

# Martin McDonagh and the Possibility of Catharsis

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**Martin McDonagh and the Possibility of Catharsis**

**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and  
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**Abstract:** The main focus of this thesis is examining the key arguments used in the ethical criticism debate found in the aesthetic branch of philosophy through the key characteristic of the In-Yer-Face theatre movement, with the main focus being on Martin McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy*, comprised of three plays set in Connemara, Ireland: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West*. In the first part of the thesis, I provide an overview of the philosophical debate regarding ethics and aesthetics and supply arguments from the most noticeable supporters of the array of positions that have emerged from the debate. Secondly, I present the key characteristics and concepts of the In-Yer-Face theatre and movement as it challenges the arguments provided in the debate of the role which ethics should play in our aesthetic experience. Lastly, I show direct examples found in the plays of Martin McDonagh, a playwright that with his specific background creates a universally accepted feeling in an environment driven to the edge of the absurd to bring to the audience a sense of a contemporary catharsis.

**Keywords:** ethical criticism, autonomism, moralism, moderate, ethicism, In-Yer-Face, Martin McDonagh, ethics, aesthetics, theory, catharsis

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## 1) INTRODUCTION

Questions regarding the moral factor and its value as presented through art have vexed philosophers since the period of Ancient Greece and have remained relevant since the introduction of aesthetics as a philosophical branch in the eighteenth century. The debate regarding questions around the moral evaluation of an artwork, such as which constituents of an artwork possess the ability to morally educate its audiences, is one of the longest and most fruitful in the ethical criticism of art.

In broad terms, two contradictory positions have been formed in the history of this debate, the first stating that art has nothing to do with morality, and that its primary and most relevant function is aesthetic. This position is called the radical autonomism position. On the other hand, the second position states that morality and ethics play an important role in the way an audience reacts to an artwork; how, in short, it values the artwork. Based on the great significance this position puts on morality, it is called the radical moralist position. While these radical positions are clearly highly problematic, branches that emerge from them, such as moderate autonomism, moderate moralism and ethicism, offer more promising avenues of exploration.

This thesis aims to question the statement that if an artwork uses immoral characters and depicts highly immoral acts and brutality, it should be regarded as morally defective, and therefore inadequate in terms of bringing to the audience a feeling of catharsis and moral improvement. The question will be elaborated through the specific characteristics and themes employed in the style of writing connected with the In-Yer-Face theatre and movement, as it puts a high emphasis on shock value gained by portraying immoral characters and actions. Specifically, the thesis will examine the three plays that constitute Martin McDonagh's *The Leenane Trilogy*, as the playwright manages to combine the rebellious spirit and absurdism created by brutality—key features of In-Yer-Face theatre—alongside a well-curated relationship with a tradition highly affected by loss

and pain—the tradition of the Irish theatre—to invoke in the audience a feeling of a universal human plight.

## 2) ETHICAL CRITICISM, CAUSAL THEORY AND MORAL EDUCATION

In the debate on the ethical criticism of art, there are two opposing positions: 'moralism' and 'autonomism'. The position of "moralism argues that the aesthetic value of art should be determined by, or reduced to, its moral value"<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, the position of autonomism states that is "it inappropriate to apply moral categories to art"<sup>2</sup>, as "they should be evaluated by 'aesthetic' standards alone."<sup>3</sup> The central issue here can be presented in the form of a question: Should moral evaluations of artworks be described as aesthetic evaluations? It has often been contended for instance, that narrative artworks have the potential to influence moral education, and that this is one of the main reasons for the interest in, and the value of, narrative art, which also questions the parameters of the concept of the aesthetic elements connected to the elements regarding ethics.

We can see artworks that present ideas that we would deem as immoral in fundamental works of European literature, such as Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* and Euripides's *Medea*, which show scenes of self-harm, murder, incest and patricide, just to name a few. The first to discuss the moral components of artworks and the role they play both in their aesthetic evaluation and influence on its audience were Aristotle in his *Poetics* and Plato in his *Republic*. Although both philosophers defended the moralist thesis in ethical criticism, their opinion of the role artworks play in society greatly differed.

Aristotle defined a tragedy as an artwork that mimics an action "with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions."<sup>4</sup> With this definition, he

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<sup>1</sup> Peek, "Ethical Criticism of Art"

<sup>2</sup> Peek, "Ethical Criticism of Art"

<sup>3</sup> Peek, "Ethical Criticism of Art"

<sup>4</sup> Schaper,1968. p.131

wanted to explain the effect that an artwork has on its audience and state what effect a proper work of art should have. Furthermore, he believed “a specific kind of pleasure, pleasure through catharsis, is produced by works of art which are well-made tragedies.”<sup>5</sup> Working from this, Nathan Spiegel defined catharsis as “the disburdenment of certain morbid elements embedded in the soul, which are roused and brought to the surface through direct contact with a tragedy.”<sup>6</sup> As he stated, there are some gruesome and grotesque parts in the soul of the spectator or the audience, afflictions and pains that leave their traces. These parts and ailments accumulate over time and a need for their abolishment becomes unavoidable. Aristotle differed two kinds of painful states: the first state being one of sharp and deep pain that we lack the power or the ability to manifest, either by speech or action, so it continues to hold mastery over us; the second state is the psychic state which brings on pains that have been suppressed for so long that they cannot be formed into an object, cannot be viewed from a distance or be resolved.<sup>7</sup> The key role of tragedy is to help the audience in a way that it brings relief from these kinds of emotion by utilizing shock.

