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Giving Voice to Violence and Void

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Irish-American masculine identity has a nebulous and bloody history. Its development began in the 1840s in Ireland and has its roots in colonialism – a story that, in itself, could fill a book-shelf. Despite this challenge, Martin Scorsese does an admirable job of exploring this dynamic in his film *The Departed*. Scorsese uses food as a cultural signifier to evoke memories of traditional Irish floodways as well as subtly working with Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson) and Colin Sullivan's (Matt Damon) story arcs to show why they both seek to reject traditional Irish identity, and the patriarchal colonial structure it was generated in, in favor of material excess – or a new patriarchal structure that Costello seeks to perpetuate.

Scorsese punctuates his exploration of this dynamic with food scenes that serve as both identifiers and generative plot devices. I will specifically discuss Costello and Sullivan's first interaction at the grocery store, Sullivan's dinner with Madolyn Madden (Vera Farmiga), and both Sullivan, and the film's, final scene. Through these mediums *The Departed's* exploration of Irish-American masculine identity becomes a delicious viewing experience. Ultimately Scorsese is arguing the rejection that traditional Irish identity has very real consequence – as the food scenes quite viscerally indicate.

In order to appreciate the contemporary masculine Irish-American identity that Scorsese explores in *The Departed,* it is first necessary to understand the roots of that identity. Part of Scorsese's brilliance is recognizing how food helped mold this identity and incorporate it into the film. For example, the opening scene of Costello's trip to the grocery store – where he meets Colin Sullivan, Sullivan's dinner with Madden, and Sullivan's return to his apartment at the end of the film – provides

an important link between the contemporary and traditional identities.

One important misconception held about the traditional Irish diet is that it had always been bland. Prior to the potato famine in 1840, the Irish had a food culture that was quite diverse in dishes and elaborate in preparation. Protestant landowners and the small class of Irish-Catholic elite, from at least 1750 to 1817, enjoyed a diet that included, "Boiled Fowl, bacon and greens, roast beef, mutton pies, veal patties, baked potatoes, jelly, custard with an apple tart" (Diner, 2001, p. 105). The aforementioned list only provides a menu for a single dinner. Another menu includes, "Macaroni ragout, creak cakes, curd cheese cakes, Yorkshire pudding, dumplings of various kinds, charlotte of apples, celery soup, rice pudding, croquettes of meat and fowl, and, so forth, prepared in profusion and preserved in written form in exquisite detail" (Diner, 2001, p. 105). Thus, the reader can see the upper-class Irish did not suffer from lack of choice. Furthermore, women of this particular class took pride in the aesthetics of their food.

The upper class Irish not only relished expensive and delicious victuals; they also worried about its appearance. Diner (2001) notes that women such as Jane Alcock, an Irish woman who lived at the time, "fretted over the aesthetics of what she served." For instance when giving details on how to prepare a pastry dough Alcock instructs, "Pound boiled potatoes very fine and add, when warm, a sufficiency of butter to make the mash hold together . . . then before it gets cold, flour the board pretty well . . . roll it to the thickness wanted (p. 105).

Clearly there was at least some food culture in Ireland – and exploring why it did not transfer to the lower classes is extremely

useful in helping explain traditional Irish Identity. This traditional Irish identity then shaped Irish-American masculine identity that Scorsese explores in *The Departed*. Investigating the mixture of necessary and elective reasons for this phenomenon is critical to understand Scorsese's project.

The reliance of the Irish masses on the potato crop has been overstated. Indeed, Diner (2001) notes that authors of the 1840s such as Radcliffe Salaman asserted, "the potato dominated the diet of 90 percent of the Irish population." Other writers like J.G. Hood claimed that the Irish, "on every day," except Christmas "ate nothing but potatoes" (p. 87). However, the reliance on potatoes as a cornerstone of the Irish diet was very real. Potatoes provided a crop that grew virtually everywhere, produced high yields, and were rather self-sustaining. Thus, once the crop was sown, the Irish could go back to working the fields of their landowners (Diner, 2001). This is critical to understand about the Irish. Their reliance on the potato was a product of their subjugation to the British Empire. Because they did not own any land, they were forced to work what little arable soil had not been taken by the British Protestants. Hence, the potato became an ideal choice – but it was not as if the Irish were thrilled about this. The potato-dominated diet was a matter of course. Their choice to sustain that minimalist culture became one of defiance.

The potato famine of the 1840s was disastrous both to the Irish population and to British-Irish relationship. While other countries had suffered crop damage from the fungus, *Phytophthera infestans,* it was in Ireland that it created an extremely grim situation. From the 1845 through 1851, when the next census was taken, the population of Ireland declined from

8,175,000 to 6,552,000 people. Though most of the citizens died from secondary causes such as dysentery, typhus, and cholera, and not from starvation itself, the blight was certainly a causal agent in Ireland's plight (Diner, 2001). Yet this was only part of the problem in the Irish famine – the fact is that Ireland did not need to starve – its misfortune was completely avoidable.

