
Violence in Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*

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Abstract

The 1990s have been of utmost importance for Ireland and the Irish as this decade is characterised by a great diversity of problems: economic problems, unemployment and migration which came as a result of these problems, racial harassment experienced abroad, psychological problems, the Troubles whose serious impact was felt not only in Northern Ireland but also in the Republic of Ireland, which emerged as a consequence of the conflict between the Catholics and the Protestants because of the political status of Northern Ireland and which began at the end of the 1960s and ended in 1998 with Belfast Agreement; self-centeredness emerging as a repercussion of the Celtic Tiger period which was witnessed between 1995 and 2000 and which means economic development in Ireland, and, lastly, the problem of violence. Martin McDonagh, an

Anglo-Irish playwright represents these problems emphasising the problem of violence encountered in this decade in a satirical but grotesque way particularly in *The Pillowman*.

Keywords: Martin McDonough, Violence, In-yer-face thetare.

Martin McDonagh was born in London in 1970. His working-class parents who were of Irish origin emigrated from London to rural Ireland during the sixties. He spent most of his youth in the rural areas of the south western Ireland. McDonagh went to Catholic schools and was tutored by priests and "grew up steeped in the emotive stories of Irish nationalism".¹

He listened to music, watched TV and read a lot. At the age of thirteen he had written around 150 grotesque tales, "[i]t was a way of avoiding work and earning a bit of money"² When McDonagh was sixteen he left school. He declared "I didn't want to educate myself toward some kind of job. I didn't even want a job. I didn't want a boss".³ At the beginning, he couldn't decide which one is exciting, writing plays or making money, "When I started writing plays, I was just going to get in, get out and take the money, but now I'm going to stick with it because it excites me"⁴ Consequently, he turned to

writing drama. He later wrote radio and stage-plays as well as film scripts but he suffered a chain of negative responses. His works remained unproduced with the exception of two plays that were transmitted to an Australian radio station.

In much the same way as McDonagh came to the writing of plays as a way of avoiding permanent failure and rejection his experience of Ireland, of his Irish ancestry, is anything but systematic or methodological. His contacts with, and impressions of, Irish culture were largely shaped during his visits with relatives on the west coast of Ireland or through the pervasive influence of London Irish-neighborhoods. ..., his image of Ireland is highly anti-traditional one, an outsider's view characterised by satire, black humor, cartoon-like reductions, and grotesque and 'Gothic' distortions.⁵

McDonagh was influenced by a theatre movement that emerged during the 1990's. That movement was known as the in-yer-face theatre. Sierz in his "What is in-yer-face theatre?" explained that,

In-yer-face theatre shocks audiences by the extremism of its language and images; unsettles them by its emotional frankness and disturbs them by its acute questioning of moral norms. It not only sums up the zeitgeist, but it criticises it as well. Most in-yer-face plays are not interested in showing events in a detached way and allowing the audience to speculate about them; instead, they are experiential – they want audiences to feel the extreme emotions that are being shown on stage. In-yer-face theatre is experiential theatre.⁶

In-yer-face theatre deals with violated taboos and shocking violence. It reveals human suffering. Aleks Sierz asserted that:

Usually, when writers use shock tactics, it is because they have something urgent to say. If they are dealing with disturbing subjects, or want to explore difficult feelings, shock is one way of waking up the audience. Writers who provoke audiences or try to confront them are usually trying to push the boundaries of what is acceptable – often because they want to question current ideas of what is normal, what it means to be human, what is natural or what is real. In other words, the use of shock is part of a search for deeper meaning, part of rediscovery of theatrical possibility – an attempt by writers to see just how far they can go.

McDonagh was influenced by that theatre and he used some of its features like the use of comedy in "depicting brutality, and cruelty"⁷ through violence. He used a kind of violence that Etienne Krug in his *World report on Violence Health* defined as "the use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person or against a group of community, that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation"⁸ The mood of McDonough's plays was

described as a "psychological and even biological warfare"⁹ The physical cruel violence between Coleman and Valene, the two brothers in *The Lonesome West* (1997), the savage cruel physical torture and tearing up the flesh in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), and the passive horrifying murders in *The Pillowman* (2003) were examples of the kind of violence McDonagh used in his plays. The utilisation of violent and horrifying scenes generated the feeling of the uncanny, and at the same time, mirrored the disintegrating picture of contemporary Irish identity. It stressed a horrible national future to come.

