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The Virgin Beauty Queen: Gender, Productivity, and Modernity in Martin McDonagh's Ireland

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Bridgewater State University

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The Virgin Beauty Queen: Gender, Productivity, and Modernity in Martin McDonagh's *Leenane*

## **Introduction**

Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* explores gender and its relation to traditional Irish nationalism by creating a distorted version of the Irish pastoral ideal and portraying in the most extreme way what it means for a woman's place to be in the home. In the bleak setting of the play, these gender roles prove to be not only inapplicable to real life, but poisonous to Irish people and the future of Ireland as a modern nation.

Written in 1996, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is a play with four characters and nine scenes that takes place in the titular Leenane, a rural village in County Galway, Ireland. Though there is much talk of the idyllic countryside of the West of Ireland, the entire play takes place inside of the home, specifically in the combined living room/kitchen of a cottage owned by Mag and Maureen Folan. Mag Folan, described as "a stoutish woman in her early seventies with short, tightly permed gray hair and a mouth that gapes slightly"(McDonagh 3), is the mother of Maureen Folan, "a plain, slim woman of forty"(McDonagh 4) who is the caregiver of her elderly mother.

Both adults, they both rely on one another for survival. Mag, who is old, frail, and injured, relies on Maureen's caregiving to remain in her own home and avoid being placed in a retirement home, while Maureen, who before the time of the play suffered a nervous breakdown while working in London, lives in her mother's home after her discharge from Difford Hall, a mental hospital. Though they rely on one another to avoid the threat of being forcibly institutionalized, the two have an incredibly contentious relationship and make deliberate

attempts to make each other as miserable as possible. Mag, by guilt and blackmail has essentially made Maureen her personal slave, and secretly interferes with Maureen's personal life to the point where Maureen is a forty year old virgin who has only kissed two men. Maureen, on the other hand, exploits her position as Mag's caregiver to verbally abuse her, and to torture her by force-feeding her repulsive food.

The two other characters are a part of a separate family, Ray and Pato Dooley. Unlike Mag and Maureen, the two brothers are never seen together onstage, and although it is stated in the play that the two keep in contact with each other through letters, they never interact onstage and are never shown to be in the Folan home at the same time. Ray Dooley, the younger brother at age twenty, acts as a messenger boy and link to the outside world, often on behalf of his older brother, Pato. Pato Dooley, aged forty, is "a good-looking man"(McDonagh 27) who works full-time in London and returns to Leenane to visit. Maureen reunites with Pato at a party and brings him back to the Folan home.

Maureen and Pato have a romantic affair together which almost results in Maureen's first sexual experience, but is ruined when Pato is unable to get an erection. Pato sends Maureen a letter through Ray apologizing for his impotence and asking her to move to Boston with him, but Mag intercepts the letter before it reaches Maureen and burns it. When Maureen learns of this, she tortures her mother by pouring hot oil onto her skin, and beats her mother to death with a poker to free herself to be with Pato. However, after Mag's funeral, Ray reveals to Maureen that Pato has already married another woman and moved to America, and that she only imagined a meeting with Ray in which he promises to come back for her. Ray leaves Maureen sitting alone in the cottage, where she takes on the mannerisms of her deceased mother.

An over-simplified reading of this play would suggest that the play is meant only to comment on the mistreatment and subjugation of women in Ireland. One may also interpret Maureen's virginity as a root cause for her violent and eventually murderous tendencies, and take issue with the play as a misogynistic text. Because Pato leaves for America with a bride in tow, and Maureen is driven over the edge by her mother's interference in their relationship, it would be understandable to mistake *Beauty Queen* as an anti-woman play that ties the success of a female life with marriage and childbirth. However, I would argue that these four characters represent not the idea that women can't succeed in life if they're not good marriage material, but the perils of a nation that retreats into the past to regain national identity, resulting in anti-modern gender roles and a defunct institution of marriage that not only prevents productivity in its citizens, but actually results in destruction.

A history of colonialism, gender subjugation, and a nationwide identity crisis culminate in McDonagh's Leenane as a Toxic Mother figure that inhibits adulthood and productivity. Toxicity in this paper is defined as something malicious or harmful, in this case to growth and productivity. It is also poisonous in a sense that it takes an identity, in this case, national and gender identity, and turns it into something that negatively affects the quality of life of an individual. The Toxic Mother that is explored in this paper is the inevitable product of a nation that defines itself by its past, at the expense of the wellbeing of its citizens.

On the other side of the Toxic Mother is the seemingly innocuous prospect of modernity. In order to move forward as an independent nation of the world, modernity is both necessary and inevitable. However, modernity also has the hidden pitfall of a homogenous, globalized identity. With the connectedness of the modern world comes the pitfall of conforming to a homogenized global identity, informed primarily by the culture of the United States, Britain, and Australia.

Thus arises the crisis of becoming a nation that is modern and in touch with the global community while still forming a distinctly Irish identity. While *Beauty Queen* demonstrates that retreating into idyllic visions of the past in act of frantic nationalism has destructive results, modernity carries the threat of destroying Irish culture, a blow which would be devastating considering the history of English colonialism and the deliberate erasure of Irish identity.

