

A Belgian Town as Purgatory and an Irish Gangster as Christ in Martin McDonagh's *In Bruges*

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At key points in writer/director Martin McDonagh's film *In Bruges*, the auteur draws our attention to Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch's triptych painting "The Last Judgement." In one scene, he has the film's two main characters – the London-based Irish gangsters Ken (Brendan Gleeson) and Ray (Colin Farrell) – discuss the painting in a gallery, and in the final scene, Ray and his cockney crime boss Harry (Ralph Fiennes) stumble onto a film set in which a Dutch director is shooting a dream sequence populated by characters from the Bosch painting. While this symbolism may strike first-time viewers of the film as obtuse, pretentious or perhaps a vain stab at adding arthouse depth to what several critics have condescendingly described as a "buddy movie" (Hunter; Kennedy; Lockett; Sims; Taylor),¹ further viewings reveal the symbolism from the painting to be a key component in McDonagh's careful and deliberate plan to suggest that Bruges in the film represents Purgatory.² The sleepy, medieval Belgian town is the liminal space in which the gangster Ray has been condemned to wait for a "Last Judgement" at the hands of his vicious boss, Harry. Ray's frustration with what he sees as the lack of excitement in Bruges, combined with his fear over the state of his soul and his concern over his future, all make Bruges a Purgatory from which he longs to be delivered. As in the theological Purgatory, Ray's soul and perspective are purified by his time spent in Bruges. McDonagh adds further layers to this eschatological symbolism by making Ray's partner, Ken, a Christ-figure in the film. Not only does Ken lay down his life at the end of the film in the hopes of saving Ray, he is also linked to Christ at various other points in the film, both through his own words and actions and those of others.

In the screenplay, McDonagh suggests that Bruges is linked to the afterlife, and that it is more than just a beautiful, central European town, when he describes it in the first sentence of the scene descriptions as “other-worldly” (3). The film’s opening shots likewise reflect McDonagh’s desire to emphasise the town’s supernatural aura and to suggest that a spiritual battle is to ensue. The camera focuses on religious ornamentation adorning the buildings around Bruges, including gargoyles, cherubs, and saints. Finally, the camera settles on a crescent moon with a watchful eye, which perhaps represents the omniscient eye of God. As the film and screenplay continue, Bruges’s otherworldliness is continually referenced, as the characters and McDonagh (in scene descriptions) repeatedly refer to the town’s “dream-like” and “fairy-tale” qualities (39, 40; 37, 38, 41, 60, 70, 73). However, it is when we see Ray’s restlessness at the prospect of spending a long time in quiet Bruges that the town’s purgatorial nature begins to emerge more clearly.

The film’s plot hinges on the fact that, prior to the start of the action, Ray accidentally killed a small boy when sent by Harry to shoot an Irish priest called Father McHenry in a London church. Because of this tragic mistake, Ray and his partner and friend Ken have been dispatched by Harry to Bruges to await instructions. Ray is in “the horrors” after having killed the child, and finds waiting for word from Harry in the picturesque Bruges excruciating. He repeatedly describes the town as a “shithole” (3, 4, 19, 30). His harsh assessment of the place is due to the fact that, lacking any interest in history or art, he finds it extremely boring. For a man so addicted to the action of cities, it is a difficult place in which to spend a lot of time. As Ray says to Ken (who, by contrast, is enchanted with Bruges): “I grew up in Dublin. I love Dublin. If I’d grown up on a farm, and was retarded, Bruges might impress me, but I didn’t, so it doesn’t” (7). Of course, as viewers, we know his agitation at waiting in the town may have more than a little to do with the fact that he knows his boss Harry, who is very sentimental about children and childhood, might want to punish him for having botched the

McHenry job and particularly for having killed a child. Ray is, in this very real sense, awaiting judgement.

Ray, however, is not only awaiting the judgement of Harry – he is also awaiting the judgement of his God, haunted as he is by the teachings from his Roman Catholic childhood. This is never clearer than during the scene in which Ray and Ken visit the art museum. As they move from painting to painting, McDonagh, in the screenplay and through his use of the camera, draws our attention to the presence of not only Bosch's "The Last Judgement" (in which, as McDonagh writes in the scene descriptions, "freakish demons torture various people in freakish ways"), but also "The Judgement of Cambyses" (which features "a flaying alive") and "De Gierigaard de Dood" (in which "a skeletal death comes to collect his due"[24]). By having the camera linger over these works and by carefully describing them in the scene descriptions, McDonagh is obviously using these three paintings to further emphasise that, for Ray, the town is a kind of Purgatory, or waiting room for judgement.

