

# Abuse and Theater: The Dynamics of Power in Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*

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## Abstract

Occasional tension in families springs from power conflicts between individuals of different ages. Psychology has studied the particular tension between mothers and daughters and compiled several observations on it in a theory termed "the mother-daughter bond." Martin McDonagh's play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* manifests the struggle between a mother and her daughter to claim power and, in so doing, they actively oppress one another until the annihilation of one of them becomes the final consequence of an ongoing circle of abuse. Such dysfunctional relationship manifests the degeneration of the mother-daughter bond and provides an explanation for the brutality of the two central characters in McDonagh's play.

**Key words:** Theater of Cruelty, Martin McDonagh, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, power, mother-daughter bond, identity

## Resumen

En las familias, ocasionalmente surgen tensiones debido a conflictos de poder entre individuos de distintas edades. La psicología ha estudiado la tensión particular entre madres e hijas y ha recopilado observaciones diversas en una teoría denominada "el vínculo madre-hija". La obra de teatro *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, de Martin McDonagh, manifiesta la lucha por el poder entre una madre y su hija y muestra cómo ambas se oprimen mutuamente hasta que la aniquilación de una de ellas cierra el círculo de abuso. Esta relación disfuncional muestra la degeneración del vínculo madre-hija y provee una explicación para la brutalidad de los personajes principales de la obra.

**Palabras claves:** teatro de la crueldad, Martin McDonagh, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, poder, vínculo madre-hija, identidad

Michel Foucault describes power as the conflicting forces in a series of hierarchical structures. He claims: “if we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others” (Foucault 217). Consequently, power has been traditionally perceived as a structure in which a privileged group is located on top and exercises power while the ones below are marginalized and must yield to the manifestations of the power upon them. This structure possesses a complexity and dynamism of its own: “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the processes which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; . . . thus forming a chain or system” (Foucault 92).

The actual exercise of power has multiple avenues: oppression can manifest itself as denial of resources, verbal aggression, and even extreme forms of physical abuse. For Marilyn Frye, power and access to resources are deeply intertwined: “total power is unconditional access; total powerlessness is being unconditionally accessible. The creation and manipulation of power is constituted of the manipulation and control of access” (103). The control of access that Frye refers to is normally perceived in social macro structures and gender struggles. However, the same notion exists at family level, where individuals engage in a competition for resources based on privilege because of gender, age, education, or position within the family unit.

Within families, social relations become tense from time to time because of power struggles between individuals of different ages. Frequently, conflicts between the parents and their offspring are seen as the direct consequence of a generational gap characterized by lexicon, technology literacy, or even changing fashion. Psychologists have observed how children in early stages of development fight the authority of their progenitors. In psychology, one of such conflicting power relations that has attracted attention is termed “the mother-daughter bond”, a recurrent pattern in which a daughter engages into an ambiguous power relation with her mother because of identity issues. While the former tries to distance herself from the latter to assert her own identity, she paradoxically mimics the behavior of her progenitor frequently. This pattern has been mentioned by Carol J. Boyd, who tried to systematize the body of knowledge on the subject and classified two lines of thought concerning the daughter-mother bond:

Two predominant groups of contemporary theories, one based in psychoanalysis and the other in social learning theory, attempt to explain why girls become like their mothers. The psycho-analytic theorists tend to emphasize daughters’ unconscious internalization of maternal values and behaviors, as well as the meaning of these values and behaviors. Social learning theorists, disregarding the idea of unconscious identification, advocate principles of modeling (Frieze, Parsons, Johnson, Ruble, and Zellman, 1978; Weitzman, 1984). The social learning theorists suggest that girls learn to mother, and to be like their mothers, by consistently and

positively being reinforced when they imitate their mothers' behaviors (Boyd 291).

This notorious imitation causes an identity dilemma because daughters who do not want to be like their mothers reject the motherly figure in search of their own identity, which triggers power conflicts among the young and the older females. The problem is that daughters rarely seem to sever the connection with their mothers:

Chodorow (1974, 1978) holds that women are more likely than men to maintain certain portions of their primary relationship with their mother. She contends that mothers and daughters engage throughout their lives in personal identification, as opposed to positional identification. The reason for this persistence, according to Chodorow, is that (in Western cultures) the mother is the early caregiver and primary source of identification for all children. However, a young girl's identification with her mother continues throughout life, whereas a young boy's identification with his mother is broken and switched to his father (or another male figure) (Boyd 292).

