambivalence about the maintenance and antipathy of Irish culture is actually a miniature of the whole Irish nation. On the one hand, they rejected the violent rule of colonial culture and tried to maintain their own language and culture. But, on the other hand, they lose confidence in their own nation and culture, and they are full of disgust. The Irish nation, like Maureen, is in a state of ambivalence.

In addition, the characters in the play are also in an ambivalent state for the western part of Ireland and the more powerful colonial countries. The early Irish Renaissance writers focused on the myth of the western Ireland and rural life to show the romantic beauty of the land and the harmonious relationship between man and nature. In most of the works of this period, the western Ireland is also a romantic garden with natural green. McDonagh’s rural, dispossessed characters and their squalid surroundings also resemble those of Synge. McDonagh sets *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in rustic Ireland, but the poetic terrain of Synge and the idyllic countryside of Dion Boucicault have been replaced by a bleak “big ould hill” that is steep, muddy, and rocky, which can be reached only by “wading through all that skitter” (p. 14). From the Irish peasants so beloved by Yeats to the lyrical poets of Synge to the lonely wayfarers of Beckett, the natives of western Ireland have been portrayed in many ways on stage, but they have never been depicted as scurrilously as they are by McDonagh. His Ireland is populated by evil mothers, bored daughters, warring brothers, and belligerent neighbors. Their antics are often narcissistic, brutal, and yet somehow mercilessly funny. Murder, thievery, and mayhem occur so often in McDonagh’s Ireland that such actions appear to be normative. The town of Leenane is a place of gratuitous violence, greed, and amorality where death appears to be nothing more than a meaningless intrusion into the self-absorbed ritual of daily life.

McDonagh breaks the ideal romantic landscape and presents a picture of poverty, backwardness, unemployment and violence. For example, when it comes to the land of Ireland, Ray’s answer is that “this bastarding town” like drugs, “just as dangerous, would kill you just as easy. Maybe even easier” (McDonagh, 1998, p. 54). Once a beautiful town, now it has become a place that “it’s soon bored you’d be” (McDonagh, 1998, p. 53). Here is backward and closed, people living here are narrow-minded, distorted violence. “You can’t kick a cow in Leenane without some bastard holding a grudge twenty year.” (McDonagh, 1998, p. 22). People here are fussy about trifles, and their personalities are dark, distorted and full of violence. In Scene Three, Pato and Maureen discuss Coleman, a town resident:

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

Pato He showed me them ears one day

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

Pato It is a awful spiteful.

Maureen It would be spiteful enough to cut the ears off anybody's dog, let alone your own brother's dog."
(McDonagh, 1998, p. 20)

In McDonagh's play, the western Ireland has become a land of material poverty and spiritual barrenness, so people in the small town no longer love their hometown, "Who wants to see Ireland on telly?" "All you have to do is look out your window to see Ireland. And it's soon bored you'd be" (McDonagh, 1998, p. 53). Young people don't want to stay in this place for a lifetime, but choose to go to Ireland's colonial country, Britain, or even the United States further away to make a living.

However, on the one hand, young people yearn for a broader development space in Britain, but on the other hand, they are not satisfied with their life in Britain. For example, when Maureen was working in Britain, she was constantly subjected to language violence, which led to her mental breakdown (McDonagh, 1998, p. 31); When Pato talks about his work and life in London, he was full of contradictions:

I do ask meself, if there was good work in Leenane, would I stay in Leenane? I mean, there never will be good work, but hypothetically, I'm saying. Or even bad work. Any work. And when I'm over there in London and working in rain and it's more or less cattle I am, and the young fellas cursing over cards and drunk and sick, and the oul digs over there, all pee-stained mattresses and nothing to do but watch the clock...when it's there I am, it's here I wish I was, of course. Who wouldn't? But when it's here I am...it isn't here I want to be either. (McDonagh, 1998, pp. 21-22)

The Irish people in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* have a deep sense of loss for their backward and closed land, but at the same time they are disgusted with Britain because they have experienced the dark and ugly side of Britain. Just like Pato, they are not involved in two countries and two cultures. They have no sense of belonging, cannot identify with any culture, and have no clear understanding of their cultural identity. This kind of ambivalence presents a kind of fuzzy identity, which is more specifically reflected in the script: the fuzzy time the characters live in and the mixed language they use.

