

Artistic Duality in Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*

Instructor: Marwa Ghazi Mohammed

University of Bagh / College of Education for Women/ English Dept.

Abstract

To be a writer in the contemporary age, that becomes so much complicated, puts a responsibility on the behalf of this writer to reflect and find a solution to some of the complications in this world. Martin McDonagh finds his own way to depict the terrifying reality of the world where a lot of gruesome crimes are committed. In *The Pillowman*, the playwright presents a series of horrible murders whose victims are children. The play is filled with a lot of literary and actual performed scenes that present the murders against those children.

The Pillowman is about Katurian, a writer, who is suspected as being a real killer of a series of children's murders because those murders are done according to his stories. However, the policemen abuse him literary and physically despite the fact that he is only a suspect. Later on, they find that his brain-damaged brother, Michal, is the real murderer. The play ends with one of the policemen shooting Katurian for lying to them.

McDonagh uses artistic duality in different ways to present his main aim about the role of art in society.

The Anglo-Irish playwright, Martin McDonagh, is one of the most distinguished living playwrights. He is known by his black satirical comedies which present an extraordinary talent of storytelling. They are featured by amoral characters, quick and clever dialogue, and acts of violence and cruelty that appear as part of his characters' lives. The kind of black humour which McDonagh presents is not new, what new is his talent in displaying such kind of comedy. In fact black humour started in the early 1920s; and it was used to express the absurdity, insensitivity, paradox and cruelty of the modern life. Its devices are often associated with tragedy and are sometimes equated with tragic farce. However, such kind of comedy is not so much popular among the audience; the main reason that this form of comedy is underappreciated is that it requires some thinking on the part of the audience and many people are not willing to do that. It is an effective means of satire towards tragic events.¹

The Pillowman (2003) is divided into three acts. It opens in an interrogative room where the protagonist, Katurian, is interrogated by two detectives as a suspect in a series of gruesome child murders. Katurian is an amoral writer of short stories, many of them contains events revolving around the murder of, and sometimes also murder by, children. The setting is in an unnamed Eastern European country under a dictator, two policemen –the self- styled good cop Tupolski and the so –called bad cop Ariel are questioning and intermittently torturing Katurian; also in an adjoining cell, his retardant brother, Michal. It is obvious that Katurian is not concerned with the consequences of his stories, which seem to have inspired a copycat infanticide, as he himself is capable of some, possible justifiable murders. His brain-damaged brother, an enthusiastic fan of the stories, confesses that he is the real murderer.

It seems that Katurian's parents have nurtured his talent of writing in one room, while next door they subject the other son, Michal, to years of torture. This insane favouritism was part of an experiment in home growing an artist. The continuous sound of child's torture causes Katurian's stories to become darker and darker. Finding out what his parents have done to his brother, the fourteen year old Katurian suffocates each one of them by a pillow. The same thing is done by him in the cell when Michal admits that he is responsible of the three murdered children.

Later on, Katurian makes a confession of all the murders on one condition; to keep his stories away from burning since the two policemen threaten of destroying them. The play ends by finding out the truth that one of the children, a girl, is still alive, and Katurian is not the real killer but his dead brother Michal. However, the detective Tuploski shoots him for lying to them as they keep his stories in a file. The case of murders is solved.

The action of play, which is set largely in an interrogation room in an unnamed totalitarian state, might lead the audience to believe that the main subject of *The Pillowman* is about crime and unjust punishment. However; the true subject which McDonagh aims at presenting is about storytelling and the thrilling narrative potential of theatre itself. This has been done through artistic duality which McDonagh displays through the structure of the play and the themes which the play presents.²

The structure of duality is apparent in the opening scene: two rooms, two brothers, two detectives. Central to the duality is the figure of the protagonist himself a double; KaturianKaturian. As the story of the writer emerges, another duality appears in the process of his formation as an artist because his parents have systematically exposed him to an experiment. For the first seven years of his life, his parents offered nothing but love, warmth, kindness, and all that stuff. Thus, his early stories reflect the delight of the young boy's life and writing, his first love. In contrast to the bright atmosphere of his first seven years, the following seven years are haunted by the sounds of torture coming from a locked room next to the young Katurian's bedroom.³

