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BLACK PASTORALS, EXPERIENTIALITY AND THE REALISM OF EXTREMES IN MARTIN MCDONAGH'S PLAYS. A CASE STUDY: *THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE* AND *THE PILLOWMAN*

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Black Pastorals, Experientiality and the Realism of Extremes in Martin Mcdonagh's Plays. A Case Study: *The Beauty Queen Of Leenane* And *The Pillowman*

While his movies have definitely placed him into the category of the most remarkable movie directors of the past few decades – from *In Bruges* to *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* or *The Banshees of Inisherin* – Martin McDonagh has established himself, first and foremost, as one of the most prolific playwrights of his generation. His plays, a mixture of cruel irony and extreme violence, depict Ireland as a space of hopelessness and isolation, which shows no remorse and has no mercy for its tragic protagonists. His plays have often been described as a reinvention of the pastoral, with a significant twist of the genre in terms of atmosphere, storytelling, themes, and (anticlimactic) resolutions, with Nicholas Grene (2000, p. 68) defining such plays as "Black Pastorals". Thus, the purpose of the paper is to highlight and analyze the key features of Black Pastorals in two of McDonagh's plays: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Pillowman*. While apparently different, the two plays share a series of common paradigms that determine the manifestation of the Black Pastoral through concepts such as "experientiality" and "the realism of extremes". Through close reading and plot analysis, the purpose is to highlight how McDonagh relates to the helplessness and isolation of the protagonists, the dysfunctional nature of the family dynamics and last, but not least, the relation between past and present, as well as cause and effect, in order to tell the violent and, yet, comical stories of 20th and 21st century Ireland.

KEYWORDS:

Black Pastoral; experientiality; Irish contemporary drama; Martin McDonagh; realism of extremes.

1. Black Pastorals, experientiality and the realism of extremes

The literary works of Martin McDonagh have always been discussed from a perspective that encompasses and centers black comedy and brutal violence as the pillars that tragedies and acts of justice – or lack thereof – find their (mis)representations in postmodern (Irish) drama of the 20th and 21st centuries. McDonagh has often been described as an "*enfant terrible*" (Rees, 2006, p. 114), one who "comprises tightly woven, brutally

violent and blackly comic thrillers" (114). In the second volume of *A History of Modern Drama*, David Krasner (2016, p. 464) calls McDonagh and Sarah Kane "extremists who view heroism and meaningfulness as false paradigms of existence and betrayal of truth", whose writings are based on a type of nihilism centered on a "crisis of values (464), one that is meant to "challenge received values such as compassion, empathy, decorum, heroics, and appropriate behavior as symbols of complacency, injustice, and the status quo". The violence and brutality has a purpose, however; it is meant, according to Krasner, to "shock, upset, evoke discomforting laughter, and ultimately call into question norms of acceptable behavior", as the two playwrights "share Artaud's penchant for a superior disease (where bourgeois values are 'inferior' and debunked), embracing death, mutilation, and violence while leaving drastic experientiality in its wake." (465).

In this regard, Nicholas Greene (2000, p. 68) discusses this type of grotesque, yet morally intriguing plays by placing them within a context that functions with a specific form, a clear purpose and a paradoxical, unconventional, yet remarkable formula: a black comedy that is specifically centered around the comedic aspect of all the unpleasant, hurtful and "dark" situations; in other words, a "Black Pastoral". Grene (68) describes the Black Pastoral as "a genre that self-consciously inverts or flouts the earlier conventions of the form". The paradox – which makes it even more difficult for such a genre to find a proper means of expression – comes, according to Grene, from the fact that comedy "normally avoids the more painful dimensions of the human situation" (68). In contrast, black comedy and, implicitly, a Black Pastoral, "makes laughter out of unhappiness, suffering, death, all the things traditionally ruled out by the comic mode", while involving "a similar kind of travesty of the pastoral mode" (68).

Two of the main features of the Black Pastoral that can be identified in McDonagh's plays – the ones that following paper will follow through a close reading and a character analysis of the two literary works previously mentioned – are two concepts that David Krasner (2016, p. 465) mentions and describes when referring to the portrayal of brutal violence and comic relief within the same literary paradigm. The first, which Krasner refers to as experientiality, is defined by the critic as "the theatricalization of violence and human interaction enacted (represented) onstage" (465), and as "posits the experiential as opposed to observing" (465). Such plays, Krasner notices, are actually trying to "grab audiences viscerally rather than intellectually" (465), while maintaining "a fourth wall of mimetic illusion" (465) and intending to "adhere to realism's tenets even while pushing the boundaries of realistic action" (465). The second one, closely related to the first one – or rather one that derives from it – would be what Krasner calls "a realism of extremes (465-466)", one in which the violent acts on stage "require the certainty of an audience accepting the bloodbaths as 'real,' or at least surrogates of reality" (466), based on the fact that McDonagh's plays, as well as Sarah Kane's, "generally begin with a realistic setting and move sequentially toward violent crescendos" (466), the intention being, as Krasner (467) suggests, "to bring audiences up close and personal with violence, dismantling cultural chimera and bourgeois pabulum that pass for safe discourse". Karen Vandevelde (2000, p. 296) argues that McDonagh's style is rather the fusion between "a grotesque style, inspired by Tarantino" and "a melodramatic mood reminiscent of many contemporary soap operas bring about an unusual juxtaposition of opposite emotions, actions and temperaments: mercilessness and tenderness, love and hatred, dreams and depressions" (296), with McDonagh succeeding precisely in "the subversion of these dichotomies and blurring of their boundaries"

