

**Martin McDonagh: A Violent Spectacle**

by

Brandon Gray

Submitted to the Department of Cinema Studies  
School of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College  
State University of New York

May 2019

Sponsor: Edwin Rifkin

Second Reader: Gregory Taylor

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### Introduction

It was a natural step for esteemed playwright Martin McDonagh to move into the cinematic arena. McDonagh has had a long history of speaking pejoratively of theater and refused to acknowledge any significant influence from his stage experiences. He had not shown the same animosity towards motion pictures, citing television and film as his sources of inspiration, with filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino as two of his major influences.<sup>1</sup> Quoted in a 2018 interview, he stated he has a "respect for the whole history of films and a slight disrespect for theater."<sup>2</sup> It is rare to see a playwright outwardly express negativity toward theatre. While this behavior can in part be attributed to McDonagh playing out his role as a rebel or provocateur, the influence of film on his writing style is apparent in both his plays and films.

McDonagh had shown a love for film and a talent for playwriting. However, early on in his career the theater was his only option. Calling his early attempts at screenwriting "shit," he stated that "the reason I didn't write plays initially was because I thought theatre was the worst of all the art forms."<sup>3</sup> Like many artists he had to follow the path that offered him the best prospect for success, always planning on shifting to his first love when the time was right. Therefore, he reluctantly began his career as a playwright, honing his talents as a storyteller. Despite his condescension to the theatre, he showed immense writing talent and threw himself into the craft, famously writing the first six of his produced plays in a span of ten months, creating some of the most highly regarded plays in Irish theater history, plays that even he -- a "film boy"-- could enjoy.<sup>4</sup>

Despite his early success in theatre, McDonagh was hesitant to make the transition into film. He realized that directing a film is a much larger and more complex production than was involved in theater; there are more aspects of production and post-production than he was familiar with as a playwright. He was determined not to make a film unless he could do it properly. If McDonagh was going to write a film script, he felt that he had to direct it himself. Being a playwright, McDonagh was used to a certain level of control during the theatrical production process, a privilege not typically shared by screenwriters with regard to scripts they create. As a narcissistic artist, McDonagh would never give his stories over to someone without the final say in how they were going to be realized. When McDonagh finally did make his first short film in 2005, he was forced to depend on his more experienced collaborators to produce his screen vision.

*Six Shooter*, his first short film, was not released until 2005, nearly a decade after his premiere in theater with *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in 1996. As a novice film director McDonagh used his strong script and the directing abilities he had learned in theater to tell this story. *Six Shooter* reads much like a play, centered on a handful of characters talking in a confined space. McDonagh was painfully aware of his lack of film production experience, writing the film to a scope he felt he was capable of realizing. Unable to get as extensively involved in all of the production facets as he would in his later films, McDonagh relied on his crew to bring forth the cinematic vision. Conveying his regrets about this in a later interview he stated,

I didn't take control over many of the aspects of filmmaking...with the director of photography, or costume designers, or production people...All of those things I needed to do.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these misgivings, McDonagh is proud of how the film turned out, even more so after he was awarded an Oscar for the best live action short film in 2006.

His inexperience was not lost on veteran Irish actor Brendon Gleeson who, at one point during the production, had to stop a pivotal scene from being cut out by threatening to walk off the set after McDonagh failed to defend the scene to his producers. Gleeson states in an interview with The New York Times, “He’s such a genius he won an Oscar without having a clue!”<sup>6</sup>. While it is true that McDonagh is an unusual storyteller, his success is largely attributable to his work in the theatre when he developed new skills and found a distinct narrative voice that uses violence and the subversion of narrative expectations to challenge many storytelling traditions. Without these, not only would the opportunity to make a short film not have occurred but, by his own admission, he would have not been prepared to create it at all.

As McDonagh continues his career in both film and theatre, the symbiotic relationship between the two mediums becomes even more apparent with time. Each influences the other, creating a more complete version of McDonagh’s overall narrative undertaking. Through this essay I will show how McDonagh’s films and plays are in conversation with each other. Looking at McDonagh through the perspective of being a film auteur, this essay will offer an analysis of McDonagh’s organic progression as he delved deeper into filmmaking.

### **The Beginning: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane***

Patrick Lonergan, Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at the National University of Ireland in Galway recounts McDonagh’s theatrical debut in his essay, “Martin McDonagh and the Ethics of Irish Storytelling.”<sup>7</sup> The premier of McDonagh’s 1996 *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* took place in Galway at a time of great social and cultural change in Ireland. The

movement towards more liberal societal ideas in previous years, such as the introduction of legal divorce, the decriminalization of homosexuality, and the election of the first female president of the Republic of Ireland, had marked a transition into Ireland's new age. With the waxing of a cultural progression, there also was an undermining of the old societal tenets that dominated earlier Irish life. Ireland's art and theatrical scene reflected this change, overtly pushing for new social and aesthetic boundaries. Galway had recently completed a newly rebuilt Civic Center and it was decided to present this first play by McDonagh, an entirely unknown playwright at the time, for their grand opening. With the legitimacy of being produced by the well-established Druid Theatre Company, audiences gathered outside the renovated theater eager to see the work of the young, up-and-coming playwright. There was a sense of anticipation in the air. Members of the audience were surprised by the play's old-fashioned title that seemed to recall an older Ireland they thought they would be leaving behind.

As the audience took their seats, the spotlight turned on, illuminating the stage and revealing a scene with a set that would immediately signify an outdated Ireland to the audience. Playing on the long history of Irish theater, the scene was set in the kitchen of a rural cottage, complete with some shabby furniture, a fire poker by the fireplace, and a crucifix prominently visible on the wall. The scene unfolded as a seemingly familiar tale of mother and daughter dynamics inducing the audience into a false state of familiarity. However, this was by design. The theatre manager had chosen McDonagh's *Beauty Queen* to open the new theater because he wanted the audience to feel "Oh lovely, this is a Druid play, we know where we are...and then..."<sup>8</sup> She did not state exactly what she intended to happen next, but she made it clear that she meant to mark an emphatic departure from Ireland's theatrical past. She saw in McDonagh's

writing a quality that would contort the traditional formula of Irish theater, and she entrusted him with this important iconoclastic role.

Lonergan described the audience's experience:

They must have been aware that they had seen something that was simultaneously over-familiar and alienating: a play that was full of codes and signals that seemed to promise conventional meanings, but which instead had led them down several interpretive blind alleys<sup>9</sup>

McDonagh displayed a gift for using preconceived storytelling patterns to manipulate his audience's expectations. As the play progressed, hints of darkness slowly began to creep into the idyllic Ireland commonly created in past Irish theater. When the play came to its blood-stained final acts, audiences lost all comfortable expectations, giving way to a new, volatile theater experience. The fire poker introduced in the opening scene is turned into a murder weapon in the final scenes of *Beauty Queen*. This completes the play's dismantling of the notion of traditional "Irishness." Any sense of familiarity that had been developed in the opening acts was now decimated. The overturned audience's reaction to *Beauty Queen* were polarized, either thrilled by the anomalous theater experience or significantly alienated by its attack on the familiar. Regardless of which camp one was in, as one left the premiere of McDonagh's first play it was evident that something important had occurred in the theater.<sup>10</sup>

By examining what McDonagh was able to achieve with this first play, it is clear that it had an undeniable impact on his film writing, despite his unwavering denial of it. In order to create the subversive manipulation McDonagh had so successfully achieved, he must have had a thorough understanding of both the history and form of Irish theater. However, he simultaneously reveals his disdain for theater through his cruel undermining of those institutions. The structure of McDonagh's plays are actually surprisingly traditional, showing a strict

adherence to classical stage play structures. It is the juxtaposition of his traditional narrative structure with shocking contemporary subject matter that creates an unsettling effect in McDonagh's writing.

While *Beauty Queen* was marked by references to Ireland's playwriting history, McDonagh's film influences are still apparent. Laura Eldred makes a comparison of *Beauty Queen* to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) in her essay "Martin McDonagh and the Contemporary Gothic."<sup>11</sup> The parallel of themes and images are quite intentional on the part of the author/director. Mag, the mother character in *Beauty Queen*, sits in a rocking chair and the overtly horrific revelation of her now-dead body moving strangely instantly calls to mind the paralleled ending scene in *Psycho*. Maureen Folan, Mag's daughter, has murdered her mother due to the sexual repression apparently caused by Mag, comparable to the Hitchcock's Norman Bates. Furthermore, both characters subsequently acquire aspects of their mother's personality respectively after they have killed them. Norman entirely loses himself, leading to his complete mental breakdown in Hitchcock's final scene showing the fulfillment of his internal metamorphosis into his mother. At the end of *Beauty Queen* Maureen has assumed the verbal and mental ticks displayed by her mother. McDonagh goes as far as to state this transformation through his character Ray calling Maureen "the exact feckking image of your mother"<sup>12</sup>

It is not surprising that McDonagh would draw from this masterpiece by Hitchcock, but as Eldred explains, these similarities are more purposeful than simply an homage. The first half of *Psycho* plays out as a suspense film with Marion Crane as the apparent protagonist. After the film's infamous shower scene occurs when Marion is viciously killed, the viewer's expectations are flipped on its head as the film reveals itself to be a horror film. Eldred states "This allusion to *Psycho* alerts McDonagh's audience that he has played a similar trick--the genre has changed"<sup>13</sup>

The transition in *Beauty Queen* from domestic comedy to violently horrific drama is conveyed to the audience in its overt allusion to *Psycho*. As McDonagh's career evolves, his interplay of genres becomes more deliberate and fluid. His manipulation of genre draws from both film and theater.

