

Ideologies and Its Resistances in Martin McDonagh's Film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*

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ABSTRACT

*This article examines resistance against the ideology upheld by institutions such as the police and society in the film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* especially through the use of three billboards as a means of protest. This research focuses on how the injustices practiced by law enforcement reflect the continuation of a dominant ideology that suppresses and provides no space for individual voices. Using a qualitative method, this article analyzes the tension between the ideology perpetuated by social structures and individual resistance. Data collection techniques were carried out through note-taking, where the researchers watched *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, noted dialogues, and took screenshots of scenes relevant to the research theme. In conclusion, this film demonstrates how ideologies within social institutions can persist and impact on individuals fighting for justice, revealing the irony and tension between expectations and reality faced by the characters in the film.*

1. Introduction

Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri is a 2017 crime drama film written, directed, and produced by Martin McDonagh and published by Fox Searchlight Pictures. The story follows Mildred Hayes, starred by Frances McDormand, a woman in Missouri who rents three billboards to bring attention to the unsolved rape and murder of her daughter (Blothner, 2021; McDonagh, 2017; Vassilev, 2024). In Ebbing, Missouri, Hayes is grieving her daughter Angela's murder, which happened seven months ago. Frustrated that the case is still unsolved, she rents three billboards accusing Chief Willoughby of doing nothing: "Raped While Dying", "And Still No Arrests?", and "How Come, Chief Willoughby?".

Ideology refers to a set of ideas, beliefs, or values that shape social behavior, institutions, and individual identities. It is a system that constitutes the imagined relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence, functioning through social institutions like law enforcement, family, and religion to reproduce societal norms. This film is full of resistance against ideology being practiced in society (Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022; Wijaya et al., 2024). In simple words, the film is about Hayes versus the world. She must

deal with any value that will stop her to protest about her daughter's death. It is especially law enforcement that she must cope with. She keeps protesting why the police never cares about her daughter's murder case.

Moreover, there are several studies that have been done regarding the film. The first is done by S. Vassilev in 2024, entitled *Resilient Femininity in Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (Vassilev, 2024). This paper underlined Mildred's feminine strength regarding a case that she faces. The second is composed by J. McEntee in 2021 entitled *Vigilantism and the Law in "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri"* (McEntee, 2021). This article shows the tensions deepened between the senses of committing crime and the weakness of law. The third one is written by R. Shasita & L. Hudawinata in 2021 entitled *Jason Dixon's Personality Development as Seen in Martin McDonagh's Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri (2017)* (Shasita & Hudawinata, 2021). This writing focused on Dixon's characterization as stated in his personality development during the scenes in the movie.

From those previous studies above, it is shown that the current theme of this paper regarding ideologies and its resistance has not been analyzed at all. It is also proven as the novelty of this paper since Mildred's struggle is not merely against the law, but against dominant ideologies within societies. This article aims to examine Hayes' efforts to deal with ideological restraints against her daughter's death. She demands full investigations, but she is always ignored by the institution of the police. They think that it is not a murder, but suicide. Hayes keeps protesting that case and she keeps doing it publicly especially by renting three billboards to inform about the truth about her daughter.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Ideology and Its Discontents

Ideology is said to be set of knowledge or ideas. The main point of ideology is hoping to create a better world. It is not interested in scientific knowledge of the "truth," but rather in political or philosophical "ideal." Ideology does not encompass social facts in complex and diverse relationships, but constructs them according to this ideal in a carefully prepared image (Gadi et al., 2024; Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022). Therefore, ideology is a synthesis of facts and assumptions arranged to support an ideal that does not always align with social reality. Ideological thinking is one form of "wishful thinking" employed particularly in the field of social action.