(296), which might be argued that represents one of the key elements that defines both experientiality and the realism of extremes, as depicted in McDonagh's literary works.

The general landscape of McDonagh's plays is, arguably, one that successfully combines bleak, hopeless worlds with cruelly ironic, pungently humorous situations and events. Violence, in this case, appears to function rather as both an act of desperation and a form of salvation from mundanity. Violence, as Krasner (2016, p. 468) suggests, is "cavalierly presented such that the juxtaposition of the extreme act and mundane reality evokes laughter" (468). It can be argued that the state of McDonagh's Ireland is a direct consequence of the characters, who, according to Marion Castleberry (2012, p. 44), "make up a gallery of rogues and miscreants unrivaled in the Irish canon", in an Ireland "populated with evil mothers, bored daughters, warring brothers, and belligerent neighbors." (44). McDonagh's plays, as Krasner (2016, p. 468) argues, have the merit of anticipating "the central themes of many other dramatists arising in the twenty-first century: small casts, intimate stories, mixture of humor and agitation, and a penchant for violent acts". They also arguably delve into a philosophy centered around brutality with a purpose, based on "the suspension of moral judgment; the brutalization of relationships; and a search for authenticity" (468), with the latter often being created following a pattern based on "the experience of living in a rapidly changing world where traditional certainties, established loyalties, and former alliances have lost their moorings as paradigms of virtue, value, and guideposts to life" (468), focusing particularly on the "struggle of those left behind, losers trying, in their awkward and ineffectual way, to arise from the debris of life and move toward something – anything – resembling human signification" (471). It can be argued that one of the reasons can be represented, according to Sara Keating (2006, p. 290), by the fact that the Irish author "deliberately invites audiences to view his plays through the lens of the Irish theatrical tradition, but, by exaggeration and satirizing the characters, language and forms of the tradition, he removes the very (anti/post-colonial) moral and ethical value on which that tradition cultivated and which it espoused". As a result, McDonagh's plays, heavily influenced by Tarantino's films, especially when it comes to "depicting violence with humor" (Krasner, 2016, p. 472) manage to find a balance of the paradoxes; in his creation of his Black Pastorals, experientiality and the realism of the extremes can be found particularly in the points where the Irish author "juxtaposes the grotesque with the ordinary, where mundane palaver and sardonic discourse occur during extremities of brutality", where this exact point of juxtaposition represents "the core feature of his humor" (472). The purpose, as Krasner (473) argues, would be for the audience to experience "what life is like in extremes – particularly how extreme conditions affect bodies: how we perceive them, inhabit them, and endure them"; however, in doing so, "McDonagh eviscerates values" (474).

Considering the elements previously discussed, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate and analyze the key features of Black Pastorals in two of Martin McDonagh's plays, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Pillowman*. The Black Pastoral, along with experientiality and the realism of extremes, will be discussed in the two plays, focusing on three ways these concepts are depicted in McDonagh's plays. As a result, each subchapter will follow one key feature, with the purpose of the paper being to show how, in the two aforementioned plays, the elements of Black Pastoral converge into (and are defined by) a matter of helplessness and isolation, caused by dysfunctional family dynamics – with a focus on a perspective based on demythologizing – and last, but not

least, a matter of past and/or versus present – intertwined, simultaneously, with a matter of cause and effect. All these elements relate to the protagonists of the two plays, and the paper will examine the character dynamics that result from the previously mentioned concepts, while also illustrating McDonagh's vision of Black Pastorals as metaphors of life, death, and everything (Irish) in-between.

2. Helplessness, isolation and dysfunctional family dynamics – a story of demythologizing

Arguably, most of McDonagh's plays revolve around a theme that explores helplessness at some point. The protagonists, whether by dealing with their own personal traumas, the consequences of their own actions or by associating themselves with the "wrong" acquaintances, find themselves, sooner or later, either in a position they cannot escape, a dysfunctional relationship they cannot avoid or – in some cases, literally – being unable to escape from the place that keeps them captive. Whether we talk about arrest or a rural area of Ireland, the matter of helplessness – significantly reinforced by the idea of isolation, the inability to escape and evade – which reminds us of Joyce's writings – allows McDonagh to create a world where brutality becomes almost a necessity. In this case, a Black Pastoral seems not only a necessary option, but a fitting literary device that would encapsulate the "fighting spirit" of those who cannot escape, while elaborating the necessary conundrum and exploiting it as a literary device meant to "fuel" the engine of his plays up to the conclusion.

