

Investigating the Postcolonial Grotesque in Martin McDonagh's *A Very Very Very Dark Matter* (2018)

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Abstract

McDonagh is arguably one of the most celebrated yet most controversial of contemporary Anglo-Irish playwrights. His plays have received mixed reviews from critics and audiences alike, mostly for featuring graphic violence and obscene dialogues. Even though comedy is mostly seen as an inferior genre compared to tragedy, McDonagh, among many contemporary Anglo-Irish writers, makes use of the malleability of the grotesque to address myriads of serious issues. In his most recent play *A Very Very Very Dark Matter* (2018), McDonagh juxtaposes both comic and grotesque elements to create a black comedy that manages to represent the painful memories of colonial history. This comic mediation of pain and suffering is only one of the several aspects of the grotesque that are present in *Dark Matter*.

Through a nuanced examination of the features and functions of the grotesque in *Dark Matter*, this article aims to illustrate how, by means of the grotesque, McDonagh manages to address the seminal issues of colonialism and social justice. The article shows that by recurring to the shocking, the repugnant, and the fantastical, McDonagh manages to remind his audience of the ugliness of colonial realities. A careful examination of the play reveals that McDonagh employs the grotesque to undermine the power and arrogance of Europe and to remind the audience of the atrocities committed against Africa and other colonized nations in the name of white supremacy.

Keywords: Martin McDonagh; Irish drama; the grotesque; post-colonialism; Hans Christian Anderson, Charles Dickens

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And all the world will rue
What Europe did to you.
Ten million skulls will bring
A dreadful reckoning
From Hell to you (*Dark Matter* 12, sc. 3)

Introduction

Born in England of Irish parents and raised in south London, Martin McDonagh (b.1970) is considered by many as an “English playwright with an Irish heritage” (Castleberry 41), yet some critics view him as “cosmopolitan in his literary and dramatic influences” (Russell 3). In his full-length study of the theme of justice in McDonagh’s plays, Eamonn Jordan describes him as “a cosmopolitan writer, whose identity has been shaped by post-colonial, globalised and diasporic factors” (1). McDonagh is arguably one of the most celebrated yet most controversial of contemporary Anglo-Irish playwrights. His plays have received mixed reviews from critics and audiences alike, mostly for featuring graphic violence and obscene dialogues. That being said, McDonagh is “one of the most performed playwrights in the world today” (Jordan 1), and “his body of plays have established his playwriting career internationally” (Etienne and Dubost 5). His blending of “comic ingredients: macabre humor, crude language, and grotesque characterizations, [aims to] illuminate the darker side of life” (Castleberry 57). Even though comedy is mostly seen as an inferior genre compared to tragedy, McDonagh, among many contemporary Anglo-Irish writers, makes use of the

malleability of the grotesque to address myriads of serious issues. Indeed, despite their comic and often absurd ingredients, McDonagh's plays are generally "preoccupied with questions of truth and falsehood; love and hate; good and evil; guilt, sin, punishment and redemption" (Lanters 166).

What distinguishes McDonagh's style as a playwright is his constant "comic blending of the macabre, grotesque, and fantasy" in an attempt to highlight "the complexity of being human in an increasingly chaotic world" (Russell 4). In his most recent play *A Very Very Very Dark Matter* (2018, henceforth *Dark Matter*), McDonagh juxtaposes both comic and grotesque elements to create a black comedy that manages to represent the painful memories of colonial history. This comic mediation of pain and suffering is only one of the several aspects of the grotesque that are present in *Dark Matter*. Through a nuanced examination of the features and functions of the grotesque in *Dark Matter*, this article aims to illustrate how, by means of the grotesque, McDonagh manages to address the seminal issues of colonialism and social justice. The article shows that by recurring to the shocking, the repugnant, and the fantastical, McDonagh manages to remind his audience of the ugliness of colonial realities. *Dark Matter*, thus, offers a critique of the "historical injustices created by imperialism and the extensive consequences of colonial subjugation" (Jordan 75). Through "an exaggerated-to-

