Chapter 5

Narratives of the Damned: Monstrosity, Metafiction, and the Modern Gothic in Martin McDonagh's The Pillowman

Ferhat Ordu[1]

Abstract

Utilising the complex mechanics of monstrosity and horror in *The Pillowman* by Martin McDonagh, this chapter places a marker on it as one of the pillars of this current tradition in British Gothic literature. The analysis first establishes a theoretical foundation, drawing upon Gothic theory and monster studies to situate the play's distinctive aesthetic, which has been critically described as a grotesque and inhumane cartoon-heightened style. It therewith proceeds to anatomize the main monstrous characters of the play, not just to one archetype, but to evil itself on a scale. This is the monster-perpetrator of the form of the child-like murderer Michal; the monster-authority of the form of the brutally self-righteous detectives Ariel and Tupolski; and the monster-parent, the bearer of a primordial, market-based brutalities. In the case of each, the analysis investigates what they desire and the particular mechanisms of production of terror, psychological, physical, and systemic. There is a fundamental inquiry into the most innovative horror in the play, the metafictional. In this case, the very process of telling the story turns into a monstrosity because narratives mix too dangerously with reality and serve as templates of violence. The chapter finally concludes that the vicious circle of abuse illustrated in the play is the greatest horror therein since monstrosity is not a condition but a vice that is being passed down to the subsequent generations, as well as to the state machine and its domestic sphere. The paper concludes by arguing that *The Pillowman* is a dark mirror of our own age that carries with it the old-felt fears about unchecked state authority and the eternally existing intoxication of toxicity and mutilation of the human spirit through narratives, which here are storytelling.

1 Karabuk University, Orcid: 0000-0003-2667-2529

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Gothic literary tradition has been functioning, as it were, as a cultural conscience where it has created an expression of the fear most profound of the society in which it is created. Since its inception in the rubble of the ancient castles and the shadows of an overly superstitious history, the genre has redefined its monsters over time to shape the concerns of the modern world. *The Pillowman* by Martin McDonagh is a play that renders such evolution in the disturbing form. The play is based on a writer called Katurian who works in a totalitarian society and is being questioned by two sadistic police officers on any information regarding the horrific nature of the content of the stories he writes, and how they are gruesomely coinciding with the series of child murders occurring lately. When Captain Ariel becomes involved in the torture, the story spirals out of control to expose the part played by intellectually disabled brother, Michal, of Katurian and the grotesque childhood test conducted by their parents, who tortured one son to inspire the other's art. The common motifs of the genre have therefore adapted to the modern world in shifting from the external and supernatural to the internal and systemic. The haunted castle is replicated in the interrogation room, the abusive house, the supernatural terror is a mental wound of inherited trauma, the monstrous Other turns out to be an uncomfortable aspect of the self. *The Pillowman* takes the very mechanics of the genre like horror and the excess to light the mundane and omnipresence of evil in a world where the highest frightening narratives are not those our society has been told, but rather the ones we have been telling, and finally, and the ones we have been experiencing daily.

This chapter is structured to analyse this contemporary Gothic environment in a systematic way. It starts with creating the theoretical basis of monstrosity and Gothic tradition. It then goes further to a detailed study of the monstrous beings in this play and classifies them as the monstrous perpetrator, the monstrous authority, and the monstrous parent. The play's central innovation—metafictional horror, in which narrative itself turns into a horrible act—will be examined in the following section. The analysis will conclude with a look at the cycle of abuse and the issues of the play's contemporary relevance, contending that the real monster in *The Pillowman* is the terrible power of the narrative and the unavoidable inheritance of trauma.