Alongside shock, a key role is played by the tragic hero. The tragic hero always experiences a tragic loss and falls victim to her/his fate. The audience can sympathise with the hero and through her/him acquire the sensation of freeing oneself of certain kind of emotions:

These are heteropathic emotions: they relate to the suffering hero. These emotions awaken sorrow and suffering in the percipient himself, drawing from the depths of his soul anxieties and terrors, i.e. autopathic emotions. They are personal torments awakened by participation in the unhappiness of the suffering character — private disquiet and anxieties, touched off by worry and fear, are connected with the tragic event, but embedded in the soul of the percipient.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the audience can deliberate on another's suffering, as the struggles of the tragic heroes are just enlarged everyday struggles, “through participation in the misfortunes and

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<sup>5</sup> Schaper, 1968, p.131

<sup>6</sup> Spiegel,1965, p.23

<sup>7</sup> Spiegel, 1965, p.23-24

<sup>8</sup> Spiegel, 1965, p.24



suffering of the characters, we ‘experience’ pains similar to our own. We expel old pains which are trapped within us and attribute them to the tragic heroes in whose sorrow we participate.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the audience members free themselves from suppressed pain by vicariously living through the struggles of the tragic hero.

Plato presented a critique of Aristotle’s work in *Republic X*, the tenth chapter of his work about an ideal state. Here Plato attacked poetry and poets to the point of banishing them completely from the state. His decision was based on the notion that art was the farthest from the truth, “in the *Republic X*, his most thorough discussion of art, Plato strongly condemns poetry, both for its confusing of the intellect and its corrupting of the emotions.”<sup>10</sup> He believed that poets, by describing the gods as flawed and nature-driven, possess a great power that could be morally harmful for Athenian youths: “Judging poetry solely in terms of its effects, Plato feels that artful language, the tool of the sophists, tends to seduce the unwary to embrace the transient beauty of pleasure instead of lift the soul to contemplate the true beauty of virtue.”<sup>11</sup> Standing in opposition to Aristotle who stated that pity and fear are crucial for experiencing catharsis, Plato contended that there is no room for anything less than the virtuous and that which invokes merit in our journey towards a fulfilled life.

Despite their contrasting opinions in evaluating the societal worth of artworks, both philosophers held that moral components influence the aesthetic evaluation of art. Aristotle’s definition of tragedy and catharsis as something crucial for every man would position him as a moderate moralist, while Plato could represent a radical moralist with his view that nothing but the ideal should be represented.

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<sup>9</sup> Spiegel, 1965, p.27

<sup>10</sup> Partee, 1970, p.209

<sup>11</sup> Partee,1970, p.209

### 3) RADICAL AUTONOMISM AND RADICAL MORALISM

Both radical autonomism and radical moralism provide the most extreme and narrow definitions of aesthetic value and this makes them quite problematic. In order to illustrate how the notion of catharsis is a vital concept that brings together the aesthetic features of an artwork with its ethical features, there is a need to show why these arguments provide an inadequate bases for making aesthetic judgements.

Radical autonomists claim that the audience should respond only to the authentic aesthetic qualities in art and that any judgement passed about a certain artwork should not rely on moral or other social values. Oscar Wilde can be seen as a supporter of the radical autonomism position, although his work deals explicitly with moral issues. In the preface to his work *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he wrote: “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all.”<sup>12</sup> His position was that moral issues contained within a work of art “are irrelevant to its aesthetic value and should not influence the audience’s aesthetic response to”<sup>13</sup> it. This amoral stance that is indifferent to the matter of right or wrong would fit perfectly within the scope of theories of art such as formalism, but regarding most artworks, the audience does not just respond to how a certain matter is explored through its artistic form, but also to the subject matter itself and the emotions it evokes.

The presented position and its construal of the aesthetic may be exclusive in a way that it neglects certain art forms that are culturally deeply embedded and inevitably bound up with social values. Noel Carroll, in his objection to radical autonomism, writes:

it is vastly improbable that there could be any substantial narrative of human affairs, especially a narrative artwork, that did not rely upon activating the moral powers of readers, viewers and listeners. Even modernist

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<sup>12</sup> Wilde, 2008., p.1

<sup>13</sup> Peek, “Ethical Criticism of Art”

novels that appear to eschew 'morality' typically do so to challenge bourgeois morality and to enlist the reader in sharing their ethical disdain for it.<sup>14</sup>

Carroll is a moderate moralist, and his argument for ethics and morality in art can be traced back to Aristotle. He regards that a necessary condition for making good art is either having the audience sympathise with the moral notions in the artwork or rebel against them. Furthermore, he states that if an artwork refrains from 'morality', it typically does so to entice a reaction from the audience.

By contrast, radical moralism reduces all aesthetic value to moral value. An advocate for the radical moralism position was Leo Tolstoy who maintained that art has a purely didactic function, and all else must abide by it. He argued against definitions of art that equated art with beauty: "The inaccuracy of all these definitions arises from the fact that in them all [...] the object considered is the pleasure art may give, and not the purpose it may serve in the life of man and of humanity."<sup>15</sup> For him, the moral significance of art in society was a vital aspect of the aesthetic value of art.

The main problem and criticism of this position is that it fails to include a unique feature of art, it merely states that a necessary role of art is that it morally improves its audience. But, it does not consider what differentiates art from other phenomena; following this line of argument, every manual and script that provided some sort of moral guidance should be considered an artwork.

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<sup>14</sup> Carroll, 1996, p.228

<sup>15</sup> Tolstoy, 1904, p.47

#### 4) A NEW SENSIBILITY REQUIRES A NEW APPROACH

The positions of radical moralism and radical autonomism, while easily disputable, was directly challenged at the Ethical Criticism Symposium, the proceedings of which were featured in *Philosophy in Literature* (1997-1998). This symposium brought on the second wave of ethical criticism debate, and three more plausible and moderate positions were proposed: 'moderate autonomism' defended by J. Anderson and J. Dean, 'moderate moralism' advocated by Noel Carroll, and 'ethicism' which was introduced by Berys Gaut. This new wave of positions regarding the debate can be viewed as a response to the aesthetic style of the period. The aesthetic of the nineties was based on heroin-chic, Quentin Tarantino movies, and when it comes to the theatre, the In-Yer-Face movement.