The Beauty Queen of Leenane is one of the most prolific examples of helplessness in McDonagh's portfolio. In short, Krasner (2016, p. 471) describes the place as the story where "a woman of 40 who has spent time in a mental institution attempts to find romance". The protagonist, Maureen, seems "stuck" with her mother, Mag, whom she nurses and cares for daily in a small village in Galway County. However, it is her mother, Mag, who seems to be quite determined to make Maureen's life a living hell with every given opportunity, with the sole (selfish) purpose that Maureen takes care of her for the rest of her days and does not get any idea of leaving her in order to start her own life anywhere that means away from her mother. Of course, from the very first pages we can notice that there is no way the story can end well: from the very beginning, the atmosphere of the play can be described as not necessarily bleak, but rather in the expectative of an imminent disaster, in a village that as Vandevelde (16) describes as "a place of gothic horror/small town melodrama". The element of horror, however, does not derive solely from the atmosphere, though it can be argued that the situation Maureen finds herself in is quite horrific. Maureen seems to be in a situation of no escape, looking for an escape of no return – Krasner (2016, p. 475) argues that McDonagh's female protagonist "might comprehend women as blinded by years of following routines and behaviors meant to direct women into a passively sexual, sheepish state", trying to seek "a way to carve out a semblance of poetry" (475) in a clearly restricted – and restricted life. Maureen, similar to the female characters in Sarah Kane's plays, shares "this penchant for rebelliousness, slackers who long for a way out of their conditions but unwilling to disembark from the commitment to their honesty and lackluster way of life" (476), characters "whose rage bubbles beneath the surface, emerging when provoked" (476). Moreover, the context provides quite the "rage bait" for Maureen and then some: since the beginning of the play, we find out that Maureen is "a

40-yearold virgin constrained by her pedestrian village, her domineering and sickly mother Mag, and her own unstable mental condition" (477). Maureen has also "served as for her 70-year old mother for 20 years and has grown trapped, cynical, moribund, and discouraged by the experience" (477), being concerned with the evolution of her own life; the lackluster experiences in her life so far have brought her into a back-and-forth situation, where she is still trying to figure out who she really is and whether there is more to life than the place she finds herself in for the moment, as she "is concerned about her spinsterhood, her lack of opportunity, her virginity, and is ashamed by her past in an English asylum for the mentally ill 15 years earlier" (477):

> "MAUREEN (quietly): Feck... (Irritated.) I'll get your Complan so if it's such a big job! From now and 'til doomsday! The one thing I ask you to do. Do you see Annette or Margo coming pouring your Complan or buying your oul cod in butter sauce for the week?
> MAG: No.
> MAUREEN: No is right, you don't. And carrying it up that hill. And still I'm not appreciated. MAG: You are appreciated, Maureen.
> MAUREEN: I'm not appreciated.
> MAG: I'll give me Complan another go so, and give it a good stir for meself.
> MAUREEN: Ah, forget your Complan. I'm expected to do everything else, I suppose that one on top of it won't hurt. Just a...just a blessed fecking skivvy is all I'm thought of!" (McDonagh, 1998, p. 5-6).

As John Waters (Krasner somewhere) also notices, in the beginning of the play, "Maureen's answer is both fatalistic and angry: fatalistic towards the world and the weather, but angry towards her mother on account, perhaps, of it all". Yet, at the same time, "Mag, too, tortures Maureen; though Maureen gives as good as she gets, there is no censorship in Mag's harassments" (480). There seems to be not only a toxic relationship between the two women, but also one in which we cannot say for certain which is more right(eous). Helplessness seems to characterize both Mag and Maureen; neither can make things right or establish a sense of certainty and order in the chaotic dynamic of their mother-daughter relationship. Debora Bianchieri (2015, p. 223) argues that McDonagh creates a "skilful depiction of the interaction between the two women in terms of tension and emotional violence, which provides a powerful allegory of a situation of conflict that perpetuates itself without fully revealing its origins" (223). As a result, the ambiguity also creates a sense of misdirection – or rather an apparent lack of direction – for the audience. According to Bianchieri (223), the audience faces a conundrum; we cannot know for certain who is lying, especially because "the past events are not performed and, even more significantly, both Mag and Maureen are motivated by reasons which are to some extent reasonable" (223):

> "MAG: And what do you say?
> MAUREEN: I say 'Aye, what's stopping me now?'
> MAG: You don't!
> MAUREEN: I do!
> MAG: At me funeral?
> MAUREEN: At your bloody wake, sure! Is even sooner!
> MAG: Well that's not a nice thing to be dreaming!
> MAUREEN: I know it's not, sure, and it isn't a dream-dream at all. It's more of a day-dream. Y'know, something happy to be thinking of when I'm scraping the skitter out of them hens.
> MAG: Not at all is that a nice dream. That's a mean dream.

