

Violence in the Theatre of Martin McDonagh



Orion Carey-Clark

Theatre Studies Programme, School of Performing Arts

University of Otago

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Abstract

This thesis investigates two violent plays by the London-born playwright Martin McDonagh, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter*. Considering these texts from a post-colonial and phenomenological perspective, this thesis investigates how violence operates within each text. Chapter One opens by establishing the playwright's attitude towards theatre. The thesis then defines working parameters for post-colonial theatre, presence, phenomenology and violence. A literature review is then undertaken to outline the current field on the playwright.

Drawing on the breadth of scholarly research already established, Chapter Two examines violence in McDonagh's 2001 play *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. This chapter reveals the farcical structure which contains the play's violence. Using this, the thesis considers how this alters the representation of the characters committing the violence. Chapter Two considers the justification of violence within the colonial context of the play and the phenomenological aspects which illuminate different aspects of violence within the text.

Chapter Three approaches McDonagh's 2018 play *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter* from a similar angle and investigates the justification of violence, its colonial context and nineteenth century Dickensian sentimentality. Because of the sparse academic research on this play, this thesis compares and extends ideas using the conclusions reached in Chapter Two.

Lastly, the fourth chapter draws conclusions about McDonagh's significant use of dismemberment, the presence of violence within language and unique aspects of theatre to determine how violence is operating in the respective texts. The thesis then proposes an answer to why McDonagh may be choosing to return to a medium he has expressed distaste for.

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Figure 1

Cover Image: Davey (Isaac Martyn) and Donny (Alex Martyn) in *Arcade presents: The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2018)

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Chapter One

Martin McDonagh is a highly controversial playwright. Much of the controversy stems from his persistent recourse to violence in his texts. From theatre to film, nearly every script, whether theatrical or filmic, features some form of violence—most often dismemberment. Several of these texts are immortalised in film and these are indeed the texts that have made him famous in Hollywood and a recognisable figure in popular culture. Most recently, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* went on to win Best Motion Picture (Drama) at the 75th Golden Globe Awards.

Having directed McDonagh's play *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* in 2018, I have become increasingly interested in his style. During my production I noticed interactions between the audience and the violence they were watching; because the play is comedic, many were laughing at acts of violence despite their extremity. Contrary to this, many were immediately deeply concerned when the presence of a live cat in my production presented them with the potential situation of watching harm occur to an animal. Many audiences were uncomfortable with the idea of a cat being harmed; even the fake prop cats which were used on subsequent performances (because of the impossible task of controlling a cat's actions on stage) elicited a deep sympathy and audible cries of concern from many in the audience. Compared with the literal dismemberment of characters by actors in precarious violent recreations, the concern for cats trumped this. Only after the show were some deeply unsettled that they had in fact laughed at the human violence they had witnessed. Reflecting on their interaction with the violence presented to them, many reconsidered if they 'should' have found such violence funny. During other performances, this interaction with violence was entirely absent; many audience members appeared deeply uncomfortable with the violence in contrast to the enjoyment of the previous night.

McDonagh's plays are both hilarious and violent. This Quentin Tarantino-esque style is one that I appreciate, but I could not discern why. What was it about the violence? How is it that his writing is so shocking yet still able to remain hilarious throughout the literal snapping of spines, shooting of eyes and dismemberment that the play features? This curiosity led me to this research thesis' question: how does violence operate within McDonagh's text *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*? Furthermore, does this violence operate in the same way in his latest and highly criticised play from October 2018, *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter*? Furthermore, what was it about this violence that evoked great sympathy for cats but regarded human violence as expected within the circumstances? In my production of *The Lieutenant*, the violence seemed both shocking yet expected, as though the situation and political context of the play mean that such violence is an expected and normal occurrence. Although the observations I had over the season run of the show were entirely subjective, both with my own and the audience's reception of violence, there are still questions regarding the operation of violence I believe can be answered.

McDonagh's Attitude Towards Theatre

Martin McDonagh is a highly accomplished writer in both film and theatre. It is not his films that this thesis is concerned with, however, but his theatre. McDonagh has a peculiar relationship with theatre, stating that while he enjoys the form, he has little affection or respect for it. His apparent disconnection from theatre has been expressed in a handful of interviews, most notably with Fintan O'Toole some twenty years ago. In these, he clearly establishes his wish to be seen as a filmmaker: "That was always the place I was coming from, this respect for the whole history of films and a slight disrespect for theatre." (O'Toole and McDonagh, 1998, p. 64). He also mentions he "only started writing for theatre when all else failed," and continues to say: "I doubt I've seen twenty plays in my life" (Feeney, 1998).

Indeed, McDonagh's attitude to theatre is peculiar:

It's not that I don't respect theater. I'm intelligent enough to know that a play can completely inspire a person as much as a film. I know that. But it's never happened to me, and theater isn't something that's connected to me, from a personal point of view, I can't appreciate what I'm doing. I hope what I'm doing, or just moments of what I'm doing, might be an inspiration, but it's something that I can't quite connect with. (O'Toole and McDonagh, 1998, p. 68)

More recently, Sean O'Hagan discovered McDonagh's opinion to be relatively unchanged: "Has his attitude towards the British – and Irish – theatrical establishment, and to theatre in general, changed in the interim?" "Not really," he says, without hesitation. "I guess I've accepted that theatre is never going to be edgy in the way I want it to be." (2015). McDonagh continues: "I have no desire to go out and see a play. The whole nature of that experience just puts me off."

Considering this, one would have expected McDonagh to have ceased writing for theatre long ago, instead choosing to focus on film. He stated that: "I would be unhappy if I wrote 90 good plays and didn't make a good film. But if I made one good film. If I made one brilliant film, one really, really good film, I'd be happy." (68). It is clear from this that his passion for film is paramount. The inspiration he has received from film is also significant; Joseph Feeney noted: "He was also affected by such violent films as *Taxi Driver* and *Night of the Hunter*" (1998, p. 25, emphasis in original)¹. McDonagh has also been frequently compared with the filmmakers John Woo and Quentin Tarantino; his violent endings and outbursts bear many similarities to films such as *Reservoir Dogs* and *The Killer*.

¹ Such quotes will retain italics throughout this thesis.

Theatrically, McDonagh shares parallels with Dion Boucicault in his use of farce and the employment of the stage Irishman. John B. Keane's *Sive* and Tom Murphy's plays are also similar in many respects in the ways in which they use Hiberno-English dialect: a merging of English and Irish-Gaelic colloquial language. McDonagh's Aran Islands plays are also very similar to J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* with its mockery of the rural Irish West and the Irish peasantry. McDonagh is undoubtedly very aware of this Irish literary history; he claims, "I read everything I could find" (O' Toole, 2006), and simply looking at his plays, it is evident they are rich with knowledge of what has come before him from Irish and British Dramatists, as well as an understanding of screen violence from Woo, Tarantino and others.

Despite this love for film, return to theatre he certainly does; McDonagh has written extensively for the stage and currently his plays outnumber his films at a ratio of ten to four². His continued writing for theatre begs the question—why return to a form you have little affection for? If film is his passion, what is it about the theatre that affords McDonagh an output for his evident preoccupation with violence? What is it about violence itself and its function within theatre that clearly proves irresistible? Nearly all McDonagh's plays (and films) contain violence in some form, and most often in the form of dismemberment. Part of the curiosity I have always had with this is to simply ask—why? Why does McDonagh always, without fail, feature some form of violence within his theatrical work? Fintan O'Toole (2018), who is a leading authority on the life and work of McDonagh, admitted the same curiosity, remarking to me in an

² McDonagh's plays include: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (1997), *The Lonesome West* (1997), *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997), *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), *The Banshees of Inisher* (as yet unproduced and unpublished), *The Pillowman* (2003), *A Behanding in Spokane* (2010), *Hangmen* (2015), and *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter* (2018). His films include the short film *Six Shooter* (2004) and the feature films *In Bruges* (2008), *Seven Psychopaths* (2012) and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017).

interview: “It is obvious that he has more to say using the stage, particularly as an avenue to express violence.”

O’Toole suggests that McDonagh’s unabashed London punk upbringing might provide one answer to the extremely violent, absurd texts that comprised the Leenane trilogy which heralded McDonagh’s theatrical debut. During a key interview, O’Toole asked McDonagh about his engagement with theatre, an enquiry that elicited the following:

I guess it goes back again to this position as a youngish guy involved in a medium that is mostly frequented by older, duller, less rock ‘n’ roll-y kinds of people. That’s a stupid sentence but, do you know what I mean? I’d like to see my plays if I wasn’t me. Maybe I should think about that more often than I do. (1998, p. 68)

Equating McDonagh’s use of violence with its ability to produce sheer spectacle and to shock an audience accustomed to the placid sensibilities of theatre is provocative, but at best only a partial explanation. It might also be that McDonagh’s twenty-year-old stance on theatre might no longer ring true, especially considering the number of plays he has written since 1998 and continues to write. Moreover, attempting to answer McDonagh’s personal obsession with and simultaneous distaste for the theatre using quotes from a dated interview is fraught with critical issues; intentionalism is not the focus of this thesis. Whatever the answer to McDonagh’s current opinions on theatre—and, as much as anyone, I would like answers to that question—its consideration raises an important question: how does theatre uniquely satisfy McDonagh’s taste for dramatizing violence? Admittedly, violence on stage is really entertaining. However, concealed within this admission are a multitude of questions about why violence on stage is shocking and frightening, yet also entertaining. The violence on McDonagh’s stage, and in extreme forms such as dismemberment, is not merely present for its proven value as entertainment.

Research Parameters

I suspect that the inner workings and obsessions of this playwright cannot be sufficiently answered with reference to confessional, autobiographical or biographical writing. Even direct interviews with the author over the years have failed to uncover a satisfactory explanation. What can be achieved, though, is a mapping of how violence operates within the narrative of each text, and from this I intend to interrogate the ways dismemberment and other forms of violence function within the texts. This thesis will therefore undertake a close reading of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) and *A Very, Very, Very, Dark Matter* (2018).

These plays are important examples of McDonagh's work because of the divided reception they received when they were staged. While such a statement could doubtless be applied to all of McDonagh's works, these two plays have been singled out by reviewers and critics as the most violent of all that he has written to date. *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is a black farce set in the Aran Islands, a desolate landscape in the West of Ireland. The play centres around the death of a cat, Wee Thomas, and the ways in which the exaggerated consequences of this cat's death play out. Much blood, revenge and woeful speeches about murdering cats takes place within the political setting of 1994 Troubles Ireland—a period when Irish republicanism had acquired an international reputation for extreme violence. Most of the play's violent characters are politically motivated Irish terrorists and the play draws on discourses from Republicanism and notions of Irish identity. *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter* premiered only last year at the Bridge Theatre in London. This play features strands of the black farce genre that McDonagh employs in *The Lieutenant*, but departs significantly in terms of its narrative. Set in nineteenth century Denmark, Hans Christian Andersen holds an indigenous Congolese woman captive in a box in his attic. The box is suspended in the air and hangs in the middle of the stage. Within

it, the character Marjory is forced to write creative stories for Andersen, which are then appropriated by him as his own work.

In investigating the extreme violence in *The Lieutenant* and *Dark Matter*, this thesis is less concerned with comparing the plays in order to chart what might prove to be a trajectory of McDonagh's preoccupation with violence—as useful as investigating such a chronology might be. Its focus is on investigating how the violence operates in each play and whether the different types of violence integral to them prove to be theatrically successful and for what reasons. Is it the violence itself? Is it the ways audiences react to it in the theatre? Is violence so integral to the human condition, so much a part of everyday life, that it cannot and should not be avoided? Is there something to do with our attitude towards violence within the political and colonial situations that features in these texts?

The thesis will commence by outlining the current critical theory around McDonagh's plays. The first chapter will establish some working parameters about violence, what can be considered violent and how violence is framed in theatre. Walter Benjamin's essay 'A Critique of Violence' (1921, 1996) will be employed here, as will Stanton Garner's work on phenomenology in theatre. The section on phenomenology in theatre will define and then justify why a phenomenological approach is appropriate for investigating how violence operates within a theatrical environment. Because both texts concern colonialism, a post-colonial lens will be used to look at violence from a perspective which prioritises each play's political and colonial context. Chapter One of this thesis will also discuss Irishness, the West of Ireland as a discourse and their place within post-colonial critiques of McDonagh's texts throughout his writing career. Lastly, with several working definitions established, Chapter One will look at the keyword "operates" to clarify what expressions of violence can be said to be "operating".

Chapter Two of this thesis will consider *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* using the definitions outlined above and will also consider violence within the text in the farcical structure it is written in. Chapter Three will move to *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter* and consider its narrative and structure, post-colonial aspects and its instances and justifications of violence. Finally, Chapter Four will cover dismemberment, the use of language as violence and expand on the justification of violence which occurs and what conclusions can be drawn from a comparison of the two texts.

Because McDonagh is as widely known (if not more so) for his films as his plays, some reference will be made to McDonagh's films and how violence operates within their respective narratives. This is important because they can be compared, to an extent, with the violence in his theatrical creations. Films such as *In Bruges* will be mentioned in passing, but it must be noted that a detailed analysis of McDonagh's films will be avoided in order to preserve a methodology that does not confuse theatrical and cinematic analysis—the way violence operates in cinema is distinct from theatre. While such a comparison can prove useful, analysis of violence in cinema is not the focus of this thesis and reference to McDonagh's films is simply useful for providing chronological markers of his preoccupation with violence—particularly dismemberment.

Defining Violence

This thesis concerns itself with the ways in which violence operates dramaturgically within texts. It seeks to interrogate the kind or kinds of violence within texts, how the violence operates and the contexts to which the violence alludes. Understanding not just a definition of violence, but also the position violence has in relation to law and justice is important to this thesis. Both texts I wish to interrogate feature characters who either justify or denounce certain acts of

violence; they use violence to justify their own actions and to violently punish those they deem to have committed egregious acts.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2010), violence is most commonly used as a noun to identify “the deliberate exercise of physical force against a person, property”, “physically violent behaviour or treatment”, or in the legal sense of “the unlawful exercise of physical force, intimidation by the exhibition of such force”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* also points out that the use of violence to describe the “abuse of power or authority to persecute or oppress” is now obsolete and the use of the word to describe “a violent or damaging act; a physical assault” is “now rare”. As a noun, “violence” can be used to identify “great strength or power of a natural force or physical action, especially when destructive or damaging”. Violence can also be used to describe “great intensity or severity, especially of something destructive or undesirable”, particularly when used in conjunction with “of”. From the early fourteenth century the word “violence” has also been used to describe “vehemence or intensity of emotion, behaviour, or language; extreme fervour; passion” and “to do violence to (also unto): to inflict harm, injury, or damage on; (also) to restrict, constrain”. Violence can also be used as a transitive verb in the sense of “to subject to violence; (also) to violate”, although the *Oxford English Dictionary* observes that while this was a common usage in the seventeenth century it is now rare. Similarly, the use of the word as a transitive verb “to compel or constrain; to force (a person) to do something or from adherence to a belief by violence” is now obsolete. Bishop and Phillips also help to summarise the various forms of violence which can refer to a variety of senses:

...physical, psychological, emotional and conceptual. Most immediately, though (and in that sense most violently), it is said to erupt among people in motivated personal or political struggles, sometimes irrationally, criminally, unexpectedly; in

any event, violence leaves its victims in shock or lying wounded or dead. (2006, p. 378)

This is a common sense understanding of what “violence” stands for; a tangible act of physical force. Indeed, this and the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition is what should be assumed when the term violence is used in later chapters. In this thesis, I will be most often using the word to describe “the deliberate exercise of physical force against a person, property”, or “physically violent behaviour or treatment”, or in the legal sense of “the unlawful exercise of physical force, intimidation by the exhibition of such force”. (Dictionaries, 2010). I will also be using it in the sense of “vehemence or intensity of emotion, behaviour, or language; extreme fervour; passion,” particularly as it relates to what is experienced by an audience.

The word violence participates in at least two registers, according to Bishop and Phillips: the lexical register and the ethical or political register. Violence has an interesting and problematic crossover in both registers, as it reveals that justice presupposes violence. Force, power, *polemos* and *eris* belong with the lexical series, whereas law, right, rules, respect, duty and justice belong in a political or ethical register. Bishop and Phillips contend that the term violence causes “the most confusion between these registers” (378). This is because for the Greeks, *Dike* (justice), whether conceived as right, trial, penalty or vengeance, is identified with a kind of *Eris*, a discord or conflict, and thus with *adikia* (injustice). Bishop and Phillips contend that the notion of justice, therefore, presupposes a certain notion of violence, “both in the condition that calls for justice and the just response to that call.” (378). Bishop and Phillips are illuminating that, for justice to be obtained, violence must be employed against injustice. Violence is perceived as something unlawful, something which is excessive to a stable principle such as the law. However, this excess is what makes justice possible; establishing justice over something which has exceeded the law means the law must reach beyond itself

(the present justice) that is in place. “All attempts to establish justice, therefore, aim either to revise existing laws or to establish laws not yet in existence.” (378) Bishop and Phillips conclude that: “No such attempt would escape violence.” (378)

Walter Benjamin describes a similar relationship between violence and the law with reference to proletarian revolution in his essay ‘A Critique of Violence’ (1921, 1996). Benjamin suggests laws are always founded in violence and any attempt to rewrite or contest those laws will also be made in the moment of violence. Both Benjamin and Bishop and Phillips articulate the “leapfrogging” which occurs between justice, the law and violence:

The requirements of both justice and law are excessive but each exceeds itself to the extent that it appeals to the other: law exceeds itself in an appeal to justice; justice exceeds itself in its appeal to law. If the Law is founded in violence, then justice, insofar as it is distinguished from the law, would always be called on to reinterpret or adjust the law as it currently stands, or to found a new one entirely, whose justification is written mysteriously in the future anterior of its moment of violence. So what the law most fears in its other is what resides in itself. (2006, p. 379)

There are essentially two possible outcomes for looking at violence in relation to law. Firstly, there is the contention that violence can never be just, and that the law should not be violent. Secondly, there is the opinion that violence is appropriate for justice, as it is a natural response. Violence can be understood as a basic tool outside the world of laws; this relates to Charles Darwin’s contention about natural selection, or natural law, in *Origin of the Species* (2009). From this second perspective, violence precedes the establishment of governed communities. Additionally, if law is merely an appropriation of violence, then it can be opposed by violence.

I do not intend to investigate this complex issue of how violence operates within society, but it is important to establish an understanding of this discourse before enquiring into ways violence operates dramaturgically. There is an extensive literature about violence, particularly about how violence relates to law and to concepts of justice. Concepts of ‘justified violence’ and ‘necessary violence’ spring from considering violence’s relationship with the law. Some violent acts and retaliatory violence could be considered justified in some instances where there is the perception that justice is being achieved. The political contexts of *The Lieutenant* and *Dark Matter* concern themselves with negotiating and highlighting what violence we as the audience, as well as the characters, consider justified or necessary. As will be discussed, both texts cause the audience to question the acts of violence they have witnessed in relation to the justifications and morality of characters.

Defining Phenomenology

To consider violence on stage and its operation as part of this thesis is to investigate a considerable body of criticism about violence in theatre. It should be mentioned that film and theatre have different grammars of violence. Talking about violence on screen involves semiotics, gaze, haptics, thematic analysis and narrative analysis, among others; these are the bread-and-butter issues of cinematic analysis. However, violence on stage involves a different methodological lens, because the physical “presentness”, the liveness of the body, applies. Because the camera lens removes this liveness and creates a fixed perspective, comparing McDonagh’s films with theatre is somewhat problematic when considering violence. Mixing methodologies, moreover, also lessens the wealth of information that can be gleaned from a strict methodology that focuses specifically on the theatrical presentation of violence. In considering how violence operates in theatre, we concern ourselves with the relationship

between character, actor and audience, and their respective “presence”. The methodology which best suits this relationship is phenomenology.

Phenomenology is a broad research lens with numerous focuses, the aims of which differ between scholars. Stanton Garner (1994) accurately summarises the collective aims of the many “phenomenologies” as lenses which seek:

to redirect attention from the world as it is conceived by the abstracting, scientific gaze (the objective world) to the world as it appears or discloses itself to the perceiving subject (the phenomenal world); to pursue the thing as it is given to consciousness in direct experience; to return perception to the fullness of its encounter with its environment. (2).

Phenomenology places emphasis on the subjective experience of an event; it foregrounds the phenomenal experience of an event. This “encounter” will, by nature, be subjective to the viewer. Garner perceives theatre as a spectacle to be consumed by the perceiving eye—“this field is environmental space, ‘subjectified’ by the physical actors who body forth the space as they inhabit it. From this perspective, theatrical space is phenomenal space, governed by the body and its spatial fields, a non-cartesian field of habitation which undermines the stance of objectivity and in which the categories of subject and object give way to a relationship of mutual implication.” Garner also considers the perception of theatre as one that is inherently subjective: “given as spectacle to be processed and consumed by the perceiving eye, objectified as field of vision for a spectator who aspires to the detachment inherent in the perceptual act. ‘Bodied Spatiality’ is at the heart of dramatic presentation, for it is through the actor’s corporeal presence under the spectator’s gaze that the dramatic text actualises itself in the field of performance.” (1).