### **Literature Review**

Isaac D. Balbus discusses the monopolization of mothers in childrearing and the effects that it has on a child's gender identity in his essay *Masculinity and the (M)Other*. He attempts to synthesize both Feminist mothering theory, in which the sense of self is completely defined by the structure of childrearing, and Narcissism theory which says that the self is completely autonomous from one's gender identity. (Balbus 213) Feminist mothering theory presents the idea that mother-dominated child-rearing causes girls to define themselves as the same as their mother, making their identity more permeable to others, thus creating a woman who views herself in relation to others. By this same line of thinking, young boys define themselves in opposition to their mothers, which causes them to grow into narcissistic men who seek to define themselves as an exceptional, independent being. (Balbus 216-217)

Balbus's synthesis of Feminist mothering theory and Narcissism theory can be used to read *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, because even though Balbus's paper seeks to understand the ways in which parenting effects people in relation to their gender identity, it shares several important parallels with *Beauty Queen* that leads to a more rich reading of the play. While the most obvious connection between "Masculinity and the (M)other" and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is the tumultuous mother-daughter relationship between Maureen and Mag, theories of parenting and self-definition add a new dimension to analyzing a play set in post-colonial

Ireland. For the purposes of this paper, the reading of Balbus's essay is primarily applicable in considering the violent relationship that Maureen has with her own mother, and the relationship that all characters share with the figure of a Toxic Mother, along with the identity crisis of a nation that is simultaneously trying to explore her previously-denied heritage in order to create a national identity while still trying to participate in an increasingly globalized modern world.

In *Beauty Queen* we can see Balbus's synthesis theory play out between the characters. While the effect of a gendered upbringing does largely define the cast of characters, in Pato we can see that it is not entirely impossible to "go rogue" and escape the cycle of a traumatic gendered upbringing. In Balbus's words there is a "relationship of connection and separation between structure and practice and between gender and sense of self." (Balbus 213), which indicates the possibility of forming a sense of self outside of one's upbringing. It would be incredibly tempting to apply Feminist mothering theory to *Beauty Queen* and see the odds as entirely in the men's favor--of course the rugged, handsome, and above all male Pato is the one to break free of Ireland-- but like Balbus's scholarship, McDonagh's Ireland is a more complicated and nuanced place.

That Maureen stays in Ireland and Pato goes to America seems to reinforce the idea that Irish gender roles are primarily harmful to women. Reinforced even more so, it would seem, as Maureen transforms into her mother. She must define herself in accordance with Mag and her Irish surroundings, whereas Pato's sexual difference naturally puts him at an advantage to strike out on his own. But, as Balbus writes, referring to literal mothers: "We must challenge the claim that mothers necessarily treat their little boys in a way that is fundamentally different from the way they treat their little girls" (Balbus 222). While Maureen is completely subdued and

consumed by the role that is passed down from her mother, Pato is less independent than he seems, and is something of a hybrid.

While he holds a job and an apartment in London, he keeps finding himself returning to Ireland, and gets entangled with smothering mother figures through his romantic endeavors. In fact, it could even be said that even in the final act of the play, Pato has still managed to trap himself in traditional Irish gender roles, only in another country. While he is not married to the violent and deeply traumatized Maureen, he is still a married man just as he is expected to be, with an Irish woman no less. No matter how much he tries to differentiate himself, an identity is still projected onto him, showing that no one is safe from the Toxic Mother. Balbus writes: “Having been overprotected by his mother, he(like his overprotected sister) will defend against the anxiety he associates with separation by seeking out relationships with overridealized[sic] others to whom he can cling.”(Balbus 223) Though we can imagine that men are more free from the influence of others than women are, the reality is that men are no more safe than their female counterparts.

Though Balbus’s essay is primarily centered around parenting, I have selected it to examine *Beauty Queen* for a few reasons. First of all, the figure of Mag is a disturbing and puzzling figure, both as a form of the Toxic Mother and as a victim. By using Balbus’s excellent insight on motherhood and parenting, we can get a deeper insight on the mother figure and the role she plays in the non-productive issues of this play. Secondly, although Balbus’s essay focuses on masculinity, as is evidenced by the title, this focus is necessary for grappling with the complex forces that disempower men in a play that is set in a nation that has historically favored men and masculinity. And thirdly, though not all women are mothers, this is the expectation within the traditional Irish gender roles that this essay aims to explore. Thus, the two primary



groups that Balbus explores, mothers and men, are represented by female and male characters of the play. Even the virginal Maureen, who is not a mother and likely never will be, has her life defined by the *idea* of motherhood.

Other scholars who have commented on *Beauty Queen* do so in the context of theater criticism, such as playwright Caridad Svich's review of the play. Written at the time of the premiere in 1996, Svich's analysis of the play primarily focuses on the impact of *Beauty Queen* as Martin McDonagh's first play. Her comments are important for this paper, however, as they represent a reasonable reaction to the agonizing gender politics that play out in *Beauty Queen*. The fates of Mag and Maureen in comparison with Pato and Ray expresses to Svich an "inherently conservative sensibility" that leaves her with a "bitter aftertaste"(137). This reaction is understandable; however, it doesn't consider why McDonagh presents the audience with such frustrating circumstances. Though Mag and Maureen are each in their own way detestable, their respective tragic fates do not come across as justified, but rather unsettling and upsetting. The violence that the characters put each other through is meant to leave a bitter taste, and is important in the discourse of gender identity and Irish nationalism.

Similar to Svich, Heath Diehl's work "Classic Realism, Irish Nationalism, and a New Breed of Angry Young Man in Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*" aims to place *Beauty Queen* in the context of theater history, though Diehl's analysis is more based in the impact of the play on Irish literature and ideas about Ireland. Both McDonagh, an Irish playwright based in London, and *Beauty Queen*, a disturbing play about Ireland, are "perplexing" figures in defining Irish identity(Diehl 98). To reinforce the idea that Irish theater is inexplicably tied to Irish national identity, Diehl discusses the foundation of the Abbey Theatre in 1899, which "sought to foster a sense of national pride by presenting plays which challenged common

misperceptions... of Ireland and its people.”(Diehl 103). The drama of McDonagh, then, utilizes the traditional practice of Irish theater to challenge the ways in which old methods of defining Irish identity have solidified in modern society. Diehl reads *Beauty Queen* as a classical realist play, set in “a world in which Irish identity is systematically undermined.”(Diehl 107) Irish identity is central to reading McDonagh, as Diehl demonstrates when he explains *Beauty Queen* as an “Angry Young Man drama”, which rails against society, in this case by taking classical representation of the Irish countryside and using them to create a toxic and destructive environment.