the-point-of-grotesque cast of characters” (O'Hagan), McDonagh attacks Europe and its pretentious civilizing and charitable missions that targeted Africa well before the Berlin conference of 1884. A careful examination of the play reveals that McDonagh employs the grotesque for three major functions: to mock the colonial history of Europe, to provide humor, and to provoke an anti-colonial sentiment among his readers. All these functions are combined to undermine the power and arrogance of Europe and, more importantly, to remind the readers of the atrocities committed against Africa and other colonized nations.

Dark Matter premiered at London's Bridge Theatre in October 2018 and is set in a townhouse in Copenhagen, Denmark. The text of the play is divided into two-parts of a total of eleven scenes and features a fictional representation of the reputable Danish writer Hans Christian Anderson¹ (henceforth Anderson) as well as that of Charles Dickens. The play opens in the claustrophobic setting of Anderson's puppet attic where he keeps a Congolese pygmy woman in “*a three-foot by three-foot mahogany box, suspended by a thick rope from an unseen roof beam, slowly and theatrically swings into view*” (3, sc. 1). Marjory's box has a circular hole through which she receives her sausages, and another thin slot “*just enough for a few sheets of paper to be slid into or out of*” (3, sc. 1). Anderson chooses to call

(¹) A highly regarded Danish writer who was particularly famous for his fairy tales. See: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hans-Christian-Andersen-Danish-author>

his captive/slave Marjory instead of her African name Mbutu Masakele because it is “too hard to remember. Too many ‘M’s and too many ‘B’s. ‘Mbubba bububbaba” (10, sc. 3). Overall, the plot consists of a series of seemingly absurd and insignificant actions; however, Eamonn Jordan insists that “the play’s actions and debates *intentionally* lack logic or coherence” (96, emphasis added). In a conversation with Sean O’Hagan, McDonagh confesses his purposeful blending of comedy and cruelty because he “think[s] one illuminates the other” (O’Hagan). The contradiction between the play’s apparent ludicrousness and the deeper meanings that lie beneath the surface is a result of McDonagh’s use of the grotesque through which “the nonsense seems to become meaningful and legitimate [. . . and] several layers of meaning are created” (Kayser 152).

Several literary terms and motifs seem to resist a clear-cut definition. The ‘Grotesque’ is such “a slippery and ambiguous term”² that varied definitions have been suggested since it was first used “to describe paintings that had been rediscovered at the end of the fifteenth century in Rome underground the *Domus Aurea* (also known as a pleasure house) of the emperor Nero” (Schneider 47). What characterized those paintings is that they all presented weird, disfigured creatures that had both human and nonhuman features (Kayser 24). Interestingly, those strange

⁽²⁾ For a thorough discussion of the varied meanings of the Grotesque see: Wolfgang Kayser (1963).

figures did not incite fear as much as they did delight and laughter, which might be attributed to the incongruity of the grotesque, as Michael Gillum suggests (14). However, Gillum adds that “the grotesque incongruity may be so jarring and disturbing that revulsion or sympathy overpowers the sense of comedy” (14). In fact, this paradoxical combination of horror and laughter becomes one of the defining features of the grotesque throughout the centuries, even though Wolfgang Kayser insists that “Laughter originates [only] on the comic and caricatural fringe of the grotesque” and that it is often “Filled with bitterness” (187). What made reaching a comprehensive, specific definition of the grotesque problematic was attributed to its own “lack of fixity, its unpredictability and its instability” (Connelly 4); in this sense, the grotesque could be achieved through countless juxtapositions of contradictory elements that could themselves continue to evolve and change over the course of a literary work.