##### 4.1) IN-YER FACE THEATRE

In-Yer-Face theatre is a contemporary form of drama that emerged in Britain, specifically around London, in the 1990s. Aleks Sierz., in his book *In-yer-face Theatre: British Drama Today* published in 2001, described this movement and this new way of writing:

In the 1990s, a revolution took place in British theatre. Out went all those boring politically correct plays with tiny casts portraying self-pitying victims; overthrown were all those pale imitations of European directors' theatre; brushed aside were all those shreds of self-regarding physical theatre and long-winded, baggy state-of-the-nation plays. In their place, came a storm of new writing, vivid new plays about contemporary life by a brat-pack of funky young playwrights. For a few heady years, the theatre was the new rock 'n' roll – a really cool place to be. At last, here was drama that really seemed to make a difference. It sweated newness out of every pore.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, this new drama enjoyed a huge box-office success, as these plays outperformed adaptations, post-war revivals, translations, classics and even Shakespeare.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, Introduction

<sup>17</sup> Sierz, 2002, p. 19

When it came to naming this ‘new’ form of theatre, Sierz states that there were four options: *Neo-Jacobeanism*, *Neo-Brutalism*, *Theatre of Urban Ennui* and *In-Yer-Face theatre*, with the choice being political and every label bringing forth a certain dimension of the particular style of theatre. For example, the term Neo-Jacobeanism implied that the most important feature of the contemporary theatre was its links with tradition. Neo-Brutalism highlighted the brutality and violence it encompassed, and Sierz argued that this label tried to convey an entirely wrong impression.

He stated that he preferred the term ‘In-Yer-Face Theatre’ because of the following reasons. Firstly, it emphasized “the sense of rupture with the past”<sup>18</sup> and stressed what is “new about the dramatic voices”<sup>19</sup> is that they were portrayed like that for the first time, magnifying the feeling of rejecting the tradition. Secondly, it suggested that what was different in this new “experience of going to the theatre and watching extreme plays, the feeling that your personal space is threatened”<sup>20</sup>, so it fully expressed the relationship between the play and the audience. Thirdly, he argued that the name is deeply connected with the culture of the 1990s as it was often used in other cultural forms linking theatre to the wider guerrilla-style culture of the decade.<sup>21</sup>

“The phrase ‘in-your-face’ is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1998) as something ‘blatantly aggressive or provocative, impossible to ignore or avoid’. The *Collins English Dictionary* (1998) adds the adjective ‘confrontational’”<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, Sierz stated that In-Yer Face theatre had certain clear characteristics. It explored the extremes of human emotion through the usage of explicit scenes which depicted

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<sup>18</sup> Sierz,2002, p. 19

<sup>19</sup> Sierz,2002, p. 19

<sup>20</sup> Sierz,2002, p. 19

<sup>21</sup> Sierz,2002, p.19-20

<sup>22</sup> Sierz, 2002, p.19

brutality, addiction and sex mixed with violence. It evoked a feeling of a certain kind of rawness in the society it presented. The dramatists aimed to break taboos, whether by using strong vulgar language, blasphemy, pornography or by putting in public acts that were considerate to be deeply private. The quality of shock and its effect on the audience was greatly appreciated. When discussing its aesthetic, he placed it in the category of experiential theatre. It forced the audience to feel as they participated in the events shown on stage, as young writers wanted to make an impression deeper than that of traditional drama: "Instead of debating issues, in-yer-face theatre imposes its point of view on the audience."<sup>23</sup> Theatre had more scope for this, as it had practically no censorship, as opposed to other forms of media such as television or the cinema. As he stated, "this gives writers the chance to explore the darkest sides of the human psyche without compromise".<sup>24</sup>

#### 4.2) ARISTOTLE AND ARTAUD: LEGACY OF SHOCK

However, it is important to highlight that In-Yer-Face, even though it presented itself as something new, could be interpreted as an iteration of Aristotle's need to give to the audience a sense of catharsis as it depicted brutal scenes to purge the emotions related to them, whilst the focus of this type of theatre was to force the audience to see everything as closely as possible, and there was a strong sense of a violation of intimacy. Even though they aimed to break the traditional role of the spectator, one may contend that they had the same aim as Aristotle, just in a more aggressive manner.

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<sup>23</sup>Sierz, 2002, p.19

<sup>24</sup> Sierz,2002, p.19

Furthermore, the movement had a lot of characteristics previously seen in Artaud's 'Theatre of cruelty', whose first manifesto was published in the 1930s. Antonin Artaud, one of the most controversial figures in theatre history, wrote in his *The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)*:

To consider the theater as a second-hand psychological or moral function, and to believe that dreams themselves have only a substitute function, is to diminish the profound poetic bearing of dreams as well as of the theater. If the theater, like dreams, is bloody and inhuman, it is, more than just that, to manifest and unforgettably root within us the idea of perpetual conflict, a spasm in which life is continually lacerated, in which everything in creation rises up and exerts itself against our appointed rank; it is in order to perpetuate in a concrete and immediate way the metaphysical ideas of certain Fables whose very atrocity and energy suffice to show their origin and continuity in essential principles.<sup>25</sup>

Artaud contended that the theatre's purpose was to perpetuate and promulgate the idea of an undying conflict, as this is the nature of our subconscious, as is revealed in dreams.