Introduction: The Anatomy of Modern Monstrosity

Gothic tradition since its emergence in the eighteenth century has been essentially a "writing of excess" (Botting, 1996, p. 1), a mode that exists to probe the darker side of the society in terms of spectres, haunted spaces,

and above all, the monster as representative of this mode. These characters have functioned as societal barometers, externalizing ingrained fears about the self, the other, and the limits of knowledge. Examples of these include the menacing antagonists of Ann Radcliffe and the scientifically created Creature in *Frankenstein*. "The monstrous body" as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996) contends is a "cultural body" (p. 4), which is a construct that, in all sense of the term, makes "fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy" live and become uncannily independent (p. 4). These monsters are not only scary but also demonstrative, their very name, *monstra*, which is the adjective of *monstrare* (to show), exists to caution, educate, and offer the lines of the society in which they were created (Mittman and Hensel, 2018, p. x). The thesis of this chapter is that *The Pillowman* by Martin McDonagh represents a pivotal evolution within this canon, transplanting the Gothic's familiar terrors from the feudal castle to the sterile brutality of the police interrogation room and the grotesque intimacy of the family home. *The Pillowman* ushers in a "new nightmarish phase," employing "archetypal Gothic fairy tales to disturb and unsettle and to tap into a more unnerving depiction of violence and extremes of the theatrical grotesque". McDonagh's work is frequently praised for its "extreme and grotesque depiction of violence" (Rees, 2018, p. 61). The monster in this play is a ubiquitous state rather than a solitary, exterior thing. A pathological state power, a generational cycle of abuse, and—most unsettling of all—the act of storytelling itself are all involved.

According to researcher Eamonn Jordan (2005), the play presents its audience with a universe in which the past is accommodated "through a sort of monstrous and transgressive, almost carnivalesque summation ... in favour of the grotesque, inhumane cartoon-heightened style" (p. 52). The primary monstrous characters of the story are the detectives Ariel and Tupolski, the child murderer Michal, and the author Katurian, each representing a distinct aspect of modern horror. They are human agents, not ghosts or vampires, whose acts are made "monstrous" by their transgression of basic moral and physical boundaries. This exemplifies Julia Kristeva's (1982) definition of the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (p. 4).

This chapter will offer a thorough examination of these beings, breaking down their personalities, particular horror mechanisms, and motivations. It will examine how McDonagh modernizes the Gothic project for the present day by "forcing audiences into identification with monstrous characters" (Eldred, 2007, pp. 118-119). Lastly, it will assess the play's deep relevance, contending that *The Pillowman* captures modern fears of trauma, state power, and the horrifying possibility that narrative—the very thing we use to make

sense of the world—can turn into a catalyst for unimaginable violence. This analysis will show us how the monster continues to reveal itself to us in its unrelenting evolution.

Theoretical Foundations: Monstrous Bodies and Gothic Landscapes

To properly understand the horrors at work in *The Pillowman*, one must first grasp the theoretical tools used to analyse monstrosity itself. This is not about simple ghost stories; it is about how certain figures and spaces come to embody our deepest cultural fears. The work of scholars like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen provides a compelling starting point. He famously argued that the "monstrous body is a cultural body," a construct which "quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy… giving them life and an uncanny independence" (1996, p. 4). In other words, monsters are never just monsters; they are physical manifestations of what a society dreads or desires to repress. They are, as Mittman and Hensel (2018) remind us, rooted in the very word *monstrare*—to show. Their primary function is to demonstrate a warning, to point towards a transgression.

This connects powerfully to the psychoanalytic concept of the abject, developed by Julia Kristeva. The abject is what people violently reject because it disturbs their sense of identity, system, and order. It is, as Kristeva (1982) writes, "what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (p. 4). Think of things that provoke a visceral recoil—corpses, waste, open wounds—which horrify people because they remind them of the fragility of their own bodily boundaries and the fact that people are, ultimately, material beings that will decay. The monster often resides in this territory of the abject, its very existence creating a challenge to a clear categorisation.

These monstrous bodies need a habitat, and this is where the Gothic tradition offers a ready-made architecture. As Fred Botting (1996) succinctly put it, "Gothic signifies a writing of excess" (p. 1). It is a mode that thrives on transgression, on pushing beyond the limits of the reasonable and the polite. From its origins, Gothic fiction has relied on "tortuous, fragmented narratives relating mysterious incidents, horrible images and life-threatening pursuits" (p. 2). Its landscapes are traditionally "desolate, alienating and full of menace" (p. 45), from crumbling castles to haunted forests.

