OBSCURED PERSONAL IDENTITY AND THE PURSUIT OF AUTHORSHIP

IN THE DRAMA OF MARTIN MCDONAGH

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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The works of Martin McDonagh can most simply be characterized by an abundance of violence and foul language, combined with a shockingly twisted sense of humor. Gruesome deaths abound for parents, children, priests, and animals, as do creative means of torture and vulgar name-calling. However, there is a wealth of potential value hidden among the violence. Gore provides him with an interesting vehicle with which he is able to drive the reader or viewer through a series of startling events, all of which revolve around the concept of personal identity and an individual’s ability to write his or her own story. In the interest of pursuing authorship, characters may experiment with different “compositional techniques,” resulting in a consistent offering of sex and violence, blended with the small, restrictive stereotype Western Ireland provides. In his Leenane Trilogy, comprised of The Beauty Queen of Leenane (1996), A Skull in Connemara (1997), and The Lonesome West (1997), and incomplete Aran Islands Trilogy, consisting of The Cripple of Inishmaan (1997) and The Lieutenant of Inishmore (2003) as well as in his stand-alone piece, The Pillowman (2003), Martin McDonagh concentrates on his characters’ need to redeem themselves from the plague of obscured identity, and the ways in which this redemption can be successfully achieved.
The works of Martin McDonagh can most simply be characterized by an abundance of violence and foul language, combined with a shockingly twisted sense of humor. Gruesome deaths abound for parents, children, priests, and animals, as do creative means of torture and vulgar name-calling. However, there is a wealth of potential value hidden among the violence. McDonagh was first discovered in the mid-1990s, “when Druid Theater’s Garry Hynes came across one of his plays in her company’s pile of unsolicited submissions” (Lonergan, “Seven steps to Martin McDonagh”). Hynes quickly produced McDonagh’s first play, The Beauty Queen of Leenane, because she “couldn’t believe how funny it was.” The confidence he had in his mesmerizing combination of humor and gore—at one point, he referred to himself as “the Irish Salman Rushdie”—has since led him to fantastic success, and provides him with an interesting vehicle with which he is able to drive the reader or viewer through a series of startling events, all of which revolve around the concept of personal identity and an individual’s ability to write his or her own story (Lanters 16).¹ In the interest of pursuing authorship, characters may experiment with different “compositional techniques,” resulting in a consistent offering of sex and violence, blended with the small, restrictive stereotype Western Ireland provides. In his essay, “Ireland in two minds: Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson,” Nicholas Grene observes that “[a]n archaic West of Ireland, sexually unfulfilled, depleted, and demoralized, has remained imaginatively live and theatrically viable well past its period sell-by date. But the uses to which this archaic Ireland is put by McDonagh...in its

¹ Since participating in that first production, Martin McDonagh has written eight plays, each of which have been tremendously received in England, Ireland, and the United States, and he has written and directed an academy-award winning short film, as well two feature-length films, with a third feature to premiere this coming October (“Martin McDonagh,” O’Toole).
updated modern time-frame is significantly different” (52). This difference shocks the audience, and makes the Leenane Trilogy, and the Aran Islands Trilogy, unlike other Irish pastoral dramas. In “Black Pastoral: 1990s Images of Ireland,” Grene uses the phrase “Black Pastoral” to describe “plays...that self consciously invert the earlier idealization of life in the west of Ireland by presenting it as violent and unidylic” (Castleberry 44)... “Black Pastoral” as a concept is formed by analogy with black comedy, a genre that self-consciously inverts or flouts the earlier conventions of the form. Comedy normally avoids the more painful dimensions of the human situation; black comedy makes laughter out of unhappiness, suffering, death, all the things traditionally ruled out by the comic mode. Black Pastoral involves a similar kind of travesty of the pastoral mode.

(Grene 68)

In his Leenane Trilogy, comprised of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (1997), and *The Lonesome West* (1997), and incomplete Aran Islands Trilogy, consisting of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997) and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2003) as well as in his stand-alone piece, *The Pillowman* (2003), Martin McDonagh concentrates on his characters’ need to redeem themselves from the plague of obscured identity, and the ways in which this redemption can be successfully achieved.

These cases of obscured identity are caused by the ongoing transition from a bucolic Irish past, one characterized by stereotypically rolling green hills and isolation, to a twentieth-century Ireland, one fitted with modern amenities like television and easily-accessible imported English biscuits. There are characters who yearn to stay firmly planted the past: Mag Folan, of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, works to keep her daughter at home, abhors any kind of progressive sexual experimentation, and proudly

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*The Pillowman* will be the only play in this thesis that does not take place in a rural town in Western Ireland.
displays her dated Catholic tchotchkes; Mary Rafferty, in *A Skull in Connemara*, finds perfect contentment in repeated discussions of the weather and of bingo, only occasionally pepperling her comments with mentions of God; Coleman and Valene, of *The Lonesome West*, are two brothers who find life most satisfying when they are squabbling about some offense or other, whether it be petty (eating the other brother’s crisps or drinking his poteen), or grave (cutting the ears off the other brother’s dog, or killing your father). Kate and Eileen Osbourne, of *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, lead an isolated island existence, only engaging with mainlanders or foreigners when they have the opportunity to swindle them out of a few bob; Padraic, in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, participates enthusiastically in torture on behalf of the Irish National Liberation Army in 1993, an organization likely founded in 1975 by IRA members who were displeased with their original organization’s ceasefire. But characters like Maureen Folan and Pato Dooley (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane*), Mick Dowd (*A Skull in Connemara*), Girleen and Father Welsh (*The Lonesome West*), Cripple Billy (*The Cripple of Inishmaan*), Mairead (*The Lieutenant of Inishmore*), all understand that Ireland is going through a necessary period of transition, and Katurian, Michal, Tupolski, and Ariel (*The Pillowman*) understand that they themselves are transitioning. All are eager to take

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3 The INLA is a “republican paramilitary group...believed to have been responsible for more than 120 murders from its formation in 1975 until its ceasefire in 1998” (Who are the INLA?). As we will see later, Padraic’s involvement with the INLA--after having been rejected by the IRA--stands as a testament to his unwillingness to move forward with his personal narrative.

4 Joan Fitzpatrick Dean, in her essay, “Martin McDonagh’s stagecraft,” observes that “The Pillowman departs from the Irish environment, but its dramaturgy is comparable even though it reflects and refracts the play’s thematic emphasis on the nature and limits, privileges and responsibilities, morality and immorality of art” (29).
their place in the new world. However, trouble comes to call when characters try to stall or outrun national progress.

For McDonagh’s fictitious Irishmen, the most important factor in successfully claiming authorship over personal narrative, is the willingness to tell a story. This willingness is marked either by literal storytelling, or by the ability of a character to emotionally, mentally, and physically leave Ireland—it is likely, in McDonagh’s plays, that characters cannot have one without the other. Some characters are able to move away in one way, but not another, limiting themselves and their potential for clarified self-identity; others understand the movements required for authorship but are not able to commit to those changes; some believe they know the best way to write their story, and pursue these ends, but the methods of these pursuits are misguided, and result in self-destruction. A character’s attempt to physically keep him- or herself in their Irish reality is the easiest way to distinguish between those craving stability in their Irish roots, and those longing for change. From this physical decision, a character’s mental and emotional connections to the country can be identified, as can the content and method of his or her storytelling. Those who wish to stay rooted in the past and who are fearful of the future, like Mag (Beauty Queen), reject the possibility of constructing a personal narrative, choosing instead to interfere with the “writing” of another character’s identity.

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5 In this essay, “personal identity” or “self-identity” refers to “certain properties to which a person feels a special sense of attachment or ownership...[s]omeone’s personal identity in this sense consists of those features she takes to ‘define her as a person’ or ‘make her the person she is’” (“Personal Identity”).

6 I believe the phrase “their Irish reality” is an important one to discuss. To argue, for example, that Padraic (Lieutenant of Inishmore) lives in an objective Irish reality, would be completely false. He physically stays in his Ireland—the Ireland of IRA terrorist activism—by engaging in acts of physical torture.
Concerning these characters who reject the future, specifically the Irish future, there is not much to discuss: their unwillingness to adapt to the changing tides leads to death, in the case of Mag and Padraic, wasted sacrifice, in the case of Coleman and Valene, or total irrelevance, in the case of Mary, Kate, and Eileen.

Those who look for change may meet the same fate, but while their peers and fellow community members reject national change altogether, these characters search for individual meaning in the context of national change. The language of the past is what these new-world Irishmen know, but they realize that this language is not relevant to what they want or where they want to be. Characters like Maureen, Pato, Mick, Father Welsh, Girleen, Billy, Mairead, and Katurian, all understand (a) that they are not where they want to be, in terms of both their geographic location and their metaphysical state, and (b) that the mental/emotional/financial resources available to them in these semi-isolated Irish small towns are not going to be sufficient to make the full transition from “here” to “there.” However, the deep devastation of their circumstance becomes clear when these characters try to find new ways to either decelerate or accelerate their personal narrative, and ways in which they can balance their deep-rooted Irish past with the modern global community. Mag, Eileen, Kate, and Padraic, as well as other characters who crave the reassurances of a familiar Irish past, work to physically destroy evidence of change, whether it be through willful ignorance or active destruction; the best way to stop change, based on the frequency and enthusiasm of their actions, is to destroy the evidence, to “unwrite the story.” The more progressive characters, who recognize that Irish limitations hinder their personal growth and/or success, work to pursue change through active
personal storytelling. These stories can be “written” through literal writing, through violence, or through performance, whether it be deception or professional acting. In all events, McDonagh’s characters’ pursuit of redemption from obscured identity is expressed through either the destruction or creation of stories, of individual narratives. However, these methods of pursuit often fall short, and the majority of the characters are left dead, dying, or unfulfilled--the audience is never sure which fate is worse.

