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## THE IMPACTS OF THE HAUNTING PAST ON THE PRESENT IN MARTIN MCDONAGH'S *THE PILLOWMAN*

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### Abstract

The Irish playwright Martin McDonagh's play, *The Pillowman* (2003) portrays a family that undergoes numerous difficulties under the strong influence of childhood traumas, violence, torture and the lack of communication. In his portrayal, McDonagh is not limited to the illustration of such issues peculiar to one place, but he, rather, presents a universal picture with its setting and the names of the characters that are not Irish. The psychological condition of the characters plays a pivotal role in communicating the implicit and explicit feelings and issues in the play. The aim of this study is, therefore, to discuss the effects of this problematic past and to demonstrate how the past strongly influences the present psychologies of the characters in *The Pillowman* with specific references to the primary source and the relevant secondary sources.

**Keywords:** Martin McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, drama, Ireland, Psychology.

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## Introduction

The Irish playwright Martin McDonagh, screenwriter and filmmaker, presents a problematic family that is under the influence of violence, artistic creation, torture and the lack of communication in his play, *The Pillowman* (2003). McDonagh does not depict an Irish familial situation, but, rather, represents a universal situation with its setting and the names of the characters that are not Irish. What is experienced in the past of the characters shapes and affects their present circumstances to a great extent in the play.

All the characters experience certain psychological or physical troubles in their past to such a degree that they cannot eschew the effects of their past since these features can be observed in their personalities, thoughts and feelings. For instance, the protagonist, Katurian lives through a disastrous past as his parents torture his brother in order to bolster up his creativity and inspiration; however, it is possible to see how it turns out that one's creativity means another one's end in the play. This study will, therefore, discuss the effects of this problematic past and how the past strongly influences the present psychologies of the characters in *The Pillowman* with specific references to the primary source and the relevant secondary sources by briefly giving information about Martin McDonagh and the play itself.

## Martin McDonagh

Martin McDonagh was born in London in 1970 to Irish parents. He was 16 when his parents moved back to Ireland, but he chose to stay in London with his brother, John. He wrote screenplays, radio plays and theatre plays, some of which are *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (1997), *The Lonesome West* (1997), *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997), *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), *A Behanding in Spokane* (2010), *Six Shooter* (film, 2006) and *In Bruges* (film, 2008). As can be seen, he is a very prolific playwright with a variety of his plays. Some of his plays deal with the Irish situation such as *The Cripple of Inishmaan* that is concerned with the Aran island community of Inishmaan in Ireland. However, his play, *The Pillowman* (2003) is accepted as his first non-Irish play, and in this sense, addresses international audience.

## Synopsis of *The Pillowman*

The brief plot summary is functional in comprehending the play better. *The Pillowman* is about a writer named Katurian K. Katurian who is interrogated by two detectives named Ariel and Tupolski in the interrogation room at the beginning of the play. Katurian, who is unaware of the reason why he is taken to the police, is accused of writing stories that give inspiration and incentive to some real child murders. Throughout the interrogation, he is tortured and is finally made to confess to killing the children, which he accepts with the condition that they maintain his stories.

It is told to Katurian that he is to be shot in an hour by Tupolski and Ariel due to killing his brother and his parents since the detectives know that it is actually Michal, his brother, that kills the children. At this point, Katurian's sole wish is to save his stories from destruction. In the end, Tupolski kills Katurian even before ten seconds is over. Ariel keeps the stories to be published fifty years after his death. As can be seen, it is a rich play in that it includes Katurian's "gruesome fairy tales . . . the deceptions practiced by the policemen . . . the official, torture-punctuated interrogation that is the play's motor to Ariel's unexpected, maudlin fantasy of what his old age might be like" (Brantley, 2006, 413). In this regard, it presents different perspectives regarding the writer, the treatment of the police and the role of language in interrogation.



### The Haunting Past on the Present in *The Pillowman*

The protagonist, Katurian K. Katurian's past haunts him, and it is due to his haunting past that he is taken to the police for interrogation. He is exposed to his parents' torturing his brother for seven years, and produces stories that are concerned with murdering children in different unfamiliar ways: "As the plot unfolds, we come to understand the violent childhood roots of Katurian's art. Even as his parents encouraged him in his fledgling literary efforts, next door they nightly tortured the brother he didn't know he had, so that Michal's screams might provide Katurian with a writer's imagination" (Cadden, 2007, 677). For instance, a girl tricks her father to swallow carved apples that are filled with razor blades; a boy shares a sandwich with a stranger that cuts off the boy's toes before he leaves, but turns out to be representative of the Pied Piper that actually saves the boy by crippling him. His stories are, thus, extremely violent and productions of his problematic psychology.

