

Representation of catholicism in irish movies in the 20th century essay

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How has the representation of Catholicism evolved in Irish cinema in the twentieth century, with specific attention to: 'The Quiet Man', 'The Magdalene Sisters' & 'Breakfast on Pluto'? "Ireland remains the overwhelmingly Catholic country of the English speaking world, according to results of the April 2011 census . . . Over 84 per cent of people in the Republic, or 3.86 million describe themselves as Roman Catholic in that census" (McGarry, 2012: 14). These figures are the most current details recorded in the country's census, yet the country's general interest is broadly reflected through the media. Focusing on Irish cinematic media, religion is explored from a range of different perspectives, which may reaffirm or question these statistics. Although religious themed films have not necessarily become more topical, representation has become more diverse.

Ranging from a priest recognizing himself as a pillar of the community in the early twentieth century to films featuring representations of sexuality, to the overall challenging of religious hierarchy. Religious representation in Irish media reflects a changing Irish society. Contemporary portrayals of religion may steer audiences from having a strong foundation in the Church to questioning it or to abandoning religion altogether. According to Dr. Pat Brereton, lecturer in Dublin City University, "religious representations in films impact our personal views as they can help us to firm up an opinion.

.. give us some concrete examples (or) personifications of priests etc. , which feed into our belief systems. " Given that the Irish Constitution affords a special place for the Catholic Church, it is therefore unsurprising that

Catholicism is portrayed in the media as very much a part of the Irish identity.

The media has influenced peoples attitude towards the Church by informing them of its strengths and its weaknesses which would not have been tolerated by the Church or State in the past. Differentiation of attitudes can be seen in three significant films: ' The Quiet Man' directed by John Ford in 1952, ' The Magdalene Sisters' directed by Peter Mullan in 2002 and ' Breakfast on Pluto' directed by Neil Jordan in 2005. Knowledge of the times in history in which these films were set gives a better understanding of the attitudes, temperaments and behaviors expressed.

These films are religious themed, yet regarding religion Hugh Gash states that " Religion is about the things we don't know and cannot know rationally. " Therefore the practices of Catholicism can answer the questions or fill the gaps. In recent years education is prioritised, and as Hugh Gash suggests we close gaps the moment we learn. This reliance on religion can therefore fluctuate, depending on the individual and the type of educational system that they experience. In recent years religion's influence on the individual have both strengthened and weakened, resulting in the constant evolution of religious values. These three films represent the evolving of religious values of the nation. The Quiet Man' is set in 1920's Ireland and gives audiences a strong understanding of the expectations of the general public at this time.

It also creates a connection between religion and Irish heritage. The protagonist Sean Thornton, played by John Wayne, is of Irish heritage and

returns to his homeland from life in the United States of America. One of the film's opening scenes sees Sean meet Father Peter Lonergan, (Ward Bond) a priest who shares that he recalls Thornton's family. This recognition and distant familiarity offers Sean a feeling of acceptance to a new society. In knowing Sean's family and his history the priest links Thornton's 'Irishness' and his cultural heritage to religion. Thornton is eager to maintain a relationship with the Church, as in the post-independence years Catholicism was a significant factor in defining Irish cultural and national identity. Therefore Sean Thornton displays the significance of the Church at the time. Although Sean Thornton hides the fact that he has killed a man, the priest is aware of this, indicating how the Catholic Church is seen to be an omnipresent force.

Thus the citizens of Innisfree are compelled to act more ethically and morally responsible, for fear of disobeying God's law. 'The Magdalene Sisters' in contrast expresses religious authority figures such as nuns as vindictive characters. This film may be expressed as daring, for it is recognised as one of the debut films in Irish cinematic history that presents nuns as malicious characters.

Although this film is set in 1960s Ireland, it was made some forty years later. Following scandals of the late 1990's, which saw Church sexual abuse cases coming to light in the media, directors - as well as journalists, began to grow confidence in sharing the negative aspects of the country's Catholic Church. Sean Thornton is fully aware that he may be judged, according to God's law.

This notion of judgment continues into contemporary Ireland, yet there are also more diverse representations.

