

The Grotesque Atrides in Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*

Tatiana GOLBAN¹

Abstract

The first staging of Martin McDonagh's play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* received extreme praise and box-office success, but this accomplishment was overshadowed by some contradictory comments regarding the playwright's attitude towards Irish identity and culture. This study aims to argue that the Irish-born dramatist engages with the grotesque conventions while depicting the image of native land, culture, and societal norms. In order to achieve this, our study reveals the ways in which McDonagh's play interacts with the myth of Atrides, Wolfgang Kayser's notion of grotesque, Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of carnivalesque and grotesque, as well as Julia Kristeva's state of abject, which are used by the playwright to expose the societal anxieties related to the issues of identity, motherhood, emigration, and rootedness. Eventually, in the collision between mythical matrix and the grotesque depictions, McDonagh raises the spectators' awareness of the necessity of some individual and societal reforms.

Keywords

Atrides myth
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Martin McDonagh'ın *Leenane'nin Güzellik Kraliçesi* Eserinde Grotesk Atrideler

Öz

Martin McDonagh'ın *Leenane'nin Güzellik Kraliçesi* oyununun ilk sahnelenmesi büyük övgü ve gişe başarısı elde etti, ancak bu başarı, oyun yazarının İrlanda kimliği ve kültürüne yönelik tutumuna ilişkin bazı yorumlarla gölgelendi. Bu çalışma, İrlanda doğumlu oyun yazarının ana vatan, kültür ve toplumsal normların imajını betimlerken grotesk geleneklerle meşgul olduğunu savunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bunu başarmak için çalışmamız, McDonagh'ın oyununun kimlik, annelik, göç, ait olma ve köklülük meseleleriyle ilgili toplumsal kaygılarını incelemek için Atrides miti, Wolfgang Kayser'in grotesk kavramı, Mikhail Bakhtin'in karnavalesk ve grotesk kavramları ve Julia Kristeva'nın iğrençlik hali ile etkileşim kurma biçimlerini ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışmanın sonucunda, mitsel matris ve grotesk tasvirler incelendiğinde, McDonagh'ın seyircilerde bazı bireysel ve toplumsal reformların gerekliliği konusundaki farkındalığını artırdığı gözlemleniyor.

Anahtar Sözcükler

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¹ Prof. Dr., Namik Kemal University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, Tekirdag/Turkey, tgolban@nku.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-7860-0992

Introduction

The British Theatre of the 1990s emerged and developed in extreme diversity, challenging the established genres, tropes and modes of the conventional theatre, the audacity of the playwrights of the period being tested and contested due to the excessive display of vulgar language, disconcerting violence and an extremely daring exposition of sex and human body. Viewed as a form of protest against the regulatory governmental practices, the theatre of the playwrights of the decade exhibits various shocking scenic representations which function as a counter discourse that attempts to dethrone the hegemonic theatrical practices. In order to expose the social construction of “normality”, various dramatists of the period, such as Sarah Kane, Tracy Letts, Mark Ravenhill and Martin McDonagh among others, engage in the cultivation of the grotesque, in a manner that would perplex and confuse the spectator who experiences a mixture of disgust and fascination during the performance.

Martin McDonagh's play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, which was published in 1996 and is the first work of *The Leenane Trilogy*, abounds in images such as gruesome spaces, macabre Ireland, torture, murder and various ludicrous situations that surprise and confuse the spectators. Though McDonagh's play achieved immediate box-office success and the playwright received three major London Awards, Broadway and off-Broadway awards, among others, the academic scholarship has approached McDonagh's plays with caution, especially due to the confusion created by remarkable but also disturbing images and themes developed by the Irish dramatist who was born and bred in London. Mostly perplexing in McDonagh's theatre is the way he depicts Ireland through a perspective seen by Powell as an “intriguingly hyphenated Irish-Englishness” (Powell, 2011, p. 138), or as by Waters, who views McDonagh to be “like Synge, a creative tourist, a visiting dilettante, an intimate outsider” (Waters, 2001, p. 38). A harsher attitude is exhibited by Mary Luckhurst, who emphasises the mercantile purpose of the playwright who uses his plays as merchandise to “[sell] (-out) to the English” the image of Ireland. As Luckhurst states, “McDonagh is a thoroughly establishment figure who relies on monolithic, prejudicial constructs of rural Ireland to generate himself an income” (Luckhurst, 2004, p. 35).

Despite numerous controversies concerning the nature and worth of McDonagh's theatre, critics have also expressed their approval and praising of the playwright's quality as a writer, mostly appreciated being his display of humour which is “balanced with dark undercurrents and destructive ambivalence” (Wallace, 2005, p. 6). The dramatist's talent to convey black humour blended with brutality made many scholars compare his style of writing

to that of the films of Quentin Tarantino or Martin Scorsese, with their display of suspense, horror, and hilarious violence. Moreover, many critics have noticed the intertextual dialogue that McDonagh establishes with the Irish dramatic heritage of Oscar Wilde, Sean O'Casey, Samuel Beckett, and John Millington Synge, in particular, and with the dramatic genre and tradition, in general, which leads to the idea of the playwright's intention to use, but mostly to interrogate and mock, the legacy left by the theatrical predecessors. All these aspects also confer the impression that McDonagh might have had the intention of exploring the grotesque and the visceral in relation to tragedy, comedy, melodrama and farce in order to bring about suspense and fear, but also the unexpected humour which derives out of this blend. In his interrogation and challenge of the dramatic models and modes, McDonagh playfully subverts the audiences' expectations and, through the engagement with the grotesque, he infuses a fresh life into the outworn theatrical conventions, themes, and motifs.