The results of these characters’ efforts to better themselves can be confusing. McDonagh’s audience may believe that a character is deserving of positive progress based on his or her past traumas, and that character may die; there may be a character who is hated by McDonagh’s audience, but he or she can be rewarded with a second chance or, worse, a modicum of success. Upon closer analysis, McDonagh characters experience success or failure in their quest for redemption, based entirely on the level of artistry with which they pursue freedom from an uncertain identity. For McDonagh, the highest form of artistry is literal storytelling, whether it be written, spoken, or acted out. In the cases of these characters, they way they pursue personal authorship determines whether or not they are able to lead a healthy romantic life, to succeed professionally, or to survive. Attempts at authorship can be seen through literal storytelling, physical violence, sexual expression, and mimicry, but most of these efforts are wasted. In McDonagh’s plays, the pursuit of authorship through “impure” methods--those which involve malintent, taking advantage of others, viciousness, selfishness, or ignorance--is punished; the pursuit of authorship through artistically “pure” methods is rewarded. Those who fail, or those characters who are punished with death or physical harm, suffer
either because they do not pursue control at all, or because they pursue control in an artistically “impure” way.

The traps which hold Maureen Folan, star of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in Ireland can best be described as the typical small Irish community and the haunting ghost of old-time Irish Catholicism. These restrictions are represented most clearly by the actions of her mother, Mag, and it is necessary to explore Maureen’s responses to these actions to most accurately examine her role as a character who either pursues or longs for a clear personal identity. Maureen Folan certainly does recognize the restraints that hold her: she talks to her mother and to her love interest, Pato Dooley, about the limitations placed on her happiness by the confines of her small community (which consists almost exclusively of her mother and, occasionally, Ray and Pato Dooley), and the abundance of religious knick-knacks in her mother’s home serves as a constant reminder of that small community’s expectation that she *stay behind*.

The set for *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, which presents the interior of Mag’s house, includes a crucifix “on the wall above the range,” a long-standing symbol of catholic faith, and one that could be found in a 2017 home just as naturally as it would be found in a 1917 or 1817 home (3). There is also “a touristy-looking embroidered tea-towel [further along the back wall]...bearing the inscription ‘May you be half an hour in Heaven afore the Devil knows you’re dead,’” (3). This may appear to be something simple, perhaps a tacky form of religious expression that could be excused by the presence of a classic crucifix. However, on the wall above the range, on the same level as the small representation of the crucified Christ, is “a framed picture of John and Robert
Kennedy” (3). The success of the Irish Catholic Kennedys in the 1950s and 60s, which followed the great financial, political, and business accomplishments of their parents and grandparents, provided a stark contrast to the abysmal possibilities of Irish success just a century before—especially in America. Naturally, Irishmen the world over were able to look to the affluent Kennedys and see the close possibility of their long awaited reward. However, Mag’s decision to hang the Kennedys next to the dying son of God may be giving the brothers too much credit. In the presence of a framed picture of JFK and Bobby, the kitschy tea-towel and the crucifix lose any substantial religious meaning, and instead are reduced to the status of old-time iconography. This “old-time” religious practice is in direct contrast with the modern mindset and modern luxuries Ireland is moving towards; while Mag does not personally express her religious values over the course of the play, she hangs the icons in an attempt to follow the current of Irish religious practice. This implication of abiding by community guidelines, even while she is in her own home, highlights Mag’s intent to physically root herself in the Irish trope of blind religious devotion. More than the ideals or expectations of Catholic religion itself, points to the limitations of small-town life on Maureen.

The restrictions of Ireland on Maureen’s quest for personal authorship, and of the small community of Leenane, are more extreme than the implied limitations of an Irish brand of Catholicism. The reader or viewer of Beauty Queen can first see Maureen’s

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7 The Irish potato famine, which started in 1845 and devastated the countryside over the next seven years, killed one million Irish and sent another two million overseas. Whether they died at home, died en route to America, or died once they arrived in the USA, Irish people grew accustomed to death. If they somehow managed to survive the trip, their Catholic roots proved to be a source of agitation for the Protestant Americans, and extreme prejudice ensued for several decades after the famine ended. It was likely that the success of the Kennedys would be considered “Irish success” (Klein).
relationship with Irish culture and Irish tradition when Mag asks to turn the radio on. Immediately, the audience would recognize the radio as a form of technology that seems too advanced for this country-bumpkin home. Later, a television is turned on, for the distraction, if not enjoyment, of Mag and Ray Dooley. Stage direction indicates that “a nasally male voice singing in Gaelic” comes through the radio, which Mag observes to be “nonsense” (6, 7). Maureen takes offense: “It isn’t nonsense anyways. Isn’t it Irish?” before she and her mother discuss the justification (or lack thereof) for speaking English in Ireland. Maureen defends the Irish language and Irish people, blaming the English for “stealing our language, and our land, and our God-knows-what,” before criticizing Americans for encouraging Irish children to take hand-outs from foreigners (8). Later, when Ray Dooley pops in for one of his apparently regular visits, he wonders “Who wants to see Ireland on telly?,” to which Maureen responds, “I do” (76). These comments would suggest Maureen to be a proud proponent of Ireland, and she is, but her Irish pride stems from stubborn allegiance and a bad experience overseas, rather than from enthusiastic desire to enjoy all that the country has to offer.

Maureen moved from Ireland to England when she was twenty-five to clean offices in Leeds, in an effort to compose a new personal narrative. However, once she arrived, she found herself constantly tormented by her English co-workers. Finding a friend in a Trinidadian woman, Maureen asks her why she left such a beautiful place, even when Mag is exposed to modern technology, she does not like the modernization of something Irish. She does like to listen to the radio and to watch television, as long as those modern amenities are not associated with her old-time Ireland. This may point to a self-destructive sense of guilt--perhaps Mag feels that she shouldn’t enjoy something that is so (to her) inherently un-Irish.

Maureen tells Pato that, while in England, she was harassed with words of “Ya oul backward Paddy fecking...The fecking pig’s-backside face on ya” (43-44).
and, to her surprise, is asked the same question in return. Maureen is unable to see any beauty in the place because she associates the country (and Leenane) with a lack of opportunity, and with the limitations set by her mother and her community. While she does work to physically distance herself from Ireland by relocating to England, Maureen is unable to personally, mentally, or emotionally move away from Leenane: the relationship between Maureen and Mag is toxic, and keeps Maureen from investing her personal self in this new English life: English coworkers constantly barrage her with criticisms about her Irishness, until she cannot mentally handle the separation from Leenane; although she believes Ireland to be a country (and Leenane to be a town) of wasted effort and missed opportunity, Maureen is emotionally tied to her home. As a result of these connections, Maureen suffers a mental breakdown in England and is brought back to Leenane by her mother but, more accurately, by the trap of Leenane itself.

Once she realizes that physically escaping from Ireland is impossible, or that it comes with too high a cost, Maureen attempts to write a new story for herself, and escape the trap of Irish limitation as represented in Mag’s desire for control of her daughter. This escape is motivated by the short-term desire to leave her mother’s house and physically commit herself to being with Pato Dooley, wherever he may be; this goal will feed Maureen’s long-term desire to change her story, ensuring that, however it ends, it does not end in Ireland. In retaliation against the bounds of Irish control, Maureen physically punishes her mother in a series of attacks, each more cruel and gruesome than the last. First, Maureen forces Mag to drink Complan after stirring it “just twice to keep it lumpy,”
to punish her for lying to Maureen about Ray Dooley’s visit (21). The scene is
unfortunate, and McDonagh’s audience is certainly made uncomfortable, but this seems
kind compared to Maureen’s more physically violent attacks. Once she realizes that her
mother has burned Pato Dooley’s letter to her, Maureen “slowly and deliberately takes
her mother’s shrivelled hand, holds it down on the burning range, and starts slowly
pouring some of the hot oil over it,” causing her mother to “scream in pain and terror”
(66). This torture is repeated when Mag claims to forget the contents of the letter. In his
essay, “The Hyphenated-Real -- The Drama of Martin McDonagh,” Eamonn Jordan
observes that in the construction of his plays, which Nicholas Grene observed to be
“atypical,” “McDonagh generates a reality that refuses to be bound up with old pastoral
images of the west of Ireland” (Grene, 52; Jordan, 240). Torture scenes would seem
ridiculous and out of place if McDonagh had not established an Irish reality different
from the reductive stereotypes that have so frequently, and for so long, promised an
Ireland of hospitable farmers and charming alcoholics. In the next scene, Maureen walks
around her mother’s house, “poker in hand,” while reciting a monologue about the life
she’ll have in America, before Mag falls out of her rocking chair, “dead” with “a red
chunk of skull [hanging] from a string of skin at the side of her head” (72).

A she delivers her monologue, the eighth scene of the play, McDonagh’s audience
may believe Maureen to be mentally and emotionally freed from Ireland, and from
Leenane: she talks enthusiastically about the encounter she and Pato had on the train
platform, just as he was about to leave forever, about life she’ll have in Boston, the life
she’ll have with Pato, the end of Mag’s interfering, her indifference to gossip, and she
even compares her kiss with Pato to a scene in a Hollywood movie. Seeing Maureen finally freed from her mother’s control, with the potential for real personal authorship in America, McDonagh’s audience forgives her for the murder of Mag (some may even revel in it--she’s finally gone!). However, closer analysis of Maureen’s speech reveals a failure to write her own story: while she does plan to move away, to forget her life in Leenane, to start anew, Maureen immediately associates her new life in Boston with Jack and Robert Kennedy, the men her mother hung up beside Christ; she compares the success she’ll have in Boston to her failed English experiment, and paints herself dependent on Pato to comfort her if anyone should try to call her names (“...no names called, and Pato’ll be there to have a say-so anyways if there was to be names called…”); she still takes the time to deliver a several-minutes long monologue to her dead mother, relishing the opportunity to lecture her but accomplishing nothing. This last point is key.

