

The Importance of the Father Figure in the Representation of the Irish in the Selected Contemporary American Films

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Abstract: The importance of the father figure seems to be one of the most ubiquitous motifs used in the portrayal of the Irish in American cinema, as it is present in films belonging to various genres. The function of the motif is related directly to the development of the main character's masculine identity, usually presented within the context of violence. As mother figures are usually absent from the representation of the Irish in contemporary Hollywood, it is the father figure that has the most profound impact on the character's social and emotional development. The present article focuses on the role of the father figure in the construction of the main Irish characters in selected contemporary American films. On the basis of the explicit, implicit and symptomatic meaning produced by the analyzed pictures, it is argued that the studied productions reflect the process of the Irish immigrants' assimilation into American culture.

Keywords: Irish, immigration, father figure, assimilation, masculinity

The present article is a fragment of a larger study focusing on the role of violence in the Irish stereotype explored by the New Hollywood and the contemporary American cinema. In the course of the aforementioned research, over thirty American films produced in the New Hollywood and the contemporary era were analyzed; it became apparent that the relationship between the father and his child constitutes one of the most important themes used in the portrayal of the Irish in America, as it appears across genres and pertains to a variety of characters. Thus, the aim of this article is to present a synthesis of these observations on the basis of three selected contemporary films and argue that through displaying the relationship between

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the characters and their fathers, either biological or substitute, the studied films reflect the process of the Irish immigrants' assimilation into American culture through developing a degree of social and emotional maturity.

One of the most important aspects of the films discussed here is the fact that in their deep structure, they strongly rely on Irish stereotypes existing in America. These stereotypes are connected primarily with professions or social roles which are traditionally associated with the Irish or, at some point, were dominated by the Irish. Those discussed in the present study are: a police officer, a firefighter, a gangster and a boxer. What is also important, the representations of the Irish in the contemporary American cinema are dominated by male characters; therefore, the studied films explore primarily the notions of masculinity, usually expressed through violent behaviour. However, one of the selected films shows a definitely strong female character, which seems to prove that, in the case of Irish-themed productions, the importance of the father figure transcends the father-son relationship, which itself may be a common cinematic motif.

The methodology of the present study consists of a paradigmatic analysis of the selected primary sources with the focus on the motif of the importance of the father figure for the main Irish character. In other words, the structure and the function of the studied motif are examined within the plots of the selected films in order to access the meaning produced by the motif.

The analysis concentrates on the implicit and symptomatic meaning produced by the films because of the presence of the studied motifs. Both the implicit and the symptomatic meanings belong to the level of "hidden meaning," as defined by David Bordwell, which exists alongside the direct or apparent meaning (Bordwell 2009, 2). In order to explain the difference between the two levels of meaning, Bordwell compares studying a film to psychoanalysis; in such a view, the direct meaning accessed through following the plot represents what a psychoanalytic patient says, whereas the hidden meaning accessed on the level of deep structure constitutes the interpretation of what is said (Bordwell 2009, 65). Moreover, the level of hidden meaning may be further divided into implicit meaning, which represents either an intended or not intended message the viewer should be able to decipher, and the symptomatic meaning, which combines the message produced by the plot with the context in which the film was made (Bordwell 2009, 71-72). This context may be formed e.g. by the producer's or the viewer's personal, social and cultural experience. Therefore,

the paradigmatic analysis focused on the studied motif is supplemented with the data on the perception of father-child relationship in the Irish society, as well as on the most important facts concerning the development of the social status of the Irish in America.

The three films chosen as the primary sources of the study illustrate both the major trends and interesting cases in the portrayal of the father figure. Although the analyzed films belong to different genres and present different plots, they realize the studied motif in a similar way. Apart from the three selected productions, other titles which also mentioned in the course of the analysis.