“Bodied spatiality” is understood here as a theatrical environment, one that Garner asserts is “a field perceptually oriented in terms of spectator, actor and character...” (2). This is an important definition; the three-way relationship between spectator, actor and character is what a phenomenological lens is concerned with when applied to theatre. For the purposes of this thesis, a phenomenological lens is useful because the site at which violence occurs is not just the body itself but occurs as a bodied spatiality that an actor, playing a character, shares with the audience in a theatrical environment. To question how violence operates in McDonagh’s texts is, in turn, to interrogate the bodied spatiality of the performance.

Defining the “Operation” of Violence

“Operates” is also essential to define, now that a functioning understanding of violence has been established. Understanding what is classed as “operating” violence is crucial when pinpointing its occurrences. Violence that is threatened, for example, means that no actual event has taken place, but the inference of or alluding to can still be classed as violence in operation; punches to the face are not the only qualifying events this thesis intends to examine. Maria Doyle argues that McDonagh’s scripts feature: “Violence threatened, violence narrated, violence enacted.” (2007, p. 92). It is evident there are a multitude of acts and inferences that can be classed as violence. This makes sense when returning to an understanding of phenomenology in theatre; if it concerns the transaction between audience, performer and character, then it can be said to be operating; although threatened violence means no actual harm occurs to the body, this nonetheless changes how the audience perceives the space they are in—perhaps because they are now anticipating the threatened violence to spring forth into action. An instance of violence operating should be understood in reference to phenomenology, as an event affecting the bodied spatiality of the theatrical environment. Violence that operates

in the bodied spatiality of the theatrical environment is between character, actor and spectator, with none of them being excluded from violent transactions.

Defining Presence

Presence is important to mention because of the ways theatre becomes a liminal space when violence is enacted. By presence, I refer to the proximity of the spectator to the performance and the fact that both share the same space and time. I do not intend to look at McDonagh's work to question the notions of presence and liveness and whether what is being represented is, as Artaud contends, a "pure presence". Many have challenged this notion, most notably Jacques Derrida, who points to the Artaudian paradox that in order to achieve a theatre of pure presence, one would first have to find a way of representing this presence. Many others have expanded on the criticism of presence in theatre, such as Philip Auslander (1992), Roger Copeland (1990), Jean Baudrillard (1994), and Elinor Fuchs. The last contends that presence has "fallen into disfavour as a theatrical value" (1985, p. 165) after Derrida's criticism of theatre's presence being its supposed "locus of power". (165)

Live theatre does have presence—the literal physical present bodies of both audience and actor share the same time and space. Presence has always been the essence of theatre, something which many scholars have frequently used to justify theatre's superiority to film and other mediums. Presence is important to consider because McDonagh's theatrical violence occurs in real-time in front of an audience, whereas the manipulated angles of a camera lens in film distances the subject, causing it to lose its liveness. Presence ceases in film because the tangible body is no longer present in the same space and dimension as the viewer, with the consequence that the audience loses the inherent liveness of a body transmitting them story and sensation. This physical "presence" of the body is important to consider because violence affects presence when it is represented on stage.

Liminal Quality of Theatre

What is distinctive about theatrical phenomenology and liveness is violence's unique position in bodied spatiality and its presence. At its most basic level, violence on stage is impossible, and whilst there are a lot of things an actor can do on stage, such as eat, drink or even have sex, violence is not possible. Genuine harm to an actor cannot occur, and this is a shared knowledge that both the spectator and actor are aware of; the body is present and therefore violence to the body must be absent. Violence in McDonagh's theatre presents itself as the most real, vivid and shocking thing that can happen on stage, yet everybody knows that it cannot genuinely take place within the theatre—violence is an existential impossibility. The presence of violence is effective to the extent that the spectator knows with certainty that it is simply a representation and actual violence is not occurring in front of them.

Despite this, there nonetheless exists a pervading anxiety of the *possibility* of harm occurring before the audience's eyes—this is a potent factor of the presence, or liveness, of the violence on stage. This observation is also phenomenological; violence on stage is phenomenological because it foregrounds the bodied spatiality of the environment to what Garner calls “a point of illusionistic crisis” (1994, p. 43). To expand on Garner's “crisis”, the theatrical representation of violence means the spectator feels safe that what they are viewing is not real; however, the fact it is live and sharing the same physical space and proximity to them means the spectator is anxious that the potential representation could spill into their reality—that something could go wrong.

Violence deliberately draws the spectator to consider the relationship between character and actor, as well as re-evaluate whether or not their position is one of voyeurism. This immediately positions the theatre in a liminal space where violence is happening even though it cannot be happening, which is not true of most other things on stage; the realness of violence is known

to be false, however elaborate the stage trickery might be. Oddly enough, the liveness and bodied spatiality which give theatre its unique phenomenal quality are the very things which prevent violence from being truly presented, which only serves to heighten all participants' awareness of violence within the space. Precisely for its liveness, theatre cannot achieve violence—this paradox is what McDonagh appears to be exploring. If McDonagh is writing for a form he does not really believe in, it makes sense that he would attempt the impossible—a form of theatre which is most fascinating for its very absence. Violence is happening, but since it cannot be happening, an audience also knows it is not happening. Precisely the more realistic it is, the less realistic it is—the more it is pushed into the grotesque, the more comic it becomes—as Hand and Wilson (2002) have observed of the French horror theatre known as Grand Guignol. The grotesque itself is not violence. Actual violence is terrifying and simple. The violence in McDonagh's theatre evokes a level of anxiety which his films cannot achieve because they cannot share presence and bodied spatiality with their audience. When looking at McDonagh's theatrical violence, there should be instances where this paradoxical interaction with violence occurs; where its falsity is known yet causes distress to the audience. From this, we can also determine the purpose this interaction with violence serves the narrative thematically; does it enhance political or social themes of the narrative because they are considering their voyeurism within it? Or is violence merely to seat the audience in discomfort?

Defining Post-Colonial Theatre

Both *The Lieutenant* and *Dark Matter* necessitate a post-colonial critique. The plays are either set in a country affected by colonial rule or mirror the oppressor/oppressed relationship. Both texts concern themselves with the politics of historical colonial atrocities and events and both are central to the issue of how violence operates in the theatre of Martin McDonagh. To understand how violence operates within each text, a post-colonial lens must be employed.

Violence can then be understood to be operating in juxtaposition, to highlight and/or to satirise the colonial context both scripts are critiquing. This section will utilise Edward Said's *Orientalism*, as well as Eamon Jordan's article which applies post-colonial theory to *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. Jordan considers whether the criticism McDonagh has received on his representation of Irishness is valid, and what aspects critics might have missed with this deliberate stereotypical representation. Employing a post-colonial consideration of McDonagh's text allows for an incorporation of the historic relationship between Britain and Ireland, as well as the relationship between Belgium, Britain and the Congo in *Dark Matter*. This lens allows us to consider the criticism which suggests that McDonagh perpetuates Irish stereotypes and reduces them to colonial violent, drunken buffoons, and how violence operates as the tool of such buffoons. A post-colonial lens also permits a consideration of the legacy of colonisation and whether this legacy (in which violence is implicit) has been sufficiently addressed.

A post-colonial lens is concerned with the dynamics of power, race and class between an indigenous population and a coloniser. It is concerned with the effects and consequences of the occupation, acculturation and assimilation of the local populace into the culture, politics and religious and moral compass of the coloniser. Historically, this relationship was largely enacted by Imperial Britain, but is widespread throughout history, such as the French occupation of Vietnam. Colonialism is defined by Ania Loomba as the "conquest and control of other people's land and goods." (1997, p. 2). Often, this assimilation of the indigenous culture is malicious; the imposition of rule and cultural control is motivated by capital gain through resource and property seizure and exploitation. The lengths to which the oppressor goes to impose their cultural values are usually violent. They can also be discriminatory; imposing regulations and laws can establish race and class divisions. "Post-colonial" is interpreted as something which has occurred post, or "after" the events of imperial conquest. However, many

debate this. Bill Ashcroft et al. (2007) state that the post-colonial condition begins at the moment of conquest; the moment imperialism is imposed, the post-colonial condition begins. Similarly, Loomba argues that the prefix in post-colonial refers to a supplanting of colonial rule. She states: “If the inequities of colonial rule have not been erased, it is perhaps premature to proclaim the demise.” (1997, p. 7).

Negative qualities of the indigenous population are reinforced and perpetuated throughout the colony through numerous forms of media, in order to affirm “the justness of the imperial action” (Jordan, 2012, p. 196). Fear, suspicion and negativity towards colonial subjects can be disseminated under the guise of objectivity through science and governmental institution. Loomba argues: “stereotypes, images and ‘knowledge’ of colonial subjects and culture tie in with institutions of economic, administrative, judicial and biomedical control” (1997, p. 54). Because the prejudiced negative qualities of the indigenous population are often spread through numerous channels, they also become internalised to some extent by the oppressed population. Eamon Jordan contends they find “it increasingly difficult to maintain their own values; indigenous communities began to eschew their own sense of self...” (2012, p. 196) Such acculturation and propaganda can be looked at as part of a global agenda in England’s colonial governance of numerous countries. There are, however, differences between each country’s colonial subjugation—Ireland’s colonial oppression is unique because of their “whiteness” and their ability to pass as British. Therefore, the distinction between Irish and British persons came to be a matter where “accent and dress were the codes by which distinctions were calibrated.” (195). As will be outlined shortly, the Irish were popularly defined as passionate, drunken louts, who were both lyrical and violent.

Post-colonial theatre concerns the relationships outlined above. Post-colonial theatre is one that seeks to return the voice of the oppressed, particularly when the voices have been suppressed

by the coloniser. Post-colonial theatre in many instances is a breaking off from colonial representation and a return to an authentic representation of the values and concerns of an indigenous population. Post-colonial theatre is concerned with how these representations are carried out in cultural products—is the colonial image being perpetuated? Is the representation of the Irishman an authentic and genuine one? Moreover, what is the true Irishman, and can they be identified geographically and represented accurately? Such issues are important in critiquing *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and its representation of Irishness and the West of Ireland. A post-colonial lens also informs the narrative of *Dark Matter*. Marjory frees herself from oppression by gaining agency over her stories. Post-colonial theatre questions the acculturation of the indigenous populace; why do we have to learn who the kings and queens of Britain were in chronological order? Why is Shakespeare incorporated in every aspect of British colonial culture? The insertion of British cultural texts into indigenous countries is very apparent; this process is part of an acculturation. Such acculturation was and continues to be violently imposed on many colonial populations. What post-colonial theatre is concerned with is returning the agency to those voices that have been disenfranchised. Additionally, it is about removing the voices of the oppressor that continue to teach or narrate indigenous stories. A classic example of this is Peter Brooks' *The Mahabharata*. Brooks took a sacred Indian text and adapted it for film, but in doing so he perpetuated a legacy of British interpretation of indigenous texts.

Literature Review

The literature that considers McDonagh's theatre is extensive. Covering a variety of scholarly concerns from a range of plays throughout McDonagh's career, academics in theatre consistently focus on the following topics: violence, problematic representation of Irishness and setting, postmodern critique and globalisation. These interrelated issues all emerge in what

has been written in reviews, articles and books about *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. The purpose of this literature review is to establish an understanding of the variety of critical thinking about *The Lieutenant*, as well as investigating possible flaws in the large amount of criticism levelled at the play. Although this research question is not concerned so much with the “Irishness” McDonagh allegedly brings to *The Lieutenant*, the issue of Irishness will be mentioned because of its importance to the context in which violence occurs. It should also be noted that *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter* is a recent addition to McDonagh’s playbook, and as such there is little scholarly work on it. Much of the scholarly work concerned with *The Lieutenant* is still beneficial when considering *Dark Matter*, however.

Irishness and McDonagh’s alleged problematic representation of Irishness are important issues. Irishness on stage is still a contentious and divisive topic in contemporary texts such as *The Lieutenant*. Irishness concerns the alleged misrepresentation of the Irish identity on stage, with reference to what is deemed to be appropriate and culturally acceptable to Irish society. Ireland, due to its violent colonial history with Britain, was, and still is, very much engaged in a struggle to forge its national identity free of imperial control. Jan Cronin’s article “‘If I was Irish I’d be crying by now’: Irishness and Exteriority, Doyle’s *Deportees* and the Irish Plays of Martin McDonagh” considers Roddy Doyle’s short story about a black Irishman navigating his identity as both black and Irish. Roddy Doyle’s argument is best seen when his main character must fill out a form when visiting New York; he ticks the box that says “other” instead of “Irish” or “African American”. Cronin argues Doyle’s story shows an “elasticity of Irishness”. It does not simply equate “otherness as Irishness” but identifies exteriority as something which is integral to Irishness. (2013, p. 188). The idea, then, from Cronin’s consideration of Doyle’s text is that the sense of not being Irish enough and being estranged from something which is a version of your supposed self is the “basic condition of Irishness” (189). Cronin uses this to consider Martin McDonagh’s texts and his use of Irishness. She refers to the “McDonagh

enigma”, a term that Patrick Lonergan coined in an article from 2004. The McDonagh enigma concerns: “two apparently irreconcilable extremes: the belief that McDonagh is cleverly subverting stereotypes of the Irish, and the conviction that, on the contrary, he is exploiting those stereotypes, earning a great deal of money by making the Irish look like a nation of morons.” (Lonergan, 2004, p. 636). Cronin’s article adds to the critical commentary concerning McDonagh’s treatment of Irishness, suggesting that his use is not unlike Roddy Doyle’s exploration of it, concluding that McDonagh’s exploration of Irishness is one which uses the stereotype but does so to show it as a picture wholly lacking in full and accurate representation.³

Eamon Jordan’s article ‘Martin McDonagh’s *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*: Commemoration and Dismemberment through Farce’ opens by stating that he believes scholars have missed the farcical aspect of *The Lieutenant* and have instead focused heavily on the representation of the political content in the play: “...the limited and biased framing of the play by many critics and commentators in relation to history and politics, reality and authenticity, but not sufficiently in terms of the play's farcical form” (Jordan, 2009, p. 369). Jordan’s article is valuable for this thesis because it reveals that violence is operating within the theatrical genre of farce. His article details the political and historical context of The Troubles, a period of civil conflict in Ireland from the 1960s to 1998. He argues that while this context is necessary for a reading of the play, the responses and criticisms it has received due to its representation of Irish Republicanism overlook how McDonagh has chosen to represent it. He points out that while *The Lieutenant* has a “contextual background, to which the play replies” it does not owe “any

³ Patrick McGee’s *Gangsters or Guerrillas: Representations of Irish republicans in “Troubles Fiction”* is also a book concerned with the topic of Irishness, arguing that McDonagh’s use of stereotype hinders the international reception of the Irish on stage.

Aidan Arrowsmith’s article ‘Genuinely Inauthentic: McDonagh’s Postdiasporic Irishness’ considers the same reception of Irishness.

obligation to reflect or consider that reality in any substantial way.” (369) Jordan’s article reflects a central contention of this thesis; the contextual backgrounds for both plays are necessary to understand how violence operates within them. Much of the discourse in and around the play is concerned with its context. The plays are glaringly political; Republican terrorism, colonial atrocities, sentimentality and revenge for the innocent all take place in specific political contexts. There is, not surprisingly, an expectation that McDonagh should surely consider what acts of violence are justified. However, the operation of violence transcends the moral and political positions that most critics feel the piece should engage with. Jordan’s article is important in mapping that distinction and emphasising the importance of farce.

West of Ireland

McDonagh’s use of the West of Ireland as a setting relates to the critical commentary on his treatment of Irishness. In the discourse of Irish identity, the west is described as the true cultural homeland of Ireland, one that is inhabited by the true representation of the Irishman—the peasant. The west is not merely a location randomly chosen by McDonagh in several of his texts, but a deliberate choice that centres the actions of his characters within what has become known as a nationalist discourse. This use of a contested site of Irish identity has attracted playwrights, novelists, storywriters, film makers and cultural and political commentators for many years.

The West of Ireland is the site of the dominant nationalist discourse of masculinity and identity. It was not conquered by the British and is a Gaelic speaking, predominantly rural and agricultural spread of land encompassing Galway, numerous small port-side towns and villages and the Aran Islands. Eamon Jordan considers the West in McDonagh’s texts “as indigenous and strange, significant and redundant, with a soft sentimental regard of place overlaid with

something altogether more unforgiving and discordant.” (370) McDonagh stated in his interview with Fintan O’ Toole that he considers the site of the Aran Islands to possess a “lunar quality”, “wildness” and “loneliness” (1998).

The West has been perceived as untouched, pure, wild and natural by many, including Samuel Beckett and J.M Synge. Coupled with its resistance to British occupation, the West has an authenticity that has been intensified by various cultural and political figures. The West was home to key figures of Irish cultural and political history—Patrick Pearse, who led the 1916 Easter rising, had a cottage there, located in the Wild Atlantic Way. Nationalist students of the Nationalist University of Ireland and the few nationalist students of Trinity College would visit during the summers and assist the peasants in bringing in the harvest. The writer J.M. Synge stayed there consecutively for five summers during 1897 (Greene and Stephens, 1959, p. 82). The poet W.B. Yeats told Synge: “Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that never found expression.” (Synge, 1968, p. 63). The peasants were considered the true depiction of Irishness, something which Synge mocked in *Playboy of the Western World*; within it there is attempted parricide, drunkenness and cruelty to animals. This depiction caused Dublin to riot when the play premiered at the Abbey Theatre in 1907. McDonagh has been quoted saying that this decision to set the plays in such a location was happenstance, simply a logistical solution to the requirement of needing somewhere that took a “long time to get to from Belfast.” (Denning, 2001). Lonergan notes: “The play’s relationship with the Aran islands may appear a fluke, but it would be an enormous mistake to disregard the setting.” (2012, p. 58).

The West of Ireland has also seen incredible suffering, incurring the highest number of deaths during the famine from 1845 to 1849. The Land Wars, the Anglo-Irish war and the civil war have also impacted the West. McDonagh’s use of location, then, is clearly deliberate in that it

is provocative of the West's long and violent history. Understanding the West of Ireland is important because it is a discourse *The Lieutenant* is situated within; Irishness itself and the contestation of Irish identity will not be investigated in this thesis, but the violence that occurs within this discourse will be, and because of this the West must be mentioned. As Graham Whybrow, literary manager at the Royal Court, puts it: "McDonagh writes both within a tradition and against a mythology". (2001, p. x) Similarly, Marion Castleberry echoes this assertion: "McDonagh is able to work within the genre of rural Irish drama while infusing the form with a new energy and aggression." (2007, p. 41). Joan Fitzpatrick Dean similarly contends: "McDonagh retains the insularity of the West but rejects its association with purity or authenticity." (2007, p. 28).

Catherine Rees also considers the West as a setting but contrasts it with globalisation. Rees' 'How to Stage Globalisation? Martin McDonagh: An Irishman on TV' positions McDonagh's writing in a global context. Rees considers the setting of West Ireland: "The ostensible setting for McDonagh's five so-called 'Irish' plays... is the Ireland of the gentle and mythical Emerald Isles, an Ireland constructed theatrical and ideological myth—an Ireland of rustic perfection and naive idealism." (2006a, p. 114). Rees' article argues that McDonagh uses this setting in order to destroy it by incorporating devices from the global sphere; pop culture references and external characters come in to unseat this mythscape of Irishness. She argues: "McDonagh's dramatic trademark is to rip apart this rural simplicity with family rivalry, sectarian violence and pointless feuds." (114) Rees goes on to consider whether nationalism and national drama can remain relevant within the "spread of a global economy and culture". Her valuable interpretation of violence in McDonagh's plays suggests that it represents globalisation intruding on an Irish identity that has struggled to remain distinct. Richard Kearney is referenced to argue that such a conflict "between the claims of tradition and modernity" has "given rise in turn to a crisis of consciousness. How is one to confront the prevailing sense of

discontinuity, the idea of a coherent identity... the insecurities of fragmentation?" (1988, p. 9). McDonagh's plays, from Rees' perspective, are "born out of the difficulty of addressing the conflict between the global modern and the traditional." (2006a, p. 116).

Aleks Sierz also argues that McDonagh's violence is an expression of the fragmentation of Irish culture due to globalisation. Aleks Sierz, in the book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* writes:

McDonagh's Ireland is postmodern in its grotesque exaggeration, in its isolation in a globalised world, and in its knowing nods and winks at Irish Culture. The fragmentation of modern society, implies McDonagh, encourages violence: people lash out because they can no longer control their lives. (2001, p. 224).

Sierz pairs McDonagh's violence with writers like Sarah Kane, Rebecca Prichard and Judy Upton: "On one level, the violence expresses real family hatreds, with the mistrust and malevolence of people trapped in a hopeless life bursting out in blatant aggression." (223) Aleks Sierz' book also does an excellent job of defining a specific period of British theatre highly relevant to McDonagh's texts. "In-Yer-Face" theatre is the name given by Sierz to a select scope of British plays which were staged in the 1990s. He considers the defining quality to be "any drama that takes its audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message" (4). If a play incorporated sex, unexpected violence, nudity, crude language and opinions on taboo subjects, it can be said to be "in-your-face". While such a category describes a wide range of plays from all corners of theatrical history, Sierz contends that "never before had so many plays been so blatant, aggressive or emotionally dark... although drama has always represented human cruelty, never before had it seemed so common." (30). Sierz also notes that In-Yer-Face theatre should not be perceived as a movement, but simply as a "sensibility and a series of theatrical techniques." (2010) In-Yer-Face theatre features "shock

tactics” (2001, p. 4) and the term “In-Yer-Face” “implies that you are being forced to see something close up, that your personal space has been invaded” (4). The power of such theatre lies in the fact it disturbs the “spectator’s habitual gaze” (5) through the use of shock tactics. Lonergan sees this as something which renegotiates the relationship “between the audience, performers and performance space” (2012, p. 86). It is worth noting that the initial shock reactions that In-Yer-Face theatre productions evoke are often what influences the criticisms. The value of In-Yer-Face theatre lies not just in the immediate reaction, but the digestion of what the initial response was, and why the audience’s response was such. Lonergan remarks “because audiences and critics found the plays of Kane, Ravenhill, McDonagh and others so shocking they tended to focus only on those immediate affective responses.” (86).