Jan Cronin’s essay “‘If I was Irish I’d be crying by now’: Irishness and Exteriority, Doyle’s Deportees, and the Irish Plays of Martin McDonagh explores the idea that Irish identity is rooted in the idea of being an outsider, of never being able to have an identity that feels to never completely encompass what it means to be truly Irish. Using the idea from Roddy Doyle’s story “Home to Harlem” that there is a “model of Irishness [that] encourages us to conceptualize Irishness both within and without Ireland’s borders as functioning in the same way, just with varying degrees of explicitness and intensity”(Cronin 191), Cronin explores the “McDonagh enigma””(192) that surrounds reception of McDonagh’s work. Cronin argues that we shouldn’t see Martin McDonagh’s plays as an attempt to explore Irish identity, and instead, she compares Martin McDonagh to Roddy Doyle’s character Declan O’Connor, and argues that his “revivification of stage Irishry [has] the potential to be construed as a Declan-like move to ‘get at the Irish’, as a retaliatory gesture in relation to an exclusionary group.”(192).

Maureen is a central figure in Cronin’s thesis of McDonagh’s plays as a site of deliberate exteriority. While the deliberately over-the-top Irish mannerisms of the characters provokes a sense of exteriority for non-Irish audience members, by placing Maureen as the

sympathetic main character only for her to turn into a cartoonish figure of psychotic violence alienates those who previously identified with her. “The pathos of the moment where Maureen tells Pato that her mother thinks Maureen can’t tell the difference between reality and fantasy(31-2) settles the audience in sympathetic mode only to facilitate their eviction from that narrative of cruel misrepresentation when it emerges that Maureen’s railway station encounter with Pato was a fiction... To a large degree *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* cultivates connection and investment in order to execute disconnect and exteriority”(Cronin 195). Cronin’s points about McDonagh and alienation are intriguing; however, exteriority and the feeling that one is never “Irish enough” are key points of the Irish identity, and are demonstrated farther in the play beyond just Maureen.

### **The Folan Home and the Toxic Mother**

Through depictions of horrific violence and the painful mental side effects of oppressive gender roles in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, McDonagh creates a non-productive, toxic, and distinctly female domestic space that criticizes the unrealistic Irish female ideal. The entire play takes place within the Folan home, but the audience only ever gets to see the kitchen/living room of the house. By concentrating only on the most public area of a private residence, there is a conspicuous lack of privacy and ownership of the space. At the center of this space are the characters of Maureen and Mag. There is a total lack of familial affection between Maureen and Mag; their existence together is mere toleration at its best and deliberate violence and sabotage at its worst. There is also a conspicuous absence of men in the home, which is not only felt in the unspoken absence of Maureen’s father, and Maureen’s sexual fantasies which she shares to upset her mother. At a first glance, it may seem like McDonagh is creating a world in which any female space is toxic, but in reality, he constructs a criticism of a nation in which a woman’s

only options are to be a barefooted maiden or an old crone. The Folan home could be a productive space, but it is overshadowed by the figure of the Toxic Mother.

A primary aspect of the Toxic Mother is that she is anti-modern, and her influences are visible not only visible in the marriage obsession of the play, but Mag's stubborn insistence to refuse to use the toilet. This is because the Toxic Mother has her roots in an antiquated vision of the Irish woman, a vision that was put forth rather successfully for several years by nationalist political leaders such as Eamon de Valera. A major political figure in Ireland between the years of 1932 and 1958, de Valera was the head of Fianna Fáil (The Irish Republic Party) and the second Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland, a nationalist who believed Catholicism and Gaelic values were a valuable aspect of strengthening the young nation that was Ireland. (Shannon 257) According to Catherine B. Shannon's essay "The Changing Face of Cathleen ni Houlihan", de Valera held a "utopian vision of comely maidens dancing at a crossroads preparatory to their destiny as devoted mothers living in frugal comfort in cozy rural homesteads", which "brought little practical benefit to the majority of Irish women." (Shannon 258). This struggle to create a national identity and culture was also reflected in the poetry of W.B. Yeats and the founding of the Abbey Theatre.

All of the components of de Valera's vision are present in the Folan household. In Maureen we have a maiden, in Mag a mother, and the Folan household could be described as nothing but frugal and rural. Indeed, the setting of the play does match an idealized vision of Irish life: a small town where everyone knows each other, in the country, in a landscape that even Maureen admits is beautiful. However, the conditions of the characters' lives prove that this life is anything but ideal. The idealized vision of Irish nationalism has little practicality in the lives of actual women, and as *Beauty Queen* goes on to show, this idealized vision affects the

lives of men as well. When a woman can be only a maiden or a mother, she begins to be distorted into a figure that poisons society and family structures at its very source. When a person doesn't have room to be a human, it takes away their humanity, which enables them emotionally to do some incredibly despicable things.

What is problematic about the Folan household is not that Maureen is non-reproductive. Indeed, at age forty, it would be incredibly difficult for her to conceive a child even if Pato didn't struggle with impotency during their sexual encounter. With Pato leaving Leenane for America with Dolores Healey/Hooley, a younger cousin, it is highly more likely that he will be reproductive in the sense of having children and starting a family. However, while Pato is productive in the sense of having children, his departure from Ireland does not inhibit the destructive cycle that Maureen continues in her mother's stead.

