

## 2–Once Upon a Time: Gothic Fairy Tales in Martin

### McDonagh's *The Pillowman*

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### INTRODUCTION

Martin McDonagh's earlier interest in writing fairy tales that he remembered from his childhood has inspired him later to compose his play *The Pillowman* (2003). He sees that at the heart of fairy tales, there lies a dark and violent action, horror and terror which are essential components of human nature. Talking about his attempt in writing fairy tales, he says that "there's something dark about them that doesn't quite come through. I tried to go down that corridor of thought, in whatever way the fairy tale, in my memory at least, had come. In re-reading the Grimm's, they're pretty bloody dark." (O'Toole, 1998) Thus, *The Pillowman* is viewed as a journey that McDonagh makes at the dark core of human psyche and life, exploring the Gothic elements which might be hidden and how does that affect human existence and his connection with the outer world. McDonagh has adopted Grimm's fairy tales but he directed them to adults, with "the graphic descriptions of murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide and incest that fill the pages of these bedtime stories for children." (Tatar, 1987, p.3) It is worth pointing out that these fairy tales originally have violent elements, for instance, "Cinderella's sisters cut off their toes in order to fit their feet into a glass slipper; a witch burns to death in an oven in "Hansel and Gretel"; the evil queen in "Snow White" must dance in hot iron shoes for her sins". (Ellis, 2012)

The dark fairy tales are part of human psych and culture that might provide a new way to observe humanity. However, the history of fairy tales is not really known; it is as old as the history of human existence. Originally, the fairy tales were not recognized as genre until the Renaissance by some writers of the Renaissance and then immensely and complexly swept Europe most specially in the eighteenth and nineteenth century; the most distinguished ones are those tales collected by the Grimm Brothers who made some adaptation to suit the children.

Classically, however, the fairy tales are connected with romance, princesses, princes, imaginative places, beauty, witches, kings, queens, supernatural elements, etc. These tales were targeted to address adults not children; so that to them warn from a danger or to provide them with entertainment, moral and ethical lessons. Nevertheless and beyond their reputation as tales for young children, the fairy tales address certain dark and gothic elements that acerbically confront the dark side of human nature in an attempt to expose it and to overcome it, if possible, or at least to be cautious about it.

Marina Warner in her book *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (2014) interprets the tales psychologically, maintaining that in fairy tales the “reality transfigured into weirdness” (p.119) where the hidden reality about the human condition, particularly familial relations is revealed. The fairy tales replete with Gothic elements impart human fears, his anxiety, his vicious power and his morals as well. Therefore, combining Gothic, which is usually associated with certain characteristics like terror, horror, mystery, inquisition, suspense, gloomy setting, the use of supernatural, the appearance of ghosts, vicious villains, persecuted heroes, with the fairy tales, which are [connected](#) with [imaginary creatures, places](#), and [magic](#), is to penetrate the dark face undercurrent these tales that represent human nature and their latent anxiety, horror and terror that might be caused by .

Gothic, as a term, has a variety of meaning; the term ‘Gothic’ is used in a number of different fields; it is used in literature, history, art, architecture. The history of the term ‘Gothic’ is not a literary one. Literally, it means ‘barbarous’ due to its derivation from the name of Goths (tribes who invaded Europe for two centuries, from the fourth to the sixth century) which refers to their extreme ruthlessness and savage behaviour. The writers of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century had used this term in this sense. However, in the last decades of the eighteenth century the term was considered for unknown reason as a characteristic of “Middle Ages and referred to a romantic as opposed to classical style of writing.” (Northy, 1976, p.4) While the classical indicated the well-ordered, refined, uncomplicated and cultural; the ‘Gothic’ meant the chaotic, drastic, and exaggerated, and the fruit of the wild and uncivilized. The Gothic, in the nineteenth century was not only amusement but an article of faith. Ruskin feels that the barbarity or “savageness” as he called it, of the Gothic is not a matter of regret or apology, but a just confession of man's imperfect nature. (Northy, 1976) In modern usage, the use of ‘Gothic’ “becomes an index of the dark, grotesque and taboo where one is confronted with the unspeakable” (Andrews, 2008, p.iii).

However, the uneasy relationship of our contemporary societies with terrorism, paedophiles, serial killers, war and environmental disaster made our culture a “culture of fear”. Spooner (2007, p. 30) states that contemporary fear anxieties stress and inform the existence of the Gothic elements: “Gothic provides a set of language and a set of discourses with which we can talk about fear and anxiety, rather than being reducible to whatever fear happens to be promoted by the media at any given time”.