Identity, or what Chodorow called "personal identification", is undeniably an expression of power. To be able to create an identity, one must perceive oneself as separate from the others, as Lacan argues. However, if a connection between a daughter and her care-giving mother is never fully cut, women undergo an unconscious pressure that erupts as anxiety. They want to lead their own lives; they do not want to see themselves as extensions of the mother.

The attachment-detachment dilemma is not the exclusive concern of daughters. In fact, mothers also have a psychological nexus with their daughters that contributes to create identity inconsistencies. After all, a woman cannot identify herself as a mother unless she has offspring, but the more daughters identify with their mothers, the stronger the psychological attachment in the dyad becomes. The mechanism by which a mother binds herself to her daughter is explained in three main activities:

Chodorow primarily discusses daughters' identification with their mothers. Eichenbaum and Orbach (1983), in contrast, focus on mothers' identification with their daughters. They point out three major activities that shape the mother-daughter relationship. First, the mother identifies with the daughter because they share a gender and the mother has reproduced herself. Second, the mother projects feelings she has about herself, possibly failing to differentiate herself from her daughter. Third, unconsciously, the mother behaves toward her daughter as she internally acts toward the daughter part of herself. Similarly, Hammer (1976) suggests that a mother, through her daughter, lives both her own childhood and her own mother's identity; by identifying with her daughter, she becomes "both her own mother and her own child" (Boyd 292).

Thus, both mothers and daughters participate actively in the ambiguous relationship that their connection sets. The dependence of mothers on their daughters, however, becomes ultimately an imposition of power on the latter: as mothers project their own identities on their daughters, the younger females must struggle to perceive themselves as voiced subjects:

As has already been mentioned, conflict and tension are often thought to characterize aspects of the mother-daughter relationship. Daughters' self-exploratory writings (e.g., Broner, 1975; Chernin, 1983; Friday, 1977; Payne, 1983) often focus on their perceptions of conflict, tension, and/or competition with their mothers. Rivers, Barnett, and Baruch (1979) stated that "a daughter can't simply will herself to be unlike her mother. She will identify with her mother on some level and the struggle to deny it can be lifelong" (Boyd 298).

The nature of the relationship between mothers and daughters has been reported to change in time. As daughters grow older and leave behind teenage identity crises to become mothers themselves, many of the frictions that they had recede, as Bromberg found out:

While conflict and tension are present, she maintained, they do not define the relationship. Agreeing with the conclusions of Baruch and Barnett (1983), Bromberg put forth three conclusions: (a) research provides relatively little evidence on the normative aspects of the adult mother-daughter relationship; (b) research data do not support the notion that the relationship is painfully conflicted; and (c) mothers and daughters are fortunate to have one another (Boyd 297).

The conclusions that Bromberg presents indicate that the nature of the mother-daughter bond is intrinsically positive. In other words, one can expect a conflicting relationship between a mother and a daughter to stabilize as they grow older. However, although Boyd's study covers many of the variables of the mother-daughter bond, there exists one type of tension that was left unexplored: sometimes daughters and mothers engage into a mutually destructive relationship that is often difficult to explain, a pattern of violence that often transcends verbal and psychological abuse and degenerates into the most horrifying manifestations of physical torture. This is the kind of relationship that McDonagh explores with his play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. In this work, a single daughter and her aging mother express the hatred that they feel toward one another with shocking actions, which manifests that a degenerated mother-daughter bond has always been the fundamental cause of the inadequacies that both of them feel as women.