As Marion Castleberry notes in her essay, “Comedy and Violence in The Beauty Queen of Leenane,” “...Maureen has finally taken control of her life by asserting her autonomy over her mother…” but once McDonagh’s audience discovers that Maureen never did find Pato at the train, that she had imagined the whole thing, her efforts at personal authorship (killing Mag) are revealed to be hollow, and accomplished nothing: “Mag has apparently destroyed her daughter’s life, but rather than mourn the loss of Pato and live like a martyr, Maureen ultimately destroys the one thing standing in the way of her independence and happiness” (54).But as Castleberry observes that “Maureen’s action has ended her oppression…” she asks the crucial question, “...or has it?”
Although she has the desire to leave Leenane, and although she follows through on an action that could assist in her permanent departure, Maureen is unable to sever all ties to Leenane. Maureen’s attacks on her mother are deadly, to be sure, but ineffective in her pursuit of individual narrative. McDonagh rewards characters with redemption only when they are willing to pursue it in an artistically pure way, specifically through the pursuit of authorship. Maureen does try to write her own story, punishing those who get in the way of local news and who burn important letters, but the potential of her storytelling is obstructed by violent methods. Noël Carroll, in an essay called, “Martin McDonagh’s The Pillowman, or The Justification of Literature,” notes that “McDonagh’s representation of violence achieves a high level of literary beauty…” but questions whether “beauty [is] enough to justify their existence” (286). The burning of Mag’s hand with hot oil, and the beating of her mother with a poker until she is dead, while they may provide examples of justified “literary beauty,” do not justify Maureen’s actions as concerns her pursuit of redemption. In Maureen’s case, the personal finesse she brings to her mother’s torture is not enough to earn her self-identification, and in the end, she is resigned to her mother’s chair and to her mother’s fate. “Maureen starts rocking slightly in the chair, listening to the song by The Chieftains on the radio,” before the radio announcer dedicates “This next one, now...from Annette and Margo Folan to their mother Maggie, all the way out in the mountains of Leenane, a lovely part of the world there, on the occasion of her seventy-first birthday” and hopes “there’ll be a good many more of them to come on top of it” (84). As she listens to “The Spinning Wheel,” the song her sisters dedicated to Mag, Maureen keeps rocking through the first three verses, in which a
young woman lives with her skittish grandmother in rural Ireland, singing and spinning her wheel. Maureen leaves the rocking chair mid-way through the fourth verse, at which time Delia Murphy sings about the young girl’s lover, and his request for the young girl to leave her grandmother’s house to be with him. Parallels between Maureen’s life and the life of this young girl are not difficult to make. However, the young girl does leave her grandmother’s house to be with the man at the window. The audience knows, as Delia Murphy’s “The Spinning Wheel” continues to play and as Maureen retreats further into the house, that Maureen has lost her only chance at “leap[ing] to the arms of her lover” (“The Spinning Wheel”). Now, since she has killed her only constant companion and is left alone in the house, Maureen will not be able to interfere with anyone’s personal story but her own.

Maureen, in her mental instability and in her penchant for violence, is the least successful of any McDonagh character in her pursuit of redemption for an unclear identity. Mick Dowd, of A Skull in Connemara, is significantly more successful in his pursuit of identity, though he deviates from the path of redemption to commit acts of violence, as Maureen does. Mick is trapped by the small community of Connemara, as Maureen is trapped by the small community of Leenane, but the looming presence of Irish Catholicism affects Mick’s personal authorship more intensely than it does Maureen’s. Although he makes no effort to physically leave the town, Mick is able to recognize the restraints that keep him from successfully constructing his own modern identity, and works to eliminate them through violence. However, where Maureen’s attempts at authorship through the malicious and violent killing of her mother were
unsuccessful, Mick commits physical violence in the interest of self-preservation, and in the hope that his dead wife’s memory may remain unbesmirched in Connemara. In this way, Mick’s mental and emotional connections to Connemara are revealed; although he does not actively chase the new, modern Ireland, Mick does pursue a reality in which he is not constantly punished for a crime (he insists) he did not commit. The most difficult obstacles for Mick to overcome in his pursuit of independent narrative is the forced intimacy of life in small-town Connemara, and, more specifically, the community’s tendency to indulge in gossip. McDonagh’s audience learns, through the general speculation of other Connemarians, that Mick has been a major suspect of the murder of his wife, Oona, for the past several years. Mick adamantly denies the accusation on several occasions, and, naturally, his methods of composing a personal identity narrative are partly motivated by the desire to clear his name.

Perhaps the most unorthodox method of authorial pursuit is Mick’s participation in Church-sanctioned grave-digging. When Mary comes to visit Mick in the first scene of the play, she remarks that a bit of sacrilegious sarcasm should be expected from someone like Mick, considering “the filthy occupation [he takes] on every autumn time…” (91). Mick is defensive, asking Mary, “Doesn’t the County pay for the job to be done if it’s such a filthy occupation? Doesn’t the priest half the time stand over me and chat to me and bring me cups of tea? Eh?” and quickly turning the focus of the conversation onto Mary and her sins (specifically, the sins concerning her habits of cheating Americans out of money, and of cheating at bingo). It is important to note that Mick accuses Mary of “cadging off the Yanks...Telling them [her] Liam’s place was where The Quiet Man was
filmed…”¹⁰ (92). The Quiet Man, a film produced in County Galway, where Mick and Mary live, and also in County Mayo, used American actors and modern American technology to produce a fictionalized portrait of Irish life in 1952. While Mag resents the overlap of Irish culture and technological modernization when a Gaelic song plays on the radio, Mary uses the affront on old-time Irish authenticity as an excuse to cheat foreigners out of money. In both cases, these women are rejecting the modernization of Ireland. In the way Nicholas Grene observes McDonagh’s work in Beauty Queen to be making functional use of an “archaic Ireland” by presenting it in a “modern time-frame,” McDonagh also introduces modern, global elements into the small community of Connemara to familiarize the audience with the dramatic discrepancies between the expectations of his characters (52).

While Mick attempts to dissuade Mary from thinking about his seasonal occupation, the subject cannot be avoided for long, and Mairtin Hanlon enters with news from Father Welsh: Mick is to “make a start on this year’s exhuming business this coming week,” and that Mairtin will be assisting him in the “graveyard shenanigans” (97). The details of Mick’s process are unclear in this opening scene--he claims first that he “hits [the skeletons] with a hammer until they [are] dust...[and peggs] them be the bucketload into the slurry,” and later claims to “seal them in a bag and let them sink to the bottom of the lake,” saying “a string of prayers...over them” as he does (99, 100). Later in the play, it is revealed that the first claim is true, that Mick does pummel the skeletons with a hammer and then toss them in the slurry, and that the lie about saying

¹⁰ The film is mentioned again on page 130, when Thomas reveals to Mairtin that the story he made up about “oul Marcus Rigby” killing twins with his tractor was not true.
prayers over bodies saintly-sealed in sacs was just to placate the judgmental Maryjohnny. The job pays, and apparently needs to be done, but Mick participates in the excavation, destruction, and removal of dead bodies primarily to compose a personal narrative that does not connect him to his wife’s death.

The connection between Mick’s willing employment as an excavator and his pursuit of total self-identification is connected intrinsically to the rumors surrounding his wife’s “murder.” Mick and Mairtin, in the graveyard together, are required to wait until Thomas Hanlon, a police officer, Mairtin’s brother and Mary’s grandson, arrives to supervise. His presence is not explained until after the skeletons have been bashed and after Mick may have murdered Mairtin for knowing about the stealing of Oona’s body from the grave. Thomas comes to Mick’s home, “takes a skull with a large forehead-crack out of his bag,” and demands “a confession to the murdering be blunt instrument, or be some sort of instrument, of [his] late wife, Mrs Oona Margaret Dowd” (152). The excavating, then, could be connected to Mick’s pursuit of authorship in two possible ways: first, there could have been a desire to clear his name through physical evidence, revealing to Thomas that nothing was wrong with Oona’s skeleton and, therefore, she was not killed by blunt instrument; second, there could have been a desire to destroy any evidence of wrongdoing. Either way, Mick’s digging is a method through which he pursues identification as “innocent.”

While Maureen Folan’s pursuit of self-identification and authorship is motivated primarily by anger, by a desire to somehow achieve a life distinctly her own, getting revenge for lost years in the process, Mick’s pursuit of self-identification is motivated
primarily by sadness and longing. Mick’s assault of Mairtin Hanlon is violent, and even though the assault is not deadly, it is potentially damaging to Mick’s story. Just as the composition of Maureen’s “independent story” was halted by the malicious murder of her mother, Mick’s malicious attack of Mairtin regresses his pursuit of personal authorship. However, Mick’s deep devotion to Oona allows McDonagh’s audience (and McDonagh) to forgive him. The play ends with Mick, alone in his house. Mairtin has insisted that there is nothing to forgive, Mick has burned the confession he willingly wrote out for Thomas Hanlon, driving the priest away, and Mary has finished her poteen. Mick “looks at the rose locket then picks up the skull and stares at it a while, feeling the forehead crack,” swearing to Maryjohnny and to Oona that he did not harm his wife (166). Lights slowly fade to black as Mick “caresses the skull again, then kisses the cranium gently.” This final, solitary, act of kindness to the physical remains of his wife leads the audience to believe that Mick did not harm her, that he has been longing for his wife since her death, and that any attempts to change the way he identifies himself have been made for Oona. Mick is not able to find definitive proof that he did not harm his wife, but he is able to reconnect with her in a new way. Throughout A Skull in Connemara, Mick’s actions were motivated by a desire to be closer to Oona, and, as long as no one in Connemara came between him and his wife, he was completely disinterested in how the community judged his behavior. In this way, Mick has already mentally and emotionally left Connemara, and his pure intentions earn him Oona’s constant physical company after all these years. McDonagh does not reward Mick with an affirmed self-identity, nor does he give him physical, mental, or emotional escape from the death of his wife, but instead
awards him a mental and emotional safe-haven in the physical presence of his wife (specifically, her skull). Based on the fact that Mick’s personal narrative and personal identification both depend heavily on Oona, this will undoubtedly help him to better handle the ever-changing Ireland in which he finds himself.

While Mick is given a small chance at reprieve from the pain of his personal identity crisis, McDonagh punishes those who either reject or ignore that gift. Father Welsh, the priest who is mentioned in both *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *A Skull in Connemara*, first appears as a speaking character in the trilogy’s final installment: *The Lonesome West*. Readers of the first two installments would be familiar with the gruesome and devastating violence that seems to exist in Leenane as naturally as toxic relationships and poteen. The priest is very aware of his parishioners’ need for moral reform, and because he connects himself to the parish, their failings corrupt his sense of self-identity. He does recognize the things that trap him: the small community in which he lives, where people are murderous, contributing as a community to the theme of death that haunts the Leenane Trilogy, and foul-mouthed and immoral; the Catholic faith, which he sometimes doubts and which sets down standards that are impossible for Father Welsh to satisfy. However, where Maureen’s acts of malicious violence isolated her from

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11 Connemara is described, in the title of the play, as the place where the skull is. Readers may be reminded of the Biblical Golgotha, or possibly of Lucky’s speech in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (when Lucky talks about “the dead loss per head since the death of Bishop Berkeley being to the tune of one inch four ounce per head,” he specifically refers to “the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara,” “abandoned unfinished the skull the skull in Connemara”). Skull also calls to mind Maureen’s final act of violence in *Beauty Queen*, in which “[a] red chunk of [her mother’s] skull hangs from a string of skin at the side of her head” (72). When Mick is accused of brutalizing his wife by bashing her head in, and when he narrowly avoids responsibility for Mairtin’s head injury, the theme of the skull is satisfied. *The Lonesome West*, too, is connected to the image of the skull. Readers will connect the “West” with Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*, which tells the story of Christy Mahon driving a spade into his father’s skull.
any possible relief from her crisis of self-identity, and where Mick’s connection to his
dead wife prevented the formation of any post-Oona personality, Father Welsh does have
a potential solution to his self-doubt: Girleen. However, his preoccupation with finding
the key to a successful priesthood—and to happiness, or so he thinks—clouds his
perspective, and he drowns himself not knowing the love affirmation Girleen could have
given him. In this, Father Welsh focuses too intently on the locks to see the key, and he
cuts short his own quest for personal identity.