MAUREEN: | don't know if it is or it isn't.
(…)
I suppose now you'll never be dying. You'll be hanging on forever, just to spite me.
MAG: I will be hanging on forever!
MAUREEN: I know well you will!
MAG: Seventy you'll be at my wake, and then how many men'll there be round your waist with their aftershave?
MAUREEN: None at all, I suppose.
MAG: None at all is right! MAUREEN: Oh aye. (Pause.) Do you want a Kimberley?" (McDonagh, 1998, p. 24).

In *The Pillowman*, the idea of helplessness derives from the situation of Katurian K. Katurian, a writer who learns that his brother has committed the crimes he described in detail in some of the stories he wrote over the years. The aura of mystery and the "innocence" of the brother quickly dissipate when we find out that Michal, Katurian's brother, not only admits to all the killings, but also finds his brother to be somewhat responsible for them as well, given that his brother used to tell him all those stories. The background of abusive parents and years of torture culminating with murder also sets this Black Pastoral onto a territory of significant trauma and the inability to escape one's past.

As in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the setting contributes to a claustrophobic atmosphere, creating an inescapable space. The rural area of Ireland is replaced here by an interrogation room, somewhere in a place described as a totalitarian state. The tension derives from the nature of the setting as well: worlds that seem impossible to escape from, not simply because of those spaces, but also because of the actions of the protagonists. While Mag does her best to keep Maureen away from starting a life of her own, Katurian seems "condemned" to accept and live with the consequences of his brother's actions; in fact, both seem to have their fates already decided, one way or another:

"KATURIAN: You just told me . . . You just told me you didn't touch those kids. You just lied to me.
MICHAL: No I didn't. I just told you the man came in and said he'd torture me unless I said I killed those kids, so I said I killed those kids. That doesn't mean I didn't kill those kids. I did kill those kids.
KATURIAN: You swore to me, on your life, that you didn't kill those three kids.
MICHAL: Ohh. See with that one, the 'Swear to me on your life you didn't kill those three kids', yeah, I was kind of playing a trick on ya. Sorry, Katurian.
Katurian backs away from him to the mattress.
I know it was wrong. Really. But it was very interesting. The little boy was just like you said it'd be." (McDonagh, 2003, p. 48).

Of course, as expected, the idea finds Katurian completely lost and helpless; just like Maureen, he finds himself stuck and helpless, in a situation that seems out of his control, caused by his own family:

"KATURIAN: (pause. Quietly) What did you do it for?
MICHAL: Huh? You're mumbling.
KATURIAN: (*tears*) What did you do it for?
MICHAL: Don't cry, Katurian. Don't cry.
Michal goes over to hold him. Katurian backs away in disgust.
KATURIAN: What did you do it for?

MICHAL: You know. Because you told me to.
KATURIAN: (*pause*) Because I what? Michal Because you told me to.
KATURIAN: (*pause*) I remember telling you to do your homework on time. I remember telling you to brush your teeth every night…" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 49).

According to Bianchieri (2015, p. 224), the story does not necessarily allow a "straightforward interpretation", particularly due to the "unprecedented abstraction of the setting and the elusiveness of this storywithin-the-story in particular" (224). However, it allows McDonagh to create and articulate "the disturbing balance that such a conflicting situation creates and, accordingly, the resigned acceptance that has to follow in order to realise that a choice has to be made" (224). As a result, the play "is portraying is the helplessness that is bound to be felt when looking at the dilemma from an outside, neutral position" (225), which can arguably apply to both *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Pillowman* altogether. The helplessness of the protagonist is also a result of isolation, which leads to the brutality and violence of the two Black Pastorals through experientiality and the realism of extremes. McDonagh wants both his protagonists and his audience to experience the claustrophobic, suffocating feeling that Ireland – whether rural or totalitarian – can provide for its inhabitants. Aleks Sierz (2000, p. 223-224) argues that McDonagh's Ireland can be described as "postmodern in its grotesque exaggeration, in its isolation in a globalised world, and in its knowing nods and winks at Irish culture". McDonagh portrays a society that, Sierz adds, "encourages violence" (224) and where "people lash out because they can no longer control their lives" (224). On the same matter, Fintan O'Toole (1998, p. 18) argues McDonagh's plays "are set in a place that has all but collapsed", a world where "meanings have been lost, where people live out their lives suspended between Ireland and England, between the real landscape they inhabit and the electronic images Australian soap opera, American movies – that fill their screens" (18), while Rees (2006, p. 119) suggests that McDonagh's protagonists "similarly reveal the need for a connection with a society which is either lost or insufficient", mostly due to the fact that society "fails to operate normally in these plays and his characters respond with violent brutality" (119). As a result, we get "the random acts of brutality and the shockingly violent stage imagery which lead to a genuine inability to make moral judgements" (121), which is precisely how the Black Pastoral, through experientiality and the realism of extremes, defines the helplessness and the isolation of the characters in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Pillowman*.