In-Yer-Face theatre is more concerned with linking this violence to the socio-economic situation of the nineties. One of the most prominent playwrights of the period, David Eldridge, described all the events that influenced and invoked a specific state of anger and dismay:

Clearly, a generation that had grown up in the UK fearing the five-minute warning, watching the Berlin Wall come down, that had experimented with E and club culture, was finding a voice. This generation had had its youthful optimism pickled by the new horrors that visited their imaginations in the shape of the atrocities in the Balkans and by a sense of outrage at the erosion of the UK's notion of community and society by the mean-spirited Thatcher regency and Mayor malaise. We responded to that shifting culture with dismay and anger.<sup>26</sup>

In his description of his generation, we can clearly see that this point in time called upon a new form of catharsis—one that needed to be brought down from the ethereal plan of the Greek tragedies and situated in the working classes. These plays signalled a clear shift, introducing a 'new tragedy' and a 'new tragic hero'. Even though the state-of-nation plays were obliterated, this new form of drama spoke about problems with the conditions their society was facing through private passions and personal pain. As previously stated, they focused on the problem of violence

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<sup>25</sup> Artaud, 1958, p.92-93

<sup>26</sup> Eldridge, 2003, p.55

and the horrors that stem from abuse. They dealt with the problem of usurped masculinity, the notions of post-feminism and the modern problems caused by consumerism.<sup>27</sup>

This new form of drama heavily relied on themes that depicted brutality and immoral acts committed by morally flawed characters. Observed through the lenses of theories that emerged from the ethical criticism debate—moderate moralism, ethicism and causal theory—this style of drama raises interesting questions. If these plays are so violent and lead by the notion that everything should be pushed toward the absurd, can they, by subverting the notions of the tragic hero and the determinism of tragic fate, provide a modern-day catharsis? Can they provide their audience with a new form of moral education through their deeply graphic depictions of what could be understood as the consequences of the sort of ethical decisions the audience has to deal with daily?

Aleks Sierz, in his article ‘Still In-Yer-Face? Towards a Critique and Summarization’, listed the dramatists who pushed this era of New Writing in British theatre, such as David Eldridge, Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson, Mark Ravenhill and Martin McDonagh, the latter being the author that this thesis is going to focus on, specifically his *Leenane Trilogy*.

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<sup>27</sup> Sierz, 2002, p.20-22



## 5) MARTIN MCDONAGH

Martin McDonagh, a playwright described by critics as “Quentin Tarantino of the Emerald Isle”, gained recognition in the late 1990s with his, *The Leenane Trilogy*, which consists of three plays all intertwined and revolving around themes in Irish life: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara*, and *The Lonesome West*.

Martin McDonagh set *The Leenane Trilogy* in a specific rural background, the Connemara region in County Galway, Ireland. Knowing this, the audience could expect that the plays will be packed with the archetypal notions and depictions of Irish life. However, McDonagh uses parody and the grotesque “to construct a deeply ironic and parodic distance towards traditional forms of dramatic literature or political and social discourses occupying prominent positions in Irish life.”<sup>28</sup> He uses his family’s memories and their longing for their roots to compose his own aesthetic. Moreover, he takes certain motifs and themes and then reconstructs them and shows them merely as established patterns that lead to the absurd. By creating this bleak environment in his plays, McDonagh played into another crucial element of the new form of theatre: while the plays all contained shocking scenes, it is the sense of bleakness, nihilism and despair that proves to be the most disturbing factor. As Sierz stated, “In-yer-face theatre is about emotions, not about shock tactics.”<sup>29</sup>

*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* has at its centre a mother-daughter relationship. Maureen Folan is a slim, forty-year-old spinster who still lives with her seventy-year-old mother, Mag Folan. At the beginning of the play, their relationship looks like something the audience has seen time and time again. Their relationship is far from ideal, and it deteriorates even more when

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<sup>28</sup> Lachman, 2004, p.61.

<sup>29</sup> Sierz, 2002, p.19

Maureen starts to get her hopes up of having a relationship with Pato Dooley. Mag accuses Maureen of being mentally unstable, as she has been committed to a mental institution before. On the other hand, Maureen states that her mother is demented and senile, and urges Pato not to trust Mag. Mag puts herself in the way of Maureen's chance of a better life out of fear that she will be left unattended; she intercepts a letter that Pato sent to Maureen with his wishes that she marries him and joins him in Boston. When Maureen finds out her mother has been plotting against her, she pours scorching oil on her mother until she admits that she took the letter. Maureen then goes to Pato's going-away party and returns to her mother, shares the news about her future with Pato, and kills her by bashing her head in. With the last scene the audience finds out that the happy ending Maureen described to her mother never happened and that, indeed, she is insane and delusional.

McDonagh's second play of the series, *A Skull in Connemara*, revolves around Mick Dowd, a known alcoholic who works as a gravedigger, he has to dig up bodies from the graves to make room for new ones. Mick's current job involves digging up his wife's remains, and with them, he also digs up the past as Mick was accused of killing his wife, be it on purpose or in a drink-driving accident. Mick gets help with removing the bodies from their graves from Mairtin Hanlon, while his older brother Thomas, a policeman who dreams of being a big-time detective like the ones on American TV shows, supervises, while trying to solve a crime that happened seven years ago and for which Mick has already done prison time.

In *The Lonesome West*, the last of the three plays, the audience is presented with the brotherly relationship within the Connor family. Coleman and Valene Connor are two brothers whose father has recently passed away from a shotgun 'accident'. The only thing that interests Valene are his material possessions, and the only thing that interests Coleman is getting on Valene's nerves. At the start of the play, we see that a character from *A Skull in Connemara*,

Thomas Hanlon, has drowned himself in the lake, which brings about a long conversation about redemption and the salvation of the human soul. Valene goes to help Father Welsh drag the body out of the lake. As the play progresses, the relationship between Coleman and Valene gets worse and the audience finds out that Coleman killed their father. Valene provided Coleman with a false alibi, and in return, Coleman had to give up all his inheritance to Valene. The state of their relationship deeply troubles the local priest, Father Welsh. In fact, in their relationship, he sees all that he has not managed to fix in his parish. He grows depressed and drowns himself, and as his last act, he writes a letter to the brothers, begging them to fix their relationship as his soul depends on it. For a brief moment, the brothers reconcile, only to return to their life of fighting and bickering, agreeing that they never asked Father Welsh to sacrifice his soul and risk eternal damnation for them.