For example as Pamela Dolan suggests in her short story Surely there is more to religions than the oppressive colonization of the domestic sphere by the Catholic Church, symbolized again and again by ominous, black clad, clerics, in the films of the recent Irish invasion. Is it either fair or accurate to reduce religion in Ireland to a kind of character of a colonizing force of oppression? Is not religion also a more personal, even intimate, and potentially liberating force in people's daily lives, and does not this force, this ultimate concern take other forms than mirror rote piety and obedience? It is therefore important to balance opposing perspectives of religion, as both oppressing and liberating". (Dolan, 1999: 140) It could be suggested that the themes of judgment and redemption are prevalent in ' The Quiet Man' and ' The Magdalene Sisters'. The latter film presents religious figures that scorn the " fallen women" who are under their direction, showing the full extent of their failure to live up to the Catholics Church's expectations.

The Irish began to speak out from the 1960s onwards about controversial social problems, most evidently regarding the Catholic Church. Reports of physical and sexual abuse in Church-run institutions began to surface. Until the 1980's the media generally avoided circulating material that would challenge Church orthodoxy. It could be suggested that the election of Mary Robinson as President was fundamental to the renegotiation of the Irish identity (Brereton 2008). Thus the affiliation between the Church and Irish society was weakened, with the media drawing attention to the abuses of

Church-run schools, institutions and the Magdalene laundries. ' The Magdalene Sisters' film explores the religious representation of Irish society from the early to mid twentieth century. Notably this film was made in the early twenty-first century, as the general public began to question the Church - after allegations of various institutional abuses began to surface.

Young Irish women who fell pregnant out of marriage, or women who were viewed as sexually deviant, were sent to laundry institutions to work hard to repent their sins. It was exposed that there were nearly 30, 000 women incarcerated to these asylums. One example of the hypocrisy of these nuns was portrayed in a scene where, these women are compared and contrasted naked by the nuns for their own humour. This film may have been described as painful to watch (Holden 2002) given that protagonists experience ill treatment from the nuns, who they had respected throughout their lives until entering the asylums. The attending " fallen women" are seen to be eating single portions of meagre food, in front of nuns who continuously enjoy banquets of rich and varied dishes. The nuns also act as bullies, forcing the girls to strip while they mock them. One of the protagonists, a character named Bernadette (Nora-Jane Noone) who was sent to a laundry from an orphanage as she was deemed a temptress.

Bernadette is not guilty of any wrong-doing, yet nuns include her in their mocking rituals. Therefore it could be suggested that representation of religion, as vindictive as in this film, is deemed polemic (Gillespie 2008). It does not offer any other representation of religion, apart from one of judgement and cruelty. ' Breakfast on Pluto' (2005), written by Pat McCabe

and directed by Neil Jordan, shares the struggle for self-acceptance in 1970s Ireland. McCabe published this as a novel in 1999, which depicts Patrick 'Kitten' Brady (Cillian Murphy) as a young transvestite on a journey to find his parents, in particular his birth mother. This journey takes Kitten from Northern Ireland to London, where he has a brush with the IRA, before finding work as a magician's assistant, then in a peep-show booth before finally posing as a researcher. It is as a researcher than Kitten finally meets his mother. This story is set in Northern Ireland and England, at a time when there is a tense political relationship between the two countries.

This external conflict could be suggested as mirroring Kitten's internal conflict, or internal struggle for independence and self-acceptance. This is where the notion of religion becomes apparent. In contrast to the harsh and vindictive representation of Catholicism in 'The Magdalene Sisters', this film presents Father Liam (Liam Neeson) as a nurturing, paternalistic, caring and accepting character. This addresses a change in the presentation of religious figures, reflecting on the diversity of Catholic representation, and how societies interpret religions in different ways. Sexual activity is explored in both 'The Magdalene Sisters' and 'Breakfast on Pluto'. Father Liam defies the celibacy clause of priesthood by firstly appearing openly attracted to his housekeeper resulting in a sexual relationship. It is from this activity that Father Liam literally becomes a father, to Patrick. In contrast, 'The Magdalene Sisters' depicts a priest engaging in sexual activity with one laundry attendee Crispina (Eileen Walsh), who is apparently mentally disabled - thus rendering her more vulnerable.

