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# A True and Lonesome West: The Spaces of Sam Shepard and Martin McDonagh

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A TRUE AND LONESOME WEST: THE SPACES OF SAM SHEPARD AND MARTIN

MCDONAGH

by

SARAH DYNE

Under the Direction of Dr. Marilyn Richtarik

ABSTRACT

In this project, I explore how Sam Shepard and Martin McDonagh treat concepts of space (both on stage and within a larger context that expands beyond the theatre), and I seek to identify how underlying anxieties about a mythologized past become manifest in the relationships between characters and landscapes by examining heterotopic and liminal elements in their scripts. Both playwrights are keenly aware of the mythological significance and accompanying restrictions of their Western spaces not only within the borders of their own countries, but also on a global scale.

INDEX WORDS: American West, Irish West, Sam Shepard, Martin McDonagh, *True West*, *The Lonesome West*, Heterotopias, Liminal spaces

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MCDONAGH

by

SARAH DYNE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012



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2012

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## **DEDICATION**

For my loving husband Evan who fills my days with joy, to my friends who push me ever forward, and to my dear grandparents whose support spans the distance.

I also dedicate this work to Dr. Jon Tuttle, one of the important mentors I've ever known and a skilled dramatist in his own right. Thank you for being a lifelong teacher and friend.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

*For we do not change place, we change our nature.*

-Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

The works of Sam Shepard and Martin McDonagh provoke dialogue about national identities, gender, and violence, and the playwrights' larger-than-life personalities have preoccupied many critics. Shepard's *True West* (1980) and McDonagh's *The Lonesome West* (1997) invite comparison, and a few critics and scholars have identified similarities between these plays; however, such comparisons have largely been limited to questions of originality, influence, and the accuracy with which these playwrights depict culture. Gerald Weales has offered a particularly strong critique of McDonagh, citing the dueling brothers in *The Lonesome West* as evidence that McDonagh created a poorly written redaction of Shepard's *True West*. Weales ultimately asserts that the conflict in Shepard's work "is richer, a confrontation between brothers and between attitudes toward life, art, and the myth of the West" (27). While Weales oversimplifies and too hastily discredits *The Lonesome West*, he does identify what lies at the heart of both plays: "the myth of the West" and deep connections between identity and space.

The concept of the West as a place of authenticity and as the seat of true national identity pervades Shepard and McDonagh's plots and is never far from the surface. Both dramatists write with culturally informed, conventional interpretations of the West in mind, subverting and manipulating them in order to expose the challenges that life in a modern world poses to these readings. Western Ireland and the Western United States have long held mythic status in art and literature, serving as embodiments of idealized Irish and American identities.<sup>1</sup> In this project, I

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<sup>1</sup> While both playwrights write about their own respective "Wests," the idea of the American West has had a markedly broader influence on global popular culture, an influence evident in McDonagh's work. Myles Duncan's *How the Irish Won the West* (2006) provides a study of

explore how Sam Shepard and Martin McDonagh treat concepts of space (both on stage and within a larger context that expands beyond the theatre), and I seek to identify how underlying anxieties about a mythologized past become manifest in the relationships between characters and landscapes by examining heterotopic and liminal elements in their scripts. Both playwrights are keenly aware of the mythological significance and accompanying restrictions of their Western spaces not only within the borders of their own countries, but also on a global scale.

These Western spaces are defined geographically as well as by a vast set of archetypal images and social concepts that have grown beyond their foundations in historical fact to become the representative icons that inform popular, conventional readings of the spaces.<sup>2</sup> Traditional interpretations of the American West as physical and symbolic space are rooted in the push for western expansion and the desire to create a unifying national identity, while traditional interpretations of the Irish West evolved in part from the Irish Literary Revival, a movement to characterize and preserve “authentic” Irish culture. In both instances, these spaces have played crucial roles in establishing national identities that differ from their European (and especially English) counterparts.

Perhaps the most enduring source for the myth of the American West is Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1891). Although his work as a historian has been criticized by modern scholars as representing only those who held cultur-

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how the American West was perceived by Irish immigrants from the 1800s to the present and how these immigrants have interacted within the mythologized space, helping both to perpetuate the concept and actively shape it.

<sup>2</sup> According to Eamonn Walls, the boundaries of each West have been debated but are generally accepted to be everything west of the Mississippi or Missouri Rivers in the United States and “the boundaries of the province of Connacht, while others will include Donegal, Kerry, Clare, and Limerick,” in Ireland (xiv).

ally dominant positions (i.e., white men), it nonetheless remains influential.<sup>3</sup> Turner's essay "has achieved almost mythic dimensions" and continues to be reprinted, read, and cited over a century after its original publication (Ridge 15). This text provides the basis for what I consider to be "traditional" understandings of the American West. Turner claims that "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character" (F. Turner 60). In this sense, the frontier has continually presented Americans with the chance to create a society independent of European influence, "a new product that is American" (F. Turner 61).

According to Turner, American identity was largely defined by becoming something other than European, and it was shaped by the geography of the West. Reflecting on westward expansion and the effects it had on the nation, Turner claims that:

[It is] to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness, that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients, that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends, that restless, nervous energy, that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom – these are traits

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<sup>3</sup> In his introduction to the 1993 printing of Turner's collected essays on the frontier, Martin Ridge says that "Muted in Turner's analysis were the voices of women, Indians, Mexican-Americans, and African-Americans, as well as other nonwhite people, but had Turner recognized or emphasized such factors as race and gender, he would have been an even more prescient historian" (15).

of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (87-88)

Thus, the American West has traditionally come to symbolize independence and freedom, a return to the primitive with the opportunity to create something new, a place associated with brave, innovative, and robust people, free of the stifling demands of the predominantly urban East. Accompanying these positive associations of the West are negative stereotypes – namely, the West has been portrayed as not only a place for independence, but also a dangerous place of violence and lawlessness, populated by uneducated roughnecks. Ironically, even these apparently negative traits have been romanticized in popular culture. Although the West can be and has been redefined in more nuanced ways, throughout this thesis I will refer to a mixture of both the negative stereotypes and the idealized Turnerian interpretations of the West as “traditional” or “conventional.”

Just as the American West has become a place that embodies “Americanness,” the West of Ireland has been viewed as the place of Irishness uncorrupted by outside influence, the last stronghold of Irish folkways and of a language that nearly died. Largely as a result of the Irish Literary Revival, an attempt by Irish writers to reclaim ownership of their cultural image, the West of Ireland has long been romanticized as the true seat of “Irishness.”<sup>4</sup> If an authentic Irish identity existed, urban Irish writers were sure that they could find it in the language and activities of the West.<sup>5</sup> In order to begin defining “traditional” or “conventional” readings of the Irish

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<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the Irish Literary Revival and the Gaelic League, see Declan Kiberd’s *The Irish Writer and the World*.

<sup>5</sup> Among these writers was J.M. Synge, who “had carefully chosen his idioms from the speech of rural Ireland, especially from those areas where the Irish language was still flourishing and had conditioned the local brand of English” (Kiberd, *Irish Writer and the World* 28).

West, I turn to Nicholas Grene, who offers a useful explanation of the Literary Revival and the resulting attention that urban Irish authors paid to the West:

Romantic pastoral was a formative part of the Literary Revival from the beginning: urban writers rejecting metropolitan life ('Give up Paris', Yeats told Synge, 'Go to the Aran Islands'), renewing themselves 'Antaeus-like' by contact with the soil, by escape into the otherness of the West. Even Joyce, most definitely city-oriented, could at least toy with the idea in 'The Dead' that it was time to set out on the journey westward. (299)

Politically, many people identify a cultural divide between the north and south of Ireland, but Declan Kiberd posits that it exists more notably "between east and west, the west being wilder but more conservative, the east more buttoned down yet at the same time more liberal" (*Inventing Ireland* 7). While Kiberd's description of the Irish West appears paradoxical to some extent, he strikes at the core of what I consider the "conventional" reading of the space that has been portrayed in literature, films, and travel guides— that is, an assumption that the Irish West is steeped in folk tradition and strict religious values but is also a place operating beyond the restrictions of complicated, modern life in the urbanized East.<sup>6</sup> In the literary world, a "traditional" reading of this space might depict the West as a quaint, pastoral region where superstitious yet religious people live simple but rugged lives, harvesting potatoes and peat, and sitting by hearths to tell stories in the old Irish language. It is this set of tropes that has come to represent an entire region as the seat of a homogeneous, "authentic" Irish heritage, an idealized but problematic set of stereotypes that suspends the West in time and disallows advancement in a modern world.

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<sup>6</sup> Films portraying a pastoral West are too numerous to list here but most notably include *The Quiet Man* (1952), starring John Wayne, *Ryan's Daughter* (1970), *Man of Aran* (1934), and *The Field* (1990, based on a 1965 play by John B. Keane).

While the West has come to embody Irish identity through the Literary Revival, there are also derogatory stereotypes associated with Ireland perpetuated in the form of the “Stage Irishman.” Kiberd offers a tongue-in-cheek definition of the Stage Irishman as “a caricature got up in England, based on ignorance and fear of the Other but also on a suspicion that that Other knew better how to enjoy the world” (*Irish Writer and the World* 1). The Stage Irishman developed in English plays as a stereotyped figure serving as naive peasant, drunken buffoon, or villain, in contrast to more flattering depictions of English characters.<sup>7</sup> Kiberd explains that, while the Stage Irishman was an English construct, “there was a very real sense in which Irish people chose to occupy the assigned role, if only to complicate and ultimately to challenge it” (*Irish Writer and the World* 3).<sup>8</sup> Even though the Stage Irishman originated from political friction between the Irish and English, the stereotyped Irish character eventually seeped into pop culture in America and elsewhere. Thus, echoes of both the positive and negative images of the Irish West are conjured when it appears in contemporary literature and theatre.

While the traditional interpretations of both the American and Irish Wests are partially based on historical fact, they have become equally mythologized. Neil Campbell identifies a shifting image of the American West, arguing that “Revision is a key term in the interrogation of myth, opening the way for...multiplicitous discourses of the New West” (9). The “New West,” according to Campbell, is an ‘agglomerative space,’ springing from the recognition that the “simple neatness” of the Turnerian West reveals a “mythic structure” that glosses over the complexities of the space in favor of an idealized picture of life and national identity (Campbell 3).