How does this relate to McDonagh, then? *The Pillowman* takes these classic Gothic foundations and recalibrates them for a modern, bureaucratic age. The haunted castle is replaced by the stark, oppressive "Police interrogation

room" (McDonagh, 2003, pp. 5, 50), a sterile, institutional space where the dungeons are not hidden but are the very rooms next door. The spectral ghost is supplanted by the very real, corporeal spectre of state-sanctioned torture, embodied by detectives like Ariel, who calmly informs a suspect, "kneel down over here, please, so I can connect you to this battery" (p. 53). This is paired with the lingering phantom of childhood trauma, acoustically haunting the narrative with "the low whirring of drills, the scritchety-scratch of bolts being tightened, the dull fizz of unknown things electrical, and the muffled screams of a small gagged child" that emanated from a locked room (p. 23). The Gothic 'writing of excess' is found not just in the bloodshed, but in the grotesque, almost cartoonish extremity of the violence, what one critic described as an "inhumane cartoon-heightened style" (Jordan, 2005, p. 52). This is realised in moments where a character can matter-of-factly state, "I chopped his toes off and he didn't scream at all. He just sat there looking at them" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 34), or in the visceral discovery of "the horrific corpse of a fourteen-year-old child... barely a bone of which wasn't broken or burned" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 24). The play thus foregrounds the production of the monstrous 'cultural body' within its most disquieting sites of manufacture: through the brutal machinery of the state, within the intimate cruelty of the family, and, perhaps most disturbingly, via the narrative constructions whose inherent destructive capacity is catastrophically unleashed.

An Anatomy of Monstrosity: The Perpetrator, the Authority, and the Parent

After establishing the theoretical framework, it is time start analysing the particular monsters that prowl *The Pillowman*'s world. It soon becomes evident that McDonagh is showing a range of monstrosities, each of which serves as a dark mirror reflecting a distinct aspect of a sick society, rather than a single, instantly recognizable creature. The play challenges people with the disturbing notion that the real horror is something ingrained in their very homes and institutions—something we may even recognize in ourselves—rather than an outside, supernatural force.

Perhaps the most immediately recognisable monster is the Monstrous Perpetrator, embodied by Katurian's brother, Michal. He is the character whose actions most directly mirror the violent, child-killing figures of folklore, the one who commits the acts that so horrify us. Yet, what makes Michal so particularly disturbing is his jarring disconnect from the gravity of his own crimes; it is the chasm between the horrific nature of his acts and the childlike simplicity with which he describes them. His recounting

of violence is delivered with a baffling pragmatism that is more unsettling than any display of rage. He tells Katurian of murdering a little boy, Aaron, matter-of-factly stating, "I chopped his toes off and he didn't scream at all. He just sat there looking at them. He seemed very surprised. I suppose you would be at that age... God, he bled a lot. You wouldn't've thought there'd be that much blood in such a little boy" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 34). The horror for the audience mounts as he then pivots seamlessly to the domestic problem of laundry, observing, "It's really hard to get out of your clothes, isn't it, blood?' (p. 34). He doesn't frame his actions in terms of sadistic pleasure, but as an almost mundane execution of a story's plot, telling Katurian with an air of inconvenience, "I didn't enjoy killing those kids. It was irritating. It took ages. And I didn't set out to kill those kids. I just set out to chop the toes off one of them and to put razors down the throat of one of them" (p. 34). His subsequent confession about hiding the severed toes—"I hid 'em under the dirt in the Christmas tree pot in the attic, 'cos I knew we wouldn't be getting the Christmas tree pot out again for ages" (p. 33)—further underscores this monstrously warped practicality.