Beginning in 1996 with *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996) McDonagh has been categorized as a part of what was called "in-yer-face" theatre, named for the brutal nature of violence he includes in his plays. In-yer-face theater is a style of theater emerging from Britain in the 1990s that explores the extremes of human emotions, usually through the use of violence and sex. Theater critic Alekz Sierz, who coined the term in a book of the same name, describes it as theater that accentuates "the sense of rupture."<sup>14</sup> In-yer-face theater is designed to shock audiences through using intentionally provocative subject matter, deliberately pushing the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. In-yer-face theater aligns perfectly with McDonagh's rebellious sensibility, using it to push the boundaries not only of Irish society but of the theater industry he found so limiting. The abrasiveness of in-yer-face theater is not designed simply for the purpose of shocking the audience but to force them to look at issues society tends to avoid.

McDonagh was put on Sierz's list of in-yer-face playwrights which he divided into two groups. The first he called "the big three" consisting of Sarah Cane, Mark Ravenhill and Anthony Neilson.<sup>15</sup> Sierz put McDonagh in a second category of playwrights who developed an individual style that was influenced by "the big three." Rather than showing sexually explicit images, McDonagh's theater confronts the audience with intense violence through action and language. The characters in McDonagh's plays display behavioral characteristics of in-yer-face theater that Sierz described as "the language is usually filthy, characters talk about unmentionable subjects...humiliate each another, experience unpleasant emotions, become



suddenly violent.”<sup>16</sup> *The Beauty Queen* and McDonagh’s subsequent plays blended in-yer-face theater with a traditional Irish nationalistic backdrop , using the brutality of in-yer face theater to contrast and challenge older Irish themes. McDonagh’s focus lies in the dimensions of human nature. The lower-class Irish in his plays are portrayed as drunken, violent and ignorant people, challenging the sentimental, idealized depiction typically honored in Irish theater.

McDonagh sets up *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in the kind of realism found in more traditional Irish theater. This realism is subverted through bursts of exaggerated cruelty, like when Mag scalds her mother’s hand in boiling oil, taking the play into the excruciating realm of the absurd. McDonagh’s plays blend realism with a touch of surrealism, blurring the lines of reality in order to reveal truth.

I suppose I walk that line between comedy and cruelty, because I think one illuminates the other. And, yeah, I tend to push things as far as I can because I think you can see things more clearly through exaggeration than through reality<sup>17</sup>

In keeping with in-yer-face theater, McDonagh exaggerates the atrocities committed by his characters making them impossible to ignore. The unnerving violence of McDonagh’s plays takes the audience out of their comfortable entertainment zone. It challenges the audiences’ thoughts of human decency, disturbing their otherwise passive identification of truth. Showing the extremes of human behavior puts into perspective what it means to be human. The truth McDonagh explores in his plays is not simply that humans are bad, but that humanity is defined by *both* good and evil. By choosing to ignore the darkness of humanity, we ignore our true nature.

However, McDonagh does not simply rely on cruelty to disarm the audience. To McDonagh the comedy in his work is “important to (him) as the violence and the sadness.”<sup>18</sup> McDonagh uses dark humor and brash witty dialogue, as well as periodic absurd situations,

steeped in irony. In his essay “Martin McDonagh's freewheeling and slightly surreal Irish national theatre, in-yer-face!” Rhea Vanhellemont states, “What is more, the playwrights mix their cruel stories with clever humor. The audience will at times be torn between horror and laughter.”<sup>19</sup> This combination of comedy and cruelty displaces the audience’s tendency to quick judgment of the horrific acts occurring on stage. The audience is unable to completely disavow Maureen--despite her horrendous actions--in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* because they have been laughing along with her before she commits these atrocities. The audience can no longer dismiss the character as simply evil but then is forced to question how they can laugh at such a character.

In-yer-face theater exploits the immediacy of live theater, where audiences exist within the same space as the actors in the performance and in the same real time. The audience of live theater experiences what occurs on stage directly, often evoking a visceral response. It is the now-time shared by the players in the story and audience, and the presence of live actors who portray extreme acts of violence in a simultaneous sense of time that freights the power of the drama in in-yer-face theater. In the practice of in-yer-face theater the violence “is mainly about the relationship between stage and audience.”<sup>20</sup> With this, McDonagh is able to use theater as an experience to *show* a story rather than simply tell viewers about an issue. “In-Yer-Face theatre is not [“] ‘debating issues’ but establishes ‘its actions and ideas on the audience’.”<sup>21</sup>

*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is generally considered a significant achievement, garnering McDonagh six Tony award nominations along with both critical and commercial success.<sup>22</sup> In 2016, twenty years after the play’s initial production, the Druid Theater Company staged a revival, allowing audiences to experience the play again in a new light. Having an opportunity to see his older work for a second time allowed McDonagh to reevaluate his

inaugural play, now as a seasoned dramatist. In an interview with The Irish Times, McDonagh was able to give his retrospective view of this work. When asked about the sensationalism of violence in the play, which has been cited by critics as one of his benchmarks throughout his writing career, McDonagh replied “I wouldn’t say it’s sensational...I would say it’s truthful to that story”<sup>23</sup>.

### **The Pillowman**

McDonagh’s work in theater up to this point consisted of six works, all of which take place in rural Ireland. McDonagh’s plays continued their use of dark comedy and abhorrent violence, gaining him increasing success. However, with his rise in popularity came considerable critical backlash, from both the English theater community and scholars of Irish drama. These critics attacked him for purposely exploiting Irish stereotypes and for representing Irish people as violent, unintelligent, and gullible. Rather than redress the many critical objections to his earlier iconoclasm, McDonagh opted to leave behind his own critique of the old Irish sensibility. Rather, he chose to work in a completely different style and structure, one reminiscent of the greatest Irish-born playwright of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Samuel Beckett. *The Pillowman* is often seen as a direct response to these specific criticisms with its major theme of autonomy of an author to write freely without responsibility to critical reaction to their work.

In The Irish Times interview, McDonagh also discusses *The Pillowman* (2003). McDonagh favors *The Pillowman* along with *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* among his other theatrical works, recognizing them as staples of his early career. McDonagh regards *The Pillowman* as the closest thing to an artistic statement of all of his plays. “I don’t usually want to try to say something in a play, but that one probably says as much, in a poetic way, as I’ll ever want to, or try to.”<sup>24</sup>

McDonagh has always had a relatively contrarian personality. It is in character for him to use *The Pillowman* to rejoin criticisms. In his book entitled The Theatre and Films of Martin McDonagh, Lonergan explains that *The Pillowman* was written at an important time in McDonagh's career.<sup>25</sup>

If we apply the apparent theme of *The Pillowman* to McDonagh's critical reception, a clear message seems to emerge: that he is entitled to write plays however he wishes, and if a theater-maker or audience member in Ohio or Tokyo or anywhere else misinterprets his intentions, then McDonagh should not be held responsible.<sup>26</sup>

*The Pillowman* deconstructs the role of authorial intent, separating the author from responsibility for an audience's reception to the created work. This directly contradicts the point of view of those critics who placed blame on McDonagh for giving Ireland a "bad image." Lonergan explains that despite the play's themes and structure, aligning it as a rebuttal to critical backlash of McDonagh's work is misguided. He makes clear that the play was not written with that intent. McDonagh wrote *The Pillowman* in 1997. While this occurred after *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*--and well after his second play, *The Cripple of Iishman* (1998)-- it was done before McDonagh had become world renowned. Regardless of his original intention, when writing *The Pillowman* McDonagh was certainly aware of most of these criticisms at the time and chose to release the play as a way of changing overall modalities with his Beckett homage.

*The Pillowman* is set in an unnamed country, described by one of the characters as "a totalitarian fucking dictatorship."<sup>27</sup> Katurian, an aspiring writer is being held for questioning by police regarding a series of dreadful murders. The murders in question are all reenactments of events occurring in Katurian's short stories. Moreover, the murder victims are all children. Katurian is presumed guilty due to the parallels between the actual murders and those he created for his stories. The interrogating officers are ready to go to any measures to get his confession and send Katurian off to be executed. They even go as far as torturing Katurian's mentally

impaired brother Michal. Despite Katurian's continued assertion that what he writes are just stories with no far-reaching meaning, he vehemently insists that they have no actual connection to the murders being investigated. The officers nevertheless insist that he is connected because of his stories. Although the two officers, Ariel and Tupolski, emphasize that they have more evidence on him than "disagreements with his fucking prose style."<sup>28</sup> Their violent interrogation seems only concerned with the content of his stories. The officers morally object to Katurian's stories for their depiction of the killing of the children. They view him as guilty regardless of his direct involvement--or lack thereof—in the enacted murders.

*The Pillowman* is the most minimalist of McDonagh's plays in terms of set design and dramatic scope. The entire play takes place in two nearby interrogation rooms. McDonagh strips the play down in order to remove any distractions from what he is trying to say, à la Beckett. He creates only four characters: Katurian, his older brother Michal, and the two officers, Ariel and Tupolski. With no signifiers from the outside world, the world of *The Pillowman* is created and defined only by information given to us by these characters. McDonagh then gives them only minimal actions to perform, putting the emphasis mostly on language in the play. He does this to examine the nature of language and to mock critics who have over-analyzed his work. The two officers stand in for McDonagh's critics, scrutinizing Katurian's words as he speaks assigning their own interpretations of his words that he never intended.

Coined by theater critic Martin Esslin in his book The Theatre of the Absurd, the Theater of the Absurd "shows the world as an incomprehensible place".<sup>29</sup> *The Beauty Queen, The Pillowman*, and the entirety of McDonagh's work in theater are centered around exploring the absurdity of human nature.

Thus, the absurd and fantastic goings-on of the Theatre of the Absurd will, in the end, be found to reveal the irrationality of the human condition and the illusion of what we thought was its apparent logical structure.<sup>30</sup>

As with his use of in-yer-face theater, McDonagh employs extreme behavior to reveal human truths. McDonagh's plays carry the outlook of melancholy hopelessness of Existentialism, showing the absurdity of human effort due to the meaninglessness of life.