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<sup>7</sup> Maureen Waters devotes a chapter to this concept in *The Comic Irishman* (1984).

<sup>8</sup> Kiberd also examines the Stage Irishman in *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1995).

Although Campbell specifically applies this concept to the American West, a similar trend can be seen in the work done by contemporary scholars in Irish Studies.<sup>9</sup>

Shepard writes with the traditional understanding of the West in mind, actively reimagining and rewriting the space as a place of binary oppositions, of contrasting reality and fantasy, where characters constantly search for or attempt to create a sense of freedom and personal identity. As Turner established, traditional understandings of the American West arose from “The need for a national origin story,” one that “occluded the recognition of the true nature of the historical processes being played out across the region and sought only to reduce these to a managed set of stories that would become the West’s official history” (Campbell 3). Shepard sees this mythic West as important but essentially artificial, and thus capable of being explored, altered, and exaggerated. In many ways, Shepard himself “is a myth-maker who deconstructs myths, a storyteller aware of the coercive power of story” who inscribes “himself and his characters into a larger script, a script that contributes to the rhetoric of nationhood, and to a fuller understanding of what more richly constitutes the ‘Americanness’ of American drama” (Roudané, “Introduction” 6).

In an interview with Matthew Roudané, Shepard considers “the myth of the American Dream” and expresses frustration that it, like the West, has never been “succinctly defined” (“Shepard on Shepard” 69). Shepard believes that the image of the “Wild West” that has become so imbedded in the American psyche sprung “from advertising campaigns,” and he posits that Americans accept the fantasy promulgated in advertising because they prefer fantasy over

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<sup>9</sup> This is especially true of the trend of discussing Irish theatre in a global context. See Lisa Fitzpatrick’s “The Land of Air-Conditioning and Opportunity: America on the Irish Stage,” Patrick Lonergan’s “‘The Laughter Will Come of Itself; The Tears are Inevitable’: Martin McDonagh, Globalization and Irish Theatre Criticism,” Mark Phelan’s “‘Authentic Reproductions’: Staging the ‘Wild West’ in Modern Irish Drama,” and Michael Mays’s “Irish Identity in an Age of Globalisation.”



reality (Roudané, “Shepard on Shepard” 70). As a result of media representations and the need for what Frederick Jackson Turner termed a “composite nationality” in “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” the “Wild” American West was constructed to suit popular taste and political agendas – to justify westward expansion by any means necessary while providing a sense of nationhood through a common set of goals (75).

Martin McDonagh follows a path similar to Shepard’s, dealing with an equally stereotyped West. As an Anglo-Irish playwright who writes about Ireland from a distance, McDonagh works within the Irish dramatic tradition, which is characterized by a highly nuanced and complicated vision of national identity.<sup>10</sup> McDonagh has been accused of resurrecting the “Stage Irishman” by many who doubt his “Irishness,” including Mary Luckhurst, who argues “that McDonagh is a thoroughly establishment figure who relies on monolithic, prejudicial constructs of rural Ireland to generate himself an income” (35).

I suggest that McDonagh approaches his plays with a hyperbolic adaptation of Declan Kiberd’s paradoxical assessment of Western Ireland, viewing it as an untamed yet stifling place “wilder but more conservative” than the densely populated East (*Inventing Ireland* 7).

McDonagh also hints at yet another paradoxical element of the Irish West. Intellectuals and writers from the urbanized East have often simultaneously romanticized and looked down upon the Western population, manifesting a conflicted desire to preserve the West in its “pure” state while pursuing more modernization and globalization in the East. McDonagh evaluates a space that promises access to true Irish life for outsiders looking in, while simultaneously posing challenges

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<sup>10</sup> Prominent authors like Synge and James Joyce wrote about what it means to be Irish, but did so from a distance; Synge spent time in the West of Ireland as an outsider and also spent lengthy periods of time in Germany, Paris, and London, while Joyce took up residence in Zurich, Paris, and Trieste in order to write about life in Ireland. See Kiberd’s *The Irish Writer and the World*.

to Western natives who look to the East or further West to the United States as their only chance of participating in the modern global community.

The inhabitants of Shepard's and McDonagh's Wests are complex characters best portrayed through live performance. Gay McAuley identifies problems that arise when scholars base their theatre analyses solely on playtexts, noting that "Such analyses, however subtle and intelligent they may be, reveal more about the critic's skill as a reader – or as virtual *metteur en scène* – than they do about theatre practice, and they belong to the literary economy: texts about texts, circulating amongst readers of texts" (10). I recognize that individual productions and performances of a single play can vary drastically from theatre to theatre, from one director to another, and even from night to night. Playtexts are often cut and modified to suit the director's interpretation, the physical space of the performance locale, and monetary constraints. In a larger project, I might explore these alternative trajectories. Instead, while acknowledging the fluidity of theatre performance and practice (as well as its intrinsic artistic value), I plan to focus on published texts. While analyses based on authorial intention are often criticized, I believe the writer's perspective should be taken into account.

McDonagh and Shepard include explicit stage directions in their scripts, and both have insisted that they expect the scripts to be regarded as performance blueprints, not merely guidelines to be treated loosely. As Eamonn Jordan has observed, McDonagh's career has earned him awards and international productions of his plays, but "in very few instances has permission been given for adaptations of his work. Productions are obliged to work within the parameters of the published texts and any serious deviations from their constraints and imperatives are discouraged or disallowed" (219). Likewise, Sam Shepard has been notoriously opposed to directors and theatres altering his texts, and he specifically discourages theatre companies from

deviating from his vision of *True West*:

*The set should be constructed realistically with no attempt to distort its dimensions, shapes, objects, or colors. No objects should be introduced which might draw special attention to themselves other than the props demanded by the script. If a stylistic "concept" is grafted onto the set design it will only serve to confuse the evolution of the characters' situation, which is the most important focus of the play.* (Shepard 3)

Based on Shepard's deliberate and thorough instructions, one can reasonably assume a certain degree of uniformity across productions of *True West*. Thus, in this thesis I will limit my discussion of individual productions of either play in order to focus on the scripts in themselves.

I will also position my analysis within the context of relevant criticism on Sam Shepard and Martin McDonagh. A large body of scholarship exists for both authors, so for the sake of brevity I aim to identify major trends in approaching these works and to trace the evolution of critical discourse topically for each play. Because *True West* was first produced in 1980, nineteen years before *The Lonesome West*, it has been the subject of more in-depth discussion. That is not to say that McDonagh's work has been neglected by scholars, but rather that a critical conversation about it is still developing.

Commentators on Shepard frequently reference *True West* in essays about other plays, but relatively few substantial articles and no book-length works have been published solely concerning the play on its own. More often than not, the most illuminating discussions and evaluations of *True West* appear within anthologies of criticism concerned with Shepard's larger body of work. Throughout the scholarship devoted specifically to *True West*, I have identified several patterns in interpretation, theoretical approach, and subject.

*True West* is one of Shepard's most popular works, meriting performances by accomplished actors like Tommy Lee Jones, Philip Seymour Hoffman, John Malkovich, and Bruce Willis. Shepard was already an accomplished playwright by the time *True West* was published and produced, and the scholarly attention it received was due, in part, to the play's release just a year after *Buried Child* (1978) won a Pulitzer Prize for Drama and an Obie Award for Best Playwriting (*Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* xvii). Early reviews of *True West* did provide thoughtful analysis, and one of the earliest and most significant critiques was written by Wendy Lesser. Lesser identified some of the most popular discussion topics in *True West* criticism, including "doubling," archetypes, and gender identity<sup>11</sup>— especially relating to images of cowboys, father figures and dueling brothers.<sup>12</sup> A number of these early commentaries were based in Jungian, Freudian, and Feminist interpretations that emphasized psychological and potentially autobiographical elements of the script. Scholars have also examined questions of authenticity, connections between art and artist, personal and national identities, "Manifest Destiny," and the significance of the American West as depicted in Shepard's work.<sup>13</sup>

Notably missing from ongoing *True West* scholarship, however, are extensive discussions of spatial elements within the text and on stage. Critics and scholars like Lesser, Richard Wat-

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<sup>11</sup> For particularly strong analyses of gender in *True West*, see Carla McDonough's "The Politics of Stage Space: Women and Male Identity in Sam Shepard's Family Plays" and James D. Riemer's "Integrating the Psyche of the American Male: Conflicting Ideals of Manhood in Sam Shepard's *True West*."

<sup>12</sup> See Tsu-chung Su's "The Double in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* and *True West*," Wendy Lesser's "True Shepard," Molly Smith's "Beckettian Symbolic Structure in Sam Shepard's *True West*: A Jungian Reading," Jeffery D. Hooper's "Cain, Canaanites, and Philistines in Sam Shepard's *True West*," and Mark Siegel's "Holy Ghosts: The Mythic Cowboy in the Plays of Sam Shepard."

<sup>13</sup> See for example Richard Wattenberg's "'The Frontier Myth' on Stage: From the Nineteenth Century to Sam Shepard's *True West*," Megan Williams' "Nowhere Man and the Twentieth-Century Cowboy: Images of Identity and American History in Sam Shepard's *True West*," and Donald R. Anderson's "The West of Frederick Jackson Turner in Three American Plays."

tenberg, and Donald R. Anderson have all mentioned a conceptual “West” and stage elements, but these topics are typically secondary to their primary focuses. Those who have examined the West in Shepard’s work often do so in order to explain its significance to character psychology or treatment. While not primarily centered on *True West*, Chris Westgate’s “Negotiating The American West in Shepard’s Family Plays” stands out as a particularly useful analysis of the West in three of Shepard’s plays (*Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, and *True West*). In his essay, Westgate suggests that what emerges in these plays “are competing, even contradictory, visions of the West. Simultaneously welcoming and menacing, unequivocal and unfathomable, redemptive and ruinous, the West becomes an intriguing, and largely overlooked, crux within [Shepard’s] semi-autobiographical writing, interviews, and plays...” (727). According to Westgate, “the West is more than merely an antidote to a moribund society; it approximates a Platonic ideal” that the characters in the plays pursue without reward (727-8). What’s left, then, are “more nuanced, even paradoxical, readings of the West than have previously been acknowledged,” and I argue that these paradoxes are able to coexist because of the ways in which Shepard conceptualizes space (Westgate 728).