Crispina is sent to a mental institution, displaying a Catholic mind-set, which may be dealt with by her best being kept 'out of sight, out of mind'. On the other hand, in 'Breakfast on Pluto' the seduction scene appears vibrant and light-hearted, presented in rich colours and cheerful music. The positive qualities are also recognised in Father Liam's efforts to care for Kitten.

Father Liam, in the confessional directs Kitten to his birth mother. This confession by the priest alludes to a loss of moral authority and power within the Church. In 'The Magdalene Sisters' Margaret's (Ann-Marie Duff) attention is caught while walking and glances towards a window to see Crispina performing this sexual act on the priest.

The priest stands with his hands behind his back, expressing a position of absolute power. The angle that this scene is presented at displays the indifference of the priest, and also gives an air of seclusion, secrecy and also highlights the vulnerability of Crispina. This representation of a priest abusing his power is a relatively new concept to Irish films. Prior to this there was a fear that traditional or highly religious audiences would find it unacceptable. Dublin City University focuses attention to students' religious upbringing by means of their Centre for Educational Evaluation (CEE). One matter that the CEE considers is indoctrination. A notable member of the CEE is Dr. Kevin Williams.

He advocates neutrality, openness, and balance in terms of religious education. Williams has explored the importance of religious identity in Ireland through his work, "Faith and the Nation: Education and religious

identity in the Republic of Ireland” (Kevin Williams 2012). Williams believes that there has been a long standing association between Ireland’s desire for independence and the Catholic Church, thereby linking the idea of nationality and loyalty to the Church (? Williams 2012). Williams goes on to discuss the influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland’s education system. Religion is taught throughout Irish primary schools, although it is not compulsory. This is in stark contrast with the education system in France, which bans any form of religious reference in schools. Civics was introduced as a second-level subject in 1966 where the values of “ charity, honesty, self-sacrifice, purity and temperance” (Williams 2012) are instilled in students. The Department of Education believed that the values of civics should be derived from religious principles.

A progressive education provider, namely ‘ Educate together’, has grown significantly in recent years in Ireland. It is a primary school network, based on a multi-denominational philosophy of education, and attempts to remove the heavy influence of Catholicism in the primary school system. The belief is that it is best for children to be educated across all religions, rather than be influenced solely by Catholicism. “ Learn together, Live together” is one motto of ‘ Educate Together’. “ Tolerance acceptance are an important part of social and moral development” (Mulcahy 2012). Although the Catholic Church has maintained much of its influence over the Irish State, the evolution of the representation of Catholicism in Irish Cinema has caused many people to question their beliefs. Professor Colum Kenny questions the census’s representation of Catholicism, pointing out “ there is no effort to

define what Catholic means in practice. Neither Church attendance nor belief in basic doctrines are measured.

” Therefore it could be reflected that media is a more accurate measurement of our countries relationship with Catholicism. From the staunch Catholic values depicted in ‘ The Quiet Man’, to the brutality of the Irish Catholic system in ‘ The Magdalene Sisters’, to the ‘ Breakfast on Pluto’s resistance to conform to the vow of celibacy in the Irish priesthood, we have been shown many different facets of Irish culture and the profound presence of religion. Dr. Patrick Brereton sees the diverse presented attitudes throughout religious themed films, to serve as touchstones of changing attitudes, values and beliefs in Ireland. These cinematic representations of religion serve as examples, clearly shaping modern society’s view of religion. Brereton personally believes “ they give us some concrete examples or personifications of priests, which feed into our belief systems. ” The representation of Catholicism has significantly evolved in Irish cinema.

‘ The Quiet Man’, ‘ The Magdalene Sisters’ and ‘ Breakfast on Pluto’, are touchstones in cinematic history. The cause and effect of such films are reflected in people’s changing attitude towards the Catholic Church causing some to stray from being a practicing Catholic, renounce religion altogether, or become more affiliated with their Catholic beliefs.