Maureen Folan, in Martin McDonagh’s *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, is constantly grumbling about the daily chores she performs for a mother she is rarely shown not fighting with. She dreams of being comforted by and of going away with a man, but since these dreams arose her lack of surety concerning her actual appeal to men, they actually serve to strengthen rather than loosen her ties to her mother. However, the play argues that a man *is exactly* what she needs for her to leave her everyday life behind her. For though Maureen initially tries to make use of a strong, gentle man who enters her life—Pato—as if he were just another prop with which to wage her ongoing war with her mother, he is actually means for her to forget all about that, and begin a better life for herself.

I do not mean to suggest, however, that Maureen is your typical lady-in-distress. Indeed, she is at times shown to be tyrannical; notably over her mother. However, at least one point in the play, her domination of her mother actually serves to strengthen her desire to be united to her. In scene two, after catching her mother in lie, Maureen makes use of her mother’s “crime” to justify a commanding stance toward her. Buoyed by a sense of righteousness, she tells Mag something she “sometimes” dreams of to make herself “happy” (24). She tells Mag she dreams of being “comfort[ed]” (23) by a man while at Mag’s wake. The man in her dreams also courts her, makes her an offer to join him at his place, to which she remarks, “what’s stopping me now?” (24). We note, however, that another person needn’t be intent on stopping her, for she stops the day-dream plot before it explores what it might be like to become involved with a man. She does so because the idea troubles her, for just after describing her dream to her mother she prompts a conversation clearly designed to result in both of them repeatedly agreeing that Mag will surely “hang on forever” (24).

Maureen might in this particular instance find comfort in her mother’s taunt that she will be around forever, because unlike when Maureen summons her dream while “scraping the skitter out of them hens” (24), she cannot at this moment discuss her dream without feeling some of the trepidation from anticipating an opportunity to soon realize it. Maureen has just been invited by Pato to a party, a party which would involve “gallivanting with fellas” (22)—that is, the sort of event Maureen thinks of as
having propelled her sisters into marriage. Therefore, she may sense that a man might very soon enter her life. We also know that Maureen is not entirely wed to the idea that she must wait for her mother to die before she might leave her. In conveying her dream to her mother, she works her way to proclaiming that she might leave with a man, “[a]t [her mother’s] [...] bloody wake, sure! Is even sooner!” (24). But leaving her mother cannot but be terrifying for Maureen: not only is she a virgin whose one experience away from home is associated with a mental collapse, she is someone who is accustomed to and finds some self-validation in taking care of her mother.

The play directs us to understand Maureen as someone whose identity is inextricably linked to routine daily chores and household rituals. More specifically, it suggests that her purpose in life has become nothing more than making use of the objects involved in these rituals to engage in an ongoing battle with her mother. Complan and porridge are their weapons of choice; they are the primary objects used by Maureen and Mag in their ongoing dispute over who is master of whom in their household, a title neither of them has clear claim to. When Maureen caught Mag in a lie, for instance, Maureen utilized the preparation of Complan to force her mother to demonstrate her acknowledgement of her guilt by drinking it, despite her ill-stomach. But earlier we observed how Mag used the preparation of Complan to force Maureen to acknowledge her being culpable of having once seared Mag’s hand (5). And given her familiarity with this way of life, and given she knows that mastering her mother offers reliable rewards (i.e., feelings of elation and self-validation), it is not surprising that Maureen seems more comfortable conceiving of a man that enters her life as an ideal object she can use to humiliate her mother than as someone who might lead her away from all that.

Maureen brings Pato back to her home, and he ends up staying overnight. Though they are shown flirting with one another, to be genuinely interested in one another, we suspect that Maureen brought him home primarily to triumphantly frustrate and humiliate her mother. Maureen knows her mother is disgusted by just the idea of her having sex: she “laugh[ed],” after her mother called her a “[w]hore” (23) for imagining herself enjoying being intimate with two men. Maureen now has the opportunity to experience how Mag would react to actually seeing her with a man she had slept with, and she will not let it slip away. She convinces Pato not to sneak out before her mother awakens, something he had intended to do, and wastes no time making use of him in the morning to antagonize her. She comes in “wearing
only a bra and slip,” “goes over to Pato,” “sits across his lap,” and “kisses him at length” (39). She obviously wants her mother to believe they had had sex the night before: she says to Pato that he’ll “have to be putting that thing of [his] [. . .] in [her] [. . .] again before too long is past” (39). Maureen is of course referring to his penis here, and it is no surprise that Pato reacts to Maureen’s statement by “get[ting] up and idl[ing] around in embarrassment” (40).