In spite of its seemingly trivial nature, Wolfgang Kayser argues that the grotesque destroys and subverts reality, which allows spectators to see the dark forces of life. Accordingly, Kayser suggests that the grotesque should be interpreted as “an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world” (188). He then identifies two basic types of the grotesque: the “fantastic” and the “satiric” (Kayser 189); *Dark Matter* is evidently an example of the latter where McDonagh presents his

serious critique of European colonialism through the portrait of several grotesque characters: a one-legged African pigmy woman, a bloody, half-naked male twins with “*stitches that run up their arms and their sides*” (44, sc. 9; fig. 1), and creepy skeletons. As such, *Dark Matter* represents “a rather threatening [type of] grotesque, [one] which is associated with alienation, unease, horror or fear” (Schneider 49). Nevertheless, *Dark Matter* is also replete with comic elements that instigate in the audience a sort of a bitter laugh, or what Samuel Beckett described as an “ethical laugh,” which he argues is most appropriate to satire (Mercier 47). Unsurprisingly, it is because of this aberrant combination of terror, disgust, and humor that critics were divided about the literary merit of the play; some lauded its “multi-layered interrogation of white privilege through manifold historical and fantastical lenses, while others saw it as misguided and not fully formed at best, and, at worst [. . .] a failure of the worst kind” (Jordan 102).

The Grotesque and satirizing history

The Berlin Conference (1884-1885) that partitioned Africa and distributed it among colonial powers agreed to allot the regions south of the Congo river to King Leopold II of Belgium under the name of the Congo Free State. Unlike other colonial countries, King Leopold did not seek to claim the area for the kingdom of Belgium, but to be privately granted to him in the form of

personal property (Rutz 8-9). As such, “Leopold could exercise royal power in a way that the constraints of constitutional monarchy in Belgium would never allow” (Rutz 9). King Leopold was determined to get the best out of his new private colony; luckily for him, “A worldwide rubber boom broke out as industry began to understand the many uses for this natural substance” (Fish and Fish 87) which was abundant in the Congo area. Worried that other nations would beat him to the riches of the rubber industry, Leopold had armed sentries supervise the process of rubber harvesting; Africans who resisted or failed to get the adequate amount of rubber were severely punished and often they were just shot dead. In many cases, women and children were taken hostages so that the men would be forced “to go into the jungle and return with rubber to meet the regular quota” (Rutz 13). In *Dark Matter*, McDonagh adopts the form of non-realistic postmodern satire to create an alternate history of European colonial exploitation of Africa.

McDonagh masterfully uses the grotesque in *Dark Matter* to trigger a “savage and purposeful [. . .] full-frontal attack on colonial exploitation” (Jordan 97). Marjory, the central character in the play, is supposedly coming from the future where the Congo was already a colony and millions have actually died as mentioned above. Since she is “aware of the horrors that will be perpetrated by Belgian forces on her people” (Jordan 96), Marjory

travels twenty-seven years back in time in an attempt to stop the Belgians from colonizing the Congo and killing her family among many others. McDonagh here seems intent on providing an alternate history where he encourages his audience to ask: what if Marjory could prevent the Belgians from going to Congo? He particularly mocks King Leopold's pursuit of rubber by providing an accurate yet satiric version of the history of colonial Congo through the dialogue of the two time-travelling dead Belgian brothers who "come back from the future with a plan to execute Mbutu/Marjory, because in the future it will be she who will kill them, after they had killed her husband and children" (Jordan 99). They appear on the stage half-naked and covered in blood:

BARRY. King Leopold the Second ...

DIRK. The one with the beard ...

BARRY. He liked bicycles and he felt like having a colony in Africa, so ...

DIRK. Everybody else had a colony in Africa! Why shouldn't Belgium have a colony in Africa?!

BARRY. Hard to argue with that logic.

DIRK. So we'd go into the villages where the rubber quotas weren't met

BARRY. And you'd lop a few hands off, it made sense at the start ...

DIRK. You'd've thought it would've concentrated their minds!