In Michal as a character, a terrifying literalisation of Cohen's concept of the monster as a 'cultural body' can be seen. He is a living testament to the idea that a story, once released into the world, can take on a life of its own with devastating consequences. He has absorbed Katurian's stories not as fictions, but as manuals, his own mind becoming the site where narrative transforms into horrifying reality. Katurian himself, in a moment of furious despair, brands Michal a "sadistic, retarded fucking pervert who enjoys killing little kids" (p. 35), a label that attempts to contain and explain the threat by naming it. However, Michal's monstrosity is more complex than simple perversion; it is a warped innocence, a broken moral compass forged in the crucible of his own abuse. This makes him one of the play's most pitiable and yet most dangerous figures—not a demon, but a damaged human being who enacts the darkest of fairy tales because, in his world, that is what stories are for. He is the ultimate warning of what happens when the line between fiction and reality catastrophically collapses.

The Monstrous Authority and the Monstrous Parent

Going beyond the character of Michal, the play makes the reader confront the monstrosity in the most organised and cunning designs: the state and the family. In this case, horror is not created by a twisted psychology but is coldly premeditated and effectively implemented and that makes it even more horrible.

Detectives, Ariel and Tupolski, are the embodiments of the Monstrous Authority. This is not just how they are rotten officials, they are the eloquent engineers to a system where pain is the major language of communication. Their menace is immediate. Ariel doesn't ask questions; he makes declarations, telling Katurian from the outset, "You will answer everything we want you to" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 6). Their monstrosity lies in its bureaucratic sheen; it is horror wearing the mask of procedure. From the very beginning, the dynamic is established not as a search for truth, but as a game of cat-and-mouse where torture is a foregone conclusion. Ariel's opening salvo—"You will answer everything we want you to.' There was never a question, 'You will answer everything we want you to.' There was a question, 'How much are you going to make us fuck you up in the meantime?' was what the question was" (p. 6)—immediately immerses us in a world where power is the only currency. This preconditions a procedure, in which the truth does not matter, and authority is absolute. They are not always very serious with their brutality. At the point when Ariel vicious attacks Katurian, the stage direction is that Tupolski just "looks at this, sighs" (p. 11) normalising the atrocity as just another part of the job.

The reason why they are so chilling is the cynicism that they have with themselves. Tupolski freely satirises even the concept of having any sort of trust in their system when he says, "I am a high-ranking police officer in a totalitarian fucking dictatorship. What are you doing taking my word about anything?" (p. 18). This is a boast rather than a confession, serving as a reminder that they function in a moral vacuum where their word is law because it is unreliable. Tupolski's line, "Oh, I almost forgot to mention... I'm the good cop, he's the bad cop" (p. 11), which appears just before the violence starts, highlights the grotesque parody of their good-cop-bad-cop routine.

Ariel's intense, self-justifying faith in his own righteousness, however, is arguably the most nuanced aspect of their monstrosity. He describes his motivation as a "overwhelming, and there is an all-pervading, hatred... of people who lay even the littlest finger... on children" in a lengthy and unsettling monologue (p. 52). In order to defend his use of "excessive force" on innocent people, he claims that if they leave the room, they will never "contemplate even raising their voice to a little kid again, just in case I fucking hear 'em" (p. 52). His final statement, "I stand for something," is a startling statement of his purpose. On the right side is where I stand. "The side of the child" (p. 53). "I would torture you to death just for writing a story like that, let alone acting it out!" (p. 53) is his final conclusion as a result of this conviction. Ariel demonstrates that the most dangerous monster is one that

is completely convinced of its own virtue by fusing the banality of evil with the zeal of the zealot.

However, according to the play, these state leaders are only signs of a more serious, underlying decay. The one place that should be safe—the family—is also the site of the first and most profound horror. The ultimate perversion of care is exemplified by the Monstrous Parent. The dark secret at the heart of the play is the tale of Katurian and Michal's childhood. Their parents were cold-blooded social experimenters, not just violent. Michal's note, written in blood, reveals the truth: "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" (pp. 23-24).