McDonagh scholarship (and discussion of *The Lonesome West* in particular) has evolved differently from Shepard scholarship, due largely to the gap between first productions of the plays. Critical commentary about McDonagh began in the late 1990s when The Leenane Trilogy – consisting of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (1997), and *The Lonesome West* (1997) – was first staged. Of the three plays in the Leenane Trilogy, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* has received the most critical attention, leaving discussion of *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West* on the periphery or considered only in relation to the other plays. While it would be an oversight to isolate *The Lonesome West* from its companion texts

(indeed, many of the harshest critiques of the text ignore its position as the finale of the Leenane Trilogy), I aim to give the play a closer examination than it has previously been given, as the culmination of events and concepts that McDonagh explores.

For the first few years after McDonagh's debut, the primary discussions among theatre critics and scholars centered on a few key topics: play performance reviews, questions about his "Irishness" and thus his authority to depict life in Ireland, critiques of the play's "gratuitous" violence and profanity, and concerns over influence and authenticity in his work. There are few ambivalent critics when it comes to McDonagh's work, and his dramatic corpus has been met with responses ranging from celebration to revulsion. Critics like Fintan O'Toole, Ondřej Pilný, José Laners, and Richard Rankin Russell feel compelled to place McDonagh within the Irish theatrical tradition alongside prominent Irish dramatists, while others, like Patrick Lonergan, place him within a developing, globalized theatre tradition.<sup>14</sup> Still others, like Robert L. King, claim that McDonagh "leeches off" the Irish dramatic tradition "without enriching it" (44). Despite King's scathing assessment of McDonagh's contributions to the literary world, many more critics favor the playwright, or at least find his work worthy of in-depth examination.

Two notable edited scholarly collections have been published within the past ten years (*Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, edited by Richard Rankin Russell, and *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, edited by Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan), along with numerous scholarly articles addressing everything from McDonagh's heritage to his treatment of religion, gender, violence, morality, and stagecraft. Among these articles, very few deal

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<sup>14</sup> See Ondřej Pilný, "Martin McDonagh: Parody? Satire? Complacency?"; Fintan O'Toole, "A Mind in Connemara: The Savage World of Martin McDonagh."; Richard Rankin Russell, Introduction to *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*.; Patrick Lonergan, "'The Laughter Will Come of Itself; The Tears are Inevitable': Martin McDonagh, Globalization and Irish Theatre Criticism."

exclusively with *The Lonesome West* but rather focus on overarching themes and concerns appearing in most of McDonagh's plays. Scholars like David Foster, Peter James Harris, and Hildegard Klein have all discussed McDonagh's treatment of gender and violence as a means to satirize modern culture,<sup>15</sup> while others, like Laura Elred, focus on classifying McDonagh's works by genre.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the volume of scholarship concerning both playwrights and their works, there are still noticeable gaps in the critical discourse. Although *True West* and *The Lonesome West* have been examined in a number of texts, they are frequently discussed in a peripheral manner, rarely as the main focus of critical works. Even rarer among these focused studies are considerations of the treatment of spatial elements within the plays.<sup>17</sup> I will briefly consider how *True West* and *The Lonesome West* relate to other works by Shepard and McDonagh, but my main focus is on how these two plays stand on their own and relate to each other. More specifically, this thesis will draw from an understanding of liminality and Foucauldian heterotopias to explore the ways Sam Shepard and Martin McDonagh manipulate mythologized concepts of the West to reinterpret how these myths function within their respective cultures. The playwrights explore the liminality of spaces and boundaries to reflect the fluidity of culture as opposed to the rigidity of stereotyped identities imposed by myths of the West. Beyond disillusionment with romanticized

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<sup>15</sup> See David Foster's "Take it like a man : masculinities and violence in David Fincher's *Fight Club*, Martin McDonagh's *The Lonesome West*, and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*"; Peter James Harris's "Sex and Violence: The Shift from Synge to McDonagh"; Hildegard Klein's "Matricide – Violating the Sacred Mother-Daughter Bond in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*"

<sup>16</sup> See Laura Elred's "Martin McDonagh and the Contemporary Gothic."

<sup>17</sup> Eamonn Jordan provides perhaps the most thorough examination of spatial elements in *The Lonesome West* to date in his essay "The Native Quarter: The Hyphenated-Real – the Drama of Martin McDonagh," while Megan Williams and Chris J. Westgate offer the most useful and thorough studies of space in *True West*.

versions of America and Ireland, Shepard and McDonagh present their audiences with an alternative, heterotopic space of deviation on which their characters can focus their attention.

The theory of liminality as it appears in literary studies originated from the work of Arnold van Gennep, whose *The Rites of Passage* is the seminal book on liminal spaces and states of being. Van Gennep identified a number of ceremonial patterns associated with transitioning into different phases of life. He subdivided *rites of passage* into three main categories: *rites of separation*, *transition rites*, and *rites of incorporation* (van Gennep 10). These subcategories, van Gennep explains:

are not developed to the same extent by all peoples or in every ceremonial pattern... [and] although a complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes preliminary rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation), in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated. (10-11)

The concept of liminality, as outlined by van Gennep, provides “a vocabulary for addressing the elusive but crucial experiences at a variety of boundaries and offer[s] a preliminary definition of their scope – psychic, communal, physiological, geographical, political, and epistemological” (Mukherji xix). While some aspects of van Gennep’s liminal theory will not apply to this project, it is “a polysemous concept” that serves as “a threshold between psychological and physical experience” (Mukherji xix).

Van Gennep’s theory of liminality was later adapted by Victor Turner, who further developed the study to encompass not only specific life changes, but also liminal places, people, and objects. Turner provides a clearer definition of “liminality” and “liminal *personae* (‘threshold people’)” than van Gennep, explaining that the attributes associated with these:



are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (V. Turner 95)

While Turner's application of the term and theory was originally used in anthropological studies, his phrase "betwixt and between" is useful for describing the position of characters and sets in *True West* and *The Lonesome West*, as it implies a transitory position of being "neither here nor there," caught between both physical and metaphorical boundaries (V. Turner 95).<sup>18</sup> Liminal phenomena, according to Turner, bring together a blend of "lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship," in a "moment in and out of time" that ultimately reveals "some recognition (in symbol if not always in language)... a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties" (96). Liminal elements appear in both plays through descriptions of the Western areas inhabited by the characters, in set design as specified in stage directions, and in the characters that navigate between the heterotopic spaces and the rest of society, all of which blend the sacred and profane, the mythic and the ordinary.

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<sup>18</sup> See also *Betwixt & Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*.

Working in conjunction with the concept of liminality, the idea of heterotopias features prominently in both plays. While liminal elements allow for change and reinterpretation of mythologized spaces, the landscapes described by Shepard and McDonagh are essentially heterotopias, spaces that allow the action of the plays to take place. In his essay “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault defines heterotopias as:

real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society –which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (24)

Based on this definition, I argue that the conceptual space of the “Wild West” is a heterotopia: an actual, physical space that represents, contests, and inverts notions of American and Irish identities. In this conceptual space, one can imagine and accept high-noon showdowns, gunfights, and free-roaming cowboys who live off the land and embody a masculine ideal –or, in the case of Ireland, rustic cottages, grazing sheep, and agrarian workers singing over pints after a long day. While a number of emblematic cultural figures are represented in both of these plays, they are also contested, since they no longer suit the needs and realities of the modern West and are ultimately found to be ineffectual for the characters who seek them out. Shepard and McDonagh deliberately respond to the disillusionment they experience when their mythic icons

fail, eventually inverting these symbols to echo their original meanings while becoming satirical.<sup>19</sup>

Foucault continues his definition of heterotopias by stating that they “obviously take on quite varied forms, and perhaps no one absolutely universal form of heterotopia would be found” (24). This absence of a universal form of heterotopia allows a broad application of the concept. Foucault does, however, classify heterotopias into two main categories: Crisis Heterotopias, which he claims are sacred sites found within “so-called primitive societies,” the likes of which are quickly disappearing, and Heterotopias of Deviation, which he claims are replacing Crisis Heterotopias. Foucault defines Heterotopias of Deviation as “those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed,” much like the spaces and characters in both plays (25).

Rather than being placed into a heterotopia by the rest of society, the characters in *True West* glorify the space and actively seek it out in order to display openly their deviant desires and behavior. The characters are not discovering the myth of the West; they are living and creating it. Furthermore, Shepard presents multiple layers and principles of heterotopias on his stage, complex dimensions that parallel the complicated plot and character development throughout the course of the play. McDonagh’s play functions within the definition of heterotopias as well, differing from *True West* in one important way: the characters of the play do not project heterotopic qualities onto the West in which they live, but are instead living within a heterotopia of deviation as defined by outsiders. Additionally, McDonagh represents the Irish West as a heterotopic space on a larger, more abstract scale than Shepard does the American West in *True West*. The heterotopic qualities of McDonagh’s West are more temporal and metaphorical than the spaces repre-

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<sup>19</sup> While the playwrights consciously invert cultural symbols, the characters in the plays actively participate in the process but rarely acknowledge doing so consciously.

sented in Shepard's play, and, thus, while McDonagh inscribes the West of Ireland as a heterotopia, his characters tend to view it as a place to escape rather than a place *of* escape. These heterotopias constructed by McDonagh and Shepard allow for dualities and multiplicities to exist within the plays; these dualities and multiplicities are manifest in the presence of dueling brothers, bipolar landscapes and sets, and complex, often conflicting notions of self and nation.