In his *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, McDonagh creates a very surprising engagement with the myth of the Atrides dynasty, a mythical cycle which proved extremely productive in many tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and which kept fascinating the imaginative minds of the twentieth-century dramatists. Even though thus far the dramatic tradition has viewed the potential of this myth primarily to generate and sustain only the tragic, McDonagh seems to take a new twist and switches the mode through the cultivation of the grotesque.

Especially recognizable in the play are the mythemes of homecoming, the arrival of a stranger, the violent confrontation between mother and daughter, the struggle of mother for power, the pathetic state of the daughter who is treated as a servant in the parental house, the neglected physical appearance of the daughter who denies herself the right to live and love for the sake of the troubles in the familial hearth, the virginity of the daughter viewed in terms of moral virtue, the excessive desire for revenge, the waiting for a saviour, descent into madness, and especially the matricide, all these strong mythical structural devices indicating the connection to the Atreus myth. Moreover, the fact that the play is a part of a trilogy sustains the link to the only surviving trilogy of antiquity, Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, a work which focuses completely on the myth of Atrides, whereas the title of McDonagh's play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, generates the association to the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Troy, who happens to be the sister of Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, a woman famous for her beauty but also for her desire to preserve the throne and the status quo which is implied by it.

It is well known that a myth proves to be a very flexible material which engages with the conflicts experienced in a given community and it is frequently used to confront the challenges, the anxieties or the existential crisis in a community while searching for solutions to them. Relying strongly on the plasticity of myth, our approach to Martin McDonagh's play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* aims to show the ability of myth to accommodate within its own symbolic matrix some stringent political and social concerns such as emigration, Irish history, Irish identity, hybridity, social and domestic violence, the relationship between parent and child, motherhood, nourishment, and other concerns that are viewed as necessary to strengthen social bonds within a family and in a community. In the postmodern manner of recycling some particular forms and stereotypes, McDonagh's play creates a critical intertextuality which aims to produce an ironic detachment through the display of parody and grotesque, thus hoping to facilitate the subversion of present social hierarchies or the political status quo, but also to destabilize the communal stereotypical social roles and taboos, while always questioning the ethical state of humanity.

The Grotesque and Laughter

Having a long history and a broad connotation, the term "grotesque" is an aesthetic category which particularly displays attributes such as "[p]eculiar, odd, absurd, bizarre, macabre, depraved, degenerate, [and] perverse" (Edwards and Graulund, 2013, p. 1). The etymology of the word "grotesque" goes back to the word "grotto", which refers to the rooms discovered after the excavations beneath the baths of Trajan and of Titus and in other ancient Roman buildings with bizarre wall paintings and incongruous ornaments and decorations in a striking style which came to be known as *la grottesca* (Clark, 1991, p. 18). The bizarre wall paintings which represent the merging of human, animal, vegetable, and mineral properties, had generated a creepy and nightmarish mood which developed into an exotic style cultivated by artists like Brueghels, Bosch, Rafael, Hogarth, Goya, and Dali, among others.

Initially perceived as a decadent trait of Nero's age, the excessive grotesque art which bends the conventional boundaries, has "always wavered in cycle betwixt the classical and the romantic, betwixt the idealized humanistic and the imaginative sub- and suprahuman sublime" (Clark, 1991, p. 18). This incredible art always possessed the unique capacity to infiltrate into the formalized aesthetics, artistic and literary traditions, and to produce a kind of "bestial flourish" (Clark, 1991, p. 19) which, in its deviation from the canon and "normality", proved to be extremely fascinating and popular. In its characteristic violation of harmony,

norm, and proportion, the grotesque became frequently associated with unnatural distortion, hence the generation of a striking mood which is ludicrous but also fearful and nightmarish.

While focusing on some corruptions of the human body or behaviour, the grotesque prompts to an ethical disorder and a discord in the human condition. The ethical and existential predicaments experienced by the human being produced at times an atmosphere which can be easily traced to the one created by an entrapment in a grotto which is “like the labyrinth, or the crypt, a disorienting and threatening place that inflames anxiety and fear. It is also a potential place of special internment that echoes the state of being confined within the physical limits of grotesque bodies” (Edwards & Graulund, 2013, p. 5).

Wolfgang Kayser, in his seminal work *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, views grotesque primarily in terms of bleakness and terror, a dreary expression of an existential homelessness which is perceived as an alienation of the world. To Kayser, “[the] grotesque world is – and is not – our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by its results from an awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence” (Kayser, 1963, p. 37) Kayser believes that the dislocation of the familiar world which is produced as a result of the grotesque estrangement inspires anxiety and dreadfulness and also a kind of uncertainty which emerges as a result of human inability to rely on this world, a terror which arises from human inability to recognize and adjust to this world (Kayser, 1963, p. 185).

However, in a surprising manner, Kayser evaluates the role of laughter within the grotesque, and even though it might initially seem to be a mere impossibility, its chance appears in the prospect of freedom and gaiety and the “playful frivolity of *capriccio*” (Kayser, 1963, p. 188), which is accompanied by laughter that appears to be a way of dislodging the fear and anxiety created by the absurd situation. Kayser explains:

In spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation. The darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged. And thus we arrive at a final interpretation of the grotesque: AN ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBDUE THE DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD (Kayser, 1963, p. 188).