The first of the studied films is a science-fiction film, *Frequency* (2000), directed by Gregory Hoblit. It tells the story of a young Irish-American police officer, John (Jim Caviezel), whose father Frank (Dennis Quaid) was a firefighter. Frank died when John was a child, leaving the boy with his mother, Julia (Elizabeth Mitchell). One day, John, who is now in his thirties, finds his father's old ham radio and, unexpectedly, makes contact with Frank thirty years into the past. Because of that, the main action of the film takes place in two parallel realities: the present and the past. As he is fully aware of the circumstances of his father's death, John attempts to save Frank. However, his actions affect the present reality, creating the worst-case scenario in which he loses both his parents. Ultimately, however, he manages to save them, at the same time changing his own life. The film is included in the study because it shows how the young Irish-American's life changes when he loses his father and then his father and his mother and, finally, when he grows up with both his parents present.

Another film chosen for the study is *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), Clint Eastwood's critically acclaimed sports drama. The plot focuses on Frank Dunn, an Irish-American boxing coach, who begins training Maggie Fitzgerald (Hillary Swank), a young talented pugilist. Initially reluctant to training a woman, Dunn becomes aware of Maggie's potential when he sees how determined she is to become a boxer. The film transcends the typical narrative schema of boxer-trainer relationship as Dunn becomes a substitute father for Maggie. During one of the fights, Maggie is seriously injured and becomes quadriplegic, which leaves Dunn torn between his religious convictions and the love to Maggie when she asks him to assist her in committing suicide. The film was chosen due to its untypical realization of the studied motif.

The third title analyzed in the present article is *The Departed* (2006), a crime film by Martin Scorsese. It tells the story of two Irish-Americans entangled in the criminal activity of the Irish mob in Boston, run by Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson). Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon) is Costello's protégé, who devoted his whole life to serve Costello's organization. He becomes a police officer in order to spy for the gangster. Thus, he is a mobster pretending to be a police officer. Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio), on the other hand, is a police officer who pretends to be a criminal so as to infiltrate Costello's organization. In his mission he is overseen by Captain Queenan (Martin Sheen). The film was selected due to the contrast between the positive and the negative vision of the father figure's influence on the main character.

The main function of both biological and substitute father figures present in the selected films is to direct the social and emotional development of the characters representing their children and, therefore, they guard the development of their identities, affecting them in a positive or negative way. The following analysis focuses on the most important events which show how the child figure's life is affected by the presence or absence of the father figure.

The mechanism of John's and Frank's ability to reach through time to contact each other in *Frequency* is never fully explained. However, it is strongly suggested to the viewer that a psychological or spiritual bond between the father and his son plays an important role in the sudden appearance of the otherwise unexplained phenomenon. In this respect, the bond between the father and the son may be treated as the single most powerful force in the world in which the action takes place, as it allows affecting the flow of time itself.

Since the viewer witnesses the events from the perspective of John, who is the only person aware of the changes to the reality that his actions entail, it is possible to see how John's life alters when his father, later followed by his mother, disappears from his life. Before he saves his father, John is unsuccessful in his life. He is lonely and miserable, which is reflected by the state of the ruined house in which he lives; old furniture constitutes all the man has and bleak colours cover the walls as a reminder of what once was the home belonging to a happy family. More importantly, however, the state of disarray in John's life is underlined by the mood of the scenes in which the Irish-American is presented.

Having been deprived of his father, John is unable to realize himself as a man. Julia is a loving mother, but it was Frank's task to prepare John for the reality he is bound to live in. In the scenes taking place in the past, Frank is presented as a father who plays with his son, teaching him how to compete with others, e.g. when playing baseball, and how to ignore bruises and failures, e.g. when riding a bicycle for the first time. When Frank is gone, John's masculinity cannot be fully realized.

When John saves his father from the fire in which he originally died, he alters the present reality. In the timeline that he creates, his father survived the fire but a chain of unfortunate events led to Julia being murdered by a serial killer and Frank becoming a chain smoker and dying of lung cancer some time after that. Thus, in the second version of the present reality, John is deprived of both his parents. However, his life without the mother changes only marginally, indicating that, while loving and caring, she only had a minor impact on John's well-being. In the third timeline, Frank and his wife survive, which results in changing John's life, as evidenced by the complete remodelling of John's house that occurs gradually, right in front of his and the viewer's eyes: the colours suddenly become vivid and the old furniture is replaced with new. What is more important, it is only when his father is present in his life that John is able to become a father himself and, as suggested by the final scenes, teach his own son the values he is going to need in his life.