Ray's already shaken nerves are stirred further by the paintings, and he eventually asks the more cultured Ken what Bosch's painting is about. Ken explains that it's about "the Last Judgement, Judgement Day ... the final day on earth when mankind will be judged for all the crimes they have committed" (24). This leads to a discussion between Ray and Ken about Heaven, Hell, and, of course, Purgatory, which Ray comically refers to as "the inbetweeny one," for souls who "weren't *really* shit, but [who] weren't all that great either... Like Tottenham" (24, emphasis original).³ He asks the older, wiser Ken if he believes in "the Last Judgement and the afterlife ... and guilt and ... sins and ... Hell and all that" (25). Ken says he's rejected most of the Catholic teachings of his youth but that remnants of it can still be seen in his worldview. Eventually, the two men acknowledge that they are really discussing what divine punishment may await them for the murders they have committed – in Ray's case, his only murder (that of the little boy), and in Ken's case, numerous murders (mainly of gangsters who "deserved" it). Ken feels that because the killing of the boy

was an accident, Ray's soul is safe, but he personally feels guilty about one of the murders he committed, because the victim wasn't a bad man, just someone in the wrong place at the wrong time, who was trying to protect his brother.

Ken's assurances to Ray regarding the accidental nature of the boy's death do not assuage Ray's troubled conscience, and the young man remains guilty and suicidal for much of the film. At one point, Ken has to stop Ray from shooting himself in the head.⁴ Carrying around such terrible guilt means that whenever Ray sees a little boy, or children and their parents, he is reminded immediately of what he has done and he grows hopeless, unable to see any way of atoning for his own sins. When Ken tells Ray that killing himself is "not going to bring that boy back" and that by living he might "save the *next* little boy," Ray protests, "What am I gonna be, a doctor? You need exams" (24, emphasis original).

As in all stories soaked in Christian imagery, what Ray needs in order to be saved from himself is Jesus. That is where Ken's role as a Christ-figure comes in. During one of the sight-seeing trips that Ray finds so tedious, Ken brings him to the Basilica of the Holy Blood. Once in the church, Ray keeps his head bowed much of the time, and we are told in the screenplay that this is because he is "trying not to look at anything with Jesus on it" (20). Ken asks Ray if he wants to approach the altar and touch a phial filled with the blood of Jesus, which a Flemish knight brought back from the crusades. Ray asks, "Do I have to?" Ken, deeply infuriated, replies, "Do you have to? Of course you don't have to! It's Jesus's fucking blood, isn't it?! Of course you don't fucking have to!" (21). This outburst makes clear Ken's belief in the importance of the blood of Jesus compared to Ray's evasiveness or indifference on the subject. Ray leaves the church, and Ken, despite remaining angry, approaches the phial and touches it. This is a transformative moment for Ken; for the remainder of the film, he repeatedly occupies the role of a "Christ-figure." McDonagh signals that a Christ-figure is being born into the situation by deliberately having the film take place at Christmas-time, something which is mentioned repeatedly by

the characters and by McDonagh in the scene descriptions (4, 5, 22, 53, 86).⁵

Ken's first Christ-like act is that he stops Ray from killing himself. Of course, Ken is not a perfect Christ-figure in this situation; he only finds Ray on the brink of suicide, because he was about to shoot Ray himself, on Harry's orders.

Nevertheless, it is uncertain that Ken would have assassinated Ray, since he saves him in this situation and does so repeatedly throughout the rest of the film. Ken's second Christ-like attempt to save Ray is when he tries to help Ray escape Bruges, and Harry's clutches, by putting him on a train out of town.

Unfortunately for the fleeing Ray, the train is stopped five minutes outside of Bruges and he is brought back to the town jail, because the police have realised that he is the man who, the night before, assaulted a Canadian man he mistook for being an arrogant American. Ray, it seems, cannot leave his Purgatory that easily. While both of these attempts to save Ray are angelic or Christ-like, Ken becomes most fully and most compellingly a Christ-figure in the film's closing minutes.

Harry, who is disgusted that Ken has not assassinated Ray as ordered, leaves London and comes to Bruges to kill both Irishmen. When he confronts Ken on the steps of the high tower in the centre of the town, however, Ken refuses to fight him, handing over his gun and expressing the brotherly love that he has felt for Harry over their many years of acquaintance. His profession to Harry that "I love you unreservedly" (73) echoes the unconditional love of Jesus for his friends and enemies.