In his interpretation of McDonagh’s use of violence, Patrick Lonergan draws on Harold Pinter’s concept of “texture”. McDonagh, he asserts, is staging the fragmentation that takes place between the national and global. By texture, Lonergan means the cultural context, the upbringing and environment of the characters. He considers this with reference to Mag and Maureen in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*: “Yet the audience understands that these actions arise not out of ‘evil’ but from ‘desperation’ and from the ‘texture’ of these women’s lives.” (7). McDonagh himself notes of the violence in his plays: “The violence has a purpose ... otherwise there’s nothing particularly interesting about shooting people on stage.” (Rosenthal, 2001). The texture that surrounds the violent acts in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* obviously informs the reception of such violence. In *The Lieutenant*, what at first appears to be senseless and excessive violence is revealed to be the most likely outcome in an isolated region whose inhabitants’ pasts are littered with violent acts. There are repeated references to previous acts of violence by the characters—Donny admits to kicking his mother (it is later found out he “trampled” on her); Mairead is infamous for shooting out the eyes of a dozen cows, an act of violence committed seemingly out of boredom, mere target practice in light of the violence she

commits later. Life on Inishmore, an island community with a population of eight hundred, must be extremely noneventful. This is the texture that Lonergan is referring to.

The setting of Inishmore is integral to representing the lives of the characters. Why would a person on Inishmore not go mad? Inishmore is a geographically isolated, limited and restrictive place. The characters' day to day activities paint a convincing picture of what limited opportunities there are on the island. Davey enjoys riding his mum's bike up and down country roads "for no other reason than to feel the wind in that girls mop o' hair of yours." (McDonagh, 2009, p. 4). How long has Davey been riding aimlessly around the island in a dramatic stasis, before coming across a dead black cat which kicks *The Lieutenant's* plot into action? What has Davey's day to day life been like until this point? Fintan O'Toole concurs; the plays "are set in a place that has all but collapsed. This is a world in which meanings have been lost, where people live out their lives suspended between Ireland and England..." (1998, p. 18).

Martin McDonagh: A Casebook is a book edited by Richard Rankin Russell. This book contains a collection of articles written by scholars looking at numerous works by McDonagh. This book is also an asset in undertaking this research, particularly an article within it titled 'Breaking Bodies: The Presence of Violence on Martin McDonagh's Stage' by Maria Doyle. Doyle frames the violence in *The Lieutenant* phenomenologically with the assistance of Stanton Garner's book *Bodied Spaces*. Doyle believes the play's violence is enhanced because of its liminal quality; the violence is not real but is so convincing that it disturbs "the boundaries of theatrical fiction". (2007, p. 95). She also argues that the audience's awareness that their presence sanctions the violence on stage does not decrease investment in the scene; rather, it augments it. They know they are partly responsible for the violence that is occurring—without them, the performed violence would not be going ahead. Charles Spencer (2002, p. 18) calls this a "conspiracy of guilty hilarity". Coupled with this guilt, the blurring of lines between actor

and character create an “illusionistic crisis” (Garner, 1994, p. 43); although the audience can assert that “my fear at a play is not a real fear; I know this danger is not real” (40), they nonetheless experience anxiety for the actor who is undertaking the performance of the violence. Doyle’s article predominantly speaks to the inherent phenomenological quality that theatre possesses over film: “When Padraic reaches for his phone... he leaves a half-naked drug dealer swinging by his ankles only a few feet from the front row of the audience, instituting an immediacy that forces the audience into an intimate relationship with the actors that film cannot achieve.” (2007, p. 93).

Another resource is the edited book titled *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, edited by Lilian Chambers and Eamon Jordan. This book contains an immense selection of critical perspectives on Martin McDonagh; it features Mary Luckhurst’s criticism of McDonagh’s Irishness and Maria Kurdi’s perspective on gender, sexuality and violence. Lisa Fitzpatrick investigates McDonagh’s use of Hiberno–English and Sara Keating considers McDonagh’s London upbringing in her article ‘Is Martin McDonagh an Irish Playwright?’ In total, the edited book contains twenty-three critical perspectives and closes with sixteen reviews by various authors, such as Ben Brantley, Fintan O’Toole, Michael Billington and Suzannah Clapp. *A World of Savage Stories* also contains an excellent critical reading by Catherine Rees titled ‘The Politics of Morality: *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*’. Rees is an excellent resource for considering how *The Lieutenant* deflates mythology, uses violence and “squeam tactics” to expose political sentimentality. Like Eamon Jordan, Rees tackles Mary Luckhurst’s criticism of *The Lieutenant*’s representation of a political struggle and suggests the “squeam tactics” of In-Yer-Face theatre, as defined by Aleks Sierz, serves to implicate the audience in the violence they are witnessing. Through comedy, Rees contends that we cannot ignore the violence because we are laughing at it, but we are also implicated in it because we are “vicariously enjoying it” (2006b, p. 136). This is precisely the uncomfortable position

McDonagh wants to put us in. As will be discussed, using comedy and violence to manipulate our perspective is what McDonagh does to cause us to consider the new position we have found ourselves in as the spectators.

Chapter Two: *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*

The Lieutenant of Inishmore is undoubtedly one of McDonagh's most violent and political plays. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how violence operates in *The Lieutenant*. Firstly, this will require a definition of the theatrical genre, farce. From this, using Jessica Milner Davis' *Farce*, as well as Eamon Jordan and Maria Doyle's articles, I will discuss how violence operates and is contained within the farcical structure of the text. The work of several scholars will then be considered, specifically the criticisms levelled at McDonagh's text regarding its use of Irishness, as well as Jordan's rebuttal of such criticism. This chapter argues

that McDonagh uses farce to highlight violence's normalised position in the political argument surrounding Irish republicanism. A post-colonial lens will be used to interrogate Irish republican sentiment and their justification of violence. The political context of The Troubles which the text interrogates will then be considered, but only to the extent that it serves further discussion of the play.

Defining Farce

“In McDonagh's repertoire, *The Lieutenant* stands as the most unrelentingly violent and the most unrelentingly comic play, a piece that in fact turns the violence into play.” (Doyle, 2007, p. 92, emphasis in original). Beginning with Doyle's insight into the text, the key to understanding the violence of *The Lieutenant* is understanding that it is encased within playfulness. Although it is certainly shocking, this shock value is contained within the dramaturgical sensibilities of farce. *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is also popularly described as a black comedy—a hilarious set of circumstances which instigate incredibly violent and confronting images. Characters in *The Lieutenant* are hopelessly and frustratingly unaware, and they exist within circumstances that are beyond dire. Violence operates within this comedic packaging. In order to investigate this violence, the theatrical structure in which the violence occurs must be considered. The theatrical structure that best facilitates the enacting of such violence is farce.

Jessica Milner Davis, in her book entitled *Farce*, describes the genre as one which is focused on the “most human of strivings” (1978, p. 22). These strivings are ones in which characters rebel against authority, themselves and their physical body, the environment they find themselves in, or perhaps the conventional morality and social expectations in which they find themselves trapped. Milner Davis contends that:

Most often, the joke entails the failure of the attempt; but it is a failure which must also touch the audience, since the joke is on us all as members of the human race. And sometimes the joke is an unexpected success, although the success is as much beyond individual control as was the original impulse to rebellion. Farce does not deny that human aspirations exist: it merely regards them as a joke. (22)

Such an assertion is reflected by Morton Gurewitch:

The victories of farce do not honor the accomplishments of human reason; instead, they register vital revolts against reason's heavily regulative hand – and against all other onerous requirements of civilisation. (1975, p. 234)

Farce is understood to be centred around human suffering; more specifically, it is a comedic celebration of human suffering and failure. This is something which critics throughout the years have criticised. Milner Davis considers the opinion of the critics of farce in the eighteenth century and states that to them, "...farce was merely a rarefied but not very refined form of malicious pleasure at the suffering of others." (1978, p. 22). The term farce is popularly understood to be "lesser than", a poor reflection of a pure, better structured event or occurrence. Often, when we say something is a farce, we mean it lacks clarity and organisation—it is somewhat of a mess. Milner Davis states that the popular assumption around farce is one of mockery; a hollow theatrical experience which lacks proper substance (1). This usage of the term carries over into theatrical farce, as many assume "...the more exaggerated characterizations, the cruder coincidences and the grosser pieces of joking belong to the farce, while the more sophisticated elements of plot, character and theme are those of comedy proper." (6). As will be discussed, this transfer of usage is incorrect, and the criticism levelled at *The Lieutenant* is tied in with these associations of "crudeness" and poorly formed joking at the expense of representation.

Constructs in Farce

Farce is the celebration of the lack of reason and irrational decisions leading to failure. However, this lack of reason and assumption of something being a “farce” does not mean that logic and reason are mutually exclusive from the structure of a farcical script. In fact, this is quite the opposite; farce’s “illogicality is most logical” (Milner Davis, 1978, p. 23). *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is a loaded and clever script; the jokes work because they are carefully constructed through setup and pay-off within a specific sub-genre of farce. Milner Davis’ book outlines numerous types of farce. There are several categories: humiliation farce, snowball farce, reversal farce and equilibrium or quarrel farce. *The Lieutenant* does not fit into all of these categories, nor do all farces fit the mould of only one sub-genre. For example, a humiliation farce may also incorporate aspects of the reversal farce but remain primarily that of humiliation.

A humiliation or deception farce is concerned with the trickery and ultimate exposure of a central character, sometimes the villain, oftentimes the central protagonist. A good example of a popular humiliation farce is *Black Comedy* by Peter Shaffer. In it, Brinsley attempts to decorate his house with the belongings of his neighbour in order to impress his fiancée’s strict father. However, the neighbour returns home threatening to expose Brinsley’s false display of wealth. Thanks to a power cut in the building, Brinsley has a chance to return all items to his neighbour’s apartment while the other characters drink in the dark. The audience watches Brinsley attempt to smuggle his neighbour’s items from the populated living room under the cover of darkness, and back into his neighbour’s house. Anticipating Brinsley’s eventual and unavoidable exposure and humiliation, the audience delights in watching his striving and failure—knowing the ruse will be revealed after several near misses and comedic physical situations.

A “snowball farce” is defined by Milner Davis as one that begins with a small event, which causes a chain of reactions and problems which become increasingly larger and more complex—akin to a snowball gathering mass as it rolls down a hill. Eventually, a climax will occur as the snowball of events comes to a head and spills apart. Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* is essentially a reversal farce. Such plays often involve a case of mistaken identity, which creates scenarios in which people who are not who they claim to be are forced into increasingly difficult challenges and situations in order to retain this identity. This identity, which is adopted out of a need or situation beyond their control, is inevitably doomed to failure (as nearly all attempts in farce are).

Characters of farce are distinct in that they lack a fully realised self-awareness. Farce generally drops inept characters into largely exaggerated situations, and because they are not very intelligent (whatever level of intelligence that may be), they are likely to fail. As such, Milner Davis contends: “Farce is comedy with *self-awareness* left out” (2003, p. 143, emphasis in original). She also states that farce is “peopled not by complex, sympathetic characters, but by simplified comic types” (1978, p. 2). Furthermore, characters are “doomed to repetitiveness in both behaviour and mental processes, ... display exactly that aspect of ‘*du mechanique plaque sur du vivant*’ (‘something mechanical plastered onto the living’) which for [Henri] Bergson defined an event as being comic” (4, emphasis in original).

Application of Farce to *The Lieutenant*

Farce then is understood to have the following elements: inept characters that lack self-awareness; situation(s) that are exaggerated, unrealistic and/or dire, in which characters are likely to fail at addressing the problems that present themselves; and lastly, the violence within such situations are reduced and absurd. *The Lieutenant* will now be considered as farce and how its plot, characters and its violence do or do not conform to this definition of farce. Joan

Fitzpatrick Dean analyses McDonagh's drama in her article 'Joe Orton and the Redefinition of Farce.' She recognises the "primitive vitality" of farce (1982, p. 482) present in McDonagh's text. Similarly, Eamon Jordan (2009), Maria Doyle (2007) and Lonergan (2012) all point to "black comedy" and "farcical" aspects of *The Lieutenant*.

The Lieutenant's plot functions as a humiliation farce and a snowball farce. It is a snowball farce because the small event of killing a cat escalates into a bloodbath of many human beings. Jordan states that a snowball farce is "driven by one small incident with the problems getting bigger and bigger" (2009, p. 383). The play opens on this seemingly small issue, but quickly paints the magnitude of what the potential fallout from this incident could be. The humiliation in the play is focused on the actions of paramilitary organisations. It is less concerned with the humiliation of Padraic and the other terrorist characters that commit violence, but more so for the "pieties of a just politically motivated terrorism" (383), which they use to bolster their atrocious acts. The play's central conflict also features mistaken identity—the core mechanism in a reversal farce. The mistaken identity of Wee Thomas at the beginning of the play instigates Padraic's over the top response, and this continued misunderstanding perpetuates the violence and the unravelling. The mistake is ultimately revealed at the climax of the play to only Davey and Donny as Wee Thomas walks in, completely unharmed.

Farcical Characterisation

The characters in *The Lieutenant* are idiotic. They attempt to justify their opinions and acts of violence with morally bankrupt ideals and by emulating failed historic figures. The play opens on Davey, a teenager with long hair and a pink bicycle, holding a dead black cat and standing next to his neighbour Donny. Donny is an old and grumpy man who is the father of "Mad" Padraic. Padraic is a member of the Irish National Liberation Army, a splinter group of the Irish Republican Army, who has left the Aran Islands to pursue militant republicanism. Both

characters silently consider the dead black cat that is in their presence, before “*Donny picks up the limp dead cat. Bits of its brain plop out*” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 3, emphasis in original). Davey promptly asks, “Do you think he’s dead Donny?” (3). The play’s opening immediately encapsulates the absurdity to come; blatant violence is met with idiotic and uninformed questioning, mild observations are made amongst serious circumstances. The opening is both unsettling and simultaneously comic due to the stage directions of how the cat is treated. The cat is obviously dead, but the intimacy of such a solemn moment is immediately undermined by Davey asking the obviously unnecessary question; it is, clearly, quite dead. Donny and Davey are hopelessly unaware, and we immediately gain an understanding of Davey’s intelligence and Donny’s drunken inability to handle the situation as he scrambles to come to grips with what has happened.

Donny and Davey are a characteristic ‘clown-duo’ who stumble upon a problem, the magnitude of which is promptly revealed. Donny knows the dire consequences of Wee Thomas being dead, and leads Davey, along with the audience, towards a frightful realisation. Padraic will be furious his cat is dead, and will surely murder anyone who is remotely connected, including Davey and Donny. Lonergan recognises how hopeless McDonagh’s character duos are without each other: “We’ve seen many times how he creates pairs of characters, who, between them, just about manage to form one functional human personality.” (2012, p. 143). Together, both characters scramble to find a solution to this impending crisis they find themselves in. Much like in McDonagh’s other works, Donny and Davey are a poorly functioning duo who cohere

to make an anxious, grumpy, yet resilient team who begin looking for ways to solve this crisis.

4

Operating within the Snowball farce however, the clown-duo create more of a problem for themselves in an attempt to alleviate their distress in the current predicament; Donny and Davey decide they must call Padraic and tell him his cat is dead, despite the absolute certainty



Figure 1

that this knowledge will enrage him. Wee Thomas is the snowball of this farce, a snowball teetering on the edge of a steep run. In this sense, the clown duo stumble when attempting to stop it from rolling and instigate its momentum.

⁴ Valene and Coleman in *The Lonesome West*, Katurian and Michal in *The Pillowman* as well as Ray and Ken in *In Bruges* are also character duos employed by McDonagh who rely heavily on each other to make complete functioning decisions.

The stakes of letting this snowball roll out of control are also enormously high; Donny informs Davey that Mad Padraic is impulsive, extremely violent and quick to anger. Padraic's temperament creates large stakes within the farce of *The Lieutenant*. He is an infamously dangerous figure in the play's setting of Inishmore. In Scene One we learn that Padraic grew up on the island. He was raised by Donny, was violent as a youth, and had only his cat as a friend. Donny recounts exactly what Padraic did to his cousin: we are informed of an incident in which he "outright cripple[d] the poor fella laughed at that girly scarf he used to wear, and that was when he was twelve?!" (7). We are also informed that Padraic, upon leaving Inishmore, was rejected by the Irish Republican Army "because he was *too mad*" (7, emphasis in original). Donny and Davey endow Padraic with immense power, and a potential for violence and mental instability; they tell stories to communicate that this currently unseen character has an absurd thirst for violence which transcends familial bonds (the cousin) and acceptable notions of paramilitary violence. To make matters worse, they also disclose Padraic's relationship with Wee Thomas—the cat was not merely a childhood pet, but Padraic's "only friend for fifteen year.... his only friend in the world, now" (6-7).

Donny and Davey are not alone in lacking fully realised self-awareness—Christy, the leader of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) gang, appears to miss the incongruities of his justifications. Christy, Brendan and Joey wish to murder Padraic and have lured him to the island by murdering his beloved cat. Believing that Padraic's distress will cause him to drop his guard is another testament to how much Padraic loves Wee Thomas. The revenge killing of Padraic is based on the fact he tortured a drug dealer named Skank Toby. During this torture, we learn that Padraic fed Skank Toby's severed nose to Toby's dog, causing it to choke and die. Christy is completely ignorant of his hypocrisy of killing a black cat over the death of Toby's dog. This adds to the audience's reception of the resulting violence, enacted on these

misunderstandings, though gruesome, as satirical and comedic. Christy's justification shows he is completely unaware of the wider hypocrisy in which his violent justifications place him.

The historical knowledge which Christy and others bring to their justifications is also comically vague and completely incorrect. Christy is not proud of killing a cat in order to lure Padraic, but considers the killing of Wee Thomas a necessary evil: "and like the fella said, 'Don't the ends justify the means?' Wasn't it Marx that said that, now? I think it was." (27). Christy's justification for violence rests on a blatantly incorrect quote; he attributes the quote to Karl Marx and not Machiavelli. It is evident that Christy values his historical knowledge, as he continues to use this method of justifying his actions throughout the fifth scene of the play. Christy, in justifying his slaying of Padraic's cat, also considers the murder slight compared with the atrocities of Oliver Cromwell, a reference to an English military leader who conducted a brutal suppression of the Irish 300 years earlier. He states that Oliver Cromwell killed "Lots of cats and burned them alive! We've a long way to go before we're in that bastard's league." (30). This is an absurd comparison of violence. Compared with Cromwell's actions, almost any act of violence pales in scale and severity.

Mairead is introduced to the audience as a fierce sixteen-year-old, toting an air rifle and wearing military boots. Her struggle between mature adult and impulsive child is very pronounced. She also offers hypocritical justifications for her violence and lacks self-awareness. Although she wants to be respected as a fiery leader of Irish resistance, she struggles with an internal conflict of what her sixteen-year-old self wants versus the Irish rebel identity she puts forward. Being a girl of sixteen, she is introduced as a fierce protector of innocent Irish cats. She berates her brother Davey and attempts to shoot him in the eye with her air rifle at the start of Scene Three. She has heard that Davey has killed a cat and believes shooting him in the eye is the least he deserves: "it's not enough at all for your crimes!" (17). Not long into this scene, Davey

challenges her to justify her own history of violence—shooting and blinding the local cattle. Mairead justifies her actions as an effective protest against the meat trade; “for who would want to buy a blind cow?” (19). As with Christy, Mairead’s supposed protection for one animal is undermined by a hypocritical justification of violence towards another. For such an extreme act of protest, Mairead then declares to Davey that she no longer believes it to be an effective protest: “My thinking has gone full tilt since then, and they are valid targets no longer.” (19). This change of mind appears to have been abrupt; it characterises Mairead as violent and impulsive.

Farcical Failure

Understanding the problem, stakes and characters that populate the farce, it should be relatively obvious that failure must occur within this situation. Jordan recognises that: “In farce, even the best laid plans go astray” (2009, p. 379). Donny and Davey decide on a plan—they will break the news to Padraic gently; “You’ll be letting him down easy” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 9). By drip feeding the news to Padraic and lying that Wee Thomas is slowly dying, they believe they can untangle themselves from the responsibility and culpability they feel in Wee Thomas’ sudden death. However, the necessity of doing this is not clear; Donny rings Padraic at the close of Scene One but at no point does he stop to consider not calling Padraic at all—at least not until they have a viable solution or decoy in place. After all, if Padraic is as dangerous as he is made out to be, why do they not stop to consider that their invoking of Padraic’s rage could be delayed, if not completely avoided? Instead, they both whip each other into a frenzy, first with Donny making Davey “*drop to his knees*” (7, emphasis in original) so the latter will admit a false confession for killing Wee Thomas. Donny frets and demands Davey leave while he rings Padraic. Donny posits this phone call to Padraic as something inevitable, a looming plot point that cannot be avoided for long. By the scene’s conclusion, he sits down to make the

call as the stage fades to black. At this point the audience strongly suspect the pair will inevitably fail miserably at convincing Padraic of anything.