BARRY. *I'd* collect more rubber if I knew *my* hand or hands, or my *children's* hand or hands, were going to be chopped off, wouldn't you?

DIRK. In retrospect we can see it's harder to work the less hands you have.

BARRY. Also, you would usually die.

DIRK. So it just became a vicious circle, didn't it?

BARRY. Yes, like a massive spinning bicycle wheel that never ... stopped ... killing ... blacks.

DIRK. There'd be buckets of fucking hands all over the fucking place. (19-20, sc. 4)

Historically speaking, the chopped hands of Congolese people were really collected in buckets during the process of rubber harvesting. Bruce and Becky Durost Fish explain that because King Leopold's military forces were

Fearful that African soldiers might save their ammunition for a future mutiny, some white officers required soldiers to prove that every bullet used had actually killed someone. Adapting a practice of African slave traders, the officers usually demanded the severed right hand from a corpse. Because it might take days for soldiers to return to their

garrisons, baskets of hands were smoked to keep them from decaying before being counted. Officers often told their soldiers that they would be released from service more quickly if they turned in more hands, so some soldiers amputated the hands of the living. (88)

Despite the accurate historical account that the two bloody Belgians provide, the satiric tone of their dialogue downplays King Leopold's motives in establishing a colony in Africa; as they see it, King Leopold did it because "Everybody else had a colony in Africa!" and because "He liked bicycles" (19, sc. 4). McDonagh thus destabilizes the colonial history of Europe by situating his play in a historical yet anti-realist context to satirize the arrogance and brutality of both Belgium and Britain in regards to their colonial endeavors in Africa.

The comic function of the verbal Grotesque

According to Martin Middeke, laughter in McDonagh's plays "questions authorities and [. . .] denies respect towards tradition and institutions alike" (228). In addition to mocking King Leopold's colonial pursuits, McDonagh uses laughter to launch another attack on the colonial exploitation of Africa. This is achieved through the play's fictional representation of an actual brief relationship that connected two highly regarded literary figures: Hans Christian Anderson and Charles Dickens, who were introduced to each other first at a party in London in 1847. They

had exchanged letters for about a year until Anderson paid Dickens a visit in 1857 that lasted for five weeks and greatly annoyed Dickens and his family (Jordan 99)³. Based on their literary careers, one can safely assume that both writers had a genuine concern for the happiness and well-being of children. But to the dismay of his audience McDonagh presents Anderson and Dickens as two sadistic, apathetic characters who imprison Marjory and her other pygmy sister, Pamela, in a box to take advantage of their creative abilities. In the play world, neither Anderson nor Dickens has tangible creative abilities; all their literary output is written by their ghost writers, Marjory and Pamela. Although, ‘in his defense,’ Dickens clarifies that his pygmy ‘lidy’

just wrote the plots, and the characters ... and the dialogue. And all the describing bits. I helped with the titles! ‘Bleak House’, that was mine. The one about the house ... that was a bit bleak. (*Pause.*) ‘Little Dorrit’ ... the one about ... well, that’s kind of self-explanatory. (*Pause.*) ‘Medium-Sized Expectations’ ... No, she changed that one back, didn’t she, so no. (49, sc. 10).

Through these bizarre relationships between Anderson and Marjory on one hand, and Dickens and Pamela on the other, McDonagh reverses the colonizer/colonized relationship by

⁽³⁾ For more information on the relationship between Anderson and Dickens see: https://www.hcandersen-homepage.dk/?page_id=3681 Accessed 04 Oct. 2022.

giving power to the colonized. Despite their physical captivity, Marjory and Pamela do not need their masters, it is the other way around. In a real reference to Dickens's unfinished novel 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood,' the fictional Dickens admits that when his 'pygmy lidy' died, "it's not the same. I can't finish 'Drood' now, and the house has felt so dreadfully empty since Christmastide. You don't really notice the sound of all that typing ... until it's gone forever" (48, sc. 10).