Harry, frustrated that Ken is being so pacifistic, shoots him in the leg, saying he is not going to be completely spared simply because he is acting "like Robert fucking Powell" (74). When Ken asks for clarification of this statement, Harry explains that Robert Powell played Jesus in the film *Jesus of Nazareth*. As Ken writhes in pain and the two men start to descend the steps of the tower together, the one-eyed Belgian ne'er-do-well Eirik comes to tell Harry that Ray is back in Bruges and sitting in the square below the tower having a beer. Ken tries to stop Harry from going to kill Ray and ends up getting shot by Harry in the

neck. As Harry runs down the stairs to assassinate Ray, Ken tries to figure out what he can do to save his friend. He drags his dying, bloody body up several flights of steps – like Jesus on his way to the cross, Ken’s own personal Via Dolorosa. And, as Lloyd Baugh has observed, a representation of “the suffering Jesus carrying his cross to Calvary” is “almost always” included in films featuring Christ-figures (209). When Ken reaches the top of the tower, he contemplates shooting Harry to stop him from killing Ray but realises, due to the lack of visibility, the fruitlessness (and perhaps cruelty, given the crowd below) of such an act. He then comes up with the plan that will involve his own self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. He takes all the coins he has in his pockets and sprinkles them onto the square below to scatter the passers-by, to keep them safe and to hopefully get Ray’s attention. He then ensures himself of getting Ray’s full attention, and of warning him of Harry’s approach, by throwing himself off the tower and into the square below.

The song that McDonagh chooses to play throughout this scene – Patrick Kavanagh’s “On Raglan Road,” as sung by Luke Kelly of The Dubliners – seems at first like a slightly bizarre choice. Its only relevance seems to be that it is a song celebrating Dublin places, and is therefore a fitting, if tangential, tribute to a Dublin man who is performing a heroic act. Examination of the lyrics of “On Raglan Road,” however, reveals that the song is relevant to the plot of *In Bruges* in two other ways, as well. The reference in the first verse to the girl whose “dark hair would weave a snare that I might one day rue” (Kavanagh 187) may refer to Ken’s deceased black wife, whose murder by a white man in 1976 was avenged by Harry. The debt of gratitude that Ken feels towards Harry for this act of vigilante justice is the main reason why he has remained in faithful service to Harry for so many years. The other significant line from the lyric is the description in the final verse of the angel who “lose[s] his wings at the dawn of the day” (188). This evokes the concept of Christ’s incarnation, in which Jesus abandoned his home in heaven to be of service to humankind, even though it meant great suffering and death. Likewise, Ken

has abandoned life with a maimed leg, or even a quiet death in the tower, and instead chosen to end his life very painfully for Ray's sake. Given that Ken patently has no wings to spare him from the full impact of his fall,⁶ it is notable that the line about the angel who has lost his wings is the last thing we hear before Ken leaps from the top of the tower.

McDonagh, in the screenplay, describes Ken's bloody body after landing as "a hideous broken heap" (78). Ray sees that it's Ken, and approaches Ken's "crucified" body in terror and grief, saying "Ken! Jesus!" (78). Ray's profane outburst is McDonagh's way of giving us another clue that Ken is a Christ-figure in this scene. Likewise, minutes earlier, when Harry and Ken first met, Harry says to him, "I may just have to shoot you right here! Christ!" (70). That may also have been an instance of McDonagh using a character's blasphemous swearing to signal Ken's Christological identity in these closing scenes. As Anton Karl Kozlovic has shown, in films featuring Christ-figures, it is common that "someone, either directly or indirectly ... refers to the Christ-figure protagonist as God or Jesus by literally saying: 'My God!' or 'Oh God!' or 'Jesus Christ!' or 'Jesus!' or 'Christ!'" (par. 66). As Ken lay dying in the square, he warns Ray of Harry's approach and this helps Ray to get away without being shot, Ken's final Christ-like act before dying.