Like all of the characters in McDonagh's plays, the four in *The Pillowman* struggle to express what they are trying to say through words. They often repeat themselves in attempts to assert their meanings more emphatically. Katurian, a writer struggling to come up with a word to describe one of his stories, describes it as "something-esque. What kind of esque? I can't remember."<sup>31</sup> The irony of having Katurian, a writer, fail to think of the word to properly express the characteristics of his own story ironically reveals language to be an unreliable way to communicate ideas. Like with the Theater of the Absurd McDonagh shows "distrust of language as a means of communication."<sup>32</sup> A key characteristic of the Theater of the Absurd is that speech cannot adequately express contradictions inherent in the human condition, and it tries to alert its audience to the prospect of finding more authentic forms of communication beyond conventional language.

The characters in *The Pillowman* spend much of the play dissecting and correcting each other's speech. Their senseless bickering over seemingly frivolous grammatical errors highlights the absurdity of how language is constructed. The domineering prison officers scrutinize Katurian's choice of words as an assertion of their own power, purposely misconstruing his words and making him repeat himself unnecessarily. These characters dispute the meaning of simple words and assertions implying that speech cannot be read at face value. This impeaches

speech as an accurate source of factual information. Tensions arise in the scenes as the characters struggle to communicate, while adding an underlying violence to their words.

The characters in *The Pillowman* are strategically shown not to have full mastery of language. This creates a challenge between what the audience hears and what is happening on stage visually. The audience is unable to understand fully or identify with the characters through their inability to express their motives. Ariel attempts to rationalize his actions with a story he tells about children giving him candy when he is older. His story only amounts to a delusional rambling which is later mocked by Tupolski, underscoring the story's absurdity. In the Theater of the Absurd "emotional identification with the characters is replaced by a puzzled, critical attention."<sup>33</sup> The audience's inability to identify with the characters serve to alienate the spectator. Emotionally disconnected, the audience is invited to critically analyze the absurdity of what is happening on stage.

McDonagh departs from the Theater of the Absurd in his use of traditional, narrative plot structure. Absurdist Theater is traditionally devoid of any discernable plot, believing there is no hope in the absurdity of life making any narrative plot action meaningful. A plot structure gives the audience something to latch onto as relatable and familiar. The plot of McDonagh's plays have an overtly traditional structure that is meticulously crafted to the point of being criticized for being too structured. McDonagh uses the absurdity in his plays as a way to subvert that structure. The narrative structure of *The Pillowman* is decidedly more complex than in his other plays. It "unfolds layers of reversals, somewhat in non-sequential fashion and others told through the stories told by the central character Katurian"<sup>34</sup>

*The Pillowman* is filled with plot twists and deceptions, leaving the audience unable to trust their own earlier perceptions. Katurian's mentally impaired brother Michal is also being

held and by the two officers in a separate room. Tupolski and Ariel try to coerce Katurian into confessing his guilt to them by informing him they are torturing his brother. Katurian (and the audience) can hear Michal's piercing shrieks from the other room. Ariel even shows Katurian a box of what he says is Michal's chopped off fingers to manipulate Katurian's emotions. When Katurian is later allowed to go into the room, he finds that Michal is completely unharmed and that he had not been tortured at all. This undermines the authenticity of information given to the audience throughout the play, embodied by Katurian's words to Michal.

KATURIAN. Why are we being so stupid? Why are we believing everything they're telling us?

MICHAL. Why?

KATURIAN. This is just like storytelling.

MICHAL. I know.

KATURIAN. A man comes into a room, says "Your mother's dead," yeah?

MICHAL. I know my mother's dead.

KATURIAN. No, I know, but in a story. A man comes in to a room, says to another man, "Your mother's dead." What do we know? Do we know the man's mother is dead?

MICHAL. Yes.

KATURIAN. No we don't

MICHAL. No, we don't.

KATURIAN. All we know is that a man has come into a room and said to another man, "Your mother is dead." That is all we know. First rule of storytelling. "Don't believe everything you read in the papers."<sup>35</sup>

The self-referencing makes it clear within the play's dialogue that this play is ultimately a story about storytelling. However, the question remains: is the audience meant to believe the story to be true? English author John Higgs lists this device as one of the qualities of postmodernism: "There are many interpretations of a work and it cannot be argued that one particular perspective is the true one".<sup>36</sup> It is up to audiences to sift through what each account of the truth is in order to figure out one's own interpretation of the story. In postmodern art there typically is no single true version; each audience member's experience is different from what they perceived initially in a work of art. McDonagh is keenly conscious of this transaction of



perception and content, formulating the story to invite the audience to take on a more active role in the story's interpretation. For example, when Michal tells Katurian that he has told the officers the truth, the writer asks his brother, "Which particular truth?"<sup>37</sup>

As the play continues on its dark and twisted path, more of the evidence and confessions made to the authorities are revealed to be false, leaving the audience to question the possibility of that no murders had occurred at all. Katurian, influenced by the violence of the authoritarian police officers, shows that with power comes the ability to control the narrative. In *The Pillowman* "truth is a fantasy, and reason is always subject to the distortion of violence."<sup>38</sup> McDonagh then subverts audience's expectations by revealing something originally put forth as fantasy which is now revealed to be true. During his defense of his stories' coincidental connections to the murders, Katurian comments that people "only write about what they know because they're too stupid to make anything up,"<sup>39</sup> a sentiment McDonagh often expresses in his own interviews.

Later in the play it is revealed that the story Katurian wrote about a boy whose parents tortured his brother as an experiment to make him a better artist was in fact the actual story of what happened to him and Michal in their youth. The ending of the story, however, was changed to hide the fact that Katurian had in fact killed their parents. This destabilizes the narrator's credibility and the audience can no longer accept the story as it has been told to this point. Katurian is revealed to be yet another perpetrator of deceit. Did he kill the children? The audience is again forced to reconsider everything they earlier had thought was true.

When Michal is revealed to be a copycat killer, the question of Katurian's culpability as the writer of the story is once again brought into question. Michal is a simpleton and thus he is easily influenced and would have not been able to come up with these violent murders on his

own. This begs the question: Is the artist responsible for the interpretation of their art by others? Michal even tells Katurian that he would have mimicked one of his stories where positive things happened, but there were not any. Katurian has denied any symbolic meaning or overarching theme to his writing throughout the play. Katurian is forced to reflect on his own position, made manifest in an earlier statement: “The first duty of a storyteller is to tell a story”... That’s what I do, tell stories.”<sup>40</sup> Katurian’s words here again reflect McDonagh’s personal view. McDonagh’s plays are similar to Katurian’s in their abundance of cruel violence. His work has sometimes been criticized for its defective moral sense representative of post-modernism’s nihilistic relativism.<sup>41</sup>

McDonagh twists our perception of truth one additional time in the final act when a missing child Michal had admitted to killing is found to be alive. This revelation is starkly different from the others previously discussed because there is a positive outcome in the realization of an untruth. Michal had not killed the young girl by reenacting Katurian’s story “The Little Jesus,” but instead acted out another one of his brother’s other stories, “The Little Green Pig.” This story, rather than using violence, has a positive message of individuality over collectivism. Michal, recreating Katurian’s only non-violent story, raises the question that maybe Michal would have only recreated his nice stories. McDonagh does not try to deflect his authorial responsibility for his work or the way it might be interpreted, yet he is unable to fully damn himself either. He posits conflicting evidence that suggests both that an artist has a responsibility for the messages they include in their work and that a writer’s obligation is to tell a story, to entertain and nothing more. This is an element of Higgs’ postmodern new era which “required practitioners to keep a number of contradictory world views at one time.”<sup>42</sup> The

audience then must use what is presented to them and as Katurian states “come to your own conclusions.”

Irish theater scholar Jose Lanters describes the ending of *The Pillowman* as a “convoluted series of unprincipled choices, surprises and ambiguities that reflect the ‘fuzzy’ postmodern principle of being unprincipled.”<sup>43</sup> Katurian tries to smother Michal after finding he has most likely killed three children, effectively becoming *The Pillowman* from his own story. He falsely confesses to the crimes in order to protect his brother from more torture by the police, but also for the selfish purpose of preserving his stories in the police files. After Katurian is executed, his ghost rises from the grave explaining that Katurian made up a final story in which Michal knowingly submits himself to his childhood torture so that Katurian would be able to write his stories. By doing so, Katurian is effectively rewriting his play from the grave believing the officer will burn his stories, despite having made a deal with the officers that his stories would be preserved in the police files following his execution. This gives *The Pillowman* a downbeat ending that Katurian plans. The policeman shoots Katurian two seconds too soon to rob him of his final story, then unexpectedly and inexplicably does not burn his stories but files them away. In its final act, *The Pillowman* realizes the postmodern notion that authorial intent is not absolute, and works are rewritten through value and interpretation imposed onto them by the reader after reader.

### **From Theater to Film: Six Shooter**

McDonagh’s experience in live theater certainly had a profound impact on his films. He carried over many similar narrative tactics themes from his work as a playwright. Questions of guilt, morality, truth, and the ethics of representing violence which preoccupied his plays such as *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Pillowman* are expanded in his subsequent film works.

McDonagh's treatment of these themes in his films gives a new perspective to the ideas he had expressed in the earlier plays. McDonagh shows a stark change in disposition in his films. As Marshall Botvinick poses in his article "Bloodied Light: The cinema of Martin McDonagh," this change can be seen from McDonagh's initial move to film in *Six Shooter* released in 2005.

'I'm sorry,' says a somber doctor just in the opening credits...Martin McDonagh's first film, dissolve... sends a clear signal to his viewers that the characters in his movies will bear little resemblance to the heartless ones found in his plays.<sup>44</sup>

Although the nihilistic outlook of absurdist theater runs through McDonagh's plays, *Six Shooter* displays a notable shift in temperament in his first short film. McDonagh's films, while still showing the dark and violent side of humanity as portrayed in his plays, disclose a greater capacity to reveal the essential goodness in man.