José Lanters explains that a typical characteristic of McDonagh's plays is the abundance of 'fragmentation;' the reader frequently encounters "bodies [that] are chopped up and 'beheaded'" (Lanters 168). In *Dark Matter* Anderson simply chops Marjory's foot off as "the price she has to pay to gain some free time outside her cage/cell" (Jordan 97). He then agrees with her to cut her box an inch smaller every time she wants to enjoy more freedom. By means of the grotesque, McDonagh portrays a character that is both wicked and funny. The audience cannot genuinely hate Anderson as he displays such a humorous and child-like personality. Consider the light and mild tone of the following dialogue where Marjory asks for more time outside her box:

HANS. You remember what the payment was the *last time*
I let you out, of course ...

MARJORY. No! You're not having another foot! I've only got one left!

HANS. Ah, I don't feel like sawing tonight anyway. Too splashy. And I'm a bit tired from all the plaudits. Fucking *thunderous* it was!

[. . .]

HANS. Oy! Ah, look at the little crutch I made ya. See, you can't say I'm all bad! You're like a tinier Tiny Tim! But African and not as funny.

MARJORY. I liked Tiny Tim. I like doomed cripples in stories who die. I was sorry he came back alive at the end. Even if it *was* Christmas.

[. . .]

HANS. [. . .] Which reminds me! Charles Darwin has just invited me to come and stay at his house in London ...!

MARJORY. Charles *Dickens* ...

HANS. Charles *Dickens* has just invited me to come and stay at his house in London because he thinks I'm totally fantastic! I think he's quite good too, although I haven't read any of his things, they're all too long . . . (11-13, sc. 3, emphasis original)

Regardless of the comic encounter where Anderson insists on calling Charles Dickens by the name of "Mister Darwin" (47, sc.

10), McDonagh implies that both of them are responsible for disabling and exploiting Marjory and her sister. The outrageous yet humorous portrayal of Anderson and Dickens “destroys reality by inventing the most unlikely things” (Kayser 161), which corresponds with the grotesque’s emphasis on alienation and lack of certainty.

Another aspect of the grotesque that McDonagh uses to highlight the pretentiousness of colonialism is the odd combination of laughter and terror, which was central to the ‘*teatro del grottesco*’ that was “developed by a group of Italian playwrights between 1916 and 1925” (Pilný 9). For instance, Dickens trades his ‘pygmy lidy’s’ “foot and one of her little hands” for a haunted concertina (50, sc. 10), and when she dies he simply turns her body into a marionette because his children “sort of missed her” (48, sc. 10). Interestingly, puppets and marionettes are featured in *Dark Matter* from the very beginning of the play when McDonagh describes the setting of the play as: “*An attic in Copenhagen in the late 1800s. Various beautifully crafted but peculiar marionettes hang across the dark wooden walls, or are strewn across the dirty floor; puppets such as tarantulas, crabs, a scarecrow, a woodsman, as well as more ordinary animals*” (3, sc. 1, emphasis original). McDonagh’s obsession with puppetry is one of the most significant aspects of the theatre of the grotesque where playwrights showed “an unimpassioned view of life on

earth as an empty, meaningless puppet play or a caricatural marionette theatre” (Kayser 186). This view of life is very true of *Dark Matter* where characters lack empathy and are incapable of communication.

In his introduction to *Modern art and the Grotesque* Frances S. Connelly asserts that “Grotesques are typically characterized by what they lack: fixity, stability, order” (4). Indeed, a shocking lack of communication occurs between Dickens and Anderson because of the latter’s sheer ignorance of English, which is unexpected of an established writer. To reverse the expectations of his audience, McDonagh deprives Anderson of his eloquence. Consider the following nonsensical dialogue where none of the two famed writers seems to understand the other:

Dickens gets up and pours himself a scotch.

DICKENS. It’s all just senseless nonsense, everything you say. Just senseless fucking nonsense.