With all that is stated above, to regard Martin McDonagh's work solely within the In-Yer-Face theatrical movement or form of drama would be a mistake, as his plays uniquely combine the traditional and the new, London's city-talk and his imagined and reconstructed Irish speech, to provide something very distinctive but at the same time universally recognisable. If other In-Yer-Face dramas have strong London-centric qualities, McDonagh shifts this focus. Even though he was born in London, McDonagh spent most of his childhood and formative years surrounded by his Irish aunts and uncles who instilled in him an image of Ireland seen through exiles' eyes--as some kind of fantasy reimagined through emotional stories of Irish nationalism. Fintan O'Toole described him as "a citizen of an indefinite land that is neither Ireland nor England, but shares borders with both. [...] a part of a generation that has completely redefined the term "Anglo-Irish"- a new fusion that arises, not from ascendancy but from exile."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> O'Toole, 1999, p.30

Hybridity does not only define the cultural space of his drama, but also its aesthetic. In common with other In-Yer-Face playwrights, he vaunts a rejection of the theatre itself, and sees his plays in movie-like terms. As he stated: "I'm coming to the theatre with a disrespect for it. I'm coming from a film fan's perspective on theatre."<sup>31</sup> Within his style, he combines the notion of magical rural Ireland passed down to him by the likes of Synge and the new sensibility of the nineties packed with violence and brutality most commonly associated with the movie director Quentin Tarantino and his 1994 hit movie *Pulp Fiction*.

### 5.1) MCDONAGH AND ETHICAL CRITICISM

If we observe McDonagh's plays through the prism of ethical criticism of literature, it is clear that from the position of radical moralism, moderate moralism, and Gaut's ethicism, they are morally defective and, following the argument that morality is connected to aesthetic judgement, aesthetically defective. The plays are filled to the brim with content that includes violence, brutality, breaking and criticising the notions of the Church, faith, and family.

The position of moderate moralism contended that the moral flaws or virtues of an artwork may be included in the aesthetic evaluation of the work, as "moral presuppositions play a structural role in the design of many artworks."<sup>32</sup> Noel Carroll supported his thesis with the 'Common Reason Argument'. He stated that many narrative artworks "require us to use our moral understanding to comprehend"<sup>33</sup> them, meaning that sometimes "it is the case that a moral defect will also"<sup>34</sup> present "an aesthetic defect"<sup>35</sup> as obstructs the audience from being fully absorbed in that work.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Carroll, 1996, p.233

<sup>33</sup> Anderson & Dean, 1998, p.156-157

<sup>34</sup> Anderson & Dean, 1998, p.156-157

<sup>35</sup> Anderson & Dean, 1998, p.156-157

<sup>36</sup> Anderson & Dean, 1998, p.156-157

To define what exactly would make an artwork morally defective and therefore aesthetically defective two arguments are presented, the moral defect argument and the aesthetic defect argument:

1) The moral defect argument:

1. The perspective of the work in question is immoral.
2. Therefore, the work 'invites us to share [this morally] defective perspective' (In one case we are invited to find an evil person sympathetic; in the other case, we are invited to find gruesome acts humorous.)
3. Any work which invites us to share a morally defective perspective is itself, morally defective.
4. Therefore, the work in question is morally defective.<sup>37</sup>

2) The aesthetic defect argument

1. The perspective of the work in question is immoral.
2. The immorality portrayed subverts the possibility of uptake. (In the case of the tragedy, the response of pity is precluded; in the case of the satire the savouring of parody is precluded.)
3. Any work which subverts its own genre is aesthetically defective.
4. Therefore, the work in question is aesthetically defective.<sup>38</sup>

All that is needed to support the moderate moralism perspective is to provide some cases where the reason artwork is morally defective is the same reason the work is aesthetically defective, and Carroll manages to do so (e.g. Mary Devereaux's analysis of *Triumph of The Will* which shows that a morally sensitive audience will be incapable of fully engaging with the film as it glorifies the Nazi regime).<sup>39</sup>

In his plays, McDonagh invites the audience to share a defective perspective and to find gruesome acts humorous. McDonagh keeps his audience on their toes in all his plays by constantly switching between laughter and brutality of horror, for example in *A Skull in Connemara*:

*Mick starts digging up his wife's grave. Thomas sits against the right-hand headstone and looks inside the black sack, grimacing a little.*

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<sup>37</sup> Anderson & Dean, 1998, p.156-157

<sup>38</sup> Anderson & Dean, 1998, p.157

<sup>39</sup> Devereaux, 1998, p. 227-256

THOMAS. Awful morbid work this is, Mick.

MICK. It's work to be done.

THOMAS. Awful ghoulish though.

[...]

THOMAS. When do I come across people only minutes dead?

MICK. Do you not? Oh. I thought the way you do talk about it, just like Hill Street Blues your job is. Bodies flying about everywhere.

THOMAS. I would like there to be bodies flying about everywhere, but there never is.

Mick: Go ahead up north so. You'll be well away. Hang about a bookies or somewhere.<sup>40</sup>

In the same conversation, Mick and Thomas grasp the horrors of a situation in which Mick needs to dig up his own wife's bones in order to make more place in the cemetery and almost simultaneously laugh about the murder of five Catholics in a bookie's shop. The whole act of Mick and Mairtin drunkenly crushing up bones is presented as a gruesome act which progresses into a humorous mess.