### **Antecedents**

*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century play that follows a dramatic current that flourished in the 90's. This kind of drama is called by several

names, such as Shock Theater, Theater of Extremes, In-Yer-Face Theater, or Theater of Cruelty. It is rooted on the aesthetic premises of the Theater of the Absurd of the 60's, In-Yer-Face productions seek to elicit an unsettling and disturbing experience for the audience. While some plays of the Theater of the Absurd can create a moderate psychological impact because of the audience's lack of understanding and the development of the actions (especially the plays by Harold Pinter), emotional stress becomes the fundamental concern for the Theater of Cruelty. First, language is employed to shock audiences through vivid images and taboo breaking. Second, although the Theater of the Absurd can be considered an abstraction of human experience, In-Yer-Face Theater is eminently experiential: playwrights conceived their works with the clear intention of making people undergo the intense emotions that are staged. Last, absurdist plays deconstruct the concept "society" by hacking at the notions of social balance and identity, but the plays of the Theater of Cruelty shake individual principles of morality and ethics by submerging character into power currents that they cannot resist. This kind of drama is best represented by the works of Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson, Mark Ravehill, Tracy Letts, and Martin McDonagh.

McDonagh, the author of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, is a talented filmmaker and screenwriter. He won an Oscar in 2006 for his first short film *Six Shooter* and the British Independent Film Award to the best screenplay for *In Bruges*, in 2008. McDonagh, despite being a prolific playwright, humbly regards his theatrical production as minor: "I tell stories. Anybody could tell the stories that I tell. But I care about the stories as I'm writing them" (O'Toole, 1998: online). His plays, however, cannot be considered lesser works, for they have been nominated for awards in multiple occasions, and McDonagh received the Critics' Circle Theater Award to the most promising playwright in 1996, precisely for *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*.

*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is the first work in what has been called "The Leenane Trilogy". This set comprises three plays and the common denominator is the gruesome acts of violence localized in Leenane, a small Western village in Connemara, Ireland. In the case of the first play, the action involves two main characters: Mag, a domineering mother, and her single forty year old daughter, Maureen. They have engaged into a prolonged destructive relationship that manifests itself both as psychological and physical abuse, which unfolds as the nine scenes of the play advance. The two men that interact with them become accessorial to the central conflict; their actions serve more like a backdrop to contextualize the outbursts of violence of the two women. In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, patriarchal oppression is merely incidental. Because of these conditions, the play provides a fertile literary ground to appreciate the degeneration of the mother-daughter bond in adulthood, as theorized by Fingerma-

When daughters enter midlife, their relationships with their mothers are amorphous. The parameters of the mother / daughter relationship are well defined when the daughters are young; the relationship revolves around nurturing and socializing the child. When both parties are adults,

however, it is unclear whose needs take precedence. Social norms concerning ties between adults and offspring in adulthood are vague. Early patterns of interaction where mothers give advice to daughters are no longer relevant when daughters acquire skills that surpass those of their mothers (Fingerman 4).

The aging mother, Mag, considers that her needs must be placed first than her daughter's and Maureen, who blames her truncated life on Mag, has been accumulating anger, which she releases when she perceives any provocation. Since the two female characters are adults, they suffer from a growing anxiety that springs from the need to be themselves, an urge to perceive themselves as independent subjects. However, to effectively do so, they must rebuild their identities in an act that nullifies each other. Such oppression is not only discursive, but also performative, which the given circumstances of the play and the use of dialog show. Ultimately, the mother-daughter bond has always been the central conflict between Maureen and her mother in McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*.

### Given circumstances and power exertion: Maureen's hatred for Mag

As plays regularly begin *in medias res*, playwrights must provide information that helps the audience to create a context for the action taking place on the stage. In play analysis, these significant aids are called given circumstances, a term devised by Stanislavski. Francis Hodge defines them as a dramatic concept that "concerns all material in a playscript that delineates the environment—the special 'world' of the play—in which the action takes place. This material includes: (1) environmental facts; (2) previous action; and (3) polar attitudes" (Hodge 24). Characters introduce given circumstances as they speak, which contributes to elucidate the background of the play.

When *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* opens, the audience can realize something about previous action: Maureen has been taking care of her aging mother and she is fed up with it: "MAG: I did take me Complian. / MAUREEN: So you *can* get it yourself so. / MAG: I can. (*Pause.*) Although lumpy it was, Maureen" (McDonagh 1.4). The brief argument that follows on whether or not Mag is capable of preparing herself a food supplement reveals that Maureen has been doing everything around the house for a long time without any help from her mother, who simply refuses to do anything for herself:

MAUREEN: I can't see how a urine infection prevents you from pouring a mug of Complian or tidying up the house a bit when I'm away. It wouldn't kill you.