I do not want to suggest that Mag is completely villainous in her characterization of the Toxic Mother. It is not something of Mag's creation, and by the final scene of the play, it is very clear that unlike Mag, the Toxic Mother is not so easy to kill. Over the course of the play, Mag is force-fed lumpy Complian, tortured with hot oil, and eventually bludgeoned to death with a poker. There is no doubt surrounding Mag's death. However, in the final scene of the play, Maureen begins to adopt Mag's mannerisms and, by extension, the Toxic Mother role.

How then, do we define the Toxic Mother? What is her role not only in the Folan household, but in the Irish national identity? The Toxic Mother is not a mother in the literal sense, although Mag is. However, when Maureen takes on the role of the Toxic Mother and begins treating Ray as she was once treated, the vision becomes more clear. The Toxic Mother inhibits sexual reproduction to be sure, but also prevents those around her from living any sort of

mature, productive life, sexual or otherwise. It does not matter whether or not the sexuality is reproductive. Sexuality in and of itself is antithetical to the mission of the Toxic Mother. That mission is not to produce children through sexuality and childbirth, but through making children of all of the adults around her.

There are no children in the cast of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, but time and time again we see characters reduced to a childlike state. First and foremost, we see the first adult child in Maureen. Maureen, aged forty, is a virgin. This fact alone is not what makes Maureen a child figure, and neither is the fact that she still lives with her mother. If Maureen were perhaps a nun, or even a content spinster with a career and a social life, there would be no issue, and it would be offensive and presumptuous to call her a child. It is the reason for Maureen's virginity that makes her position in life so disturbing.

The most common stage action for Maureen is housework. She's either fixing her mother's meals, cleaning the cottage-- even at one moment when she is off stage, Mag informs Ray Dooley that Maureen is feeding the chickens. It is important for a home to be maintained, however, this is not Maureen's home. Maureen doesn't own her own home, which is parallel to the fact that in many ways, Maureen does not own her own body. Maureen is not maintaining a space that is her own, nor is she the only one capable of doing the work she does, as Mag is implied to be more capable than she lets on. No, the work that she does is in service to her mother. Simply put, she has chores in the same way that a child does, and as such as never left her role as a daughter subordinate to her mother.

There are two moments in the play in which Mag herself falls victim to the infantilization of the Toxic Mother. The first comes about the morning after Maureen's sexual encounter with Pato, in an aggressive standoff between her and Maureen over the Mother role. As Maureen

flaunts her play-pretend sexuality, she characterizes her elderly and helpless mother as an unwanted child, meanwhile negating Pato's personhood and bodily autonomy and wielding him as a power object against her mother. Forced into the power struggle between Maureen and Mag, Pato is reduced only to his manhood, a phallus rather than a person.

MAUREEN. Careful enough, cos we don't need any babies coming, do we? We do have enough babies in this house to be going on with.

MAUREEN *kisses him at length. MAG watches in disgust.*

PATO. Maureen, now...

MAUREEN: Just thanking you for a wonderful night, I am, Pato. Well worth the wait it was. *Well* worth the wait.

PATO(*embarrassed*): Good-oh.

MAG: Discussing me scoulded hand we was before you breezed in with no clothes!

MAUREEN: Ar, feck your scoulded hand. (*To PATO*) You'll have to be putting that thing of yours in me again before too long is past, Pato. I do have a taste for it now, I do...

PATO: Maureen...

*She kisses him, gets off, and stares at MAG as she passes into the kitchen.*

Maureen clings to her sexual encounter, unfulfilling as it was for her, as a way to wield her recently developed sexuality and adulthood against her mother. But the Toxic Mother makes herself known in Maureen, because instead of Maureen wishing to prove herself to be her mother's adult equal, she envisions her mother as an infant and herself as an unwilling, unloving mother. This parallel is not entirely unwarranted, as Maureen is Mag's primary caregiver. However, the relationships in this play revolve around domestic power, rather than intimacy or love. Relationships based in love are productive and can create positive change, for example,

Pato's eventual relationship with Dolores results in a successful move to Boston. Power-based relationships result in pain and destruction, as is seen in Maureen and Mag's violent and abusive relationship. Having been pulled into the fold of one of these power exchanges, Pato is denied his subjectivity when he is made into a sexual object to serve as a pawn in Maureen and Mag's argument. Pato's identity and personhood are irrelevant in this case; any man would serve the same purpose.

By making the hate between Maureen and Mag so palpable, McDonagh shows that a relationship that is based on a power struggle cannot be harmonious. Mag and Maureen are both adults, and rightfully find it cruel not to be treated as such. They constantly try to dominate each other using the resources they are given, Mag as Maureen's mother and Maureen as Mag's caregiver. When a woman is "stuck in the house" and cannot form meaningful relationships with others with the exception of their husbands, who they must be subservient to, and children, who must be subservient to them, her identity becomes intertwined with the idea of control. This produces a woman forced into a mother role that, regardless of whether she is reproductive or not, becomes a destructive force in the lives of others. And, in Act Two Scene Seven, this parallel is most dramatic when Maureen finally becomes physically destructive.

Because her success at playing the role of Toxic Mother has all but driven Pato out of Maureen's life, Mag is smug in having secured her future, and can now safely resign herself to being her child's child until the end of her life. This scene is for a moment quite peaceful, until a growing tension emerges about who occupies the adult role. Thinking that Mag does not know that she and Pato never actually had sex, Maureen looks for every opportunity to flaunt her fictional sexual encounter. Mag revels in her secret knowledge of Pato's impotence like a mischievous child and mocks Maureen to her face. They exchange childish innuendos about



penises and sexuality, never once directly mentioning the organ or the act. This is where their struggle to take the role of Toxic Mother comes to a head, and the violence between Mag and Maureen proves to be not only more violent than could be imagined, but also cyclical.