In order to provide thorough and orderly analyses that address the nuances of each playwright's treatment of space and identity, this thesis will consist of two mirrored chapters on *True West* and *The Lonesome West*, focusing on metaphoric and physical spaces, characterization, and the function of liminal and heterotopic elements. Through an examination of where these plays converge and diverge, I hope to reveal some of the ways in which Shepard and McDonagh subvert and manipulate conventional understandings of the West and how these new interpretations expose underlying anxieties about nationality and nationhood in a modern world where borders are continuously blurred and re-defined. In these plays, space and identity are linked; the national identities of the characters would not exist without the real and imagined spaces, but, at the same time, the inhabitants of the spaces are the ones who give them meaning. By creating these liminal and heterotopic spaces, Shepard and McDonagh point to the development of a "global West," where all of the mythic emblems continue to live, still influential but devoid of the comfort and security they are meant to bring to the characters who seek them out.

## CHAPTER ONE: “THERE’S NOTHING REAL DOWN HERE!” –SHEPARD’S WEST

At the climax of Sam Shepard’s 1980 play, *True West*, one of the main characters exclaims that “There’s nothing real down here... Least of all me!” (Shepard 49). This simple expression of frustration strikes at the heart of the play and reveals an anxiety that extends throughout: the desire for an “authentic” West that appears to have been lost in modern America, and a connection (or desire for connection) between person and place. Shepard recognizes that rather than remaining static as in written literature, the theatre allows flexibility to “do things in space and time” (Bartels 83). In *True West*, Shepard manipulates the space of the theatre through stage directions and creates a claustrophobic, post-modern reimagining of the American Dream and Western Frontier. The play centers on the dysfunctional family dynamic of a twentieth-century rendition of Cain and Abel, renamed Lee, the desert-dwelling, roughneck thief, and Austin, the emasculated family man/ hack screenwriter. Shepard shapes his American West by drawing from traditional symbols and themes only to subvert their meanings and reveal tensions between the expectations his characters have of living in the West and the realities they encounter. The West Shepard envisions is a complicated place where the inhabitants struggle to connect with anyone, especially those who should, by standard conventions, be closest.

The landscape of *True West* is ambiguous; it is a place that offers the promise of freedom and a life beyond the confines of domesticity while simultaneously threatening to consume the characters and lead them down the same self-destructive path as their drunk and absent father. Disillusioned by varying romanticized views of the American West and its reality, Shepard depicts a space that Lee and Austin both glorify and find hostile. Shepard creates a multi-faceted space that contains both liminal and heterotopic elements, a place where his characters can both physically and psychologically act out the anxieties that manifest when individual identities are

inextricably tied to a mythologized national history. As the identities of Austin and Lee devolve, so does the liminal and heterotopic space they inhabit. The corresponding erosion of clearly defined personalities and spatial borders ultimately exposes challenges that life in a modern world poses to Turnerian depictions of the West. Accordingly, this chapter will focus on the function of heterotopic elements, liminal elements, and the ways these elements converge in *True West* to invert traditional interpretations of the American West in order to create a version of what Neil Campbell calls the “New West” (9).

### **I. Lee and Austin: Identity Defined by Space**

While examining the spaces that Shepard both creates and destroys, this chapter considers Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopias: “real places” that function as “counter-sites” where all of the elements of a given culture are “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24). Based on this definition, the American “Wild West” is a heterotopia: it is an actual, physical space that represents American ideals while contesting the possibility of an ideal existence, ultimately inverting societal notions and creating a new version of the West. In this conceptual space, one can imagine that characters like Billy the Kid, Wyatt Earp, and The Lone Ranger roam the plains and deserts, herding cattle, robbing trains, and fighting in saloons. Neil Campbell explains that the traditional Turnerian interpretation of the West was a “mythic discourse, produced by selective history, literature, visual arts, and popular culture” that “constructs an ideological framework” in order to build a unifying American identity (6). This popular version of the West represents American independence and freedom, a place where brave and determined people build something from nothing and tame a harsh, wild landscape. At the same time, the conceptual West is frequently depicted as a place of either lawlessness or vigilante justice. Thus, the American West traditionally represents both a return to primitive cultural interac-

tion and an exercise in cultivating a new civilized and unified nation. The “West” we see in *True West*, however, inverts these ideas. The play is set in a modern version of the West, where civilization has already been established for long period of time. Instead of playing the role of frontiersmen with the responsibility and satisfaction of building something new, the characters of *True West* find themselves caught in positions of frustrating stasis, unable to change themselves or their world.

Lee and Austin represent disillusioned members of a postmodern generation searching for something “real” or “authentic” to which they can cling. Seeing no frontier left to conquer, the brothers regress and eventually become trapped in a space that has long represented freedom. Lee and Austin glorify the mythologized Old West as depicted in the books, movies, and television shows of their childhood, imagining the desert to be a place where they can operate outside of the demands of society. The desert or “West” that the brothers wish to inhabit is always just beyond their reach, despite their physical location in their mother’s home in a desert town. The brothers only devolve further as they fail to access the freedom of the West. This devolution transforms a space that was once stable and places the brothers both within and outside the boundaries of societal norms into a Foucauldian “heterotopia of deviation” (Foucault 25). The “West” of *True West* thus serves as a space “in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (Foucault 25). Rather than Austin and Lee being placed into the heterotopia of deviation by society, they actively seek out the space in order to indulge their deviant desires and behaviors.

From the beginning of the play, both Austin and Lee represent the ineffectual post-modern man. Austin believes that the confines of societal norms have stripped him of his natural masculinity, so he retreats to his mother’s home in her absence and quickly regresses to a juve-

nile state of mind, an act which rekindles sibling rivalry between Austin and his brother, Lee. Upon seeing Lee, who Austin believes lives outside the constraints of the laws of civilized society or even the dictates of an internal conscience, Austin feels a strong urge to escape his stifling responsibilities and enter the heterotopia of deviation he believes Lee inhabits, a space where he can live out his western outlaw fantasies. Lee, however, consists of more layers than Austin imagines. He is at once the “bad” brother, a detached and alienated scoundrel who lives on the margins of society who, and a perceptive, adaptable survivor able to understand and navigate this ‘post-culture’ world: the only character capable of navigating the varying landscapes of time and space. Lee alone can go into the desert and make it back out, and he alone can act as a last surviving image of the cowboy, a man who successfully lives by his own rules.<sup>20</sup>

While the brothers appear to mirror one another as polar opposites, they also exchange character traits and ultimately switch positions all together, creating double images of each other. Megan Williams observes that “The endless doubling of Austin and Lee allegorizes two ways modern man attempts to solve his feelings of placelessness and alienation,” and while “Austin clings to the image of living in the desert *with* his brother, he reveals contemporary man’s lingering nostalgia for a family connection that inscribes his identity in time,” an identity in relation to the collective history of America (58). Williams continues her comparison of the brothers, observing that as a binary opposition to Austin’s incapacity to leave his sibling, “Lee stands as a self-declared ‘free agent.’ He registers a potentially positive sense of freedom which accompanies man when he loses his nostalgia for history and realizes that identity and the past are only

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20 The term “successfully” is applied loosely here. Lee’s actions are “successful” only to the point that he is able to come and go within this conflicted setting; his flaws are self-evident. I merely aim to show that his character traits are uniquely functional in the play. He is the character who is closest to getting what he wants, but his incessant need to belittle his brother and flaunt his “freedom” is ultimately his downfall.



myths to be performed and manipulated” (58). The “doubling” Williams describes is yet another consistent theme of the play, a recurring set of mirror images, bipolar tendencies, and binary oppositions. Lee and Austin are presented at the beginning of the play as complete opposites of one another, but the more time they spend together, the more their individual identities begin to disintegrate. By the end of the play, it is Austin, not Lee, who has stolen all the neighbors’ toasters and tried to kill his brother out of desperation. While Williams focuses on character action and inaction, she raises an important concept: the connections between identity, place, and time.<sup>21</sup>

In Shepard’s theatrical world, the Whitmanian throngs of Americans united by a shared set of ideals and desire for westward expansion have all but disappeared, leaving his characters with an anxiety that echoes the anxieties Shepard himself expresses in interviews. Shepard claims that American culture is “destroyed....There is no culture here. It’s shreds of stuff. We’re amongst shrapnel” (Bartels 77). The unease that this “destroyed” culture creates is at once terrifying and liberating; it leaves Shepard (and by extension his characters and audience) reminiscing about and longing for an America that may never have existed, the fabled America represented in patriotic songs and movies. Gerri Reaves observes a connection between national and individual identities, stating, “Whether an author views America as an ideology, a set of cultural codes, a geographical place, a metaphorical space, a myth, a fiction, or even a state of mind, that vision defines the sense of self and structures an autobiographical discourse” (2-3). By this logic, if one’s culture is “destroyed,” a national identity (and even a sense of self) becomes difficult to define. At the same time, the absence of culture indicates that there is a void that can be filled however the writer sees fit; if no concrete system exists, the artist is free to shape it into whatever

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21 See also Mark Busby’s “Sam Shepard and Frontier Gothic” (1993). Busby claims that the rift between Lee and Austin represents a larger divide: the “two sides of the American present: one sophisticated, cultured, ambitious, and successful; the other alienated and outcast, raw, wild, and violent” (86).

he chooses. Unfortunately, the brothers' artistic ability to create a cohesive or satisfying vision of the world is stifled in *True West*. As Jeanette Malkin observes, "the "true West" figures lack the strength to imagine a whole past and thus to re-create a real world. They always fade and are usually replaced by textualized and unmemoried postmodern images" (126).

In place of the idealized Americana of the past, we are thrust into a postmodern world of fear and uncertainty. Megan Williams offers a particularly useful discussion of the postmodern resonances in *True West* as well as the struggle the characters go through in defining their relationships to one another. She explains that "in Shepard's depiction of our late twentieth-century cultural moment, man realizes that he has lost a stable sense of identity and of history" (58). The civilized suburban neighborhood does not embody the classic American identity that the brothers crave, but rather leaves them searching for a place that offers any sense of authenticity. Austin and Lee mention at various points throughout the play that they see an artificial element to the very construct of society, and they express their anxieties about what happens to the men who inhabit such artificial places. Character identity in *True West* is directly tied to location, and while the heterotopia of deviation allows Lee and Austin to act upon their deviant desires to live beyond the perceived restraints of suburban life, their self-imposed retreat or exile in their mother's desert home ultimately leads to the dissolution of their individual identities.