HANS. No, none for me, Charles.

DICKENS. I didn’t ask.

HANS. Yes. My mama was always a mad one for the booze. And then she became a mad one for the everything.

I wonder if one precipped the other?

[. . .]

HANS. I not been able to ask you so far, what with the skank, but ... how ees the writeeng? (*Mimes.*) The writeeng?

DICKENS. The writing? Oh. So so, Hans. So so.

HANS. So so? Malo? Gloomy face? No good?

DICKENS. Malo, indeed. 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood'.
Fucked.

HANS. Miserere Drooge fucked? (36, sc. 8)

Even in his own native language, Anderson's "lack of vocabulary forces [him] into ludicrous locutions" (Dean 32) such as: "Write-that-downer," "makey-uppy things" (6, 8 sc. 2); "beddy-byes smiling" (9, sc. 3); "elephant-footed," "message-passer-onner" (29, sc. 6); and "Looker-afterer" (54, sc. 11). Thus, to intensify the grotesque characterization of Anderson, McDonagh recurs to "verbal invention" (Kayser 151) where he creates linguistic absurdities through word formation to shake his audience's confidence even in language. Because of his lack of eloquence, Anderson can only make minor changes to Marjory's stories, such as changing the title of her "The Little Black Mermaid" into "The Little Mermaid" because "There's no such thing as black mermaids!" (9, sc. 3). In spite of his seemingly higher status, Anderson is so much weakened by his lack of talent that he keeps asking Marjory for more "upbeat stories" (9, sc. 3).

The reference to literary works and authors is a common feature of the grotesque in Irish and British Drama, and “it has always played a special role in enhancing the effects of the grotesque” (Pilný 82). McDonagh employs this feature to satirize the arrogance of the colonial powers who always claimed to have bestowed on their colonies countless benefits. In their dialogue about what they have done in Congo, one of the Belgian brothers mentions that “Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* was inspired by the Belgian Congo;” the other proudly says, “So you can’t say the Congo didn’t get anything out of it” (21, sc. 4). In another literary reference McDonagh dedicates an entire scene to a public reading of Hans Anderson's original story *The Little Mermaid* offered to children by Anderson in a Copenhagen garden party:

HANS. Fireworks?! And clapping?! For the lowly Hans Christian Andersen? I might cry! I knew my new story was wonderful and one for the ages but fireworks! Gosh! Invented by Chinamen, fireworks, a little known fact. Fireworks and *walls*, they invented. [. . .] as my old mum used to point out, another little known fact, the Chinese? Absolute savages. They eat the puppies that belong to their children and then, if they’re still hungry, they eat their children! (*To the Press Man.*) Don’t write that down you, you old ‘Write-that-downer’! (6, sc. 2, emphasis original)

Even a heartwarming event such as this is ruined by McDonagh's insistence on "juxtaposing the mundane with the shocking" (Castleberry 48), and on deconstructing the image of Anderson who apparently symbolizes the arrogance and racism of the colonial mindset.

Grotesque Characterizations

Maria Doyle convincingly argues that "Martin McDonagh's approach to theater hinges on violence—violence recalled, violence threatened, violence narrated, and violence enacted" (92). Unlike the comic aspect of the grotesque that McDonagh masterfully uses in his portrayal of Anderson and Dickens, in his representation of the Belgian colonizers he relies on what Frances S. Connelly describes as "fearful grotesques" where writers create characters "whose bodies are monstrous, tormented, or decomposing" (10). These grotesque characters, Connelly argues, "exude their own brand of dark humor, but it is a humor absurd enough to make the horrible bearable and to mitigate our responses of fear and disgust" (10). The grotesque nature of the Belgian brothers is achieved through their nakedness, the blood that covers their body, and the "*stitches that run up their arms and their sides*" (44, sc. 9). Certainly, the use of flashy violence on the stage is meant to provoke fear and revulsion into McDonagh's audience. The blood that covers the Belgians' bodies obviously functions as a reminder of their "thirty-year-old

Congo blood” (27, sc. 6), while the stitches that run up their arms and sides might refer to the fact that Marjory has already killed them and now they are resurrected to travel to the past and get their revenge. While Anderson is away on his visit to Dickens, Marjory has a violent confrontation with the Belgian brothers where she tricks them into their deaths, again. The presence of violently killed bodies along with the witty dialogue has the effect of producing laughter and horror simultaneously, which is typical of the theatre of the grotesque.