Harry chases Ray through the streets of Bruges for the next several minutes and eventually shoots him. Ray manages to keep on running until arriving at the film set in which the Dutch crew are creating the "Boschian nightmare" (McDonagh 75). All the extras are dressed as figures from "The Last Judgement" and fog machines add to the eerie quality of the setting. Jimmy, an American dwarf that Ken and Ray met earlier and who is starring in the film, is dressed as a little school boy. The now hallucinating Ray thinks at first that Jimmy is the boy that he killed in the church back in London and is once again in the horrors, his Judgment Day having arrived at last. When Harry shoots at Ray in the middle of the film set, he not only hits Ray again, but also hits Jimmy with one of his deadly "dum dum"

bullets (65), causing the dwarf's head to explode. Without a head, Jimmy's body looks just like that of a dead school boy.

Harry, who is sentimental about children and childhood, refusing to hear a bad word said about his own children and still protective of the memories he had of Bruges during a happy childhood holiday, is now convinced that he has, like Ray, killed a child accidentally. Earlier in the film, when Ken had protested that Harry didn't have to kill Ray because the guilt-ridden young man was suicidal and "kept going on about Hell and Purgatory," Harry was unmoved, saying, "If I'd killed a little kid, accidentally or otherwise, I wouldn't've thought twice, I'd've killed myself on the fucking spot! On the fucking spot! I'd've stuck the gun in my mouth on the fucking spot!" (66-7, emphasis original). Now standing in the middle of the film set, thinking that he too has killed a child, Harry, keeping his word with the inflexible "honour" of the Stage Englishman, draws himself up, says "you've got to stick to your principles" (86), sticks his gun in his mouth, and, before Ray can explain that Jimmy is not a child, commits suicide.

McDonagh's character directions tell us that Eirik, who betrayed Ray's whereabouts to Harry, stares down at the profusely bleeding Ray "looking as guilty as Judas" (87) – adding to the Christ/crucifixion imagery. Marie, the lovely pregnant woman who runs the hotel where Ray and Ken stayed, is likewise staring down at Ray, and McDonagh writes that she is looking down at Ray "from somewhere almost heavenly ... [with her] gentle, angelic, smiling face" (87). Perhaps the life she has with her husband and expectant child is the Heaven that is available to Ray and his new Belgian girlfriend, Chloe, if he can survive the shooting. We also see Chloe screaming and crying as she discovers what has happened to Ray.

Ray is then placed on a stretcher by ambulance men, and McDonagh informs us in the character directions that their "grim countenances don't seem to hold out too much hope" for the young Dubliner (87). As he is fighting for his life, Ray vows that if he survives, he will go to the mother of the child he killed and accept whatever sentence she gives him – prison, death,

“whatever” – because he wants to be rid of the crushing guilt and also to finally escape Bruges. Ray sardonically remarks “maybe that’s what Hell is. The entire rest of eternity spent in fucking Bruges” (87). But Ray is wrong. Bruges in this film is not Hell and it is not somewhere you would be forced to stay for eternity; it is Purgatory, the place in which a person awaits judgement and experiences the slow sanctification of one’s soul and perspective, just as Ray has in Bruges.

While it is clear that Ray is awaiting judgement in Bruges (the judgement of Harry, the judgement of his own guilt-addled mind, the judgement of his God, and, after his decision in the final scene, the judgement of the mother of the child he killed), the ways in which his soul and perspective were sanctified by the time spent in Bruges might be less clear. He *has* been changed, however. First, he has come to realise that he shouldn’t run away from justice, that he should pay for his crime. Second, having botched his first job and having discovered he has a sensitive conscience, he has learned that gangster life is definitely not for him. Third, having entered a true love relationship with Chloe, he has discovered a new world of love, a possible Heaven on earth.

One final objection that people may have to the notion that Bruges stands for Purgatory in the film is that Ken and Harry both find Bruges lovely and it is only Ray who finds it so awful. This, however, recalls the closing scenes in Belfast writer C.S. Lewis’s *The Last Battle*, the final book in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lewis, despite being an Ulster Protestant, was actually quite a “High Church” Anglican, and believed sincerely in Purgatory (*Malcolm* 107-11; *Reflections* 8). Hence, in the last book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, several characters await Judgement and undergo purification in a Purgatory-like place. Lewis, however, has the different characters view the same Purgatorial space quite differently, depending on the state of their souls. The essentially “good” characters find the liminal space quite pleasant, while the “bad” (or less “good”) characters think that the same space is miserable, or, at best, indifferent. For example, to very “good” characters like Queen Lucy, this

Purgatory appears to be beautiful countryside, while to “bad” ones like the hard, cynical Diggle, it appears to be a “pitch-black, poky, smelly little hole of a stable” (*Last Battle* 136). In the same way, perhaps McDonagh has Ray’s appreciation of Bruges blunted by the state of his blighted soul, full as it is of guilt, shame and a lack of moral perspective.