Almost all of McDonagh's films come from the perspective of a mourner, following a character living through the aftermath of a personal tragedy. *Six Shooter* follows Donnelly (Brendan Gleeson) on a train ride home from the hospital where his wife had just passed away. McDonagh highlights the absurdity of human existence through Donnelly's struggles in coping with the death of his wife while the world around him continues as if nothing of significance has happened. Donnelly reflects a human attempting to hold onto the ordinary after such a powerful loss. He engages in normal everyday activities, moving through his life as if it were just any other day. He takes a train ride home, chatting with a young man sitting nearby. There is a strangeness to Donnelly's many familiar actions after such a life-altering loss. McDonagh wants the audience to empathize with Donnelly, implying that these familiar activities are now somehow alien. Lonergan describes *Six Shooter* as "a film about looking, how our ways of seeing the world are determined by what we feel."<sup>45</sup>

McDonagh returns to setting his film in rural Ireland, showing imagery associated with an idyllic Ireland viewed through the eyes of Donnelly. McDonagh plays a similar trick as he did in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, showing images connoting familiar Irishness, which he then suddenly subverts into the something altogether unfamiliar. Through the train window-- which serves as a kind of secondary cinema screen —Donnelly sees the usual cows and other livestock standing in green fields. This classic Irish landscape yields to somewhat absurd images, replacing the film's sense of bucolic realism with rather bizarre imagery. First, we see a dog standing on a wall barking, then there is the decapitated head of a woman and finally there is a gang of police officers.<sup>46</sup> McDonagh slowly builds the level of psychological displacement. The first image of the dog barking occurs in a quick shot and seems to be barely noticed by Donnelly. Later a woman jumps off the side of the train, her head hitting the window leaving streaks of her blood on the glass. The final image is that of a gang of police officers destroying the boundaries between film and reality as bullets shatter the window.

Like in *The Pillowman*, *Six Shooter* shows language as an insufficient form of communication. As Lonergan writes *Six Shooter* “seems to convey anxiety about the value of the spoken word” and “emphasizes the power of the visual image.”<sup>47</sup> In his apparent anguish over his own wife's death, Donnelly had earlier asked the doctor if a woman in the other room was able to survive a gunshot wound to the head, to which the doctor responds, “She's dead. She had no head left on her, like.”<sup>48</sup> This pattern continues when Donnelly first boards the train. He asks the young man (only referred to as “Kid”) if there is anyone sitting in the seat across from him, to which the Kid replies sarcastically, “[H]undreds of fellas like.”<sup>49</sup> Donnelly's failed attempts to communicate with the young man conveys his general disconnection with the

ordinary, preoccupied with his momentous grief. In the wake of tragedy language fails to communicate the human experience.

*Six Shooter* expands upon the idea of the absurdist theater that McDonagh displayed in his plays--especially in *The Pillowman*--by stressing the power of visual images over language. In the opening scene Donnelly leans over his wife's lifeless body to tell her, "I don't know what to say to you, Babe."<sup>50</sup> He then places a polaroid picture of their pet rabbit on her corpse. McDonagh emphasizes the emotional significance of the picture through a close-up of the picture, with Donnelly's wife out of focus in the background. McDonagh's choice to give the picture of the rabbit prominence in the frame over Donnelly's wife suggests that images can have a greater impact than empirical reality. As Lonergan points out, *Six Shooter* suggests that "the mediated image can sometimes seem more real than reality."<sup>51</sup> Later in the film, a woman reacts to the accidental tearing of a picture of her deceased baby as if it were the death of her child itself. This soon after drives her to commit suicide by jumping off the train.

McDonagh continues his chosen objective of provoking his audience through brutal imagery. Using a similar tactic as in his plays, he prepares his audience for the violence to come. Described by film critic Maria Doyle as

throwing the audience into a verbally violent world that simultaneously sets the tone for the possibility of physical violence and manipulates us into believing that people will not actually do such thing, at least not in front of us<sup>52</sup>

In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Mag has exclaimed that Maureen burned her hand earlier but this is likely written off in disbelief by the audience. McDonagh cleverly hides this information within the comedic style of the dialogue. When the audience later witnesses a desperately shattered Maureen committing the violent act, they are shocked not simply by the act itself, but by the reversal of their perception of Maureen throughout the play. McDonagh

initially conditions the audience to view Maureen as a victim, enabling viewers to empathize with her dire situation. The audience must now reassess the validity of their own previous perceptions, as well as their current understanding of what has been occurring on stage.

We can see McDonagh use this strategy in *Six Shooter* with the character of “Kid,” who spouts a non-stop barrage of hateful language throughout the short film. His erratic behavior is overlooked by Donnelly and the audience even as he repeatedly insists that the mourning couple must have killed their child.

That’s what they all say. I’ll bet they banged it on something. I would if I had a kid. I’d just keep banging it like, on something. If he was getting on me nerves like. Like Marvin Gay’s dad I’d have shot Marvin Gay if I was Marvin Gays dad. Get the cunt to shut up. I’m surprised moms and dads don’t kill their kids more often, because most kids are fuckin rotten. I certainly am. I’m a fuckin rotten kid. You have kids?<sup>53</sup>

What Kid is saying is clearly deranged and should signal to the audience that he has the capacity to and will commit horrendous acts of violence. The casual manner in which Kid speaks about such atrocities to a man he has just met is meant to be jarring. The scene focuses on the social inappropriateness of Kid’s casual conversation. The absurdity of the situation is highlighted by Kid inquiring if Donnelly has children—but only at the end of his rant--showing that he has little awareness of what he has just said. McDonagh later shows the consequences of not believing Kid’s cruel language. The man whose wife has just thrown herself off the train asks if anyone saw had seen where she had gone, to which Kid casually replies “I did aye, she flung herself off the train five minute back. Touched her brain to muck against the wall back there”<sup>54</sup> The husband mistakes Kid’s cruel words as a sick joke, but seconds later Donnelly sees the woman’s blood splattered on the train window proving that Kid’s words were accurate. This exchange should warn the audience that they too should have believed Kid during his previous violent ramblings, but the dark comedic nature of the diatribe disarms the audience’s suspicions.

This dialogical technique is used in both McDonagh's films and plays and is described by dramatist Marshall Botvinck in his essay "Bloodied Light: The cinema of Martin McDonagh" as comic and the petty, disarming audiences, often rendering them oblivious to the small verbal cruelties ... occurring before their very eyes."<sup>55</sup> McDonagh strikes an important balance of comedy and cruelty in his work, never fully revealing the full extent of the film's atrocities until it is too late. To McDonagh, "[I]t's all mathematical," intricately weaving his dark punchlines and his characters acts of cruelty so the audience "find themselves laughing in spite of themselves."<sup>56</sup> The audience has been laughing at Kid's seemingly crude but harmless behavior, when he is soon after revealed to be a murderer when he gets into a bloody shootout with police. Viewers may well feel somewhat ashamed for having enjoyed Kid's irreverent behavior.

Despite the title, there is a surprising lack of violence in *Six Shooter* compared to McDonagh's previous works -- until the final two scenes. Film scholar Maria Doyle notes this strategy in McDonagh's plays wherein "most save the particularly jarring visual images for later on in the play."<sup>57</sup> In *Six Shooter*, this takes the form of a shoot-out, inaugurating the pattern of McDonagh's films having inescapably violent ends. Like his plays, *Six Shooter* offers moments of violent imagery to "manipulate the audience into accepting rising levels of spectacle."<sup>58</sup> *Six Shooter* is shown through Donnelly's perspective. McDonagh subverts the black comedy showing Kid in a thrilling shoot-out riotous of an old western or a 1930s gangster film.

Donnelley's dead wife is the first image seen in the opening scene of the film. Later we see another striking visual of a woman throwing herself off the side of the train after the unbearable death of her infant son. These images indicate to the audience that they should anticipate Donnelly's eventual suicide. McDonagh has set up the audiences' expectations for *Six Shooter* as a melancholy black comedy, focused on Donnelly and his impending death. We have



already left Kid behind before we are suddenly quickly returned back to Donnelly, a six shooter in each of his hands.

McDonagh uses similar dramatic strategies to set up the violence in his films which is also visible in his plays. However, the execution of that violence is decidedly different from his use of it on the stage. Film does not possess the same immediacy as theater that is necessary for the visceral response McDonagh achieves in his plays.

All these aspects are even more striking because they are put live on stage; the story does not get to the audience indirectly like it does through films and books. The actor, a real person, is actually present; hence if this person is naked or if he/she is assaulted brutally, it evokes a stronger reaction than when the same thing is shown in a film.<sup>59</sup>

McDonagh's plays are saturated with gruesome acts of violence. For example, in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Maureen scalds her mother's hand in boiling oil and in *The Pillowman* Katurian's stories of child abuse are shown using actual child actors. These scenes are painful to watch in the closed-in space of a theater. McDonagh's plays create a marked unease in their audiences by threatening their personal space with these unseemly acts of violence. Seeing such terrors enacted on a live person-- especially a child-- causes an instinctual response from the viewers' psyches when reacting to the staging of bodily pain. The same experience cannot be achieved in film, thus McDonagh had to adapt to his new medium.

McDonagh's films create an introspective psychological assault on his audience, using unique visual elements of film. As Botvinick describes "instead of shoving violence in his audience's face, McDonagh stylizes it...diminishes its emotional impact on the spectators."<sup>60</sup> Rather than attempt to make the violence in his films seem as realistic as possible, McDonagh creates serial actions in sequences. The shoot-out in *Six Shooter* utilizes the more spectacular aspects of film, containing the movie's most dynamic shots and editing pace. Rather than take

cover when surrounded by the cops, Kid fires away, striking a pose as if imitating something he had seen in the movies. McDonagh uses slow motion to dramatize further the visual as the windows of the train are blown out by a flurry of bullets. Blood spurts from Kid's chest as he is shot down by a hailstorm of bullets reminiscent of the penultimate shots in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). The beautifully slowed images and the frantic pace of the editing creates more of a sense of acceleration and awe over the spectacle, rather than utter horror.