Figure 2

Shortly into Scene Two, Donny rings Padraic but lies about Wee Thomas' situation, saying he is only poorly but alive. Padraic responds: "but you wouldn't be fecking calling me at all if he was not too bad, now" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 14). The call ends with Padraic smashing the phone to pieces, crying, and then declaring "I'm off to Galway to see me cat." (16). This blatant failure escalates the stakes for Donny and Davey, who are now forced to hatch a Plan B: to replace Wee Thomas with another black cat so Padraic's violent temperament will be quelled. Donny seems extremely concerned with Padraic's reaction to the news but has assured himself by quietly positioning Davey as a scapegoat in the event things go awry with their decoy cat ploy.

Donny and Davey's Plan B hinges on Padraic being convinced Sir Roger, Mairead's ginger cat, who is partially coated black with shoe polish, is his cat. Both Donny and Davey know the

stakes are very high but seem assured that they at least have a plan. Because we know this plan will surely fail, this human striving in the face of inevitable failure is comedic for the audience. Additionally, despite the egregious circumstances, Donny and Davey drink poteen, ponder their love for their mothers and argue whilst they botch the ‘cat-covering’ job they have set themselves. Characters in *The Lieutenant* also fail at the very schemes, ploys and ideas they declare to be easily achievable—Davey believes he can wake “bang on any hour...and not just any hour, the minute” (37) in order to place the final touches on Sir Roger before Padraic returns home. Davey’s timely snap to consciousness “like a ninja” (37) fails, as does their wider ploy of tricking Padraic into thinking Wee Thomas is alive with a badly shoe-polished ginger cat as his replacement. When Padraic returns home at midday he arouses the two sleeping clowns and promptly shoots the false Wee Thomas point blank, before shoving Davey’s face into the bloodied corpse.

Violence Creating Suspense

With a solid grasp of how *The Lieutenant* fits into the category of farce through its construction of plot, its characters and the snowball/humiliation scenario, I wish to consider the violence that operates within this. Milner Davis argues that “violence is omnipresent” (1978, p. 3) in farce, but it is “often more sound and fury than actual harm, more symbolic gesture than potent action.” (3). This is not the case with a play as violent as *The Lieutenant*; violence is certainly omnipresent in the text and gradually escalates to both actual harm and potent action once Padraic returns to Inishmore. This section will consider how *The Lieutenant* both breaks and remains within the expectations for violence in farce. Having established how violence operates, I will then consider the effect this has from a phenomenological and post-colonial perspective.

Suspense in Farce

Violence operates in *The Lieutenant* both within the restrictions of farce and outside them. One of the ways violence operates within farce is through the creation and resolution of suspense in the narrative. Suspense is created through the introduction of certain elements and circumstances. This generates anxiety and expectation about whether the play will reincorporate such elements and when this will occur. Martin Esslin notes the effect this reincorporation has in his book *The Field of Drama*. Esslin contends that suspense comes from the potential for “the imagined and inferred becoming reality” (1987, p. 121). Esslin argues that the resolution of this suspense can therefore “spring from the recognition of the familiar, the fulfilment of an expectation” (121). If certain elements, character traits and dangers are introduced, then the reincorporation of such elements will fulfil a spectator’s expectation and potentially cause a range of reactions.

McDonagh’s writing uses violence to build suspense by introducing violence into characters’ histories. McDonagh imbues characters in *The Lieutenant* with the potential for violence; this creates an anticipation that anything which hints at violence from then on will possibly unravel into violence in front of the spectator. For example, in the opening scene violence has already occurred in the past; Wee Thomas is already dead. However, the dripping body of Wee Thomas creates an undercurrent of suspense within the text. Coupled with the terror on Donny’s face, the audience does not need to witness this act of violence to know what it has set up. The immediate presence of a blood-drenched body introduces the audience to an environment where the destruction of bodies and violence will likely occur. This is the first significant taunt of violence which threatens future on-stage violence.

Another example of violence being used to create and resolve suspense occurs in Scene Eight, when Christy, Brendan and Joey exit the cottage with Padraic to execute him. As Donny and

Davey sit restrained on the cottage floor, awaiting the return of the INLA members, the audience hears the “*rapid fire*” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 50, emphasis in original) of shots from Mairead’s air rifle, followed by the screams of Christy, Brendan and Joey. As the INLA trio run back on stage, we see them clutching their bleeding eyes and scrambling blindly; Mairead’s blinding of cows has been transferred to humans. This violence off-stage rewards the audience for listening, not just to the distinctive shots of Mairead’s air rifle, but for their attention to Scene Three’s discussion of her being an accurate shooter of cow’s eyes. The suspense has been created by the introduction of these elements early in the text. The suspense of this is resolved when we piece together what Mairead has done to Christy, Brendan and Joey; we infer from the air rifle sound effect and the screaming that something has happened to the three INLA members, and this suspense is released when they come in screaming and shooting blindly. What I wish to emphasise with this example is that violence operates by creating and resolving suspense—it both creates expectations set up by the farcical structure of the play and then returns later with ferocity to resolve those expectations. In my production, the reception of this resolution of suspense was usually greeted with gasps of horror as well as laughter from the audience; for some the scene played had played out precisely how they expected it to, others seemed to have forgotten about Mairead’s potential for violence and were shocked when it materialised.

Criticism

The main issues arising from *The Lieutenant* are its representation of Irishness, the excessive level of violence present in the play and the apparently reckless approach to considering Irish paramilitary violence. As discussed in Chapter One, post-colonial theatre seeks an accurate representation of colonial subjects; a representation that is distinct from the commonly negative depiction imposed by the coloniser. After its premiere in 2001, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*

drew significant criticism for its portrayal of its characters. Mary Luckhurst is probably the most accessible critic. Her article 'Martin McDonagh's Lieutenant of Inishmore: Selling (-out) to the English' is a popular critique of the play. Luckhurst's criticism focuses on the colonial representation of Irishness and considers the script as McDonagh's failure to incorporate meaningful insights into the political chaos the play draws from. She notes that:

Even a single intelligent person, able to challenge, or comment on proceedings in order to expose contrary views and set up an interrogative dynamic would have allowed space for some interesting reflection, but McDonagh is intent on avoiding the possibility of allowing informed politics into the play... (Luckhurst, 2004, p. 36)

There is an assumption inherent in Luckhurst's critique that a play which concerns such subject matter is required to present the audience an analysis and commentary of what the politics of that subject are. She continues: "... the choice of farce as a form does not, as is widely known, presuppose a refusal of serious political debate... Nor does farce inevitably contain characters who are hopelessly dumb, out-and out psychopaths." (36). Unfortunately, as described in earlier paragraphs, farce does contain such characters—ones who lack self-awareness and a fully realised consciousness. Luckhurst is aware that McDonagh's text functions as a farce to some extent, but denies that some of its key elements are what they are. For example, she identifies the lack of self-awareness that the characters possess but fails to recognise this is an essential element of farce. "They certainly do not show signs of an intellectual or emotional life, and never engage in meaningful political discussion—indeed they appear bankrupt of historical knowledge." (36).

Luckhurst is joined by others, such as Victor Merriman, who asserts: "By representing their own countrymen as 'others', and scorching them in the heat of their derision, McDonagh and

Carr offer bourgeois audiences course after course of reassurance. [. . .] McDonagh's plays and Carr's substitute for human vitality a set of monsters frozen in the stony gaze of the triumphant bourgeoisie." (Merriman, 1999, p. 314). Merriman argues that McDonagh promotes a palatable and recognisable stereotype for British consumption; he is profiting from Irish misrepresentation. He asserts that McDonagh perpetuates "gross caricatures with no purchase on the experience of today's audiences [;] their appeal to the new consumer-Irish consensus lies in their appearance as ludicrous Manichean opposites—the colonised simian reborn." (313). Tom Maguire echoes that "the representation of the composite Irish Republican was to reach its nadir" (Maguire, 2006, p. 33) in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. Maguire bases this criticism on Patrick Magee's investigation into the representation of republicans in prose fiction. Magee's contention is that representations were like that of "Irish Frankenstein and other images...redolent of Victorian racism." (2001, p. 2). Someone who was a "fixated Mother-Ireland psycho-killer" (2). Both Maguire and Magee believe these representations need to be challenged. Incorporated with this criticism is Seamus Deane's argument that "the language of politics in Ireland and England is still dominated by the putative division between barbarism and civilisation." (1985, p. 39). By getting the Irish to adopt British norms, those who remained outside the law were deemed barbaric and uncivilised. Such a characterisation of those who reject British norms in turn legitimises the violence of the state. Using Deane's observation, the criticism of McDonagh's portrayal of Irish Republicans as psychopathic and immoral is well-intentioned.⁵

⁵ Other plays by McDonagh have also received similar criticism for other portrayals. Hilton Als has criticised McDonagh for his play *A Behanding in Spokane*. Als criticises what he considers is a poor representation of an African American character, stating: "the caricature he presents in Toby, the young black male as a shucking, jiving thief, can't be excused..." Als, H. 2010, *Underhanded: Martin McDonagh's Slap in the Face* [Online]. newyorker.com: The New Yorker. Available: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/03/15/underhanded> [Accessed 6 February 2020].

Considering Criticism

Some have interpreted McDonagh's dismantling of the West of Ireland and the use of the stage Irishman as dismantling the discourse that resists English Imperialism. However, Eamonn Jordan (2012) disagrees that this is a perpetuation of stereotypes; rather, he sees this representation as an attack on them. By holding the racist remarks of characters in quotation marks, performances of the material expose the idiocy of the remarks and hold them up to the light in order to undermine the character and their beliefs. For example, Christopher Walken's portrayal of Carmichael in *A Behanding in Spokane* changed the delivery of the word nigger; it was delivered by Walken with an acute meta-theatrical awareness for the idiocy of his own character.

Statements made by Luckhurst and Als assume McDonagh's plays have a responsibility to comment on their political context more thoughtfully. Eamonn Jordan argues that "the text has no requirement to fulfil a contextual imperative" (Jordan, 2009, p. 369). *The Lieutenant* does not set out to highlight or consider the moral complexities of "The Troubles" in Ireland and give a considered representation of the conflict, nor does *A Behanding* attempt to unravel the complexities of racism in America. This is an important conclusion which Eamonn Jordan draws in his article:

These views do expose the play to a range of critiques, however, but they seem to be more about the theorization of a way of reading and responding to misrepresentation and trivialization, rather than being open to the possibility of the

play having neither a real commitment to a specific type of representation nor a need to be responsibly interrogative. (373).

I wish to consider this criticism's limitations; Luckhurst considers violence only within the misrepresentation of Irishness and this argument means otherwise helpful insights might be overlooked. Eamonn Jordan is suggesting that a reading of violence which is separate from the desire for a politically correct representation of Irishness can be useful; he considers this distinction necessary to "challenge the propensity of politically correct culture to mobilise a type of optimism and suppression that is painfully uptight." (2012, p. 200). For example, Luckhurst calls McDonagh's form of violence "comic strip" (Luckhurst, 2004, p. 38), drawing comparison with Sarah Kane's representation of violence in her play *Blasted*. Luckhurst considers McDonagh's violence offensive and derivative of the purer form present in Kane's *In-Yer-Face* script. However, violence in Kane's *Blasted* operates differently from the violence in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. *Blasted* is not a black farce and its on-stage violence is graphic; its violence is intended to focus on the humanity of the victim of the violence. *The Lieutenant* is more concerned with the building and release of suspense, and by assuming it has a duty to reflect the humanity of certain victims or perpetrators of violence criticises the play for something it does not purport to do. This is important to consider in the definition of farce; if farce situates characters in positions where they rebel against conventional morals and assert themselves in ways that one usually would not in reality, it is then illogical to criticise the text for not representing the situation as it would normally play out. The assumption that farce needs to represent the characters and subjects of a situation realistically is misplaced; the interest of farce lies not in the logistics of a character rationally navigating a situation, it is concerned with the human element of characters striving against absurd or heightened scenarios in which they are doomed to fail.

Off-Stage and On-Stage Violence

Certain acts of violence remain off-stage in *The Lieutenant*, remaining within the imagination of the audience. In the example of Mairead blinding Christy, Brendan and Joey, the audience can see the result of this off-stage action, but they do not witness the act. Doyle notes that off-stage violence coupled with the “speed of the assault...eliminates the audience’s moral depth perception, cutting it off from contemplation of the victims’ pain” (2007, p. 99). Because the violence that occurs off-stage happens quickly and the victims do not linger in pain before being killed, there is a disconnection towards the violence. It should be noted that not all off-stage violence creates a disconnection and lessens the effect of violence:

Greek drama uses several tricks to make the off-stage horror truly upsetting. Graphic descriptions of what has happened, usually related by a messenger, use metaphor and similes to unforgettable effect. In Euripides’s *Medea*, a messenger describes how a princess is tricked into putting on a poisoned robe that burns her alive: ‘Her flesh dripped from her bones like resin from a pine torch.’ (Swift, 2017, emphasis in original)

Instead of the absence on the stage being filled with a graphic description of violence, as is the case with *Medea*, the focus in *The Lieutenant* avoids the humanity of the victims and instead focuses on their striving in the face of failure. In my production, the INLA members scrambled around the stage, comically shooting towards any noise in the hope of hitting Padraic or Mairead. Although their blinding and hysterical shrieking was confronting, the audience did not seem concerned with the pain the characters were in, but were excited to watch them navigate the stage set, which was cluttered with props and furniture. In this respect, violence operates off-stage to relieve suspense and instigate a situation of physical comedy.



Figure 3

If this is the result of off-stage violence, then it can be argued violence has a different effect in farce if it is performed on-stage. McDonagh's choice to keep certain acts of violence off-stage is deliberate; it retains the form of farce and prevents a disintegration into the macabre. Milner Davis contends: "since farce, more than any other comic forms, depends upon the direct, dramatic enactment of its jokes and humiliations, it is in more danger of becoming merely and violently aggressive. The strictness of its rules is necessary to prevent farce from overbalancing into an outright attack on the social conventions of its time." (Milner Davis, 1978, p. 24). McDonagh breaks this rule of violence within farce—although some acts remain off-stage, others do not, and therefore create what Milner Davis believes is an attack on social conventions.



Figure 4

While the play occasionally adheres to the rules of violence in farce, McDonagh subtly drops in hints of greater violence from the outset. Violence is enacted on-stage as early as Scene One, when Donny kicks Davey hard enough to have him “*almost in tears*” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 3, emphasis in original). This violence occurs within the cottage, where “*a framed piece of embroidery reading ‘Home Sweet Home’.*” (3, emphasis in original) hangs. This act creates suspense, as the action is in stark contrast to the peaceful and domestic connotations of the embroidery hanging behind them. The presence of domestic, familial violence is compounded in Scene Four, when Donny admits to kicking his mother because “*she’d get on me nerves.*” (24). In Scene Three, we see familial violence on stage again when Mairead tries to shoot her brother Davey’s eye out. Upon failing, she kicks him and his bicycle violently before holding him at gun point. Scene Five threatens gun violence as Christy, Brendan and Joey work themselves up into a Mexican standoff, but ultimately fails to lead to any violent act. Scenes

Six and Seven feature no violence other than Padraic and Mairead working each other up into a stand-off, guns drawn. The absence of violence in Scene Seven serves to build suspense and to lull the audience into a sense of calm; the birds are chirping and Donny and Davey are settling in to sleep before Padraic returns home. Padraic returns home in Scene Eight and promptly shoots the sleeping shoe-polish-covered Sir Roger and shoves Davey's face into the cat's remains, quickly destroying any semblance of peace. This instigates the on-stage violence that commands the remaining half of the show. The subtle crescendo of on-stage and off-stage violence heightens the audience's anxiety that a larger act of violence is coming; the play constantly threatens to spill over into the representable. Another example of on-stage violence is the execution of Christy, Brendan and Joey at the close of Scene Eight, followed finally by Padraic's execution by Mairead in Scene Nine.

Post-Colonial Considerations

Having established that violence is operating to create suspense within a farcical dramaturgy, I will now incorporate a post-colonial reading of *The Lieutenant*. This is beneficial because it helps to place the violence in context and helps to assess the justification of violence which occurs in the text. McDonagh's play is set during a time in which the very real violence of "The Troubles" in Ireland occurred. Clashes between the Irish Republican Army and loyalist forces throughout 1990s Ireland occurred within this period called "The Troubles". *The Lieutenant*, being "circa 1993" (3, emphasis in original) situates the play five years before the Good Friday agreement of 1998, which saw an end to much of the violence which permeated that decade of Ireland's history. Many years of Ireland's history have seen conflict, but much of The Troubles' violence occurred in the decades preceding the 1990s. Richard English reminds us that "there was a need for Catholic self-protection in the late 1960s (and beyond)" (2003, p. 351).

Aspects of violence seen in *The Lieutenant* are also historically accurate for this period. The “punishment beatings” carried out by the IRA, for example, are similar to what is represented in Scene Two. Kevin Rafter details that “There were over 1200 so-called punishment attacks in the post-1995 period which were attributed to the IRA. These brutal attacks—which underlined the IRA’s self-adopted role as judge, jury and executioner—frequently left people crippled or limbless” (2005, p. 27). Often, these beatings were carried out for increasingly petty crimes, such as loitering. Eamon Jordan (2009) also notes that the Irish National Liberation Army’s approach to drug dealing and petty crime was essentially torture. Additionally, criminal activity such as drug dealing was simply taken over by the organisation, with its punishment of the crime present in order to monopolise the market. The irony of this is not lost in Scene Two, which represents such a situation and is a direct criticism by McDonagh of the methods used in paramilitary policing.

A post-colonial reading of *The Lieutenant* also takes into account McDonagh’s use and mockery of the West of Ireland as a setting. As outlined in Chapter One of this thesis, the discourse of the West allows for the possibility of a counter discourse; it is what is being used to resist English imperialism. The West is intended to be an establishment of a cultural identity separate from the British. The West evokes “ideas of rural or pastoral Ireland depicted in many novels, films and advertisements” (Jordan, 2012, p. 194) and “perpetuate[s] a romantic evocation of rural living” (194). McDonagh situates his play in this setting only to promptly dismantle the discourse—the characters are violent, do not care for their own kin, and appear as drunken, scruffy louts. The popular colonial depiction of the Irish was (and still is) centred on: “the fighting, drunken, religiously superstitious, slovenly, feckless but pleasantly humoured and good-natured Irish—a stereotype that continues to be propagated across different forms of popular culture.” (194). In addition to this, the rural life in *The Lieutenant* is also losing its identity to popular culture—Donny sings “The Ace of Spades” by Motorhead in Scene Three,

shouting it over Mairead, who is attempting to sing the more traditional, popular Irish rebel song “The Dying Rebel”. The globalised world is encroaching on Inishmore, and within this McDonagh’s farce occurs.

Justification of Violence

The Lieutenant naturally concerns the justification of violence because it draws on a colonial conflict; it dramatises the violence of the oppressed and the oppressor. Questions arise from this conflict, such as: Is the violence perpetuated by paramilitary groups justified in fighting the legacy of oppression imposed by British forces? Additionally, at what point do these violent acts become eligible for criticism? What violence can be justified as retaliatory for other, more vicious violence on the part of the British? Infamously, the Omagh car bomb in 1998 by the Irish Republican Army drew public outcry over the deaths of civilians and children. This was arguably a turning point in The Troubles, one which sought a political resolution to the conflict. Infamously, the response by the IRA, who claimed responsibility for the bombing, argued that such “responsibility lay solely at the feet of Britain.” (English, 2003, p. 234).

Richard English also notes:

It is not difficult to hear the echoes in IRA thinking of a Fanonist argument that the violence of the colonized can only be understood within the context of the colonizer's own prior violent actions (235).

The complications of this are apparent. If the justifications for current violence are previous acts of violence, then violence can be committed continuously. Depending on the political alignment, conflict can be justified simply as a retaliation for other violence. Depending on the grossness of that previous violence, the justification for retaliatory violence might also be

particularly compelling. The legitimacy held by Britain denotes what is considered lawful violence, but this is complicated if used improperly. Richard English states:

The state, in Weberian manner, identified itself as holding a monopoly over legitimate force. But what if a democratic state used force in arbitrary and extra-legal ways, killing members of its population in dubious circumstances, and then refusing adequately to investigate those circumstances? Could the distinction between legal force and illegal paramilitarism remain crisp after such episodes? (2003, p. 238).