When it comes to dysfunctional family dynamics, it is no surprise that the conflict in both of McDonagh's plays is not only based on them but *also needs* them for the "action" of the plays to be set in motion. However, what is arguably striking about the two literary works is that McDonagh uses Ireland not only as a literary device for an isolated setting but also as a way to tell a story about a place where family dynamics are set to collapse. Jan Cronin (2013, p. 194) argues that Maureen "presents to the audience as the vulnerable and abused daughter, one with a keen sense of cultural agency", as *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* "cultivates connection and investment in order to execute disconnect and exteriority" (195). Nicholas Grene (2005, p. 301) mentions the fact that the "violently disfunctional relationship of Meg and Maureen" is rather "central to this strategy of demythologizing Ireland", with a focus on a turn of events meant to evoke and portray "the explicitness of the aggression and a sort of comic exhilaration in its expression" (301):

"MAUREEN: I'll tell you, eh? 'Young girls out gallivanting.' I've heard it all now. What have

I ever done but kissed two men the past forty year?
MAG: Iwo men is plenty!
MAUREEN: Finish!
MAG: I've finished!
MAG *holds out the mug.* MAUREEN *washes it.*
Two men is two men too much!
MAUREEN: To you, maybe. To you. Not to me.
MAG: Two men too much!
MAUREEN: Do you think I like being stuck up here with you? Eh? Like a dried up oul…
MAG: Whore! MAUREEN *laughs*.
MAUREEN: 'Whore'? (*Pause*.) Do I not wish, now? Do I not wish? (*Pause*.) Sometimes I dream...
MAG: Ofbeinga...?
MAUREEN: Of anything! (Pause. Quietly.) Of anything. Other than this.
MAG: Well an odd dream that is!
MAUREEN: It's not at all. Not at all is it an odd dream". (McDonagh, 1998, p. 22-23).

These elements converge in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, as Grene (2005, p. 301) calls it, "a cartoon-like gleefulness in this, a grotesque excess in the language that actually reduces its shock value by taking it out of the realm of the real". The dysfunctional relation of Mag and Maureen is seen rather as "the stuff of sitcom, a sort of latter-day Irish *Steptoe and Son*, the crafty mother using her weakness as strength against the impotently raging daughter" (301), while, of course, "the threat of real violence is of course always there from the beginning of the play" (301). The example he provides is not necessarily Maureen, but rather Mag, whom he describes as "ignorant, cunning, and predatory" (301) and, most importantly, "has no redeeming features", which makes the entire "sympathy" of the audience to be rather directed towards Maureen, who is also "frustrated, entrapped in her role as domestic carer, above all denied the chance of escaping from the incestuous awfulness of Leenane" (301). Furthermore, Grene argues that, for Maureen, there is a "need to destroy the mother" (302), which would imply "the recoil against the motherland with all its mythology of the rural west as primal place of origin" (302). Therefore, Maureen finds herself in a place where drastic measures are needed to escape the inescapable. In this context, Grene suggests, when her life consists of living with Mag, in a place such as bleak and unforgiving as Leenane, "matricide is all but justified" (302).

In the case of *The Pillowman*, there is an argument to be made about the "functional" aspect of the dysfunctional dynamics between the two brothers. Despite everything, they still seem try and be more of a "family" (in the "traditional" sense of the word) than Mag and Maureen. There is still a bond between siblings that Katurian and Michal share, even after Katurian finds out about his brother's wrongdoings – and even after Michal shockingly (and inexplicably calmly) confesses to the murders – one that, arguably, is tested up to its very limit throughout the play and gets to change the protagonists up to the end irreversibly. It might be argued that it is not necessarily a potential need of McDonagh to find justifications for his characters, but rather an attempt to create a connection between shock value and tradition, between established values and principles and excessive, yet not unjustified violence, between a classic pastoral of idyllic Ireland and a Black Pastoral of unforgiving and cruel Ireland. Susanne Peters (2003, p. 294) argues that McDonagh's plays bring into question "an agreement between author and audience that the excesses of violence and cruelty are not only fictitious and temporal,

but more importantly, to be superseded by humane thoughts and actions", which leads to the intersection of "two worlds: that of trash (unmotivated and unjustified excesses of cruelty) and that of tradition (commonsensical, realistic attitudes towards others and, generally, life)" (294).