The world around those characters was violent. They lacked the sense of belonging to Ireland and the way they acted could be justified as "a longing for rootedness."¹⁰ McDonough condemned violence through dark comedy. He was called the "master of the art of inciting cruel laughter".¹¹ He believed that his plays were moral instruments to deliver a message to Irish people, to stop laughing and to make a change. In his "Murderous Laughter", Fintan O'Toole stated that

We have [...] spent nearly six hours laughing ourselves sick at some of the blackest, bleakest stories that have ever been told in the Irish theatre. We have laughed at the Famine, at murders and suicides, at children drowning in slurry pits, and old men choking on vomit. And the question that McDonagh asks us: when does the laughing stop and the thinking begin?¹²

McDonagh wanted the audience to realise that they were laughing at the catastrophic situation of humankind. His purpose for using violence and comedy was to shock the audience back to reality and make them observe and criticise the tragic and cruel side of the contemporary world. His aim was to free them. When asked by Sean O'Hagan in an interview about the reason of using extremes, his answer was: "Well, we are all cruel, aren't we? We're all extreme in one way or another at times, and that what drama, since the Greeks, has dealt with."¹³

The Pillowman received the Laurence Olivier Award in (2004) for Best New Play, and in (2005) it was nominated for Tony Award for Best Play.¹⁴ In an unknown totalitarian country, Katurian K Katurian, the writer of violent children short stories is arrested by Ariel and Tupolski. They are cruel and sadistic, fanatic and violent police officers. McDonagh criticises the central power of the police force and eventually the political scene in general. Katurian is charged for the murder of children due to the similarities between the real murders and the ones in his short stories.

To impose their power and to make Katurian confess, Ariel and Tupolski put Katurian and his brother in separate rooms. This act enhances the terror. Leonard Shapiro explains that

it is not merely to frighten people into submission, but rather to isolate each individual, to leave him enclosed by a wall of loneliness, shut off from the support and comfort of his family, his friends and, of course, any kind of free association of his fellows. This is regarded by many as a process of 'atomisation'.¹⁵

Tupolski asks Katurian about his first story, "The Little Apple Men" where an abusive father kills his daughter.

Tupolski: ... the father, as we have established, treats the little girl badly, and one day the girl get some apples and carves some little men out of these apples, all little fingers, little eyes, little toes, and she gives them to her father but she says to him they're *not* to be eaten, they are to be kept as a memento of when his only little daughter was young, and naturally the pig of a father swallows a bunch of these applemen whole, just to spire her, and they have razor blades in them, and he dies in agony. (*The Pillowman*, 11)

McDonagh adds a violent scene by giving a more tragic end to the story where the little girl wakes up at night seeing little applemen who say, "you killed our brothers". (*The Pillowman*, 11) They throw themselves down her throat causing her to choke and die. The investigation goes on till Ariel decides to send Michal to the next room. Katurian is worried about his disabled brother. Tupolski in return promises Katurian to protect his brother if he confesses these murders "Your brother will be fine. I give you my word." (*The Pillowman*, 13) The two officers manipulate the both brothers. Tupolski continues evoking Katurian to speak about the stories he wrote. Tupolski drags another story from the file of the case, "The Tale of the three Gibbet Crossroads".

Tupolski: a man wakes up in the iron gibbet he's been left to starve to death in. He knows he *was guilty* of the crime they put him in there for, but he cannot remember what the crime was. Across the crossroads from him are two other gibbets; there's a placard outside one that reads "Rapist," there's a placard outside the second that reads "Murderer." There's a dusty skeleton inside the rapists cage; there's a dying old man inside the murderer's cage. Our man can't read the placard outside his *own* cage, so he asks the old man to read it for him, to find out what he's done. The old man looks at the placard, looks at our man then spits on his face in disgust. (*Pause.*) Some nuns come along. They say prayers over the dead rapist. Uh-huh. They give food and water to the old murderer. Uh-huh. They read our man's crime. The life drains from them and they walk away in tears. (*Pause.*) (14-15)

He turns to another story, "The Tale of the Town on the River" which is his only published play in "The Libertad". Tupolski orders Katurian to read it loud while standing, as if he is a school boy and he

intimidates him, "Except at school they didn't execute you at the end." (*The Pillowman*, 16) Katurian reads his story.