MAG (pause): Me bad back.

MAUREEN: Your bad back.

MAG: And me bad hand. (MAG *holds up her shrivelled hand for a second.*)

MAUREEN (*quietly*): Feck...(*Irritated.*) I'll get your Complian so if it's such a big job! From now and 'till doomsday! The one thing I ask you to do. Do you see Annette or Margo coming pouring your Complian or buying your oul cod in butter sauce for the week?

MAG: No.

MAUREEN: No is right, you don't. And carrying it up that hill. And still I'm not appreciated. (McDonagh 1.5, 6).

Maureen's words, therefore, manifest that she feels constrained because, even though Mag has other two daughters, they are distant and she has, presumably by obligation, assumed the role of the caregiver of her mother. As the scene progresses and both women interact, the daughter's frustration reaches a peak and, by the end of this first scene, the audience is left with the impression that Maureen is acting with excessive harshness toward Mag. However, the given circumstances have not disclosed enough information as for one to understand why Maureen treats her mother with such inclemency. Although the previous action leads the audience to somehow understand the suffering of the daughter, since little is revealed on the behavior of the mother, one feels sympathy for the latter.

Scene two unveils what the role of the mother has been and, hence, the audience starts to grasp the real nature of the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship in the play. The scene opens with Mag's refusal to open the door for a visitor that she knows, apparently because of senility. Maureen is out of the house feeding the chickens and Mag's hesitation to let Ray Dooley come in does not seem abnormal or suspicious, especially because the audience has sided up with her after seeing the way in which her daughter mistreated her in the previous scene. Ray has come to deliver a message but, exasperated because the old woman seems not to remember it and asks him to prepare tea or soup for her, he writes it down and leaves it on the table. As soon as he is gone, Mag burns the paper and, when Maureen comes into the house, she deliberately lies to her daughter not to let her know about the visitor or the invitation that he brought. Mag nervously admits later that Ray came, which gives heed to their argument and the daughter reveals the source of her anger:

MAUREEN: Arsing me around, eh? Interfering with my life again? Isn't it enough I've has to be beck and call for you every day for the past twenty year? Is it one evening out you begrudge me?

MAG: Young girls should not be out gallivanting with fellas...!

MAUREEN: Young girls! I'm forty years old, for feck's sake! Finish it!

MAG *drinks again.*

MAUREEN: 'Young girls'! That's the best yet. And how did Annette or Margo ever get married if it wasn't first our gallivanting that they were?

MAG: I don't know (McDonagh 2.22).

After Maureen states that she has only kissed two men in her entire life, the audience gradually figures out that Mag has stepped into her daughter's

love life to ruin it. When Maureen was twenty-five, her two sisters had found in marriage a way to escape from their mother. In an attempt to assert herself as an individual, Maureen landed a job in England, where she only got psychological abuse for being Irish. Maureen was able to resist such abuse because a black woman became her friend and her source of emotional support, but the woman soon left for London. This caused the young worker an emotional breakdown, which led to her admission in a mental institution for a month. Possibly, Mag took advantage of her daughter's mental history to shun away men that were interested in Maureen. To humiliate her daughter and make sure that her potential love partner deserts her, Mag tells Pato about Maureen's hospitalization in scene four:

MAG: Forget wee! Forget wee! D'you want to know what Difford Hall is, fella?

MAUREEN: Shut up, now!

MAG: It's a nut-house! An oul nut-house in England I did have to sign her out of and promise to keep her in me care. Would you want to be seeing the papers now?

MAG *shuffles off to the hall.*

As proof, like. Or to prove am I just a senile oul hen, like, or *who's* the loopy one? Heh! (McDonagh 4.42).

That Mag is able to disclose this kind of private information in front of Maureen's lover indicates that the mother has appropriated the self of her daughter. Maureen has, then, ceased being a woman of her own and became Mag's exclusive caregiver or, more accurately, a servant to her mother's every whim. Consequently, given circumstances make it clear for the audience that, thanks to the breakdown, Mag stole her daughter's voice, which poisoned the mother-daughter bond in between them.