Moreover, his plays also include the act of making the spectator sympathise with a deeply morally flawed character. The moral defect argument explicitly states in its second premise that "The immorality portrayed subverts the possibility of uptake", meaning that there is no chance that the audience can appropriately react to tragic or humorous concepts of the plays if they are presented through an immoral agency. Despite that, the audience can feel compassion for Maureen even if we know that she tortured and killed her mother, we can see Mick being deeply troubled by the idea of having to deal with the remains of his wife and feel for him although he killed her, by accident or on purpose. The Connor brothers and their feud draw a similarity with the tale of Cain and Abel, the tale of love, competition, and flawed family ties.

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<sup>40</sup> McDonagh, 1999, p.89

The position of ethicism, proposed by Berys Gaut, shared similar claims with moderate moralism regarding what connects our moral and ethical judgements regarding art. His argument for ethicism stated:

1. A work's manifestation of an attitude is a matter of the work's prescribing certain responses toward the events described.
2. If those responses are unmerited, because unethical, we have reason not to respond in the way prescribed.
3. Our having reason not to respond in the way prescribed is a failure of the work.
4. What responses the work prescribes is of aesthetic relevance.
5. So the fact that we have reason not to respond in the way prescribed is an aesthetic failure of the work, that is to say, is an aesthetic defect.
6. So a work's manifestation of ethically bad attitudes is an aesthetic defect in it.
7. Mutatis mutandis, a parallel argument shows that a work's manifestation of ethically commendable attitudes is an aesthetic merit in it, since we have reason to adopt a prescribed response that is ethically commendable.
8. So Ethicism is true.<sup>41</sup>

Berys argued that a work which prescribed unethical responses because it manifested unmerited attitudes would not be able to create or gain such responses. Moreover, he stated that, because it could not gain the response that was needed, the work was aesthetically defective because of its moral defect. While this may be the case in the aforementioned problem with *The Triumph of Will*, it is not clear how this helps us evaluate McDonagh's work. If a gruesome act is presented as humorous, the audience can still perceive it as simultaneously troubling and comical by understanding parody and dark humour.

## 5.2) MORAL EDUCATION AND IMMORAL ART

Regarding the discussion about moral education and the specific way that artworks can attribute to our moral prosperity, it is important to introduce the distinction between nonce beliefs and fixed norms. As the intended goal of any work of literature or artwork as such is to project and promote certain desires in the reader, it becomes a question if that is permissible with immoral art

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<sup>41</sup> Gaut, 1998, p.195-196.

(a working definition of immoral art is art containing immoral graphic content or revolving around a highly immoral character and requesting the audience to sympathize with him). Wayne Booth states “that narratives, when we are paying attention to them, tend to reshape us<sup>42</sup>”: “a large part of our thought-stream is taken over, for at least the duration of the telling, by the story we are taking in.”<sup>43</sup> This implies that when we read, our thinking becomes that of the author presented through the characters. Considering this claim, “morally bad literature is the literature that promulgates badly fixed norms”.<sup>44</sup>

With the themes and stylistic characteristics of the In-Yer-Face movement and McDonagh's opus, there are a few questions that arise regarding the statement that morally bad literature promulgates badly fixed norms. Is it possible that by shocking the audience with graphic content, the author calls upon a reaction working against the deepening of immorality? Could it be the case that the author is demanding the audience to stop showing indifference to pain and violence by portraying such acts?

The difference between fixed norms and nonce beliefs is that nonce beliefs are embraced by the reader only for the duration of the story, while “fixed norms are beliefs on which the narrative depends for its effect but which are also by implication applicable in the ‘real’ world”<sup>45</sup>, one outside the storyline. The problem emerges when and if an audience cannot separate nonce beliefs from fixed norms and they try to carry out the beliefs shown in the narrative in the real world. The arguments presented by theories such as moralism and ethicism claim that if the nonce beliefs presented within the work are immoral, the fixed norms in the work shall also be immoral and this will affect the aesthetic worth of the work in question.

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<sup>42</sup>Koppelman, 2005, p.1644

<sup>43</sup> Booth, 1988, p.38

<sup>44</sup> Koppelman, 2005, p.1644

<sup>45</sup> Koppelman, 2005, p.1646



When discussing the idea that good moral literature can help morally educate its audience, there are two prominent authors: Wayne C. Booth and Martha Nussbaum. The latter mentioned was the strongest advocate for the thesis that good art has the capacity to play an important role in our moral education. She drew her understanding of morality from Aristotle and her interest in ethical criticism stemmed from the desire to show that a selection of literature could prove valuable and useful to moral philosophy and the development of important moral skills and abilities.

Nussbaum based her understanding of moral knowledge on Henry James who suggested that “is not simply an intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply an intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception, it is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, she contended that it was precisely the artistic conventions and stylistic devices that are used by writers that allow us to show “our inner lives in a very full and realistic way”<sup>47</sup> because they involve the imagination of the audience; indeed, she argues that a part of human nature and actions regarding ethics can only be thoroughly and correctly represented if they are embodied in art: “a responsible action [...] is a highly context-specific and nuanced and responsive thing whose rightness could not be captured in a description that fell short of the artistic.”<sup>48</sup>

While I agree with the claim that art has the capacity to play a significant role in shaping our moral understanding and perceiving the world, I would contend that the claim that this feature belongs to art that presents only ethically commendable content is highly exclusive and reminiscent of Plato's fears about presenting anything less than the ideal in art. As was mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, graphic content and morally questionable decisions and actions

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<sup>46</sup> Nussbaum, 1987, p.174

<sup>47</sup> Peek, “Ethical Criticism of Art”

<sup>48</sup> Nussbaum, 1987, p.176

presented in drama are one of the key constituents of the whole genre. Furthermore, Aristotle himself claimed that the crucial elements of drama which can bring to the audience the feeling of catharsis are moments that invoke pity and fear.

