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## ABBREVIATIONS

Title	Abbreviations	Internal referencing
<i>A Behanding in Spokane</i>	<i>Spokane</i>	<i>S</i>
<i>A Skull in Connemara</i>	<i>Skull</i>	<i>SC</i>
<i>A Very Very Very Dark Matter</i>	<i>Dark Matter</i>	<i>DM</i>
<i>Hangmen</i>	<i>Hangmen</i>	<i>H</i>
<i>In Bruges</i>	<i>Bruges</i>	<i>IB</i>
<i>Seven Psychopaths</i>	<i>Psychopaths</i>	<i>SP</i>
<i>Six Shooter</i>	<i>Shooter</i>	<i>SS</i>
<i>The Beauty Queen of Leenane</i>	<i>Beauty Queen</i>	<i>BQ</i>
<i>The Lieutenant of Inishmore</i>	<i>Inishmore</i>	<i>I</i>
<i>The Lonesome West</i>	<i>Lonesome</i>	<i>LW</i>
<i>The Pillowman</i>	<i>Pillowman</i>	<i>P</i>
<i>Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri</i>	<i>Billboards</i>	<i>B</i>





## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction: Beware of Justice

**Abstract** This chapter introduces Martin McDonagh's inclination to place unconventional characters in situations of intense extremity, often for comic effect. The chapter then signals the wide range of critical perspectives already offered by commentators in relation to McDonagh's body of work. Finally, the chapter starts to consider how Amartya Sen's reflections, amongst others, on the idea of justice offer an appropriate frame to tease out and interrogate the various manifestations of criminal justice in McDonagh's writings.

**Keywords** Writing style · Critical commentary · Morality · Violence · Comedy · Justice

Born in London on 26 March 1970 to Irish parents, Martin Faranan McDonagh is one of the most performed playwrights in the world today. The fact that the plays are so regularly revived in multiple contexts across the globe from Dublin to Dubai, from London to Perm (a Russian city that hosted two international festivals dedicated to McDonagh's work), speaks to the relevance and importance of his writing. In the world of film, as writer/director, McDonagh has had notable successes with his highly regarded three full-length films, and one film short. It is less important to regard him as an Irish, English, London-Irish or Anglo-Irish writer, as he is a cosmopolitan writer, whose identity has been shaped by post-colonial, globalised and diasporic factors. (See Jordan

[2014, 1–7] on McDonagh’s background, and Brah, 1996 on the impact of poly-locationality on diasporic populations.)

Martin McDonagh’s writing for stage and screen is widely noted for its taboo transgressions, moral ambiguities and various inflammatory extravagances, particularly its association with excesses and extremes of violence. Aspects of McDonagh’s dramaturgical intent are especially evident in the coarse, twisted and contradictory dispositions of characters who are noted for their irritating fixations, petty and irrational obsessions, vindictive sentiments, and ridiculous self-justifications. They are self-assured, reinforced by their own self-deceptions and self-belief, unafraid of their own myths, never unnerved by knock-backs, failures or uncomplimentary feedback from others.

Character relationships are shaped as much by sentimentality as they are by ruthlessness, by an inability to calibrate the differences of another, and by unadorned empathy deficiencies. In the Oscar-winning short-film *Six Shooter* (2005) a couple that have just lost their child to a cot death are called “Fred and Rosemary” [West], after the notorious serial killers, by a troubled character, Kid.

Most characters are blatantly unpredictable in their responses to the circumstances in which they find themselves. With few exceptions McDonagh affords his characters little consideration of their own motives or adequate space to reflect on their actions. Thus, prompted more by impulse rather than reflection and by compulsion rather than choice, ill-conceived and ill-concealed character self-interest leads habitually to catastrophic outcomes. When reflection enters the fray, it regularly dissipates, particularly in the early work. Audiences are often disorientated by not knowing quite how to position themselves, in relation to a character, situation or expressed values.

However incendiary, gruesome and provocative the writing, staging and cinematographic strategies seem to be, these are distorted, magnified and indeed often moderated by genre shifting, re-framing or blurring, thus complicating reception frames. (See Weitz [2012], on the idea of sleights-of-frame.) This is a body of work comfortable with the concurrent mingling of various genres. The work combines the tragic-comic, the melodramatic, the farcical, the grotesque, the surreal, the carnivalesque as well as the sensibilities of Théâtre du Grand-Guignol—(hereafter Grand-Guignol) in both the films and the plays. (See Jordan 2014, 12–19.) For Manohla Dargis, “McDonagh likes to play comedy

against violence and to wring laughs out of the unspeakable” (2017). A tongue-in-cheek disposition ensures that there is a constant flitting from the serious and intense to the mundane and the throwaway—the switching of sensibility from the profound to the profane and vice versa is often instantaneous rather than built up incrementally.