McDonagh immediately undercuts Kid's violent acts of dying "in a blaze of glory," when it is revealed that, unlike the star of an action movie, Kid was unable to hit anyone with a single shot. Kid describes this as "fucking woeful."<sup>61</sup> Analyzing the shoot-outs in McDonagh's films reveals McDonagh's commentary on the absurdity of the violent spectacle in Hollywood films. While McDonagh attempts to subvert the glorification of violence in films, he is unable to resist his impulse to use it, inviting the audience to enjoy the well-worn fetishism of blood and gore on the screen. Sequences in the shoot-out in *Six Shooter* fall into the realm of sheer unadulterated entertainment. This is especially evident in the point-of-view shots from Kid's perspective as he fires at police officers. These are experienced like a video game. *Six Shooter* only critiques the shoot-out trope after McDonagh participates in and enjoys the powerful benefits of its violent fetishism.

The aestheticized violence of the shoot-out forestalls the audiences from being confronted with the horrifying bodily pain of Kid's gruesome death. The film focuses instead on the emotional pain of Donnelly as Kid bleeds out in his arms, taking us out of the cinematically thrilling world and back into the deeper sadness of the rest of the film. This is where McDonagh is most successful: he does not undercut the tragedy of the moment with comedy but leaves the viewer with an empathetic and hollow feeling experienced by Donnelly. While the characters in

McDonagh's plays are often unsettling because of their inability to experience compassion, Donnelly shows both sorrow and remorse in Donnelly throughout this film. We see how much he cared for his wife and we empathize with the pain he feels from her death. Donnelly even appears to form somewhat of a connection to the immoral Kid. He has failed in his attempt to intervene to save Kid's life. What little faith he musters is restored, only to be shattered again.

As Donnelly takes the revolver out of Kid's lifeless hands, we sense what he might use it for. Donnelly is fully immersed in the hopelessness of death throughout the film--the death of his wife and the woman who kills herself after the death of her infant son. Now he is unable to prevent the ultra-bloody death of Kid. Death is an unstoppable force that surrounds Donnelly. He is incapable of escaping it and he is driven toward committing suicide. Once inside his house, Donnelly lays the six-shooter on the table before finding the resolve within himself to end his life. As Donnelly looks over at a picture of his dead wife, a picture of Jesus on his dresser seems to stare back at him. His behavior is clearly full of grief and he is illogical as he says, "I hope I see you soon, Baby. If I don't, I don't"<sup>62</sup> to the photograph of his dead wife. His words reveal an awareness that the picture he is looking at is not the same phenomenon as actually seeing her. Subsequently he places the picture of Jesus face down, as if to prevent Him from seeing him Donnelly commit the sin of suicide. Donnelly stated earlier that he does not believe in religion since the death of his wife. This loss of faith is why he may be killing himself.

Donnelly then loads two bullets into the revolver and before pulling the trigger is stopped by the sound of his pet rabbit, David. Perhaps as an act of kindness, Donnelly decides to kill the rabbit along with himself, rather than let it starve after Donnelly is dead. Donnelly comforts the rabbit and says, "There's one for the each of us,"<sup>63</sup> implying the two bullets are intended for the both of them. Donnelly next blows the head off his beloved rabbit but, as he goes to kill himself,

the gun misfires, leaving him with his decapitated rabbit sitting in his lap. McDonagh again subverts viewers' expectations, having conditioned the audience to anticipate Donnelly's suicide. McDonagh has portrayed Donnelly as kind, manifesting a strong sense of guilt likely from his apparently Irish Catholic background. After brutally killing the innocent animal, not only will Donnelly not be able to live with himself, he would ironically become more alone. The first time Donnelly puts the gun to his head the audience might well dread what he is about to do. McDonagh robs the audience of the dramatic closure that they were expecting when the gun misfires. As the screen fades to black as the film ends, the audience is left wondering why they feel so unfulfilled and questioning if they subconsciously wanted to see Donnelly kill himself.

The end of *Six Shooter* refuses to give the audience any satisfactory dramatic resolution, an element carried over from McDonagh's earlier work in theater. The ambiguous ending stems from the influence of absurdist theater whose denouements are "regularly absurd or comic and there won't be any solution."<sup>64</sup> The audience will never know Donnelly's fate. He may very well still be suicidal. Donnelly could put another bullet in the gun and end his life moments after the film ends or at any time thereafter. His final words in the film--"What a fuckin' day!"--(before the film cuts to black) leave the viewer on a much more light-hearted note than the final scenes of McDonagh's plays. Donnelly's verbal outburst contains an implicit awareness of the dark humor in the absurdity of his tragic situation, as he looks down to see the headless white rabbit in his lap. The crass expression he utters implies that this is just one day after which there could be many more.

### **In Bruges**

After the success and award-winning recognition of *Six Shooter*, McDonagh did not return to cinema for four years. *In Bruges*, his debut feature length film, was released in 2008.

He was quite aware of his relative inexperience in film directing as well as the many other aspects of filmmaking. This made him hesitant to rush into a feature film, but knew he had to direct the picture. This was an obvious departure from his work in theater where he wrote plays, but after writing a script, he never directed his plays. McDonagh recognized the different scale of power the director had in a feature format and knew “[I]f I handed over *In Bruges* to anyone, it wouldn’t be my film.”<sup>65</sup>

McDonagh had come up with the idea for the new film on a trip to Bruges and knew exactly how it *had* to be made. When McDonagh went to Bruges on a holiday, he really did not know anything about the city, but found himself in complete awe of its historical and natural beauty. McDonagh says this feeling did not last very long and, after a few hours of walking around, he “was bored out of my head and I just wanted to get drunk or get laid. Both sides of my brain were arguing, the culture loving geek and the drunken slut.”<sup>66</sup> These two sides of McDonagh’s personality were the bases for the central characters of Ken and Ray in what would become the film. This bifurcation of the authorial voice is similar to McDonagh’s brothers in *The Pillowman*, Katurian and Michal who, if put together, would form an entirely integrated person. McDonagh came home from his trip and immediately started writing a film script.

As he was conceiving his script, McDonagh realized that he needed a reason for the two characters to be stuck in Bruges. McDonagh decided to make them professional hitmen hiding out after a botched job. This added another level of contrast with having two killers for hire trapped in what is generally considered to be a tourist destination. The idea for *In Bruges* is heavily indebted to Harold Pinter’s play, *The Dumb Waiter*,<sup>67</sup> which similarly follows two hitmen hiding out in Birmingham, an unfamiliar territory to them. Like Ken and Ray, Pinter’s two characters are waiting for their next assignment. While they feel an unease about being in

unfamiliar surroundings, one of the men wants to take a look at the scenery, similar to Ken in *In Bruges*.

In McDonagh's script, Ken is eventually ordered to kill Ray. Comparably, in Pinter's play one of the two hitmen has been hired to kill his partner. McDonagh's plays had often been compared to, and have been influenced by, Pinter's work. McDonagh expresses Pinter's direct impact on *In Bruges* by having Ray and Ken check into their hotel under the pseudonyms "Cranham" and "Blakely," a nod to the original cast members who played Pinter's hitmen in the 1985 BBC version of *The Dumb Waiter*.<sup>68</sup>

Unlike the obscure locations of rural Ireland McDonagh used for his plays or the nonspecific setting of *The Pillowman*, McDonagh stresses the importance of the city of Bruges in this film. McDonagh states "Bruges is such an integral character to the whole piece that if we hadn't been able to film there, I would have scrapped the whole piece."<sup>69</sup> McDonagh uses film's unique capability to capture the actual Bruges on screen, something his theatrical work in could not possibly achieve. Every location that he used in *In Bruges* was specifically written into the script, each designed to convey a particular experience.<sup>70</sup> McDonagh's minimalist approach to his plays' sets served as a backdrop for his tales, a simple space in which his characters interact. In *In Bruges*, the city of Bruges has as much influence on the film as any character.

McDonagh exploits the religious ambiance of the city, prominently featured in the opening shots of the film. A montage of medieval, Catholic statuary and architecture is shown, accompanied by an eerie score and eventually a Ray's voice-over narration describing his actions immediately after committing a recent murder. The dark and dramatic lighting with odd close-ups at unusual angles lends an ominous tone to the early scenes. This does not convey the

church's view of religion as pure and forgiving, but rather something that will haunt these two characters while in the city. This feeling of uneasiness carries throughout the film whenever any Catholic imagery is shown. As Lonergan states, McDonagh "creates a tension between a tourist version of Bruges and a real one."<sup>71</sup> *In Bruges* does not display the daily existence of the citizens of Bruges, giving the viewer only the tourist experience. Ken and Ray participate in typical tourist activities like going sightseeing, visiting a museum, and living in a hotel.

The two main characters in *In Bruges* are portrayed as good-hearted killers, whose actions derive from a strong sense of moral right and wrong. In discussing these film characters, Botvinick asserts that McDonagh's "films, in contrast to his plays, feature characters whose violent acts are motivated by ethical principles, not small grievances."<sup>72</sup> More than in any other of McDonagh's works, *In Bruges* can be construed as a morality tale. It poses a discourse of human ethics, one that is more conditional rather than the absolute morality of religion. The three killers in *In Bruges*— Harry, Ken, and Ray--live by strong, if twisted senses of morality that dominates their actions. They struggle with inner conflicts between their professions as hired guns and their commitments to their personal moral codes. Ray and Ken spend much of the film attempting to come to terms with the tragedy of Ray's accidental shooting of a child, an act that goes against each of their moral codes. Jose Laners notes, "In *In Bruges*, McDonagh uses a triangular character structure to tease out questions of sin and sin in a postmodern world."<sup>73</sup>

Harry embodies the traditional morality of religion, an absolute morality of cause and effect, wherein sin is met with unquestioned punishment. McDonagh portrays Harry as the cruelest and most violent character in the film, using his complex and irrational code of honor to justify his otherwise psychotic behavior. There is certainty in his world view, which allows for

no guilt or introspection over clearly abhorrent acts. Harry is comparable to Tupolski and Ariel, the abusive officers in *The Pillowman*, who live by an absolute principal that anyone who harms a child must die. Harry is the boss who dispatched Ray on the original job back in England which led to the accidental killing of an innocent by-standing child. He sees it as his duty to pass harsh judgment on Ray. Harry's perspective is best explained in his comment to Ken, "If I'd killed a kid, accidentally or otherwise, I wouldn't've thought twice, I'd've killed myself on the fucking spot! I'd have stuck the gun in my mouth on the fucking spot."<sup>74</sup> For Harry there is no room for redemption.