In *Million Dollar Baby* the two main characters become foster family members to each other because their biological families are dysfunctional. Dunn has lost contact with his biological daughter, who returns each and every letter he sends her. Maggie Fitzgerald is an adult woman whose dream is to become a boxer. Initially, when Frank refuses to train her, she finds a coach who is incompetent and does not treat her seriously. It is only when she is given an opportunity to train with Dunn that she is able to develop her skills. What is more important, thanks to Frank, she becomes aware of her Irish origins and undergoes a transformation from "white trash" to a proud Irish-American woman who is able to decide about her own fate. This is emphasized by her rejection of her biological family represented by her mother and siblings, who are interested only in the money she earned as a boxer and who stress the fact that she lost her last fight and became quadriplegic. Consequently, the Irish ethos represented by Frank is contrasted with the lack of ideals in the case of Maggie's family (Carroll 2011, 132).

Furthermore, the connection between the “father” and the “daughter” is emphasized with the use of Irish language. When she begins her career, Maggie is given a pseudonym by Dunn – “Mo Chuisle,” which itself is a version of an Irish term of endearment: a chuisle mo chroi, which means “the pulse of my heart,” and is roughly the equivalent of the English “darling.” Dunn, however, refuses to reveal the meaning of the pseudonym to Maggie until the very end of the film, when he is about to assist her in her suicide and translates it to her as “my darling, my blood”; thus, in Maggie’s final moments, he affirms that he has considered her a daughter for a long time. Maggie chooses to die as she sees it the only way to preserve her dignity. As she became injured due to a dishonourable illegal punch, she is striving to preserve the dignity and honour she gained thanks to Frank. Thus, teaching Maggie about her Irish heritage, Frank instigates in her the emotions she was deprived of by her biological family.

Also, in the light of the present study, it is interesting that the film deviates from two typical narrative patterns, i.e. the father-son relationship and the male trainer-male boxer relationship. Thus, it suggests that the Irish women, who admittedly appeared in American cinema before but who were usually given marginal roles, have finally gained some attention. What is important in this context, Maggie traverses the territory reserved for men and proves to be even more successful than most male pugilists seen in the film. This empowerment of the Irish women, who are usually presented in the context of the patriarchal Irish community, proves the evolution of the way Irish women are seen today in American popular culture. Still, Maggie needs a father figure to learn about duty and honour, as well as to discover her Irish identity, while her mother is presented in a decisively negative way.

A sharp contrast between a negative and a positive character development directed by substitute father figures is seen in *The Departed*. The film presents two pairs of father-son characters. Frank Costello performs the function of the father figure for Colin Sullivan, representing a dark and destructive version of fatherhood. Costello, whose motto *Non serviam* emphasizes his diabolical nature (Wernblad 2010, 205), begins shaping Colin’s identity when the latter is a young boy. His age and low social status make him susceptible to Costello’s skilful manipulations and he is easily impressed by the gangster’s strength and wealth. Although Costello teaches Colin the values usually emphasized in Irish-themed films, such as the sense of duty,

and instigates in the boy the sense of Irish pride, his motivation is decisively negative; Colin is his long-time investment that is supposed to become quite valuable in the future. Thus, the gangster does not educate the boy out of fatherly love but because of a selfish calculation. When Colin starts serving as Costello's informer, the father-son relationship between the two characters is emphasized by the fact that Colin calls Frank "Dad" whenever he calls him with information on police activity.