One could argue that Harry is a much more evil character than Ray, and therefore, now that he is no longer the innocent who fell in love with Bruges as a child but a hardened adult gangster, he should find Bruges even more excruciating than Ray does. Perhaps, however, Harry’s “honourable” suicide, his sentimental love of children, and his (admittedly twisted) gangster moral code, are not simply targets for McDonagh’s satirical mocking of a Stage English gangster; they may also be the filmmaker’s approval of the fact that Harry, unlike Ray, at least possesses a moral code and is as true to it as he can be. Given that McDonagh is the London-born son of Irish parents, and that, when asked if he is English or Irish, has responded “I don’t feel either. And, in another way, of course, I’m both” (O’Hagan par. 12), it is perhaps unsurprising that he should give the first English character in his work both admirable and absurd qualities.

One of the most striking features of the film as a whole is its cliff-hanger ending – as the credits roll, we do not know if Ray ultimately lives or dies. This is crucial to McDonagh’s Purgatory theme. Just as Purgatory is a place of delayed gratification, we as viewers remain in a kind of Purgatory when the film ends, kept from the Heaven of a Hollywood ending or the Hell of a final death scene, beloved of classical tragedies and Victorian melodrama. From the opening of the film to the very last frame before the credits, McDonagh makes a sustained and meticulous effort to link Bruges to Purgatory, in order to ask probing questions about the spiritual condition of humankind, including our beliefs about morality, guilt, and the afterlife. It is another fine work from a writer whose plays and films have always generated much critical comment due to the fact that

careful examination of the multiple layers in his work often yields rich rewards.

Notes

1. Taylor, to be strictly accurate, uses the phrase “male-buddy caper” (par. 3).
2. Several reviewers of the film picked up on the idea that *Bruges* is meant to be a kind of Purgatory but no one, at the time of the film’s release or since, has explored the idea in any depth. When asked by an interviewer if he was suggesting that the characters in the film were “trapped in purgatory,” McDonagh agreed “that’s what I was trying to do,” but didn’t expand on the idea and the interviewer didn’t follow up this remark with further questions on the subject (“Capone”).
3. This reference to the Tottenham Hotspur football team is one of several nods in the film to Harold Pinter’s 1957 play *The Dumb Waiter*, in which two gangsters wait in a flat for word from their boss and discuss, among other things, “the Spurs” (Pinter 138). McDonagh has said that a 1985 BBC Television production of *The Dumb Waiter* was an important early influence on him. That version starred Kenneth Cranham and Colin Blakely, hence the choice of aliases for Ken and Ray in *In Bruges* – “Cranham and Blakely” (McDonagh 4). Fintan O’Toole first noted the various parallels between *In Bruges* and *The Dumb Waiter* in an article in the *Irish Times* at the time of the film’s release, and Patrick Lonergan draws further parallels between the two works in his excellent 2012 study, *The Theatre and Films of Martin McDonagh* (146-47).
4. The fact that Ray is contemplating suicide shows how far he has departed from the Catholicism of his youth, but also serves to show that he has seriously considered Harry’s “eye for an eye” solution to his killing of the child (as is discussed later in

this essay, Harry believes that anyone who kills a child should kill themselves in atonement, and is appalled that Ray has not done so). For more on “eye for an eye” morality in the film, see Lonergan (149-52).

5. As Patrick Lonergan has pointed out, the Christmas-time setting is also significant for two other reasons, both of which relate to the film’s extensive engagement with Catholicism. First, the pregnant, Belgian hotelier in the film, Marie, “gives others room at her hotel, rather than being turned away from an inn as her namesake was in the Gospels.” (149). Likewise, Ray (late in the film) prevents Marie from being shot by Harry, and, “although the Christmas-time birth of [her] child is not shown during the film, its imminence does seem to suggest some sort of atonement for Ray’s accidental killing of the boy in the church” (149).

6. Ken’s Christ-like, sacrificial fall from the tower could be seen as a reversal of Adam’s selfish “Fall” in the Garden of Eden. St. Paul refers to Christ as “the last Adam” or the “second” Adam, since his crucifixion reversed the bad effects of Adam’s Fall and since his resurrection made him “the firstborn from among the dead” (1 Corinthians 15:45-47 and Colossians 1:18 New International Version).

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