Father Welsh’s personal identity is completely dependent on his personal success,
and he determines the scale of this success in two ways: first, his own morality, and
second, the moral alignment of his parishioners. His own shortcomings are frequently
acknowledged by others, and it is unlikely that Father Welsh is unaware of, for example,
his alcoholism or his faith-based doubts: Coleman claims that “[a] bent child with no
paint could paint you as an alcoholic” and later reckons that “the only thing wrong with
[Father Welsh] is…[he’s] a terror for the drink and [he has] doubts of Catholicism”; (171,
177). Surprisingly, Father Welsh never considers an alternative life plan; deviating from
the priesthood is never discussed, and it seems that the 35-year-old Welsh has already
consigned himself to a lifetime of religious servitude. For this reason, the “sins” of which
he finds himself guilty are made all the more serious: a layman who frequently consumes
alcohol is merely a sinner in need of saving; a priest who frequently consumes alcohol is
an abomination. Readers may see the potential for a happy lay life, and they may even
root for a relationship between Father Welsh and Girleen, who so clearly loves him.
However, Father Welsh has mentally, emotionally, and physically united his person with
the priesthood, and so success or failure as a priest is the only option he’s afforded himself. In this, he has sealed himself within the trap of Irish Catholicism, and is only further burdened by the trap of his toxic small community.

Welsh primarily evaluates the success of his priesthood based on the morality of Leenane’s citizens. Readers of other plays in the Leenane Trilogy have heard the name “Father Welsh, Walsh, Welsh” before, and so these readers also know that the men and women living under Father Welsh’s guidance are utterly depraved (A Skull in Connemara, 91). He talks about the “two murders” he has “on me books,” referring to the killing of Mag by Maureen and, presumably, the killing of Oona by Mick, though the crime cannot be proven, as though serving as a priest in an Irish Catholic parish is something like policing the streets of South Beach—all without knowing that Coleman, too, has murdered his father (177). When Girleen, a cute seventeen-year-old, first comes on the scene, she is selling poteen and making jokes about prostituting herself to Coleman. She then asks what Father Welsh’s wages are (presumably so that she could propose prostitution to him). Father Welsh, at this point either scandalized or frustrated by the repeated immoralities, cries, “Will you stop now?! Will you stop?! Isn’t it enough for a girl going round flogging poteen, not to go talking of whoring herself on top of it?!” (180). Not long after he makes this impassioned request, Girleen refers to Valene as “the king of stink-scum fecking filth-bastards you, ya bitch feck, Valene” and Welsh is only able to half-heartedly chastise her for her language (181). It is clear, after the first dozen pages, that he is tired of fighting with the people of Leenane. Of his own admission, Father Welsh claims, “I’m a terrible priest, and I run a terrible parish, and that’s the end
of the matter” (177). There is a definitiveness to this claim, as if he is damning himself for the sins of his parishioners. The connection between the moral leanings of Leenane parish, and the “success” of Father Welsh as its priest, are for him, inextricably linked. Obviously, Father Welsh considers himself an overwhelming failure, and this influences his self-perception to the point of self-destruction.

It is undoubtedly unfortunate that Father Welsh is not able to see the human goodness in himself, and the reader is cut by his inability to see the potential for love and happiness which Girleen offers. The most devastating revelation of potential relief for Father Welsh’s identity crisis comes after Thomas Hanlon drowns himself in the lake. After their first reading, McDonagh’s audience will know that Father Welsh, when he muses on the sadness of Thomas’s passing, is unknowingly remarking on his future method of suicide. Although the reflection is promising at the start—Father Welsh observes that “[e]very life has good points, even if it’s only...seeing rivers, or going travelling...[o]r the hopes of being loved” and the audience is filled with its own hope that this priest will recognize the potential for happiness in Girleen--Father Welsh quickly abandons these positive thoughts. Girleen even goes so far, in her conversation with Father Welsh on the bench in scene four, as to observe that “even if you’re sad or something, or lonely or something, you’re still better off than them lost in the ground or in the lake, because...at least you’ve got the chance of being happy, and even if it’s a real little chance, it’s more than them dead ones have” (218). Readers will clearly see this as an extension of a friendly hand, but Welsh ignores her message completely, choosing to kill himself in spite of her proffered friendship. One may expect a typical Catholic priest
to preach to the inherent goodness of human existence, and to reject suicide at all cost, but Father Welsh is not a typical priest. He wonders “if the world’s such a decent place worth staying in, where were his (Thomas Hanlon’s) friends when he needed them in this decent world? Where was I then?” (201). This rhetorical postulating serves as an excellent representation of the solution to Father Welsh’s struggle, which he does not acknowledge: because Father Welsh has already determined that his self-identity must be that of either a successful or a failed priest (and nothing else), and because his parishioners are failing to make him a success, he is either unable or unwilling to see the friend (and potential romantic interest, Girleen) who is able to support him. This inability or unwillingness to recognize Girleen as a potential source of relief from his crisis of personal identity--it is difficult to tell whether Father Welsh is at all aware of how earnest Girleen is in her affections, or if he sees and rebuffs them because of his commitment to identifying as a priest--does prevent Father Welsh from achieving any kind of honest introspection, and it does kill him, but it also harms those around him.

Father Welsh’s suicide may come as a shock to some readers, especially since the priest’s remarks on Thomas Hanlon’s death included the phrase “[r]otting in hell now…[a]ccording to the Catholic Church anyways…,” though McDonagh’s audience is prepared for tragedy when Father tells Girleen that she won’t be able to come sit next to him “any time” (201, 220). The entirety of scene five is much like the eighth scene in The Beauty Queen of Leenane, when Maureen delivers own monologue after killing her mother: Father Welsh delivers his suicide note, directly addressed to Coleman and Valene, before (it is implied) drowning himself in the lake. It is important to note that
Welsh may not completely acknowledge the sinfulness of his suicide, instead viewing it as a physical departure from his community: “I am leaving Leenane for good tonight,” he says (221). However, this leaving will not afford him the luxury of clarification as concerns his self-identity. While Father’s final message was intended to be a last call for any morality that may be hidden somewhere in the brothers’ souls—or, at the very least, a sense of priority—they are too far gone to take Welsh’s message to heart. Welsh acknowledges this, in the first few lines of his note: “Dear Valene and Coleman, it is Father Welsh here...I wanted to be saying a few words to you, but I won’t be preaching at you for why would I be? It has never worked in the past and it won’t work now,” but commits to pursuing their conversion (221). Although Maureen has murdered her mother, and Mick has supposedly murdered his wife, Father Welsh is entirely preoccupied with the petty squabblings of Coleman and Valene. Father Welsh has identified Coleman and Valene as the two parishioners most in need of his attention, and, since he has already tied his perception of success as a priest with the moral alignment of his parishioners, he quite literally drowns in failure with one final plea for redemption; by asking the seemingly unsaveable Coleman and Valene to “…go stepping back and be making a listeen of all the things about that other that do get on yere nerves, and the wrong the other has done all down through the years that you still hold against him, and be reading them lists out, and be discussing them openly, and be taking a deep breath then and be forgiving each other them wrongs, no matter what they may be,” Father Welsh is unknowingly asking the

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12 I include, in those “petty squabblings,” Coleman’s murdering of his father. Father Welsh does not seem to care so much about this crime, excusing Coleman’s “deed” as one “done out of temper and spite,” and one that is not as “dark” as Valene’s lying about it, because Valene’s “deed” was “done out of being nothing but a money-grubbing fecking miser with no heart at all” (222).
same of himself, leading the audience to a experience a kind of deja vu as they remember his musings about Thomas Hanlon’s need for a friend to keep him from killing himself (223).

Readers or viewers will finish Welsh’s suicide note to Coleman and Valene wondering how there could be no mention of Girleen, or wondering how Girleen could not have received a note of her own, when in just the scene prior it was she who kept Welsh company. The pair has many interactions throughout the play, most of which consist of Girleen aggressively flirting with Father Welsh to conceal her true affections, and Father Welsh brushing her off, but the last of which (the scene in which Father and Girleen share a bench) exists as a completely sincere conversation between two people who appear to be compatible. While the relationship between Coleman and Valene, as well as the relationship between Father Welsh and the brothers, provide constant points of conflict, the relationship between Welsh and Girleen exists as a kind of smooth oasis for McDonagh’s audience. But Welsh does not see her as a parishioner whose redemption could possibly improve the “writing” of his identity story, and so he ignores the stolen glances, the implied meanings, and the genuine offering of friendship when he most needs it. Through conversation between Coleman and Valene, readers or viewers learn that Girleen’s mother “two times has had to drag her screaming from the lake at night...there where Father Welsh jumped,” and are left wondering whether Girleen will survive this trauma (240). In focusing so intently on the irredeemable brothers, in trying to connect the construction of his personal narrative only with the moral development of these specific parishioners, and in killing himself when Coleman and Valene fail to affirm
his choice of identity, Father Welsh brings mental, emotional, and physical harm to Girleen. Readers may be surprised that Girleen’s suicide attempts are revealed through casual and indifferent conversation, but should not be: Father Welsh focused on the brothers while he was living, and would likely still measure his success as a priest in Leenane by the behavior of Coleman and Valene, even after his death. This fixation, and resulting ignorance, causes him to ignore the potential gift of happiness in life, as presented by Girleen, and McDonagh punishes the rejection of this gift with unfulfilled identity and unfulfilled last wishes.