Turning our attention to Benjamin's considerations of violence and whether acts may be justified, we can begin to excavate a more concrete idea of what McDonagh's farcical violence causes us to focus on. The characters committing this violence are all immoral in their justification of violence. Morality in *The Lieutenant* is undermined; the audience cannot accept any character's justifications because they are either blatantly flawed or revealed to be serving the character's own selfish ends. Christy's morality appears to hinge on ideals of the greater good, on utilising necessary violence to justify an end—the prospect of less violence. Padraic's violence is similar—he bombs chip shops and tortures James in the belief that his actions will achieve a peaceful Irish independence. The only difference is that Padraic believes the actions of the INLA to be too soft, and that an escalation of violent methods will lead to a quicker independence for Ireland. However, the motivations for both characters are soon revealed to be selfish; Padraic is willing to disturb rural Inishmore in order to enact vengeance on those responsible for his cat's health. Padraic even appropriates the gaze of Wee Thomas as a justification for paramilitary violence: “egging me on he would be, saying, ‘This is for me and for Ireland, Padraic’. Remember that, as I'd lob a bomb at a pub, or be shooting a builder.” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 44). Christy also has a personal stake in his justification for violence: he

wishes to assassinate Padraic not simply to control Padraic's unreasonable thirst for violence, but out of vengeance for Padraic's blinding of Christy. Padraic shot out his eye with a crossbow whilst the two were playing "murder in the dark" (46). With this revealed in Scene Eight, Christy's already shaky and misquoted ideals are trounced once more due to his violence being based out of a need to revenge his poor vision. Christy falls victim to becoming antagonised by Brendan's remarks on whether it was Marx who said "the ends justify the means". Although Christy, as the leader of the group, tries to remain above the childlike squabbling of Brendan and Joey, he resorts to threats of violence (pulling his gun out) in order to convince Joey to drop the matter of "cat-battering".



Figure 5

This violence can be considered childish; Christy's authority and ability to control the situation collapses as his temper boils over, resulting in a guns-drawn standoff. Brendan and Joey are brothers and their disagreements are childlike because of this. Brendan antagonises Joey simply

because he knows he can. Christy, their superior, fills the role of parental figure. Using Benjamin's consideration of violence, we see that McDonagh causes Christy to threaten violence in order to maintain order. McDonagh causes the audience to question the validity of Christy's leadership, but McDonagh is also mocking the patience and level-headedness of paramilitary leaders. Although violence is necessary to justify Christy's means, the audience is shown that a simple in-house squabble is also approached with the same tactic. Christy pointing his gun at Joey reveals he uses violence as a tool of convenience, justifying it idealistically when he needs to, yet using it when it suits to solve simple arguments and disagreements with his own soldiers. Employed at a whim like this, we see that Christy's just uses for violence are anything but ethical or convincing.

Joan Fitzpatrick Dean argues that within a conventional representational dramaturgy such as *The Lieutenant*, the inconsistencies and lying most characters partake in "generate[s] epistemological uncertainties" (2007, p. 30) and that these underpin all of McDonagh's plays. Because the character's justifications for violence are faulty and based on incorrect moral assertions, the audience mistrusts what is being represented. Lonergan (2012) argues that the lack of morality the characters possess is intentionally employed by McDonagh; in the face of such immoral and cruel violence, the audience must react morally to what is being displayed. The result of this is a rollercoaster effect, because if the audience does not know the assertions of characters to be true, they are also less certain about what their reactions to the violence perpetuated by them will be. The revelation of ulterior motives and the farcical absence of self-awareness the characters possess limit the audience from aligning with characters in the text.

The assumption that the dead black cat which is discovered in Scene One is Wee Thomas also reveals attitudes towards the justification of violence. Because such violence has occurred through the alleged killing of Wee Thomas, McDonagh mocks the assertion that only justice

(in the form of justified violence) can answer such a call. He undermines the ideological justifications of violence by revealing that any old cat can be sacrificed as a means to an end. Upon Davey realising the dead cat is in fact, not Wee Thomas at all, he remarks, “So all of this terror has been for absolutely nothing?” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 68), revealing that he previously considered the enormous amount of killing unavoidable and, though gruesome, acceptable within the circumstances. Davey and the others consider the resulting violence to be unavoidable, even justified in the name of Wee Thomas. Wee Thomas is a martyrdom for whatever cause his death needs to support; Christy, Brendan and Joey claim his death is a necessary violence to lure Padraic back home. Padraic uses Wee Thomas to justify killing anyone he deems responsible for his cat’s death. In fact, Wee Thomas seems to be a mere excuse for Christy to kill Padraic because of the incident that led to him losing an eye.

Phenomenological Considerations

James Hanley swinging upside down in Scene Two is distressing for an audience. Suspense arises from the audience’s knowledge that he has been tortured, and although they do not have to be put through the physical act of watching him being tortured, Padraic constantly threatens to continue this. In this scene, not only does threatened violence create suspense, but in my production, a different kind of anxiety also arose the longer the scene continued. Speaking to audience members afterwards, many reported becoming increasingly concerned at the amount of time the actor playing James Hanley had to hang upside down. When he was eventually released there was concern over whether he would be able to stand up. Would he be so dizzy he would fall over and injure himself? Did the actor have the physical stamina to endure the scene? Investigating this from a phenomenological perspective illuminates another way violence operates in this scene.



Figure 6

Scene Two of the play does not show us explicit violence; rather, it dances with the potential for it to occur in front of the audience. Fitzpatrick encapsulates why the potential of violence is so effective in a theatrical setting:

The scene threatened possible future violence, because the actor/character was tied and exposed as helpless, and because the wall marking the auditorium from the stage positioned the audience more firmly as spectators incapable of intervention. This exposure of the vulnerable body acts as a trigger for the spectator's imagination, heightening their dread of what they might see. (2011, p. 62).

With the scene opening on James Hanley strung upside down by the ankles, his half naked body bloody and bruised, the audience's imagination is triggered because the physical presence of a body at risk heightens the scene. The presence of the actor in a precarious position engages the audience from a phenomenological perspective—they are simultaneously concerned for the actor and the character within the present circumstances. Their anxiety towards the safety of the actor feeds into their anxiety towards violence potentially erupting on stage. In their eyes,

scripted violence being performed could lead to actual albeit incidental violence occurring to the actor. To add to this, they are powerless to intervene in the scripted violence and are uncertain about what actual, incidental violence might look like if it happened.

The violence in Scene Two, more than any other in *The Lieutenant*, challenges the audience as spectators; they are both complicit in a violence that is awful but they are also helpless to alter the event. Depending on the staging of the scene, the spectators may also experience a voyeuristic satisfaction. For example, when Padraic saunters into the warehouse and taunts James by calling his name and asking, “Do you know what’s next on the agenda?” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 10), Padraic’s question prods the audience, threatening potential violence. Violence has already occurred to the bloody and bruised James—what could be next? In my interpretation, the audience was physically separated from the scene through a clear seating arrangement and the lighting was contained to the scene, leaving the audience safely in darkness and free to enjoy the scene. Fitzpatrick notes that changing such parameters through lighting also causes a change in how the audience sees themselves involved in the violence on stage: “... the audience were not safely invisible in the dark and the lit stage space was not a self-contained elsewhere, not a fictional dramatic world but the same world as inhabited by the audience.” (2011, p. 62).

Although the lighting and seating arrangement mitigated this convergence of the fictional world with reality, my performance engaged the audience phenomenologically in other ways. From the outset, the curtain which concealed James Hanley was visible to the audience. The result of this was that when he was revealed to be strung up behind it, some audience members gasped—clearly wondering if he had been suspended there for the entirety of the preshow and Scene One. To add to this, the actor playing James Hanley helped to share the fictional space with the audience by shivering throughout the scene. Because the space was cold, and with

many audience members wrapped in blankets, this converged the space between performer, character and actor. Despite the seating arrangement and the lighting, the audience had an intimacy with the violence presented to them.

The graphic In-Yer-Face brutality occurring on-stage in Scene Two has a humanising effect and is another example of undermined morality in action. The precarious position James Hanley is in creates genuine concern for what might happen to the actor, even though we understand what we are seeing cannot be real. Thus, such actions prompt the audience to react morally; depending on who is committing the violence and what they represent, the audience will align against this brutality, depending on the circumstances, out of a strong discomfort for the human body of the actor on stage. Because of the length of time James is hanging upside down, the audience grows increasingly concerned for the actor's wellbeing and are subtly aligned with him in the hope that his (and their own discomfort) is alleviated. Scene Two then continues to challenge concepts of justified violence. At the prospect of harm, James retorts: "but I've done nothing at all to deserve getting nipples off, Padraic!" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 12). This assault on the body which Padraic sees as justified under the circumstances is quickly illuminated; McDonagh dissolves the moral dilemma of whether James Hanley is indeed getting his comeuppance when Padraic reveals he is torturing James because he deals drugs to youngsters. Padraic argues this impedes their ability to resist British rule: "Keeping our youngsters in a drugged up and idle haze, when it's out on the streets pegging bottles at coppers they should be." (12). The question of whether this violence is justified is promptly answered with absurdist reasoning from Padraic and reveals that Padraic's skewed morality does not attempt to discern between just and unjust execution of violence. McDonagh is employing violence in this scenario to illustrate just how absurd the validity of this violence was towards dealing with crimes.

Framed within farce, Padraic's absent-minded and studied casualness towards torture reveals his attitude towards violence as something which is part of his everyday life; it is as though he is performing a role which he thinks real INLA interrogators perform. The audience watches him partake in what he interprets to be a regular "nine-to-five" job. When Padraic frees James, he recommends James get himself to a hospital "to get them toes looked at" (16). He mentions these practicalities with such a casual approach that it becomes apparent such acts of violence are normalised for Padraic; they are unavoidable, necessary acts in the work of a paramilitary leader. He appears to have no disdain, rather, a psychopathic enjoyment for enacting this on James, yet he still cites the recommended steps James take for continued health at the end of the torture. Padraic is a professional in his job, if nothing else.

This casual attitude is also demonstrated when Donny calls Padraic in the middle of torturing James. Padraic, on the phone to his father, admits: "I haven't been up to much else, really. I put bombs in a couple of chip shops, but they didn't go off." (13). Violence has become so normalised for Padraic that it provides a simple solution for an array of problems and is employed without the slightest consideration. Chip shops "aren't as well guarded as army barracks" (13) and are thus a logical target for paramilitary violence. From a political perspective, McDonagh is criticising the normalcy of violence present in the depictions of such terrorism. The fact that these actions are expected, even unsurprising, of such figures and that the results, though tragic, are normalised within our expectations of such groups is brought to the fore.

Breaking the Cycle of Colonial Violence

Donny and Davey break the endless cycle of vengeful violence which consistently drives characters to murder. Outraged at the senselessness of the violence due to Wee Thomas being, in fact, very much alive, Donny and Davey decide they must execute the cat. Davey is enraged

by the killing that has occurred while Wee Thomas has been off galivanting in the neighbourhood: “All because this fecker was after his hole?” (68). However, Donny and Davey cannot bring themselves to murder Wee Thomas at the close of the play; they both point their guns at Wee Thomas: “A long, long pause, arms taut, teeth gritted, not breathing. But neither of them can bring himself to do it.” (69, emphasis in original). By choosing to spare Wee Thomas, Donny and Davey halt the endless cycle of violence that has unravelled in Inishmore. They consciously choose to spare a cat they know to be innocent of any wrongdoing and in so doing recognise their attempts to control their unfortunate circumstances with violence are fruitless. Despite the mess they are in, Donny and Davey do not use violence as a way of expressing their despair, nor to exert vengeance on a cat that they deem loosely responsible for their circumstances. Donny and Davey’s morality is based on redemption. Despite the atrocities enacted in the name of Wee Thomas, both characters decide to stop the violence and choose not to kill Wee Thomas. Both characters gain redemption and place themselves above the morality which Padraic, Christy and Mairead operate under. Theirs is a morality in which violence is absent. Both settle down and pour Wee Thomas a bowl of Frosties as the lights dim on the final scene of the play; they have overcome the thirst for violence which has consumed all other characters in the play.

Closing Statements

Farce causes violence to be removed from the political context of the paramilitary groups. For example, by removing the logic from Christy’s justifications of violence, McDonagh exposes the excess of the violence that occurs politically. The audience can see the violence for what it is, and not as it is justified within the rhetoric of an ideology. Jordan notes that “Absurdity is [McDonagh’s] way of decontextualizing the sentiment of Republicanism and challenging the myths of Republican indoctrination and the fixation on the dead.” (2009, p. 378). Violence

operates purely as excess in the play; it is devoid of and disentangled from the sentimental and martyrdom arguments made by paramilitaries. What the audience is left with is violence for the sake of violence—that is, violence that happens because it is normalised within the situation. This is exposed and highlighted because the justifications underpinning it are removed from all logical, political and sentimental arguments. This is the crux of how violence operates in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*.

The Lieutenant is less about whether the actions of the IRA, INLA or British are justified, but it is more about the operation of violence itself being present within such transactions in the first place. McDonagh questions the willingness of individuals, both character and audience alike, to allow sentimentality and lazy thinking to determine their actions. Lonergan suggests, “McDonagh is again demanding that his audiences start to think more critically about the images of violence and terrorism that they are presented with on a daily basis.” (2012, p. 84). Do we choose to justify current violence based on our knowledge of previous acts committed against the party who is currently enacting the same based on the idea of vengeance—an eye for an eye? Is Christy justified in executing Padraic on the grounds that the latter’s violence is too intense on which to form a republic and thus laws. Christy in this sense represents state-sanctioned violence, as described by Benjamin—he ventures beyond the acceptable law in order to establish a new one founded in violence, but one that denounces the very violence upon which it was founded, thus revealing the hypocrisy of “the ends justifying the means”. Christy literalises “an eye for an eye” when it is revealed in Scene Eight that Padraic accidentally shot out his eye in the past. Christy admits he has carried this with him, and it is partly his motivation for killing Padraic.

McDonagh’s unique perspective on the political conflict must be mentioned. Some background is useful in seeing why such a writer would consider the conflict in Ireland in such a way.

McDonagh's upbringing is both Irish and British; his parents emigrated from Ireland. In this sense, McDonagh himself is decoupled from the paramilitary sentiment of Ireland, yet is equally removed from British imperialist doctrine. McDonagh states he writes:

from a position of what you might call pacifist rage. I mean, it's a violent play that is wholeheartedly anti-violence. The bottom line, I suppose, is that I believe that if a piece of work is well written, you can tackle anything. (O'Hagan, 2001).

He continues:

I think a lot of the stuff that has happened in the past 25 years has been a sick joke. I'm not trying to solve anything, the same way as I am not trying to damage anything; just looking at it in a different way. I mean, how else can you react to all that has happened through writing, or art, or whatever you want to call it, if not through absurdity? (2001).

With this perspective in mind, the reason for framing violence within a farcical structure becomes apparent; it exposes the absurdity of such violence and undermines the political conviction behind it. Frantz Fanon argues: "Decolonization is always a violent phenomenon" (1961, p. 27). However, the adoption of violence as a justification on which to base continued violence is what McDonagh appears to be criticising. *The Lieutenant* forces us to consider whether we accept violence from characters because we expect it. Do we accept the violence of certain individuals simply because such violence is expected from an individual such as Padraic, a crazed psychopathic terrorist? Are we as the audience simultaneously relieved and disappointed when this teasing dance with violence ceases in Scene Two, and James is set free? McDonagh is also causing audiences to focus on how much violence they permit when it is present in such scenarios, at the same time he relieves us of the need to consider which

justifications it is operating under by placing it in the hands of farcical dramaturgy. The effect of farcical elements such as character failure, heightened excess of violence and the lack of self-awareness all of the characters possess decontextualises the violence. Jordan notes that "... violence is, on the one hand, de-contextualized, and, on the other, occurs with both a speed and theatricality that, more than anything else, disrupts, even dissolves its relationship with the real." (Jordan, 2009, p. 375). What audiences are left to focus on is how they regard violence. Lonergan comes to a similar conclusion: "McDonagh's target is not just Irish terrorism, but the compliant and complacent culture that makes Irish terrorism possible." (2012, p. 74). It is our culture which is being interrogated, one which allows certain violence and condemns other acts through complex and flawed moral assertions like those touted by the characters in the play. Forcing the audience to think is something which is central to all McDonagh's plays.

Mairead becomes the new "Lieutenant of Inishmore"; her cat has been taken from her and she vows to find who is responsible. Mairead operates from a place of vengeance just as Padraic does; in this sense she fills his shoes and assumes the role of the new lieutenant. This can be interpreted as a continuation of the cycle of violence; although Donny and Davey were able to cease their need for vengeance, Mairead is unable to. Violence enacted because of vengeance reveals itself, at least in this farcical structure, to create the precise conditions which caused bloodshed in the first place. After all, the play is bookended with a highly cherished and sentimental cat lying dead, with its owner vowing to find whoever is responsible.

However, whether Mairead will go on to continue avenging Sir Roger's death is left open to interpretation. After executing Padraic she sings "I stood alone where brave men perished" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 65). Mairead's use of a song infers she considers herself separate from the brave Irish rebels who are the subject of the verse, such as Padraic, who now lies dead because of her. Mairead questions her loyalty to the Irish rebellion—instead of being a brave

soldier who has perished for the cause, she has murdered someone out of personal grievance. Mairead's personal identity as a fierce protector of innocent Irish cats has led to the death of someone whom she romantically and politically idolised. Mairead remarks: "I thought shooting fellas would be fun. It's not. It's dull" (66). Utilising violence to fulfil personal vengeance has only led Mairead to disappointment. Indeed, the ones who have held violence so highly have been destroyed by it; Donny remarks that: "Sure there's not fecker left in the INLA, now" (66). Similarly, Doyle asserts that "by the end of the play the ideological system sustained by violence has imploded." (2007, p. 106). The cycle of violence from this perspective has actually ended; Mairead can see that those who perpetuated it have destroyed themselves and that the personal motivations and revenge killings have resulted in destroying the political movement to which she was so closely aligned.



Figure 7

Chapter Three: *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter*

Employing a post-colonial reading of *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter* reveals significant aspects of the play. A play that contains a black woman trapped in a box, who has been mutilated and forced to write stories for a white bourgeois oppressor, demands, if nothing else, a post-colonial consideration. It is apparent that the content of this play is indeed very, very, very dark and that within it, the way violence operates is embedded within a colonial discourse. Firstly, this chapter will outline the plot, before examining the criticism levelled at the play after its premiere at the Bridge Theatre, London in October of 2018. Using the definition of post-colonial theatre outlined in Chapter One of this thesis, an analysis of *Dark Matter* will then be conducted. This analysis will also look at how violence operates in the play in terms of nineteenth century sentimentality. Like *The Lieutenant*, this serves to challenge notions of justified violence within the colonial context of the play. The structure of *Dark Matter* will also be discussed in this chapter; although it retains some of the characteristics of farcical dramaturgy it departs significantly, opting for a non-cohesive narrative which features timeline-altering occurrences. Finally, this chapter will consider violence in *Dark Matter* from a phenomenological perspective in order to assess whether the physically present body alters the reception of violence.

Plot Summary

The premise that is presented in *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter* is outrageous; Marjory, a Congolese woman, is trapped in a box in Hans Christian Andersen's attic in Denmark. With a sack wrapped around where one foot used to be, she is forced to write children's stories and slip the paper out through a slit at the bottom of the box. The pages fall to the floor and are collected by Andersen, a cruel and buffoonish writer who rewrites sections and alters them slightly for publication.

The play begins with a wooden mahogany box which “slowly and theatrically swings into view and, like a pendulum, swings back and forth from left to right, but does so as if in slow motion” (McDonagh, 2018, p. 1). McDonagh immediately provokes the audience to consider time, using the box with Marjory trapped inside as a pendulum and timekeeper. A recorded voiceover begins: “You could call it a puzzle, or you could call it a poem. *I* wouldn’t call it *either*, really, but you could. I mean, a *person* could, y’know...?” (1, emphasis in original). McDonagh posits that the key to this story is one that wishes to consider the passage of time, and one that is open to interpretation. I argue that this puzzle and the story in a wider sense considers the measurement of time and what is selected and omitted over the passage of time. It is a provocative image of colonialism; a prison box which houses a trapped indigenous woman measures the passing of time. The instrument which measures the advancement of human civilization throughout the ages is constructed out of horrors which have been omitted or neglected. They have passed not so long ago and have not been given the significance and remembrance they deserve.

Once the prologue has finished, we are introduced to Hans Christian Andersen in Scene Two. Andersen is doing a public reading to an infatuated crowd of fans of his latest story *The Little Mermaid*. Andersen is frequently distracted by his own popularity, but soon spies two “Red Men”, covered in blood, who are menacingly staring at him from the crowd. Scene Three involves Andersen and Marjory debating the content of *The Little Mermaid* and how it was received by the audience. Both discuss the ten million victims of the Congo Free State massacre, which is yet to happen. Marjory reveals she has knowledge of this event and further hints that she is originally from the future: “I can’t leave until it arrives, anyway... My Future” (12). McDonagh has placed Marjory in a time-loop—through unknown means, she has travelled back in time to Andersen’s age and has been imprisoned in a box. She intends to escape this and find her way back to the Congolese massacre in order to prevent the millions

of deaths that are, from her perspective, yet to occur and preventable. At the end of Scene Three Marjory asks if Andersen noticed anything at the reading, knowing that the Belgian “Red Men” have come to assassinate her.

Scene Four attempts to clarify the confusing narrative for the audience through a direct address by the Red Men, who are named Barry and Dirk. Under a single spotlight, both explain that they have come from the future to murder Marjory before she can murder them in the future timeline. They explain the reason for the massacre as: “Market forces, isn’t it?” (14). They describe the simple reality of the historical massacre as one centred around the imperial control of resources, namely rubber. McDonagh, in a darkly comic line, links this to King Leopold II’s love for bicycles and thus the subsequent need for more rubber for the tyres: “He liked bicycles and he felt like having a colony in Africa, so...Hard to argue with that Logic.” (14).