When we examine In-Yer-Face drama and McDonagh's plays, we can see that, behind the brutality and the grotesque, there are themes that need to be discussed so that a modern audience could get a sense of relief. As the sensibility of audiences changes over time, it is plausible to say that the late-20<sup>th</sup> century created a more resilient audience, one that required brutality so it could employ the principle introduced by Aristotle "a change from ignorance to knowledge."<sup>49</sup>

McDonagh, in his post-modernistic way, deals with deeply ingrained and troubling themes of Irish life such as family, the Catholic church, addiction, sex and toxic masculinity, faith and death, socio-economic decline and consumerism. His plays are packed with black humour, and parody is used to depict weighty ethical topics. The characters compare historical and recent events like the Irish famine, the plight of the Birmingham Six, violent conflicts in Northern Ireland and the wars that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia to their personal troubles and even joke about it, showing that in their world violence has lost its shock value and is seen as an everyday occurrence.

The Connemara of his plays is not a magical and serene place, it is dull and bleak; in O'Toole's words, it is:

a place in which it is hard to remember anyone's name, in which news of murders floats in through the television screen, in which the blurring of personal identities makes the line between the real and the unreal dangerously thin. And behind these garish colours, there are shadows in which madness and violence lurk, waiting to emerge.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Dean, 2003, p.29.

<sup>50</sup> O'Toole, 1999, xv.

But this madness is depicted as happening in a location that is not too far from the real-world. The playwright exploits dramatic exaggerations to showcase their sociological reality, but simultaneously, “McDonagh makes sure that the action is continually brushing up against verifiable actuality.”<sup>51</sup>

Dealing with the notion of the Catholic Church and its significance within the Irish community he employs the character of Father Welsh who becomes the running joke of the whole trilogy, as he is a leader of a parish that cannot even remember his name:

VALENE: Father Walsh, now...

COLEMAN: Father Walsh, Father Walsh...

*Welsh pulls his fists out of the bowl, red raw, stifles his scream again, looks over the shocked Valene and Coleman in despair and torment, smashes the bowl off the table and dashes out through the front door, his fists clutched to his chest in pain.*

WELSH (exiting, screaming) Me name’s Welsh!!!

Valene and Coleman stare after him a moment or two.

COLEMAN: Sure that fella’s pure mad.

VALENE: He’s outright mad.<sup>52</sup>

In all of the plays of the *Leenane Trilogy*, we can see characters dealing with the paedophilia scandals that came to light in Ireland in the 1990s, with news that hundreds of priests abused thousands of children over six decades that ultimately led to the secularisation of Ireland. In *The Lonesome West*, Coleman tries consoling Fr Welsh by stating he is a good priest because he is not a paedophile:

COLEMAN: Ah there be a lot worse priests than you, Father, I’m sure. The only thing with you is you’re a bit too weedy and you’re a terror for the drink and you have doubts about Catholicism. Apart from that you’re a fine priest. Number one you don’t go abusing five-year olds so, sure, doesn’t that give you a head-start over half of the priests in Ireland?<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> O’Toole, 1999, xv.

<sup>52</sup> McDonagh, 1999, p.159

<sup>53</sup> McDonagh, 1999, p.135

The priest himself, when talking about his parish and the people of Connemara, admits that he has not fulfilled his role in leading them towards morality and a good Catholic life. In *The Lonesome West*, he states that “God has no jurisdiction in this town. No jurisdiction at all”,<sup>54</sup> and he calls his parish “the murder capital of fecking Europe”<sup>55</sup>. Ultimately, he even takes his own life in a futile final plea to the Connor brothers to stop their violence and brutality. Any residual notion of faith is presented through acts such as Valene’s consumeristic obtaining of plastic figurines of saints objects, or in the hope that vol-au-vents will be served at the funeral ; as O’Toole says, in this world, “The Catholic faith has melted like Valene’s plastic saints and martyrs when his brother, out of spite, bakes them in the brand-new stove”.<sup>56</sup>

Mick and Mairtin’s behaviour in *A Skull in Connemara* shows that the memory of the dead is a joke, as they dig up bones and smash them to bits in a very grotesque way. Moreover, Mick also jokes about the Great Famine of 1840. In *The Lonesome West*, we can see that the characters, for a brief moment, feel a loss after Fr Welsh:

GIRLEEN (*pause*): Father Welsh drowned himself in the lake last night, same place as Tom Hanlon. They dragged his body out this morning. His soul in hell he’s talking about, that only ye can save for him. (*Pause.*) You notice he never asked me to go saving his soul. I’d’ve liked to’ve saved his soul. I’d’ve been honoured, but no. (*Crying.*) Only mad drunken, pig-shite feck-brained thicks he goes asking.<sup>57</sup>

[...]

COLEMAN: It’s always the best ones go to hell. Me, probably straight to heaven I’ll go, even though I blew the head off poor dad. So long as I go confessing to it anyways. That’s the good thing about being Catholic. You can shoot your dad in the head and it doesn’t even matter at all.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, we can also see the very idea of family being torn apart. In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Mag psychologically tortures her daughter Maureen to the point of her completely running wild and killing her mother. In a scene where Maureen thinks she has the upper hand and

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<sup>54</sup>McDonagh, 1999, p.134

<sup>55</sup> McDonagh, 1999, p.134

<sup>56</sup> O’Toole, 1999, xiii

<sup>57</sup> McDonagh, 1999, p.177

<sup>58</sup> McDonagh, 199, p.181-182

that she can finally break free from her mother's grasp, Mag doesn't even think twice before letting her know that she knows the soul-crushing truth which ultimately leads to her demise. It is a story about a mother who used the pretence of wanting to protect her daughter in order to have someone to take care of her.