Further, a habitual uncertainty principle forefronts improbability, additional ambivalence and ambiguity. Chaos surfaces in multiple ways with characters detaching from reality as Maureen does in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), or by characters being denied the outcomes that they have vigorously pursued. Donnelly fails to kill himself in *Shooter* when the gun explodes as he is about to take his own life, and in *A Behanding in Spokane* (2010) Carmichael cannot set alight a petrol-soaked hotel room because of a malfunctioning cigarette lighter.

An anarchic sensibility is evident also when behaviours deemed just are not necessarily rewarded or evil actions are not inevitably punished as seen in *Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) and, by the bedlam associated with the return of characters long considered dead, from *A Skull in Connemara* (1997) to *Hangmen* (2015). McDonagh’s characters express racist, gender, ageist, ableist, sizeist (stature and girth) and national prejudices often to maximise offence towards ideological and politically correct sensitivities. Some find the reinforcement of gender types and national stereotypes offensive, and that the racist and homophobic comments of characters are in bad taste, no matter the framing, while others take comfort in the playfulness and destabilising attempts to transgress norms. In *Billboards*, Dixon’s attempt to cause offence to Red is based on his misinformation about Cuba’s human rights violations, but Red brings such injustices far closer to home, to Wyoming, and, in effect, the Mathew Shepard killing in Laramie. The tables on the intended offence are turned, so to speak.

Criticism of McDonagh to date has taken the form of various articles that tend to focus on specific works, occasional attempts to offer overviews, like Martin Middeke’s (2010) or collections of essays (Chambers and Jordan’s [2006], and Rankin Russell’s [2007]), book projects by Patrick Lonergan (2012) and my own monograph which includes in-depth analysis of the plays in performance (Jordan 2014).

Others have looked at the work from multiple perspectives, ranging from Gender, Sexuality and Violence (Kurdi [2006] and FitzPatrick Dean [2012]), Intertextuality (Morash [2002] and Clare [2015]), Black

Pastoral (Greene 2000), Irony, Pastiche and Parody (Wallace 2006), Grotesque/Puppet Theatre (Pilný 2006), Hypermasculinity imploded by its reinforcement and conspicuous retraction (Ferguson 2019), “medieval allusions” (Rouse 2011), and In-Yer-Face dramaturgy and a “pessimism about humanity” (Sierz 2001, 219).

Critical readings are offered with emphasis on Diasporic Discourses, Post-Colonial Subjectivities (Ferguson 2016), Neo-Colonialism (Merriman 1999), Race (Als 2010), Globalisation (Lonergan 2009, 2012), Postmodernism, Irony, Nostalgia and “contingent truths” (Lanters 2012, 169), and the Postdramatic, ambivalence and ethics (Wallace 2018). *The Pillowman* variously invites allegorical (Worthen and Worthen 2006), language games (Fitzpatrick 2006), Focualtdian (Haughton 2012) or Žižekian (Akşehir-Uygur 2017) readings.

Fintan O’Toole notes that McDonagh is a part of an Irish Gothic tradition, which “has always been about the sublimation of very real horrors into imaginary terrors” (2018). For John Lahr “The louts and lunatics who inhabit” *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) “are just such gruesome and unforgettable figures; as all gargoyles do, they inspire an almost childish terror and elation in the audience. In its horror and hilarity, it works as an act of both revenge and repair, turning the tables on grief and goonery, and forcing the audience to think about the unthinkable” (2006). McDonagh himself has linked his writing to both a “pacifist rage” (O’Hagan 2001) and “pure moral outrage” (Chambers 2018), a viewpoint offset by Paul Taylor’s claim that McDonagh has a “disturbingly defective moral sense” (2003) and by Pilný’s accusation that ethical considerations are not taken as seriously as they should be (2018). The connection between religion and morality is the focus of much of the writing on *In Bruges* (2008), especially that of O’Brien (2012).

Shaun Richards, Hilton Als, Joan FitzPatrick Dean and O’Toole offer different examples of argument positioning. Richards proposes that the most striking feature of the Leenane Trilogy “is the absence of any informing moral structure on which authority itself rests” (2003, 11). FitzPatrick Dean notes that “questions of morality often remain totally abstract, recondite, and mysterious for many of his characters, especially in his Irish plays” (2018, 101).