The ethical points of ideology are values. Actions and ideas, as well as ideals, are regarded as "right" or "wrong." In this part, ideology works as a tool to differentiate one from another. It consists of embraced values giving perspectives to define things. Indeed, such ideology may always tend to create such stigma and stereotype, such as ideology of white people tends to undermine black ones or ideology of patriarchy that will fight head-to-head with feminism (Gadi et al., 2024; Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022). Then, ideology moves along by defining things in exact points so that goodness may still always be intact. By giving definitions, such ideology can strengthen internal values which automatically defend people from external attacks. Moreover, by stating such things, ideology may also play role in political aspects in deciding the direction of societies that demand progress but by undermining external issues behind.

Meanwhile, although ideologies function to shape views and provide direction for society, they also generate discontent. This is because ideologies often emphasize a simplistic or distorted understanding of social reality, leading to dissatisfaction with the existing situation. Ideologies that do not reflect the complexity of the social world can create tension between expectations and reality (Gadi et al., 2024; Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022). Indeed, they are also fostering discontent among those who feel that the world does not align with the ideal promised by the ideology. Such ideology may be hated due to stigma it makes that shape people strengthened on a hand but will demonize others on the other hand.

The discontent of ideology may lead to negative change. In many cases, ideologies can actually become instruments that worsen inequality and social tension, because the values embedded in ideologies are often exclusive and limit space for pluralism and differing opinions. Therefore, while ideologies offer solutions to social problems, they often overlook more complex realities, causing ongoing dissatisfaction. The existence of ideologies that advocate for change can motivate individuals or groups to take action (Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022; Wijaya et al., 2024). However, these actions often do not align with the ideological expectations because social reality is more dynamic and unpredictable. The discontent that arises from the difference between ideals and reality creates space for the search for more realistic solutions that acknowledge social complexity and avoid the oversimplification often done by ideologies.

While ideology often serves to offer a vision of a better world, it can also overlook the complexities of existing social realities, leading to tension between expectations and reality. This discontent, although it can drive change, often leads to unintended consequences, such as increased inequality and social tension, especially when the values of the ideology conflict with the diversity and pluralism present in society. Moreover, although ideology has the power to motivate change and provide direction for social movements, it must be applied carefully and accompanied by a deep understanding of the more complex social realities (Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022; Wijaya et al., 2024). Avoiding excessive simplification and opening space for pluralism and differing opinions are crucial steps for ideology to function constructively, rather than contributing to ongoing discontent. Ideologies that can adapt to the dynamic and complex social reality will be more effective in achieving changes that truly benefit society.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* through the theoretical framework of ideological resistances. The main objective of this research is to explore how ideologies are maintained within social institutions and how individual resistance, particularly through the actions of Mildred Hayes, challenges these dominant ideologies. The data collection technique is carried out using the note-taking method, which includes the following steps. (1) Watching the film and analyzing scenes, (2) Analyzing the film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, (3) Taking notes on the flow of ideologies in the film, (4) Analyzing the ideologies in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* in relation to the theory of ideological resistances, and (4) Drawing conclusions from the overall results.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section underscores data of dialogues derived from the film and analysis regarding ideologies and its resistance in the movie.

3.1 Analyses of Hayes' Resistance in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*

The story of the film of *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* starts from Hayes' frustration of her daughter's unsolved case. She rents three billboards accusing Chief Willoughby of doing nothing: "*Raped While Dying*," "*And Still No Arrests?*" and "*How Come, Chief Willoughby?*" (Blothner, 2021; McDonagh, 2017; Vassilev, 2024). The billboards upset the town. Willoughby, who is dying of cancer, asks Hayes to take them down, but she refuses. Many people, including Officer Dixon, turn against her.

Despite this, Hayes keeps fighting for justice. Willoughby spends one last day with his family before taking his own life. He leaves a letter for Mildred, saying he cared about the case and paid to keep the billboards up (Blothner, 2021; McDonagh, 2017; Vassilev, 2024). Later, a friend of her named Dixon hears a man bragging about a crime like Angela's murder. Though the evidence does not match her case, Hayes and Dixon decide to track the man down to find the truth.

In *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, ideology shows up in the actions of the police, the town, and the characters. It reveals how people accept unfair systems and how some, like Hayes, fight against them.

"If you got rid of every cop with vaguely racist leanings, then you'd have three cops left." (McDonagh, 2017).