Although Costello is sometimes analyzed also as a father figure for Billy Costigan, it is Captain Queenan who seems to be more accentuated in this function. Firstly, it is Queenan who creates Billy's identity as an infiltrator, effectively deciding about his further personal and professional life. Despite the fact that he is directed by Queenan into a dangerous situation, Costigan trusts his Captain also as the keeper of his original identity. Secondly, Queenan is selfless when it comes to Billy's safety; when Costello's gangsters assault Queenan, they ask him where his "boy" is, which obviously refers to Costigan, but the Captain answers as if it was a question about his son.

Gangster: "Where's your boy?"
Queenan: "He's studying law at Notre Dame."

This serves a similar purpose to Sullivan's referring to Costello as "Dad" during their phone calls. Finally, as a true Irish father, whose role is to be a hero for his son, Queenan sacrifices his life in order to save Billy. When he is thrown down from a roof, his body hits the pavement right in front of Costigan, the Captain's blood staining Billy, emphasizing the fact that Queenan died for his young protégé.

Furthermore, the storylines involving the respective father-son relationships mirror each other. To begin with, Costello and Queenan both send their "sons" to infiltrate their enemies. Secondly, the father figures serve as constant reminders to Sullivan and Costigan that their respective missions must be completed. Finally, both infiltrators eventually lose their "fathers," which proves to have a profound impact on their lives as, in both cases, the event affects their identity. When Sullivan shoots Costello, he has problems accepting his new identity as a hero of the police unit. However, he quickly comes to terms with the fact that he is free from the toxic father figure's influence and seems ready to reconstruct his identity. Billy, on the other hand,

has his world shattered by Queenan's death as he is now left alone against the mobsters.

Similar ideas about father-son relations in the Irish context may be found in other contemporary American films, which stress the loss of the father figure and its consequences for the main characters. In *The Devil's Own* (1997), Frankie McGuire (Brad Pitt) becomes a member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army when his biological father is murdered by Ulster Loyalists, an event which deprives him of a chance for normal life. In *Backdraft*, an action thriller from 1991, directed by Ron Howard, firefighter Brian McCaffery (William Baldwin) is a young man struggling to follow in his father's footsteps after the latter dies in the line of duty. In *Daredevil* (2003), a neo-noir superhero film based on a comic book, Matt Murdock (Ben Affleck) becomes a superhero fighting against criminal underworld in New York when his father, a boxer, is murdered. In *Gangs of New York* (2002), another Irish-themed film by Martin Scorsese, Amsterdam Vallon (Leonardo DiCaprio) is driven by the desire to avenge his father who was murdered by Bull Cutting (Daniel Day-Lewis).

There might be various reasons as to why the father figure is important for the representation of the Irish in American cinema. The traditional image of the Irish father, stemming from literature but also from classical Hollywood, is dominated by negative characters, similar to Costello. As pointed out by a developmental psychologist, J. Kevin Nugent, "[Irish] fathers are generally emotionally distant yet controlling, having little contact with their children except as disciplinarians" (Nugent 2013, 175). However, Nugent also argues that this image is undergoing a change, especially in Irish literature, with fathers beginning to show affection to their children (Nugent 2013, 176). The famous *In The Name of the Father* by Jim Sheridan might be seen as an important example of this trend. When it comes to American Irish-themed films, the stereotype of Irish fathers as distant and emotionally cold towards their children (Nugent 2013, 175) seems to be rather marginal with positive examples constituting a majority of representations. The father figure is a character of authority and is crucial for a young Irish person to develop socially, as it is the father who is the source or the carrier of emotions and qualities that are indispensable for this development. This dominant emotion here is Irish pride and the dominant quality is the sense of duty.

What is interesting, such a decisively positive image of the Irish father differs from the one projected by contemporary Irish productions. As Debbie Ging points in her book *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema*: "In the case

of cinematic portrayals of the Irish father-son relationship, (...), the dominant trope is one of dis-identification, for the Irish father on-screen is more often than not a bully whose only emotional outlet is to inflict psychological damage on his children. Indeed, the harsh, autocratic father figure has arguably become a metonym for all that is backward about Ireland" (Ging 2012, 81). Conversely, in contemporary American cinema, the dominant trope in father-child relations is identification, rather than dis-identification.