It is worth noting that Gothic studies in drama are scarce compared with the augmentation of Gothic critical studies in novels and on screen. Significantly, Gothic drama has recently preoccupies critics and writers; so, some literary and critical studies have been published like Jeffrey N. Cox’s *Seven Gothic Dramas* (1992), Glennis Byron and Dale Townshend’s *The Gothic World* (2013) McEvoy’s ‘West End Ghosts and Southwark Horrors’ (2010). Similar to the Gothic film and literature, Gothic drama uses a number of Gothic devices such as the “uncanny double, the confusion between real and fantastic...and the use of...exotic locales as settings” (Hoeveler, 2012, p.57) which aims to evoke and invoke fear, shock, horror, claustrophobia and disorientation for the audience.

## **2–“I chopped of his toes, and he didn't even scream”:** Gothic Elements in McDonough's *The Pillowman*

Martin McDonagh’s Irishness is “highly anti–traditional one, an outsider's view characterised by satire, black humour, cartoon–like reductions, and grotesque and 'Gothic' distortions”. (Huber, 2006, p.93) His literary works are influenced by a theatre movement that emerged during the 1990's. That movement was known as the in–yer–face theatre which has certain techniques of Gothic. The in–yer–face theatre aims to shock audiences and wake them up to experience difficult feelings and to search for a deeper meaning in life 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. ... [V]iolence breaks out, one character humiliates another, taboos are broken, unmentionable subjects are broached...Usually, when writers use shock tactics, it is because they have something urgent to say”. (Sierz, 2001, p.222)

The effect of in–yer–face theatre on McDonagh is vividly apparent by his use of some of its features like the use of dark comedy and “depicting brutality, and cruelty” through verbal and physical violence. (Dean, 2002, p.57)He wants to shock the audience to recognize the dark reality of a society that claimed modernity so that to free them from any shackles in expressing

and criticising the barbaric and cruel side of the contemporary world. His aim was to free them. When asked by Sean O'Hagan (2001) 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."

In *The Pillowman*, a play nominated for Tony Award for Best Play (2005), McDonagh presents a setting in an unknown totalitarian state where Katurian K Katurian a writer of violent children short stories is investigated by two police officers, Ariel and Tupolski. These officers are brutal, sadistic, and violent; so, they follow cruel means in their search for the reality. Through their characters, McDonagh criticises the cruelty of the police force and ultimately the political power in general. Katurian and his mentally handicapped brother Michal are accused of a crime which is the murder of little children in that totalitarian country. It happens that these murders are copycatting of Katurian written stories. The specialists in staging and theatrical performance argue that the little stories are narrated and performed in a way to help emphasize the significance of fairy tales to the play "they appear framed above the stage, set in the rear wall. Their slow, stylised movement enacted his words and, in their ordinary simplicity, deepened the ritualistic quality of the story's action and, so, provided the theatrical embodiment of the fairy tale" (Jones, Poore, and Dean, 2018, p.62)

However, the first story that Tupolski asks Katurian to explain is the story about a vicious father who killed his daughter. This story is called "The Little Apple Men".

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 gives a violent tragic end to the story when the girl is transformed from perpetrator to victim. The little applemen come to the little girl in the mid of night, accusing her, "you killed our brothers". (*The Pillowman*, 11) They hung themselves on her throat causing her to choke and die. The interrogation continues till Ariel decides to go to Michal in the next room. Katurian feels **anxious** about his disabled brother. However, Tupolski asserts that he will protect Michal if his brother, Katurian, admits these crimes "Your brother will be fine. I give you my word." (*The Pillowman*, 13)

In his interrogation, Tupolski attempts to invoke Katurian to speak about the other stories he did write. Tupolski draws another story from the case file, "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.)* a highwayman comes along, ah–huh. He looks over the rapist without much interest. He sees the old murderer, smashes the lock off his cage, sets him free. He comes to our man's cage, reads his crime. The highwayman smiles slightly. Our man smiles back, slightly. The highwayman raises his gun and shoots him through the heart. As our man is 97 dying he screams out, "Just tell me what I've done?!" the highwayman rides off without telling him what he's done. The last words that our man ever says are, "Will I go to Hell?" And the last sound he ever hears is the highwayman quietly laughing. (14–15)

To intimidate him more, Tupolski orders Katurian to stand like a school boy and loudly read the only published story which is, "The Tale of the Town on the River"; "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)

Then Katurian continues his story saying that night while the boy was cleaning his wounds under the bridge; a black hooded driver of a cart approached him. In his cart driver, there were cages of animal. The little boy put his fear aside and offered the driver half of his poor dinner.