Scene Five and Six return to Marjory and Andersen, where Marjory discovers that Andersen is leaving to visit Charles Dickens for several weeks. A Press Man enters, having been tipped off by both Red Men that the origins of Andersen’s stories are a woman trapped in his attic. Although the Press Man discovers this, he is murdered by Andersen shortly after he enters. Before dying, he tells Marjory that her sister Ogechi is also imprisoned in a box at Charles Dickens’ house—information which he received from the Red Men. After intermission, Scene Seven begins as a dream sequence between Marjory and her sister Ogechi, who informs Marjory that she should play a haunted concertina which hangs in the marionette-riddled attic with her. Andersen sold Marjory’s foot “to the gypsies for a haunted concertina” (34). Scene Eight moves to Andersen, who has been living with Dickens and his family for the past five weeks. All members of the family are incredibly sick of Andersen, who struggles to understand anything Dickens says. Dickens admits to Andersen that he has struggled to write anything

significant. Andersen reveals he has a pygmy in his attic who composes his stories for him; he says this in the hope that Dickens will admit he harbours the same secret.



Figure 8

Scene Nine involves the Red Men arriving at the attic with the intention to execute Marjory. They let her out of her box and allow her to play the haunted concertina as a farewell because: “It’s the least we can do if you take the Congo into consideration.” (36). As they begin a countdown, Marjory begins playing. Scene Ten returns to Dickens and Andersen. Catherine, Dickens’ wife, accidentally confesses that Dickens did in fact own a pygmy, but she died. Because of this, he is unable to complete *Edwin Drood*. But before the scene ends, Dickens complains of a concertina Ogechi acquired from some gypsies—which happened to conceal a machine gun. Scene Eleven quickly picks up from this revelation; at the end of the countdown, Marjory tears apart her concertina and machine-guns Dirk and Barry to death in a spectacular

moment of on-stage violence. Shortly afterwards, Andersen returns home. Although he requests that Marjory return to her box, he accepts that she must travel to the Congo to await the massacre that will occur in the future. The pair leave on good terms; despite Andersen's years of torturing Marjory, the two are very endearing in their parting from one another.

Criticism

Dark Matter has received a mix of reviews, the spread of which leans towards mixed to negative reception. This might appear as a marked drop in McDonagh's theatrical brilliance; some consider his golden years to be in creating the Leenane trilogy and the unfinished Aran Islands trilogy. However, it would not be a McDonagh premiere without divisive opinions about the following subjects: excessive violence, the representation of certain characters and the racist or sexist remarks they make and allegedly deliberate, reckless treatment of sensitive political or cultural issues.

Evans Lloyd opens his review: "Mean-spirited, muddled, idiotic and puerile" (2018). He continues, regarding the Bridge Theatre's production of *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter* as a "humiliating low point in the Bridge's short history" (2018). Evans, more than other critics, attacks McDonagh directly, something which Aleks Sierz identifies in his book on British Drama. Sierz argues that the popularity of In-Yer-Face theatre writers often clouds the merits of their texts. He uses Sarah Kane's popularity as well as McDonagh's as an example of playwrights whose content, although it had such shock value, was received at face value and associated with the persona of the writer as young and edgy. Kane felt this pressure and produced work under the pseudonym Marie Kelvedon. Only after her suicide did scholarly discussion of *4.48 Psychosis* and other texts result in an approach from different perspectives. McDonagh is popularly described as the "bad boy of British theatre" (Sierz, 2001, p. 219). He is famously known for getting drunk and telling Sean Connery to "fuck off". Criticism of the

well-dressed image which McDonagh puts forward, one which is perpetuated by the media, fuels Evans' review with terms like: "fashionable wag" and "Hollywood big-wig" (2018).

Criticism appears to take the representation of characters literally, suggesting that the representations of the historical figures in the play are meant to be taken to heart. Matt Trueman, reviewing for the website *Variety*, remarks of Hans Christian Andersen: "Whitewashed as his legacy has been, it's unlikely he kept a pygmy woman prisoner in a mahogany box, passing her words off as his own" (2018). The disruption of such nostalgic and sentimental figures like Andersen and Dickens irks numerous critics. Trueman struggles to hide his disappointment at the representation of Dickens: "[Dickens] becomes a boorish playboy with his own pygmy proxy" (2018); and speaks of McDonagh's "airhead Andersen" characterisation with thinly veiled disdain. Lloyd Evans similarly disagrees with this representation, calling it a "silly, mean-spirited skit about Hans Christian Andersen" (2018). In a vein similar to Luckhurst's criticism of *The Lieutenant*, Trueman at once recognises the key theme McDonagh is interrogating within an odd scenario, yet continues to take the representation at face value.

Reading McDonagh's work this way preempts thoughtful consideration of its themes. It is only after the curtain falls that the audience is able to intellectualise the In-Yer-Face "shock tactics" of what they have seen. The answer lies not in the shocking representation of Andersen's vulgar cruelty or Dickens' sleezy and angry temperament; rather, it is the aftertaste of what that phenomenon leaves us with. The same approach should be made with the graphic instances of violence which occur in the play; although they are explicit, they have a point. Again, the representation of such figures as buffoons, akin to Luckhurst's disagreement of representing Irish paramilitaries as "out and out psychopaths" (Luckhurst, 2004, p. 36), appears to frustrate critics who place an expectation, an onus of accurate representation, on McDonagh.

Nevertheless, critics seem determined to find within the play a regression of sorts by McDonagh to employ the basest violence and vulgarity for cheap laughs. Some of the lines are particularly vulgar and seem racist. Lloyd Evans takes particular issue with the line “You’re like a tinier Tiny Tim! But African and not as funny.” (McDonagh, 2018, p. 8). Instead of seeing the character as someone who regards jokes like these as funny, Evans equates the racist remarks of characters with McDonagh having poor taste in humour; it is as though the audience is incapable of recognizing the type of character from which these racist remarks are being made. He contends that:

This gag, which typifies the show’s level of humour, rests on two assumptions. First, the audience will consider a disabled child such as Tiny Tim funny. Second, they will regard another invalid as a less fertile source of mirth because she’s Congolese. These are very grating, puerile sentiments. Which of us believes, as McDonagh appears to, that every instance of human adversity, penury or impairment has been laid on by providence to keep us amused in our theatres? (Evans, 2018).

Thematically, *Dark Matter* concerns itself with aspects of post-colonial theory, such as the exploitation of culture and the persistent attempt to control history through whitewashing. *Dark Matter* also concerns itself with the origin of inspiration. Evans considers the play “an attempt to parrot the orthodoxy that the wealth of Europe is the plunder of a superior culture in Africa.” (2018). He dismisses such a suggestion by McDonagh as “bleak, childish frivolity”. Ian Shuttleworth also appears frustrated with the play’s vague and scattershot approach to tackling any theme in depth:

I could spend day and night training a pneumatic drill on Martin McDonagh's 80-minute play and still not be sure I'd hit any vein of reliable meaning. It's often about

creativity and its links to the shadows, sometimes more broadly about human nature itself, periodically about race and the still largely ignored massacres by the Belgians in the then-Congo Free State in the late 19th century. (2018).

Fergus Morgan agrees: “there’s plenty of scope for an interrogation of colonialism, racism, and the authenticity of authorship—but all that is entirely squandered, thanks to a bewildering plot that goes both nowhere and all over the place at the same time” (2018).

Narrative Structure

What is apparent from reviews is critics’ need for a more detailed interrogation of the post-colonial themes described above and tackled within a coherent theatricality. The narrative structure of *Dark Matter* is disjointed compared with previous trilogies; Joan Fitzpatrick Dean reminds us that these trilogies are “chronological, suspense-driven narrative[s] through a representational dramaturgy” (2007, p. 31). Instead, *Dark Matter* delivers a fragmented, postmodern, discontinuous and disturbed set of vignettes. This is best demonstrated by the pendulum-like swing of the box Marjory is contained in as the play opens: “A 3 foot by 3 foot mahogany box... swings back and forth from left to right, but does so **as if in slow motion**” (McDonagh, 2018, p. 1, emphasis in original). With this image, McDonagh conveys that the tick of time within this universe is disturbed. This prepares the audience for accepting the time

travel which Marjory has already been on, and the time travel which Barry and Dirk (the Red Men) do so that they may kill Marjory.



Figure 9

The narrative in *Dark Matter* is essentially two strands of story woven together. One follows Marjory's eventual return to agency in order to alter future events; the other follows Hans Christian Andersen's journey to Dickens and eventual relinquishing of his control over Marjory. Act Two of the play jumps between Andersen at Dickens' home and Marjory back in Andersen's attic, with each scene changing perspective. This serves to build suspense in the narrative; as Andersen discovers at the close of Scene Ten that there are machine-guns hidden within the concertinas Ogechi obtained, the audience is promptly shown the result of this the moment we return to Marjory in Scene Eleven.

From a post-modern perspective, *Dark Matter* is in some ways a reimagining of the 1984 classic film *The Terminator*. McDonagh has again injected a colonial history with reference to pop-culture subtly within the structure of the narrative. In *The Terminator*, a cyborg assassin is sent back in time to murder a woman named Sarah Connor who, in the future, will give birth to the savior of mankind. In *Dark Matter*, Dirk and Barry chase Marjory back in time because she

murders them in the future and is also a key figure in fighting the devastation of the Congolese in the Congo.

The play is infused with intertextuality and meta-theatricality; the text refers to some of Hans Christian Andersen's actual works, such as *The Little Mermaid*, and the characters Marjory and Andersen discuss the darker aspects of this story—in some respects alluding to the dark nature of the story they themselves are in. Andersen encourages Marjory to write stories that are more “upbeat” (9). This is an example of McDonagh commenting on the anxiety of the audience, who may be anticipating the violence McDonagh is known for. Andersen is commenting on the script itself as a critic of McDonagh's reputation for dark stories and is also actualising the worried voice of the audience who are anticipating the “dark matter” the play is teasing them with. The play also uses the audience's knowledge of Dickensian and Andersen's literary history to rig jokes for those familiar with classic texts such as Dickens' “medium-sized expectations” (40). Upon being gunned down by Marjory, Barry remarks “Well *that* was a bit of a surprise!” (24, emphasis in original). Upon unexpectedly meeting her sister at the beginning of Act Two, Marjory remarks: “Oh Jesus, it's a dream sequence” (25). This quickly reacquaints the audience, who have been at intermission, with the self-aware, parodical nature of the show they are watching.

In *The Lieutenant*, characters lack a fully realised humanity, but *Dark Matter* is inhabited by characters who are completely self-aware. Rather, they are hyper-aware of the theatrical construction they find themselves in. McDonagh's insertion of himself and the audience into the script functions primarily for comedic purposes; the characters undermine and comment on the situations they find themselves in, highlighting the theatrical artificiality of the text in order to knowingly nod towards the audience. Henry Hitchings argues that these meta-theatrical comments inhibit the reception of McDonagh's script: “Whereas in the past his hallmark has

been the freshness of his vision, here he seems to be parodying his own pitiless, no-filter style,” (2018). He concludes that none of these elements “cut deep” (2018). McDonagh both admits the challenge he has set for himself by opening with such a setting—it better be an impressive script to progress such a thematically challenging play: “Maybe you’re going to write your way out of it? (*Pause*) Yeah, that’s it. Maybe you’re going to write your way out of it.” (McDonagh, 2018, p. 2, emphasis in original).

Post-Colonial Perspective

The backdrop of this play involves the colonial position of Belgium over its colony in the Congo, then called the Congo Free State. This colony, as many were, was exploited for its wealth and resources in order to enrich the West. *Dark Matter* is undoubtedly a divisive and contentious script, but what occurred historically is even more outrageous. From 1877–1908, the Congolese people lived under the rule of King Leopold II of Belgium, with the area being known as the Congo Free State. Colonialism, as we have discussed, is centred on the acquisition of land and resources. King Leopold II promptly acquired the rights to the Congo, making it his private property in 1885. Having this settled, Leopold began exporting natural resources from the colony; of these, rubber was the primary asset he sought to obtain due to the booming demand for tyres from the automobile industry. To enforce this rubber quota, the military were called in and enforced a policy of cutting off limbs if rubber quotas from villages and communities were not met. A severed limb handed into a superior was a proof of death certificate; they had done their job and they had not wasted ammunition. Ammunition was a valuable resource, and a severed hand was proof of a successful kill. As the rubber quota continued to be increased beyond what villages could realistically harvest, the demand for limbs increased as accountability for the military enforcing such a quota. This saw a marked increase in brutality—dismemberment and mutilation became commonplace and a demand for

human limbs as a currency accelerated. Instead of reporting the failed rubber quotas to their superiors, lower-ranking military personnel delivered baskets of severed hands and limbs as proof of punishment. This circumnavigated their responsibility to enforce the quota; if it was not met, the military instead simply proved that punishment (as per their job) was conducted and ammunition they had been provided from Europe had not been wasted.

The result of this exploitation of the Congo was an estimated ten million deaths of the indigenous Congolese people. King Leopold II obtained an incredible amount of wealth for Belgium, but chiefly for his own private interests. What is less known is that Denmark also participated in this atrocity alongside King Leopold II. McDonagh uses pre-recorded narration and the meta-theatrical address of characters in *Dark Matter* to critique the nineteenth century literary legacy of Denmark and England. He criticises their lack of apology for their colonial pasts. Using Andersen and Dickens and the idea of the English Christmas, England and Denmark literally wrote themselves clear of their colonial atrocities. Arguably, this Danish period is remembered for Hans Christian Andersen more than it is Denmark's participation in the atrocities which occurred in the Congo. McDonagh is using both writers as signposts for an era that popularly remembers such cultural figures rather than the expansive and aggressive colonial history they wrote within. The entrance to Copenhagen harbour in Denmark greets boats with a statue of Andersen's little mermaid. Belgium still has numerous statues of King Leopold II erected in various locations. The latter statues have come under criticism in recent years for standing as monuments to a king who privatised a country and enabled a genocide of the Congolese to advance his own wealth. In 2004 the statue overlooking Ostend's seafront was vandalised; one of the Congolese slaves depicted in the statue had its hand hacksawed off. Criticism towards Denmark, however, is less apparent. Because of this, McDonagh compares their literary history to England, which is infamous for its numerous imperialist conquests and atrocities in numerous countries. Through this comparison, McDonagh reveals that both writers

have colonial “skeletons” in their closets; Denmark is as bad as England in its persistent refusal to acknowledge its imperialism.

The oppressed reclaiming their own voice is a clear theme within McDonagh’s script. As Barry lies dying from gunshot wounds, he addresses Marjory using her slave name. Marjory responds: “My name’s M’bute, cunt.” (42) She then proceeds to kick him in the head, killing him. Marjory (her name in the script) also demands this of Andersen when he farewells her, he obliges, and calls her M’bute Masakele, to which she replies: “It wasn’t *that* fucking hard, was it?” (48, emphasis in original). The post-colonial viewpoint is apparent; the acknowledgement of their involvement in injustices should not be a difficult thing for governments with imperialist histories, and yet, no acknowledgement or formal apology has ever been issued by Denmark or Belgium. Marjory’s demand for her birth name to be recognised represents the same demand by the Congolese; McDonagh employs Andersen as a representative Danish oppressor who recognises her birth name and respects her agency and identity in his own limited way.

Dark Matter is McDonagh’s attempt at a commemoration to an event that is largely removed from popular memory. Marjory says: “I ain’t seen a statue to a pygmy in a coon’s age.” (48). I argue that McDonagh’s play is such a statue. Additionally, the play is an unwelcome monument and broadcast of Denmark’s participation in the massacre. The return of agency to that of the oppressed and her subsequent exit to rewrite history and enact revenge on the those who have taken control of history, the better to conceal their nefarious imperialism, is Marjory’s story in *Dark Matter*. The play is essentially the prologue for a classic “revenge plot”, one which involves Marjory going to the Congo to destroy those who intend to harm her culture and people.

In the closing pages of the script, McDonagh makes his position apparent on the Congolese genocide: “Ten million people...It’ll probably define the century” (46), to which Marjory replies, “It won’t”. To McDonagh, this atrocity deserves to be remembered more than it has been—after all, such a loss of life exceeds the Jewish Holocaust. However, near the end of the play Marjory addresses the audience, saying: “The story isn’t over yet. Is it, boys?” (49), before winking and exiting. McDonagh issues this line as a challenge for the audience; although this narrative is over, emancipation of colonial subjects is a project that is largely unresolved. From a post-colonial perspective, McDonagh is suggesting that this specific narrative from history needs to be retold and is still unfolding in the present day; although McDonagh does not believe it was an event that defined the century, he believes the larger narrative of violence within imperialism should be remembered and interrogated.

Nineteenth Century Sentimentality

Dark Matter draws attention to numerous uncomfortable truths from the nineteenth century. What is popularly celebrated from this period is the literary achievements of Charles Dickens and Hans Christian Andersen. Dickens essentially sentimentalised nineteenth century life. In this section I wish to briefly define what that sentimentality is. Doing this will help to illuminate the colonial mindset of evasion and denial which McDonagh’s play functions to highlight and undo. Once an understanding of this is clarified, I will then consider how violence functions to expose the imperialist sentimentality of both writers by highlighting the presence of violence in and around their works.

Dickensian sentimentality is part of and attributed to Victorian sentimentality of the 1800s. Purton (2012) defines a polarised system which operates within sentimental literature of the period as heart versus head. The heart rules the head in Dickensian sentimentality; the head representing industrialisation, science and mechanisation. Regardless of industrialisation,

slavery, the exploitation of colonies and the violence in India, Ireland and Africa, Dickensian sentimentality describes the English as possessing insurmountable patience, virtue and compassion. Dickens' use of sentiment functions as a panacea for lower middle-class self-improvement. This distinctly 'English' and conservative way of life perpetuated in Dickens' writings was primarily drawn from earlier eighteenth century romanticism ideals (Purton, 2012). Heart versus head defines the structures and plots of Dickens' novels: 'feeling' characters are kept apart from the plotters and schemers that inhabit the darker corners of the Dickensian world.

In Dickensian sentimentality, the heart wins over the head; characters triumph due to utilising good will and kindness towards others. Dickensian sentimentality features numerous tropes, such as tearful, but virtuous heroes and heroines; benevolent guardian figures who guide lost 'children'; and the privileging of pity and self-denial over calculating logic and reason. Characters in Dickens' texts are extremely committed to the notion of being kind and generous; the transformation of Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* proves a good example. Confronted with the prospect of Tiny Tim dying, Scrooge experiences a change of heart. Pip the orphan is similarly elevated to a substantial figure by the end of *Great Expectations* due to kindness and Dickensian sentimentality. Often using children, Dickens encouraged English social strata to move closer, as the well-to-do upper class could assist the lower class, and in turn, raise England to greater heights.

Fred Kaplan's *Sacred Tears* is also useful in understanding Victorian sentimentality. Using Dickens as an example, he argues that the Victorians gained from Dickens a theory of human nature, a belief in the innateness of benevolent moral instincts. He argues that sentiment emerged as a set of shared moral feelings in opposition to both scientific realism and the more ego-driven energies of Romanticism (2013). The success of Dickens' novels can be traced to

this sentimentality—they reassured the emerging middleclass of a distinctly rosy and Christian English experience.

Hans Christian Andersen is tied to this sentimentality; Dickens' Danish counterpart, Andersen is popularly remembered with such reverence and used similar ideals in his fiction. Jackie Wullschläger asserts that Andersen's texts "have become culturally embedded in the West's collective consciousness, readily accessible to children, but presenting lessons of virtue and resilience in the face of adversity for mature readers as well." (2002). There exists beneath both authors' sentiments an undercurrent of historical violence their respective countries committed against many nations during this period. The meeting of both Andersen and Dickens proves interesting when considering nineteenth century sentimentality. McDonagh takes the real historical event of Dickens meeting Andersen. The use of both writers in *Dark Matter* is deliberate; both made large amounts of money through exploiting sentimentality in their work. Andersen achieved this by titillating readers' childhood fascination with violence and the uncanny. McDonagh places these two characters in a host-guest situation; a normal setting. What results from this normal situation is violence—hidden within Dickens' closet is the literal skeleton of Ogechi, which he refuses to tell Andersen before Dickens' wife, Catherine, reveals this information to the Danish writer. Attempting to bridge the language barrier between them, Andersen patronizingly remarks, "Skeleton? From da cupboard?" (McDonagh, 2018, p. 39). Dickens recognises there is "probably a joke in there somewhere" (40), however he cannot work out what it is because that was Ogechi's job as his "pygmy in a box". This demonstrates that both writers are complicit in the atrocities committed by their countries; McDonagh reveals both have captive indigenous people hidden beneath their constructed rosy exterior. This draws similarities to the literary style both authors wrote within, and how an emphasis was placed on sentimentality and the atrocities of imperialism were obscured. Their literary achievements are

founded upon and are largely in ignorance of greater, terrible historical events that damage the image of colonial England and Denmark.

Violence Within the Literary History

Both Andersen and Dickens wrote within a literary period surrounded by colonial violence. It is no surprise, then, that both Dickens' novels and Andersen's are littered with subtle accounts of dismemberment, cruelty and wickedness. McDonagh is undoubtedly aware of these eerie similarities the texts bear to colonial atrocities of the period. When read from a post-colonial perspective, *The Little Mermaid* bears many similarities to *Dark Matter*. I wish to briefly consider Andersen's text *The Little Mermaid*, because the violence present in the text and certain events which occur reveal an attitude towards 'otherness'. This attitude towards otherness also occurs in Andersen's treatment of Marjory in *Dark Matter*.