First, what Hayes must face is the power of the police. The police in the town reflect how power works in an unfair system. Chief Willoughby knows that Officer Dixon is violent and racist, but he keeps him on the job (McDonagh, 2017; McEntee, 2021; Shasita & Hudawinata, 2021). This shows how the police, as a system, protect their own instead of fixing problems. This shows how racism is treated as normal, and nothing is done to change it.

"The time it's took you to come out here whining like a bitch, some other poor girl's probably being butchered right now." (McDonagh, 2017).

Second, as a woman, Hayes must confront people undermine her in her gender role, including herself as a mother. The above quotation shows how Hayes tells Willoughby about her frustration with how women's voices are ignored while men are excused for their failures. Hayes challenges the idea that women should stay quiet and not fight back (McDonagh, 2017; McEntee, 2021; Shasita & Hudawinata, 2021). By putting up the billboards, she demands action from the male dominated police force, showing that women can be strong and outspoken.

"... You joined the gang. You're culpable..." (McDonagh, 2017).

Third, Hayes opposes the silent of religious ideology to her daughter's death. She even compares the church to gangs like the Crips and Bloods. She calls out the church's failure to take responsibility for its wrongdoings while trying to lecture her about her actions. Religion in the film represents the idea of moral control (McDonagh, 2017; McEntee, 2021; Shasita & Hudawinata, 2021). Father Montgomery visits Hayes to convince her to take down the billboards, showing how religion often works to maintain peace rather than address real issues.

"... But the town also knows what kind of a man William Willoughby is. And the town is dead set against these billboards of yours." (McDonagh, 2017).

This shows how the town protects its image instead of supporting justice for Mildred's daughter. The people in Ebbing side with the police, even though the police have failed them. This shows how communities often stick to old beliefs and defend authority figures, even when those figures do not deserve it (Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017). In this case, Hayes must also confront with prolonging ideology in Ebbing, especially the town's blind loyalty to authority.

"So how's it all going in the nigger-torturing business, Dixon?" (McDonagh, 2017).

Hayes asks Dixon, this highlights the unchecked racism in the system, which stops the police from solving real crimes. Racism is shown as a major problem in the town, especially in the police department (Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017). Officer Dixon is openly racist, and no one holds him accountable. It is quite eerie to see how legitimate apparatus is actually the one that destroys the life of the ones he used to protect.

"It seems like the local police department is too busy going round torturing black folks to be bothered doing anything about solving actual crime" (McDonagh, 2017).

Hayes said in television about her frustration. She even also protests the media's role that tend to ignore the elephant in the room, that is her daughter's case. This makes her voice heard but also puts her at odds with the town. The media helps spread Mildred's message, but it also creates tension (Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017). Hayes uses it to expose the police's failures, but the town dislikes the attention it brings.

"And the buck stops at Willoughby?"
"Yeah, the buck stops at Willoughby. Dead right it does."
(McDonagh, 2017).

Hayes holds the Chief responsible for the police's failures, even though he is personally respected by the town. Her actions show a struggle between justice and revenge. She wants justice for her daughter, but her aggressive approach is seen as extreme by others (Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017). People may see her as a strange person, but actually she is the frustrated one.

"You go, girl! You go fuck those cops up!" (McDonagh, 2017).

Denise, Hayes' co-worker, supports her. This shows that Hayes' bravery inspires others who feel powerless. Hayes' fight for justice shows the clash between her personal mission and the community's values. While the town wants peace, she demands action. In *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, characters struggle with moral questions about justice, revenge, forgiveness, and responsibility (Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017). Their actions reveal different approaches to dealing with pain and injustice. Somehow, it shows the connections between ideology and morality since morality is about understanding what is right and wrong and it guides people's decisions and actions, but it may distract people from truth sugarcoated by ideology of togetherness.

"My daughter, Angela, she got abducted, and she got raped and murdered seven months ago, on this self-same stretch on road here."

"It seems like the local police department is too busy going round torturing black folks to be bothered doing anything about solving actual crime."