The driver wanted to repay him for his kindness saying, "because you have been so kindly to an old weary traveller in offering half of your already meagre portions, I would like to give you something now, the worth of which today you may not realise, but one day, when you are a little older, perhaps, I think you will truly value and thank me for. Now close your eyes." (*The Pillowman*, 17)

So, the little boy closed his eyes, and that hooded merciless 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) .The cutting off of the little boy's toes echoes the incident in Cinderella fairytale when her sisters cut off their toes so their feet would fit into the glass shoes. This violent against children and the vulgarity of the scene is intended by McDonagh to illustrate the abuse and violent against children in their own family; in return, McDonagh sheds light on the family problems where the only victims are children who are helpless under the power of their parents. Commenting on the significance of Katurian's stories, Lilian and Jordan (2006, p.185) state that these stories are "very much about abuse and violation, where the family, as a primary agent of socialization, discipline, and punishment, becomes a cruel arbiter of fates".

Throughout the events of the play, the audience discover that Katurian's family has a double standard in dealing and treating the two brothers during their childhood. Katurian gets all love, encouragements and support, while Michal was being tortured and even his basic needs were neglected "as part of some grotesque artistic experience" (Lilian and Jordan, 2006, p. 185). "The Writer and the Writer's Brother" is a narrated story by Katurian that reflects the life of the two brothers but with a different ending. In this story, the family has two sons and the parents show all love, support and care for one of them. This 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 jailed in the next room and he is tormented and abused physically and emotionally. The second boy's painful cries are heard by his brother. One day, the first brother sees a note written in a Gothic style, in blood, saying: "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)

Upon moving to another house, the first boy at the age of seventeen and after becoming a famous writer, decided to go back to his old house and there he finds a little boy left to decompose with a story in his hand written in blood which is "the sweetest, gentlest thing he'd ever come across [and] better than anything he himself had written" (*The Pillowman*, 24). 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 tortured his brother to evoke his artistic ability. In the real life, Katurian enters into the next room to find a boy who is breathing heavily and "barely a bone of which wasn't broken or burnt" and an instrument to torture Michal, 'old dusty drills and padlocks and electrical cord' (*The Pillowman* , 33). He discovers that this boy is his brother who is "brain-damaged beyond repair" (34); a damaged that might be caused by his parents' violent action against his younger brother. In a fit of anger, Katurian suffocates his parents by pillow to death to avenge his brother. Consequently, this story exposes Katurian and Michal's the suffering, pain and murder.

In Act two, the truth of the children's murders is revealed. The damaged brother, Michal, is the one who did all the crimes of killing because he admires his brother and wants to copycat the stories and make them real. Being in the cell together, Michal asks Katurian tell him the story of "The Pillowman" because it is his favourite one. In the story, the Pillowman is all made of pillows. His 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 in the same place for them anyway" (*The Pillowman*, 31)

Katurian's explains to his brother that the Pillowman is not happy. The little Pillowman decides to put an end to his agony; therefore, he 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 admires Pillowman is a "very good character" as he reminds him of himself (*The Pillowman*, 36) Michal believes the Pillowman is a savoir, saving children from their painful life. In this scene, Michal confesses to Katurian that he was the one who committed those crimes, claiming that Katurian has told him to do so via his written stories. Michal copycats his brother's stories, "narratives that are filtered through trauma of their growing up" (Lilian and Jordan, 2006, p. 186). Here, a very serious matter can be deduced about the life-long impact of violent films and stories on the audience and how the writers, whether for the screen or literature, have to take into consideration the effect of their works on the individual's psyche. In this regard, Russell (2009, p. 11) identifies Katurian's predicament saying, "Katurian's dilemma in *The Pillowman* is also that of McDonagh, and of his audience: can a writer 'just tell stories' for mere 'private' entertainment, or do those stories always end up acquiring unintended (political) meaning, simply by virtue of being out of the author's hands and in the public sphere?" Moreover, McDonagh's use of the Gothic fairytale aims to "destabilize violent" (Lilian and Jordan, 2006, p. 187) and to shock audience.