In regards to the grotesque representation of the colonial subject, Michael Gillum explains that “one of the most prominent is the grossness of the human body [. . .] The grotesque in art often reminds us that the body, with its smells, wastes, unruly appetites, and deformities, calls into question human idealisms and human pretensions” (14). The body of the central character in *Dark Matter*, Marjory, starkly deviates from the norm; just looking at her seems to generate laughter among the audience. However, “It is that ‘inappropriate’ laughter” where “those who are laughing are aware that they should not be doing so” (Pilný 17). British critic and cultural historian Marina Warner suggests a resemblance between the scenes where Marjory is shown through the glass wall of her Mahogany box, with “the ‘specimen’ collections held by imperialists at the Hunterian Museum in London where an “anonymous African woman, then designated a

pygmy, was pregnant when she died and was bisected and preserved in formaldehyde” (Warner). Additionally, the very idea of keeping Marjory in a box/cage reminds the audience of the infamous 19th-century colonial exhibitions that toured Europe to show to spectators what was believed to be “a specimen of an inferior race” (Pilný 104). Among the most famous of these ‘specimen’ was a woman with the name of Sara Baartman “whose body was perceived as grotesque” and so she “was taken from South Africa in 1810 and exhibited in London as ‘The Hottentot Venus’” (Pilný 104). Baartman was exhibited inside a cage with a ringmaster who “[ordered] her to exit her cage, perform tricks and music for the audience, and [threatened] her with a stick if she disobeyed” (Pilný 106). When she died, Baartman’s brain and genitals were preserved in jars and exhibited in the Musée de l’Homme in France (Jordan 96)⁴.

By placing Marjory within a mahogany box that has a glass side, McDonagh recreates the colonial freak show to remind his audience of that shameful history and to further undermine the status of Anderson by assigning him the role of a ringmaster for Marjory who, like the ‘The Hottentot Venus,’ happens to have a grotesque body. But instead of “prodding [Marjory] with a stick to generate stories, there is cajoling, intimidation and the torture

⁽⁴⁾ Nelson Mandela requested Baartman’s remains in his first visit to France in 1994. Her organs were finally “returned in 2002 and buried during ceremonies lasting several months.” See: Ondřej Pilný, p.107.

of his captive that is beneficial to her creative outputs to which he lays claim” (Jordan 95). Both Marjory and Baartman are symbols of colonialism and racism; they both “[reflect] a long, infamous history of racial objectification whereby non-whites have been perceived as simultaneously human and non-human, as grotesque creatures who served to reinforce the identity of Europeans and white Americans as superior” (Pilný 105). Despite the seemingly debasing and racist portrayal of Marjory, McDonagh empowers her and “[sets her] free on history” (Jordan 100). In fact, McDonagh compensates Marjory for the foot that Anderson/the colonizer cuts and trades for a supposedly haunted concertina; the audience finds out later that “the concertina wasn’t haunted, they never are, it was just the best place to hide the machine gun they’d brought for her” (50-51, sc. 10). Thus, in place of her missing foot Marjory is given a machine gun to support her rescue mission. By the end of the play Andersen gives up on Marjory and gives her the concertina and the two guns that she took from the now dead Belgian brothers. Interestingly then, despite all the violence and the absurdities, the play ends optimistically as Marjory takes the weapons and starts her journey to save the Congo.