The liberating power of laughter which emerges from the interaction with the grotesque is presented by Mikhail Bakhtin in his influential work *Rabelais and His World*. The scholar evaluates grotesque through the prism of the world of Rabelais's characters

Gargantua and Pantagruel, a world which exceeds the limits of the expected “normal” decency with its excessive display of farts, urine, faeces, gluttony, adultery, sex, cannibalism, and many other crude and uncouth depictions. To Bakhtin, grotesque implies “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” to a physical, and earthly level (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 19). He stresses out that the conventional scholarship has dismissed the “low material” and the “inappropriate” in their pursue of propriety, ignoring altogether the place which they hold in the “grotesque realism.” The material bodily principle, according to Bakhtin, possesses a deeply positive aspect, since it is “presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such, it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 19).

The body and the grotesque should be viewed historically, and in this hypostasis they are represented as the grotesque bodies of Gargantua and Pantagruel, who – in their monstrous proportions and exposure of all orifices, delivered through copulation, childbirth, death, urine, and defecation— surprise and bewilder the observers, thus producing laughter. According to Bakhtin:

the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 26).

The complete openness of the grotesque body leads to the idea of a cultural or historical organism which is always unfinished, is in a continuous growth, and, through the emission of the bodily fluids that flow into or out of bodies and laughter, by symbolic associations, generates the transformations of cultural values which remain connected to the physiological identity. In the act of perpetual becoming, the grotesque body represents the world itself, which, with its fertile depths and procreative ability, “is never clearly differentiated from the world but is transferred, merged, and fused with it” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 339). The universe acquires a physiological identity, whereas the body attains a cosmic significance.

In the display of the incongruities of the body, the laughter emerges and, as a product of the body, laughter possesses the “power to liberate from dogmatism, completeness, and limitation” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 44). The regenerative impact of laughter is viewed in terms of the liberation from the oppressive governmental practices, and by stimulation of change in the

cultural values, it becomes capable of subverting the social taboos, hierarchies or even the political status quo.

The anarchic laughter, which inspires change and freedom, is also central to Bakhtin's concept of the "carnavalesque", a cultural practice that suspends temporarily all social hierarchies, all the conventions of low and high culture, vulgarity and decency and "perceive[s] the world in its laughing aspect" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 13). Producing a space where all the hierarchies and conventions are overturned, the carnivalesque bends the boundaries between the actor and the spectator, and, by the temporary annihilation of the distinction between the laughing body and the comic performance, it generates an ambivalent experience in which the spurt of laughter reaches the brink of abjection.

Bakhtin's representation of the eruption of laughter reminds of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, which in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, is explained as a "vortex of summons and repulsions" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1), which prompts the infant's separation from the mother and provides its entrance into the stage of language. A necessary stage in the infant's development of the boundaries between the Self and the Other, abjection infuses an ambivalent and traumatic experience of expulsion and rejection. As Kristeva explains, "[the] abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). The state of abjection is frequently represented in terms of grotesque imagery and language. Depicted in relation to deformed bodies or bodily fluids which are emitted through various bodily orifices, such as vomit, body waste, blood, phlegm, sperm, and others, the abjection annihilates the inside-outside boundaries and, in its perpetual state of flux, concomitantly terrifies and makes one feel accomplished. Kristeva states that

[W]hat goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection. Faecal matter signifies [...] what never ceases to separate from a body in a state of permanent loss in order to become *autonomous*, *distinct* from the mixtures, alterations, and decay that run through it (Kristeva, 1982, p. 108).

The ability of becoming "autonomous" and "distinct" from any possible associations, mixtures and decay may seem to be the first accomplishment of the self, but regardless of its fascinating appeal, through the abject experience, this act becomes terrifying due to the exposure to the other side, which is not dreadful and disgusting due to the "lack of cleanness or health" but primarily due to anything that "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).

Since there is a need to repress whatever is perceived as abject, the very same abject motivates the establishment of taboos in the communal symbolic order. According to Kristeva, a vast majority of taboos are related to a woman's body, as it is viewed through the male gaze and whatever disturbs the patriarchal perception of a "perfect" woman's body, starting with size and shape to any bodily functions as ingestions, secretions, excretions, aging, sickness, etc., is considered as deviant and threatening. Grotesque body, however, gains the unique ability of resisting its assimilation into the objectifying gaze which aims to control and subdue it. Edwards and Graulund claim that

Horror, pathos and laughter all come together in Kristeva's theory of the 'monstrous-feminine'. This notion is related to the female grotesque, for within her account the maternal body is a corporeal manifestation of horror, a feeling emanating from the fear of reincorporation into the mother, as well as in the fear of the mother's generative power. (Edwards & Graulund, 2013, p. 33).

According to Kristeva, the female body becomes the locus for "abject". Calling upon the fact that "abjection is above all ambiguity" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9), Kristeva sets out to delineate the "monstrous-feminine" in terms of abjection which annihilates the binary opposition between subject and object, and in this manner the scholar interrogates the widespread construction of virgin/whore dichotomy which countervails the conventional "pure" woman or immaculate body to that of slut or the grotesque female body. In the state of ambiguity generated by abjection and fascination, the grotesque female body produces a "horrified laughter" or an "apocalyptic laughter" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 204), which is neither jolly nor ingenious, nor sublime. Instead, this type of laughter shatters the ego in the paradoxical attempt to strengthen itself, being "bare, anguished, and as fascinated as it is frightened" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 206).

The concept of grotesque delivers a unique opportunity of interrogating the ability of an abject body to become a possible locus of transgression or the capacity of monstrous-feminine body to develop into a powerful force which subverts and resists any governmental or societal policies of normalization. A grotesque figure interrupts the ordinary circuit of communal existence and expectations in order to recognize and possibly admit wider varieties of beings and conducts as dignified and esteemed. Consequently, the encounter with the grotesque allows the opportunity to criticise some well-established ethical norms or taboos, and to expose the truth of the relativity of any perception of "normality", as well as the lack of any ethical obligation to correspond to the known "normal".