Although Katurian thinks that he is brought to the police owing to some political messages and ideology in his stories, it turns out that it is actually the content of his stories and past experiences that cause his disaster. However, he stills feels the need to express that he has nothing against the police: "Because I've never done anything. I've never done any anti-police thing, I've never done any anti-state thing" (McDonagh, 2003, 5). It is possible to infer from his remarks that he does not seem to take in the reason for his detention.

Katurian even agrees to omit the political parts if there are any because he does not reveal his problematic past involving killing his parents and the problematic childhood he has. Thus, he points out that his sole motive is to tell a story: "The *only* duty of a storyteller is tell a story . . . No social anything whatsoever. And that's why, I can't see, if that's why you've brought me in here, I can't see what the reason would be" (McDonagh, 2003, 7). It seems that he is afraid of the police and is ready to change his stories in order to avoid torturing and punishment.

When Katurian learns that he is in the interrogation room owing to his stories, he argues that his stories do not tell people to murder children. He claims not to be responsible for "the interpretations that readers make of his work, especially readers of limited intelligence, like Michal" (Carroll, 2011, 173). While Tupolski and Ariel try to make Katurian admit to his crime, Katurian finds out that his brother, Michal is also brought there, upon which he expresses his deep fear and worry: "I'm scared my brother is all alone in a strange place, and I'm scared your friend is gonna go kick the shit out of him, and I'm scared he's gonna come kick the shit out of me again" (McDonagh, 2003, 15).

Hence, he is worried about his brother whom he has protected throughout his life even from his own parents by killing them with a pillow. Due to his stress, fear and panic, Katurian is easily deluded by Ariel and Tupolski. During interrogation, he is tortured as well, which might reflect that "[f]or years previously, Michal had suffered and Katurian was the observing party, and now McDonagh very skillfully plays out the reversal of roles" (Jordan, 2006, 185). This demonstrates how these two characters experience torture at different points of their lives.

It is hinted that Katurian owes his creativity and inspiration to the constant torturing of Michal. His parents have two sons: they choose to treat these two sons in a completely different manner. They make Katurian "the subject of an experiment, lavishing him with affection while abusing an invisible brother always within earshot, in order to see if such contradictions and imagined horrors would give birth to a great writer" (Lewis, 2007, 18). The parents want Katurian to become a writer, whereas Michal falls victim to this artistic creativity process since the parents believe that this torturing can give inspiration to Katurian. His writing mode changes gradually from optimism to pessimism. As he hears the torturing, his stories "got darker and darker, due to the constant sound of child-torture" (McDonagh, 2003, 32). He is still not conscious of the fact that it is actually Michal that is tortured, but finds out the truth later on.

Katurian even wins a story competition, but he does not know that his writing process becomes the calamity of another person. He finds a note someday in red writing slips under door



saying: “They have loved you and tortured me for seven straight years for no reason other than as an artistic experiment, an artistic experiment which has worked. You don’t write about little green pigs any more, do you? The note was signed Your brother” (McDonagh, 2003, 33). This artistic process gives pain and misery to Michal whom Ariel defines as “backward” (McDonagh 9), and seems that Michal has lost his mental health to some extent. When Katurian finds him, he is “brain-damaged beyond repair” (McDonagh, 2003, 34), and therefore decides to murder his parents using a pillow in order to appease Michal’s pain and to halt the torturing.

During the interrogation, Katurian does not want his past to be revealed and tells Michal to do so accordingly. While talking to Michal, he gets suspicious and starts to question the reliability of the police since Ariel and Tupolski have deluded him before. He summarizes his own situation as follows:

A writer in a totalitarian state is interrogated about the gruesome content of his short stories and their similarities to a number of child-murders that are happening in his town. A number of child-murders...that aren’t actually happening at all . . . Whatever they do, Michal, no matter what, you don’t sign anything. No matter what they do to you, you don’t sign anything. You got it? (McDonagh, 2003, 41).

The totalitarian system accuses him due to the violent content of his stories, which are supposedly similar to the child-murders in their town. Although he has secrets regarding his past, he does not prefer to reveal these secrets and orders Michal not to say anything accordingly.