The Disney film of the same name popularised Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* for a contemporary audience in 1989, with a narrative more suited to children than the original text. In the original text, Ariel wishes to live on land with the prince she has saved from drowning in a storm, but in order to achieve this she must undergo a ritual that removes her fish tail and replaces it with a pair of legs. The necessary sacrifice for this ritual is having her tongue removed. Having attained human legs (that constantly cause her great pain) at the price of her voice, she approaches the prince only to be declined; he believes that she is dumb and mute. Ariel is then forced to live out her life on land and watch the prince marry another. This is an abysmally dark 'children's story'.

The post-colonial consideration of *The Little Mermaid* reveals that the relationship between Ariel and the prince is essentially the coloniser and the colonised. The research of Homi K. Bhabha regarding the stereotyping, 'otherness' and exoticisation of 'others' is useful here. Bhabha considers stereotyping: "knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is

always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (2004, p. 95). Stereotyping is a system of representation—it categorises large groups of people, whether correct or not. The intention of this in colonialism is to ‘other’ the conquered society—to denote their values, beliefs and morals as inferior. Related to this is fetishism, or exoticisation. Exoticisation in post-colonial discourse refers to the over emphasis of attributes (oftentimes physical) of the colonised subject. To relate this to *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel’s strange fragility and her exceptional dancing and muteness are exoticised aspects of character and are used to position her as simultaneously fascinating, yet inferior to the Prince and his monarchy. Ariel must dismember herself and sacrifice her agency; removing her tongue means losing her voice and her ability to be understood. Even then, Ariel is kept by the prince’s side as an oddity from the sea. She is selected to entertain him through dancing, and in silence she watches the prince marry someone else. Her position in the Prince’s household at the end of the text means she is exoticised. She is neither fully accepted nor rejected by the monarchy she lives under. In much the same way, Marjory is trapped in a box; she is an exoticised creature, reduced to an oddity in an attic full of marionette dolls. However, she is kept alive for the stories she produces in much the same way as Ariel is for her dancing and captivating, fragile appearance. McDonagh’s inclusion of *The Little Mermaid* in Scene Two highlights the amount of colonial violence present in the original stories—there is the threat of death, dismemberment and excruciating pain at different points of the story. In addition to this, it is evident the story features a similar exoticisation of the main character in a manner like Marjory’s treatment in *Dark Matter*. The inclusion of Andersen’s text *The Little Mermaid* is, from this perspective, a deliberate choice by McDonagh.

Andersen’s attitude towards the violence in *The Little Mermaid* also exposes it to post-colonial critique; specifically, the sanitisation of the violence which occurred in the Congo Free State. The Congolese were subjected to horror, yet what has been immortalised from this period is

children's stories. In Scene Two, Hans expresses his surprise towards the inclusion of violence in *The Little Mermaid*:

HANS: For small normal children might get frightened of that savage image and small normal children are the lifeblood of Denmark and my core fanbase so, y'know? Lovely Edvard Collin? Where was I?

EDVARD: The little mermaid has refused to kill the prince and now it appears that she may die...

HANS: Die? Really? (3)

Upon returning home to Marjory, Andersen reiterates this dislike: "but seriously, send 'em to beddy-byes smiling. Like in real life." (6). Andersen demonstrates a wish to remove the violence present in a story about colonial subjugation and sacrifice. He requests Marjory write more "upbeat" (9) stories numerous times throughout the script. The "dark matter" in Andersen's stories comes from his colonial subject expressing her situation through the literature, something which Andersen is determined to obscure. This is another example of *Dark Matter* illuminating the similarities between the historical violence of imperialism in the Congo and the subtle presence of violence within the literary output of the time. McDonagh is positing imperialist brutality within a normal setting, thereby tying it to Andersen and Dickens' creative inspiration in order to draw out this similarity.

McDonagh also highlights the glorification by imperialist countries of certain kinds of violence and the erasure and denunciation of other forms. Andersen asserts that the violence in *The Little Mermaid* should be altered for public consumption, yet privately indulges in his own violence by making Marjory's box smaller. The script is explicit about Andersen's enjoyment: "(gleefully) You'll get crushed to bits if we do this too many times!" (8, emphasis in original).

The forced adoption of Western morals and religious beliefs in colonial countries is hypocritical because the imperialist force imposing this does so with violence and exploitation; values which are not officially acceptable in the coloniser's society.

Violence in the Script

Violence operates in *Dark Matter* in numerous forms, as it does in *The Lieutenant* to illuminate its presence within a colonial context. The first physical instance of violence in the script occurs when Andersen kills the reporter with the axe. It is an immense blow, which sends him "slumping down, bleeding" (20). Comically, the Press Man continues to partake in conversation with both Andersen and Marjory, despite his injury; he repeatedly chimes in, "I'm bleeding!" (21). After informing Marjory and Andersen that the Red Men tipped him off as to Andersen's secret, he then notifies Marjory that her sister is with Charles Dickens and is also trapped in a box. Andersen promptly slits the Press Man's throat with the axe and kills him. The post-colonial perspective is clear when observing this violence; media (represented by the Press Man) wishing to expose colonial atrocities are quickly quashed. Andersen silences the Press Man before Marjory learns too much about Ogechi. Violence in this instance operates as a tool of the oppressor.

The next occurrence of violence comes much later in Scene Eleven, when Marjory kills the Red Men with the machine gun concealed in the "haunted concertina". Using the most elaborate description seen in the script, aside from the opening set description, Marjory guns down the men, which: "*tears the Belgians to horrifying pieces, bloody squibs bursting out of them, Peckinpah-like in their awful death dance, arterial spray splattering the walls behind them, the worst thing that's ever been seen on the London stage, till they finally collapse to the blood-strewn floor in clumpen fucked-up heaps and, as they're lying there, Marjory gives them another burst of machine gun fire for good measure.*" (42, emphasis in original). This moment

is a climax of Marjory's return to agency; the tool of the oppressor has been appropriated by her to destroy the Belgian antagonists and to gain freedom. Again, this violence concerns *Dark Matter*'s colonial context; the Belgian characters have received a punishment which they were hoping to avoid in the future, something which was coming to them.

Phenomenological Considerations

A phenomenological approach to *Dark Matter* reveals that by exposing the post-colonial considerations of the text using theatre affords McDonagh a potentially greater impact on his audience. Due to the shared bodied spatiality of the theatrical environment, audience members experience the imprisonment of Marjory sensorially. The anxieties felt from the knowledge that an actor is genuinely suspended in a box hanging from the ceiling is powerful. This claustrophobic representation of Marjory's subjugation creates an anxiety; subtly, this aligns the audience with Marjory—the audience wants her discomfort to be alleviated. Marjory is also missing a foot, and the pain and inconvenience of this is demonstrated when she is let out of the box by Andersen in Scene Five.



Figure 10

The destruction of the Belgian Red Men also creates a de-edifying experience for the audience and violence registers on the body of the spectator in a way that is unusual. Considering the reactions of spectators in *The Lieutenant*, one way to react to violence is to giggle nervously, another is shock and subsequent refusal to be taken by it. There is a range of reactions that might present themselves depending on the performance and the subjectivity of the spectator, but there are still insights to be gained from considering *Dark Matter* phenomenologically. The negative reviews of *Dark Matter* consistently seem to be by critics marshalling a whole swath of moral and ethical truisms—perhaps in order to try to remove themselves from what they are seeing. The negative reviews are a constant attempt to intellectualise and criticise the weak thematic cornerstones of *Dark Matter* instead of considering the effect the play’s use of violence had on them. Do we consider Marjory’s extreme use of violence justified? Has their relationship with colonial violence been altered by witnessing a graphic on-stage machine-gunning?

Figure 11



Justification of Violence

As with *The Lieutenant*, *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter* employs violence as a tool for characters to achieve what they want. Because of this, the justifications for using violence by certain characters can be considered. The violence perpetrated by the Marjory in killing the Red Men can arguably be justified in the theatrical fiction because it gives her a chance to rewrite history; however, the voracity of the assault from a phenomenological perspective complicates this justification. Marjory argues that “a coupla hundred dead Belgians. Everyone shuts the fuck up and goes home” (47) is a necessary sacrifice in order to save her race, and in this respect violence operates as a necessary violence which saves ten million innocent Congolese people in this fictional rewrite of history. This bears similarity to Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglorious Basterds*, which ends with American soldiers murdering Hitler and his elite cohort; the lives of millions are saved at the expense of the graphic death of a few. This return of agency is post-colonial in nature and is deepened by the fact Marjory herself is already the writer of stories, albeit for a white oppressor. The story she wishes to rewrite in the timeline of history is of far greater importance. Marjory uses violence to reclaim her agency, the authorship of her own story. Although this story is an incredibly dark one, unlike the children’s stories written for Andersen, this is one she is determined to rewrite as upbeat.

The justification of Andersen’s dismemberment of Marjory is a violence which is challenged in the closing scene of *Dark Matter*. Andersen considers his dismemberment of Marjory to be kind in comparison to Dickens’ mutilation of Ogechi. He suggests his level of mutilation could have been worse, comparing it with Dickens’ violence against Ogechi: “at least I didn’t take your foot *and* your hand off.” (44, emphasis in original). Marjory corrects him and reveals this was not Dickens’ doing but occurred when her sister lived in the Congo in the future.

McDonagh equates Andersen's violence with that of the violence which occurred in the colonial atrocity. This serves to implicate Andersen, and thus Denmark, with the colonial violence it has attempted to keep hidden. Through a flawed comparison to "greater violence", Andersen implicates himself, revealing that he is partaking in the same kind of dismemberment. As Christy does with Oliver Cromwell in *The Lieutenant*, Andersen attempts to justify his act of violence by comparing it with one of greater magnitude. Andersen's argument is that a certain amount of dismemberment is not as bad as an orchestrated genocidal massacre. This demonstrates that Andersen possesses a morality which places acts of violence according to their severity; he considers a certain level of dismemberment acceptable. Whilst disagreeing with this, the audience may consider the violence Marjory intends to inflict on the Belgians justified, thereby aligning themselves with the same justifications used by Andersen—comparing violence to greater acts of violence in order to minimise and justify the act. The effect of this is that it exposes the flawed justifications under which violence operates. As discussed in Chapter One, in order to establish justice in the Congo, Marjory must utilise "lawful" violence to establish justice over what she considers "unlawful" violence. Her tool though, is nonetheless one of violence.

Andersen's ability to inflict violence on Marjory is limited only because of her usefulness as a writer and is another example of McDonagh's violence mimicking attitudes present in colonial violence. Andersen argues that his violence (although essentially the same as Dickens') is not as bad because of its minor change in severity—he has only removed Marjory's foot and not her hand. However, Andersen would probably enact this greater violence if he knew it would not impede his own prosperity. Marjory's hands are essential for her continued success as Andersen's ghost writer. For the oppressor to continue exploiting the cultural production of the oppressed, Andersen must not dismember her purely out of necessity. If he were to remove Marjory's hand in an act of violence, he could potentially compromise his successful

exploitation of Marjory as a literary resource. Simultaneously, Andersen denounces greater violence and uses it to justify and manipulate his own to be perceived as merciful. Like colonial exploitation, Andersen's mercy is revealed as a simple colonial necessity based in selfish desire. However, there is a distinctive Stockholm syndrome quality to their relationship; the two seem to get along despite the fact Andersen has imprisoned and mutilated Marjory. The normalisation of cruelty and violence can be witnessed between Marjory and Andersen's relationship in this respect.

McDonagh's characterisation of Andersen also demonstrates imperialist strategies of whitewashing and altering historical events. Andersen is wilfully blind to the atrocities as well as his complicity within them when confronted in person. In Scene Two, he chooses to ignore the Red Men when they arrive at his public reading of *The Little Mermaid*. Later in Scene Three, when the subject is broached by Marjory, he pretends the sighting of the blood-covered Belgian men did not happen. Andersen even goes as far as suggesting they are covered not in blood, but in jam: "Perhaps it's jam. That'd be sticky" (3). Andersen's white-washing, or rather, 'jam-washing' of the atrocities and violence is a refusal to acknowledge the confronting violence of colonialism. Rather than tackle the prospect of colonial violence, McDonagh has Andersen sugar-coat the violence to make it palatable for himself. When Andersen does accidentally let slip that he did see the Red Men, he relegates this to his own imagination and suggests that he is voicing a new idea for a book: "What blood-covered men?! Exactly! All part of a new story I am making up but which I will save for another day. 'The Blood-covered Men Who Came To Tea.'" (4). Andersen deals with the confrontation of colonial violence by fictionalising it in this example. A link can therefore be made to how Denmark also refused to acknowledge its involvement with this colonial violence, thereby removing itself from responsibility and guilt. Andersen also diverts attention from this topic when others, such as Marjory, confront him about it:

MARJORY: Of course it was blood. It was twenty-year-old Congo blood.

HANS: That doesn't sound very hygienic. (21)

McDonagh finally has Andersen admit this erasure of history as a tactic to the Press Man in Scene Six. Andersen argues that he co-writes with Marjory, his involvement being: "I change the bits I don't like and then erase all the rest from history. I'm more like a German Theatre Director. Or, y'know, a German generally." (21). Another example of this appears in Scene Three, where Andersen admits to changing the race of Ariel the mermaid to white, effectively demonstrating the whitewashing of colonial history: "'The Little Mermaid'. No colour specified. Which means she's white, so suck it up." (7). In the closing moment of the play, McDonagh leaves Andersen with the victims of this colonial violence: "*he surveys the room for a moment; the skeleton, the rotting Press Man, the dead Belgians and their bloodstained walls, the doorway that Marjory departed through.*" (49, emphasis in original). Because of his five-week stay with Dickens, the Press Man has decomposed. There are shell casings scattered across the floor, and bodies are strewn in bloody heaps. Andersen is finally confronted with the mounting number of corpses his colonial project is responsible for. They are the hidden atrocities behind his successful literary career; in an effort to continue exploiting Marjory, Andersen is in many ways responsible for the cadavers he finds himself surrounded by.

Closing Statements

The violence of *Dark Matter* operates in juxtaposition. It exposes the normalcy and airbrushing of colonial atrocities in the Congo. Whereas in *The Lieutenant*, violence is decoupled from sentiment and Irish paramilitary justifications of violence, *Dark Matter* juxtaposes violence with nineteenth century sentimentality. In the same way that McDonagh decouples violence from Irish republican sentimentality in *The Lieutenant*, *Dark Matter* decouples, rather, extracts and foregrounds, violence against its sentimental associations with Andersen and Dickens.

McDonagh exposes and foregrounds a violence that lies within this chapter of British and Danish literary history and which has remained relatively undiscussed. McDonagh exposes the way in which this middle-class culture functions through marketing and image and airbrushing violence from its imperial history. However, the justification of violence present in *Dark Matter* is susceptible to the same critical reading of violence in *The Lieutenant*; necessary violence is precisely that, depending on the logical justification. McDonagh involves the audience in this justification, thereby exposing how we also partake in this flawed operation.

Dark Matter's narrative is not a cohesive whole, but rather a disarray of vignettes that further unsettles an audience seeking catharsis and resolution. Within this, McDonagh highlights our indifferent attitude towards violence—we justify certain acts and denounce others. By establishing violence as normal within the creative workings of a beloved children's writer and as an essential part of the process by which the works are produced and plundered by an oppressor, McDonagh exposes our own attitude towards violence and the presence of colonial violence which has been normalised and ignored from this section of nineteenth century literary history. McDonagh is exposing the acculturation and ignorance of a violence that pervades not only this period of writing but the wider identity of the West. McDonagh has taken that normality and represented it on stage juxtaposed with violence; the interesting thing about this violence is that it has become so acculturated that is accepted as part of the scene. He is exposing this in *Dark Matter* and is challenging that acceptance. As seen by the criticism discussed in this chapter, this violence exposed in such a way is what shocks people; this is what leads to the negative reviews. This criticism reveals itself as an aversion to the truthfulness of the script.

Chapter Four: Language, Morality and Dismemberment

As evidenced, McDonagh employs violence liberally in both *The Lieutenant* and *Dark Matter*. Moreover, the criticism levelled at both plays over the years shows that this level of violence is unsettling and often misunderstood as indulgent and excessive. Many critics take the representation of characters at face value and consider the violence they enact to be McDonagh indulging himself with cheap and easy shock tactics. This chapter seeks to consider the other, subtler ways in which violence operates within the texts; chiefly through language and dismemberment. Consideration will also be made whether the violence employed in *Dark Matter* is as effective as *The Lieutenant*. Although both have characters who function immorally, *Dark Matter* lacks the tight farcical structure of *The Lieutenant*. This chapter will also reiterate the ideas of justified violence expressed in earlier chapters and expand on them.

Violence Functioning Under Flawed Morality

It is apparent that McDonagh remains interested in dramatizing the relationships between violent acts and their justifications. McDonagh causes characters to employ flawed morals to justify their violence. Lonergan reminds us that “characters apply unshakeable moral principles to immoral acts: his belief that murder is acceptable once the conditions under which it is carried out are ‘fair’...” (2012, p. 151). The navigation of this point of “fairness” of violence is something which recurs throughout McDonagh’s work; this fairness and judgement must come from the audience entering into a negotiation of what is and is not justice as they witness violence enacted in front of them. McDonagh’s characters demonstrate that “morality is an act of interpretation rather than a series of rules to be followed. The moral person must thus treat life like the audience at McDonagh’s film: we observe, we assess, we imagine—and then, we act.” (154). Nearly every character in McDonagh’s texts believes that their acts of cruelty and

violence are justified on moral grounds; however, these grounds, on close investigation, are completely bankrupt of any morality. McDonagh's characters also use religious concepts of morality when musing on violent acts. Much of this is evident in *In Bruges*. José Laners contends that:

McDonagh evokes traditional and religious legal concepts and systems of morality only to treat them ironically even as he approaches them nostalgically, and simultaneously makes us question whether what seemed like nostalgia was really meant to be taken as irony or what seemed to be ironic was really meant to be taken seriously. (2012, p. 178).

Laners speaks to an intentional muddying of such morals and justifications which McDonagh employs; he uses such concepts but then at once subverts them and places them in contexts which cause the audience to question their validity. For example, Ray is racked with guilt over his accidental murder of a child while he is carrying out the assassination of a priest in a church. The condemnation of this assassination and its religious significance is dismissed by Ray because the priest was a paedophile. However, he cannot forgive himself for the unprofessional and disastrous result of the assassination. Ray is filled with remorse, less for the murder of an innocent child and more for the fact that he used a gun that was too powerful at such a close range. Not long after, however, the film re-emphasises the significance of religious judgement and forgiveness; the shot goes from a flashback of Ray killing the boy in church (who is in line for confession) to a shot of Ray and Ken in the Groeninge Museum observing three paintings: "The Last Judgement" by Hieronymus Bosch, "The Judgement of Cambyses" by Gerard David and "De Gierigaard en de Dood" by Jan Provoost. All paintings convey judgement and damnation of humans by god. The hard cut from the deed Ray has committed, to his dwelling on religious depictions of judgement, shows McDonagh's preoccupation with violence,

judgement and the justifications surrounding it. McDonagh's interest in linking judgement with violence as well as his flexible use of religious concepts of judgement and forgiveness are demonstrated well here.

Returning to the outline of Benjamin and Bishop and Phillips' considerations of violence expressed in Chapter One, McDonagh creates environments for various types of violence to be expressed. *The Lieutenant* demonstrates that lawful violence can be so deemed depending on the justifications set down by the perpetrator. One such justification both Andersen and Christy use is to compare their violence with greater violence, thereby justifying theirs as lesser and necessary. However, *Dark Matter* shows us unlawful violence needs to be used against the lawful and sanctioned violence of the Congo, thereby complicating our disagreement with its employment in *The Lieutenant* by Christy, and by Andersen in *Dark Matter*. If the audience can function in the same way as the fictional characters they denounce, what does this say about the relationship between violence and justice? The answer for this remains in Bishop's and Phillips' ideas about violence—that no attempt to enforce justice can escape using violence. The only theoretical way is through non-violent action.

Language as Violence

McDonagh's use of dialogue to enact violence is a feature of all of his texts. *The Lieutenant* features a Hiberno-English dialect. Hiberno-English mashes standard English with traditional Gaelic structures. Donny and Davey blend words such as "poteen", "bitteen" and employ words such as "gasur" (boy) in their everyday speech. In the very language itself there is a conflict and merging of ideas which constitutes a violence. Additionally, this colourful and lyrical dialect obscures the darker content which most characters are discussing. Lonergan notes that "one of the most important features of McDonagh's work is its ambiguity; another is his ability

to show how everyday speech can not only obscure violence but also convey the threat of violence.” (2012, p. 147). Maria Doyle also recognises McDonagh’s ability to use language to mask violence. She states, “horrific threats are often perceived as part of the creative one-upmanship that enlivens the characters’ verbal sparring” (2007, p. 95). William Boles echoes this: “spectators, engrossed in laughter, miss the sinister overtones of these conversations” (1999, p. 129). Because of the threat of violence in the dialogue, McDonagh hides threats of physical violence in plain sight; the audience are placated with descriptions and threats of grandiose violence, and because these are comically delivered, we miss the genuine threat these remarks carry.