### **The dialog of violence as a manifestation of power**

Given circumstances provide the context so that the power struggle in the play can manifest itself in full form, and the dialog constitutes the vehicle to reach such end. In this sense, the linguistic tensions are similar to those found in the Theater of the Absurd, especially in the plays by Harold Pinter. As each interaction between the mother and her daughter progresses, words of active violence go in crescendo until psychological aggression becomes physical. The repertoire of verbal attacks includes derogatory remarks, the use of foul language as a marker of domination, and explicit insults.

Sarcasm is an instrument of power. Since it presupposes the understanding of more than one level of meaning, utterances become subtle weapons: the surface level might seem innocent, but the implications underlying that apparently innocuous layer constitute a manifestation of psychological aggression. In *The*

*Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Maureen is the character that resorts to these verbalized stings the most. In fact, the first words that she says on stage illustrate such attacks. When the play opens, it is raining heavily and Mag sees her daughter come into the house after shopping for groceries. The mother then attempts to start a conversation: "MAG: Wet, Maureen? / MAUREEN: Of course wet. / MAG: Oh-h"(McDonagh 1.4). Maureen is trying to imply that it is her mother's fault that she was caught in the rain. Mag picks up the clue and, to make it up to her daughter, she says that, not to be so bothersome, she was at least able to prepare her food supplement herself. In this brief exchange, one can see a small battle for power. While Maureen uses sarcasm to minimize her mother and represent her as a useless version of a woman, Mag reacts and defends her position implying that Maureen lasted a long time buying groceries and, hence, left her unattended, whipping her daughter with the lash of guilt. However, Mag's rebuttal does her a disservice because Maureen charges against the old woman claiming that her dependence is fake: "MAUREEN: You're just a hypochondriac is what you are"(McDonagh 1.5).

The daughter shows more and more exasperation to every request of the old woman until her sarcasm becomes more pungent, and she incorporates symbolic language of death to it. For instance, when her old mother tells her about the man who committed a femicide in Dublin, Maureen replies: "MAUREEN: Sure, that sounds exactly the type of fella I would *like* to meet, and then bring him home to meet you, if he likes murdering owl women" (McDonagh 1.10). Upon hearing this, Mag feels intimidated and tries to play Maureen's game unsuccessfully; even when the old lady asserts that the man would probably kill her daughter first, the young woman states nonchalantly that, as long as the man killed her mother brutally, she would not mind being the first victim. Savoring her triumph, Maureen, cruelly, expresses her satisfaction of being freed from the continuous requests of Mag. Mag then realizes that she cannot defeat her daughter in the arena of symbolic language of death, but maneuvers into the ground in which she can truly claim power over Maureen: reality. The old woman interrupts Maureen's speech requesting sugar for her tea. Mag's move has devastating effects on the psyche of her daughter who, deprived at once of her linguistic power, employs patrimonial violence: she takes Mag's mug of tea and, instead of adding sugar to it, pours it away in the sink. She then repeats the operation with her mother's half-eaten food and gives her a threatening look before going to sleep. The scene closes with Mag "staring grumpily out into space" (McDonagh 1.11) and the audience, ignorant of her real character, might sympathize with her. Nevertheless, such feelings of sympathy must be revised and reformulated when Mag shows later how little she has been concerned about the happiness and personal fulfillment of her daughter.

In addition to sarcasm, the dialog of the play includes foul language, which is in itself a revealing manifestation of power. In fact, Timothy Jay argues that the use of foul language (what he calls "taboo words") is conditioned by power and authority: "We first internalize taboos at a personal level. Indeed, we learn not to use them when we are punished by caregivers. Aversive classical

conditioning is probably how words acquire their taboo status and arousing autonomic properties" (Jay 153). Again, Maureen is the character in the dyad that swears the most. In scene one, she swears basically to herself. However, she grows bolder in scene two and expresses foul words directly to her mother. First, she uses what Jay refers to as "offensive slang" when describing her desire to abandon Mag's corpse at her funeral: "MAUREEN: At your bloody wake, right. Is even sooner! (McDonagh 2.24). She then calls her progenitor "a pig"(McDonagh 2.25).