Such a sharp contrast between the view and the representation of Irish fathers in Ireland and in America might be symptomatic of the differences between the apparent function of the Irish father figure in the two countries. The father figure in contemporary American films treating about the Irish in America is connected to Irish tradition and the attachment to tradition and the feeling of Irish pride related to it played a crucial role in allowing the descendants of Irish immigrants to become successful members of American society. When the Irish came to America, they brought with them all the components of their culture, including the disregard for authority (Miller 1988, 327) and militant Catholicism, which automatically put them at odds with the dominant American WASP society (Kenny 2014, 118). At first, they organized themselves in gangs, which reflected the ancient tribal divisions brought from their homeland (Blake 1981, 29), but eventually, they started to gradually gain importance as valuable members of society, often serving as firefighters, often referred to as "an Irish club" (Smith 2010, 122), and police officers, becoming urban icons (O'Brien 2012, 861). These professions were often a part of family traditions with sons following in their fathers' footsteps.

As the Irish were patriarchal, with the father taking the role of the breadwinner, an important function of the father was to teach his child, primarily a son, to become the breadwinner for his future family. As Michael Hout notices in his *Following in Father's Footsteps: Social Mobility in Ireland*, Irish sons were usually taught by their fathers to eventually substitute them in the profession they performed, which normally happened when the father was no longer able to work (Hout 1989, 242). This feature was then transferred by Irish immigrants to America and became a part of the Irish stereotype. As the cinematic representations of the Irish have always been based on stereotypes, with the change in the perception of the Irish father that took place at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new such stereotype appeared: one in which the role of the Irish father is not only to teach his son or daughter a traditional Irish profession, but also to develop

the child in terms of emotions, mainly to instigate the Irish pride and the sense of duty which guarantee success in American society. However, this may also prove destructive if the elements of the tradition the father passes on to his son involve the stereotypical Irish violence.

The importance of the father figure for the representation of the Irish in the contemporary American cinema seems to be one of the main motifs used in the construction of Irish characters in selected films. Moreover, the loss of the father figure as the factor affecting and usually impeding the development of the Irish-American characters' identity is also emphasized in various films. Taking into account the aforementioned current trends in the evolution of the Irish father stereotype, it may be said that, in contemporary American cinema, the Irish father represents the old ways, the remnants of the Irish tradition, still very much alive in Irish Diaspora, while the son is the reflection of the first generations of the Irish born in the USA, who were torn between the allegiance to the country of their parents and that to America. In their successful transition from living in poverty in American cities of the nineteenth century to achieving the middle class status at the end of the twentieth century (Ibson 2003, 238), the Irish needed to remember who they were and what they were trying to achieve. According to John Ibson, it was the memory of the painful experience connected with oppressive English authority they carried with them from Ireland that made the Irish strive to achieve higher social status in their new home, which resulted in some of them rising to the positions of the highest authority, such as e.g. John F. Kennedy (Ibson 2003, 239).

Thus, the importance of the father figure in the representation of the Irish in contemporary American cinema stems from the father being a link to the tradition and the difficult history of the Irish; losing a father means severing these ties and the need to find a substitute who would direct the emotional development of the child figure's as an Irish person and its social development as an American.

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Filmography

Frequency. Director: Gregory Hoblit. Writer: Toby Emmerich. Cast: Dennis Quaid, Jim Caviezel, Shawn Doyle. New Line Cinema, 2000.

Million Dollar Baby. Director: Clint Eastwood. Writers: Paul Haggis, F. X. Toole. Cast: Hilary Swank, Clint Eastwood, Morgan Freeman. Warner Bros., Lakeshore Entertainment, 2004.

The Departed. Director: Martin Scorsese. Writer: William Monahan. Cast: Leonardo DiCaprio, Matt Damon, Jack Nicholson, Mark Wahlberg, Martin Sheen. Warner Bros., 2006.