## **II. Heterotopic Qualities in *True West***

Foucault describes five main principles that govern heterotopic spaces, and one of the most striking characteristics is that "the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (25). Foucault also tells us that the theatre itself is a heterotopia because it is "brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another," and so we see in *True*

*West* a heterotopia within a heterotopia and characters who search for yet *another* heterotopia beyond the ones they already inhabit (25). One of the primary reasons that Austin and Lee are discontent is because they fail to see that they are already in a heterotopic space. The brothers are already positioned in a place where they may operate by their own rules. The entire action of the play takes place within the same set: an average, middle-class kitchen in the characters' childhood home. It is a stereotypical room that is void of many uniquely defining characteristics. However, because Shepard's detail is so specific, the stage directions should be closely considered as integral to understanding the play. The set is described as:

*...a kitchen and adjoining alcove of an older home in a Southern California suburb, about 40 miles east of Los Angeles. The kitchen takes up most of the playing area to stage left. The kitchen consists of a sink, upstage center, surrounded by counter space, a wall telephone, cupboards, and a small window just above it bordered by neat yellow curtains. Stage left of sink is a stove. Stage right, a refrigerator. (Shepard 3)*

The only distinctive quality described at this point is the set of yellow curtains, but even though they are a cheery color and the fabric adds softness to the space, they are described as "neat," indicating that the person who lives there is orderly. There is an odd contrast between the warm tone and "neatness" of the yellow curtains, a detail that at once points to the care the resident puts into the home as well as a subtle feeling of sterility.<sup>22</sup>

At first glance, the house looks like an average, albeit utilitarian home, but the stage directions reveal that the very home where Austin hopes to find a doorway to his heterotopia of

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<sup>22</sup> I posit that the yellow curtains are meant to function as the one lighthearted place in the kitchen, the only splash of "happy" color on the set other than the plants – that is, at least, in the beginning of the play. However, yellow is also a color that often represents sickness, an interpretation which also works within the parameters of the plot.

deviation is, in itself, a multi-dimensional heterotopic space. The subtle contrast between the warm tone and “neatness” of the yellow curtains is not the only one we see on set. While the space does not have much character of its own up until this point, it gets more interesting when Shepard describes the adjoining alcove to stage right of the kitchen area:

*There is no wall division or door to the alcove. It is open and easily accessible from the kitchen and defined only by the objects in it: a small round glass breakfast table mounted on white iron legs, two matching white iron chairs set across from each other. The two exterior walls of the alcove which prescribe a corner in the upstage right are composed of many small windows, beginning from a solid wall about three feet high and extending to the ceiling. The windows look out to bushes and citrus trees. The alcove is filled with all sorts of house plants in various pots, mostly Boston ferns hanging in planters at different levels. The floor of the alcove is composed of green synthetic grass. All entrances and exits are made stage left from the kitchen. There is no door. The actors simply go off and come onto the playing area. (Shepard 3)*

Rather than being defined by the standard borders one would expect to find in a building (even a staged one), the space is “defined only by the objects in it,” which reflects the lonely artificiality of societal structures that the brothers perceive and find uncomfortable. One of the few objects mentioned in the room is a small, transparent, glass table, and it is only accompanied by two chairs; this is not the family table, but rather the table of an empty home. The glass top causes the table to blend in with the background, and the fact that there are only two chairs prohibits the possibility of more than one person visiting at a time, an indication that the person who lives in this house has reconciled herself to the understanding that there is no use for a place for the

family to gather because the family is broken. Thus, Austin is incorrect in his assumption that his mother's home still thoroughly embodies the societal norms he hopes to escape.

Rather, the only aspect of social and physical structure that appears in this home is one of artificiality – not a firmly constructed building in which Austin is trapped, nor the seemingly confining demands of family life, the likes of which drove his father into the deviant heterotopia of the desert. Furthermore, the house satisfies Foucault's defining principle of juxtaposition in more obvious ways than what the "neat yellow curtains" create. Foucault offers us the example of a garden as a heterotopic space; it is a microcosm, where seemingly unrelated elements meet (25-6). For instance, one might find plants from many different countries combined in one artificial, idealized space. Similarly, the home of Austin and Lee's mother is a heterotopic microcosm, where seemingly unrelated fragments of Americana are put together and juxtaposed; we are constantly reminded of the desert just outside of the home, but we also find Boston ferns and dinner plates with Idaho decals, which are identified by Lee as foreign objects. Lee exclaims that the house contains nothing of meaning, "Just a lotta' junk," and that "Most of it's phony anyway" (Shepard 10). Lee sees the juxtaposition of Idaho plates in a California home as not only strange, but even menacing:

Now who in the hell wants to eat offa' plate with the State of Idaho starin' ya' in the face... I don't wann' be invaded by Idaho when I'm eatin'. When I'm eatin' I'm home. Ya' know what I'm sayin'? I'm not driftin', I'm home. I don't need my thoughts swept off to Idaho. I don't need that! (Shepard 10)

By comparison, the abundance of house plants does not immediately appear unusual or incongruous with the rest of the home, especially in a room with so many windows. However, Shepard is specific in stating that the ferns are Boston ferns in a California desert home. The

plants are out of place, much like the brothers who have returned to their mother's home in her absence after being gone for an undetermined length of time.

The home, while functioning as a heterotopia in many ways, does not offer the mythic satisfaction that the brothers seek. Thus, the brothers inhabit one heterotopia while fixating on and looking for access to another heterotopic space where they hope to undergo some unclearly defined transformations into "authentic" versions of themselves. In every way – psychologically, physically, emotionally – the brothers are in a liminal "betwixt and between" state of being (V. Turner 95). Much like the heterotopic elements of *True West*, liminal qualities of the play exist in the setting Shepard describes in his stage directions and in the increasingly blurred distinctions between character identities.

### **III. Blurred Lines: Liminal Spaces and People of *True West***

The juxtaposition between the microcosm of the home, the macrocosm of the desert outside, and the unusual blending thereof highlights the growing tension between the brothers and their tangled identities. Character and place are inextricably tied in *True West*, and I argue that the lack of concrete borders (specifically the lack of distinct divisions between areas of the house) provides insight into the play as a whole. As the story progresses, the lines between space, temporality, and character identity begin to blur until we are overcome by the collective frustration and anxiety of the space and its inhabitants. This indistinct border between the domestic and wild heterotopic spheres functions as a liminal space, a state of being on the transitory "threshold" between both physical and metaphorical boundaries, as defined by Arnold van Gennep and later Victor Turner (V. Turner 95).

Here I assume van Gennep's definition that refers to liminal spaces as "in-between situations and conditions that are characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the rever-

sal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes” (van Gennep 11). In this way, liminal spaces function in a similar manner to heterotopias; that is, they act as spaces where people are allowed to behave in ways that do not fit with the rest of society. Like Foucault’s concept of heterotopic spaces, liminal spaces have ritual resonances as places where some important physical, spiritual, or psychological change or action is meant to occur. Liminal spaces, according to van Gennep, are specifically linked to “rites of transition” or “rites of passage,” during which a person moves from one phase of life to another through a series of significant ritualistic actions (11).

The indistinct physical and cerebral boundaries in the play indicate the existence of a liminal, in-between space through which Lee and Austin must pass if they are to access the heterotopic space of deviation they envision waiting in the desert just outside of their mother’s home and the borders of her town. The borders of the room are further blurred by the central presence of windows and notable absence of doors. There is a subtle, underlying tension between the natural world and the artificiality of the domesticated realm, which is emphasized by the unstable boundaries separating the two. Nearly the entire wall of the alcove is transparent, revealing the citrus trees that serve as a buffer between the house and the desert beyond (Shepard 3). When it is night, the darkness of the night sky invades the interior of the house, shrouding the outside world in mystery – but the knowledge that the wilderness is just beyond thin panes of glass remains ever clear to the characters and audience, as it is frequently mentioned (jarringly interjected into dialogue at times), and the crickets and coyotes act as the soundtrack and constant reminder that the freedom the characters desire is just beyond the doorless room.

The characters and scenery mirror one another, and as the set becomes increasingly liminal, so do its inhabitants. Foucault provides yet another principle governing heterotopias that is

useful for explaining why the brothers are ultimately unable to access their ideal Western space, stating that “heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (26). In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place, because “Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications” (Foucault 26). Because the brothers are intentionally seeking out the heterotopia, they must fall under the second option for entering the space. In some way, the brothers must undergo some sort of change that makes them worthy of what the heterotopia represents. However, Shepard’s West has already lost most of its “authenticity” because the culture ascribing meaning to it has been “destroyed” (Bartels 77). Without a culturally based ritual through which the brothers can gain access to the heterotopic space, an alternate avenue must be available. I suggest that the reason Lee is able to pass through the liminal space of the home and bring elements of the heterotopia of deviation back is that Lee is an example of what Victor Turner calls “liminal personae”:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (95)



As a liminal persona, Lee exists “betwixt and between” the domestic and wild spheres. His character identity is not easily defined, as he simultaneously represents the lawless desert (having returned to town with the intention of stealing from his mother’s neighbors) while occupying his mother’s home and reminding his brother of the rules of the house: “You keepin’ the plants watered?... Keepin’ the sink clean? She don’t like even a single tea leaf in the sink ya’ know” (Shepard 5). While he possesses knowledge of the desert, we are never sure that his information is reliable – as we shall see, his accounts of coyotes are contrary to Shepard’s specific stage directions – and so Lee is not clearly defined as either a full initiate into desert life or a true member of the structured domestic world. Lee makes it clear that Austin is incapable of entering the desert; Austin’s identity is too embedded with the societal norms that he wishes to discard. As the play progresses, boundaries become blurred, including the boundaries between the home and the desert, between right and wrong, and between the brothers’ individual personalities.