Ken's sense of morality allows for leniency, placing him on the horns of a moral dilemma over Harry's orders for Ken to kill Ray while in Bruges. He is already previously indebted to Harry for having avenged the murder of his own wife but Ken believes that Ray should have a chance to atone for his misdeed. Ken struggles between doing what he personally believes to be morally right and obeying Harry's orders out of a sense of duty to his boss. Uncertain of his own moral standing as a killer who is "trying to lead a good life," Ken empathizes with Ray and tries to console him in Ray's unrelenting torment. Ken attempts to answer Ray's questions regarding hell and purgatory but confesses that he has long ago rejected his Catholic beliefs from his childhood, but then he says, "The things you're taught as a child never really leave you."<sup>75</sup> Later when Ray and Ken visit a church which supposedly has a phial said to contain the actual blood of Christ, Ken lines up to touch the phial simply because that "is what you do." Thus Ken participates in the superstitious ritual without questioning the efficacy of his actions, mindlessly following patterns of learned procedural behavior.

Ray shows no interest in the heritage or cultural legacy of Bruges, referring to history as "just a bunch of stuff that's already happened."<sup>76</sup> Ray's aversion to the past may come from his



inability to cope with his own recent past actions, specifically his accidental murder of a child. Constantly trying to forget what he has done, Ray tries to focus on the present, distracting himself with superficial activities such as drinking and having sex in an attempt to avoid feeling the deeper emotional pain of his actions. In his occasional moments of solitude, we are shown the profound impact the child's death has had on Ray's psyche. As Ray gets ready for his date with Chloe, he observes himself in a mirror. He touches his face trying to feel something, as if he has become so numb, so detached from himself that he cannot feel himself in his own body. McDonagh shows Ray's anguish through his facial expressions; as he looks at himself in the mirror, he displays self-contempt.

In Ray's attempts to avoid confronting his tragic screw-up, he tries to joke about murdering a child. On his date with Chloe, Ray gets into an exchange of words describing what he does for a living;

Ray. I shoot people for money

Chloe. What kind of people?

Ray. Priests, children, Y'know the usual.

Chloe. Is There a lot of money to be made in that line of business?

Ray. There is in priests. There isn't in children.<sup>77</sup>

This is dialogue play similar to the one McDonagh uses in *Six Shooter* wherein Kid casually describes his violent behavior and he is not taken seriously or believed by Donnelly. The filmgoer already knows Ray is actually a killer -- information Chloe is not aware of— adding an underlying tension to the scene. Ray's ironic, aloof delivery of the information may suggest his lack of genuine remorse. One can even laugh during this exchange. When Ray asks her if he looks like someone who kills people, he smiles when Chloe replies “No.” She then adds jokingly, “Just children.” Chloe laughs, but Ray does not as he quickly tries to change the

subject. Unlike Kid in *Six Shooter*, Ray is not speaking cavalierly because he does not care. He is trying to avoid what he has shamefully done through self-deprecation. Ray's inescapable guilt and self-reflections have no precursor in McDonagh's previous film works.

Similar to Harry, Ray's perspective centers upon cause-and-effect as displayed when he tells Ken, "Because of the choices I made, and the course that I put into action, that little boy isn't here anymore and he'll never be here again."<sup>78</sup> This cause and effect view is mirrored in the film's plot structure. After Ray shockingly assaults a Canadian couple while on his date with Chloe, he is arrested on the train while he is attempting to leave Bruges. In *In Bruges*, actions have direct consequences. Ray differs from Harry, who operates from a position of certainty, while Ray lives in a perpetual state of moral ambivalence. Ironically, Ray exhibits a child-like innocence at times. He frequently says whatever comes to mind without any filter. He drags his feet like a difficult preteen while at the church with Ken and it appears that he cannot come to terms with his own conflicted and battered conscience. Laners notes why it is that the audience sympathizes with Ray over Harry:

The movie exploits the audience's own penchant for the sentimental and the nostalgic, fostered by Ray's wide-eyed expression of distress. His feelings of remorse and Harry's retribution in the wake of the little boy's killing lead them to the same conclusion, springing from their fetishism of childhood innocence<sup>79</sup>

Ironically Ray and Harry share the belief that the former must die. The two sentiments collide in an overt twist of fate as Ken, on Harry's orders, creeps up from behind the oblivious Ray (who is sitting on a bench facing away from the camera) and points a gun at Ray's head. Coincidentally, Ray simultaneously puts his own revolver against his temple as he is about to kill himself. These two concurrent acts cause each of them not to pull the triggers. After seeing that Ray was about to take his own life, Ken realizes he must disobey Harry's order to assassinate Ray.

Because McDonagh refrains from exploiting the absurdity of this obvious coincidence for its easy laugh of dark humor, he offers the audience an opportunity to sit with these killers as Ray cries his eyes out on Ken's shoulders. The audience can empathize with Ray and Ken due to their portrayal as being oddly kind-hearted killers. McDonagh poses a critical question on to the audience: can someone be a "good" person and commit such violent acts? McDonagh revisits the subject later in a more comedic light, when Harry mocks Ken's act of clemency toward Ray. This strategy continues as Ken becomes McDonagh's "Suicidal Christ" figure.<sup>80</sup> Ken refuses to fight Harry in a shoot-out, effectively turning the other cheek. He subsequently sacrifices himself by throwing himself off the steeple of the church to warn Ray that Harry has come to Bruges in order to kill him. Thus Ken's suicidal plunge supersedes Ray's unsuccessful suicide attempt to turn the drama around.

McDonagh has distrust of those with rigid worldviews such as Harry's and accentuates the misguided nature of Harry's absolutism by mirroring the tragic catalyst of the film in the penultimate scene. The film thus recasts itself as farce. Harry then shoots Ray, the bullets ripping through Ray's chest and accidentally blows the head off of a secondary character, Jimmy the Dwarf, who is wearing a schoolboy's uniform for the role he has in a film that is being shot in Bruges. Harry sees the small and headless bloodied body and believes that he has just accidentally killed a little boy. Harry then sticks to his previously stated principles and immediately puts the gun into his mouth and pulls the trigger. The ironic echoes of the initial tragedy of Ray's accidental child-killing and the recall of his own recent suicide attempt -- Harry's misperception emphasizes the absurdity of his unyielding idea of morality.

The pervasive violence driving the final act of *In Bruges* fits perfectly into place with what audiences would expect from a crime thriller genre film. Despite his attempts to undermine

the genre he has set into motion through his use of heavy dialogue filled with comedy and drama, the true violent nature of the crime thriller seeps in. Earlier in the film the viewer notices a proclivity for sudden bursts of aggression from Ray, which desensitizes the gratuitous gore shown as a flashback of Ray's botched killing of a priest that also results in the inadvertent murder of the innocent boy. After Ken decides to give Ray a chance for redemption, putting him on a train out of Bruges, the film culminates in its final shoot-out between Ken and Harry. McDonagh again subverts expectations by having Ken refuse to participate in the gunfight, for a moment looking like he was going to rob the audience of their blood-soaked payoff and have the diplomatic ending for which he might have wished. Harry is moved by Ken's nostalgic words and only shoots him in the leg, a relatively peaceful concession on his part.

The film again turns this prospect for dramatic resolution on its head as Ray is revealed to be still in Bruges, which has led directly to Ken's death, within the context of the shoot-out with Harry. As the two characters stand each with a gun in hand, McDonagh makes one last attempt at his peaceful resolution. Marie, the owner of the hotel where Ken and Ray have stayed, suggests that the two men "put your guns down and go home," but Harry quickly shuts that idea down saying, "Don't be stupid. This is the shoot-out."<sup>81</sup> Having the character refer to "the shoot-out," a trope for films of the crime genre, McDonagh momentarily takes the viewer out of his passive experience, making him acutely aware of the film structure they are presently watching. Harry's self-conscious statement about film clichés explains directly to the audience that this is a "crime thriller" and therefore there *must* be a shoot-out at the end. The two characters cannot just walk away. McDonagh is inviting the audience to become more actively thoughtful about his scene, asking them to reflect on their expectations and their otherwise passive role as the

spectator. This sort of meta commentary is expanded upon in McDonagh's next film, *Seven Psychopaths*.

### *Seven Psychopaths*

In his next film, *Seven Psychopaths* (2012) McDonagh returns to his preferred subject matter: the nature of storytelling. The film follows a struggling screenwriter named Marty who is dealing with a prolonged case of writer's block as well as with his growing dependency on alcohol. Marty's character embodies McDonagh's real life desire to depart from the Hollywood clichés of film violence:

Marty

No, you know what I think the movie should be...The first half should be like a perfect set-up for a pure out and out revenge movie; violence anger, all the usual bullshit...And then... I dunno, man. The lead characters should just... Yeah, just like this. They should just walk away. Just drive off into the desert, pitch a tent somewhere pretty, and just talk. For the rest of the goddam movie. No shoot-outs no pay-offs, no nothing. Just human beings talking.<sup>82</sup>

Brimming with postmodernist self-references, McDonagh's film is emphatically self-conscious and self-aware. His characters occasionally crack the fourth wall, without ever fully breaking it. The above excerpt of dialogue from *Seven Psychopaths*, reflects the personal struggle McDonagh was having in the very writing of his films which inevitably end with brutality and carnage. The character of Marty is an outright ironical representation of McDonagh himself on screen--a screenwriter with his own name. The film as a whole allowed McDonagh to put a version of his creative process on screen, showing some of the mechanisms of writing a screenplay through its deconstruction of the process. In *Seven Psychopaths*, the protagonist Marty starts off in much of the same position as McDonagh when he began the

writing of the script for this film. He begins with a story about a murderous psychopath who is a Quaker (i.e. non-violent) and knowing that the title of the film will be *Seven Psychopaths*. In an interview with The Playlist, McDonagh said, “[T]hat’s all I had, the title, and a desire to write a film called *Seven Psychopaths*, but not to make it about violence and guns.”<sup>83</sup> As he developed the characters of Marty and his friend Billy, they seem again to represent two parts of McDonagh battling over whether the movie would end in peace or in violence.