The Irish, as a subjugated people, also struggled during the potato famine because of British exploitation. During the 1840s, Ireland produced more than double the amount of food that was necessary to feed the entire Irish population. Unfortunately, the Irish-Catholic class worked as tenant farmers on lands that British Protestants owned. They worked for paltry wages while the landowners exported most of the products out of the country to feed Britain's population (Diner, 2001). Thus, the Irish Catholic tenant farmers, the lowest class, either grew potatoes on whatever arable land was left or bought them with their meager income.

However, when the potato blight hit, they were unable to afford the prices of other goods. Diner (2001) notes that "the cattle grew fat. The herds increased. The landowners themselves felt no pinch in their standard of living . . . pictures of wagons laden with food streaming to the ports to be shipped to England . . . emerged as one of the most potent images in Irish political thinking" (p. 90). It is disingenuous to suggest the British actively sought to starve the Irish – it would have done them no good and killed a cheap food supply for them. In actuality, a misapplied public-work program and bureaucratic feet dragging were more to blame (Diner, 2001). It is true the Irish hated the British government. But to be fair, the British government's poor handling of the situation

was more due to incompetence than malice. Still, the tension that resulted had important implications for Irish and Irish-American identity.

The lack of food culture that came after the 1840 famine was partially born of necessity and political choice. Even though potato crop yields eventually stabilized, the Irish-Catholic class lacked the infrastructure for developing a more sophisticated food experience. For instance, Diner (2001) explains that an 1836 parish inventory of Donegal's 4,000 peopled yielded, "only 10 table forks and no other utensils dedicated to cooking or eating" (p. 95). The Irish were an agrarian society that enjoyed only partial industrialization, and as a result had very little room to develop sophisticated cooking techniques (Diner, 2001). But the Irish also rejected adopting the potato as a symbol. To place the potato upon a pedestal would have celebrated the imperialistic culture that caused them so much strife – they relied upon the potato, but they certainly did not love it. Thus, the Irish did not develop a cuisine because of both pride and necessity. This absence of a cuisine became an important cultural signifier as large amounts of Irish left Ireland to find better prospects in America.

Irish-American identity deserves as extensive treatment as Irish identity, and it can be studied through the lens of *The Departed*. Thus, the void in the cuisine becomes an important driving force in the development of Irish-American masculine identity. This is because the memories of absence and patriarchy were transmitted temporally and spatially and helped weave the Irish American existence. Part of Scorsese's project, from beginning to end, is to explore those issues through the lens of food.

The Departed begins with a firm statement

about the process of asserting an identity and, moreover, works to do this through the lens of food. When the Irish came to America, they were limited in their authority and power. This is because the native Protestant population feared the sudden influx of a strong Catholic population. The trouble was not such the religion itself, but that the Catholics would unify themselves into a single, unified constituency. The film critic Kelly (2007) offers insight into Scorsese's treatment of this with:

> It still was a struggle for Catholics and for other religions – and it's still a struggle today for other religions, as we know, mainly because people feel that they're going to threaten our way of life, and this is a question even more alive today than in the 1840s and 1850s. What they mean by threatening our way of life is, they listen to a foreign power – at the time the Vatican was a very strong foreign power . . . How does that work you say? – well, they can vote in America. Well, they're not educated – well, the church has representatives . . . the archbishops. Well, what does that mean – well the archbishops will tell the uneducated Irish masses how to vote. (p. 6)

In the opening scenes when the viewer sees Costello walking through the streets saying, "I don't want to be a product of my environment. I want my environment to be a product of me. No one gives it to you. You have to take it," he is making a multi-faceted point (Scorsese). He is, firstly, referring to the sense of cultural bothering that was cast upon the Irish when they arrived in America. The Irish-Americans departed from a land of Protestant hostility only to a land in another country full of

Protestant hostility. They had no contacts, spoke a different language, and had no means to establish a position in society. They were, as Kelly (2007) notes:

> Perceived as persistently alien by virtue of their Catholic loyalties and their natural tendency to cluster in enclaves . . . The aspirant Irish-American citizen would have been obliged to model a certain Americanness in order to take his or her place within that society and yet, by virtue of that model behaviour, would always have been liable to the suspicion of being inauthentic, a counterfeit, and not just to American perceptions but equally to his or her own consciousness of self. (p. 2)

This establishing of this “other” identity is important to Costello’s role in the film. It not only helps explain why he is asserting his need for dominance at the beginning of the film, but also why he continues to do so when it is unnecessary. The Irish were subjugated people in Ireland, and in a different way, also when they came to America. Costello is seeking to invert that dynamic and gain control over his environment. He not only wants to invert the centuries-old power dynamic so that the poor Irish Catholic is the figure of patriarchy, but also literally wants to extend patriarchy into the future.