Ron Mottram draws on Shepard’s personal experience to offer an explanation for his frequent use of the desert landscape in his plays, stating that the desert, despite its forbidding nature, “fascinates Shepard” and “recurs repeatedly in his plays as a setting for the action and as a refuge for the absent father no longer able to live with his family, who at the extreme is alienated from all normal social contact” (3-4).<sup>23</sup> For Shepard, the desert is a place where fathers disappear when they are too emotionally damaged by the trauma of war (both actual and internal) for them to function within the domesticated sphere of the family unit. Such is the case with Lee and Austin’s father. The father, although never physically present on stage, becomes a Derridian ghost

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<sup>23</sup> In his book, Mottram makes lengthy comparisons between Shepard’s dramatic works and his personal life. Specifically, Mottram draws parallels between the way Shepard depicts fathers in his plays with Shepard’s own father, who returned from war wounded and distant (1-3).

whose physical absence creates a premature death of sorts, allowing him to hover over the entire plot – serving as either a threat or a promise of what the brothers could become. He is simultaneously vilified and admired, for he lives beyond the laws of society; he has been sent to the heterotopia of deviation, as far as we can see, because he failed within society and thus became an outcast. Austin identifies with his father to an extent and wishes to follow him, but Austin’s attempts to enter the heterotopic space are impeded because he does not meet the proper criteria.

However, when discussing the way Shepard intends the audience to view the brothers, Megan Williams says that “Shepard warns the audience against applying any totalizing ‘symbolic’ analysis to Austin and Lee, yet the very idea of a ‘two-sided’ nature asks the audience to define the conflict between these two shifting ‘sides’ – to discover what Lee and Austin allegorize or represent” (60). Williams ultimately suggests “that Lee represents the ‘side’ of contemporary man which realizes that history and individual subjectivity no longer exist in his present. The conflict that drives *True West* occurs when Austin is pulled between a double desire. He wishes both to relinquish himself to the positive freedom and anonymity of Lee’s present and to contest the negative ‘terror’ and placelessness that accompany it” (60). In this sense, Austin is trapped not only by the confines of civilized society, but also by his inability to decide or act.<sup>24</sup> Although Shepard hopes to dissuade his audience from applying “symbolic analysis” to the brothers, it is difficult to ignore such a clear resemblance to the Biblical and archetypal characters they seem to represent.

### III. The Convergence of Heterotopic and Liminal Elements

*True West* is largely about the limitations of human beings and the difficulty of defining one’s personal identity. While Austin becomes more like Lee toward the end of the play, the

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<sup>24</sup> Austin is trapped, not by the physical space of the home (as there are no doors to hold him in), but the prison cell of his own mind and his immature dependence on his brother – a dependence he can only break by attempting fratricide.

primary tension arises when each character tries to “cross-over” to the other side. There is a distinct anxiety when Lee tries his hand at screenwriting and when Austin tries his hand at stealing. Shepard may be asking the audience to attempt the impossible, as the bipolarities of the brothers cannot be any clearer – that is, until the end of the play, when a reversal occurs and Austin succumbs to his anger, becoming Cain rather than Abel. Conversely, while Lee is an instigator, he does not consistently maintain the guise of “Cain,” of the altogether malicious and destructive brother. That is not to say that he doesn’t do these things – he does, and he provokes Austin with incredible efficiency – but his character is much more fluid, and his true intentions and allegiances are never fully clear, making him a truly liminal persona.

These binary characteristics are not simply exclusive to the characters, and this leads us back to the setting of the play and the larger landscape that is constantly referenced by the brothers. If we are to understand how the polarities of the brothers function, leading us to some understanding (or at least questioning) of an individual’s relationship to the world at large, then we must continue to examine how the individual works with and within the desert. Wendy Lesser observes that “When characters turn out to be symbols-even if symbols of each other-there is always a grave danger that their weight will bring down the structure of the play they inhabit” (19). However, this is not the case in *True West*, where the structure of the play is built on the strong foundation of a powerful yet changing landscape. The connection between person and place is so strong in Shepard’s world that it becomes difficult to distinguish which has dominion over the other. Don Shewey accounts for this connection between people and the land they inhabit, quoting Shepard:

‘There are areas like Wyoming, Texas, Montana, and places like that, where you really feel this ancient thing about the land. Ancient... It has to do with the rela-

tionship between the land and the people – between the human being and the ground. I think that’s typically Western and much more attractive than this tight little forest civilization that happened back East. It’s much more physical and emotional to me...’ (5)

Thus, to say that the Mojave Desert plays a central role in *True West* would be a gross understatement; it is a driving force, ever-present and ever-powerful, even for those (like Shepard) who eventually leave. The landscape itself dominates the mind of the individual, constantly challenging and invading the notions of personhood and community.

In *True West*, the landscape is almost anthropomorphic; it pervades the story, gradually encroaching on the “civilized” suburban home, conducting its cacophonous orchestra of crickets and coyotes as its siren-like voice, calling to the brothers. It represents a place beyond the confines of life after adventure, once all the frontiers have been conquered. The voice of this desert is strong, and it steadily invades the domestic space of the home. It is not merely background noise, but an integral part of the storyline. Shepard includes a special “Note on Sound” in the stage directions at the very beginning of the play, in which he states:

*The Coyote of Southern California has a distinct yapping, dog-like bark, similar to a Hyena. This yapping grows more intense and maniacal as the pack grows in numbers, which is usually the case when they lure and kill pets from suburban yards. The sense of growing frenzy in the pack should be felt in the background, particularly in Scenes 7 and 8. In any case, these Coyotes never make the long, mournful, solitary howl of the Hollywood stereotype. The sound of Crickets can speak for itself. These sounds should also be treated realistically even though they sometimes grow in volume and numbers. (4)*

Coyotes function as particularly strong voices of the desert. Even the way Shepard types the word indicates significance; both the words “Coyote” and “Crickets” are capitalized, as though they were actual, personified characters with proper names. They are the ambassadors of the desert, serving as the voice of the land. They are the sirens that call to Austin, promising a life beyond convention, but really luring him to a further destruction of his identity. However, Austin is no Odysseus, and there is no real frontier left to discover. Rather than being associated with a great warrior/ adventuring king, Austin’s character is equated to the pets that are lured away from suburban yards, only to be killed by the pack he hopes to join. At once, the coyotes represent a solitary, isolated lifestyle, far from the jungle of Hollywood suburbia, and also another kind of society, a wild, uninhibited group of men being men in a desert without rules.

While the coyotes represent all that is natural and wild, there is also something artificial about the “yapping” coyotes in and around the town. Likewise, it is assumed by the brothers that men can howl in the desert, instead of being stuck in domestic “yapping.” All that lies beyond the “safety” of their mother’s suburban home, that temple of artificiality, is further destruction of his identity as a modern, “cultured” man. The coyotes supposedly “howl” in the wild, as Lee claims, based on his Hollywood-influenced image of the Wild West, which contradicts the stage directions Shepard provides; Shepard insists that the “yapping” sound is more authentic than the Hollywood “howl,” and so the reliability of Lee’s description is questionable, even though he has supposedly been in the desert long enough to speak about the inauthenticity of the urban sprawl that is destroying the “natural” landscape he identifies with and admires (Shepard 10).

This larger question of what is “natural” and “authentic” versus what is “artificial” encapsulates the entirety of the play, further complicating the relationship between man and nature. There is an obvious tension between the characters over what “art” actually is. Austin labors

away to try and create something original (despite the fact that he's working on a clichéd period piece romance), while Lee jumps into screenwriting without any formal training, knowingly and enthusiastically relying on overused tropes and clichés while recreating his version of the mythologized American West that could help shape a sense of national belonging.

As Wendy Lesser argues in her 1980 theatre review of *True West*, "What Shepard's play does, finally, is to give us [a] sense of illusion and at the same time undermine it. By enlisting us in his mockery of Hollywood, his parody of communion ("What is all this bullshit with toast? You make it sound like salvation or something," Lee says at one point to Austin), his dissection of cliché, Shepard makes us see how much we really depend on the illusions created by art, by ritual, by language. For he understands-as do all good playwrights- that those illusions may well be our only access to reality" (19). However, the rituals in *True West* have lost their meaning. The heterotopic and liminal space that the brothers occupy no longer holds cultural currency. Lee and Austin fail to realize any potential within the modernized culture of the American West. The multi-faceted layers of illusion and uncertainty in *True West* obfuscate the value of what is within reach, exposing the anxiety of losing a sense of self and connection to others.

Shepard's characters battle with each other, and even themselves, searching the depths of their minds for a glimpse of who they think they should be. The play speaks to its post-modern audience as fellow products of a dead culture, as fellow seekers of something, *anything* authentic. By the end of the play, all divisions between space and character have disappeared. At the height of tension in the play, the home looks like a desert wasteland: "*Mid-Day. No sound, blazing heat, the stage is ravaged; bottles, toasters, smashed typewriter; ripped out telephone, etc. All the debris from previous scene is now starkly visible in intense yellow light, the effect should be like a desert junkyard at high noon*" (Shepard 50).

We are left without a true conclusion; the last time the brothers are on stage, they “*square off to each other, keeping a distance between them... the figures of the brothers now appear to be caught in a vast desert-like landscape, they are very still but watchful for the next move, lights go slowly to black as the after-image... pulses in the dark*” (Shepard 59). Perhaps the lack of a tidy conclusion is the only thing that is not illusionary in the play. It may be the only clear statement we have. Identities are not clearly defined, nor are the boundaries of our world, despite the solidity of the physicality and personality of the desert. Shepard inverts nearly all traditional images of home and the American West, rewriting the postmodern space as a new, alternative West. Thus, the characters and audience grope in the darkness for something real, authentic, while they continue to find little more than synthetic grass to grab hold of in the hostile, fragmented, and inadequate environment that is twentieth-century suburbia.

## CHAPTER TWO: LOOKING WEST IN McDONAGH'S *LEENANE TRILOGY*

In his depictions of the Irish West throughout *The Leenane Trilogy*, Martin McDonagh presents his audience with a place that is at once heterotopic and liminal, where characters struggle with the loss or rejection of a unifying national identity. Much like Sam Shepard's depiction of the American West, McDonagh creates an alternative reading of the West of Ireland by subverting traditional assumptions about the space and its residents. Through his stage directions and character dialogue, McDonagh draws from and exaggerates common Irish stereotypes and misconceptions in order to reveal a West that, instead of being the bastion of Irish culture and traditional folkways depicted by the Irish Literary Revival, is a place of discontent, detachment, and contradiction.<sup>25</sup> As Patrick Lonergan observes in a recent review of *The Leenane Trilogy*, the plays have gained popularity because of "their delinquent humour, their rootedness in (but distance from) the Irish dramatic tradition, their wilfully transgressive attitude – and, in particular, their disorientating blend of the past with the present" ("Beauty Queen"). The West we see in the *Leenane Trilogy* is no longer the pastoral haven of Yeats, but rather a space where characters are simultaneously disconnected from and haunted by their heritage. Instead of finding comfort in a collective national identity, the residents of McDonagh's West at once feel trapped by but disconnected from their homes, families, and neighbors.