Michal's presence in Katurian's life works on two dimensions. First of all, it is Michal's harrowing screams, being tortured by his parents, that fitters into the talented young Katurian's dream and turns him into a great writer. The other dimension is that Katurian has been turned to a murderer by killing his parents one after the other for torturing his brother for years; a matter which enables him to justify killing Michal after finding out that he is the one who imitates his stories in murdering the children. According to this, Katurian is presented with double characters; the creative talented writer and a killer.⁴

The two cops, who interrogateKaturian, represent one system. Tuploski is a good cop in the sense that he wears a mask in a totalitarian dictatorship, an authority which does not have the individual's best interest at heart. Ariel,the other policeman, represents the bad cop in comparison to Tuploski' way of treating Katurian. The latter appears to be friend to the suspect while the former is abusing Katurian literary and physically. Moreover, both of them are victims of their drunken abused fathers.⁵

Accordingly, it is quite ironic and a clear indication of the duality in their characters since both of them works as representatives of the totalitarian system. This system represents the suppression or repression of an individual's expression. In Katurian's case, who had tough life (to say the least), whereby his parents have been abusive to his brother and to him; so he murders his parents. McDonagh tries to reflect what happens to Katurian, to the regime that some people live in, to a lesser or greater degree, takes away human rights and the freedom of choice; it is equivalent to the domestic unit of mother and father. Hence, Katurian; as an individual, is oppressed, repressed, abused by authority, his parents in that case. And what he does then to make himself whole and healthy is; his ability to express it. He is able to create, to engage in the creative art, and write stories that enable him to live a whole life, a pure life, regardless of the fact that he is brought into the interrogation room. What is important is that he finds a way to deal with his disturbed childhood.⁶

The dark atmosphere of the play is lightened by the funny circumstances; since neither Katurian nor the cops seem to take his execution fully seriously; it is not clear enough to judge what is truly fearful and what is mock- fearful in the prison. Fear is just an atmosphere of the abusing background for improbable events, which treat the product of a writer- art- as a threat comparable to terrorism.⁷

Katurian's execution at the end of the play carries the sense of duality whether it is just punishment or unjust one. Ariel points out to Katurian, "the only killing we can definitely pin on you is the killing of your brother. In light of the extenuating circumstances, I doubt it highly that you would be executed for it"⁸. Nevertheless, they execute him on an abused moralistic mistake, "you didn't confess truthfully, you lied to us, but you didn't kill the children and you said that you did, so we have to

kill you because you lied to us” (p.99). Tuploski believes that to keep their job in a totalitarian regime they need to find someone to be responsible for these murders, because it will make their regime look efficient, effective, and safe. Thus, *ThePillowman* depicts the struggle for the central of representation between the creative artist and the state.⁹

III

The Pillowman displays the nature of storytelling its power to amuse, frighten and enchant, and it both embodies and dramatizes all those possibilities, as it goes between brutal interrogation scenes and the visualisation of Katurian’s tales which are presented as mostly dumb shows with child actors as heroes who experience shocking amounts of trauma at the hands of parents and supernatural beings; Katurian’s three tales which his brother has embodied in murder are; “The Little Apple Men”, “The Tale of the town on the River”, and “ The Little Jesus”. All of them are performed in dumb shows within the main play.¹⁰

In “The Little Apple Men”, a girl who is abused by her father carves apples into several little men, asking her father not to eat them, to keep them as a memory of her childhood. But he gobbles them up, finding only too late that she has hidden razor blades inside. Katurian says, “That’s kind of like the end of the story, the father gets his comeuppance” (p.13); but the story continues. One night, the girl awakens to find “number of apple men...walking up her chest. They hold her mouth open. They say to her....”You killed our little brothers” (p.13)and climb down her throat chocking her to death. So, the first crime victim is a little girl who has been forced to swallow little apple men hiding razor blades.

In "The Tale of the Town on the River", another abused child, a boy, escapes from his parents and is shivering under a bridge when a dark driver approaches in a cart, which is filled with empty cages of animals. The boy shares his sandwich with the driver, who rewards him, shockingly, by snatching up his meat cleaver and cutting off his toes. The story concludes "he got back onto his cart, and quietly rode on over the bridge, leaving the boy.... For behind him"(p.22). The second crime victim is a little boy who bleeds to death when his toes cut off.