This was not a sporadic outburst of anger but a sustained, calculated programme of torture. Katurian's childhood was soundtracked by a hidden, ongoing horror, described as "the low whirring of drills, the scritchety-scratch of bolts being tightened, the dull fizz of unknown things electrical, and the muffled screams of a small gagged child [that] began to emanate through its thick brick walls. On a nightly basis" (p. 23). The physical proof of this years-long atrocity is discovered when Katurian finds "the horrific corpse of a fourteen-year-old child that had been left to rot in there, barely a bone of which wasn't broken or burned" (p. 24). In this, the parents become the ultimate source of the abject. They are the monsters who do not simply cross boundaries; they systematically destroy the most sacred one of all—the bond that should protect a child. They create the damaged individuals that the state then hunts down, completing a vicious cycle where monstrosity begets monstrosity, leaving no institution and no relationship untouched by its corrosive influence.

The Metafictional Monster: Storytelling as Violence

Having considered the monstrous people in the play, we reach what is perhaps the original and disturbing thought of the play, that the monster is not a person at all, but a process. The Pillowman compels the reader to pose a very awkward question: Is even telling a story a monstrous activity? What would become of stories no longer being merely accounts of violence, but practical plans of the same? It is this meta-horror, in which there is an ugly blurring of fact and fiction, which is actually the genuine intellectual and emotional core of this play of McDonagh.

This is demonstrated in the play at an early stage. The dark short stories by Katurian are not merely abstract fictions, but they are directly involved in the crimes in the real world that are under investigation. The horrendous

parallel is spelled out by the detective Tupolski. He describes one of Katurian's stories, in which a girl carves little figures from apples and her father swallows them. But then, Tupolski continues narrating the story, "it goes on. The girl wakes up that night. A number of applemen are walking up her chest. They hold her mouth open. They say to her ... 'You killed our little brothers.' They climb down her throat. She chokes to death on her own blood. The end" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 11). This is not just a tale; it is a precise mirror of the murder of a little girl, whose cause of death, as Ariel bluntly states, was "Two razor blades down her little fucking throat, both wrapped in apple, funnily enough" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 21). The story has jumped from the page into the real world, with fatal consequences.

This terrifying transference is most perfectly embodied in the character of Michal. He does not see the stories as metaphors; he reads them as instructions. He confesses to Katurian that he killed a little boy because "The little boy was just like you said it'd be. I chopped his toes off and he didn't scream at all" (p. 34), directly enacting Katurian's "The Tale of the Town on the River." His actions reveal a literal-mindedness that exposes the dangerous power of art. In his formal confession, Katurian is forced to write this dynamic into the official record, stating, "And I held him down as my brother cut his toes off, acting out a story called 'The Tale of the Town on the River.' Attached." And later, "And I held her down, as he fed her a number of little figures made from apples, with razor blades inside them, acting out a story called 'The Little Apple Men.' Attached" (p. 51). The word "acting out" here is crucial; it frames the murders not as original crimes, but as performances of a pre-written script.

This blurring is further intensified by the play's staging, which brings Katurian's fictional worlds to life on stage. The narrative of "The Little Jesus" is not just told; it is performed, with the girl being crucified and eventually buried alive. The audience is made complicit, forced to witness the very horrors that inspired Michal. As the girl is buried, Katurian narrates the dreadful conclusion:

> Three days later a man out walking the woods stumbled over a small, freshly dug grave, but, as the man was quite quite blind, he carried on by, sadly not hearing a horrible scratching of bone upon wood a little way behind him, that ever so slowly faded away and was lost forever..." (p. 49).

This is the culmination of the metafictional horror: we are not just hearing a story, but witnessing the visceral, sensory reality of its execution, a reality first conceived in a writer's mind.