KATURIAN: (Pause.) Um, "Once upon a time in a tiny cobble street town on the banks of a fast-flowing river, there lived a little boy who did not get along with the other children of the town; they picked on and bullied him because he was poor and his parents were drunkards and his cloths were rags and he walked around barefoot. The little boy, however, was of a happy and dreamy disposition, and he did not mind the taunt and the beating and the unending solitude. He knew that he was kind-hearted and full of love and that someday someone would see this love inside him and repay him in kind. (*The Pillowman*, 16)

Katurian continues his story. One night, and while the boy is cleaning his wounds under the bridge; a cart driven by a driver in black hood gets closer to him. The driver in black carries cages of animals in his cart. The little boy offers the driver half of his poor dinner. The driver wants to repay him for his kindness. He asks him to close his eyes:

And so the little boy did what he was told and closed his eyes, and from a secret inner pocket of his robes the driver pulled out a long, sharp and shiny meat cleaver, raised it high in the air and brought it scything down onto the boy's right foot, serving all five of his muddy little toes. And as the boy sat there in gaping silent shock, staring blankly off into the distance at nothing in particular, the driver gathered his bloody toes. (*The Pillowman*, 16- 17)

Cutting off of the little boy's toes takes the reader back the Cinderella fairytale when her sisters cut off their toes so their feet would fit into the glass shoes. In this play, McDonagh illustrates family problems by showing the children as the only victims in the family. They suffer due to their parents' deeds. Katurian and his brother Michal cannot forget their parents' ill-treatment. The characters will reveal secrets that forme their present personalities and attitudes.

Ariel leaves the room angrily and Katurian addresses Tupolski saying: "I'm not going to say another word to you until you let me see my brother. So torture me as much as you like, Detective Tupolski, 'cos I ain't saying another [f...ing] word. (*The Pillowman*, 22) Katurian's stories are "very much about abuse and violation, where the family, as a primary agent of socialisation, discipline, and punishment, becomes a cruel arbiter of fates."¹⁶ (Jordon, 887) Here little Katurian narrates his story entitled "The Writer and the Writer's Brother" which is similar to their life but with a different ending. In the story, the family has two sons. The parents want one of the boys to be a writer. They love and support him. The son starts writing "short stories, fairy

tales, little novels, and so forth, and some of them were good, some of them were very good." (*The Pillowman*, 23) The second son is locked in the next room and he is tortured violently. His painful screams are heard by his brother. One day, the first brother sees a note written in blood.

They have loved you and tortured me for seven straight years for no reason other than as an artistic experiment which has worked. You don't write about little green pigs any more. (*The Pillowman*, 23- 24)

The parents move to another house, and one day at the age of seventeen and after becoming a famous writer, the first boy goes back to his old house to find a little boy left to rot with a story in his hand written in blood. This story is better than what the first boy has ever written. After reading the story, he burns it and "covered his brother back up, and he never mentioned a word of what he had seen to anybody. Not to his parents, not to his publishers, not to anybody." (*The Pillowman*, 24) His parents torture his brother to evoke his artistic ability. In the real story, Katurian breaks into the next room to find the child, breathing heavily. He discovers that his brother is still alive but his brain is damaged being tortured for a long time. Katurian suffocates both his parents to death to avenge his brother. Thus, the suffering of Katurian and Michal's childhood is reflected in his stories.

Officer Ariel throws Katurian into his brother's cell. Both are relieved to see each other and are sure that those two officers are trying to frame them. After calming each other down, Michal asks Katurian to tell him the story of "The Pillowman" saying "I like the Pillowman. He's my favourite." (*The Pillowman*, 33) In the story, the Pillowman's job is 'sad' for:

"Whenever a man or a lady was very very sad because they had a dreadful and hard life and they just wanted to end it all, they just wanted to take their own lives and take all the pain away, well, just as they were about to do it, by a razor, or by bullet, or by gas, or ..." "the Pillowman would go to them, and sit with them, and gently hold them, and he'd say, "Hold on a minute," and time would slow strangely, and as time slowed, the Pillowman would go back in time to when that man or that lady was just a little boy or a girl, to when the life of horror they were to lead hadn't quite yet begun, and the Pillowman's job was very very sad, because the Pillowman's job was to get that child to kill themselves, and so avoid the years of pain that would just end up I the same place for them anyway" (*The Pillowman*, 31)

katurian's explains to his brother that the Pillowman is not happy. One day, he decides to visit his younger self so as to end his agony. The little Pillowman sets himself on fire and "the last thing he heard was the screams of the hundred thousand children he'd helped to

commit suicide coming back to life and going on to lead the cold, wretched lives that were destined for them." (*The Pillowman*, 33)

Michal explains that the Pillowman is a "very good character. He reminds me a lot of me." (*The Pillowman*, 36) Michal sees the Pillowman as a savior, saving children from their painful life. He confesses to Katurian that he was the one who committed those crimes. Katurian asks him why he did it, Michal answers, "Because you told me to." (*The Pillowman*, 34) This presents serious matters about copycat massacres and films like Oliver Stone's *Natural born Killers*.¹⁷ McDonagh believes that literature in general and tales, myths and stories, in particular, affect the audience. According to Katurian, his soul resides in his stories.

Michal asks Katurian to narrate the story of "The Little Green Pig". The story takes the audience to the fairytale of "The Three Little Pigs". The elements of myth and fairytales are manipulated by McDonagh once more to reflect Irish society. Katurian starts his story about the green pig that was happy being different and 'peculiar'. The farmer paints him with pink that "could never be washed off and it could never be painted over." (*The Pillowman*, 45) One day due to a strong storm of special green rain all the pigs are coloured in green while the old little pig remains pink. He smiles and thanks God for being peculiar. The story suggests that "individuality cannot be obscured, despite the broad strokes of an ideologically repressive society."¹⁸

Katurian narrates the story of "The Little Jesus", which "echoes Snow White and the glass coffin. The story mingles the world of the fairy tale with religious parable in the form of the life of Jesus Christ."¹⁹ The story is another incarnation of family violence, where the adults are the oppressors and the children are the victims. The story is about a little girl who strongly believes that she is "the second coming of the Lord Jesus". (*The Pillowman*, 46) She puts on a fake beard and wears a sandal and goes out helping the poor and visiting the church frequently. She is two days late coming back home and her parents are worried about her. A phone call from a priest calms the horrified parents. The daughter is fine and they must come and take her back. On their way to the church the parents die in an accident.

The little girl is sent to a home where the foster parents are abusive, "who hated religion, who hated Jesus, who hated anybody, in fact, [...], and who, as would follow, hated the little girl." (*The Pillowman*, 47) They do not want her to go to church and take her sandals leaving her bare footed "over craggy roads of broken glass". (*The Pillowman*, 47) She goes to the church bleeding kneeling and praying for her Father in Heaven to forgive them. The foster parents beat her for everything she does yet she receives it with a smile. One

day she meets a blind man and tries to act like Jesus to restore his sight back. The blind man calls the police who in return call her foster parents. They force her to wear a crown of thrones made of barbed wire and they force her to carry a heavy wooden cross over her back. They nail her on that cross till they finish their TV programmes and she forgives them. They take her off the cross and bury her in a little coffin and they tell her, "Well, if you're Jesus, you'll rise again in three days, won't you?" (*The Pillowman*, 47) She is left to die in the "empty, empty, empty, forest." (*The Pillowman*, 49) In the mean time, Michal goes into a deep sleep. In order to save his brother from being executed and for the crimes he committed, Katurian decides to accept the responsibilities of his deeds.

(Katurian takes the pillow and holds it down forcefully over Michal's face. As Michal starts to jerk, Katurian sists across his arms and body still holding the pillow down. After a minute Michal jerks lessen. After another minute he's dead. Once Katurian is certain of this, he takes the pillow off, kisses Michal from the lips, crying and closes his eyes. He goes to the door, clangs it loudly.) (The Pillowman, 46)

Katurian cries out for the detectives to come. He writes his confession on paper, mentioning, in details, every murder that is committed by his brother, yet takes the responsibility on his own. He even mentions the murder of his parents and the place where he buried them.