Keenly aware of the traditional tropes and personal expectations of genre in films, McDonagh again uses “the shoot-out,” a staple of the action thrillers, as a platform for his self-critical commentary. In her article for the “Journal of Irish Studies,” dramatist Joan Fitzpatrick describes *Seven Psychopaths* as a “dense network of illusions to cinematic history.”<sup>84</sup> *Seven Psychopaths* introduces this topic with its opening shot of the Hollywood sign signaling the audience that this is a movie about movies. The camera slowly pans over to two hitmen as one asks the other, “Was it Dillinger who got shot through the eyeball?” to which the other replies, “Moe Greene got shot through the eyeball in *The Godfather*.”<sup>85</sup> Lanters has noted that “McDonagh’s characters can only make sense of reality by comparing it to what they have seen on television or in the movies”<sup>86</sup> Like its characters, *Seven Psychopaths* struggles to distinguish between actual reality and one’s vivid imagination stimulated by movies as the movie we are watching evolves into a complex web of cutaways and imitation flashbacks. The characters’ banal conversation about their inability to distinguish between real and film violence embodies the film’s struggle between the superficial and the profound. McDonagh builds tension through the two hitmen’s repetitive speech, which is met with a violent moment as the two men are shockingly shot through the back of their heads by yet another killer. The opening scene of

*Seven Psychopaths* sets the expectation that dialogue can quickly be superseded by acts of violence.

*Seven Psychopaths* is saturated with references to Hollywood films like *The Godfather*, which contains numerous examples of gratuitous violence. McDonagh is not only a student of the Hollywood films he is commenting on, but he is also a serious fan. He uses this film to express admiration for them. Marty's best friend is named Billy Bickle, an obvious homage to Travis Bickle, the protagonist in *Taxi Driver* (1976). Directed by Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* is cited by McDonagh as one of his major film influences.<sup>87</sup> Billy, similar to his precursor, talks to his reflection in the mirror, displaying his depravity and detachment from reality through its relation to the original scene in *Taxi Driver*. Whereas in *Taxi Driver*, Travis stands in front of the mirror drawing his gun at his own reflection, preparing himself for--and fantasizing about-- a violent confrontation. In McDonagh's film, Billy stands in front of the mirror ironically practicing his small talk for Marty's upcoming dinner party. McDonagh uses the pastiche as an alert to the audience of Billy's disconnection from reality and his violent nature.

Many of McDonagh's/Marty's characters and scenes derive from striking mental images: "I just like the image of a Vietnamese guy with a snub-nosed .44," says Marty, the character.<sup>88</sup> *Seven Psychopaths* continues in using stylized violence, which calls attention to the visual aspects of the particular shot. In the scene in which Billy is revealed to be the serial killer, (a.k.a. Jack O'Diamonds) who has been taking out members of organized crime, he shoots his girlfriend in the stomach, but not before handing her a jack of diamonds playing card. McDonagh intricately frames the shot and uses an irregular amount of camera movement compared to the rest of the film. As Billy's wounded girlfriend is bleeding out, she faces the playing card towards the camera, as if to deliberately reveal it to the audience. McDonagh does

not attempt to hide the directorial nature of the shot, making the actress's behavior and movement unnatural to highlight the striking image.

It is revealed later in the film that Billy's reasoning for murdering members of an organized crime family is to help inspire Marty's writing of his film script, giving him a model psychopath to write about. This parallels the character of Michal in McDonagh's play *The Pillowman*, who reenacts the murders in his brother Katurian's short stories to show the world how good a writer his brother is. *Seven Psychopaths* and *The Pillowman* can be seen as complementary pieces, both being stories about storytelling and following two writers who embody McDonagh's own beliefs. They share a similar narrative structure of telling smaller stories within the larger narrative: *The Pillowman* embeds nine of Katurian's gruesome fairy tales portrayed by child actors on stage; whereas *Seven Psychopaths* inserts flashbacks and dream sequences into Marty's script. McDonagh plays a similar trick of having one of the writer's stories revealed to be a manipulated version of reality. In *Seven Psychopaths*, Marty accidentally uses a story of a Quaker who slices his own throat in an attempt to follow his daughter's murderer into the afterlife. This is a story he heard from his friend Billy at a bar, about another of his friends, Hans.

Hans later corrects Marty's assessment of the story saying, "I wouldn't necessarily call myself a psychopath," and later avows that "psychopaths get kinda tiresome after a while."<sup>89</sup> As McDonagh states in an interview with [Hypable](#), "Psychopaths have no love or empathy."<sup>90</sup> This would apply to McDonagh's theater characters, such as Mag from *The Beauty Queen of Lenaane*, but McDonagh has moved beyond that type of portrayal in his films. *In Bruges* is an examination of the guilt of an otherwise decent man who does violent criminal things to earn a living. *Seven Psychopaths*, despite its name, portrays its characters rather empathetically, having



a strong sense of human nature and its emotional complexity. McDonagh chose psychopaths for the subject of the film to comment on society and Hollywood's obsession with them. He does this by subverting previous Hollywood portrayals of the psychopath in giving his characters superficial psychotic tendencies and thereby inducing genuine empathy from his audience. Hans cares for his dying wife, and between Billy and Marty "decency, love for each other should be palpable throughout."<sup>91</sup> McDonagh crafts these characters with psychopathic tendencies, never questioning the efficacy of their behavior or showing any guilt they may have for their violent acts, as with the characters in *In Bruges*. While *In Bruges* focuses on the inherent nature of violence in man, *Seven Psychopaths* focuses on the nature of violence in film.

In McDonagh's own words, "The whole setup of *Seven Psychopaths* is to question violence in movies."<sup>92</sup> McDonagh has always played off both sides in this debate, both commenting on--and participating in--the contemporary fetishism of violence in film. The characters of Marty and Billy in *Seven Psychopaths* are personifications of these polarized impulses. While Marty professes McDonagh's desire to move toward a more non-violent direction in his writing, Billy is appalled by his friends' non-violent concept, expressing his belief that violence is a necessary aspect of life. The two friends battle over Marty's script also entitled "Seven Psychopaths" and subsequently argue about how the movie might end, whether in peace or in violence.

The movie sets up "the shootout" quite nicely. Billy, along and his partner in crime, Hans, have a racket of collecting ransoms for dogs they have temporarily abducted. They wind up stealing Bonny, Charlie's beloved dog, who will not hesitate to kill to order to get her back. The plot becomes considerably more convoluted when it is revealed that Billy has been the killer of Charlie's men and had stolen Bonny deliberately. Coincidentally Billy is also sleeping with

the deranged mobster's girlfriend. Billy and Hans, along with Marty, are sucked in to this madness and are forced to hide out. Marty's plan is to give the dog back to Charlie. Billy's description of their hideout is "the perfect place for a shootout"<sup>93</sup> suggesting that he has a less peaceful ending in mind than Marty does. McDonagh uses the dusty desert landscape as an allusion to old westerns, famed for their dramatic final scene shoot-outs. Billy's line is meant to stir up images of *High Noon* and the old-fashioned stand-offs.

As the three men wait it out in the desert, Marty humors Billy by listening to his various outlandish ideas for their script. Billy sets his scene in a foggy cemetery as his alter ego--Jack O'Diamonds--attempts to make the same transactional deal with Charlie that they are now discussing. Charlie comes in with his guns a blazing. Marty points out, "Surely he knows that the Mafia boss is a psycho? Why would he believe he'd show up alone and unarmed?"<sup>94</sup> Their future shoot-out is now all but solidified. With Billy's animated voice-over narration, the audience is treated to a cartoonish over-the-top gunfight, as the entire cast comes together to fight in the final battle scene. McDonagh comments on the absurdity of the film shoot-out in Billy's ridiculous description, accompanied by the overly bloody gunfight with lines like "She's fuckin' mown down! Fuckin' mown down!" He makes ridiculous gun sound effects with his mouth before continuing, "Her head almost comes off. Her head does come off."<sup>95</sup> The absurdity of Billy's shoot-out increases as characters are gunned down one by one in a bloody spectacle. Billy later remarks "You can't let the animals die, just the woman,"<sup>96</sup> as he allows a pet rabbit to survive in his story. McDonagh uses Billy's loony ramblings to address the absurdity of the criticism he received for killing Donnelly's pet rabbit in his short film *Six Shooter*, while critics had no problem with gratuitous violence towards women in film.

McDonagh uses Billy's shoot-out to expose the clichés of the crime thriller genre form, as Billy's shoot-out echoes the typical tropes of innumerable Hollywood shoot-outs. Each member of the "good guys" dies in a blaze of glory, with a loosely attached, melodramatic emotional meaning articulated by Billy. This leaves only the main characters, Hans and Marty, to face off against the mega-villain Charlie. However, Hans and Marty are out of bullets. "But the Jack-O-Diamonds isn't dead at all. He was just a bit injured, and he had a fucking crossbow up his sleeve."<sup>97</sup> Billy narrates his scene as the Jack-O-Diamonds shoots a crossbow through Charlie's neck. Billy's shoot-out, characterized by McDonagh's baroque depiction of the Hollywood shoot-out, finds Jack-O-Diamonds blowing off Charlie's head with a shot gun. McDonagh follows his pattern of commenting on his own film violence through revisiting the subject in an ironic conversation about whether heads explode when shot (concluding they do) if the head is filled with explosives.