As well as hiding threats of violence within dialogue, McDonagh juxtaposes trivial and polite language against acts of violence. Doyle argues that the action in *The Lieutenant* is enhanced by “overlaying a seemingly trivial spoken dialogue with a performed action calculated to disturb us.” (2007, p. 103). This is demonstrated in many instances, such as when Padraic talks to his dad, instructing him to care for the poorly Wee Thomas whilst James Hanley is strung upside down in the background. *Dark Matter* features Andersen talking about the merits of children’s stories as he measures the box Marjory is trapped in; his intention being periodically to make it one inch smaller until she is eventually “crushed to bits...” (McDonagh, 2018, p. 8). The triviality of this dialogue is comedic, and thus lulls the viewer into thinking it will remain as threatened violence. The fact we have been forewarned using dialogue and language enhances McDonagh’s “shock tactic”, as described by Sierz. We are surprised when the threatened violence is brought into reality; we disbelieved the violence which was threatened, and are now in shock as the promise is made good in front of us.

Within both texts, McDonagh also uses repetition in language as a form of violence. José Laners remarks that “the instability of meaning also means characters feel the need to keep

qualifying their utterances...” (2012, p. 167). An example of this can be seen in *The Lieutenant*, wherein Padraic says, “You wouldn’t be killing a fella in front of his dad now would ya?” to which Brendan replies, “You’re behind your dad,” Padraic: “It’s the *principle*, I’m saying, ya thick, Brendan.” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 46, emphasis in original). This is predominantly a post-modern consideration, as the language of the characters is no longer sufficient to portray meaning. This is also a type of violence—the power of language is being stripped away and taken at a base understanding. Language no longer works adequately to convey the meaning the characters intend; everything is misinterpreted, sparking arguments and potential paths towards violence.

McDonagh also builds tension using repetition and often releases this tension with an act of violence. An example of this lies in Scene Five of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, where the repetitive verbal altercation between Christy and Brendan about Karl Marx and “cat battering” boils into a standoff. This scene prepares the audience for the ways the moral arguments of the characters become mired in verbal exchanges (no matter their logical fallacies) and how they will lead to violent outbursts. In Scene Five, Christy and Brendan ping-pong their dialogue between “was it Marx” and “it wasn’t Marx” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 28) multiple times as their argument develops in tension but fails to develop in articulation. Christy and Joey also repeat phrases; the accusation of who is or who is not guilty of “cat battering” is tossed backwards and forwards. Christy and Joey argue for and against “battering cats” as a justified means to an end. Because the argument is unfounded, it linguistically fails to develop beyond a basic language of labelling and name calling. Again, this argument builds tension but does not develop intellectually; the pair’s anger is released when they draw guns to threaten one another. This type of dialogue is like the Greek stichomythia, a technique used in Greek chorus which repeats lines and half lines in order to develop tension. In Greek tragedy this creates a sense of

foreboding, but in McDonagh's text the inane repetition heightens absurdity. It also points out the failure of the limited language resources possessed by the farcical characters. An example of this occurring in *Dark Matter* is in Scene Eight, where Andersen visits Dickens in his home. Andersen fails to understand anything Dickens says, and constantly repeats phrases back to him in a patronising manner. Dickens becomes increasingly frustrated at this; violence in language builds tension for the purpose of comedy in this scenario.

Violence in language is also expressed in *The Lieutenant* using the word "feck". For Catholics, there are venial sins and mortal sins. The use of profanities in speech is considered a venial sin, whereas the use of sexually explicit words in speech is considered a mortal sin. As such, "feck" rather than "fuck" was employed in Ireland as a way of avoiding mortal sin. McDonagh employs this through the Hiberno-English dialect in the play. Padraic and others use "feck" constantly. If "feck" is an attempt to avoid a mortal sin by merely changing a vowel, and the subtext is that it actually means fuck, the repeated use of the sanitised word draws attention to both the violence done to the English language and the violence of the act the word describes.

Comparison of the Justifications for Violence

Comparing how characters justify violence in each play helps to clarify how violence operates and whether this dramatisation of violence is effective. Violence in *Dark Matter* is something enacted on the oppressed, but it is then appropriated by Marjory as a tool to regain her freedom. This is an arguably justified use of violence to prevent further violence. In *The Lieutenant* however, violence is easily condemned by the audience; we renounce the senseless killings we witness and are unable to side with anyone who enacts violence because their justifications are nonsensical. Our relationship with the justification of violence is not as complicated in *Dark Matter*. Violence is enacted by Marjory against the two "Red Men" who are sent from the

future to kill her; her machine-gunning both is the climax of her return to agency and shows she owns her story. This violence is a shock tactic by McDonagh; it is an unexpected twist when the protagonist Marjory has been condemned to death. In addition to this on-stage violence being unexpected, this act of violence is justified from our perspective, as it liberates Marjory from an oppression which is cruel and unjust. Her violence is also pushed further into being considered “justified” by the audience as it is a necessary means to an end—the end being preventing the deaths of millions of Congolese in a future colonial atrocity.

The violence in *Dark Matter* both oppresses and enables a reclamation of Marjory’s power, but it lacks the moral ambiguity present in McDonagh’s *The Lieutenant*. Lonergan contends that McDonagh uses ambiguity in his characters’ intentions and language to explore specific forms of morality. In *The Lieutenant*, morality is completely nonsensical and decouples violent acts from their Irish paramilitary rhetoric and doctrine. Using language, characters manipulate and endlessly justify their acts. Because *Dark Matter*’s violence operates to emancipate the main protagonist who demonstrates solid morals, it lacks the need for consideration by the audience about whether such violence is justified. McDonagh returns agency to the colonial subject by allowing her to rewrite history and prevent the massacre of millions of Congolese through means of time travel. While this is outlandish and proves to be a satisfying sequence of events to watch, the skewed morality that is present in *The Lieutenant* is somewhat absent from this final action. The justifications for such violence are clear—Andersen is a cruel oppressor and Marjory deserves to enact vengeance because of what has been done (what will be done) to her people. Additionally, the “Red Men” she must kill in order to fulfil this wish are poorly fleshed out characters. They are blatant antagonists; murderous goons who have come from the future Free Congo State and are covered in blood, which suggests they have been murdering innocent

Congolese. This simplification of the moral ambiguity McDonagh features in *The Lieutenant* is potentially another cause of the mixed reviews *Dark Matter* has received.

Nonetheless, McDonagh successfully attacks and decouples violence from its sentimental origins in both plays. Aleks Sierz has a telling observation of what purpose the violence serves in McDonagh's hugely successful *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Sierz' short chapter on McDonagh focuses solely on *Beauty Queen*, with a minor consideration for *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. Crucially though, Sierz provides an insightful revelation on what McDonagh appears to target in his work:

...he offers a method of attacking nostalgia that applies not just to Ireland, but to any nation's culture. A country, he implies, can only prepare for the twenty first century by breaking with the cultural myths of its past. (2001, p. 225).

He continues, "McDonagh attacks the cultural images of a quaint 'old country'" (225). Considering this, both *Dark Matter* and *The Lieutenant* are attacking the quaint images of both Ireland and the imperial legacy of Britain, Denmark and Belgium. "Old country" can be seen in McDonagh's choice of the West of Ireland as a setting for *The Lieutenant*. In the same way that J.M. Synge attacks this cultural image in *The Playboy of the Western World*, McDonagh does so by placing it as the homeland of extremist terrorism. *Dark Matter* also evokes notions of old country and criticises the attachment Western culture has with nineteenth century literature by placing the story within cherished writers' attics. This literalises the hidden 'dark side' of this cultural period in Belgian history. The quaint old country has skeletons hidden in the attic.

Violence enters this negotiation by operating to decouple itself from sentimental ideals which have attached themselves to the violence of the past of both "old countries". Sierz says that

“the essential violence of his work is a question not of murders but of a writer’s attitude, an intellectual stance that scorns respect and vents its fury on all things sentimental.” (225). Essentially, it is the decoupling of violence from the sentimentality and the normalisation of such violence within that sentiment and cultural legacy which McDonagh is drawing to the audience’s attention. It is less the presence of violence itself, but violence coupled with political context and the extent to which we consider this presence of violence permissible in such contexts.



Figure 12

Sentimentality for Cats over Humans

McDonagh also uses the justification of violence to trap the audience into aligning with ideals that they might have previously disagreed with. This exposes how the justification of violence is flawed from the outset. Audiences, such as in my production of *The Lieutenant*, were more concerned for the non-human lives on stage than the actors at times. Although they experienced

a great deal of anxiety at the upside-down James Hanley in Scene Two, the loudest outbursts of discomfort came from the live cat who ‘played’ Wee Thomas. In the final scene of the play, Wee Thomas re-enters and Donny and Davey decide to shoot him for all the harm he has caused. The screams and proceeding panicked hush as the audience settled in to see whether this would occur in front of them helped to illuminate several aspects of McDonagh’s text. Mark Lawson (2001) recognises that McDonagh “makes us worry more about cats than the humans involved.” Suzannah Clapp (2001), recognises the same: “In doing so, he 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 that often accompanies thuggishness.” This sentiment the audience has for the animal victims of *The Lieutenant* subtly aligns them with the very characters whose morals they denounce. Padraic and all INLA members justify the murder of humans to avenge the death of animals, such as Padraic’s cat and Skank Toby’s dog, respectively. With their thuggishness comes a sentimentality for the innocent animals of Ireland. By utilising our sentimentality for animals, McDonagh exposes the inconsistencies in both the audience and in the Irish Republic for defending the death of such animals while accepting that, in the circumstances, violence against humans is what is expected.

Choosing Theatre

Theatre affords McDonagh the unique ability to enact violence on the physically present body. Phenomenologically, this affects the audience in a way that film never could. At times this strays into an excess which in turn becomes farcical—too much blood is hilarious rather than thought-provoking. Nevertheless, the ability of violence on the physically present body to affect us remains potent in McDonagh’s theatre, particularly when such violence is used to carry a provocation for the audience to reconsider how they receive such violence and its

political and colonial justifications as well as its association with normalcy. As seen by Benjamin and Bishop and Phillips' contentions, violence operates to expose the flawed logic of Irish republican sentimentality, which uses gross acts of violence to justify current acts of vengeful violence.

Why is this writer, who has made numerous pronouncements asserting his distaste for theatre, still writing plays which contain an enormous amount of violence? Despite asserting he will never write another play to Fintan O' Toole (2006), McDonagh has continued to write for the theatre. By investigating the operation of violence in both texts, a polite assessment can be made on why McDonagh enjoys writing violent theatre. Although this research does not intend to tackle this psychologically unanswerable biographical issue, it does appear from the investigation conducted that theatre offers physically present violence. From a phenomenological perspective, this heightens the violence and thus the message of how entrenched and normalised violence is within the discourses McDonagh is interrogating.

Dismemberment

McDonagh obviously has a deep psychological impulse to return to the stage and its unique portrayal of violence. Considering the breadth of his work, in addition to *The Lieutenant* and *Dark Matter*, it is also apparent McDonagh's stage violence continues to be expressed as dismemberment. The physical dismemberment of bodies, as well as characters losing limbs and extremities, is something which can be seen from the beginning of McDonagh's writing of short stories. But why dismemberment? What is it about the dismantling of the human body that interests McDonagh? Why is this his 'preferred' choice? Stabbings and shootings are not uncommon within McDonagh's work, but dismemberment is more particular than any other

violence. The answer may lie in the lack of affection McDonagh has expressed for the theatrical form.

The dismemberment of bodies might be related to this attitude. Dismemberment is an extreme act of violence and is a great thing to have on stage, particularly if McDonagh's aim is to push the theatrical form and to create a de-edifying experience for the audience. As I have argued in this thesis, violence on stage can provoke anxiety and concern in the audience; the physical presence of bodies on stage generates the possibility that the performed violence could go wrong and spill into reality. This anxiety is what fuels scenes such as James Hanley swinging from his feet in Scene Two of *The Lieutenant*. There is a possibility that the scene could go wrong and the actor could be genuinely harmed. The audience also feels a guilty pleasure of watching this unfold, as the action they watch has been initiated by their passive participation of turning up to see the show. McDonagh's incorporation of violence into his works lends this particular quality to it.

The dismemberment of the bodies of Christy, Brendan and Joey is conducted on props and therefore is less concerned with the physically present body, as discussed above. Despite this, the dismantling of the INLA's bodies in Scene Nine is still effective in creating a de-edifying experience. It achieves a level of discomfort in the audience because they cannot escape or alter the event in front of them. McDonagh heightens this discomfort by contrasting dismemberment with casual dialogue. Donny and Davey casually dismember the bodies of Christy, Brendan and Joey while they discuss their admiration for the style in which the IRA enacts its violence. The pair discuss aspects of the violence they have witnessed with an alarming off-handedness. Because Mairead used her air rifle accurately, they conclude that "Mairead sees more of the sport" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 56) in murdering people. They both agree that, in comparison, Padraic's method of killing people with "two guns up close" is easy: "Sure, there's no skill in

that” (56). Donny and Davey also consider the tourism opportunities of joining the IRA versus the INLA, determining that the IRA “do travel further afield than the INLA... they go to Belgium sometimes.” (55). In their eyes, this marks the Irish Republican Army as more established. Donny and Davey’s discussion coupled with the act of dismemberment causes a great deal of discomfort in the audience; every night in my production the audience seemed simultaneously disgusted and entertained. The script also denies the audience any chance to escape the dismemberment that is occurring so casually in front of them, because McDonagh constantly returns our attention to it. Donny stops the above discussion to proclaim: “Boy, spines are awful hard sawing, I’ll tell ya.” (64). McDonagh also draws ironies while the duo continue to dismember the corpses—Davey remarks of Padraic “Morbid that was, digging up his dead cat” (56). Mairead, Donny and Davey also seem more concerned with whose



Figure 13

responsibility it is to chop up the bodies than the fact they are doing it at all; Davey argues that

“It’s yere mess sure!” (56) to his older sister, in a squabble more suited to household chores than the corpses which litter the stage. Dismemberment can also be read politically; Doyle contends of *The Lieutenant* that “the play’s pointed destruction of bodies serves as its most obvious transgression of taboo spaces, both culturally and theatrically.” (2007, p. 101). Theatrically, the destruction of the body renders the body itself a literal prop—to be altered and handled by others. This means the body is reduced to a plaything. Doyle suggests this “pacifying of the body” can be read politically. The literal destruction and tearing apart of the Irish Republican affiliates who perpetuate most of this violence demonstrates a disregard for what the characters stand for politically. The play suggests that they have destroyed themselves with the very violence they both condemn and utilise in their preoccupation with killing. Christy, Brendan, Joey and Padraic, who are all Irish Paramilitary members, are all killed, and their bodies dismembered. Although the dismemberment of Padraic does not occur immediately, it is Mairead’s intention; she orders Donny and Davey to “be chopping up that feck too, now, the two of ye.” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 66).

Dismemberment in *Dark Matter* primarily concerns the missing limbs of both Marjory and her sister Ogechi, with the latter sustaining her dismemberment in the yet to come future of the Congo. This dismemberment is clearly associated with the mutilation of Congolese in the Belgian colony. From a phenomenological perspective, dismemberment affects the audience in *Dark Matter* because the limping of Marjory is a sight of violence and butchery. The audience can empathise with the physical pain and difficulty Marjory experiences when moving around. The audience may register in their own body a possible fragmentation of their cells and relate this to the political context. Dismemberment as it relates to the law and violence is also historically a punishment. Severed hands were the punishment and still are for stealing in numerous countries.

Dismemberment also relates to butchery and is therefore a form of violence which is normalised. However, the above associations we have with dismemberment are manipulated. In McDonagh's world, butchery is a practical step. It is used to prevent Marjory escaping and as a punishment. It is also a practical means for disposing of murder victims in *The Lieutenant*. Butchery is not a normal activity from the audience's perspective, but the act is considered so within the world McDonagh has built. The effect this has from a phenomenological perspective is one which heightens the audience's understanding of the colonial cruelty which occurred. Not only do they intellectually grasp the atrocity, it also registers on their body through understanding the perversion of the normal activity of butchery. Considering this, the choice by McDonagh to have Andersen to feed Marjory sausages throughout the play is deliberate yet subtle in provoking this association.

The marionette dolls in the attic also allude to that colonial cruelty which is the subject matter of the play. This is a carnivalesque violence. Marjory being trapped in a box suggests a parallel with magic shows, specifically the trick wherein a woman is placed in a box to be sawed in half. The theatricality of the circus is therefore very present in *Dark Matter*, and the traditional carnivalesque circus relies on brutality, violence and cruelty in its treatment of animals and performers alike. Circus puppetry is also present in the imagery of the Marionette dolls which populate Andersen's attic. From a post-colonial perspective, puppets are completely controlled by the puppet master, just as Marjory is entirely controlled by her oppressor Hans Christian Andersen. Marjory's body is reduced to the plaything of a dominating colonial force. Andersen mutilates her to maintain control of his puppet. Andersen also manipulates the 'strings' so Marjory can continue to produce the work he requires; depending on her behavior, Andersen gifts or cuts the string of sausages he feeds her through a small hole in the box within which she is imprisoned.

Dismemberment is not exclusive to *The Lieutenant* and *Dark Matter*. Dismemberment on stage is enacted on props, and this destruction of objects occurs throughout a range of McDonagh's works. In *The Lonesome West*, Coleman and Valene smash to pieces the remains of corpses they have dug up. In *The Pillowman*, Katurian writes fictional stories featuring many acts of dismemberment. Over all these stories, the characters attempt to claim dominance; they attempt to control the circumstances and events which violence affords them to alter. Read phenomenologically, the dismemberment of a body on stage emulates a need for the audience to dominate and control the violence they see occurring on stage. The result of the characters trying to influence events with violence leads to uncontrolled and perhaps uncontrollable violence occurring. Such violence spills from the stage into the reality of the audience. In my production of *The Lieutenant*, squibs which shot blood often flew into the front row of the audience. Doyle contends that such stage violence feeds into the audience's anxiety at the inability to control and contain the fiction of violence, and that this supplants in them the same anxiety which is being depicted in the fiction. (2007, p. 103). Within the fiction, the characters are attempting to control their surroundings through dismemberment in order to "assert their own sense of the proper order of things" (98). Mairead shoots the eyes out of cows to protest the meat trade; Padraic cuts off Davey's long hair to enforce gender norms; and Andersen in *Dark Matter* silences the Journalist with an axe to retain his identity as a talented writer.

Closing Statements

This thesis' intention was to explore how violence operates within Martin McDonagh's texts *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter*. To explore both texts, post-colonial and phenomenological lenses were employed. Violence operates in *The Lieutenant* within a snowball and humiliation farce structure. As discussed, this structure decouples the violence of paramilitary organisations and other violent characters in the play from their moral

and ethical justifications for such violence. The characters within this farce lack self-awareness and the ability to comprehend the senseless and often hypocritical justifications for the violence they employ. This lack of self-awareness received criticism because McDonagh's representation of Irishness appears to repeat historical British representations that demeaned the Irish. McDonagh exposes how absurd the justifications for violence can become through examining the rationale of Irish Republican sentiment within farce. It is not the political conflict McDonagh wishes to untangle in *The Lieutenant*, but the presence of violence itself within the conflict. He persistently and remorselessly draws attention to the spectator's habitual justification of violence, showing the spectator that, like the characters in the play, they too are susceptible to the same flawed process of justifying violence. McDonagh is arguing that it is indeed possible for a writer to accept the "legitimacy of a cause without accepting that violence is a necessary form of protest and resistance." (Lonergan, 2012, p. 208). Chapter Two has shown that this operation of violence raises questions around the normality of such violence being present at all in such transactions and political struggles.

Highlighting violence's normalised presence within a colonial context is also McDonagh's concern in *A Very, Very, Very Dark Matter*. Chapter Three focused on the conclusions drawn in Chapter Two and applied them to violence within McDonagh's most recent text. What is apparent is that violence operates within the play juxtaposed against nineteenth century literary history. By placing violence as a normalised occurrence within the creation of both Charles Dickens' and Hans Christian Andersen's cultural products, McDonagh reminds the audience of violence's presence, historically and politically, within the period of literary history. This exposes the hidden violence of the largely ignored colonial atrocities of Denmark and Britain within the cultural sentimentality of the time period. This violence also highlights the normalisation of the violence within those children's stories and suggests that their macabre

inspiration likely draws on the stories and presence of real colonial atrocities which occurred during the time.

It appears that McDonagh will continue to write for the stage; his apparent fascination with physically present violence is partially met through stage representation. By investigating violence on stage from a phenomenological perspective, this thesis discovered that the physically present violence affects the bodied spatiality of the environment. Aleks Sierz' description of such "shock tactics" means the violence registers strongly on the spectator and influences an intellectual consideration long after it has passed. Because violence on stage implicates the audience from a phenomenological perspective, the spectator can also consider their complicity in the colonial context which each play investigates. Do they choose to justify the violence they are witnessing? What makes the violence Marjory intends to commit justified and the Christy's violence unjust?

This thesis also covered the criticism raised about each text. The strong negation of McDonagh's use of stereotype in both texts is very apparent. However, the subversion of the stereotypical Irishman and the portrayal of Andersen is deliberate—they expose the flawed sentimentality and justifications the characters have towards violence. Ultimately, McDonagh attacks this sentimentality in both texts' colonial backgrounds. Regardless of the criticism, which responds to this use of stereotype rather than what it achieves, it is likely McDonagh will produce other violent theatrical works in the years to come. Having moved away from Ireland in *Dark Matter*, McDonagh has a wealth of colonial histories and use of sentiment to draw upon and engage.

Word Count: 36304

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