Scene four provides a turning point in Maureen's use of foul language. When she argues with Mag, the younger woman resorts to varied assortment of taboo words: from sexual references ("feck your scoulded hand", "now you just shut your fecking...") to animal names ("an owl hen"). Maureen employs this type of language attempting to intimidate her mother and to prevent her from revealing private information to Pato, the young man who left for the United States and wanted Maureen to go with him. Interestingly, the research carried out by Jay on the subject of taboo words indicates that Maureen swears so much precisely because she feels in a subordinate position: "One's social rank plays a role in swearing; McEnery (2006) found socially low-ranking speakers produced higher rates of swearing than did high-ranking speakers" (Jay 156). Maureen's use of taboo words, thus, springs from the realization that Mag, despite her apparent physical disadvantage, still capitalizes more power than she does, as her mother proves when reducing her daughter to anger and impotency by revealing the episode of Difford Hall to her lover.

Explicit insults, however, constitute the linguistic weapon of choice of those who sit in the power position. Since insults generate anger, it is unlikely that someone in a subordinate position dares to brandish them in the presence of a superior and much less to direct them to a figure of authority. It is possible, therefore, to infer that insults will be more frequently used by those who know that their power position is safe, prompting them to toe the line of respectful behavior. Anna Holmber's research on the subject of online insults supports this assertion:

This use of a derogatory name-calling functions as an impoliteness output strategy. Different impoliteness output strategies are often used in a derogatory manner with the intention to insult someone as discussed above.

One gets the indication, by detecting the usage of such words as dick-head and dumbasses, that the need to be subtle about one's insult is of less importance for some people. There is a fine line between being covertly rude to crossing the line and becoming overtly rude. Several messages began with covert rudeness and then escalated into the use of very offensive language (Holmberg 24).

Not surprisingly, Mag uses insults and offensive references to taunt her daughter. When they are discussing the less-than-active sexual life of Maureen,

her mother does not vacillate to equate her to a prostitute, even though her daughter's sexual experiences amount to only having kissed two men:

MAG: Two men is two men too much!

MAUREEN: To you, maybe. To you. Not to me.

MAG: Two men too much!

MAUREEN: Do you think I like being stuck up here with you? Eh? Like a dried up oul...

MAG: Whore! (McDonagh 2.23).

Mag also provokes Maureen's anger by referring to her nakedness as a reminder of her daughter's stay at the mental hospital. She chants "Diffidor Hall" repeatedly to harass her and even calls her daughter "the loopy one" (McDonagh 4.42). In addition to taunting and insulting Maureen directly, scene six discloses more information about the behavior of the old mother concerning her caregiver. When Ray Dooley, Pato's younger brother, insults Maureen profusely, the old lady, instead of stopping him or defending the image of her absent daughter, actually encourages him:

RAY: Neverminding swingball, I saw her there on the road the other week and I said hello to her and what did she do? She outright ignored me. Didn't even look up.

MAG: Didn't she?

RAY: And what I thought of saying, I thought of saying, 'Up your oul hole, Missus', but i didn't say it, I just thought of saying it, but thinking back on it, I should've gone ahead and said it and skitter on the bitch!

MAG: It would've been good enough for her to say it, up and ignoring you on the road, because you're a good gassur..." (McDonagh 6.55).

By calling Ray a good person and granting him permission to verbally abuse Maureen, Mag is implicitly denigrating her own daughter. Obviously, she wants people to have the most negative image possible of Maureen so that she becomes ostracized and has no other choice than to remain as the old lady's caregiver. This power scheme shows the extent as to which Mag has monopolized the life of her daughter, depriving her from her selfhood.

### **Physical violence: the product of a dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship**

All these conditions become the cauldron for tensions to boil into physical violence. Maureen, unable to deal with the silencing of her voice, the nullification of her selfhood, and her constant marginalization, transforms into an agent of oppression who seeks vindication and finds gratification in the progressive torturing of her aging mother. Maureen, realizing that a linguistic crossing of swords with her mother will lead her nowhere, decides to invade and conquer

other spaces to rebuild her womanhood. One of such spaces is, precisely, the body of her mother, which she transforms into a canvas to experiment her power by inflicting pain and thus assert her authority. Feminist geography contributes to explain this behavior:

. . . gendered spatiality has been theorized [sic] at the level of individual bodies—the body as a surface to be mapped, a surface for inscription, as a boundary between the individual subject and that which is Other to it, as the container of individual identity, but also as a permeable boundary which leaks and bleeds and is penetrable (Meyers 114).