Ultimately, the play presents a world where, as scholar Eamonn Jordan (2005) notes, characters "both tell their Grimm and terrorizing narratives, monstrous in different ways, over which they cannot control either meaning or interpretation" (p. 61). Katurian may have written his stories as dark art, but he cannot control their migration into the world. His desperate plea to the detectives—"I just want you to keep your word. To go ahead and kill me, and to go ahead and keep my stories safe" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 52)—is a futile attempt to re-cage the monster he has unleashed. In doing so, *The Pillowman* holds a dark mirror to the act of creation itself, questioning the ethical responsibility of the artist in a world where a story is never just a story, but a potential weapon waiting for the right, or more accurately, the wrong, reader.

The Vicious Circle: Monstrosity as an Inheritance

Thus far, we have examined each of *The Pillowman*'s monsters as distinct species: the Parent, the Authority, and the Perpetrator. The worst fact in the play, though is the fact that all these forms of monstrosity are connected. These are all links of a single chain. Monstrosity, in the world that McDonagh shows does not represent an independent, single defect of a personality. Instead it is treated like a contagious disease that transpires through one family to the other and even to the institutions of a state. Each fresh violence is merely the reverberation of an even greater and older hurt, and it comes down to a dreadful curse, in which the very one who was hurt turns out to be the injuring one.

The parents' deliberate, cruel brutality sets off this vicious cycle. In addition to being a horrifying act of abuse, their so-called "artistic experiment"—torturing one son in order to motivate the other—is a direct recipe for producing monsters. More than just a startling admission, the note Michael left behind—which states that he was tortured for seven years straight for this "experiment" (McDonagh, 2003, pp. 23–24)—is a diagnosis of their entire worldview. This diagnosis demonstrates that the parents saw their kids as raw material to be shaped—or, more accurately, as being torn apart and reshaped—rather than as human beings to be raised. Katurian and Michal's childhoods were accompanied by those sounds of disintegration—"the whurr-whurr of drills, the scribble-scribble of bolts being tightened... the smothered screams of a small struggling gagged child" (p. 23). These dark, venomous nursery rhymes taught them their first lessons about pain, power, and the close relationship between the two.

The aftereffects of this parental trauma are disastrous in Michal. The

most immediate product of the experiment is himself a living embodiment of the harm caused. His violent actions are not born in some vacuum, it is just the perversified offspring of his upbringing. As Katurian stamps him, the debate goes to the root of this inheritance. He says, "You are just like mum and dad, you cry out, Michal! Hitting me, and shouting at me!" (p. 37). Any display of anger or violence is a repetition of the parental model in his head. The sad, hopeless logic of the cycle can be played out furious by Katurian in his infuriated reply:

> "Mum and Dad had their first-born son in a room and tortured him seven years in it, and you made a little boy bleed to death... and you are not like Mum and Dad, but I banged the head of a dimwit in the wall once and I am like Mum and Dad" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 37).

It is at this point that Katurian understands the dreadful reality: not only in opposing the monstrosity, not only in attempting to prevent his brother, he has been subjected to employ its tactics. He has joined the same life that he is trying to avoid.

And yet, the circle is not complete with the brothers. It extends to absorb the state per se. The play implicitly recommends that the detectives, despite all their institutional authority are also victims of this economy of abuse. Ariel, who presents himself as the avenger of children is a broken man. During one of the most dramatic scenes of psychological conflict, Katurian finally breaks through his mask, asking him to remember that "And who was the first one who told you to kneel down, Ariel? Your mum or your dad?" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 54). The question lands like a physical blow, and Tupolski's subsequent, cynical commentary—"What phrase would you use? A 'fucked by your dad' childhood?" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 54)—confirms that Ariel's own history is one of victimisation. The violent, crusading campaign he has made to save children, is seen as a traumatised reaction on his own childhood, and a desperate attempt to conquer his past by recreating it through an authoritative place. He is not breaking the cycle; he is just continuing it under another label.