McDonagh, whose plays are “driven by character and plot” does not depict Katurian as a psychologically stable character, which accordingly leads his psychology to be negatively influenced while talking to Michal (Feeney, 1998, 27). He is the one to be blamed by Michal when Michal says: “And I wouldn’t have done anything if you hadn’t told me, so don’t you act all the innocent. Every story you tell me, something horrible happens to somebody. I was just testing out how far-fetched they were” (McDonagh, 2003, 50). At this point, Katurian learns that it is actually Michal who kills the children in exactly the same manner as explained in Katurian’s stories, as “[n]early every narrative produced by Katurian is a differing segment of ‘collapse’ in which the cultural investment is done through psychological troubles recalling some noteworthy metaphors observed within tangible ‘childhood’ traumas” (Çakırtaş, 2018, 48). Michal is not aware of the violence to be enacted upon those children unless he himself observes, and is referred to as “a sadistic, retarded fucking pervert who enjoys killing little kids” by Katurian (McDonagh, 2003, 50). Thus, a disastrous past, which “is accommodated in *The Pillowman* through a sort of monstrous and transgressive, almost carnivalesque summation in a way that casts aside any notion of verisimilitude in favor of the grotesque, inhuman cartoon-heightened style” turns the present into a disaster for these two characters (Jordan, 2005, 32).

Katurian acts like a father to Michal upon killing his parents with a pillow since he does not want Michal to experience pain and torture any more. In the interrogation room, he decides to kill Michal as well with a pillow so that he can avoid pain. He then confesses to the murders involving six people. However, his sole worry is about his stories again since he is very much afraid of the fact that they are going to destroy his stories. Their problematic past turns Katurian into a very pessimistic character because he no longer believes in the happy ending in real life: his stories reflect pain, violence and killing. His stories are all he has got in life according to him: “They’re not going to kill my stories. They’re all I’ve got” (McDonagh, 2003, 60). This psychologically problematic protagonist clings to his literary productions in order to keep on living: they are what will keep him and his name alive after he is shot with a black hood over his head.

The past does not only affect the protagonist in the play, but other functional characters as well: Michal is under the strong influence of his past, and its repercussions can be observed in his present psychological and physical condition. He is mentally and psychologically not healthy and stable anymore due to seven years of torturing. He is the one to be sacrificed for an artistic experiment that gives inspiration to Katurian. Although he is described as backward, and



retarded, his remarks demonstrate that he is not totally unaware of the situation. It ultimately turns out that it is actually Michal who murders the children in the same way as Katurian explains in his stories. He reads Katurian's stories, exercises what he tells in the stories, and witnesses how the children feel after he realizes the method of murdering illustrated in the stories. In this sense, he cannot understand the consequence of his action; therefore, he feels the need to see literally what happens, which shows his "lack of empathy for the others" (Worthen & Worthen, 2006, 164).

Michal shows inconsistency in his speech, and is not aware of this fact as to confessing the murders to Ariel. He is only interested in the stories like "The Little Green Pig" and "The Pillowman" and can be easily manipulated into confessing. At that point, he admits to Katurian that he actually murders these children:

I chopped his toes off and he didn't scream at all . . . You wouldn't've thought there'd be that much blood in such a little boy . . . But the girl was a pain in the arse . . . It's really hard to get the razor blades inside. You don't say how to make them in the story, do ya? I checked. So, anyway, I had to force 'em down her (McDonagh, 2003, 49).

As can be understood from these lines, Michal is influenced by Katurian's stories, namely, "The Little Apple Men", "The Three Gibbets Crossroads" and "The Tale of the Town on the River," which manifests the close relationship between Katurian and Michal. Michal is not aware of the fact that he actually hurts those children. In the end, Katurian tells him the story of "The Little Green Pig" which saves the third child from death since the child is found alive painted to pink, and kills Michal with a pillow.

Tupolski and Ariel are the two detectives whose pasts actually haunt them as well. Tupolski is the older one that does not resort to violence during interrogation, but prefers to use words and different strategies in order to make Katurian confess, whereas Ariel is the younger one that resorts to violence and torture like electroshock during interrogation. They tell certain lies so that they can persuade Katurian to accept the false allegations through psychological and physical pressure.

Tupolski feels associated with one of Katurian's stories due to his past, as he has lost his son while he is fishing on his own. Behind this seemingly strong detective, there exists a mourning father for his dead son, and feels at least consoled to read that the child is not alone while dying, which he finds in the story, "The Pillowman": "There was something about 'The Pillowman' that stayed with me. There was something gentle about it . . . He had this kind, soft person with him, to hold his hand and whatnot" (McDonagh, 2003, 92). He is in sorrow and demonstrates his desire to become the one saving children and people from disasters, which he tells through his story named "The Story of the Little Deaf Boy on the Big Long Railroad Tracks in China." Tupolski seems to be a dominating and powerful detective; however, it is also possible to observe his psychological disturbance and sensitive nature.