2. The Vague Time, the Rewriting of the Irish Western Pastoral and the Hybrid Language of English and Irish

First of all, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* does not directly mention the time of the story in the introduction, but the specific time can be inferred from the dialogue of the characters in the play. In Scene Six, Ray mentions that when he played swingball with his friends as a child, the ball popped out and went into the yard of Maureen's house, and then it was kept by Maureen and she didn't give it back. Ray said, "no matter how much we begged and that was ten years ago and I still haven't forgotten it?" (McDonagh, 1998, p. 38). In the last scene, Ray finds the faded tennis ball hidden on the window sill in Maureen's house and says, "A tenner that swingball set did cost me poor ma and da and in 1979 that was, when a tenner was a lot of money" (McDonagh, 1998, p. 58). These two dialogues directly show that the story happened in the 1990s. However, the Australian soap operas on TV: *the Sullivans*, *Sons and Daughters*, and *A Country Fecking Practice's* are all from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. In addition, the images in the *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* are also a mixture of the past and the present. For example, the opening of the play shows a picture of rural western

Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s: The turf (a traditional fuel, an indispensable daily necessities in rural Ireland), the picture of the crucified Christ, the traditional Irish songs played on the radio and a framed picture of John and Robert Kennedy on the wall (McDonagh, 1998, p. 1). The play is set in a “living room/kitchens of a rural cottage” (McDonagh, 1998, p. 1), “reminiscent of the rural kitchens of Synge and much of Irish peasant drama” (Russell, 2007, p. 47). The characters in such vague time and space have the characteristics of Ireland’s past and present. However, McDonagh’s treatment of the time is not simply a mixture of Ireland’s past and present, tradition and modern, but rather a deliberate reconstruction of an Irish identity. Nicholas Grene has coined the term “black pastoral” to describe plays like *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* that self consciously invert the earlier idealization of life in the west of Ireland by presenting it as violent and unidyllic. In his essay, “Black Pastoral: 1990s Images of Ireland”, Grene demonstrates how *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* satirizes and subverts the customary motifs of mother, child, and emigrant, those traditional motifs that connect the space of pastoral with the world the audience inhabits. Grene explains that “Pastoral” concerns an idealized place of origin, while “Black Pastoral” mocks the very desire to go back to that origin (Grene, 2000, p. 68). McDonagh not only rewrites the western pastoral, but also subverts the national myth in Celtic culture. The traditional themes of Irish drama are completely broken here: family, neighborhood, church, language, country kitchen, tavern, farm, countryside and so on have lost their original colors. Those representative characters have changed their faces completely. McDonagh infuses the traditional melodramatic structure of the play with an array of comic ingredients: macabre humor, crude language, and grotesque characterizations, facets of comedy that illuminate the darker side of life. The play speaks to several aspects of cultural transition in Ireland of the 1990s, such as the disintegration of the ideal family unit as depicted in traditional Irish melodrama. It shatters the idea of the idyllic home and family and offers a horrific portrait of the dysfunctional and destructive relationship between Mag and Maureen. McDonagh reviews the traditional images and themes while subverting them, which shows that he does not want the Irish nation to return to the past and pursue its Irish identity, but to examine the past with a new perspective, so as to build a national identity with both tradition and modern.

Secondly, the characters use a hybrid language of English and Irish. Due to his identity as a descendant of Irish immigrants and his holiday experience in Ireland in his youth, McDonagh is familiar with the Irish dialect, and his skillful use of the dialect has become a major feature of his drama language. He finds that the language of Ireland is a key to his creativity: “In Connemara and Galway, the natural dialogue style is to invert sentences and use strange inflections of speech, especially in Galway” (Feeney, 1998, p. 28). When he recalls his uncle’s talking, he fixes on “the structure of their sentences. I didn’t think of it as structure, just as kind of rhythm in the speech. And that seemed an interesting way to go, to try to do something with that language”. So in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, there are many Irish words and sentence structures in the characters’ dialogues, but their dialogue is not pure traditional Irish, but the Irish English created by McDonagh himself. As Li Yuan, a domestic scholar, said, “although the language of the characters in the play has local flavor, it is not the real dialect, but the pursuit of a deliberate and artificial style, which mixes the sharp irony of McDonagh’s signature and the surreal humor” (Li, 2014, p. 121). Werner Huber describes “McDonagh’s dramatic language, a hybrid of contemporary street-talk and rural Irish speech, is also a distancing device which opens up an enormous incongruity between the world of his plays and traditional images of Ireland” (Huber, 2006, p. 13). The