The Grotesque Depictions in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*

Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is a play in which the grotesque becomes discernible especially in its interaction with the grandeur of the Atreus dynasty myth. The sacredness of Iphigenia's sacrifice prior to Agamemnon's departure to the Trojan War, as well as the aftermath of this deed resulting in Agamemnon's murder by his wife Clytemnestra upon his homecoming ten years later, which is followed by the sacred duty of the siblings Electra and Orestes to commit the act of matricide in order to attain the universal harmony, are easily recognizable in the play. The mythical scenario of the Trojan War and its aftermath in Argos provides a symbolic matrix which becomes juxtaposed to the political conflict between the British and Northern Ireland's governments since the late 1960s which was still ongoing in 1996 when McDonagh's play was first staged. Through the symbolic grotesque the playwright creates a convenient space to express the background for a long history of violence and its repercussions experienced by the people of Northern Ireland, a nation which is set on the Irish island but is a part of the United Kingdom. The political conflict is solved only in 1998 by the symbolical signing of the Good Friday Agreement, but when the play was first staged in 1996, the long history of discrimination, debasement, and violence against Irish people was still a very stringent problem in Ireland, so that the apparent deprecatory portrayal of Ireland in McDonagh's play was an extremely sensitive matter.

At first glance the depiction of Ireland in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* may seem ugly and disgusting, as McDonagh's rustic Ireland is a far cry from the conventional idyllic countryside representations in the Irish literary tradition. The radical shift from the bucolic image of Ireland to that of a "rocky" and "muddy" space, a "steep", which can be reached only by "wading through all that skitter" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 13) does not convey a flattering tone. Of course, Martin McDonagh is not the first writer to depict certain negative aspects of Ireland, but his stance is mostly stinging, as the references to commonness of murder, robbery, and chaos attain a quality of vehement criticism of his native land.

However, one may also pay attention to the stark discrepancy between the real place of Leenane and the chaotic hellhole that McDonagh depicts in his play. Lonergan Patrick, in *The Theatre and Films of Martin McDonagh*, points out that the village of Leenane is one of Ireland's most beautiful places, and the Connemara Mountains confer a stunning landscape to the place which is usually accompanied by calm and tranquil atmosphere. While considering the harsh accusations brought to the young playwright about the misrepresented Ireland and the twisted image of the Irish, Lonergan claims that "*of course* McDonagh's Leenane is not

like the real place; *of course* his characters are not like the real people who live here. McDonagh's Leenane – *of course!* – is an imagined location, bearing little resemblance to the real Galway village” (Loneragan, 2012, pp. 3-4).

The purpose of misrepresenting the Leenane setting, through the dialogue with the mythical space of Troy and Argos, is to create a kind of estranged world of mystery which Kayser calls “‘fantastic’ grotesque with its oneiric worlds”, and concomitantly, “a radically “satiric” grotesque with its play of masks” (Kayser, 1963, p. 186). Pondering on the two types of grotesque evoked by Kayser in relation to McDonagh's Leenane, Michael Lachman clarifies that

the “satiric grotesque” refers precisely to a caricatural deformation of life, assuming much more familiar shapes of things and objects instead of oneiric distortion. No matter how distorted and alienated from common experience, the two forms of grotesque remain fundamentally distressing in one particular respect – they instil “the fear of life rather than of death”, by viewing the worldly horrors as much more frightening than their eternal counterparts (Lachman, 2004, p. 67).

The caricatural deformation of life emerges from the first depiction of the setting in the play. The set of a “living room/kitchen of a rural cottage in the west of Ireland” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 5) conveys an image of two merged spaces which may refer to the two fused worlds of high and low, of esteemed and deprecated, of England and Ireland, of sophisticated and *kitch*. The grotesque arises especially while merging some forms that result into some hybrid categories which disrupt the established borders. In the play, the disharmony is produced by the amalgamation of some Irish rural identity markers and some universally used objects, such as “a crucifix and a framed picture of John and Robert Kennedy”, “a black poker beside the range”, “a touristy-looking embroidered tea towel”, an oven, a “small TV”, an electric kettle, and “a radio on one of the kitchen cupboards” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 5). All the iconic symbols of Irishness become distorted by the caricatural depictions and instead of providing a site of Irish mythical community, they convey an exaggerated dissymmetry of the national identity. The grotesque arises with the awareness that some symbolic features of a specific culture are fused to the degree of their unrecognizability. The playwright juxtaposes the serious political conflict of a cultural annihilation with the triviality of its touristy display, which results in an image of a world that is both dreadful and ludicrous. The macabre and ludic atmosphere is sustained by the presence of a black poker, which is used in a domestic environment and is apparently inoffensively mentioned several times, but which becomes the

offensive murder weapon at the end of the play. Moreover, the image of the fields, which could be seen only from a window, and a framed picture of Kennedys who emigrated from Ireland to become an accomplished American dream, where both are symbols of freedom and achievement, as a result of their merger in this grotesque living room/kitchen, create a state of dread, fear and limitation, because the playwright raises the awareness that the Irish fields can be viewed only through a politicised window, whereas the Kennedys, only through a familiar frame of political and social triumph which ended up in their murder. Such situation acquires a ridiculous aspect, but Kayser asks whether ridiculous can be a part of grotesque or not:

The possibility of such a view is most easily grasped in connection with the grotesque that emerges from a satiric world view. Laughter originates on the comic and caricatural fringe of the grotesque. Filled with bitterness, it takes on characteristics of the mocking, cynical, and ultimately satanic laughter while turning into grotesque (Kayser, 1963, pp. 186-7).