Subsequent to Als’ negative comments in a review on McDonagh and the handling of race in 2010s *Behanding*, more recently Als suggests that McDonagh is a “proper moralist”:

McDonagh's dramatic world is defined by power and filled with cruelty and injustice; the bad guy takes center stage but doesn't always get called out. When he revels in his wrongdoing, he's so sly and funny that we forget to disapprove until it's too late—and then we feel doubly guilty for having enjoyed swimming in all that filth. Part of what makes McDonagh's plays so upsetting is that he's a proper moralist, with a severe heart and a weird acceptance of the worst. (2017)

Als links justice, morality and the implications of breaches of expectation for audiences, who find themselves within realms of uncertainty. Specific writing on body violation (Doyle 2007), violence and comedy (Rees 2009), genre, farce and dismemberment (Wallace 2006) are some examples of how scholars have discussed how violent, criminal or vicious acts are premeditated, reflexive, opportunistic, symbolic, predatorial, psychopathic, sadistic and self-destructive. But few critics have sufficiently pursued the significance of such violent actions—namely, vengeance, revenge, restitution, a violence of last resort or claims of self-defence—in relation to justice. O'Toole positions the Leenane Trilogy as:

A version of one of the great mythic landscapes – the world before morality. It is the ancient Greece of *The Oresteia* – a cycle of death and revenge before the invention of justice. It is, perhaps more to the point, the Wild West of John Ford's westerns or Cormac McCarthy's novels, a raw frontier beyond civilization. (1997, 12)

“Before morality” and “before the invention of justice” are important trigger perspectives. And Ben Brantley notes: “McDonagh puts his characters through a series of whiplash reversals in which distinguishing fact from fiction, malice from affection and heroes from villains becomes a serious challenge” (2014) and it is such blurring that interests me.

At times the focus of Patrick Lonergan's writing on McDonagh has been on the law, on not taking the law seriously, and on the absence and flaws of justice. Lonergan notes “if Thomas [*Skull*] is an example of Irish law enforcement, then it seems reasonable to assume that *the* inquest into Oona's death might well have been flawed” (2012, 21). Additionally, Lonergan's response to Tupolski in *Pillowman* (2003) is significant: “He shows that the enactment of law involves not just the punishment of the criminal but also the performance of the *act of punishment*” (2012, 104).

Akşehir-Uygur suggests in relation to *Pillowman*, like I will do, that “it becomes really hard to draw the boundaries between the victim and

the perpetrator,” as police interrogators are pawns in a larger game of violence and oppression (2017, 361). The appearance of 2015s *Hangmen* prompts scholars like FitzPatrick Dean (2018), Lanters (2018) and Pilný (2018) to be more cognisant of the issue of justice. In relation to capital punishment, FitzPatrick Dean notes how the requirement of absolute certainty presses for an end to McDonagh’s more traditional practice of “epistemological instability” (2018, 102).

In McDonagh’s plays and films the frequency with which his characters are agents of criminal justice is telling, namely police officers, investigating detectives, prison guards or hangmen. Invariably, these characters act in ways that ensure that there is nothing necessarily natural, ordered, substantive or inevitable about State-administered justice. Investigative failures, blind spots, incompetencies, justice illiteracy and corruption lead invariably to calamitous miscarriages of justice. Non-State agent characters respond to perceived injustices by taking the law into their own hands (“self-help” justice as Steven Pinker describes it [99]) and then often propose and practise rival systems of justice, resulting in the killing of oppressive authority figures, paramilitary activities, punishment beatings, kangaroo courts, vigilantism, or lynch mob formation.

Such characters appropriate ideas of heightened, if not fundamental principles of justice, evoking codes of honour that licence extreme extra-judicial actions. McDonagh further obfuscates issues of justice by including real life characters and historic situations in his fictional worlds. In *Inishmore* it is the killing of the politician, Airey Neave, whose car exploded as he left a House of Commons car park on 30 March 1979. In *Hangmen* there is Albert Pierrepoint, a real life, celebrity hangman, and direct and indirect references to real criminal cases are made. The Mỹ Lai massacre is central to the Vietnamese character’s revenge narrative in *Psychopaths* (2012). In *A Very Very Very Dark Matter* (2018) it is Belgium’s colonisation of the Congo in the nineteenth century that features. The real spaces of Leenane, Spokane, Bruges, Oldham, Copenhagen, and London interconnect with the indeterminate fictional spaces of Kamenice (*Pillowman*), Tarlington (*Spokane*), and Ebbing (*Billboards*).