MAUREEN gives MAG a shortbread finger, after waving phallically in the air a moment.

MAUREEN: Remind me of something, shortbread fingers do.

MAG: I suppose they do, now.

MAUREEN: I suppose it's been so long since you've seen what they remind me of, you do forget what they look like.

MAG: I suppose I do. And I suppose you're the expert.

MAUREEN: I am the expert.

MAG: Oh aye.

MAUREEN: I'm the king of experts.

MAG: I suppose you are now. Oh, I'm sure. I suppose you're the king of the experts.

MAUREEN: (pause. Suspicious) Why wouldn't you be sure?

MAG: With your Pato Dooley and your throwing it all in me face like an old peahen, eh?

When... (She catches herself before revealing any more.)

MAUREEN: (pause. Smiling) When what? (McDonagh 64)

This seemingly innocent encounter shows their inability to participate in adult conversation, comparing cookies to penises and antagonizing each other like children on the playground, teasing at sexuality but never emerging on a healthy discussion of what is a contentious subject in their home. In this exchange, McDonagh empathizes Maureen's comparison between shortbread fingers and the human penis. One purpose for this comparison is comedy; however, the piece of shortbread is one of several phallic symbols in the play.

Unlike the other prominent phallic symbol in the play, the poker, a shortbread finger is small, diminutive, edible. What makes the comparison particularly interesting is the unsuitability of the comparison combined with Maureen's insistence on making it. Maureen's suggestion of the shortbread finger as a penis does on the one hand suggest that she is merely seeking any means of provoking her mother, but more than that, shows her preoccupation with this phallic symbol, and her desire to wave one in her mother's face. The small size of the shortbread finger and its scant resemblance to an actual penis resembles Maureen's sexual experience and sense of power. Maureen has never seen an erect penis and therefore relies on her uninformed imagination to fulfill her deviant desire for phallic power. The comparison is ridiculous, deliberately so on McDonagh's part, and Mag knows better, by having not only sexual knowledge, but knowledge of Pato's impotence.

If Mag's own wellbeing was all that was at stake, and if she had any real maternal sympathy towards Maureen, she would humor her and continue to let Maureen look after her for the rest of her life. However, wellbeing and a positive relationship are not Mag's objectives, and it becomes clear that while it may seem that sexuality is power in this house, Mag is just as powerless as Maureen is. Truthfully, none of the characters in the play actually wield any personal power, and are instead victims and perpetrators in a vicious cycle, where all power, sexual or otherwise, is temporary and imaginary. Wishing to relish the imagined power she has over Maureen, Mag continues to indulge in teasing her until she finally, accidentally reveals her knowledge about Pato and Maureen's failed sexual encounter. It becomes clear at this moment that Mag herself is not the nefarious Toxic Mother, but is just as vulnerable to her influence. By not only infantilizing those around her, but by infantilizing herself, Mag is unable to fight back when Maureen becomes violent.

The subsequent torture and murder of Mag renders the role of the Toxic Mother as less gendered, and reveals it to be not a feminine role, but the outcome of a false feminine role. First, Maureen holds down Mag and pours boiling oil over her hand and stomach. Like the earlier force feeding, what is supposed to nourish and sustain Mag has been used to cause her pain. Reverted to a completely infantile state after her torture, Maureen abandons her child mother, leaving her wounded on the ground.

MAG(*quietly, sobbing*): Maureen... help me...

MAUREEN *returns a moment later, pulling her black dress on.*

MAUREEN(*to herself*) How do I look? Ah, I'll have to do. What time is it? Oh God...

MAG: Help me, Maureen...

MAUREEN(*brushing her hair*): Help you, is it? After what you've done? Help you, she says. No, I won't help you, and I'll tell you another thing. If you've made me miss Pato before he goes, then you'll *really* be for it, so you will, and no messing this time. Out of me fecking way, now...

MAUREEN *steps over MAG, who is still shaking on the floor, and exits through the front door. Pause. MAG is still crawling around slightly. The front door bangs open and MAG looks up at MAUREEN as she bangs back in.*

Me car keys I forgot...

MAUREEN *grabs her keys from the table, goes to the door, turns back to the table and switches the radio off.*

Electricity.

MAUREEN *exits again, slamming the door. Pause. Sound of her car starting and pulling off. Pause.*

MAG: But who will look after me, so?(McDonagh 68-69)

In her violent domination of Mag, Maureen also knows that this has rendered her mother more dependent than ever, and so resolves to commit a murder that is not only matricide, but in a way, infanticide to the mother who was like a child to her. Maureen's sexuality thus far has been abnormal in every sense. Her sexual fulfillment has been intercepted both by Pato's failure to have an erection on their night together, and by her mother's destruction of Pato's letter. Because Maureen has not been able to experience the physical and emotional pleasure that could come from her only sexual encounter, she also reverses the other outcome of sexuality, which is reproduction. Instead of bringing another life into this world, she takes away the life of the person who brought her into this world.

The site of the torture is the hearth and the home, and seems most suited to a violent figure that emerges from domestic entrapment. Like the cold, lumpy Complan, food is once again used not to sustain the body, but to cause pain. This is an integral part in the way the household functions: everything that should do something positive instead does something negative. The Toxic Mother doesn't give birth, but instead kills. The tainted hearth of the Folan home represents the outcome of a movement that aimed to strengthen the Irish nation, but was tainted by sexism, poverty, and discrimination. By using the hearth, the symbolic and traditional site of womanhood as a place of torture in the Folan home, *Beauty Queen* makes a statement about femininity and the inherent violence of enforced identity. The fire of the hearth may be intended to cook, but it can also burn, and therefore destroy. The device that Maureen uses to murder Mag comes from the hearth as well: a poker. The poker holds other implications about gender as a false phallus.