Costello’s desire to invert the patriarchy nicely sets up exploring his desire for literal patriarchy. One of the most important dynamics in *The Departed* is the idea of an Irish patriarchy being transmitted on both sides of justice. The first example that we see of a paternalistic figure using his patriarchal position to build a power base is Frank Costello buying groceries for Colin Sullivan in the opening scene. Costello reminisces about how the Knights of

Columbus, presumably Italians, were “head breakers” and through violence “took over their piece of the city” (Scorsese).

Thus, in the opening scene, we see that Costello is working to carve out his own piece of the city – visiting a grocer who serves as a front for his bookkeeping operation. Costello walks in the door and confronts the bookie about owing him money – all the while making lewd comments toward the proprietor’s daughter. Sullivan, meanwhile, watches the exchange intently until Costello asks him if he is, “Johnny Sullivan’s boy” (Scorsese). Though the viewer is never quite sure what the significance of that relationship is, it is impetus enough for Costello to enact an important transaction. Costello instructs the proprietor to give Sullivan, “a couple loaves of bread, a couple half-gallons of milk, cold cuts, and mayo” (Scorsese).

Additionally Costello gives Sullivan several comic books and pocket change and tells him to seek him out if he ever wants to earn some extra money. Thus the viewer sees Costello buy Sullivan’s loyalty for a low price. This is very subtle, but shrewd commentary. It shows Costello’s power dynamic in an unusual currency – showing that he is able to easily manipulate people. The food that Costello gives to Sullivan is simple, bland, and nutritionally sound, but it certainly would not buy most people’s loyalty or admiration. Thus, the viewer can see how Irish poverty, exemplified here through groceries, was an impetus for crime.

An important thing to note is that Sullivan is not a stupid man. From a young age, he displays an aptitude and shrewdness that Costello’s gang members do not usually show. For instance, one of Costello’s main henchmen does not know how to spell citizens. Furthermore, he shines not only by

relative merit, but also his own skill. Sullivan is proficient with his police training and also has an intimate knowledge of academia – casually interspersing Freud and Joyce references throughout the film. Interestingly, and tellingly, though is that he misattributes Frank's quote "*Non Serviam*" to Joyce – rather than the actual origin – Satan (Molony, 2007).

It is an important distinction to note that Costello's initial gift to Sullivan was given to a boy who understood the magnitude of what he was doing when he accepted the gifts. These basic staples were freely chosen – and so was his decision to turn away from his traditional Irish-Catholic upbringing and choose a life of deception and excess. Heyer-Caput (2011) details "a jump cut takes us into a Catholic church through a close-up shot of an altar boy who is performing his part of the ritual during a funeral mass. The colour symbolism of the mise en scene, with a heavy predominance of red remind us of . . . doing 'penance in the streets'" (p. 174).

The boy in this frame is Sullivan. It is set in a place to establish his identity as a traditional Irish-Catholic, who chooses to reject that identity. He chooses to enter Frank's path of doing "penance in the streets." The "penance in the streets", as Heyer-Caput details, is from *Mean Streets*, the movie *The Departed* is based upon. In this sense, it takes on a different meaning – Costello's form of penance is creating a patriarchal system that he can pass along. He seeks to gain power at the cost of rejecting a traditional Irish identity. Entering into this contract of sorts with Costello was a consciously-chosen and dangerous move. His willingness to become a protégé, or more accurately a son figure, to Costello puts him down a path of turning his back on the community – one that has

very real costs to both him and Frank.

Sullivan's rejection of traditional Irish identity has immediate short-term benefits. His inside information to Costello's inner workings not only garners him material benefit, but also advances his career at an accelerated pace. For instance, materially, Costello cosigns on a lease that puts him in an apartment far outside of his price range. Furthermore, his seeming sixth sense for solving crimes, when Jimmy Pappas is set up or when he has the police trace Fitzy's call to Mr. French (after the ecstasy cache is out of the building) allow his superiors to think he is more talented than he is. Whether he is at his apartment with, "high ceilings, parquet floors, a lock on the fridge door" (Scorsese) or driving golf balls with Captain Ellerby, there is a clear indication that he is succeeding at his job – but there are signs, depicted through food, that indicate Sullivan's wanton rejection of traditional values will catch up with him.