As Father Welsh is presented with potential happiness to relieve the crisis of identity caused by Catholicism and the small-town community of Leenane, Cripple Billy, star of The Cripple of Inishmaan, is also presented with the gift of love. The Cripple of Inishmaan is the first of two installments in McDonagh’s incomplete Aran Islands trilogy, which also includes The Lieutenant of Inishmore (completed) and The Banshees of Inisheer (unproduced and unpublished), a series in which the outer western bounds of Ireland are presented as they were in 1934 (The Cripple of Inishmaan) and the early 1990s (The Lieutenant of Inishmore). The trilogy, specifically Cripple, was completed in response to the 1934 film Man of Aran, a fictional documentary which presumed to display the reality of life for Irishmen on these islands, but which actually relied on a cast of actors, pretending to be an Aran family, and outdated shark-fishing methods for its shock value (Hockings, 184). In the first scene of the play, when Johnnypateenmike comes to deliver the local news to Kate and Eileen, he announces that “From Hollywood, California, in America they’re coming, led be a Yank be the name of Robert Flaherty, one
of the most famous and richest Yanks there is...The Man of Aran they’re going calling the film and Ireland mustn’t be such a bad place so if the Yanks want to come to Ireland to do their filming” (10, 11). In an original review of the film, Andre Sennwald insisted that Man of Aran “...is bare, cruel and authentically real; it is ardent with life, and it represents the pure cinema at its best.” In an essay simply titled “Man of Aran,” Martin McLoon notes that “[t]o achieve his epic vision of the ‘noble savage’, Flaherty took considerable liberties with the objective reality of life on Aran as he found it...The problem, though, is that at the time of its release in Ireland in 1934, the film was received as a realistic representation of the Aran Islands...” (48, 50). The issue of using actors to play the roles of Aran islanders is discussed in Cripple: when he returns from America, dejected, Billy tells Bobby that the filmmakers in America thought it would be “better to get a normal fella who can act crippled than a crippled fella who can’t fecking act at all” (58). The release and astounding popularity of this film physically and culturally isolated the Aran Islands, not only from the rest of the world, but from the rest of Ireland.

Today, tourism is a popular source of capital, and visitors can expect to entertain themselves with trips to stone forts, views of the dramatic cliffs, charming colonies of seals, and quaint Irish villages, along with the opportunities to camp or “glamp” on any of the three islands.14 Life on the islands in the early twentieth century, though, posed a

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13 Flaherty was a phenomenally successful American “docufiction” filmmaker during the 1920s and early 30s, during which time he produced fictionalized accounts of life in the Canadian Arctic (Nanook of the North, 1922), the Samoa (Moana, 1926), and the Irish Aran islands (The Man of Aran, 1934). The phrase “docufiction” (a combination of “documentary” and “fiction”) is key here, as these films purported to show privileged modern Americans the lifestyles of “noble savages,” but instead introduced actors to participate in dramatic and inaccurate scenes.

14 Tourist traps are advertised on the official webpage of the Aran Islands, along with opportunities to book accommodations and day trips.
series of difficulties for permanent residents, most of which concerned sending or receiving goods, or remaining connected with the outside world. Most interestingly in the history of the Aran Islands was the connection the small cluster had with the modern accomplishments of the global community. Cripple is set, as Patrick Lonergan observes in The Theater and Films of Martin McDonagh, at a time when modernity was beginning to make its presence felt in the Aran Islands,” and insists that “if Flaherty’s Man of Aran suggested that the life of Aran Islanders would endure forever, The Cripple of Inishmaan instead seeks to present that location at a moment of transition from tradition to modernity” (73). Cripple Billy’s challenge is living as a person with disabilities on an isolated community, long before the possibility of modern Ireland had been introduced. His desire for change is challenged by his physical limitations and small-town Irish reality, but also encouraged by personal interactions with family and potential love interests.

A fictional resident of Inishmaan in 1934, Cripple Billy is “crippled” by a number of realities over the course of his life on the island, most of which, if not all, are addressed over the course of Cripple. The most obvious limitation is Billy’s physical disability, marked by which is a major factor in Billy’s relationships with other islanders and which, according to the island doctor, was caused by disease. His physical form precedes his personality, and even contributes to the identity he is given by other members of the community. When Billy first enters, as Johnny is sharing news with Kate and Eileen, stage direction indicates that he has “one arm and one leg crippled” and that he is “shuffling,” as Johnny addresses him as “Cripple Billy” (9). Billy has to ask Johnny
to not call him “Cripple Billy,” to which Johnny responds, “For why? Isn’t your name Billy and aren’t you a cripple?” (10). When Billy approaches Bobby to ask for passage from Inishmaan to Inishmore, so he might participate in the filming, Bobby makes several claims about the unluckiness and uselessness of cripples: “A cripple fella’s bad luck in a boat, and everybody knows,” Bobby says, before wondering why Billy would even want to go to the filming, since “[t]hey wouldn’t want a cripple boy” (24). Just as Billy needs to ask Johnny to call him “just Billy,” he also needs to ask Bobby. Helen and Bartley refer to him as “Cripple Billy” throughout their interactions before and after Billy’s four-month stay in America, and even Kate and Eileen refer to their adopted nephew as “Cripple.” At the end of the play, just lines before Billy is actually given an actual soft-diagnosis of tuberculosis, Billy and the Doctor have a heartfelt conversation about Billy’s parents and his disability: “I’ve heard me mammy was a beautiful woman,” Billy says, to which the Doctor responds, “No, no, she was awful ugly”; “They say it was that dad punched mammy while she was heavy with me was why I turned out the way I did,” Billy says, but the Doctor tells him, “Disease caused you to turn out the way you did, Billy. Not punching at all. Don’t go romanticising it” (60). In this, aspects of his past identity are made more clear, and Billy is able to walk away with more knowledge than he had before the filming of Man of Aran interrupted his life on Inishmaan. The knowledge contributes greatly to Billy’s ability to write his own story, and this information seems to validate his attempts at authorship throughout the first and second

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*After Billy has left Inishmaan, Kate tells Eileen that she “still [worries] o’er Cripple Billy,” and Eileen soon after wonders whether “a cow came o’er to Cripple Billy and he lost track of time” (35, 36). Later, after Helen has spurned Billy’s affections, Eileen notes that “Cripple Billy wants to aim lower than Helen,” and Kate agrees: “Cripple Billy does want to aim lower than Helen” (69).*
acts, through the disability itself continues to define him. In every aspect of his life, Billy’s bodily limitations restrict him, just as does the physical island of Inishmaan.

Billy is also limited by the small community in which he lives. Life on Inishmaan is deadly for Billy, whether that death (which is both metaphorical and literal) be caused by insufficient health care, lack of opportunity regarding his personal and professional life, or the over-involvement of neighbors and elderly relatives. While Eileen and Kate Osbourne have been mentioned above as examples of characters who, in some ways, work to stay the modernization of Ireland, they anchor Billy in a way that is restrictive, yes, but also nurturing. Most of Billy’s interactions with his “aunts” Eileen and Kate are prompted either by Billy’s unordinary behavior or existence in Leenane, or by Billy’s desire to leave. This relationship is not toxic, in the way Maureen’s and Mag’s relationship is, but it does speak to a larger internal conflict with which Billy struggles. It should be noted that these are not Billy’s real aunts, but the women who took him in after the death of his parents: Helen tells her brother, Bartley, that “[t]hey only took him in when Billy’s mam and dad went and drowned themselves, when they found out Billy was born a cripple-boy,” but Billy rejects this idea, claiming instead that “[t]hey only fell o’erboard in rough seas…[t]rying to get to America…” (16). In a time of self-doubt, when Billy is wondering whether his parents ever loved him, Eileen encourages Johnny to tell Billy that their suicide was a final act of love, one that saved his life: “They did love you because of everything, Billy,” Eileen says.16 It can be assumed that Billy’s

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16 This, of course, is a lie, and Kate later speaks with Eileen about the attempt by Billy’s parents to kill Billy. The pair’s complicity in this years-long lie stands as testament to their love for Billy. While Eileen and Kate both occasionally refer to Billy as “Cripple,” they also forbid him to leave Inishmaan; Billy pays them no mind, of course, because he is an eighteen year-old boy with ambition, and these are two women in their sixties who talk to stones and who eat their own
courage to endure the day-to-day drudgery and humiliation of life on Inishmaan would not exist without the support (and, occasionally, restriction) of Kate and Eileen, and so the trap of his aunts also becomes a source for Billy’s authorship.

This specific instance of affirmation from his aunts gives him the confidence to seek another opportunity for reciprocated love in his relationship with Helen. While Father Welsh neglected to acknowledge the potential happiness that Girleen’s friendship or romantic affections could provide, Billy does recognize the potential for some kind of personal fulfilment in Helen. There are obvious signs of Billy’s romantic feelings for her throughout the text, but nothing is done until Billy has gone to and come back from America: when Billy speaks with Bobby about the method of payment Helen promised for a boat ride to Inishmore, Billy asks him “Wouldn’t you want to kiss Helen, so?” and, when Bobby asks Billy if he would want to kiss Helen, “Billy shrugs shyly, sadly,” and doubts that Helen would ever want to kiss a boy like him; while Billy is in America, Kate and Eileen both “think Billy’s in love with Helen…”; when Billy sees Helen for the first time since his return to Ireland, wanting to spend time alone with her, he hints to his aunt Eileen, “Em, Aunty, is that the kettle, now, I hear boiling in the back?” (24, 37, 65).

Finally, Billy reaches out to her, emotionally, though he knows full well the risk of rejection, and says, “...I was wondering if maybe you might want to go out walking with me some evening…[f]or the company…[a]nd for the way sweethearts be,” which makes Helen laugh and walk out (68). Readers or viewers may very well be angry with

sweetie rations before they’ve got a chance to sell them. In this way, they are working to prevent Billy from physically leaving his Irish reality, as Mag tried to prevent Maureen from going to America with Pato Dooley. However, the aunts genuinely care for Billy, and their constant presence fosters his desire for self-identity (even if this may not be what they want).
Helen--Billy is the one to root for, the underdog--but they need not be for long.