Other than the figure of the interfering mother, one of the most smothering and harmful structures present in Irish consciousness is the idealized Catholic marriage. Rural women are most obviously oppressed by this structure, defined by a history of poor job prospects which forced them into male-dominated marriages(Shannon 260), however, just as with all harmful gender roles, no one is left unaffected. Balbus writes of the hypothetical boy with the overprotective mother: “Having been overprotected by his mother, he (like his overprotected sister) will defend against the anxiety he associates with separation by seeking out relationships with over-idealized others to whom he can cling.”(223) The Irish man, under the influence of a nation that functions as an overprotective mother, while not manipulated by legal or financial consequences, is manipulated by crushing social pressure. Marriage provides women with a protective power in society; however, such motivation can reduce a husband from a romantic partner to a surrogate phallus. Men, on the other hand, are made to seek out women that can never measure up to the vision of his smothering mother.

Pato Dooley is a real man, who theoretically could offer Maureen real power in the restrictive structure of rural Ireland, including more money and even children of her own to control. His personhood, it should be noted, is made secondary in his scenario, and instead he becomes a source of power, a means for which Maureen can leave her mother and become one herself. The potential toxicity that could exist in that union, however, will never be known, as Pato has been effectively removed. In place of a man, to stand by Maureen’s side and allow her to move into adulthood, Maureen has taken up the poker. Detached from a man and therefore devoid of any humanity, the poker is a symbol of violent machismo that has tainted and can effectively destroy the domestic interior that Maureen feels trapped in. The false phallus makes a

more subtle appearance in an earlier scene in the play in which Maureen wishes that a male serial killer would come and kill Mag. This false phallus emerges to take the place of an absent phallus, which has been systematically removed from the house by the Toxic Mother.

The structure of the Folan household reduces Pato to a phallic symbol himself, negating his personhood and instead reducing him as symbol of power in Maureen and Mag's power struggle. Though his absence in Leenane is mostly felt as an absent phallus, Pato is able to regain his personhood when he leaves. It is from his apartment in England, and only by letter that he reveals to the audience that he was unable to maintain an erection during the night that he spent with Maureen. Out of the Folan home and out of Ireland, he can speak frankly to Maureen as an adult, no longer forced to sneak around like a teenager or be flaunted in front of Mag. He takes action in the form of the letter; however, knowing of Mag's meddling, he takes his best precautionary measures to ensure that the letter goes directly into Maureen's hands by mailing the letter to his younger brother Ray. Ray's failure as a messenger and the subsequent burning of the letter by Mag represents a second incident of impotency, and Pato misses his mark again. With Pato gone, the masculine focus of the show shifts to Ray.

### **Ray Dooley and the Future of Ireland**

Unlike the rest of the characters who are all aged forty or older, Ray Dooley is twenty years old and fresh out of adolescence, and the most in touch with modernity. While waiting in the Folan house with Mag, Ray expresses a desire to have a car, and enjoys watching foreign television programs, even going so far as to say that no one would want to watch Ireland on television. This aligns him with a modernity that is more global, in opposition to the nationalist

antiquity that burdens the remaining characters. However, he also has desires for a traditional Irish masculine identity, which is betrayed in his fixation on the poker. Over and over again, he expresses the desire to buy the poker from Maureen and Mag, and it is implied that he would use it to fight with police officers. He also holds a grudge against Maureen for stealing his swing ball set from him when he was a child.

In a space that is so defined by feminine identity, Ray's masculine identity is undefined. Ray doesn't have anything to offer the violent cycle that plays out between Mag, Maureen, and Pato, and thus he is pushed to the side. This shows how toxic the identity crisis in the play is, and how a culture based on the past and strict marriage structures doesn't allow any type of productive gender identity to form, male or female. Unlike his brother, Ray is completely relegated to the role of child for the majority of the play. He alternates between being a nuisance and a messenger boy, until he and Maureen are the only remaining characters in the play. Ray's confrontation with Maureen serves as a symbol of hope for escape from the influence of the Toxic Mother.

Ray enters the scene assuming his old role as the messenger boy. However, this time he is delivering a message that destroys Maureen's fantasies and delusions. In this moment, Ray represents the realities of modern life in contrast to Maureen's marriage plot fantasy. The idea that Ireland should build its identity on heterosexual marriage and traditional gender roles inhibits modernity and progress, which Ray represents as a member of the new generation. Instead of the hypothetical children that could come from traditional marriage, McDonagh shifts our focus back onto the young citizens of Ireland that already exist to build a national identity. Ray's information that Maureen never actually reunited with Pato and that instead he has left Ireland for America changes the nature of the show.

First, the audience learns that in addition to becoming violent, Maureen has also become delusional, and secondly, the play is informed by the fact that Pato could not make it work in Ireland, and will become one of many in the Irish diaspora. Both facts shatter not only Maureen's world, but the notion of the idealized Ireland. The social pressures to build homes that live in a vision of the past have created a space that may have all of the physical components of a cozy Irish home-- the range, the rocking chair, the chickens in the yard--but is not only non-productive, but destructive. While Maureen was walking around in a daze dreaming of Pato, Ray is well aware that something is not right, even if he doesn't know the full extent of it. What he does notice is Maureen burning food. Ray openly criticizes Maureen's food wastage, and then discovers the swing ball that Maureen has kept in her house since childhood.

Unlike Maureen, who used a false phallus to gain supremacy over her mother which only resulted in her entrapment in the Toxic Mother role, Ray is reclaiming something that belongs to him by right. Maureen's theft of Ray's swing ball set is another indication of a system that places a heavy emphasis on family values while devaluing actual people, including children. What has plagued Ray's whole life is not boredom as he so suspects, but rather poverty and emasculation.