Maureen tries to colonize her mother by torturing her. In scene seven the audience finally realizes that Mag's claims about her daughter burning her hand were true. From forcing her mother to eat carelessly prepared food, the younger woman advances in her mistreatment until she gradually pours boiling oil into the hand of the old woman. She wants a confession about the contents of the letter that Mag burned. Once Maureen obtains the information, she, in a dreamy state, splashes the remainder of the oil into her mother's body and face. The tortured mother falls onto the floor and, twisting in pain, begs for help, to which her daughter responds:

MAUREEN: (*to herself*): How do I look? Ah, I'll have to do. What time is it? Oh God...

MAG: Help me, Maureen...

MAUREEN: (*brushing her hair*): Help you, is it? After what you've done? Help you, she says. No, I won't help you, and I'll tell you another thing. If you've made me miss Pato before he goes, then you'll really be for it, so you will, and no messing this time. Out of my fucking way, now. (McDonagh 7. 68).

The scene ends with Mag shaking on the floor, burned and distressed. Although she is in physical pain, her last line shows the actual source of her suffering: her power has been brutally removed from her at last and she acknowledges it: MAG (*quietly*): But who'll look after me, so? (McDonagh 7.69). The old woman, therefore, shows that her true concern is losing her caregiver, the subordinate female figure in her house. As Maureen finally claims all the power, scene nine reveals that the threat that she pronounced was not an empty one. The marginalized woman tries to vindicate herself by removing that which endangers her newly acquired position of privilege: she savagely kills her mother to release the anchor that might prevent her from traveling to America with Pato.

### **Conclusion: transformation into the Other**

One might think that the murder of Mag finally severed the bond between her and Maureen. That is not the case, however. The last scene of the play later

shows that Maureen missed her lover's departure and her monologue in scene eight was only a delusional state. Even so, she did kill her mother, presumably enraged because of her lost opportunity to become Pato's wife, and then she plummeted emotionally and created an alternate reality to cope with Mag's last victory.

The brutal expression of violence between a mother and her daughter in the play illustrates one of the most problematic areas of exploration of the mother-daughter bond, as Boyd asserts:

Regardless of the theoretical explanation, data show that mothers and daughters tend to be similar in such areas as sexual behavior, attitudes, employment orientation, and occupational status. However, Nolan (1980) failed to show any similarities in mother-daughter aggression traits. The theoretical distinction between same-sexed identification (internalizing meaning as well as behaviors) and modeling (imitating behavior) is difficult to assess, since "meaning" was not examined in any of these studies (Boyd 300).

Boyd's research on the subject of aggression traits is not conclusive, but one can imagine that Maureen's identification with her mother is the explanation of the murder. Mag had subjected her daughter to emotional torture and killed her symbolically: Maureen, the woman, disappeared and became an extension of the mother. Interestingly, this symbiosis diluted the identities of both women. Maureen, therefore, mimics her mother's behavior, not in the symbolic level, but in reality: she tries to nullify Mag by physically destroying her. It is a failed attempt, nevertheless; her mother's identity overlaps her own and, by acquiring her mother's power position, Maureen transforms into Mag. Their mother-daughter bond was so strong that Maureen starts to behave exactly as her mother did: instead of calling Ray by his name, she calls him "Pato", her speech is slow and disconnected, and she requests favors from her visitor using her mother's jargon:

MAUREEN: Will you turn the radio up a bitten too, before you go, there, Pato, now? *Ray*, I mean...

RAY: (*exasperated*): Feck...

*Ray turns the radio up.*

The exact fecking image of your mother you are, sitting there pegging orders and forgetting my name! Goodbye!

RAY: And pull the door after you... (McDonagh 9.83).

Maureen's final transformation into her mother closes the cycle. Her futile attempt to conquer her mother's space ended with the personality of Mag overtaking her already deteriorated selfhood. As Boyd records in her research, despite Maureen's hatred towards Mag, she could not prevent mimicking the behavior of she whom she loathed. Consequently, with all its gruesome abuse

images, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* illustrates the dynamics of power in a dysfunctional family relationship that presents a destructive mother-daughter bond.

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