That is the pessimistic, strong ending of the play concerning the character of evil. It is not an external factor that penetrates into a healthy system. It is an acquired habit, a scenario that is passed on between the parent and the child, domesticity to the powers that be. *The Pillowman* is the last symbol of this cycle who is haunting, a kind of animal, who does not provide a solution to a sufferer, but assists him to transfer the painful experience to the next generation, persuading children to kill themselves to avoid further tortures. There is no clean break in the world of the play, just endless grim

repeats. McDonagh demonstrates that the reaction of merely punishing the monster of the moment is the last thing we need. The actual labour, the actual horror, is to track down the monster back to its beginning and realise the dreadful, familiar mould of its beginnings.

Contemporary Relevance: The Modern Gothic Mirror

The Pillowman is not the dark fairy tale or a shock-piece written for stage that should be ignored. The real strength of it comes in the fact that it is highly relevant to the contemporary real life issues. The real genius of the play is that it applies the traditional qualities of the Gothic, the creepy space, the dirty secrets, the monstrous characters of the Gothic, and uses them as a faulty, but frighteningly transparent reflection of the world we live in now. The play is able to transcend its fictional and totalitarian environment to address pressing, real-world concerns regarding power, trauma, and the reality of the twenty-first century. It shows that the Gothic was never about ghosts and castles, it is always about those atrocities that we bring on each other and *The Pillowman* proves that atrocities have merely had a new clothing.

The closest reverberation is, perhaps, in the factors of state power and institutional cruelty expressed in the play. The Ariel and Tupolski interrogation room is infinitely far away, a mediaeval dungeon, yet it achieves the same end; that is, terror and extracting a confession. Their nonchalant and almost bureaucratic attitude towards torture is very relatable today when there are recorded cases of human rights offences, black site prisons and the psychological manipulation of detainees. When Tupolski quips, "I am a high-ranking police officer in a totalitarian fucking dictatorship. What are you doing taking my word about anything?" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 18), he is not just describing his fictional reality; he is articulating a deep-seated public scepticism towards authority figures who operate with impunity. Ariel's self-justifying monologue, where he declares, "I stand for something. I stand on the right side. The child's side. The opposite side to you" (p. 53), echoes the rhetoric used to justify extraordinary measures, illegal wars, and the erosion of civil liberties in the name of a "greater good." The play forces us to ask: how thin is the line between a protector and a persecutor? And what does it do to a society when that line is repeatedly crossed by the very institutions designed to uphold it?

In addition, the theme of the play, which is cycle of abuse and the post-traumatic inheritance relates directly to our acquired contemporary knowledge of the psychological harm. We have, now, recognised, what former epochs had not so clearly, how deeply the misfortune of childhood

memories influence the adulthood. The horrific "artistic experiment" conducted by Katurian and Michal's parents is an extreme, Gothicised representation of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that clinicians study today. The play is a dramatic expression of the fact that any untreated trauma does not disappear; it spreads. Michal that was the main victim renders into another victim, and the violence that he invents is his revenge, although taken to the extreme, directed at the same person. The secondary witness Katurian is psychologically traumatised and his life drive is just the sound of a tortured brother. This is not merely a plot device, but a strong allegory for the intergenerational transmission of abuse, addiction, and poverty with which communities are cursed. According to the play, it is only possible to conceive of possibilities to know and avert violence by having the courage to contemplate the rooms in the dark where the violence originated.

Above all, *The Pillowman* is frighteningly timely in the matters of narrative and metafictional horror. This is the world of saturation with narratives, a digital ecosystem where the narratives can be weaponised, may go viral and make the people take action in the real world with especially frightening rapidity. The hopelessness with which Katurian realises that his tales have slipped out of his hands and are now operating at an instructional level by assisting in a killing spree may be a primordial fear of any artist, although it is also the fashion of the day in our internet lives. The play is an augur of a time of "fake news", when rival narratives fight for dominance, and in which ideologies of violence are propagated via internet manifestos and echo chambers of earlier times. In thinking of a fictional story as a literal teaching, Michal is the focus of the worst repercussions of a world in which the boundary between reality and fiction has been purposefully obscured. The play contains a solemn reminder of the moral duty of the creator in the era of mass distribution. It poses a question to people: what is the price of a story? And who becomes a target when a story that has been put out into the world causes real damage?