After building the anticipation of *Seven Psychopaths*' shoot-out to being filled with violence and gore through Billy's exaggerated depiction, McDonagh once again subverts expectations. Charlie comes alone to make the deal and, contradictory to Marty's earlier comments, he arrives unarmed. McDonagh has already indulged in displaying gratuitous violence in *Seven Psychopaths* through Billy's imagined script. It is possible here for McDonagh to take a step toward the more peaceful film ending he has been talking about within the film. McDonagh immediately rips the possibility of a peaceful ending away, as Billy takes the flare gun hidden in the back of Charlie's car and shoots it in the air, signaling the commencement of the shoot-out. The final shoot-out scene of *Seven Psychopaths* is not the grandiose spectacle described by Billy, but a more toned-down standoff. McDonagh imitates the cliché previously shown of running out of bullets by having Charlie's gun jam, yet another trope

of the crime thriller genre. This time it is done in a strictly comedic tone to highlight the absurdity of the trope. The shoot-out ends with a single shot--Billy sacrificing himself--giving Marty the chance to escape, thus getting the ending he wanted.

Despite McDonagh giving into his representations of film violence and the gratifying shoot-out conclusion, *Seven Psychopaths* successfully subverts the typical violent thriller. Marty remains a “pacifist” throughout the entire film, refusing to take a gun from Billy when offered. Hans refuses one of Charlie’s henchmen’s orders at gunpoint, in effect taking away the power guns have in the film. Two of the characters stories’ end positively because of their peaceful nature; Marty survives the ending of the film and manages to finish his script, while Hans sacrifices himself to alert the police to Charlie and his men. Contrary to the typical Hollywood crime thriller, the victors of the shoot-out are promptly arrested for their crimes. The final scene, before the credits roll, depicts Hans in a peaceful revision of the Buddhist priest psychopath’s story, where he burns himself alive to protest the Vietnam war. McDonagh purposefully ends the film in an act of peace but keeps to his consistently melancholy tone. The final act is not simply the Buddhist priest’s self-immolation, but the rewriting of his story, one that Marty did not want to continue because he believed it could only end in blood and carnage. McDonagh thus shows that films can end peacefully. Even though McDonagh’s *Seven Psychopaths* ended in a shoot-out, the ending of the script written by his character Marty ends peacefully.

### **Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri: Conclusion**

McDonagh had used *Seven Psychopaths* to address his concerns that arise with his own screenwriting.

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.<sup>98</sup>

This is a problem McDonagh did not have in his early theatrical work, but his films had developed a pattern of being about guys with guns. McDonagh looked to rectify this weakness in his most recent film, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017). The film takes place in the fictitious town of Ebbing and follows Mildred Hayes in the aftermath of her daughter's death without adequate criminal justice. Frustrated with the local police's lack of results in solving her daughter's rape and murder case, she aggressively decides to rent three billboards on a well-travelled road to pressure the local authorities into finding results. The signs read: 1) Raped While Dying 2) And Still No Arrests? 3) How Come Chief Willoughby?

The raging anger expressed in the plot of *Three Billboards* drives the story as an all-out revenge film, setting up the same violent path contained in McDonagh's previous works. Mildred is a champion of the downtrodden, unleashing her fury on an evil world that violently took her daughter from her. The police she is challenging are initially portrayed as dull and racist. Dixon, the young cop who idolizes Willoughby (the police chief), has recently run into trouble on the force for an episode of racially incited violence, for which he seemingly receives no major penalties. McDonagh establishes what at first appears to be a clear line of hero and villain that the audience is meant to accept. The filmgoer not only accepts, but moreover enjoys Mildred's exceedingly eccentric behavior, lashing out against a seemingly indifferent system that failed her.

The violence in *Three Billboards* is much more muted and less stylized than in McDonagh's previous films. When Mildred's dentist asserts that she is going to have to have her tooth painfully taken out (seemingly because her dentist was angered by her billboards), she stabs him with his own drill. McDonagh uses a close-up shot as the drill slowly pierces the

man's fingernail. McDonagh sets the focus on the gruesome experience and pain of the violent act and not the psychological effect on the perpetrator as in *In Bruges*. Unlike Ray, Mildred feels no guilt for her violent actions, believing she is wholly justified.

[Similar to] As in McDonagh's previous films, the world in *Three Billboards* is told from the perspective of its protagonist, Mildred, whose view of the world is influenced by her extreme emotional state after her traumatic loss. The first act of the film is shaped by Mildred's anger, but as the film continues, it moves beyond her perspective. *Three Billboards* shows how misguided her hatred is. Chief Willoughby truly did everything he could and is pained by his inability to find her daughter's rapist/murderer. Moreover, Willoughby is dying of cancer and is still trying to do right by Mildred as she ruthlessly and publicly attacks his character with her text on the billboards. There is an important scene in the film when Willoughby is interrogating Mildred after she has stabbed the dentist. The two get into a game of word play typical of McDonagh's characters, each making verbal moves to provoke the other. Willoughby asks her about her ex-husband: "He still shackled up with that pretty little intern that works down at the zoo...how old is she 19? That's smart!" Mildred later counters: "Ex-cop, ex-wife beater-- same difference I guess, right?"<sup>99</sup> McDonagh builds dramatic tension through their comedic and combative dialogue. In McDonagh's work that tension would traditionally be released with an act of violence. *Three Billboards* breaks that pattern somewhat. Just as the tension of the scene is at its peak, Willoughby suddenly coughs up blood that splatters on Mildred's face. What was set up to be a violent outburst is replaced with a surprise moment that elicits compassion as Mildred comforts Willoughby in her arms, with both characters in tears.

McDonagh subverts all preconceived notions of the police as being the villains of the story, asking Mildred (and the audience) to reexamine her usual reactive behavior. In a later

scene, Willoughby shoots himself in the head, trying to save his wife and kids from the burden of watching him slowly die. Dixon, in his own grief, misdirects his anger at Red, the young man from whom Mildred rented the billboard space, attacking and throwing him out of a second-story window. The scene is shot in a single long take, forcing the audience to witness Dixon's extreme brutality. The long take embodies Dixon's linear thinking as stated in a video essay featured on the DVD:

Cutting implies breakage, a new angle, a new perspective. That's exactly what Dixon doesn't have. He doesn't give himself a chance to look at things from a different point of view, so the audience doesn't get one either.<sup>100</sup>

McDonagh's use of the long shot places the audience deeper into the twisted perspective of someone who is overwhelmed with anger and misdirected grief from the loss of a loved one. When Dixon reaches Red, who he repeatedly bashes in the face, the camera does not move away or shield the viewer from his actions. McDonagh does not stylize or fetishize the violence in this scene. In contrast to the rest of *Three Billboards*, this scene is void of any comedic elements, emphasizing the tragic flaw in Dixon's character. This scene invites the audience to question their own initial perspective of Mildred's violent behavior, when they are meant to side with her in the earlier parts of the film.

While *Three Billboards* begins as a film about anger and violence, McDonagh shifts from this notion in order to emphasize the power of peace and forgiveness. Willoughby holds no grudges against Mildred--he even secretly pays for the billboards to remain up another month after his suicide. Red later chooses forgiveness shown through the simple kind act of offering water to a severely burned Dixon. Even Dixon is influenced by these acts of kindness and begins to change from his racially bigoted ways, trying to live up to the faith Willoughby showed in him in a posthumous letter the sheriff had written to him, telling Dixon that he has the potential to be

a good detective. Mildred's path of anger misleads her into setting fire to the police station in response to her billboards being burned down. Her violent reaction almost leads to the accidental burning her daughter's case file, which would have effectively ended any chance of her capturing the rapist/murderer. The case files are saved by Dixon risking his life, as he happened to be in the police station when Mildred started the fire.

*Three Billboards* shows the dangers of having an eye-for-an-eye revenge mentality and it looks to break the pattern of violence begetting more violence. Mildred's anger is portrayed as a negative response to her grief. In moments of silence, Mildred reveals her guilt and sadness over her daughter's death and uses anger and outward acts of violence to avoid dealing with those emotions. Dixon is emblematic of living a life fueled by anger as his character ironically parallels Mildred's. As he has made steps toward redemption after being enveloped by his anger, so can she. Mildred's outlook on life, much like Dixon's, begins to change due to the acts of kindness shown by Willoughby and Dixon. When Mildred later finds out that it was her ex-husband who burned down her billboards, she sees him at a restaurant, grabs a bottle of wine and heads toward his table undoubtedly to smash over his head. McDonagh uses a similar shot with Dixon, as he moves up the stairs to assault Red. Her grip tightens around the neck of the bottle in the same way Dixon's did around his gun, signaling a similar act of violence is about to occur. McDonagh then undermines our expectations as Mildred simply places the bottle on the table. Mildred chooses not to respond in violence, breaking the cycle of violence in McDonagh's films.

*Three Billboards* does not end in a shoot-out like McDonagh's previous films. However, it refuses to give the audience an entirely peaceful resolution. Dixon overhears a man at a bar bragging to his friend about seemingly raping and killing a girl. Dixon starts a fight with the man, scratching his face, thereby getting the man's DNA sample under his fingernails. Although



the DNA test reveals that he was not the man who raped/killed Mildred's daughter, the lengths to which Dixon had gone to in an attempt to find her daughter's assailant showed Mildred that he truly cared about her. The film ends with Mildred and Dixon in a car, gun in the trunk, on their way to kill the man who may not be Mildred's daughter's rapist but who is surely a rapist, nonetheless. As they drive down the road starting their long trip, Mildred and Dixon admit that they were not sure about killing the man, but they will "decide on the way." Like the ambiguous ending of *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, it is uncertain if McDonagh will continue his use of violence as he continues his work in both film and theater. However, the philosophies and revelations he has made in this film lead to the assumption that he will continue to take steps toward creating works that showcase the more peaceful side of human nature.

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