RAY: ...The best fecking present I did ever get and only two oul' months' play out if I got before you went and confiscated it on me. What right did you have?... And just left it sitting there then to fade to fecking skitter. I wouldn't have minded if you'd got some use out of it, if you'd taken out the string and played pat-ball or something agin a wall, but no. Just out of pure spite is the only reason you've kept it, and right under me fecking nose.(81)



Ray knows something has been taken from him unjustly, and for something which doesn't serve any purpose to anyone. Though the efforts of the past were intended to help Ray form an identity as an Irish man, Ray instead is distrustful of the older generation, and finding his swing ball in Maureen's house has proved that he was right to think so. Maureen and Ray then enter an exchange which proves the falseness of the false phallus.

Ray's interest in the poker as a false phallus emerges in scene six, while he's waiting for Maureen to give her Pato's letter. Though not stuck for the same amount of time that Maureen has been, Ray feels oppressed by the dull nature of the home, as well as Mag constantly pressuring him into doing errands for her. It's then that he takes notice of the poker.

RAY: Good and heavy and long. A half a dozen coppers you could take out with this poker and barely notice and have not a scratch on it and then clobber them against just for the fun of seeing the blood running out of them. (*Pause.*) Will you sell it to me? (McDonagh 56).

Maureen attempts to wield the poker against Ray as she had wielded it against her mother. Wielding the poker, she now embodies toxic masculinity along with toxic femininity. Her desire to attack Ray points out an oversimplified approach to gender issues, which puts men and women in opposition to each other. This contention prevents both sexes from moving forward and unifying a nation, and can be identified as one of the root issues in using traditional gender roles to fortify Ireland. However, Ray is not compliant in this cycle as his brother was. When he finds his balls and stands as a man, not with violence but with his words, Maureen becomes powerless and drops the poker. Ray still desires the poker, just as false machismo can be desirable, but Maureen denies it to him once again, and although Ray resents her not taking better care of the poker, he leaves the cottage with his ball and leaves the Toxic Mother and the

false phallus behind. As Ray leaves, Maureen calls out to him and tells him to deliver a message to Pato.

MAUREEN: Tell him... The Beauty Queen of Leenane says goodbye.

While Ray has a chance to leave the house, and go out to live a productive life inside or outside of the nation, Maureen resolves to say inside. By doing this, Martin McDonagh is placing the emphasis on the new generation and their crucial impact on the future of Ireland. While Maureen is too familiar with domestic entrapment to leave, Ray has a chance because of his new age and different view on the world to make a change. The play was written in 1996, right in the early days of the Celtic Tiger economy. McDonagh's work, while painting a bleak picture of the idealized nationalist vision, points towards hope in modernity.

Irish modernity is often set in complete opposition to Irish nationalism. Angela Bourke discusses this in her essay "Language, Stories, Healing" telling of how her peers sought to distance themselves from Irish traditions and particularly Irish language to establish themselves as progressive and left-wing in the turbulent political climate of Ireland in the 1960s. "About the time I started university, new violence in Northern Ireland was helping discredit the romantic nationalism I had grown up with... other people our age... rejected the authoritarianism of their schooling [and] were turning firmly away from Irish tradition as they immersed themselves in left-wing politics." (Bourke 304). Bourke's writing gives us a sense of how Irish identity was perceived among people who are young like Ray, albeit more well educated. Her peers, having witnessed the horrible violence that is the cost of staunch nationalism, do not just turn away from the harmful aspects of traditional Ireland, but on Irish identity and language entirely, cutting

themselves off from the “kind of magic” Bourke experienced through her Irish education. While Ray is set apart from the university students of Bourke’s recollection in his education level, he expresses similar ideas in relation to Ireland and television.

Besides the Dooley brothers, the primary outlet to the world outside of the Folan home is the radio and the television. The television is the most modern device in the home, and yet, as a reflection of the outside world, Ireland is never seen on television. Rather, Australian soap operas such as *The Sullivans* and *A Country Practice* are always on, which the characters continuously comment on. A telling exchange emerges between Ray and Maureen after Mag’s funeral.

RAY: Father Welsh punched Mairtin Hanlon in the head once, and for no reason.

(*Pause.*) Are you not watching telly for yourself, no?

MAUREEN: I’m not. It’s only Australian out shite they do ever show on that thing.

RAY (*slightly bemused*): Sure, that’s why I do like it. Who wants to see Ireland on telly?

MAUREEN: *I* do.

RAY: All you have to do is look out your window to see Ireland. And it’s soon bored you’ll be. ‘There goes a calf.’ (*Pause.*) I be bored anyway. I be continually bored.

(*Pause.*) London I’m thinking of going to. Aye. Thinking of it, anyways. To work, y’know. One of these days. Or else Manchester. They have a lot more drugs in Manchester. Supposedly, anyways. (McDonagh 75-76)

Ray doesn’t see Ireland on television, and doesn’t want to. The two worlds are entirely incompatible to him. Television is entertaining, modern, where “Everybody’s always killing each other and a lot of the girls do have swimsuits”(52), which seems terribly out of place in the rural

Leenane outside of his window. Though rural Ireland as depicted in *Beauty Queen* does have a lack of sexy, bathing suit clad women, Ray is not so far from killing as he thinks. In reality, Ray is in the thick of the extreme violence provoked by the very traditionalism that is choking him. Ray has a desire to be around death and drugs, rather than spend seventy years waiting to die in Leenane(76). However, unlike Maureen who engages in violence inside of the home--very in line with her place as a woman--Ray is seeking out violence and excitement elsewhere. Pato and Maureen's tragic experiences in London as well as the suggestion that Ray would seek out drugs and danger in Manchester point out that abandoning Irish identity is not the pathway to escaping the violent influence of the Toxic Mother. Indeed, the problem is not with "Irishness", but rather, one concentrated vision of Ireland, the extreme pressures of which create violence unless one resists the influence of the Toxic Mother in order to produce an Ireland that is truly modern, a hybrid of Irish identity and modern ideas.