And lastly, the character The Pillowman himself, a troubled comforter that suggests death as an advance cure to misery, echoes the modern debate of despair, agency and the right to die. Although not a direct comparison to assisted dying laws, the character exploits a massive contemporary fear of the quality of life and fear of pain in the future. In a culture where it becomes more common to experience a mental crisis, the reasoning of The Pillowman is an ugly portrayal of their desperation that is, at times, unavoidable. He is the ultimate disavowal of hope, and his appearance in the play makes us think over what type of society might think of producing circumstances in which such a figure can be even viewed as a relief.

To conclude, *The Pillowman* lives on not due to the Grand Guignol effect of the violence within it, but because the anxieties its main characters are facing are ours. Essentially the native language of horror is the Grand-Guignol style of the play. It is the aesthetic vehicle, under which McDonagh brings out the most shocking concepts regarding violence, storytelling and trauma, and makes them, not merely intellectual, but manifestly, nauseatingly real. Monstrous government, the leftover poison of being violated as a child, the menacing aspect of free-floating narratives, the spectre of desperation these are not Gothic fantasies. They are titles of our days, the manipulated black and brilliant spectacle of McDonagh. The play shows that the Gothic mode is alone able to solve the existential anxieties of any era we now find ourselves living in and in portraying its own Gothic reflection on us nowadays remind us of something terrifying and something that is not to be forgotten.

Conclusion

Moving out beyond the bleak and depersonalised Pillowman, we are not only left with the penumbra of the violence the book explores, but with a greater disturbing issue that makes us think deeply, even deeply, about what we have learned about the nature of monstrosity. The unrealistic play with its unblushing approach to the matter provides a difficult and thoroughly contemporary solution. It shows us that the monster is hardly ever an isolated subject to be defeated. It is rather an epidemic, a disease that is transmitted by the society, its manifestation is the brutal state, sick family, and the darkest regions of human consciousness. What McDonagh has here done with his usual mixture of the grotesque and the tragic is to reduce to the scalpels of the Gothic the malaisees of our own time.

The passage of this play has given a view of a land where the horror is mass-produced. We have observed how monstrous power of Ariel and Tupolski is not an exception but a logical result of a system which perversifies brutality as right. Back of the genealogy of corruption we have tracked the trail of vice into the monstrous mother, and discovered that even cold artistry shows that the permanent evils are frequently created at home. And, perhaps, most frighteningly, we have seen the emergence of the teratologic offender in Michal, a human being who demonstrates how readily a narrative can turn into a killing when it gets into the head of a traumatised individual.

The devastating point of the play is monstrosity that is cycling. It is echoing along the generational lines and this is not just a story it tells, but it is a story that has been lived. The Personality of such an abject economy is *The Pillowman* himself, who is the animal which can not repent, it can only

be killed in time, in order that the sequence of the silence and the suffering can be renewed and continued. It is a vile self-examination of picking up this dark mirror in the play. It puts us to think about the role that we have in the storeys that we read and write. It is a challenge to us not only to take a glance at the working out of the power in our own societies but also to listen to the yet cry of the suppressed, we ourselves otherwise being prone to discount.

At some point *The Pillowman* does not just frighten us. It implores us to understand. It argues that simply disapproving the monster is only denying the fact that the person is trying to cure a symptom but not the disease. The real horror of it, its real labour is to discover the origin of the monster, to discover it in the state or the family or in the tales which we tell our children and to start to realise with a sense of horror shock that we are the ones who can create a cycle and that we are the ones who can destroy. There is no straight forward solution in the play. Instead, it creates a hair-raising realisation of its own: the greatest narratives are the ones which lack a happy ending, but prompt us to keep on asking ourselves the disheartening questions in the wake of the final curtain being lifted.

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