In "The Little Jesus", a little girl, who is very good and kind working to be just like Jesus Christ, is tortured and abused by her parents who live in the forest. They continue torturing her in an attempt to stop her from being too good just like Jesus. She insists on her way as they crucify her and put a crown of thrones on her head. When they fail to stop her, they burry her alive. After three days, she is still alive, a blind man passes but he doesn't pay attention to the sounds she makes. And the story ends with the little lonely girl in her dying coffin. The third victim is a girl, but this time she is not tortured or buried alive. In fact, Ariel and his team find her being painted green.

While Katurian's stories do have the same theme of children getting abused, they also insist on ending with a surprising narrative twist. Katurian's stories all contain an ironic twist in which "good" acts have "bad" consequences. All of these stories present ethical concern to the sharpening priorities of formal allegory. The two detectives believe that violent, abusive, depictive "storytelling" can be a means for the discovery of the truth, even when the stories they tell are lies.¹¹ In spite of that, Katurian insists that his stories do not say anything; as he believes that "the first duty of a storyteller is not to tell a story and I believe in that whole heartedly" (p.5).

The Pillowman celebrates the vital human's instinct to invent fantasies, to lie for the sport of it, to bait with red herring. It seems that this instinct for McDonagh is primal and energising. Life is short and brutal, but stories are fun. Also, they have the chance of living for ever.¹² McDonagh states:

I suppose I walk that line between comedy and cruelty because I think one illuminates the other. We're all cruel, aren't we? We're all extreme one way or another at times and that's what drama, since the Greek, has dealt with. I hope the overall view isn't just that enough, or i've failed in my writing. There have to be moments when you glimpse something decent, something life-affirming even in the most twisted character. That's where the real art lies.¹³

Martin McDonagh urges his audience, through the horror of his stories, to learn from what they watch and act to make a difference in the world. This motive is so much obvious in Katurian's story "The Pillowman", which tells the story of a man whose everything about him is a pillow, his body, his head, hands and even his teeth. The Pillowman appears and takes the suicide back to that moments in childhood when all the torment began as he attempts to persuade the child to take his or her own life, "and so avoid the years of pain that would just end up in the same place for them anyway, facing an oven, facing a shotgun, facing a lake" (p.44). Just like the Pillowman, man is supposed to act in order to stop the atrocities of life around him. MarthaLavey on *The Pillowman* says; "It is.... A provocative reflection of our current social climate: our

complex, multicultural, global society bristling with issues of free speech, with authorship, with conundrums and dualities at every turn”.¹⁴

There is a difference between the invention of the artist and the consequences of art. In Katurian’s case, there is a unity between them, since he becomes responsible for the consequences of his writing although he never intends to end this way. His talent means exposure and openness to dark thoughts. It seems that superior beauty does not need to be dark, Katurian’s tortured brother suggests that real horrible experience is better artistic treating than imaginative horrible experience.¹⁵ Katurian’s stories are more important to him than his life. Writing comprises Katurian’s identity, and his stories define him to the point that he would sacrifice himself to preserve them. Also, writing defines Michal, whose sacrifice allows Katurian to become the artist he is, though Michal never chooses to have this sacrifice. At the end when Tuploski shoots Katurian, Katurian starts to give a story about the Pillowman who comes to his brother informing him about the years of torture that will be. The Pillowman offers his help to commit suicide and avoid long years of torment. Surprisingly enough, Michal chooses to continue living offering this sacrifice for the sake of his brother’s creative talent. With this imaginary sacrifice, McDonagh, it seems, displays the significance of art over everything else. *The Pillowman* continually layers and intertextualises the storytelling process and this diversity encourages the audience to be as enthusiastic for stories as Katurian himself is. The supreme and the only unquestioned good in the play is the preservation of Katurian’s stories from censorship and police destruction, in other words, McDonagh’s literary survival, no matter how many must die horribly for it.¹⁶

IV

One of the critics, in writing on the play, believes that the type of the play depends on how the audience receives it; either the darkest comedy or the most cheerful and affirming of tragedies. Or it might be both at once. Again and again a duality is there even in classifying the play. It seems that the playwright, McDonagh, presents a series of artistic dualities with a certain aim behind them; this aim goes around the role of art in any society. Accordingly, it raises the question whether art reflects life or influences it, and whose business is, in this way, to take its responsibility, the reader or the writer?¹⁷

In fact, *The Pillowman* arouses a lot of questions, but it seems that McDonagh is able to provide indirectly the answers to them; an artist needs to depend on his imagination in reflecting his reality, so his product is considered an art, no matter how much horrible and terrifying the contents of his product are. The artist has a responsibility of telling the truth of his reality, though it might be decorated by the work his imagination. Thus, the audience's role is to have the responsibility towards what they watch, and be able to understand the essence of the artistic war. In *The Pillowman*'s case, the violent stories and scenes are supposed to deepen the audience's conscious towards the violence widespread in the whole world; also it has to activate the ability of resistance to such atrocities, being effective towards what is happening in the world which is full of miseries and sufferings. Although *The Pillowman* is shocking and horrifying because of its contained presented stories, these stories are not more shocking than what is there in reality. McDonagh wants to say that life is more terrifying than what his audience is watching, the question, which remains, how to react?