Indeed, the satire on Ireland and the way Irish are viewed through certain limited frames is obvious, and a kind of satanic laughter emerges especially after reading the incongruous inscription on the touristy tea towel, which says “May you be half an hour in Heaven afore the Devil knows you’re dead” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 5). The humorous formulaic welcoming to Ireland’s heavenly space is sprinkled with an element of terror produced by this hellhole and it attains a quality of the carnivalesque, which, instead of celebrating, generates a liminal space where familiar law is overturned and irony and satire reign.

A volatile mixture of humour and terror emerges when the mythologised images of bucolic Ireland and the traditional figure of a peasant unharmed by advancement of modernity and unscathed by the Englishness are mocked in the play. McDonagh purposefully picks up one of the most beautiful locations of the rustic Ireland and its inhabitants in order to interrogate the existent version of authentic Irish identity. The mythical Ireland, which is the home to people who are completely dedicated to spiritual matters in their countryside cosy houses, totally lacking the ambition for material wealth is brusquely curbed in McDonagh’s play. In the ancestral place, like the mythical space of Argos, the absence of a father figure is stringent, and instead of a patriarch who would guide and take care of the children and the welfare of the community, the only paternal figure mentioned is the Father Walsh–Walsh, a caricatural figure who loses any pretence of sacredness through his depravity and inefficiency. A powerful intertextual allusion to Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia for the sake of his community, which is then followed by a decade of his absence from Argos for the

Trojan War, is created through the link with the Father Walsh–Walsh, whose inefficiency is obvious from the community's uncertainty concerning his name and his significance. Moreover, his memorability is built around his assault against children, who though “punched Martin Hanlon in the head once, and for no reason”, he “seldom uses violence, same as most young priests” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 14). A complete fiasco of the Irish spiritual tradition is conveyed by the satirical depiction of the moral corruption and the degeneracy of the clergy of the community, since as Ray says, “[it'd] be hard to find a priest who hasn't had a babby with a Yank” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 14).

Through a ludic excess, the emblematic markers of Irish culture become interrogated, delivering the troubles of an unsettled nation which welcomes everyone to its paradisiacal landscapes but is incapable of holding its youth in the heavenly garden which loses its appeal due to the multiple deformations. In this respect, Ray, the youngest character in the play, expresses his feelings towards his native land in a similarly deformed and limited perspective: “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.’ (*Pause*) I be bored anyway. I be continually bored” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 59). This moment invokes the “satiric grotesque” precisely due to the caricatural depiction of the Irish life, in which the familiar shapes of fields or peasants assume the deformed aspect of dirt, detritus or calf, such distortion of view of the Irish countryside being attained especially by the politicised colonial media channels which have infiltrated and corrupted the Irish culture. As Kayser explains that the “satiric laughter” instils “the fear of life rather than of death” (Kayser, 2004, p. 67), and it becomes clear why in this place, which is presented as a bizarre, macabre, and degenerate Ireland, nobody wants to stay.

In this world of poverty, violence and lack of any transcendental values, the young people seem to get through life only by prioritising personal victory or survival and any sentimental attachment is replaced by the desire to achieve financial security, which can be provided by the emigration to England or The United States. But the painful and deep theme of emigration, which is central to many Irish literary texts, gains, in McDonagh's play, a quality of burlesque through its reduction to a small talk between Maureen and Ray. When Ray expresses his willingness to emigrate “[to] work (...) One of these days. Or else Manchester. They have a lot more drugs in Manchester” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 59), Maureen warns him of the impending danger of drugs, Ray's response acquires an element of dark comedy as he says “[maybe] they are, maybe they are. But there are plenty of other things just as dangerous, would kill you just as easy. Maybe even easier. (...) [like] this bastarding town

for one" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 59). The grotesque humour emerges as a result of the juxtaposition of painful truth of the danger in the outside world and the macabre comedy which arises from the knowledge of the lack of safety in the maternal house, since Maureen just killed her mother in her home. The grotesque humour also arises from the parody of American Dream, a dream of emigration and fulfilment which is presented through the satirical reference to drugs that allures one into some deceptive temporary happiness.

Pato and Maureen, both aged about forty, chose emigration in their youth as a kind of escape, a mirage which Alfano explains as "a deceptive image that contains also a reflection of the self" (Alfano, 2013, p. 3). The projection of the personal desires of success into a mirage, a dream, or a hyperreality, is doomed to failure, because, as Baudrillard claims, it estranges people and places from the common, ordinary world, so that "the real" becomes meaningless and non-existent (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 17). Referring to the American Dream, Baudrillard stresses out precisely the desire to break free from any constraints and limitations, but it leads only to a simulation of the freedom. McDonagh delivers this truth playfully, but seasons it with a bit of macabre elements, like the framed picture of the Kennedys present in the house of Mag and Maureen, two Irishmen who accomplished their dream only to be murdered after their success.