The struggle with gender identity and its harsh confines is inseparable from the Irish struggle for national identity. Though it would appear that Ireland escaped the clutches of foreign influence when it became an independent nation, the looming threat of globalism appeared just in time to create a continuing identity crisis that centers around the question of what is Irish. The modern world, as seen through the television in the Folan household, is filled with foreign influence--particularly Australian, American, and English influence. Thus, to say that the solution to the issues presented in *Beauty Queen* is to fly forward into the modern world and completely dismiss the original goals of Irish nationalism vastly oversimplifies the matter. Just as progressive views on gender propose that a person does not have to conform being either masculine or feminine, the progressive approach to the question of Irish identity would be that one does not have to be either modern or Irish.

While naiveté would suggest that McDonagh hints at a bright future for Ireland in the character of Ray Dooley, Heath Diehl notes that “McDonagh does not articulate visions of hope for an altered future, but instead remarks on the emptiness of older social structures.”(Diehl 107). Having Ray Dooley as the representation of a nation’s bright new generation is an incredibly bleak vision. While Ray is aware that there is something wrong with his surroundings, as evidenced by his monologue about the swing ball, he doesn’t know how to put the pieces together to change things.

RAY: “The beauty queen of Leenane says goodbye.” Whatever the feck that means, I’ll pass it on. “The beauty queen of Leenane says goodbye”, although after this fecking swingball business, I don’t see why the feck I should. Goodbye to you so, Missus.

MAUREEN: Will you turn the radio a up a biteen too, before you go, there, Pato, now?

*Ray, I mean...*

RAY (*exasperated*): Feck...

*RAY turns the radio up.*

The exact fecking image of your mother you are, sitting there pegging orders and forgetting me name! Goodbye!

MAUREEN: And pull the door after you...

RAY (*shouting angrily*): I was going to pull the fecking door after me!!

*RAY slams the door behind him as he exits.* (McDonagh 83-84)

Ray is conscious that things around him aren’t right, and even recognizes that Maureen has taken on the same exasperating role that Mag previously filled. Even after he calls Maureen out on her pointlessly cruel, nonsensical behavior, he still consents to do her bidding, He says goodbye, but takes orders from her, even if she doesn’t recognize him as a separate person from his older

brother. He even states that he doesn't know why he is willing to carry on Maureen's message, but agrees to do it anyway. Nothing ever changes, and even if Ray knows that, he only knows how to continue in the life that he knows, dreaming of the foreign world that he sees on television, and wallowing in his anger at the Ireland he sees when he looks out his window. This presents the futility of the situation: even if someone knows that there is something wrong with the world around them, if they are not equipped in their upbringing to constructively change things in any way, things will remain the same. And, the audience is not meant to believe that Ray is the brave new voice of his generation. He won't be leading any movements, but he may continue to cause trouble with the law.

It is occasionally hinted at by critics, including Caridad Svich that Pato and Ray are able to "win" in this situation; however, Pato's flight of his own country and the uncertainty of Ray's future make this supposed victory less certain for the men of *Beauty Queen*. Rather than looking at Pato as a person and rather as a representation of the Irish emigrant, the wife and potentiality for children are a moot point. What has Pato gained except for greater insecurity in his national identity? The inherent exteriority discussed by Jan Cronin will still plague him when he goes to live with relatives in what is likely an Irish enclave of Boston. As for Ray, he has still proven himself to be powerless to Maureen's demands, in spite of his awareness of their lack of sense and unfairness, and has shown himself to be more accepting of a lower standard of living, even down to his willingness to eat the Kimberley biscuits that the older characters of the play refuse to touch. In spite of his filthy language and preoccupation with fighting police officers, there is a bizarre innocence to Ray, which is inevitable for someone of his age, as evidenced by his vague interest in getting involved with drugs in Manchester.

The conspicuous absence of a conclusive ending for Ray Dooley is indicative of Ireland's questionable future in 1996. Ray's murky future not only serves to make a statement about the then-current state of Ireland's economic prospects, but also serves as a precaution against too much investment in modern foreign influences, particularly unintelligent and destructive influences like violent soap operas and drugs. Modernity is desirable, but only when considered in such a way that doesn't consume Irish identity or bring new, undesirable problems to the Irish nation.

## Conclusion

*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* functions as a criticism of Irish nationalism being toxic and anti-modern while simultaneously showing the urgent need for an identity that is not only modern, but Irish. The elder members of the Folan and Dooley families leave the picture entirely through death or emigration, and neither Maureen nor Ray is moved enough to step out of the non-productive cycle that they are trapped in. Reading *Beauty Queen* comes with a sort of frustration, particularly that although the events that play out are painful and destructive, there is a certain feeling of inevitability to the way in which things unfold. The sense of helplessness that is both unique to each character and yet shared in the discussion of the nation at large is more exasperating than Mag's continuous orders and repetitive idiosyncrasies. While McDonagh's priorities rest in creating black comedy, that the play has become so iconic speaks volumes about its place in a larger discussion of the struggle of finding a middle ground between fantastical nationalism and culturally void modernity. While McDonagh doesn't point towards any type of hope or solution in *Beauty Queen*, the heartbreaking cycle of trauma presented between the characters in Leenane presents an honest and grim cultural critique.

Some other things to explore on this subject would be to bring more from post-colonial studies to the subject of Irish gender identities in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. It would be valuable to consider the ways in which the alternate violence, compliance, and rebellion of these characters mimic colonial patterns of power.



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