> "KATURIAN: Do you want to know where you're going when you die?
> MICHAL: Where? And don't say somewhere horrible just because you're in a mood.
> KATURIAN: You're going to go to a little room in a little house in a little forest, and for the rest of all time you're going to be looked after not by me but by a person called Mum and a person called Dad, and they're gonna look after you in the same way they always looked after you, except this time I'm not gonna be around to rescue you, 'cos I ain't going to the same place you're going, 'cos I never butchered any little fucking kids.
> MICHAL: That is just the most meanest thing that any person has ever said to any other person and I am never never going to speak to you again ever.
> KATURIAN: Good. Then let's just sit here in silence till they come back and execute us.
> MICHAL: The meanest thing I ever heard! And I *told* you not to say anything mean. I said, 'Don't say anything mean,' and what did you do? What did you do? You went and said something mean. Katurian I used to love you so much.
> MICHAL: (*pause*) What do you mean, 'used to'? That's an even meaner thing to say than the other mean thing you said, and that other thing was the meanest thing I ever heard! Jesus!
> KATURIAN: Then let's just sit here in silence." (McDonagh, 2003, p. 57-58).

As Joseph Feeney (1998, p. 28) notices, most of McDonagh's characters "remain angry, desperate, unforgiving, and woeful in their personal relationships.". In this particular case, it's arguable that, as Eamonn Jordan (2019, p.13) suggests, they "refuse to have their behaviours regulated, and are clearly not keen on the consequences that may follow on from criminal actions" In the case of *The Pillowman*, it can be said that both Katurian and Michal "refuse to countenance liability, and often attempt to collapse differentials between being a perpetrator and victim, and downplay or ignore the scale of their crimes", which is one of the reasons why we can discuss Katurian as "a victim and perpetrator in his dealings with his parents, also a rescuer, protector and mercy killer of Michal" (13):

> *"Katurian takes the pillow and holds it down forcefully over Michal's face. As Michal starts to jerk, Katurian sits across his arms and body, still holding the pillow down. After a minute Michal's jerks lessen. After another minute he's dead. Once Katurian is certain of this, he takes the pillow off, kisses Michal on the lips, crying, and closes his eyes. He goes to the door, clangs it loudly.*
>
> Detectives?! (*Pause.*) Detectives?! I would like to make a confession to my part in the murders of six people. (*Pause.*) I have one condition. (*Pause.*) It involves my stories." (McDonagh, 2003, p. 67)

3. Past and present, cause and effect

Nothing is unintentional and everything has consequences – this is, arguably, a description that can apply to these two (and most) plays written by McDonagh. The ideas that every action has consequences and that what goes around comes around find their equivalents and corresponding elements in the final parts of the plays. Of course, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Pillowman* make no exception. In the case of the first play, all the traumas of the past find a violent resolution towards the end. Violence "unexpectedly interrupts this play as Mag is ritualistically tortured by her daughter for

meddling in her affairs and destroying her chances of happiness" (Rees, 2006, p. 115). The toxic relationship between the two has reached its summit; from this point of no return, it can only get worse – and, eventually, it does, as Maureen "leaves without redemption or understanding; she is, in fact, at least "saved" from an endless life in her pedestrian, narrow-minded Irish town. Ireland itself is hardly a vestige of nostalgia, morality, or comfort". (Krasner, 2016, p. 481). The final "nail in the coffin" —Maureen killing Mag —appears not as a resolution but as an act of desperation, leading to the most unsatisfying conclusion for Maureen. Tricked, heartbroken and with no real hope in sight, she becomes the tragic victim of her past and present: "she is struck by a form of dissociative madness, second, she cannot reverse the loss of her potential suitor/rescuer, third, she is essentially imprisoned within her own home, and finally, she effectively metamorphizes into her mother, taking on Mag's gestural and behavioural characteristics, including confusion and forgetfulness" (Jordan, 2019, p. 26-27).

Furthermore, it only gets worse when we look at the chain of events that McDonagh has carefully crafted to illustrate Maureen's downfall. The Irish playwright "uses Pato's letter to precipitate disaster, but with an ironic bitter twist that accentuates the pain" (Wilson, 2006, p. 33). The letter that Mag intentionally reads and burns was the chance Maureen needed but missed "by archetypal melodramatic treacherous villainy" (33) – therefore, "the potential key to her liberation is the key that locks her finally in her prison" (33). Still, despite everything, the characters are not portrayed as the ultimate evils – in fact, quite the opposite. As Patrick Lonergan (2012, p. 7) notices, McDonagh "shows a remarkable ability to elicit sympathy for Mag and Maureen even as we condemn them for their brutality towards each other". This is also, in part, due to the audience, which "understands that these actions arise not out of 'evil' but from 'desperation' and from the 'texture' of these women's lives" (7). The Black Pastoral elements can also be identified in the ending: overall, the dysfunctional dynamic between Mag and Maureen "allows us to think of emigration from Ireland as operating in almost Oedipal terms, as involving a dysfunctional parent–child dynamic". Lonergan (8) suggests that both Mag and Ireland have a (more or less) similar impact when it comes to Maureen's character arc: "both are damaged and repressive and ought to have been abandoned years before, but continue to exercise a disproportionate influence over the direction of her life." (8):