Martin McDonagh reveals the postmodern tendency of the ironic detachment through the parody of a returned migrant stereotype by establishing a dialogical relation to the mythical scenario of Agamemnon's homecoming after a ten-year war. Pato Dooley's homecoming after years spent in England creates an ironic connection through the intertextual relation to Agamemnon's murder by his wife Clytemnestra upon his return home as a vindictive outburst for the made sacrifice. The mythical scenario creates the dreadful awareness of the menace of the outside world, but it also encapsulates the threat in the space of "home", which, through the dialogical relation, acquires an element of "grotto", a dreadful crypt or labyrinth which provokes anxiety and fear due to the possibility of death. Pato leaves his homeland and abandons his "beauty queen of Leenane" in a desperate attempt to find felicity and fulfilment, but a genuine pain of this character is intensely conveyed through his awareness of displacement and existential homelessness:

I do ask myself, if there was good work in Leenane, would I stay in Leenane? I mean, there never will be good work, but hypothetically, I'm saying. Or even bad work. Any work. And when I'm over there in London and working in rain and it's more or less cattle I am, and the young fellas cursing over cards and drunk and sick, and the oul digs over there, all pee-stained

mattresses and nothing to do but watch the clock ... when it's there I am, it's here I wish I was, of course. Who wouldn't? But when it's here I am ... it isn't *there* I want to be either (McDonagh, 2009, p. 26).

In a grotesque manner, Pato feels his entrapment within the limits of his own physicality. Lonergan, while referring to Pato's language from the above fragment as a kind of "strange eloquence", considers that the "simple repetition of the word 'and' brilliantly emphasises the monotony of Pato's life" (Lonergan, 2012, p. 11). However, in Pato's self-referential "more or less cattle I am" or in his specific dissatisfaction of being neither in Leenane nor in London, he acquires a quality of a rebellious and inadequate body that, through the multiple use of "and", delivers an image of a grotesque excessive appetite which can never be satisfied, never finds enough or can never settle. In a surprising manner, McDonagh seems to parody the concept of "hybridity", the state of in-between, a Homi Bhabha's term which is defined as "the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). Pato's dwelling between neither—nor conveys a state of suspense due to his symbolic imprisonment and torture into a liminal space of interaction of an identity between various polarities, a state which is delivered with an unexpected comic twist. Ironically, Pato, who emigrates in order to explore his freedom and accomplish himself, becomes the embodiment of the abnormal grotesque which is expressed through his own sense of inadequacy in his own body or land; he is also subjected by socio-political attempts to regulate and control whatever defies the known "normal".

In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, McDonagh merges the motif of arrival of a stranger/estranged who comes home looking for a possibility of healing by finding love and spiritual fulfilment with the dreadful mythical possibility of being murdered in the ancestral home. The playwright depicts the image of home by relying on various modes of exaggeration and excess which occupy a central place in grotesque representations. The epitome of home is delivered through the image of a rural cottage in the West of Ireland, which is inhabited by Mag Folan, aged seventy, and her "plain" and "slim" daughter, Maureen Folan, aged forty. The playwright juxtaposes the myth of home as a place of healing and nurturing with the mythical home in Argos, ruled in the absence of Agamemnon by the Queen Clytemnestra, who is perpetually engaged in plights for the power of the throne and fight for authority with her daughter Electra.

The juxtaposition between the mythical Clytemnestra and Electra with Mag and Maureen Folan is conveyed powerfully in the play by Mag's constant viciousness and hostility towards her daughter Maureen, a virgin at the age of forty, who is treated as a servant in her parental house, with a neglected physical appearance due to her constant humiliations and excessive suffering, and who seeks revenge by wishing to commit matricide. But in McDonagh's play the formidable and fascinating Clytemnestra becomes "a stoutish woman in her early seventies with short, tightly permed grey hair and a mouth that gapes slightly, is sitting in the rocking chair, staring off into space. Her left hand is somewhat more shrivelled and red than her right" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 5).

McDonagh depicts a grotesque Clytemnestra, confined and disempowered by her corporeal, physical body, which is aging and breaking down and is left vulnerable to any possible deformations, like the gaping mouth or a shrivelled and red hand. It seems that the playwright attempts to convey an example of a monstrous metamorphosis from Clytemnestra, who is the extremely beautiful but obsessed with the power of the throne, to an incapacitated Mag, who is unwilling to walk, drink or feed herself and spends her time always in a rocking chair. Mag's self-inflicted dependency renders her as a grotesque body which is always incomplete and perpetually lacking. In an extremely hilarious manner, McDonagh represents Mag's lacking and incompleteness by her dependence on Maureen, when daughter tries to force her mother to admit her ability to feed herself, Mag says: "I can. (*Pause.*) Although lumpy it was, Maureen. (...) You do make me Complan nice and smooth. (*Pause.*) Not a lump at all, nor the comrade of a lump" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 5). At first glance this mundane conversation between mother and daughter seems to express the vulnerability of the mother who expects care and affection from her daughter, but this impression shifts radically after the display of the mother's cruelty, who asserts her power by creating constant psychological pressure upon her daughter and literally watching her collapse. Suddenly, the inoffensive and fragile mother assumes Clytemnestra's monstrous *femme fatale* qualities, a queen who sits in her rocking chair as a throne and sadistically manoeuvres her daughter into an emotional breakdown. The hostility of the selfish mother is shocking in Mag's desire to destroy the very fragile incipient relationship between Maureen and Pato by her willingness to expose Maureen's emotional breakdown which she experiences while being away in England. The ludicrous situation of Mag's desire to "prove" Maureen's insanity loses any comic appeal when Maureen, after Pato's leaving, is broken, shattered, crouching on the floor and is holding tightly her new dress thrown away by her mother.

Marion Castleberry, while referring to Maureen's collapse, points out that "we are left with an image of heart-rendering despair. Comedy seems impossible at this moment" (Castleberry, 2007, p. 48). But the playwright proves resourceful enough to create a moment of cruel comedy when Mag, totally indifferent to her daughter's suffering, while holding up the incriminating papers "*rather dumbly (...) scratches herself, notices the uneaten porridge and sticks a finger in it*". (McDonagh, 2009, p. 39). Her *coup de grace* is delivered by her cruel demand from her daughter: "Me porridge is gone cold now. (*Loudly.*) Me porridge is gone cold now!" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 39).

