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## **The good, the bad, and the ugly: violence, tradition and the politics of morality in Martin McDonagh's 'The Lieutenant of Inishmore'**

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Catherine Rees

## The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: the Politics of Morality in Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*

The recent plays of Martin McDonagh have fascinated and repelled critics for nearly a decade. His idiosyncratic blend of rural Irish mythology and 'in-ye-face' aggression has both caused consternation and won high praise, but the motivations and inspirations of McDonagh's work have not been widely discussed. Here, Catherine Rees addresses some of the common critical assaults on one of his most contentious plays, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), and seeks to rescue the playwright from misunderstanding and heavy-handed critical treatment. She also aims to clarify some of the issues surrounding this politically charged and controversial work, and discusses it within the wider context of British and Irish drama. An earlier version of this article was given as a paper at the 'Contemporary Irish Literature: Diverse Voices' conference at the University of Central Lancaster in April 2003. Rees has presented on various aspects of McDonagh's work at a joint American Conference for Irish Studies and British Association of Irish Studies conference, and is currently working on a PhD about his plays at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

IRISH DRAMA is, it would appear, unable to escape from the politics either of its writing or its subject. Martin McDonagh, a playwright who has set all but one of his plays in the rural landscape of the west of Ireland, has been attacked and praised in equal measure for both responding to and refusing to be restrained by the accepted trajectory of Irish theatre. Born in London of Irish parentage, McDonagh is in the perfect position to interrogate the mythology of Irish drama, while simultaneously able to claim this heritage as his own. As Graham Whybrow, literary manager at the Royal Court, puts it, 'McDonagh writes both within a tradition and against a mythology'.<sup>1</sup>

Critics have attacked McDonagh's theatrical technique, and especially his recent Olivier Award-winning play, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), arguing that he provides English audiences with stereotypical images of the Irish, existing purely to be laughed at. It is this claim which I will be contesting here. Mary Luckhurst, who challenged the play in a now published paper, first given at a conference in 2002, finds that its characters are

'all psychopathic morons' and so 'make . . . any serious debate impossible'. Her argument is that *The Lieutenant* fails in that it provides no overt political commentary. She finds the lack of seriousness in the characters to be an indication of a lack of clear political angle, challenging the absence of 'a single intelligent Irish character in any of McDonagh's plays' as proof of 'a set of characters who merge into a single cod stereotype of "Oirishness"'.<sup>2</sup>

Luckhurst and other critics clearly feel let down by *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. Because McDonagh has written a violent play about the violence of terrorism within the INLA, he is seen as not being responsible enough to provide his audiences with adequate moral co-ordinates to negotiate and respond to his play. The concern is that English audiences are merely laughing at the farcical elements and forgetting to think about the political message that Irish playwrights are traditionally supposed to deliver.

The weakness of this argument is the mistake of aligning Irish drama with political drama *per se*. As Nicholas Grene points

out, 'As long as there has been a distinct Irish drama it has been so closely bound up with national politics that the one has often been considered more or less a reflection of the other'.<sup>3</sup> While McDonagh's play is, I would argue, a clear and absolute political satire, there is no reason why Luckhurst should seek a defining politics in his play. The mere fact of his writing an Irish drama on an Irish subject does not dictate a resolute didactic purpose, and to wish for such a moral outlook in the work of a playwright such as McDonagh is, arguably, to miss the point of his drama.

The political impetus behind the writing of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, as claimed by McDonagh himself, is, however, clear. What 'spurred him to write [the play] was the IRA atrocity in Warrington, in which two boys were killed', writes theatre critic Charles Spencer in the *Daily Telegraph* (28 June 2002), quoting McDonagh as saying: 'I thought, hang on, this is being done in my name and I just feel like exploding in rage.' Indeed, McDonagh seems to answer Luckhurst's criticism directly when he remarks: 'The violence has a purpose . . . otherwise there's nothing particularly interesting about shooting people on stage. If people who've had violence inflicted on them on either side of the Troubles see this play, I hope they'll see it as anti-violence.'<sup>4</sup>

### Comedy and Cruelty

The violence in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is one of the aspects of the play that critics object to. Luckhurst speaks of 'an orgy of random violence' and of 'a rather obvious attempt to outdo her [Sarah Kane's *Blasted*] for blood and guts'. It is undeniably a violent and horrific play, whose plot involves a *Reservoir Dogs*-style torture scene in which a drug dealer is hung upside down on stage at the mercy of 'Mad Padraic', a terrorist refused membership to the IRA because he was 'too mad'.<sup>5</sup>