The other re-enacted fairy tale is "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." (Jordan, p.187) This story is another embodiment of adult violence and abuse against children. The story is about a little girl who believes that she is "the second coming of the lord Jesus". (*The Pillowman*, 46) Dismayed by her parents and annoyed by the others, she presents her blessing to whom she thinks unsavoury characters. After the death of her parents in a horrible accident, the little girl is sent to live in a home with tyrannical foster parents "who hated religion, who hated Jesus, who hated anybody, in fact, [...], and who, as would follow, hated the little girl." (*The Pillowman*, 47). The stage descriptions explain 'The dreadful details of the following are all acted out onstage' (*The Pillowman*,47), exposing the audience to the moments of 'horror and violence' . Hated her pretensions of divinity, the foster parents have tried to force her to give up her divinely deeds. Therefore, they take her sandals and leave her bare footed "over craggy roads of broken glass". (*The Pillowman*, 47). And to complete her performance of Jesus' life, they torture by making her carry a heavy wooden over her back and crucify her till they finish their TV programmes, and then bury her alive in a little coffin, telling her, "Well, if you're Jesus, you'll rise again in three days, won't you?" (*The Pillowman*, 47). The sound effects in the performance of the play, the scratching of the girl's



fingernails on the coffin lid, are dreadfully narrated as 'a horrible scratching of bone upon wood' (47). The little girl is left to die in the "empty, empty, empty, forest." (*The Pillowman*, 49).

The other acted fairy tale is "The Little Green Pig" which echoes the fairy tale of "The Three Little Pigs". In this story, Katurian talks about the green pig which was happy due to its being different and unique. One day farmers re-painted it with pink; then suddenly, a very heaven shower of special green rain that "could never be washed off and it could never be painted over." (*The Pillowman*, 45) The old little pig thanks God for being a 'peculiar' as it remains pink while all other pigs are coloured in green. The story suggests that "individuality cannot be obscured, despite the broad strokes of an ideologically repressive society." (Lilian and Jordan, 2006, p.188)

In order to save his brother from being executed for the crimes he committed and to protect his stories, 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 calls for the detectives to come and take down his confession about the murders of children and of his parents. However, Katurian has one condition which is that his stories have to be published and read by others; that shows the egoistic nature of the artist who wants his stories to live for a long time even if he himself is not exist.

"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)

The two detectives, Ariel and Tupolski, want to torture Katurian by an electric device. Katurian, then, provokes Ariel by asking, "Where is your father now?" (*The Pillowman*, 55), indicating that Ariel might be tortured or abused in his childhood that may explain his irritated feelings. Ariel refuses to say anything, but Tupolski illustrate that Ariel killed his father because his father "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).

However, Ariel justifies his murdering of his father as self-defence. Tupolski asks Katurian few questions based on the story he wrote so that to get some information about the place of the muted girl in the story of "The Little Jesus". Ariel hurries with the search team to the location where they might find the little girl. After a while, Ariel enters the room and informs both Katurian and Tupolski that the little mute girl is still alive. Here the two detectives think that Katurian is lying at them. After few questions, Katurian confesses the whole truth and how his brother mimics and reacts his stories because he finds inspiration in them and because his brother considers him (Katurian) his hero. Katurian justifies this stating 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)

However, the detectives disagree with Katurian telling him that they consented to keep his stories if he tells the truth but he proves not, and that is why they decide to set a fire and burn all of his stories. Tupolski shoots Katurian in the head and leaves the room asking Ariel to finish all of the paper work.

*(Tupolski exits. Ariel adds a little lighter fuel to the fire, then looks at the sheaf of stories in his bands. 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)

The amount of violence and death in this play seems intended by McDonagh who aims to criticise power, politics and violence. The play complexly stresses the vulgarity of adults in dealing with children who are considered as victims with no power to defend themselves in a world that is lack of any kind of humanity. The fairy tales are supposed to be a shelter for children to find peace, yet these tales are inflicted with Gothic, grotesque and with fear and horror. The tales show a world where the innocent childhood is violated and where the child is abused and tortured.

### **Conclusion:**

It becomes clear that the Gothic in McDonagh's *The Pillowman* is the product of a profound reaction against everyday reality of unstable political life. The play arouses audiences' imaginative capacities. Thus, commingling Gothic 'shock and terror' with extreme and unusual use of violence was one of the most important devices which were employed to achieve this end. The Gothic in *The Pillowman* deliberately resort to this device in order to affect the audience and stimulate their imaginative powers. In other words, the audiences' participation is one of the essential factors in dealing with Gothic by making them partly responsible in understanding

the various hidden meaning in his play. In *The Pillowman*, McDonagh seeks to investigate the workings of the inner psyche of man and to penetrate into the depth what goes on in the mind by making use of conventional the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales and transform them into nightmarish and violent stories.

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