McDonagh rewards Billy’s passionate attempt at authorship with a romantic second encounter. Helen reenters, agrees to go walking with Billy, and kisses him, thrilling readers and viewers who had hopes for Billy’s personal success. However, as quickly as McDonagh rewards him with Helen’s reciprocation, Billy coughs up a large amount of blood, and his death from tuberculosis is confirmed. Though his imminent death is tragic, Billy could be identified as the most successful pursuer of confirmed identity. His attempts at authorship are made through offers of friendship and love, as can be seen in his interactions with Kate and Eileen, as well as with Helen, but also through the delivery of a few key monologues.

When Billy delivers his first speech, stage direction indicates that he is “shivering alone on a chair in a squalid Hollywood hotel room” and that he “wheezes slightly throughout” (47). Readers or viewers will know, at this point, that Billy has gone to America to act, and that his TB would only afford him three or four months to live. The speech, then, seems to be Billy’s delivery of his last words: he speaks as a cripple with a strong, deadly cough, and longs for the Ireland he left behind; he speaks of his parents, who are not with him, and of the way his heart has been broken “be a lass who never knew his true feelings, and now, sure, never will” (48).17 This sounds like the authentic

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17 It is also worth mentioning that Cripple Billy quotes and quietly sings “The Croppy Boy” in this scene. Lyrics from the song include lines like, “I looked behind, and I looked before,/And my aged mother I’ll see no more,” and “And when I stood on the scaffold high/My own dear father did me deny” (“The Croppy Boy”). When Billy returns to Inishmaan from America, he tells his neighbors that the Yanks made him feel ridiculous when they asked him to sing “The Croppy Boy.” This is likely because the song represents a reductive assumption that Irish people will know and be able to sing any Irish song, but also because the lyrics remind him of the relationship he craves, but will never have, with his parents. His rejection of this song proves interesting, if one were to look at Billy’s rejection of “Croppy Boy” as the rejection of his past. However, Billy is still concerned
Billy, as the audience has come to know him. However, Billy is not dead, and reappears behind the curtain of Inishmaan’s *Man of Aran* premiere. He later tells Bobby that “the Yank” said Billy couldn’t “fecking act at all,” and McDonagh’s audience realizes that the heartfelt monologue about the beauty of Ireland, and the tender reflection on a relationship between parent and child, were parts of a failed performance. Billy does not get the part, but it is important to observe that this failure does *not* hinder his pursuit for authorship. Instead, he capitalizes on two other opportunities to communicate truth through language, both of which involve risking his physical, mental, and emotional being. First, Billy tells Bobby that he had lied to him about suffering from tuberculosis, and admits that he “thought that [it] would be more effective” to trick Bobby by using the same disease that killed his wife. Here, Bobby beats Billy with a lead pipe, and Billy suffers physical punishment. Once he has been to the doctor and his face has been examined and bandaged, Billy has another opportunity to be honest with Helen, and this time is rewarded (as mentioned in the previous paragraph). Ultimately, though Billy fails in his attempts to physically leave Inishmaan, and to physically leave Ireland, he experiences a different kind of success. As Mick Dowd was not able to leave Connemara, but was given the gift of his wife’s skull (and, by extension, the gift of emotional support) as reward for *mostly* pure intentions, Billy is rewarded for his enthusiastic and repeated efforts to compose his own identity narrative, which were motivated by a genuine desire for something better.

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with the circumstances surrounding his parents’ death at the end of *Cripple*, as he himself exits, plagued by a fit of tuberculosis.
Padraic, star of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, is a far cry from the endearing Cripple Billy, and while he is also offered the possibility of happiness in this changing Ireland, he, like Father Welsh, rejects the gift. His relationship with the traps and restraints of small-town Ireland is an interesting one. As a want-to-be member of the Irish Republican Army, and an actual member of the radicalized Irish National Liberation Army, Padraic participates in the violent, terrorist-style torture of petty criminals, convinced that pulling the toenails off a marijuana pusher is somehow going to save northern Ireland. He is also deeply connected to his childhood cat, Wee Thomas, and the news of his cat’s poor health pulls him back to Inishmore. These things indicate that Padraic wishes to reject the threat of a modern Ireland, in favor of more enthusiastic participation in his own personal childhood aspirations (the desire to be a member of the IRA) and practices (spending time with Wee Thomas). However, while Padraic is one of the McDonagh characters who works to stay firmly rooted in his personal past, he seeks change at a national level. Perhaps more importantly, and more relevant to the composition of Padraic’s personal narrative, is his potential partner in crime, Mairead, who looks to her future, as well as the future of Ireland.

Over the course of his Leenane Trilogy, and in *Cripple*, McDonagh establishes a series of requirements for what can and cannot result in reconstruction of personal narrative. This can be seen in the cases of Maureen, who is punished for malicious intent, Mick, who is forgiven for violent action and rewarded for his pure intent, Father Welsh, who is punished for rejecting the potential for satisfaction in his identity and for giving in to the desperation of less-than ideal circumstances, and Billy, who is rewarded for
enthusiastically pursuing the potential for narrative satisfaction in spite of *crippling* circumstances. In the case of Padraic, intent regarding his actions is difficult to understand. To summarize, Padraic’s only desires are to rid northern Ireland of “them jackboot hirelings of England’s foul monarchy,” and to punish anyone who hurts Wee Thomas (30). These desires are often pursued through violent means. His involvement with the Irish National Liberation Army is a step-down from his ideal position as a member of the IRA, but he seems content and proud of his position as he “tortur[es] one of them fellas pushes drugs (marijuana) on wee kids” (15). McDonagh himself noted that the violence in *Lieutenant* was extreme, even compared to the violence in his other plays: “this is the furthest I’m going to push this whole violence, black-comedy thing, because I don’t think it can get much blacker or more violent” (Rosenthal 10). The removal of the “pusher’s” toenails is black, as is the point-blank shooting of Sir Roger, but the chopping up of dead bodies and smashing of teeth as to prevent identification takes the theme of violent “black-comedy” somewhere further even than the mother-torture in *Beauty Queen*. Padraic’s involvement in the INLA, and the extreme violence in *Lieutenant*, likely reflect McDonagh’s early stages of writing; “[f]irst performed in 2001 but composed in 1994, two years before...*The Beauty Queen of Leenane, The Lieutenant of Inishmore* represents something of an experiment in how far a writer can push these boundaries” (Doyle 94). Although the violence here *is* extreme, even for McDonagh, there are elements of romance in *Lieutenant* far more volcanic than the relationships between Maureen and Pato, Mick and Oona, Father Welsh and Girleen, Billy and Helen. Padraic does not look for romance, the way Maureen, Girleen and Billy do, but happily
falls into it on more than one occasion. These casual acceptances of changes in personal narrative make Padraic unlike other McDonagh characters, and, acts of brutal violence towards people and animals aside, readers of Lieutenant may be unsure of how to best judge his character.

It can be frustrating to compare Padraic’s desire to stay in Ireland with the desires of characters like Maureen and Billy, and it may seem impossible to connect a violent (potentially psychopathic) INLA soldier to Father Welsh. However, while Padraic does not necessarily prioritize the composition of his personal narrative, he does seek to change the story of Ireland’s political history. His involvement in the INLA makes it clear to McDonagh’s audience that (a) the current Irish political reality is not satisfactory for Padraic, and (b) just as Father Welsh connects the success of his personal priest narrative to the moral alignment of his parishioners, so to does Padraic connect the success of his identity to Ireland’s total independence from England. And while Father Welsh, for the sake of his sanity, is able to maintain one level of distinction between himself and the achievements or failures of his parishioners (he is a priest, they are not), Padraic understands that his role as an INLA soldier makes him one with the country. A desire to pursue an independent national identity has replaced the desire to pursue an independent personal identity. In this way, Padraic’s words and actions, for him and for McDonagh’s audience, are directly connected to the violent, volatile, and changing Ireland of the twentieth century.

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18 First, Padraic kisses Mairead in thanks, but the kiss quickly becomes sensual; second, Padraic is taken outside to be executed, and returns to the house safely, kissing and caressing Mairead.
19 I find it acceptable to push these acts of violence “aside,” for the sake of character examination, specifically character examination as concerns Padraic’s pursuit of a personal identity that is intrinsically connected with the Irish identity.
The issue, though, are Padraic’s relationships, and figuring out how Donny and Davey, Wee Thomas, and Mairead factor into this comparison between individual and country. Donny and Davey seem to represent the older, more complacent Ireland, one which wearily accepted the occupation of England, the one which gives way to Padraic’s INLA terrorism, and one which falls asleep with trouble looming: “So be remembering to be waking me,” Donny says to Davey, as they ready themselves for a short nap, after which they will “be up bright and early to fix the final touches so not a thing will he suspect” (33, 32-33). But Davey cannot wake himself, and so forgets to wake Donny before Padraic comes home. Wee Thomas is likely a symbol of Padraic’s childhood, something precious to him, which was thought to be gone, but which had been there, out of sight, all along. Mairead offers a possible solution here, as she provides a glimpse into the person Padraic once was—-a young rebel, excited to get out of Inishmore and involve herself completely in the fight for Ireland’s freedom—-while also existing as a “Girleen” or “Helen” type—a potential love interest whose presence could improve the life of a man wanting things to move more quickly. Her involvement in local bovine torture is similar to Padraic’s torture of James, the marijuana peddler, and Mairead’s “close-cropped hair [and] army trousers” are outward expressions of her rebellious nature and desire to join a revolutionary group, which, readers can imagine, is much like Padraic as a younger man. But while Padraic has aligned his personal narrative entirely

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20 Wee Thomas, Padraic’s black cat, seems to be the only part of Inishmore Padraic cares for. For the love of Wee Thomas, Padraic abandons the torture of the weed peddler, comes home, tortures and threatens to kill his father and Davey, and kills another cat. It is possible that the cat Padraic kills, Mairead’s own Sir Roger, also represents her childhood, which has just been abruptly taken from her.
with that of Ireland’s national narrative, Mairead seeks to pursue both personal and national paths, and she provides the standard by which Padraic may be judged.