In *A Skull in Connemara*, the audience sympathises with Mick because he must dig up his wife's remains, only to discover that he killed her, and it is unknown if was because of his drink-driving or because he wanted to do so. In this play, a lot of dialogue is dedicated to the problem of alcoholism:

MAIRTIN: There you got me hoping I was working with a fella up and slaughtered his wife with an axe of something, when all it was was an oul cheap-ass drink-driving. Aren't they ten-a-penny? Wouldn't it be hard to find somebody round here who hasn't killed somebody drink-driving? Or if not a somebody then a heifer, or at least a dog. Didn't you?? Marcus Rigby kill twins with his tractor, and him over seventy?<sup>59</sup>

[...]

MICK: I had three uncles drowned on sick.

MAIRTIN (*pause*): But, sure, drowned on sick is nothing to go shouting about. Doesn't everybody drown on sick?

MICK: Three uncles now, I'm saying.

MAIRTIN: Three uncles or no. Drowned on sick is ten-a-penny now, Mick. A million have drowned on sick. Oul black fellas. Jimi Hendrix. Drowned on wee I'm talking about. Drowned on wee you have to go out of your way. Drowned on sick you don't. And of course. Sick is there in your gob already. Wee is nowhere near.<sup>60</sup>

For Father Welsh, a place like Connemara, with its bleakness and apathy, drives people to addiction.

WELSH: Like an alcoholic you paint me as half the time.

COLEMAN: Well that isn't a big job of painting. A bent child with no paint could paint you as an alcoholic. There's no great effort needed in that.

WELSH: I never touched the stuff before I came to this parish. This parish would drive you to drink.

COLEMAN: I suppose it would, only some people don't need as much of a drive as others. Some need only a short walk.

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<sup>59</sup> McDonagh, 1999, p.197

<sup>60</sup> McDonagh, 1999, p.106-107

WELSH: I'm no alcoholic, Coleman. I like drink is all.<sup>61</sup>

McDonagh chooses to take problems that are universally known and then he pushes them to the extreme by using the grotesque and the absurd. The audience can trace some aspects of these plays to everyday life—as O'Toole notes, “dirty realism is continually shading into heightened epic”<sup>62</sup>—and the basic norms are turned upside down and presented as something monstrous. Through his plays, he presents to the audience a world where everyone is dismissive of pain and violence, both the villains and the victims. However, the audience is not expected to interpret the given content as fixed norms, as there is in these plays a distinct cry out for a rebellion against the world. To quote Artaud: “There is no cruelty without consciousness and without the application of consciousness. It is consciousness that gives to the exercise of every act of life its blood-red color, its cruel nuance, since it is understood that life is always someone's death.”<sup>63</sup> Spectators are fully aware that this is not how things should be.

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<sup>61</sup> McDonagh, 1999, p.130

<sup>62</sup> O'Toole, 1999, xvii

<sup>63</sup> Artaud, 1958, p.102

## 6) CONCLUSION

Martin McDonagh's plays portray an array of relationships and topics that occur in real life and which were present in the nineties. However, he shows them in such a brutal and exaggerated way that they seem alien and strange to the audience, even if, at the same time, the audience can recognize standard literary tropes (the brother relationship, the mother-daughter relationship).

Ethical criticism as a branch of philosophy of literature and aesthetics provides positions such as moderate moralism and ethicism that claim that a work of art can be perceived as aesthetically defective if it provides morally defective content. However, the topics and actions in McDonagh's plays are subverted to fit the chaotic aesthetic and absurd theatre of the late-20<sup>th</sup> century. Regarding the question of moral education, they can be seen almost as a warning notice for the audience: all these relationships are poisonous and, taking out the highly-stylised violence and grotesquerie, are present in today's life. So, I would contend that the audience, while watching McDonagh's plays, sees the extremes to which these relationships and ways of thinking can be pushed, and this recognition releases those harmful emotions in the theatre. The killing of one's mother, father, brother or a wife are all nonce beliefs that show that the characters have all lost hope in a better tomorrow and have fallen victims of a dull and bleak present time. Furthermore, all his characters are immensely impulsive and use violence as a medium in a world where language and society have failed them.

The brutal depictions do not serve to morally corrupt its audience. On the contrary, highly immoral actions are used to ignite in the audience a need for a moral resolution. There is a certain pathos that can be traced back to Greek tragedy: all these plays conclude without a resolution, there is no *deus ex machina*, and we are left perplexed with a great feeling of uncertainty. There is

a feeling of emptiness and disappointment when you realise that the plays show no growth of character and no result in the end. Maybe the most successful of the three plays in creating this feeling is *The Lonesome West*: Fr Welsh takes his own life in the hope that the Connor brothers will grow and learn from loss and, for a moment, the audience gets this faint sense of resolution, just to have it taken away when the two brothers start arguing again. Extreme acts bring to the viewer a new sensibility to pain. To quote Sarah Kane: “It is important to commit to memory events which have never happened – so that they never happen. I'd rather risk overdose in the theatre than in life”.

The use of these actions, observed through the position held by Martha Nussbaum, shows the audience the universality of violence and brutality. The real world often is a gruesome place filled with pain and loss, and McDonagh shows a great deal of loss through his plays, be it the loss of one's future, of a loved one, or of family. As O'Toole notes, “By bringing the slaughter of Bosnia and Northern Ireland or the failings of British justice to mind they destroy any illusion that the bloody death and petty cruelty that afflict this fictional Leenane are either wild exaggerations or peculiar, endemic Irish failings.”<sup>64</sup> Even though the grotesque in his plays is unsettling, it is not impossible, and it is all-embracing. In this light, it can be observed that McDonagh uses post-modernistic dramatic devices and seamlessly merges them with the loud aesthetics of the nineties to deal with atemporal literary themes, in order that his audiences experience a new, modern-day, catharsis.

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<sup>64</sup> O'Toole, 1999, xvii



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