characters in the play live in a vaguetime, and the language is also a hybrid language of English and Irish. To explore the problem of the hybrid of time and culture, it is necessary to explore the growing experience of the playwright's dual identity.

3. Rewriting of the Irish Identity

Many other critics have highlighted McDonagh's obvious Anglo-Irish heritage, and many have been quick to point towards other figures caught in a similar sensibility, those constituting second generation Irish, who were reared, educated, and socialized in Britain, but also exist with strong, complex, and ambivalent connections with Ireland. Within the specifics of that Irish community operating within a London environment, McDonagh absorbed and rehearsed notions and conventions of Irishness and much more besides. (The Northern Irish troubles and the bombing campaigns by paramilitaries in the United Kingdom often led to hostile and stereotypical responses to the Irish communities.) When asked by Sean O'Hagan as to how he responds to "the inevitable accusations of cultural stereotyping", McDonagh responded by saying, "I don't even enter into it. I mean, I don't feel I have to defend myself for being English or for being Irish, because, in a way, I don't feel either. And, in another way, of course, I'm both" (O'Hagan, 2001, p. 32). Some critics attempt to define McDonagh's importance in national terms—to consider his place in the Irish literary canon or to present him as an example of the British style of "in-yer-face" theater (Sierz, 2001, pp. 219-225). Yet McDonagh himself resists the attempt to categorize him as either Irish or British:

I always felt somewhere kind of in-between...I felt half-and-half and neither, which is good [...]. I'm happy having a foot in both camps. I'm not into any kind of definition, any kind of -ism, politically, socially, religiously, all that stuff. It's not that I don't think about those things, but I've come to a place where the ambiguities are more interesting than choosing a strict path and following it. (O'Toole, 2006, p. 42)

McDonagh defines himself in an in-between world. In his book *Nation and Narration*, Homi K. Bhabha writes in the introduction: "Nation, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation—or narration—might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 1). That is to say, the nation itself is a kind of narration, just like the unreliability of narration, it is also full of uncertainty. Therefore, just as the nation is in a "narrative" construction, the national identity is in an uncertain state. The hybrid of languages is the best embodiment of the vagueness of Irish identity. Language itself is an important feature of nation identity. The hybrid language symbolizes that the cultural composition of Ireland is no longer a single Gaelic culture that was canonized in the Irish Renaissance. The core subject of Irish culture has become the hybrid of English culture and Gaelic culture. The hybrid language in the play is exactly the new meaning produced by the combination of different cultures. This kind of hybrid language, which contains two cultures, is conducive to the promotion of Irish drama to the world and the construction of a multi-cultural national identity.

Martin McDonagh, who has dual identities, blurs the time reference in his plays, making Ireland's past and present mixed. At the same time, he reviews the green countryside in western Ireland and breaks it, subverting the traditional Irish drama. Therefore, through his works, McDonagh aims to reconstruct a multi-cultural identity horizontally and rewrite a national image with both Irish traditional culture and current popular culture

vertically. One of the critical commonplaces about drama after World War Two concerns its inherently mixed nature. David L. Hirst, for example, notes that post-war tragicomedy is comprised of a “bewildering variety of theatrical idioms” (Hirst, 1984, p. 121). McDonagh has said that “I walk that line between comedy and cruelty because I think one illuminates the other. And yeah, I tend to push things as far as I can because I think you can see things more clearly through exaggeration than through reality” (O’Hagan, 2001, p. 24). The “black pastoral” in his works and the more open and inclusive image of Ireland also add a brighter color to Irish literature.

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