The most logical comparison to be made between Mairead and Padraic is her desire for personal relationships which benefit her, but not Ireland, and his complete lack of interest in anything that does not work to eradicate the English from Ulster. When Mairead first comes to collect Padraic, air rifle in hand, she asks Padraic if he won’t take her to a dance at the church hall that Friday. He refuses, her on the grounds that he is “interested in no social activities that don’t involve the freeing of Ulster” (30). Mairead offers to “go Dutch” on a viewing of a movie about the Guildford Four, which Padraic also declines.21 Immediately, Padraic asks her “Why did you come to meet me this far out of your way?” to which she “skulkily” responds “No reason.” He, and the audience, quickly realize that it was just to ask Padraic out on a date. Mairead, when her initial offer is declined, attempts to connect her personal desires with Padraic’s. In the same scene, when Mairead asks Padraic if he will take her with him, when he returns, Padraic insists that they “don’t be letting girls in the INLA. No. Unless pretty girls” (31). Mairead is crushed, and on the verge of tears; her desires to participate in the INLA, and to promote the independence of Ireland, are as important to her as feeling attractive. When Padraic kisses Mairead, after she’s told him that Wee Thomas “is over the worst of it,” it starts as an innocuous kiss of thanks but transforms into “something much more sensual” (32).

21 Considering that Lieutenant takes place in 1993, the film Mairead wanted to see was likely In the Name of the Father (1993), a film which dramatizes the case of the Guildford Four: a man is “coerced” into confessing his involvement in an IRA bombing, though he was not involved in the incident (“In the Name of the Father”). The film was nominated for dozens of awards in the US and England, but Padraic refuses Mairead’s offer on the grounds that the Guildford Four “did nothing but whine” (30). Perhaps the film’s success in non-Irish countries contributed to his disinterest.
accidental stumbling into a romantic experience is dramatically contrasted with Mairead’s
efforts at manufacturing one. His lack of effort speaks to a disinterest in anything that
does not directly relate to the success of Ireland’s liberation, but it also dehumanizes him
when compared with Mairead, who so intently works to blend her personal and national
lives. Her commitment to compose a personal narrative that includes Ireland, but does not
depend entirely on the Irish national state, is a far cry from Padraic’s dependence on
Ireland for a personal identity.

By scene seven, Padraic has learned that Wee Thomas is dead. After he has killed
Sir Roger, the replacement cat, and tied up Davey and Donny, three Northern Irishmen
(Christy, Brendan and Joey) have appeared to punish Padraic for forming a splinter group
and torturing James, the marijuana peddler. Joey ties Padraic’s hands behind his back and
leads him outside with the intent of killing him. It is assumed that, while outside, Mairead
kills Joey to save Padraic. By the time they come back inside, they have become a
couple. Stage direction indicates that “Padraic and Mairead appear in the doorway, hand
in hand…[they] seem to almost glide across the room, their eyes locked on each other.
Padraic caresses her hair and cheek impressed beyond words at her abilities with a gun”
(43). Again, Padraic has stumbled into a romantic experience without any effort, but
Mairead has had to work for it; again, Padraic has pursued nothing but survival in the
interest of Irish victory, and Mairead’s desire for composition of personal narrative has
made her the most human character in *Lieutenant*, dehumanizing Padraic in the eyes of
McDonagh’s readers. Mairead does follow Padraic, both his influence and his direct
orders: she works to impress him throughout, and responds with an obedient “Check,
Lieutenant,” when Padraic asks her to bring “a knife, a cheese grate, a razor, an iron and anything to gag the screaming,” as he drags Christy off to be tortured (45). Ultimately, though, Padraic is killed by the thing he has influenced and effortlessly seduced. Mairead learns that it was Padraic who killed her beloved cat, Sir Roger, and she shoots him mercilessly before confidently ordering Donny and Davey to start “chopping up that feck…” (53). Mairead, the young woman who is able to successfully combine her interest in compositing Ireland’s history with the desire to construct her own identity, seems to be more than capable of commanding both narratives as she leaves the stage. Although she does engage in petty acts of violence against innocent cows, Mairead commits herself to punishing the “bad” guys, and protecting those she deems “good,” and McDonagh rewards her for an enthusiastic pursuit of two different kinds of authorship.

While the plays of both the Leenane Trilogy and the incomplete Aran islands trilogy are set in real parts of Ireland, during real periods of Ireland’s history, events of The Pillowman take place in an unnamed totalitarian state, at an unidentified time--Detective Tupolski admits, “a totalitarian fucking dictatorship” (18). Although the play does not rely on the political or geographical traps of Ireland to confine its characters, the literal prison in which Katurian and Michal are held (and in which Tupolski and Ariel work) restricts the potential authorship of characters in The Pillowman just as Leenane and the Aran Islands restrict the potential authorship of characters in McDonagh’s other plays. The pursuit of an identity narrative by each of the characters in The Pillowman, then, is definitely not as “Irish” as, say, the pursuits of Padraic or Maureen Folan. Other McDonagh characters have pursued authorship through
physical escape, violence, or acting, but Katurian quite literally writes his own stories. Katurian, the author, is undoubtedly the most logical choice in an analytical search for “characters who search for redemption from a corrupted sense of identity through composition.” But each of the four main characters in The Pillowman, in their way, compose: Michal attempts to regain the authority that was taken from him through mimicry; Tupolski composes a personal narrative through literal storytelling and through his choice of profession; Ariel’s modern identity as one who “polices” and protects relies completely on the erasure of the identity forced on him by his sexually abusive parents. In a play filled with individuals striving to redeem their identities, the examination of different methods of “composition” is key to understanding the details of McDonagh’s regulations for punishment and reward.

Tupolski and Ariel, who enthusiastically participate in stereotypical “good cop” and “bad cop” roles, are the most unlikely pursuers of personal identity in The Pillowman. However, the revelation of each character’s past identity allows readers to understand how two police officials of a totalitarian dictatorship can be using the opportunities afforded them by their profession to revise their personal narratives. Ariel’s childhood identity is revealed by Tupolski, prompted by Katurian’s probing questions: “...[W]ho was the first one who told you to kneel down, Ariel” Your mum or your dad?”; “I’m guessing your dad, right?”; “Where’s your father now, Ariel?”; “Is he in prison?” (54, 55). Ariel has already delivered his “Children are gonna come up and give me sweets when I’m an old man” speech, as Tupolski calls it, and readers know that he currently

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While Katurian composes original narratives, and Michal mimics the stories his brother tells, Ariel and Tupolski seem to have had one instance of creativity which they repeat when the situation calls for optimistic fiction. Ariel does deliver his “Children are gonna come up and give
identifies himself as a savior of helpless children, rather than as an agent of a dictatorial state (53). This passionate desire to protect children shifts Ariel’s identity in Pillowman from “mindless, torture-hungry police agent” to “well-meaning protector,” which prepares McDonagh’s audience for a more dramatic shift in identity. Tupolski reveals that Ariel was repeatedly raped by his father from the age of eight, and that, eventually, he “held a pillow over his [father’s] head while he was sleeping” (55). This sexual abuse identified Ariel for years, stripping him of all authorship and making him a victim to his father’s advances, so it makes sense that, after murdering his father, Ariel seeks work that will allow him to prevent the creation of future Ariels. In a way, Ariel becomes “The Pillowman,” but encourages children to pursue happiness by locking up the sources of their unhappiness, rather than by aiding them in suicide. His need to protect children becomes something intensely personal, where it was simply endearing before Tupolski gave away his secret, and Ariel’s desire to save children can now be understood as an outward professional reflection of his deeper desire to construct his own adult narrative.

Like Ariel, Tupolski views his profession as a position that allows him to save children, rather than as a job that perpetuates the unidentified totalitarian regime. Tupolski has also prepared a “speech” to deliver when occasion warrants such a thing, in me sweets when I’m an old man” speech to Katurian, but, at the time of its delivery, readers do not know that this is a trope Tupolski has heard several times before. There is genuine personal authorship here, as Ariel has crafted a future for himself and is actively working toward that future, but the value of that authorship is slightly diminished when readers realize Ariel has delivered these lines before.

It is important to note that, while the totalitarian dictatorship created the oppressive system which allowed Tupolski and Ariel to hold Katurian and Michal without rights, it is reduced to a very basic structure which restricts these characters, rather than a nation. As McDonagh shifts the focus from Katurian’s imprisonment to his role as storyteller, injustices are aligned more directly with personal history than with the current political reality, and readers/viewers become less concerned with the political realities of this unnamed state.
the form of a short story, that, “if it doesn’t sum up [his] world view, it sums up [his] view of detective work and the relation of the detective work to the world at large” (57). “The Story of the Little Deaf Boy on the Big Long Railroad Tracks. In China.” is a story about a deaf Chinese boy who follows the railroad tracks on his way home “from someplace one time...there’s no trees, there’s no nothing, there’s just these fucking plains, and he’s walking along these tracks…” (58). An old man, who chooses to live alone at the top of a very tall tower, spots the boy and the train which threatens to crush him. Instead of rushing down the stairs of the tower to pull the boy aside, the old man “does nothing but start making a little calculation on a piece of paper...based...on the train’s speed, on the length of railroad track, and on the speed the little boy’s little legs are going at, a calculation to find out exactly at what point on the track this train is going to plough straight through the poor little deaf boy’s little fucking back” (60). The old man calculates that the train will crush the boy ten yards from the foot of the tower, and, knowing this, folds his calculations into a paper airplane, which he then tosses out of the window, “without another thought for the poor little deaf boy.” Eleven yards from the foot of the tower, the boy leaves the railroad tracks to follow the path of the paper airplane, and he is saved. Tupolski does need to explain the equivalencies he draws between himself and the old man in the tower, as well as the logic behind the old man’s tossing the paper airplane out the window without looking to make sure the young deaf boy runs off the tracks to retrieve it, but the “moral” of the story identifies Tupolski as someone removed from his “fellow man,” but still invested in the care and protection of
vulnerable people.\textsuperscript{24} This story is much like Ariel’s “Children are gonna come up and give me sweets” speech in that it brings a specific personality and personalized desire to a job that could otherwise be occupied by mindless government sheep. And, like Ariel, this exposition of Tupolski’s personal interest in promoting safety for the unsafe prepares McDonagh’s audience for a more dramatic revelation: Tupolski’s son drowned while “[f]ishing on his own,” (62). While Ariel’s truth is revealed against his will, Tupolski chooses to reveal his own personal history, though it could be said that Katurian’s story of “The Pillowman,” and his gentle question of “Did you lose a child?,” encourages him to do so. Further, while Ariel’s past trauma has directly influenced his choice to become a police officer, Tupolski’s decision to work as a detective, and his motivation for authorship, is secondary.\textsuperscript{25} He could not save his son—about whose death he clearly feels guilty—but he has chosen to commit himself to saving other children, and thus, chosen take responsibility for his own narrative.