Conclusion

Irish drama has a long tradition of “creating laughter in darkness and finding humor in the pain and torture of living,” which is evident for example in the dramaturgy of Samuel Beckett and

Sean O’Casey (Castleberry 41). McDonagh’s *Dark Matter* fits perfectly within this long tradition of exploring the darker sides of humanity. By setting his play in a non-realistic timeframe and presenting “a fantastical and inverted version of history” (Jordan 101), McDonagh “challenges traditional authorities and expectations” (Middeke 228) and thus shakes his audience's confidence in history and in reality itself. Although the whole situation about Marjory's and her sister's organs sounds absurd, it actually highlights the objectification of Africa and Africans as the private property of Europe. By means of the grotesque McDonagh compensates the Congolese, represented in Marjory and her sister, for the brutal losses of their hands, feet, and family members in King Leopold’s bloody pursuit of rubber. He also empowers Marjory by bestowing upon her the imagination and the talent that she uses to “write her way out of [her captivity]” (5, sc. 1). McDonagh thus gives voice to the oppressed and urges his audience to see things from the perspective of the other. As such, his play stands as a post-colonial counter-discourse that reverses the power dynamics between Europe and Africa. Through his skilled use of satire McDonagh manages to destabilize the colonial history of Europe by presenting to his audience an alternate history where one wonders what would have happened if Marjory really managed to save the Congo.

In terms of characterization, McDonagh relied on the verbal grotesque in his portrayal of canonical literary figures such as Hans Christian Anderson and Charles Dickens whose power lies mainly in words. Their absurd portrayal provides much of the humor in the play, yet it certainly has a deeper layer of meaning; McDonagh seems to imply that Africa is the root of all the achievements, even the intellectual ones, that Europe has been and is still bragging about. The satiric representation of the literary history of Europe presents a striking attack on the colonial legacy. On the other hand, and given the violent nature of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, McDonagh relied on the physical grotesque to characterize Marjory, her sister, and the Belgian brothers. In fact, violence and sadism are key terms that define the relationship among all the grotesque characters of *Dark Matter*. Marjory and Anderson have a quarrelsome relationship that very often inspires laughter rather than tears or fear. Anderson and Dickens have a relationship that lacks respect, empathy, and understanding. McDonagh's reliance on the bizarre ingredients of chopped organs, stitched bodies, massive amounts of blood, rotten bodies, and human skeletons turned into marionettes to amuse the children, emphasizes the darkness of life, particularly for those who are deemed powerless, and highlights the violations committed in the name of white supremacy.



Fig. 1. 'Time-travelling Belgians' Photo by Manuel Harlan, Oct. 2018. bridgetheatre.co.uk/the-unfree-free-state-an-overview-of-the-history-of-the-congo/

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ملخص

يعد الكاتب الأيرلندي مارتن ماكدونا من أكثر كتاب المسرح المعاصرين نجاحاً وأكثرهم جدلاً أيضاً وذلك يعود بشكل كبير إلى استخدامه العنف والحوار غير اللائق. ما يُميز مارتن ماكدونا في كتاباته هو اعتماده على الكوميديا وعناصر "الجروتسك" المخاطبة قضايا جادة مثل الاستعمار والعدالة الاجتماعية ولتذكير الجمهور والقراء بتاريخ الاستعمار في أفريقيا. يدرس البحث الحالي عناصر الجروتسك في مسرحيته الأخيرة التي جاءت بعنوان "أمر مظلم جدا جدا" والتي صنفتها النقاد على أنها كوميديا سوداء حيث تعرض البشاعات التي ارتكبتها الملك ليوبولد الثاني ملك بلجيكا في مستعمرته في الكونغو الأفريقية. يعتمد البحث على دراسة عناصر الجروتسك في المسرحية ومناقشة كيف وظّف الكاتب تلك العناصر لمهاجمة تاريخ الاستعمار المظلم واستغلاله لثروات أفريقيا المادية والفكرية.