What makes the violence harder to stomach is the comedy which accompanies it, and it is this irreverence to the violence of the Northern Irish political situation which

so unnerves critics. The sinister torture scene is cut short by a telephone call from Padraic's father and includes moments of black comedy such as 'I'm torturing one of them fellas pushes drugs on wee kids, but I can't say too much over the phone, like . . .', and Padraic politely apologizing to his victim for the delay: 'I'll be with you in a minute now, James.' The on-going joke in the play is established as it emerges that Padraic cares more for his sick cat than for the human victims of his crimes, finally allowing James to go after he feigns a love of cats himself and Padraic 'gives the confused James some change' for the bus to the hospital, 'because you want to get them toes looked at. The last thing you want now is septic toes.'<sup>6</sup>

The brutality in the play certainly resembles that of farce. The bodies which pile up by its end recall the carnage of Alfred Jarry's infamous *Père Ubu*, 'in which crowds of victims are gleefully tortured and murdered before our eyes'.<sup>7</sup> But, like Jarry's play, which sought to challenge the accepted conventions of the French theatre, McDonagh uses cruelty not to titillate middle-class audiences and create an *enfant terrible* reputation, but to expose the cruelty and pointlessness of the terrorism he is criticizing. As Charles Spencer puts it, 'The more gory and outrageous the action becomes . . . the more forcefully he makes his point about mindless barbarity.'<sup>8</sup> And McDonagh himself tells us:

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. . . . There is a humour in there that is straight-ahead funny and uncomfortable. It makes you laugh and think.<sup>9</sup>

### Deflating Mythology

David Ian Rabey argues (paraphrasing Marx) that 'by intensifying a situation it becomes a revolutionary one'.<sup>10</sup> Arguably, when Luckhurst finds the characters of McDonagh's plays one-dimensional and stereotypical, she is reacting against McDonagh's use of caricature to deflate the Irish mythology of previous drama and to make a very specific

point about the sentimentality of both Irish rural drama and of the approaches to radical terrorism.

W. A. Armstrong writes of J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, a play that is often seen as having influenced McDonagh's *Lonesome West* and *A Skull in Connemara*, 'Synge had a great affection for the peasant communities that he knew, but in his plays he satirizes their credulity, violence, and parochialism.'<sup>11</sup> This is, I'd suggest, exactly what McDonagh is doing – writing within this classical Irish tradition of the idyllic, pastoral countryside, while savagely attacking the sentimentality of the terrorist movement as a noble response to 'the love of one's land' by employing the overt and dramatic tactics of the London playwrights of the late 1990s, the so-called 'in yer face' British drama.<sup>12</sup> It is this combination of dramatic styles which makes *The Lieutenant* so hard for critics.

Aleks Sierz characterizes this trend in British drama by stressing 'its intensity, its deliberate relentlessness, and its ruthless commitment to extremes'. He also argues for the need for violence and provocative images on stage as they undermine traditional stage constraints, 'affronting the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown on stage [and] also tap[ping] into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort'.<sup>13</sup> A good example of a play that employed some of these techniques in an earlier era is Edward Bond's controversial *Saved* (1965), in which a baby is stoned to death in its pram. Sarah Kane, a leading figure of 'In-ye-face' drama, was influenced by it, remarking, 'When I read *Saved*, I was shocked by the baby being stoned. But then I thought, there isn't anything you can't represent on stage.'<sup>14</sup>

This attitude leads to a refusal to ignore the sometimes sordid and violent aspects of life, and a determination to represent them in the theatre. The justification for the explicit violence in these plays is that in the 'jagged and violent decade' of the 'nineties, plays sometimes need shocking images which are 'impossible to ignore'. Similarly, comedy is a valid device for tapping into the audience's psyche: Sierz argues that 'a common reaction

to terror is either to ignore it or to laugh at it'.<sup>15</sup> We cannot ignore the terror in McDonagh's play because we are laughing at it, but on a deeper level the audience is also implicated in the violence because we are vicariously enjoying it. This is exactly the uncomfortable position McDonagh wishes to put us in.