McDonagh’s creative worlds are ones where distinctions between victim and perpetrator and guilt and innocence are precarious, where the burden of truth seldom reaches the threshold of beyond reasonable doubt as in criminal law cases, and where punishments and rewards of criminal justice are applied disproportionately and prejudicially.

McDonagh's writing is additionally complicated by the presence and significance of variously violated bodies/skeletal remains, including those of adults, adult/children, teenagers, children or animals—some of whom are established as innocent characters/figures, some as villainous while, sometimes, neither term neatly applies.

While I have evaluated most of these plays and films on other occasions, and although I will work with many of the same scenarios and textual and performance details, sometimes even with ideas substantiated by the same scholarly commentaries, my perspective, emphasis, and argument here is very different. While individual chapters are structured to link certain plays and films, and allow them to speak to each other, the analysis of particular works could be easily rehoused in other chapters, so the chapter divisions allow me to structure my argument rather than affirm any definitive clusterings.

This publication's focus is not on criminology, sociology, abnormal psychology, critical race theory, gender or class studies, seldom addresses social, distributive or restorative forms of justice, the prohibitive costs to access justice, how people evade the law by devious or obstructive means, nor the connections between crime, poverty, and disadvantage. Neither is the publication directly about political and elite interferences nor about widespread corruption within justice systems more broadly. Equally, I am not addressing the prevalence of criminality within popular culture.

This project is partially about criminal justice and how it is manifested, undermined, enhanced and abjected in McDonagh's writing for stage and screen and partially, it is about justice and the ideology of liberal democracies, and how justice, sometimes serves as a formidable and also an illusionary bedrock of state. Although the plays and films have Irish, English and American settings, yet in many instances are set in places that are not necessarily real, and are written in ways that dissociate themselves from the real, despite the significant markers of contextualization that connect the work to such nations, it would be impossible to situate this project in direct relation to the criminal law as it applies in such jurisdictions. Even less useful would be attempts by a non-legal scholar to give the impression of a substantial working knowledge of such wide-ranging contexts and complex legal issues.

My approach is a common sense/general common knowledge approach to various criminal justice scenarios, alert to the broader issues of justice in terms of rights, freedoms and responsibilities, protections

and enforcement, cognizant of how imaginative works interconnect with real world issues, without being reliant on the specificities, authorities, precedents, judgements and complex nuances and principles of criminal law.

### MANIFESTATIONS OF JUSTICE/CRIMINAL LAW AND DECONTEXTUALIZED INSCRIPTIONS

Before turning to criminal law, I need to build my argument, by affirming a wide-focus approach to justice, that is not just about fairness, but about forms of justice that are plural, comparative, consequence-driven. Accordingly, the “reason-based,” and institution and administrative focused theory of justice proposed by Nobel Laureate (for Economic Science) and political philosopher, Amartya Sen especially serves my purpose. His overview offers a comprehensive application of his ideas of justice. Sen proposes a “[c]ritical assessment of the grounds upon which judgments about justice are based,” namely liberties and equalities, whether measured in terms of “freedoms, capabilities, resources, happiness, well-being,” consequences and obligations (2010, ix). For Sen “[t]here is a clear connection between the objectivity of a judgement and its ability to withstand public scrutiny” (394). Broadly, Sen associates justice with a need to recognise and respond to circumstances and conditions of manifest injustice.

Sen refutes the idealism associated with transcendental or utopian conceptualisations of justice that he sees in the “contractarian approach” (xvi) as proposed by John Rawls in his landmark publication, *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Sen cogently deconstructs the Rawlsian “[J]ustice as fairness,” model (11) based on the notion of a foundational liberty, impartiality, “primordial equality,” “devised ignorance,” “unanimous choice,” “conformity,” “equity,” and spontaneous productivity (55–64). Rawls’ ideas, Sen argues, are propped up by presumptions of compliance, prudence, unanimity of choice and by the inclination to uphold the law (7). From Sen’s perspective, Rawls places too much emphasis on liberty, and is over-reliant on the idea of “just institutions” and spontaneous reasonableness, without enough consideration given to the realisations of justice. According to Sen, Rawls offers an “arrangement focused” rather than a “realization focused understanding” (7) delivering “transcendental institutionalism” (5) rather than “comparative institutionalism” (6).