Ariel as the bulldog of a policeman reflects the effects of his past in his present psychological condition and mood with his inclination towards violence and torture. He is referred to as the "sadistic interrogator" (Ackerman, 2006, 149). He says: "There is an overwhelming, and there is an all-pervading hatred ... a hatred ... of people like you . . . I admit it, sometimes I use excessive force . . . Because I' a good policeman" (McDonagh, 2003, 78). He purports that he is against those people who give harm to little innocent children, therefore, he stands for something in this struggle. In his opinion, children will follow him, know his name and show their gratitude to him. This mood of Ariel can have some explanations and justifications in his past since he is raped by his father, being subject to sexual assault.

He has a problematic childhood since he is raped by his father and kills him upon this act of rape. Tupolski accordingly attributes Ariel's desire for violence to his past: "I'm not torturing a condemned fuckwit just to satisfy my own sadistic vengeance fantasies" (McDonagh, 2003, 80). Furthermore, he goes on to explain what Ariel has experienced in his childhood: "Hey, I'd murder



my dad if he crawled into bed with me every week from the age of eight, y'know? Mm. He held a pillow over his head while he was sleeping. I see you boys have a lot in common" (McDonagh, 2003, 82). Thus, although Ariel interrogates and tortures Katurian due to the content of his stories, his story is actually not so different than the one in his stories, which illustrates how the past influences the present and how the reality is not a happy ending.

The characters in the play experience a problematic past that haunts their present psychologies. Katurian writes stories that are related to child murders, violence, and torturing by means of the artistic inspiration and creativity, whereas Michal is "ritually tortured and abused, as part of some grotesque artistic experiment" (Jordan, 2006, 185). Furthermore, Ariel spills out his hatred against criminals. He exerts extreme violence and torture at times, probably stemming from his childhood. Tupolski, on the other hand, emerges as an older and stronger detective; however, it soon turns out that he has lost his son as well. Thus, these characters are not psychologically healthy and stable, which they demonstrate through their speeches and behaviors.

The story is not limited to Ireland since it has many universal features such as the names of the characters. This shows that these problems that the characters experience in the play can be encountered all over the world. Regarding the universality of the play, Pilny points out:

The linguistic melange of names only underscores the fictitious nature of the setting: the writer's name appears to be Armenian in overdose; his hometown is called Kamenice which is Czech, but features a Jewish quarter with the non-Czech name of Lamence [...]. The brother is called Michal-Czech, Slovak or Polish; the victims are Andrea Jovanovic-Serb, Croat, or Slovene, and Aaron Goldberg-a credible Germanic / Jewish name for the Central European region. The detectives' names, Tupolski and Ariel, blend Polish with Shakespeare (2006, 215).

McDonagh presents international names common in different parts of the world in order to highlight a universal problem, and draws the attention of the audience to the influences and impacts of the troublesome past over the psychology of the present in the play.

The title of the play also sheds light on the problematic past and the possible problematic future in the play because it is the pillowman that encourages people to kill themselves before their life becomes unbearable. He is "all made up of these fluffy pink pillows: his arms were pillows and his legs were pillows and his body was a pillow; his fingers were tiny little pillows, even his head was a pillow, a big round pillow" (McDonagh, 2003, 43). His job is to "get [the] child to kill themselves, 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" (McDonagh, 2003, 44). Thus, the pillowman tries to prevent children from leading miserable, wretched lives thereby persuading them to kill themselves with a view to avoiding a problematic present and future. This story is "wound into the play in such a way that it becomes a metafiction about Katurian's own family history" (Fitzpatrick, 2006, 143).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Martin McDonagh's play, *The Pillowman* deals with the interrogation and shooting of a writer, Katurian whose stories reflect his distressful childhood, the effects of which can be observed in his troublesome psychological state, as has been exemplified and discussed throughout this study. He presents a fictional figure, the pillowman through whom the reader is implicitly encouraged to empathize and "sympathise with [this] giant, fluffy character" (Lonergan, 2012, 111) that tries to make children kill themselves to avoid a miserable life. Through this play, McDonagh illustrates how a problematic past can turn the present into a disastrous atmosphere and how it may have a radical influence over people's psychology, as represented in his play, *The Pillowman*.



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