### Squeam Tactics

When Luckhurst argues that McDonagh is pandering to his English audiences, she seems to overlook the complex trap he is setting for them. Mark Lawson argues that McDonagh intends to confound audiences' expectations by 'mak[ing] us worry more about the cats than the humans involved', while Susannah Clapp says that McDonagh 'uses the squeamishness of his audience – who are more accustomed to seeing a stage littered with human corpses than witnessing the death of one pet puss – to highlight the sentimentality which often accompanies thuggishness'.<sup>16</sup>

By increasing our attachment to the cats of the play, McDonagh is cleverly trapping the very audience that Luckhurst argues he is courting into an alignment with Padraic. In doing so, McDonagh is subverting the theatrical convention – notably that of the Jacobean revenge tragedy, which accepts the loss of human life as part of the theatrical occasion – and is instead focusing our attention on the absurd sentimentality which worries and fusses over the death of a terrorist's cat. The irony of animal rights campaigners protesting at the use of live cats in a Dutch performance of the play would surely not be lost on McDonagh.<sup>17</sup>

In exposing the inconsistencies in both the audience and in the creation of Padraic's character, McDonagh is not only 'razor sharp on the terrorists who quite happily torture and murder human beings, but are desperately concerned about the welfare of cats', but he is also mounting a scathing attack on 'a band of men . . . whose murderous activities are motivated by adolescent absolutes and maudlin sentimentality'.<sup>18</sup>

When Luckhurst states that she finds 'political substance all but air-brushed away'<sup>19</sup> in

*The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, she is clearly overlooking the subtle inversion of political idealism and Irish political history. Not only is McDonagh confronting the audience with a sentimentality which forces them to question their own moral system, he is simultaneously challenging them to condemn the utopian ideals that are becoming meaningless and forgotten.

### Against Political Sentimentality

The Irish history presented in the play is based on particularly shaky knowledge, not due to McDonagh's personal dismissal of its significance but because the characters are operating in a world which no longer understands it. For instance, the INLA understand they should be antagonistic towards Oliver Cromwell, but can no longer remember why. Christy's remark, 'Do you know how many cats Oliver Cromwell killed in his time?' (p. 30), exposes the absurd reduction of Irish history into the image of a maltreated cat, thus condemning the terrorist movement which still fights in its name. Mairead's choice of name for her own cat, Sir Roger Casement, similarly reduces Irish history to the laughably absurd. More recent history does not escape McDonagh's scorn, either, when Joey tries to liken the battering of a cat to the Bloody Sunday massacre (p. 28).

McDonagh's criticism of the misuse of Irish political history doesn't end with *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. Ray Dooley in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* equates his drunken escapade of kicking a cell door in just his socks with the injustice of the Birmingham Six case. Similarly, Padraic completely misses the point when he remarks, 'Ah feck the Guildford Four. Even if they didn't do it, they should've taken the blame and been proud.' When Mick Dowd in *A Skull in Connemara* remarks, 'That's the trouble with young people today, they don't know the first thing about Irish history', McDonagh is clearly challenging the validity of this past as a basis for terrorism.<sup>20</sup>

In challenging the sentimentality and also absurdity of the Irish terrorist movement, McDonagh also exposes the pointlessness of

the terrorists' fight. By setting the plays in southern rather than northern Ireland, he instantly retracts the immediacy of the situation and exposes the farce of extreme terrorist violence in a 'cottage on Inishmore' in which there is a 'framed piece of embroidery reading "Home Sweet Home"' (p. 3) – an environment which says very little to the audience in terms of justifying terrorism.

Likewise, McDonagh takes care to undermine the utopian ideals of his characters by showing them as lacking in vital respects. Padraic's advice to Mairead, to 'be staying at home, now, and marry some nice fella. Let your hair grow out a tadeen and some fella's bound to be looking twice at you some day, and if you learn to cook and sew too, sure, that'd double your chances. Maybe treble' (p. 36), along with his insistence that 'We don't be letting girls in the INLA. No. Unless pretty girls' (p. 35), demonstrates that his ideals are based on a foundation which is hypocritical and opportunistic.

The direct link McDonagh makes between the drugs trade and the funding of terrorism again undermines Padraic's ideal. Christy points out to Padraic that the drug dealers he is so fond of torturing, because they sell to Catholics as well as Protestants, are 'fella[s] without whom there'd be no financing for your ferry crossings and chip-shop manoeuvres' (p. 45). The constant reference in the play to 'freeing Ireland' is shown to be, in the hands of terrorists, a worthless ideal. Brian Logan writes, 'There's no room for ambiguity . . . no one could think of these terrorists as freedom fighters. They're sexist, emotionally stunted, and concerned with the implications for tourism. . . . McDonagh's scorn of pig-headed Utopianism and false history has a wide application.'<sup>21</sup> In this context, the use of stock characters, whom Luckhurst condemns as '[not] worth keeping alive anyway', become political tools, larger-than-life cartoons who have lost any sense of what they are fighting for.<sup>22</sup>

### Challenging the Idyllic

McDonagh's view of Ireland, like his presentation of history and character, is not accid-



ental. Nicholas Grene traces the presentation of pastoral Ireland, citing the film *The Quiet Man* as an archetypal 'classic use of Ireland', employing the 'idyllic landscape' and creating an Ireland which is 'archaic [and] traditional'.<sup>23</sup> McDonagh takes this rural myth and challenges it, deliberately using *The Quiet Man* to destroy the mythology it creates.