Pato’s discomfort leads to his insisting he must soon be off: “I’ll have to be off now in a minute anyways. I do have packing to do I do” (40). But Mag, intent on making full use of him, persists in relating to him in ways he finds uncomfortable. She orders him into the kitchen to “[s]mell the sink” (41). He does so, and he is described as being “disgust[ed]” (41) by the smell of Mag’s urine. But though Maureen has effectively made use of him to disturb her mother, Mag is equally facile at making use of whatever is at hand to manipulate and manage her daughter. She responds by informing Pato of Maureen’s stay in a mental hospital, and this is effective in upsetting Maureen, causing her to lose her assurance and her control, and to run over, “fists clenched” (42), to assault Mag. Pato, however, prevents her from landing blows—an act which ends his stance in this scene as a passive tool/observer. He physically intercedes between the two of them (he “steps between the two” [42] of them), and, in comforting her and reassuring her that she is not abnormal, that she is sane, makes claim to all of Maureen’s attention and interest. After Pato says, “[t]hat’s all past and behind you anyways” (44), Maureen responds by “look[ing] at him awhile” (44). In her daydream she imagined being comforted by a man, a consideration scary enough to have her follow it by strengthening her attachment to her mother. Here now, likely for the first time, she actually experiences being comforted by a man she cares about, and it proves sufficiently compelling that she replies by attending more closely rather than by backing away.

True, she does make use of her renewed intimacy with him to better sell her story that she was not the one who burned Mag, but she may do so primarily now to ensure Pato continues to find her desirable—the first time that morning she shows this concern. She clearly begins to see Pato as someone who could assist her in leaving her current life. She “look[s] straight at him,” and asks, “[d]on’t I have to live with it?” (45). Much seems to depend on how he responds to this question, for her disposition changes abruptly when Pato responds simply by requesting she put some clothing on. She becomes “sombre again” (45), looks “down at herself” (45), and
concludes that Pato had from the beginning not found her good-looking enough to excite him.

But though Pato failed to supply the reassurance she needed to brave the continuation of their courtship, the scene offers uninterrupted evidence of how much his interest in her has affected and changed her. Mag re-enters the room “waving papers,” she even “stopp[s] Pato’s approach” (46), but neither of them seem to notice her, something she is shown cognizant of in her asking, “Eh?” (46), after allowing sufficient time for them to respond to her discovery of the Difford Hall papers. But Pato “look[s] [only] at Maureen,” and Maureen will “look at her a moment” (47), but only after Pato has left her home. Maureen will again speak to Mag, but has lost all interest in combating her. After “linger[ing]” (47) over her dress, she says in “passing [to] her mother,” “Why? Why? Why do you . . .?” (47), but is not really interested in her response. Mag is left “holding [the] [. . .] papers rather dumbly” (47), and though she subsequently tries to make use of a more familiar object—her porridge—to engage her daughter’s attention (something she managed to do at the end of scene one), the scene ends with her all alone, speaking to no one but herself.

After she concludes that Pato is not interested in her, Maureen returns to her habitual means of engaging with her mother, but Mag knows her daughter would be doing otherwise had she not intercepted Pato’s letter to her. Though Maureen tries to persuade herself that she and Pato are incompatible, Mag remarks that she knows her daughter attends to her now only because he did “not invit[e] [her] [. . .] to his oul going-away do” (61). And, indeed, whereas it was once the only relationship Maureen was comfortable being involved in, their relationship now serves as compensation for the one Maureen failed to secure with him. Maureen has proven herself to be just like her sisters in that she too can lose herself in a man, and she will once again show how quickly she can forget about Mag upon learning that Pato had not in fact rejected her but actually had invited her “to go to America with him” (68). After hearing this, Maureen is described as “in a daze,” as “barely noticing her” mother (even though her mother lies on the floor, “convulsing” and “screaming” [68]). And we note this scene is also one that ends with Maureen talking only to herself.

Pato ends up marrying someone else, and once Maureen is made aware of this, her fate is sealed: she will forever after be “a dried up oul” (23) bitty. While she still believed it possible she would join him in America, she aggressively removed from her kitchen shelves those objects—Complan and porridge—most clearly associated
with her life with her mother. But without a man to lead her out of her previous existence, she even more closely fuses herself to her, and all promise of her having her own life is over.

Work Cited