This chapter will trace McDonagh's treatment of space across the span of all three plays in *The Leenane Trilogy*, with a focus on *The Lonesome West*, which, as the culmination of the trilogy, is where the unstated anxieties about a mythologized past become apparent through the dysfunctional relationships between characters and the infertile and ultimately deadly landscape. The concept of the West as a place of authenticity and as the seat of true national identity lurks in the background of McDonagh's plots, and reminders of a past, more traditional Ireland (whether

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<sup>25</sup> See Declan Kiberd's *The Irish Writer and the World*.



realistic or romanticized) are never far from the surface. Throughout the course of the plays, remnants of folkways are specifically mentioned in both stage directions and character dialogue. Conventional symbols of a thriving, romanticized Ireland –hearths, crucifixes, and farmstead tools – are subverted or ignored, devoid of their former meanings. While McDonagh has been criticized for his harsh treatment of Irish culture, he writes with culturally informed, conventional interpretations of the West in mind.<sup>26</sup> The *Leenane Trilogy* ultimately challenges and manipulates traditional understandings of Ireland in order to expose the challenges that life in a modern world poses to these readings. McDonagh’s treatment of the Irish West mirrors Sam Shepard’s American West. I suggest that because both Wests have similar mythic resonance, McDonagh’s depiction of Ireland examines the nature of life in an increasingly global community and the ramifications of losing a strong sense of national and personal identity.

Eamonn Walls observes similarities in the way writers have traditionally portrayed both the American and Irish Wests. Western regions in both America and Ireland have complicated histories that have long fascinated writers, and Walls posits that many contemporary Irish texts “arise from those parts of the physical and psychic landscapes where fissures have emerged” (xv). Furthermore, Walls suggests that “Literary and moral imaginations have been formed by interactions with place, space and a natural world that exists in free play with the human,” and that ecology is “one of the roots of creativity” in both the American and Irish Wests (xv). While not all Irish writers have explicitly expressed a desire for stronger connections to the physical landscape of the country, most at the very least acknowledge that such a connection has long been a part of the Irish literary tradition.<sup>27</sup> The characters in McDonagh’s portrayal of Leenane

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<sup>26</sup> Robert L. King’s “The Irish and Others” is perhaps the most scathing review of McDonagh’s work to date.

<sup>27</sup> To clarify, I do not mean to imply that urban-centered Irish writers have weaker bonds with their Irish heritage than nature-centered authors. For instance, James Joyce was clearly influenced by the urban-

have all but lost their connections to the land, and by the time we reach *The Lonesome West*, characters like Valene attempt to establish a sense of place and ownership – Valene does so by creating a visual border between his and Colman’s halves of their family home with tape. Through McDonagh’s use of heterotopic and liminal elements, sets and general descriptions of the Irish West become darker and less welcoming as the trilogy progresses, revealing a general breakdown of social structures when old systems of understanding the world no longer provide stability. As the culminating piece in the trilogy, *The Lonesome West* represents McDonagh’s final vision of the West of Ireland. At the center of this play, as in Shepard’s *True West*, is a pair of feuding brothers. Father Welsh laments the strife between the brothers: “Ah Valene, now. If it’s your own brother you can’t get on with, how can we ever hope for peace in the world” (McDonagh 200). The volatile interaction between Coleman and Valene not only reveals the internal anxieties of living in a postmodern world, but seems to represent the relationships of all people in an increasingly globalized world. In this way, the broken – or at least damaged - relationship between Coleman and Valene hints at the idea that the West of Ireland represents a microcosm for all of Ireland, or perhaps even a global community.

The heterotopic elements of *The Leenane Trilogy* are more abstract and encompassing than its liminal qualities, but there are far more clearly liminal aspects to McDonagh’s West. The prevalence of liminal elements in the trilogy indicate that the fate of McDonagh’s characters is not fully determined; they are still in an in-between condition, but there is no indication that they will be caught in a state of stasis permanently like the brothers of *True West*. Despite the violence, fractured ties to national identity, and a repeatedly expressed desire to leave Ireland, the final play of the trilogy (and McDonagh’s final word of the subject) is not without hope. While

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ized space of Dublin, but I would not immediately picture him as having strong ties to the “natural world.”

there is little hope that the residents of McDonagh's West will recover or renew their ties to the past notions of Irishness, the liminal characters and spaces indicate that there is the possibility of creating new interpersonal ties and shared identities.

The first breakdown of connection we see in the trilogy is the loss of cultural ties to the mythologized West portrayed in the Celtic Revival. We see this gradually intensifying break with culture through the subversion of traditional Irish symbols of home and community. The first of these symbols of the old Irish West, and perhaps the most significant, that McDonagh incorporates into his trilogy is the image of the hearth. E. Estyn Evans explains the folkloric significance of the hearth in traditional Irish life:

The kitchen and the hearth are the very core of the Irish house, and the turf fire burning continuously day and night, throughout the year, is the symbol both of family continuity and of hospitality towards the stranger. When it goes out, it has been said, the soul goes out of the people of the house. (Evans 59)

McDonagh subverts the symbol of the hearth throughout the trilogy. In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the hearth and fire within becomes a destructive force rather than a life-sustaining one – Mag burns Maureen's letter from Pato in the stove, and the fire poker that is usually used as an instrument for maintaining warmth in the home ultimately becomes a murder weapon (McDonagh 59-70). The hearth also traditionally serves a communal purpose, as the place for family and friends to gather and share entertaining or important stories that preserve and pass on traditions (Evans 62-3). However, for McDonagh's characters, the hearth has lost its unifying purpose as a center of communication and instead leads to the destruction of communication through the burnt letter in *Beauty Queen*, lingering meditations on death and guilt in *A*

*Skull in Connemara*, and the commodification and annihilation of family and religious structures in *The Lonesome West*.

In addition to dissolving lines of communication and family bonds, McDonagh manipulates religious symbols to further emphasize the divide between the modern inhabitants of Leenane and their collective national history. McDonagh manipulates the image of the crucifix across the span of the trilogy, and introduces commodification and lack of symbolic resonance in religious structures when he introduces fiberglass figurines of saints in *The Lonesome West*. In the introductory stage directions for each play in the trilogy, McDonagh explicitly describes a crucifix hanging on the wall – in *Beauty Queen*, it appears beside a framed picture of JFK and Robert Kennedy; in *A Skull in Connemara*, it hangs beside unused farm tools; and in *The Lonesome West*, it finally hangs beneath the double-barrel shotgun that was used to commit patricide before the play begins. The position of the crucifix in *Beauty Queen* signifies connections between Ireland and America and hints at the desire to be somewhere other than the Irish West. In *A Skull in Connemara*, the crucifix is ignored, just like the neglected tools beside it. In *The Lonesome West*, the crucifix is disregarded until the very end of the play, but its position beneath a murder weapon suggests that the item's significance has been so forgotten, ignored, or stripped that the characters value it less than objects of violence. McDonagh further subverts religious symbols in *The Lonesome West* through the treatment of Valene's fiberglass figurines of saints. Valene fixates on the figurines, often referencing them and going to great lengths to mark them as his own possessions while simultaneously treating Father Welsh – a living representative of the church – with less reverence than the inanimate symbols of his wealth and financial domination over his brother.

Finally, the third predominant symbol of tradition that McDonagh subverts is the image of farm tools. The most obvious manipulation of the symbolic meaning attached to a tool in *The Leenane Trilogy* appears in *A Skull in Connemara*. Not only do most of the farming tools simply hang unused on the wall, but the only tool we see serving a purpose is a spade or shovel. Traditionally, “the Irish spade is much more than a gardening tool: it was, and still is in backward areas and in the boglands, an implement for field cultivation and for cutting turf” – the two most life-sustaining activities performed in an agriculturally based society (Evans 127). In McDonagh’s world, however, characters misuse, lack, or possess broken spades. *A Skull in Connemara* is arguably the most “grounded” play. Instead of focusing on London or America (like the characters do in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*), or focusing on the microcosm of the home or macrocosm of abstract places like Heaven and Hell, *A Skull in Connemara* remains focused on Ireland, the community, the dirt of the cemetery, and the abyss of a lake. The middle play of the trilogy centers on Mick, a man who has been commissioned by his local parish to dig up and crush the bones of dead residents in order to make room in the church graveyard for new corpses.

Instead of participation in the life-affirming traditions of farming and digging turf, we see the bastardization of the agricultural tradition that commonly characterizes the West of Ireland and disconnect between person and place. Because some residents don’t even own a spade, the most basic tool found in Irish folk tradition, we see a distinct disconnect between past and present-day life. Mick even complains that the youth in Connemara “Don’t know the first thing about Irish history” (117). Not only are the characters breaking with tradition, they are completely oblivious to it. Because of these breaks with tradition (whether conscious or unconscious), and because of multiple meanings and an overwhelming impression of placelessness, it is clear that

McDonagh's West is a conceptual space that is both a heterotopia of deviation in which characters operate outside of societal norms and a liminal space that is constantly in flux between the past, present, sacred and mundane.

### **I. McDonagh's Heterotopic West**

McDonagh's depiction of the West is a heterotopic space. Early in the trilogy, it becomes obvious to the audience and to Father Welsh that the actions of Leenane residents are deviant from what is acceptable elsewhere – characters lie, steal, commit murder without guilt or punishment, and disrespect or completely disregard the religious system they purportedly subscribe to. Father Welsh's exclamation during one of many crises of faith is telling. When he dejectedly claims that "God has no jurisdiction here," Welsh reveals that the rural parish for which he is responsible exists beyond not only the jurisdiction and social laws of the rest of the country, but beyond the rule of an omnipresent and supposedly all-powerful God (McDonagh 175). Welsh's statement implies that the space he inhabits is somehow different from everywhere else, including the rest of Ireland, and I posit that this is because the space is a heterotopia of deviation. However, the characters are, for the most part, unaware of their position within the heterotopia. Herein lies a large problem that complicates the structure of the heterotopic space. According to Foucault's description of such spaces, heterotopias have symbolic cultural and ritualistic resonance, but McDonagh's West complicates things by creating characters who are in many ways cut off from the traditional culture that ascribes meaning to the heterotopias they inhabit.