In *A Skull in Connemara*, Mick berates Mary for pandering to the tourist 'Yanks', 'telling them your Liam's place was where *The Quiet Man* was filmed, when wasn't it a hundred miles away?' (p. 67). Tourism is an issue McDonagh chooses to confront, acknowledging Ireland's need for it but laughing at 'them eejit Yanks' (p. 67) at the same time. During the violence at the ending of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, Donny dryly remarks, 'It's incidents like this does put tourists off Ireland' (p. 50).

The play thus articulates the widening and hybridizing of Ireland into the 'global village', and is punctuated by references to media influence.<sup>24</sup> The characters understand and articulate their experiences through television programmes, for instance, the local policeman glamorizing his job as 'just like *Hill Street Blues*', while Catholic doctrine is reduced to, 'So that fella from *Alias Smith and Jones*, he'd be in hell?', and Padraic's view of women is limited to idealizing 'Evie off *The House of Elliott*'.<sup>25</sup>

Critics of McDonagh would have it that the idiocies of the characters in *The Lieutenant* make 'serious debate impossible'.<sup>26</sup> In the light of the above discussion, perhaps one could further respond by pointing out that this is McDonagh's point. His characters are deliberately extreme and consciously controversial. The very real brutality of the play not only locates it in the tradition of 'in-yer-face' drama, it deliberately forces the audience not to laugh at the stupidities of the Irish but to confront their own approaches to the sentimentality of the Irish political movement and to interrogate the causes of Padraic's dislocation and isolation in a world which no longer remembers the history it is fighting for.

To question the intelligence of McDonagh's characters is also to overlook the fact that he

does not want us to find them intelligent and eloquent spokespeople for a political cause, such as John Osborne's Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger* (1956) or David Hare's Susan Traherne in *Plenty* (1978); rather he would prefer we saw them as the gang from Edward Bond's *Saved*, brutal and thuggish without offering any justification for or comprehension of their actions.

The characters in *Lieutenant* cannot be judged within a naturalistic, believable, and realistic context. As Sierz remarks, 'The problem with judging 'nineties new writing in terms of naturalism or social realism is that this tries to impose the conventions of a previous era onto the present.' Sierz also argues that: 'Of course, "in-yer-face" drama is not strong on either plot or characterization – but its power lies in the directness of its shock tactics, the immediacy of its language, the relevance of its themes, and the stark aptness of its stage pictures.'<sup>27</sup> Failure to appreciate this often lies at the heart of criticism of McDonagh and can be expressed as the dichotomy laid out at the beginning of this paper: the use of 'nineties shock tactics on the one hand, and the exploration and interrogation of traditional political drama and Irish dramatic tradition on the other.

## Conclusion

I would argue that it is impossible to appreciate *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* without an understanding of its context. The violence and shock-potential of this play not only align it with a 'nineties trend which is seeking to test the limits of theatricality and to push the boundaries of what can be shown on stage, it is also reminiscent of Jacobean tragedies, ending as they do in bloodshed and the piling up of corpses on stage.

*The Lieutenant of Inishmore* recalls this classic technique, with its 'blood-soaked living room . . . strewn with . . . body parts' (p. 55), but it also sits well in the tradition of farce and surrealism. The politics of the play are made clear in the absurdity of the ending, when the real 'Wee Thomas' nonchalantly wanders across the stage, unaware of the carnage which has taken place in his name. When

Davey remarks, 'So all this terror has been for absolutely nothing?' (p. 68), we would be foolish to ignore the political seriousness in this line, as we would be to overlook the warmth of the ending in which neither Davey nor Donny can bring themselves to shoot the cat, instead feeding it, in an image not unlike Len's mending of the chair at the close of *Saved*: a clear suggestion of hope among futility. If audiences choose to ignore this message, and the constant ridiculing of the political extremists which runs throughout the play, it is because of an inability to see past the physical staging and the black humour, which not only give the play its form, but also contribute to its message.

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