> "MAUREEN: What are you talking about, no home? What else did it say?!
> MAG: I can't remember, now, Maureen. I can't... !
> *MAUREEN grabs MAG's hand, holds it down again and repeats the torture.*
> MAG: No...!
> MAUREEN: What else did it say?! Eh?!
> MAG (*through screams*): Asked you to go to America with him, it did!
> *Stunned, MAUREEN releases MAG's hand and stops pouring the oil. MAG clutches her hand to herself again, whimpering.*
> MAUREEN: What?
> MAG: But how could you go with him? You do still have me to look after.
> MAUREEN (*in a happy daze*): He asked me to go to America with him? Pato asked me to go to America with him?
> MAG (looking up at her): But what about me, Maureen?" (McDonagh, 1998, p. 67)

In the end, Maureen's state of mind becomes, literally and figuratively altogether, a reflection of Mag's character, as the cause (Mag's selfishness) becomes the effect (Maureen kills her, but inevitably becomes just like her). By purposefully denying

Maureen the right to have her own life, Mag's destruction "is the inevitable outcome of such prohibitions. If the law does not deliver an appropriate form of justice, the play's dramaturgy does for Mag" (Jordan, 2019, p. 27):

> "MAUREEN: Will you turn the radio up a biteen too, before you go, there, Pato, now? Ray, I mean...
> RAY (exasperated): Feck...
> *RAY turns the radio up.*
> The exact fecking image of your mother you are, sitting there pegging orders and forgetting me name! Goodbye!
> MAUREEN: And pull the door after you... " (McDonagh, 1998, p. 83)

The Pillowman explores a complex dynamic of actions and consequences. Michal "can barely distinguish between right and wrong, his motives are triggered by a poor working knowledge of or even a disconnect from reality and by a distorted world-view; he does not have clear and reasonable foresight as to the consequences of his actions, however negligent, reckless and violationary they are" (Jordan, 2019, p. 14). According to Eamonn Jordan (14), Katurian's brother "has or has not acted alone, if we allow for the undue influence of the stories on him, and moreover, torture at the hands of his parents has hindered his autonomy and his unified sense of self. That his victims are children murdered in the most gruesome of ways complicates matters of guilt and innocence further, given how such actions are always more distasteful" (14). This is not to say that Michal is completely innocent (or innocent at all), but McDonagh's play on concepts such as guilt, justice, and morality becomes remarkable because of their ambiguous, fluid nature. By operating with distinctions between "heroism and treachery, victim and perpetrator, virtue and malice, protection and poor enforcement, and reward and punishment, truth and lies", (15) these categories become "endlessly blurred" (15), which leads to the conclusion that justice, in McDonagh's view, is "neither simple nor clear-cut" (15). This is also a consequence that derives from the fact that, in the world that McDonagh creates for this play, "neither individual characters nor the state is entirely troubled by impartiality, lack of objectivity, due process, the right to a defence, by any fallout from actual or perceived miscarriages of justice" (72).

What arguably defines this play as a Black Pastoral, however, is the relation between past and present, as well as the connection between cause and effect. For the two protagonists – especially Katurian – the past comes back strong to determine his present and his future: "instead of the villain despoiling the place of innocence and activating the plot, the potential hero enters a vile place and activates the plot" (Wilson, 2006, p. 29). And, ironic enough, everything is related to a key-element, one that Katurian values even more than his life: his stories, "almost anti fairy tales" (Jordan, 2006, p. 180). The stories that Katurian writes as a way to cope with childhood trauma become "a sort of monstrous and transgressive, almost carnivalesque, summation in a way that casts aside any notion of verisimilitude in favour of the grotesque, inhumane, cartoon-heightened style" (181). His stories are "very much about abuse and violation, where the family, as a primary agent of socialization, discipline, and punishment, becomes the cruel arbiter of fates" (185); however, they still manage to "retain some innate sense of fundamental legitimacy that moves way beyond either natural or poetic justice" (188). But there is little to no room for poetic justice in *The Pillowman*, especially for Katurian or Michal. What resembles a somewhat "poetic" fate is Katurian's attempt to "save" his stories from being burned down and disappearing forever. But even this gesture carries a lot

of irony and even hypocrisy; Lonergan (2012, p. 107) notes that Katurian "only decides to confess to the various murders in the play after he realises that his execution is inevitable":

> "TUPOLSKI: '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.' Brackets, 'Attached', close brackets. (*Pause*.) 'My most recent killing was that of my brother, Michal . . . ' Yeah, thanks for that, Katurian. We'd never've been able to pin that one on you. 'Held a pillow over his head . . .' blah blah blah . . . 'save him the horror of torture and execution at the hands of his . . .' blah blah blah. Stuff about how much he loves his brother. Yeah, you really showed it. 'My most recent killing prior to that was of a little mute girl, about three days ago. I do not know her name. This little girl . . . was . . .'
> ARIEL: (*pause*) This little girl was what?
> TUPOLSKI: It's the end of the page.
> ARIEL: Write quicker." (McDonagh, 2003, p. 73).