In his work *On Ugliness*, Umberto Eco claims that "modern caricature came into being as a polemical device against a real person or a recognizable social category, and it exaggerates an aspect of the body (usually the face) to deride or denounce a moral blemish through a physical one" (Eco, 2011, p. 152). The caricatural depiction of Mag in McDonagh's play is intensified through the deformations of her body which attempt to deliver the corruptions of moral order and the chaos of some social expectations. The gapping mouth which always wants to be nourished reminds of Bakhtin's association between the grotesque body and the world, the open mouth indicating the continuous decay of a world with its constant demands, norms, and taboos which are extremely damaging. Since for Bakhtin the grotesque body is never distinct from the world, but is "transferred, merged and fused with it" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 339), the association between mother Mag and Mother Ireland or governmental institutions emerges easily and results in a cultural critique of some social norms. Like Mag, who continuously devours her daughter by subduing her to some existential taboos and social expectations and never nurtures back, the government is callous and vindictive with its children, as it no longer nourishes but only abuses its youth.

The most vivid example of this is conveyed through the hypocrisy of Mag, who pretends to care about her daughter after the mental breakdown that Maureen has got through as a result of her displacement. Rather than caring for her daughter's wellbeing after the mental house experience, Mag uses her newly gained power in order to abuse and humiliate her even more. Willing to expose Maureen's vulnerabilities and inadequacies in front of Pato, Mag exclaims: "D'you want to know what Difford Hall is, fella? (...) It's a nut-house! An owl nut-house in England I did have to sign her out of and promise to keep her in me care. Would you want to be seeing the paper now?" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 35). In this monstrous caricatural manner McDonagh creates a moment of carnivalesque laughter which exposes the hypocrisy and the gluttony of the eternally desirable appetites of governmental systems of

care and also of motherly myth that indulges into the bleeding and suffering of youth. Relying on Foucault's concept of power, Edwards and Graulund explain that

Power is (...) governed by a logic that is not only wielded by the executive, judiciary or legislative powers. Power is fluid. As such, it is itself a sort of *monster*, an organism that can exceed the control of individuals or groups of individuals. Power is a force that eludes boundaries and controls as regularly as the deviants it is meant to regulate. In this, power is often grotesque. Its grotesquerie operates through the faceless mechanics of the state, in the anonymous bureaucracies of asylums, hospitals and prisons, and in a more personalized image: the power of the 'strong man', the dictator (Edwards & Graulund, 2013, p. 27).

Mag's regulation and dictatorship over her daughter, the control over her body, over her quality or quantity of life reminds of Foucault's notion of "biopower" by which the scholar explains the governmental practice of control over the knowledge, the body, and, ultimately, over the freedom of individuals (Foucault, 2008). It is hardly surprising that in her youth, Maureen chooses emigration as an attempt to break free from any form of parental or governmental control, but instead of a euphoric fulfilment upon her first time out of Connemara, she experiences humiliations and embarrassment due to her nationality. She remembers the way English treat her due to her inability to understand English language: "get back to that backward fucking pigsty of yours or whatever hole it was you drug yourself out of" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 36). In her attempt to achieve a personal accomplishment, to make herself a name and an identity, she is confined by her own limitations which entrap her in the same hypostasis that she held prior to her departure from home. In her desire to escape from the position of a servant in her mother's house, she ends up getting "to this place, cleaning shit" of strangers (McDonagh, 2009, p. 36). In the foreign land, Maureen becomes a hybrid monster, a deviant, or even an "abject" body which "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4); therefore, she is pushed to the margins by a system's force, which devours her initially by abusing her and then expunges her, as a waste, into a mental house.

Feeling like a freak and a misfit in the foreign land, Maureen is longing for stability, security, and rootedness, which can be experienced only in relation to home, native land and culture. Upon her return home, Maureen expresses a more loyal attitude to the Irish culture and also resentment toward the governmental policies that forced the break of youth from home: "If it wasn't for the English stealing our language, and our land, and our God-knows-what, wouldn't it be we wouldn't need to go over their begging for jobs and for handouts?" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 9). Maureen's challenge to the social and political system in Ireland

would make a good patriotic stand, but, ironically, in her use of English for conversational purpose, she divulges her hypocrisy and her freakish nature again. This inadequate and grotesque nature emerges out of Maureen's inability to adjust to the norms of her homeland either. And this is not surprising, considering that instead of welcoming and familial hearth, McDonagh presents another freakish and grotesque environment. Castleberry explains that this home of Mag and Maureen, which is, by extension, their environment, is "no haven of nurture and nourishment. The kitchen of Mag and Maureen is a place of unwholesomeness and disease, used for storing poteen and Complan, pouring urine, burning letters, scalding hands, and torturing mothers" (Castleberry, 2007, p. 47).

The house is reeking due to Mag's constant pouring of urine into the sink and it reminds of Kristeva's state of "abject" which captures one in the "vortex of summons and repulsions" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1); also, in a grotesque manner, this house attracts and repulses whoever enters it. It seems that McDonagh creates a playful dialogue with the abject as the first "autonomous" achievement of the self, which regardless of the characters' fascination with home, motherly and sense of rootedness, as a result of their exposure to the other side, it becomes dreadful and disgusting due to "lack of cleanness or health", but mostly due to anything that "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). The juxtaposition between libation bearing women in the family of Atrides, who pour libations as a part of a sacred ritual for the dead, and Mag, the unholy matron of the house who pours urine into the sink, is conveyed by McDonagh through a farcical situation which generates genuine carnival laughter when Maureen invites Pato to have a cup of tea, but in this welcoming gesture she insists he should smell the sink. Complaining about her mother's habit, Maureen tells Pato: "Doesn't she pour a potty of wee away down there every morning, though I tell hell seven hundred times the lavvy to use, but oh no. (...) And doesn't even rinse it either. Now is that hygienic? And she does have a urine infection too (...) Here is your tea now, Pato" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 34).