I hereby confess to my part in the murders of six people; three carried out by me alone, three carried out by myself and my brother while acting out a number of gruesome and perverted short stories I had written." [...] "My most recent killing was that of my brother, Michal..."[...] "Held a pillow over his head..." [...] "save him the horror of torture and execution at the hands of his..."[...] "My most recent killing prior to that was a little mute girl, about three days ago. I don't know her name. (*The Pillowman*, 57)

Ariel prepares the electric device to torture Katurian, but the latter provokes him by asking, "Where is your father now?" (*The Pillowman*, 55), hinting that Ariel's father must have tortured him badly during his childhood and that is the reason for his tension. Ariel refuses to talk about anything blaming Tupolski of his bad behaviour during the investigation, Tupolski clarifies that Ariel murdered his father because the latter "crawled into bed with me [Ariel] every week from the age of eight." (*The Pillowman*, 55) and one day "He held a pillow over his head while he was sleeping." (*The Pillowman*, 55)

Ariel justifies the murder of his father as self-defense while Tupolski criticises his way of extracting information from the suspect. He asks Katurian few questions according to the story he wrote and

getting to the part that the girl might be alive because it is the third day of her burial. Ariel is surprised and hurries with the search team to the location Katurian gave them. Now Katurian and Tupolski are left alone. The audience discovers, from the conversation between Katurian and Tupolski that Tupolski lost a child. After a while, Ariel enters the room and informs both Katurian and Tupolski that the little mute girl is alive. Here the two detectives suspect Katurian. After few questions, he confesses everything and justifying that:

I thought that if I tied myself into all of it, like you wanted me to. At least I'd be able to save my stories. At least I'd have that. (*Pause.*) At least I'd have that. (*The pillowman*, 67)

But Tupolski disagrees with him telling him that they give him their word to keep his stories in case he tells the truth. They burn all his stories.

Michal confesses to Tupolski that he is the murderer of the children. In an attempt to save his brother, Katurian suffocates his brother with a pillow and eventually kills him. They prepare Katurian for the execution, putting a hood on his head. Tupolski shoots Katurian in the head and leaves the room asking Ariel to finish the paper work.

(*Tupolski exits. Ariel adds a little lighter fuel to the fire, then looks at the sheaf of stories in his hands. The dead Katurian slowly gets to his feet, takes the hood off to reveal his bloody, bullet-shattered head, observes Ariel at the table, and speaks.*) (*The pillowman*, 68)

At the end, the police discover that Katurian did not commit the murders yet he was executed for the murder of his brother.

The play is concerned with the violation of innocence, tyranny and child abuse. It stresses the cruelty of the adults who are responsible for violent actions. McDonagh uses violence to criticise power and politics. The play reflects the violent relationships between Ireland and England.

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العنف في مسرحية رجل الوسادة لمارتن مكدونا

الاستاذ: صباح عطاالله ضيائي
حاصل على شهادة الدكتوراه في
الادب الانكليزي

المدرس: بسمه عبدالحسن علي
حاصل على شهادة الكتوراه في
الادب الانكليزي

الخلاصة:

كانت فترة التسعينات ذات أهمية قصوى لأيرلندا. كما تتميز بتنوع كبير في المشاكل كالمشاكل الاقتصادية و المشاكل النفسية والبطالة والهجرة التي جاءت نتيجة لهذه المشاكل، والتحرش العنصري من الخارج ولهذه الاضطرابات آثار خطيرة ليس فقط في أيرلندا الشمالية ولكن أيضا في جمهورية أيرلندا، التي برزت نتيجة للصراع بين الكاثوليك والبروتستانت بسبب الوضع السياسي لشمال أيرلندا، والتي بدأت في نهاية الستينات وانتهى في عام " 1998 اتفاق بلفاست"؛ سينتريديس والذي ظهر كالتعكسات لفترة "نمور سلتيك" الذي شهد بين عامي 1995 و 2000 التنمية الاقتصادية في أيرلندا، وأخيراً، مشكلة العنف، يمثل الكاتب المسرحي مارتن مكدونا العنف كنتاج لهذه المشاكل وخاصة في مسرحيته رجل الوسادة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مارتن مكدونا، العنف، مسرح الانير-فيس.