The chain of events in which Katurian condemns himself – and his brother – to the inevitable demise is similar to the one his brother, Michal, had previously initiated. The story comes to an anticlimactic full circle because McDonagh conveys a sense of inevitability through a narrative that goes beyond cause and effect. Katurian seems doomed from the start because of his brother committing the crimes, who was doomed from the start as well by being tortured by their parents. In a tumultuous and helpless world, Katurian applies the only justice he knows: killing – even though that brings his own death in the end: first his parents, then, years later, his brother. He "kills his parents because of their mistreatment of Michal, for example, and then smothers Michal with a pillow in order to save him from a crueller execution by the police – yet, in doing so, he also guarantees his own death" (Lonergan, 2012, p. 107).

The ending of the play seems to revolve around two main coordinates: the life of Katurian and the "life" of his stories. McDonagh's choice to relate to stories as a way of "measuring" the meaning of one's life can be attributed to the capacity that stories have, which, according to Lonergan (2012, p. 109), is "to reveal truths about their authors even when no such revelation is intended". The meaning of the stories "can change depending on the circumstances of its telling" (109) – and so seems to be the case for the lives of the protagonists as well. In constructing a Black Pastoral with a brutal and unforgiving ending, McDonagh, in *The Pillowman*, "sweeps away its audience's sense of moral certainty – but it does so to reinforce an ethical perspective at its conclusion" (112), with a duality that "functions thematically", based on "a clear relationship between suffering and redemption running through the play" (112). Inevitably, hopelessly and ironically at the same time, the duality, which was previously identified in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* as well – and the one that defines the Black Pastoral through experientiality and the realism of extremes – takes place, beyond hopelessness, isolation and the dysfunctional family dynamics, precisely "between past and present or, more precisely, between cause and effect" (113):

> "KATURIAN: The story was going to finish in fashionably downbeat mode, with Michal going through all that torment, with Katurian writing all those stories, only to have them burned from the world by a bulldog of a policeman. The story was going to finish that way, but was of course cut short by a bullet blowing his brains out two seconds too soon. And maybe it was best that the story didn't finish that way, as it wouldn't have been quite accurate. Because, for reasons known only to himself, the bulldog of a policeman chose

not to put the stories in the burning trash, but placed them carefully with Katurian's case file, which he then sealed away to remain unopened for fifty-odd years.
Ariel puts the stories in the box file.
A fact which would have ruined the writer's fashionably downbeat ending, but was somehow . . . somehow . . . more in keeping with the spirit of the thing.
Ariel snuffs out the fire in the bin with water, as the lights, very slowly, fade to black.
The End." (McDonagh, 2003, p. 103-104).

Conclusions

From hopelessness and isolation to Ireland as a "demythologized" space, from dysfunctional families and traumas of the past coming to haunt and destroy present and future, from cause and effect to brutal destruction and ironic tragedies and from shock and laughter to shockingly funny, Martin McDonagh's two Black Pastorals analyzed in the paper, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Pillowman,* share not only the playwright's views of Ireland as an inescapable, suffocating place, but also integrate violence as a consequence of toxic, co-dependent family bonds that collapse under the weight of their own struggles for power and manipulation. The need to escape and "evade" from a dehumanizing space – whether it is an unnamed totalitarian and oppressive space or rural Ireland – ends in the only solution the protagonists find: tragically, murder becomes inevitable and necessary altogether; yet the cruel, ironic twist is that there is no clear resolution or change of fortune. Murder does not solve any part of the problem, or any problems at all – in fact, Katurian's fate is the same, while Maureen remains stuck in an inescapable present, mirroring (and slowly becoming) just like her mother.

McDonagh provides no true liberation and no taste of freedom for his protagonists – experientiality and the realism of extremes are brought into consideration in order to portray the balance between horror and dark comedy, between the shocking details (and acts) and the hallucinating (and often, at times, absurd) comedic dimension meant to reveal the hostile, grotesque humor of life as Meg, Maureen, Katurian and Michal experience it to their inevitable tragic destinies. Instead of a resolution, McDonagh chooses to tell stories of (self-)entrapment; both *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Pillowman* can be interpreted and discussed as (post)modern Black Pastorals that not only challenge stereotypes regarding modern Irish theater, but also build upon the legacy of other Irish writers whose works have portrayed Ireland as a claustrophobic, inescapable space (Joyce's *Dubliners* being the most obvious example here). The unconventional violence and the "brutal" register tell a story of abuse, neglect, and dysfunction – both at state and personal, familial levels. McDonagh blurs the registers of good and evil, guilt and innocence, closeness and alienation, justice and anarchy, and last, but not least, morality and immorality. In doing so, he questions, while also revealing, humanity – not as a tale of hope and redemption, but rather in the form of a violent, hopeless, inescapable epiphany.

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