This skilful moment of carnivalesque generates laughter that liberates from the expressed tensions in the community. But this moment of grotesque and carnivalesque raises the awareness about the gendered social norms and expectations of motherly attitude, nursing and nurturing, and the "monstrous feminine", in case the woman does not fit into the perception of the "perfect", normative feminine. In the play, Pato's disgust from the stink of urine functions as a comic repellent in the manner of the patriarchal gaze of horror on whatever does not correspond to the "archaic mother" image.

In a similar note, McDonagh seems to blur the boundaries of the dichotomy virgin versus whore construction when he presents Maureen in terms of abjection, since, at the age of forty, she is still a virgin, a plain and slim woman who has not gone over kissing two men in her whole life, but who transforms to become an unruly woman enjoying lengthy kisses with Pato, his fondling of her breasts and who releases her “monstrous feminine” qualities by sitting across his lap and demanding: “Go lower... Lower...” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 29). Even though, in a ludicrous manner, the sex is never consumed, Maureen is transformed into an unruly woman who seems to have developed a predilection for sex, as she says: “You’ll have to be putting that thing of yours in me again before too long is passed, Pato. I do have a taste for it now, I do” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 32). This moment acquires a ludic quality when Pato declares his need to depart, embarrassingly stating: “I’ll have to be off now in a minute anyways. I do have packing to do I do” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 33).

Becoming a laughing body and a comic spectacle in one, Maureen, as Electra, produces an ambivalent experience which places her at the threshold of abject with her final decision to commit matricide. In the myth of Atrides, the matricide is wrapped in sacrality, whereas in McDonagh’s play, the matricide gains a quality of revolt and release from the constitutive violence and also from the repressive customs and taboos of society. If grotesque presents the degraded body as a locus of carnival’s mirth blended with social politics, Maureen’s murder of her mother Mag acquires carnivalesque qualities. The bodily excess is manifested in Maureen’s pouring of boiled oil on Mag’s shrivelled hand, splashing of some of it into Mag’s midriff and some into her face, followed by smashing her head open with a poker as “she finally topples over and falls heavily to the floor, dead. A red chunk of skull from a sting of skin at the side of her head” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 56). This excess creates a symbolic grotesque which can be used as a cultural critique since, through the distortion of proportions, it problematizes vision, seeking a manner of liberation through the freedom of imagination. Through this symbolic grotesque, McDonagh renders a specific culture, norms and its taboos, such as mixing blood and milk, or the destructive drive towards death, and, through their symbolic nature, the playwright tries to make the audience see the things which cannot be easily grasped, concomitantly pointing to some “truths” that are set beyond the limits of confining and normative human thought. Maureen’s final “thoughtful contemplation” (McDonagh, 2009, p. 56) becomes liberating and scandalous, because, by her act, the spectators gain the awareness that our perceptions of monstrosity, body and laughter

change over time and now she loudly takes her farewell: "The beauty queen of Leenane says *goodbye*" (McDonagh, 2009, p. 65).

The emerging laughter is unavoidable, for after a long history of repeated disempowerment and victimisation, Maureen beats Mag to death with a fireplace poker, ironically being the object which keeps warmth, safety and familial unity by the hearth. The spectator witnesses the transformation from a *femme fatale* to a "*moralised bestiar[y]*, in which every creature mentioned (...) [is] associated with a moral teaching" (Eco, 2011, p. 117) and this begetting triggers a need for change. The audience also experiences laughter while watching the mutilated corpse, because it confers a state of superiority while standing above the cadaver, which is the embodiment of all archaic norms and taboo; and while distancing from it, the spectators gain a state of supremacy from the newly gained knowledge of the need for reform. This bodily abhorrence, conveyed in such a macabre but also comic manner, produces the imperative for social change and renewal.

Conclusion

Martin McDonagh's play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* oscillates between biting satire and eviscerating caricature while also navigating amid the impasses confronted in contemporary community, such as emigration, dislocation of the self, the abject female body, and the social norms and taboos.

The play reveals the disintegration of communal values and the dysfunctional and destructive familial and societal norms by implementing some mythical units and grotesque conventions, which destabilise through horror and comedy and lead to the eruption of the abject. In this collision between humour and abjection, McDonagh's spectators experience both fascination and dread, and, through liberating carnival laughter, they attain a fertile terrain to confront and change the contradictory norms and taboos in a community.

Particularly, the confrontation with a laughing and laughable body generates a comic spectacle which triggers the ambivalent experience of abject, whereas the awareness of sacrality versus profanity in this very moment of confrontation may prompt a possible revolt and release from the constitutive violence and from the repressive communal customs and taboos. In the growing awareness that the grotesque delivers the degraded body as a space of negotiation of carnival mirth with social politics, bodily excess gains new connotations, as the distortion of proportions always problematizes vision, and it indicates the necessity of liberation through the freedom of imagination.

Moreover, through the development of the symbolic grotesque, McDonagh's spectators gain the awareness of the pressure created by a specific culture with its norms and taboos, such as female's place in community, the mixing of blood and milk, or the destructive drive towards death, and reconsider their perception of monstrosity, body and laughter, and, even though at first glance the rendered situations may seem scandalous, they have the power of liberation and healing which is necessary for the communal change.

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