McDonagh's West is both heterotopic and liminal, as it juxtaposes the antiquated and modern. The characters and their towns are caught between times, in a paradoxical state of perpetual transition into modernization. Much of their news is delivered through gossip, while many of their radio programs are in Gaelic (a language that they, as residents of Western Ireland, are

expected to know but do not), and their television programs are typically foreign and at least a decade old. McDonagh's version of Galway is isolated, lonely, and behind the times. The residents in *Beauty Queen* are constantly reminded of the fact that they live in a place that is removed from the rest of Ireland.

Eamonn Jordan observes that "Temporal cohesion and specificity are denied across the Leenane Trilogy, because no specific time period can be established from the facts of the play" (221). Throughout the trilogy, characters reference television shows from the 1950s and 1960s as if they were current while also referencing products, shows, and music from the late 1980s and early 1990s. There are moments where characters and their villages appear to inhabit multiple periods of time at once. The absence of a specific sense of time implies that the characters are in a state of limbo or exist outside of time altogether, and the temporal inconsistencies allow for the inclusion of objects and ideas from many eras to occupy the set at once – a time-based variation on Foucault's principle of heterotopic juxtaposition – and also indicates that the space is liminal, paradoxically stuck in a state of transition (25).

Foucault specifically mentions the connection between time and space, explaining that "Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time-which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, *heterochronies*. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (26). In this sense, McDonagh's West is not a true-to-life representation of the Irish West; it is a conceptual space that has somehow been removed from the rest of the world, and if we are to assume Eamonn Walls's position that interpretations of the West are "formed by interactions with place, space and a natural world that exists in free play with the human" we will see that the gradually

increasing distance between McDonagh's characters and the land points to a sense of placelessness and ultimately a loss or confusion of identity (xv).

## II. Liminal Spaces

Not only is McDonagh's West a heterotopia of deviation, it is also a liminal space, caught physically "betwixt and between" England and America, and figuratively between periods of time. The Irish West in *The Leenane Trilogy* is in a paradoxical state of stasis and transition – people pass through or long to escape from Ireland. As Maureen observes in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, "That's Ireland, anyways. There's always someone leaving" (31). While the characters are in a position of stasis, the world continues to move around them. Because they have lost a sense of place and a strong sense of identity, they have also become directionless; instead of progressing fully into modern life, the characters instead appear to be locked in a cyclical, destructive set of patterns.

Connections to the natural world steadily dissolve throughout the course of the trilogy. In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the landscape is met with indifference by Ray: "Who wants to see Ireland on telly? ...All you have to do is look out your window to see Ireland. And it's soon bored you'd be. 'There goes a calf'" (McDonagh 76). In *A Skull in Connemara*, the natural world is dead or dying, the farms neglected for the sake of graveyard maintenance, as revealed in an exchange between Mick and Mairtin:

Mairtin: There's been a cow in our field dead four or five years...

Mick: I know there has. And that's the best cow you have.

Mairtin: No, no, now. Not the best cow we have. It wasn't even our cow at all.

Didn't it just wander into our fields one day and fall over dead? (McDonagh 101)



This brief conversation illustrates just how broken the connection between character and land has become, and one gets the impression that the land is so corrupt that it not only fails to produce new life, but it is also capable of ending life all together. The digging of graves becomes a bastardization of farming practices that not only indicates that the West is operating as a heterotopic space, but also that it is liminal, because living characters occupy a dead land, effectively becoming ghosts before their time.

Most references to land have disappeared by the time we reach *The Lonesome West*. The only natural feature mentioned in *The Lonesome West* is the lake, and based on the happenings of *A Skull in Connemara*, we know that the bones of dead locals are crushed and thrown (or “gently eased,” as Mick puts it) into the lake (McDonagh 101). We also know early on in the play that the sheriff, Tom Hanolon, drowned himself in the lake. The lake, like the land, *should* be considered a fertile, life-sustaining, and peaceful landscape feature, but McDonagh subverts traditional ideas associated with the symbol in order to create an alternative, more complicated reading of the space. In many ways, the lake is a liminal space that is literally between sky and earth (like windows). When Father Welsh follows Tom Hanolon’s lead and takes his life by walking into the lake, he enters a liminal place between the earth-bound world of the living and the ethereal world of the sky. It is Father Welsh out of all the characters in *The Leenane Trilogy* who is able to pass beyond the physical constraints of the Irish West. Because he appears on stage after his death to read a suicide note that reaches out to the dueling brothers Colman and Valene from beyond the grave, I suggest that Father Welsh is a liminal persona, and as such is perhaps the most important figure in *The Leenane Trilogy*.

### III. Father Welsh: Liminal Persona

In order to ground my discussion of liminal characters, I turn once again to Victor Turner's definition of "liminal personae," or 'threshold people.' Liminal personae "are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (V. Turner 95). These individuals "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial," and "their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions" (V. Turner 95).

The most overtly liminal personae of the *Leenane Trilogy* is Father Welsh. Until his appearance in *The Lonesome West*, Welsh has no fixed identity. He is defined by a lack of definition, by ambiguity. Characters in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara*, and *The Lonesome West* all struggle to remember his name: "Welsh, Walsh, Welsh" is repeated by various characters every time the priest comes up in conversation (McDonagh 91). In many ways, Father Welsh is a go-between; he tries to be a representative of the spiritual within an increasingly secular place and he ventures into the unknown, appears in a nondescript, dark place after his death to read his suicide note in monologue. Welsh's presence throughout the course of the trilogy is not dependant on his physical location on set – his name is constantly, albeit incorrectly, brought up in the conversations of other characters in each play, and so he, like the father in *True West*, becomes a type of Derridian ghost who is capable of being invoked simply through language, even before he is dead.

A number of critics have argued that Father Welsh simply functions as an ineffectual representative of a dying religious institution, while others, like Stephanie Pocock, argue that he is a

central figure of the plays and the only voice of morality and rationality. To this end, Pocock states that “a search for the elusive ‘heart’ of *The Leenane Trilogy* leads to Father Welsh, whose alcoholism, depression, and self-loathing cannot entirely disguise his love for the equally broken people who surround him,” a sentiment that speaks volumes about the emotional depth lurking beneath McDonagh’s irreverent and violent surface (74). Because McDonagh places the liminal figure of Father Welsh at the ‘heart’ of his West, I suggest that the characters and their situations are not beyond redemption.

#### **IV. New Readings of the Irish West**

Like Sam Shepard does in *True West*, Martin McDonagh rewrites his West by constructing heterotopic and liminal spaces that allow traditional understandings of national identity, cultural symbols, and connections to the past to be complicated by life in a modern world. By envisioning the West of Ireland as a heterotopia of deviation, McDonagh exaggerates how disconnected people become when the space they inhabit has meaning ascribed to it by outsiders. McDonagh plays on the romanticized, pastoral version of the West that became popularized by the Irish Literary Revival. While the Irish Revival heralded the West as the bastion of “true” Irish culture, McDonagh creates a West that has all but lost touch with real Irishness. In a modern world that is moving away from national communities toward a globalized community, McDonagh’s characters struggle to maintain a sense of self. Because of their loss of “self,” the characters also lose direction and become stuck in a perpetual state of being “betwixt and between,” neither directly tied to folkways of old nor fully accepted and able to participate in modern life.

At the same time, because McDonagh emphasizes liminality, there is hope that the characters may regain or establish a sense of community and construct some new identity out of the

fragments of modern life. While his plays have often been criticized as too violent, gratuitously vulgar, and devoid of artistic or moral value, McDonagh chooses to place a caring, self-sacrificing (albeit mortally flawed) character at the middle of his West. Thus, the center of this West is the possibility for change.

## CONCLUSION

Through a series of similarities, both Sam Shepard's and Martin McDonagh's plays speak to one another, serving as mirror images of how Western spaces function within both American and Irish cultures. By writing with culturally informed, conventional interpretations of both wests in mind, the playwrights succeed in subverting and manipulating the representations of their respective western spaces in order to expose the challenges that modern life pose to these traditional readings. The Wests of *True West* and *The Lonesome West* are portrayed as places that function outside of societal norms, where characters struggle to find something "authentic" to which they can cling. In Shepard's work, Lee and Austin explicitly state their desire for authenticity. They search for access to what they imagine to be the "real" American West, only to be left with more questionable visions of the West than when they began. Similarly, Mark Phelan observes a slightly more abstract search for "authenticity" in McDonagh's work, stating that "The very concept of 'authenticity' is consistently ironized and undermined" in order to critique "the hegemonic ideologies of cultural nationalism" (236). In both wests, we see characters that are disconnected from their collective national identities – they are adrift in spaces that have traditionally represented the very essence of what it means to be American or Irish.

By subverting (or completely destroying) traditional readings of these western spaces, McDonagh and Shepard simultaneously open the conceptual spaces to new interpretation and reveal the anxiety that manifests when people are without their foundational understandings of national identity. Heterotopic elements in the plays allow for these explorations to occur - without the strict governing rules of society, the characters of *True West* and *The Lonesome West* are able to re-imagine their roles within a larger, more globalized world. Likewise, the liminal ele-

ments of both plays point to mutability, to the hope of change and nuance – the chance for life that is both grounded in tradition and open for invention and growth. As Victor Turner explains:

What is interesting about liminal phenomena... is the blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness of homogeneity and comradeship. We are presented, in such rites, with a 'moment in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural tie. (96)

Because both playwrights emphasize liminality within their plays, we are not only left with a series of gestures and symbols which have all but been stripped of their cultural significance, but also the possibility for change and a new, more contemporary notion of directional space than we had before. This hope – however subtle and understated – that Shepard and McDonagh leave us with points to the possibility for a global West, a space that is able to reconcile traditional and modern ways of life.

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