Michal’s and Katurian’s individual pursuits of authorship first appear to be that of student and unwitting teacher, or passionate fan and admired celebrity, but the balance each man creates, between active and inactive methods of storytelling, reveals the similarities between these pursuits. While Katurian expresses his methods of authorship quite directly, and without deception, his brother lies in order to further his personal narrative. Michal is perhaps the most interesting character to analyze when looking for intent to craft a new story, as well as motivation for that intent, because so much of his

\textsuperscript{24} Tupolski does mention that his father was a violent alcoholic and that he, too, has become a violent alcoholic (which was his “personal choice,” and not “shitty behaviour” that can be justified by a “shitty childhood” (54).

\textsuperscript{25} As Mick worked to change the content of his personal narrative after losing Oona, so too does Tupolski work after losing his son.
physical action is mimicry of Katurian’s written tales. When Katurian is first reunited with his brother in the prison, Kautrian asks Michal to “[s]wear to me on your life that you didn’t kill those three kids,” and Michal responds, “I swear to you on my life that I didn’t kill those three kids” (27). Katurian is relieved, and starts to think how best they could get out of the prison. After telling Michal the story of “The Pillowman,” Michal says, “Hmm. But I still can’t figure it out” (33). Katurian asks if he means the story, but Michal actually means the young boy’s toes, which he had hidden in a box under the Christmas tree pot. He had lied, he did kill the children. Michal then reveals to Katurian that he maimed and killed three young children because Katurian wrote such gruesome stories, and that he “wouldn’t have done anything” if Katurian hadn’t told these stories to Michal: first, Aaron, whose five right toes Michal chopped and who then bled to death; second, a girl whom Michal force-fed razor-filled applemen, and who drowned in her own blood; third, a mute girl who was forced by Michal to reenact “The Little Jesus” (35). While the first two murders are certainly horrifying, it is the third “Little Jesus” murder that most repulses Tupolski, Ariel, and even Katurian, though he wrote it.26 However, when men of the state go to search the area around the wishing well, where Michal told Katurian she had been buried alive, hoping to find the little girl before she suffocated, they instead found her “down there...in a little Wendy house there. She had three little piglets with her. She had plenty of food and water. So did the piglets. She seems quite happy about it all…” (63-64). Again, Michal has lied. Rather than acting out

26 The child-murder in “The Little Jesus” involves a young girl’s step-parents brutalizing her constantly over the course of her lifetime, eventually forcing her to act out the Passion of Christ: she is crowned with barbed wire, whipped with a cat o’ nine tails, forced to carry a cross until her shins and knees break, crucified, and stabbed. When her step-parents see that, after all this, she has not died, they bury her alive, insisting that if she really is Jesus, she’ll be alive in three days.
the gruesome “Little Jesus” story, he has painted a small deaf girl green and given her piglets, acting out the events of “The Little Green Pig.” Author Eamonn Jordan questions the place authorial truth has in McDonagh’s world: “What obligations does the writer have to the idea of authenticity? Some would argue that the writer is duty bound to reflect as accurately as possible the dealings and coercive dynamics of the real world in which the play is set” (221). Because of the deep psychological and developmental damage inflicted on Michal by his parents, his is allowed a more lenient relationship with “the truth.” Throughout his life, Michal’s only exposure to authorship has been as a plot point for his younger brother’s development tale, with no independence or agency, and the stories Katurian tells. As a result, Michal understands that neglecting to tell the whole truth is not “lying,” but “creating a twist” or “playing a trick” that will make for a more interesting story. By lying about not murdering the children, then lying about how many children he had murdered and in which way, Michal manipulates his audience into a series of twists, and is able to tell his own story. His method of authorship is not the written word, as is Katurian’s, but he is still able to compose a narrative. Because his intentions were not to harm, but to tell and retell stories, McDonagh rewards Michal with one final recitation of “The Little Green Pig,” and a relatively painless death at the hands of a loved one.

Similar to his brother, but less deceptive, Katurian most clearly composes through literal story writing, and has produced “about four hundred stories” over the course of his adolescent and adult life (67). The content and quantity of these stories has labeled him

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Michal’s “retelling” of “The Little Green Pig” was clearly not complete, as the story ends with the green pig painted pink, and all the pink pigs painted green. It is unclear if Michal was captured by the state in the middle of his “storytelling.”
“author,” and this identity is affirmed by Tupolski and Ariel in their initial interrogation: “This writer,” Ariel calls him (9). Katurian also self-identifies, telling the detectives that, “That’s what I do, I tell stories” (8). As Tupolski and Ariel and Katurian all speak to Katurian’s literal writing as his personal identity, so too does McDonagh’s audience identify him as a storyteller, specifically as a storyteller who communicates through the written word, rather than through action. However, Katurian is also able to tell stories and compose his personal identity through physical action. Once he realizes that Michal is also being held in the prison, Katurian uses inaction to identify himself as a brother and as a caregiver: “I’m scared my brother is all alone in a strange place,” he says, “and I’m scared your friend is gonna go kick the shit out of him...but my brother gets frightened easily, and he doesn’t understand these things and he’s got nothing to do with these stories anyway...and I think you should just fucking go and fucking let him out of here right now! Right fucking now!” (12). Rather than prioritize his own safety, or that of his stories, Katurian acts in a way that prioritizes the safety and comfort of his brother. When Michal tells Katurian he killed the children, and Katurian is forced to deal with the reality of his influence on this “sadistic, retarded fucking pervert who enjoys killing little kids,” he chooses to kill Michal rather than let him be executed by Ariel and Tupolski (35). While he does not prioritize the physical safety of his brother, Katurian does suffocate him in the interest of sparing him the pain of torture, and decides to take responsibility for the murders of six people: the children, his two parents, and, now, Michal. While his

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Ariel makes this comment after Katurian tells the officers that he works in “The Kamenice abattoir,” the slaughterhouse. Likely, the comment is made sarcastically, as Ariel cannot believe that the author of such gruesome tales actually works in a slaughterhouse full-time. However, this is not the only instance in which Katurian is addressed as one who writes.
brother lies about who he killed and how, in the interest of storytelling, Katurian likely
does not consider lying about his involvement in the murders to be a “twist,” just
something he must do to preserve his stories. With these two actions, Katurian
dramatically changes his personal narrative, and now faces execution as a punishment for
crimes he did not commit. But like he kills Michal to spare him physical pain, McDonagh
kills Katurian to spare his stories.29

After Katurian is shot through the head, the stage direction indicates that “the
dead Katurian slowly gets to his feet, takes the hood off to reveal his bloody,
bullet-shattered head, observes Ariel at the table, and speaks” (68). Katurian tells the
audience, in third-person narrative, that his final moments were spent thinking of a story
for his dead brother. In his physical act of sacrifice, in his mental composition of a new
narrative, and in his emotional connection to his brother, his source of success and
inspiration, Katurian definitively identifies himself—both before and in death—as a
storyteller.30 He has maintained this identity throughout the play, and has used different
physical means to push his own narrative forward, and in different directions, always
with the intention of protecting Michal and his stories. For this authenticity and purity of
intention, McDonagh rewards him: though Tupolski instructs Ariel to burn the stories

29 It should be noted that, considering Michal’s experience with physical torture, and considering
Katurian’s devotion to his own stories, these killings were done to spare each brother an
equivalent amount of pain.
30 In “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother,” Katurian himself attributes his success (referring not
necessarily his literary success—he has only published one story—but to the possible longevity of
his work) to the psychological influence of his brother’s years-long muffled screams and torture,
at the hands of their parents. It would not be difficult to insist that the killing of his mother and
father was, for Katurian, deemed necessary by the way they treated Michal, and that this event
too influenced his writing. Interestingly enough, with the death of Katurian and the survival of
his stories, “McDonagh ends his story...in a way that would have met with Michal's approval”
(Carroll, 286).
immediately after Katurian is killed, the now-dead Katurian tells the audience that “...for reasons known only to himself, the bulldog of a policeman chose not to put the stories in the burning trash, but placed them carefully with Katurain’s case file…” (69). The physical copies of these stories would not be so precious to Katurian if they were not the only copies of his work; more than physical things, Katurian hopes that his stories will outlive him, and he signs a (false) confession of murder only once Tupolski and Ariel have agreed to “...keep all [his] stories with [his] case file and not release them until fifty years after [his] death” (51). Yes, he literally writes stories in the interest of getting them published, like any writer, but Katurian’s priority lies with storytelling, not money-making. His stories are preserved and he is rewarded because the composition of his personal narrative is accomplished through sacrificial action, mental commitment to his craft, and emotional devotion to his brother.

Through the analysis of several of Martin McDonagh’s plays, it is clear that the need for individuals to redeem themselves of any action or lack of action, on their own part or on the part of others, is necessary for one’s happiness, and that this is best done through the pursuit of individual authorship. Constructing one’s own story is necessary for genuine satisfaction, though it is important to understand that the methods of construction are as important, if not more important, than the desire to construct. Specifically, successful or failed identification of self depends on how the characters tell the story in which they want to live. Maureen Folan, Mick Dowd, Father Welsh, Cripple Billy, Padraic, Mairead, Ariel, Tupolski, Michal and Katurian are all characters in Martin McDonagh’s work who are deprived, at some point, of the ability to determine their own
identity, and who desire to construct a new narrative. However, their success or failure is determined by their chosen methods of authorial pursuit. Those who choose to compose a personal identity story through violent or impatient means (Maureen), those who expect their story to be written as part of something or someone else (Padraic), and those who do not recognize that important additions to their personal story must be made (Father Welsh), are punished with death or loss of any potential authorship. But those who are able to pursue authorship while maintaining (relatively) pure intentions are able to succeed, if not in some small way. Mick Dowd, though he seems to be disinterested in creating a story in which he lives separately from his dead wife, Oona, is rewarded for the purity of his missing her. Cripple Billy pursues a career in acting, diving into a literal method of storytelling that rewards him with a romantic encounter before death, and Mairead works hard to balance her desires for love stories and stories of Irish revolution, so she is rewarded with romance and a place in the paramilitaries. The characters of *The Pillowman* all find a way to prioritize authorship, and are all motivated by a pure intention to better themselves and their world through either action or storytelling. Ultimately, McDonagh uses his own stories to express the value of composition to individual identity, and the need for people, Irish or otherwise, to either patiently pursue progress, or risk death.
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