(McDonagh, 2017).

Hayes believes it is her responsibility to demand justice, even if it creates tension in the town or with the police. She is not merely protesting since she is also reeling a mother's mission. She rents three billboards with messages like *"Raped While Dying," "And Still No Arrests?"* and *"How Come, Chief Willoughby?"* to pressure the police into solving her daughter Angela's murder (Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017). She feels strongly that standing up for her daughter is worth any discomfort it may cause others.

"I'd do anything to catch the guy who did it..."

"...right now, there ain't too much more we can do"

(McDonagh, 2017).

Willoughby tells Hayes. His morality is rooted in accepting his limitations, even if it disappoints others. Chief Willoughby is caught between his moral duty as a police officer and his personal limitations (Gadi et al., 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017). While he sympathizes with Hayes, he believes he has done all he can, given the lack of evidence in the case.

"...But what you need to become a detective... is Love."

"You don't even need a gun. And you definitely don't need Hate."

"Hate never solved nothing..."

(McDonagh, 2017).

Willoughby leaves a suicide note for Dixon, encouraging him to let go of hatred and focus on love and courage. This shows Willoughby's belief in forgiveness as a higher moral value. This scene is interesting since they talk about how good a life is. It is always in reverse with what Hayes says. Then, this scene underlines that saying that such life's despair is actually

existential both in morality and even in politics (Giroux, 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017).

"Why do you think he's the guy?" (McDonagh, 2017)

Hayes asks Dixon about the accusation to the guy. This reveals her moral uncertainty and desire to ensure fairness. She starts questioning her own choices toward the end of the film. Her decision to join Dixon in investigating a suspect shows her willingness to approach justice more thoughtfully. She may know that Dixon may be wrong. However, she keeps insisting and moving forward to find the truth of his daughter. In this case, she is pushed more by her moral obligation to her own blood (Gadi et al., 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017).

*"Pull blood from every man in the country, then."
"...make a hundred percent certain it was a correct match,
then kill them."* (McDonagh, 2017)

This shows how far Hayes is willing to go for justice, even if it crosses moral boundaries. Hayes wants every man in town tested for DNA to find the killer, even if it means breaking rules. It is both sense of her depression and her eagerness to find through. Moreover, what she does is pushed by her frustration the police (Gadi et al., 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017).

"I guess we can decide along the way." (McDonagh, 2017).

The film's ending leaves questions about morality unresolved. Hayes and Dixon set out to confront a suspect, but their final decision remains unclear, showing that morality is often complex and subjective (Gadi et al., 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017). This reflects the ongoing nature of their moral journey, making it open-ended to various possibilities ahead.

*"No, stay at home, your mom loves you. And now I wish I
had not, because if I had not she would still fucking be
here!"* (McDonagh, 2017)

This shows how guilty and regretful Charlie feels about what happened to Angela. He told her to stay home to keep her safe, but after she died, he blames himself and wishes he had said something different. Charlie feels confused about what was right or wrong. He wanted to protect her by talking about love and family, but things did not turn out as he hoped. Now, he feels responsible for something he could not change. This shows how even good choices can lead to sad results.

*"I mean, you know, you came across really good, in the
things you were saying."
"So you wanna go out to dinner next week?"* (McDonagh,
2017)

This quotation highlights his moral belief in kindness and standing by someone in need. James, known as "midget", shows moral courage and kindness by supporting Hayes when most people keep away from her. He offers her a dinner date, prove empathy despite the town's judgment.

"...I hope I get raped on the way!" (McDonagh, 2017)

This quotation shows a flashback stated by Angela's last words during an argument with Hayes. This memory haunts Hayes and fuels her determination to fight for justice. Hayes is deeply affected by the trauma of her daughter Angela's murder. Her anger and focus on the billboards are her way of dealing with feelings of guilt and helplessness. Hayes feels guilty for not being able to protect Angela. The billboards act as a way for her to deal with this guilt, turning her inner pain of prolonged trauma into action against others.