Notes

¹"Black Humour". The Columbia Encyclopaedia, 6th ed. 2012 The Columbia Electronic Encyclopaedia. Columbia University Press, 2013. Not available page number.

²Ben Brantley, *A Storytelling Instinct Revels in Horror's Fun*. DailyTelegraph 11 April, 2005, p. 34.

³Martha Lavey, *Martha Lavey on ThePillowman*. Volume 1(Watch and Listen Steppenwolf Theatre Company, 2007). Cited in www.steppenwolf.org/watchlisten/program-articles.

⁴Paul Taylor, *Arts: Theatre-A Violent Kind of Pillow Talk; ThePillowmanCottesloe Theatre* (London: The Independent November 17, 2003), p.16.

⁵MartonCsokas, *ThePillowman-Interview-MartonsCsokas*. 20th & 28th May, 2008, p. 2.

⁶*Ibid*.p.4.

⁷JonathanKalb, *Profound Pathologies: A Defence of The Pillowman*(NY: Hunter Department of Theatre, 2003), p. 95.

⁸Martin McDonagh, *The Pillowman* (London: Faber, 2003)p. 98. All subsequent references are from this edition cited parenthetically within the text by page number.

⁹Csokas, p.7.

¹⁰*No Sweet Dreams after Watching 'Pillowman'; Ten Grisly Stories with Children as Victims Mix Horror, Morality*(Washington: The

Washington Times, March 20, 2007), p. B05.

¹¹Worthen, Hana and W.B.Worthen." *The Pillowman* and the Ethics of Allegory" *Modern Drama*.(London: Faber, 2006)p.163.

¹²Brantley.

¹³Lavey.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Leicester Curve, Rev. of *The Pillowman* The Guardian Wednesday 18 February, 2009, p.18.

¹⁶John Simon, Rev. of *The Pillowman*(New York Magazine April 25, 2005). New York Magazine Theatre Review.Htm, p.24.

¹⁷ Barbara Vitello, *Hard to Forget Steepen wolf* Does McDonagh's *Brilliant Tragicomedy Justice*. Daily Herald 29 September, 2006, p.33.

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الثنائية الفنية في مسرحية "رجل الوسادة" للكاتب

مارتن مكдона

م. مروة غازي محمد

جامعة بغداد / كلية التربية للبنات / قسم اللغة الانكليزية

المستخلص

ان الكاتب في الوقت المعاصر، الذي اصبح مليء بالتعقيدات، يضع مسؤولية كبيرة على عاتق الكاتب لعكس هذه التعقيدات و ايجاد الحلول لبعض منها. لقد وجد الكاتب مارتن مكدونا طريقته الخاصة في عكس و تصوير الواقع المخيف لهذا العالم حست ترتكب افضع و ابشع الجرائم. في مسرحية " رجل الوسادة" يقدم الكاتب سلسلة من الجرائم البشعة التي يذهب ضحيتها الاطفال من خلال مجموعة من المشاهد التمثيلية و الالقائية التي توضح هذه الجرائم.

ان مسرحية "رجل الوسادة" عن كاتب يدعى كاتيرن مشتبه به تحقيق على اساس القاتل الحقيقي في سلسلة هذه الجرائم التي تم ارتكابها وفقاً للقصص التي يكتبها . يقوم رجال الشرطة بايذائه جسديا وحرفيا على الرغم من كونه مشتبه به . بعد ذلك يتبين ان اخوه المتخلف عقليا مايكل هو المجرم الحقيقي . مع هذا ان المسرحية تنتهي باطلاق رجال الشرطة النار على الكاتب لكونه قد اعترف كذبا .

يستعمل الكاتب مكدونا الثنائية الفنية بطرق مختلفة في هذه المسرحية من اجل تقديم هدفة الرئيسي عن دور الفن في المجتمع .