Sullivan shows rather clear signs of being over his head throughout the film. Two in particular revolve around his love interest Madden and food. Sullivan and Madden are on a date at an expensive French restaurant. Their date for the most part has gone well, despite Sullivan's petulance about not having "duck l'orange" (Scorses). Yet despite the joviality, there are three clear food indicators that Colin is out of his element. Firstly, the restaurant in general is out of keeping with Irish food tradition. French cuisine is commonly lauded as being the most sophisticated in the world – a far cry from the simple Irish diet that came to dominate after the 1840s. It is not necessarily improper for Colin to want to enjoy fine cuisine, but the manner he comes to this restaurant by is out of keeping with Irish values. He has come to this opulent dinner by means of betrayal, not by paying

proper dues.

Thus, though it is hard to notice in the film itself – because the focus is on his and Madden's interaction – Sullivan's behavior at the dinner table indicates a sense of misplacement. For example, Sullivan's choice of dinner wine is out of keeping with the meal that he is eating, suggesting that this type of meal is a novel experience for him – he is out of his element (Scorsese). Furthermore, Colin's inability to make a move with the phallically-shaped dessert shows an inability to finish – an allusion to his later sexual encounter with Madden. While there's no guaranteeing that Colin's impotency is caused by stress, it certainly does not help that he is leading a double life while trying to start a relationship. Thus, while Sullivan is celebrating his new beginnings, it has distinct undertones of what his ultimate fate will be – again subtly represented by food.

An interjection in Sullivan's story is necessary to fully appreciate the patriarchal framework. Though Costello rejects the patriarchal framework that traditional Irish identity provides, he does try to transmit his own. The reason for Frank's great lengths to keep his criminal empire going is because of his intense desire to pass along his enterprise to his "sons." Costello mocks the Catholic Church, and subsequently, the traditional Irish identity multiple times throughout the film. Molony (2007) notes that Costello is quite open his disdain exhibiting, "open mockery of the church, which includes propositioning nuns and accusing priests of pedophilia" (p. 7).

It is perhaps because of his conscious rejection of Irish Catholic identity that he is seeking to build a lineage of sorts through adopted sons. Costello intended to transfer his empire in some fashion, to Colin or William Costigan (Leanardo DiCaprio).

When Costello is killed at the end of the film, he states, "I know you Colin. You're like a . . ." which is then picked up by Sullivan who says, "A son . . . to you? Is that what this is about? All that murdering and fuckin' and no sons? What are you shootin' blanks?" (Scorsese). Costello clearly wanted to extend a patriarchal structure in order to keep his defiance of the overarching patriarchal structure of America at arm's length. Costello fails in this regard, and – eventually – his vision is snuffed out.

Sullivan's progression through his career and life follow a traditional arc – from humble beginnings to great heights and to humiliation (ultimately assignation). Scorsese does a brilliant job of bringing the movie full circle. Sullivan seemingly escapes his confrontations with Costello and Costigan Scott free. However this is not the case. After the funerals, when the dust has settled, he is entering his lavish apartment, carrying a bag of groceries. There is a sense of rejection that is emphasized as he walks down the hallway. His neighbors regard him rather snootily, and even the woman's dog shrinks away from him perhaps suggesting that his corrupt nature shines through.

The long shot camera view builds a sense of anticipation as he treads down the hall. Sullivan stops, and opens the door to his apartment only to find Sargent Dingam (Mark Wahlberg) waiting for him with a pistol drawn. Dingam shoots Sullivan after he says his last word(s), "Ok" (Scorsese). It is a decidedly subtle and minimalist scene. Perhaps the most important element in the scene is the bag of groceries. Looking closely, the viewer can see that the material itself is of higher quality than the traditional brown paper bag. However, besides some bagels – the food in the bag closely resembles what Sullivan's loyalty, loyalty being a murky word, was bought for

at the beginning of the film. The bread and milk in the bag serve as a reminder that people cannot outrun who they truly are. Colin's identity – though he refused it – was directly tied towards the Irish tradition and his turning away had very real consequences.

The Departed, like Irish American masculine identity, is a morass to sift through. They both rely on complex intertwining elements, contingences, and connecting agents that support and build upon one another. However, by studying the role of the universal element of food it is possible to cut through some of the difficulties and cut to one of film's primary messages. Thus, by reducing the story arcs to key scenes that contain food, one of the film's messages becomes much more understandable and accessible. Scorsese lends a modern interpretation to a socio-historical context and presents a bit of an admonishment – those that seek to sever their ties for personal gain may earn a comeuppance that they did not bargain for. Sullivan's identity – though he refused it – was directly tied towards Irish tradition. In the end, he could not outrun his true nature and, if one can pardon the pun, he earned his "just deserts."

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