"I got cancer. I'm dying." (McDonagh, 2017)

Willoughby tells Hayes, in a calm, almost detached manner, reflecting his reluctance to show emotional weakness. Chief Willoughby hides his illness to maintain control and authority, suppressing his emotions even as he faces death (Gadi et al., 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017). Ideology of societal expectations always expect men to appear strong and stop Willoughby from showing fear or sadness. He must suppress his emotion while still listening to Hayes' protest from time to time.



The picture of the burning police station shows how Hayes' feelings, like anger and sadness, control what she does. Instead of dealing with her pain in a better way, she shows it by setting the police station on fire. This shows how much she is hurting inside (Gadi et al., 2024; Marchetti, 2022; McDonagh, 2017). The fire shows how Hayes' guilt and sadness are too much for her to handle. She turns her pain into anger and blames others, like the police, for what happened. Setting the police station on fire makes her feel like she has some control, even though it does not really help her deal with her loss. Her actions show how deeply she is hurting.

"Why don't you tell those good friends of Bill Willoughby to tell Bill Willoughby to go do his fucking job, fat boy."
(McDonagh, 2017)

It shows how she takes out her anger and sadness about Angela's death on others. This is called displacement, where strong emotions are redirected to someone else. From a psychoanalytic view, this shows how Hayes' grief and guilt are too much for her to handle, so she turns them into anger at others (Giroux, 2024; McDonagh, 2017; Wirnoto et al., 2023). She lashes out at people she thinks are part of the system that failed her daughter because she struggles to deal with her own feelings.

"If it was me, I would start up a database, every male baby what's born, stick them on it, cross-reference it, and as soon as they done something wrong, make a hundred percent certain it was a correct match, then kill them." (McDonagh, 2017).

Hayes suggests creating a DNA database for all men to stop future crimes. This idea shows how she wants to feel in control after losing Angela and feeling powerless. In psychoanalysis, this shows Hayes using rationalization, a way of making extreme ideas seem reasonable to deal with her anger and helplessness (Giroux, 2024; McDonagh, 2017; Wirnoto et al., 2023). This idea helps her feel like she has control while coping with her pain and grief.

"Here's five thousand for the first month." (McDonagh, 2017)

Mildred's choice to rent the billboards shows that she rejects the idea that women should stay quiet and not take action after a tragedy. Showing she is in control of her plan even though people might judge her. In feminism, this is seen as an example of strength and independence (McDonagh, 2017; Pramesti & Erlangga, 2022; Pasopati et al., 2024). Hayes takes charge of the situation and refuses to follow the usual expectations for mourning mothers.

"Surely it is the perfect ending for you, isn't it? It is proof that they have been successful, these billboards of yours, isn't it, a dead policeman? It is quantifiable now." (McDonagh, 2017)

Anne, Willoughby's wife, points out that the billboards, while drawing attention to Angela's case, also hurt people like her husband. She sees it as a sad result for Mildred. It shows how Mildred's actions got attention for Angela, but they also caused harm (McDonagh, 2017; Pramesti & Erlangga, 2022; Pasopati et al., 2024). This shows how women's efforts for justice can have unexpected bad effects, especially when challenging powerful men.

Conclusion

Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri by Martin McDonagh explores complex themes like justice, morality, ideology, trauma, and gender roles. The film shows how characters deal with grief, anger, and guilt in different ways, often making difficult and questionable choices. Hayes fight for justice reveals her strength and determination but also highlights the emotional pain she carries. Hayes' guilt and grief shape her actions to resist such ideological conceptions of society, making her breaking free from traditional roles and

challenging systems of power. The film also exposes how societal structures, like the police, religion, and community, often fail to deliver fairness or equality. It reveals how deeply rooted ideologies and biases can harm individuals and silence women. However, Hayes' bravery inspires others to question these systems and seek change. Overall, the film does not provide simple answers to its questions about justice and morality. Instead, it invites audience to reflect on the complexity of human emotions, relationships, and the ongoing fight against injustice.

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