**Ethical Implications of Literature in Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman***

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**Abstract:** This article goes in accordance with a contemporary – though previously exploited – tendency in renegotiating ethics in the literary field, as illustrated in Martin McDonagh’s play *The Pillowman*. A brief diachronic argumentation wrapping textual analysis and concerning the function of the writer –from the Romantic role of ”legislator of the world” to his/her subtle withdrawal behind the formally accomplished work – is meant to question his/her position within the complex social discourse. The argumentation articulates around two main coordinates –thematic and compositional- engaging a series of opposing factors. The former defends the human and therefore subjective nature of literature, whereas the later refers to structure, both of them converging on the territory of ethics.Thus, the ethical implications of the artistic process are pursued from intention to consequence, from the sources to the diffusion, and the subsequent impact upon readership, the mutual exchange between fiction and reality, as well as the distribution of responsibilities within the triad author-work-reader.

**Keywords**: ethics, author-work-reader, responsibility, opposition

Despite a widespread reluctance towards the ethical judgement of literature and art in general[[2]](#footnote-3), such an approach proves fruitful, as it engages venerable arguments such as: form versus content, reality versus fiction, author versus reader, intention versus consequence, abstract versus concrete, poetry versus prose.

Due to the complexity of the enterprise, a textual analysis of Martin McDonagh’s play, *The Pillowman*, is a common yet relevant artifice, as well as a very welcome pretext – and post-text – for a diachronical examination of the controversial triad author-work-reader, which somehow encompasses the previously mentioned antinomic pairs. Under the given circumstances, our primary concern remains to observe – not to confirm, less to quantify – how literature can actually perform on the ground of ethical negotiation without overbidding its didactic tendencies or completely depriving it of any moral and social responsibility.

The argumentation articulates around two basic coordinates: thematic and compositional.

We shall introduce the thematic aspect with Cleanth Brooks’s anticipated counterargument to the formalist object-oriented approach of literature:

The formalist critic knows as well as anyone that poems and plays and novels are written by men – and that they do not somehow happen – and that they are written as expressions of particular personalities and are written from all sorts of motives ... Moreover, the formalist critic knows as well as anyone that literary works are mere potential until they are read – that is, they are recreated in the minds of actual readers, who vary enormously in their capabilities, their interests, their prejudices, their ideas.(Brooks 86)

Thus, were we to trace some sort of general thematic pattern, while secularizing the myths surrounding the almost divine creative process, we would have to admit that any piece of literature is ultimately “all too human”: roughly restricted to human concerns and conditioned by both its origin – the author as inspired source or channel – and the prevailing communicative function of its medium, language, as well as all the other derivative functions. Among them, the empathic function activates the ethical dimension of literature, for any apposite moral judgement implies a fictional hypostatization, a temporary change of roles. As inversion of roles, the phenomenon occurs through the overlapping between author and reader, which, according to Mavrodin, has less an onthological nature. It rather refers to a change of status between the two: the author becomes the reader of his potential text, of the preceeding texts he has somehow assimilated, implicitly the “text” of his surrounding world; the reader becomes an author as he re-creates the work, it takes it from virtual to real (Mavrodin 19). As hypostatization, it refers to the impersonalisation of the author and to the suspension of the reader as real-life person, “whose moral preferences are infinitely more elastic in literature than in life” (Lodge 72).

Michal, one of the two brothers in the story, cannot sympathize with his victims. He compensates this emotional drawback through a rigid mimetic approach of his brother’s stories. He takes the shift to an extreme, trying to test their verisimilitude. The tragical outcome of this literal approach does not necessarily raise an insurmountable barrier between reality and fiction, thus hindering ethical interpretations, but it rather insists on the active role of the reader, whose responsibility begins with the premise of a basic and general ability of discerning right from wrong, the modern assumption of a universal ethical competence and it challenges moral performance in a more...postmodern sense, which insists on a moral ambivalence (Bauman 15).

The ethical dimension of literature derives mainly from its dialectic nature. The implied status of fictional dialogue contests once more a sterile autonomy. For it is no strange fact that the writer “writes to be read, and comes to realize that he is answerable” (Gordimer 3), therefore responsible. Moreover, the writer “learns that his creative act was not pure even while being formed in his brain: already it carried congenital responsibility for what preceded cognition and volition: for what he represented in genetic, environmental, social and economic terms when he was born of his parents” (Gordimer 3).

Nonetheless, Katurian Katurian Katurian, the main character of McDonagh’s play, transforms the reading act into a passive activity. He does not expect an answer, at least not on an intellectual level, but he ignores the emotional surcharge, which eventually triggers a powerful physical response:”my brother gets frightened easily and he doesn’t understand these things and he’s got nothing to do with these stories anyway, I’ve only ever read them to him” (McDonagh 12).

Moreover, Katurian defends the idea of creative purity, of disinterested and entertaining role of literature (a more shallow facet of the aesthetic one, only aiming, in this case, the public’s taste for sensationalism), thus evading any authorial responsibility: *“*I’m not trying to say anything at all. That’s my whole thing”(McDonagh 13). He dismisses any suspicion of determinism in the artistic process, although his stories are hardly random display of literary skills. They are artificial products of imagination and memory, stimulated and refined by a painful experiment of psychological torture, for “all seeds of creativity were implanted in him from an early age” and his stories got “better and better, due to all of the love and encouragement, as is often the case, but they got darker and darker, due to the constant sound of child torture, as is also often the case”(McDonagh 23).

However, the term “artificial”, far from opposing “human”, it confirms its limitations. The postmodern approach neutralizes this opposition through the reluctance towards any pretense of originality, the relativisation of perspectives, the recombination of given material so as to “undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge” (Hutcheon 2). This relativisation is exemplified by Michal’s words: “When I was in here listening to you screaming next door, I thought this musta been kinda like how it was for you all those years. Well let me tell ya, it’s easier from this side” (McDonagh 38). The two characters are complementary (body and mind), through the distinct nature of their experiences (physical and psychological).

Moreover, with regard to the “congenital responsibility*”*, the murder of Katurian’s parents could be perceived as symptomatic of the Bloomian anxiety of influence, as Katurian buries any clues concerning the circumstances that favoured creation, among which his parents, the authors of the “text” of his world. This diagnosis is confirmed by onomastic symbolism. The iterative “Katurian” suggests a paternal obssession of continuity, contrasting with his urge to cover the past.

Returning to the thematic aspect, the play’s subject matter deals with the role of art in changing society. Repeatedly anticipated, it can be summed up as follows: a writer/storyteller is being brutally interrogated by two policemen, Tupolski and Ariel, matching successively the good cop – bad cop profile. The aim of the interrogatory is the striking resemblance of Katurian’s gruesome stories with actual murders, performed, as it is subsequently disclosed, by his brother, Michal. The choice of the setting is not fortuitous: indefinite, so that it eases empathy, dictatorial in order to question the legitimacy of the situation, to make a statement, given the fact that, as Tupolski says:”We like executing writers. Dimwits we can execute anyday. And we do. But, you execute a writer, it sends out a signal, y’know” (McDonagh 22).

The two cops identify a pattern in the unfolding of the sadistic acts, corresponding on a fictional level to a unifying theme: the violent death of children.

This is one of the aspects that raise ethical issues concerning the presence of evil in literature and, in this particular case, its graphical illustration. One possible argument is thematic. Obviously, the very ancient mimetic role of art justifies the representation of evil. Katurian’s pessimistic statement supports this view: “There are no happy endings in real life” (McDonagh 41).

According to Freud, there is a gradual evolution from physical to psychological suffering in drama, meant to spare the spectator from unpleasant images, to help convert suffering into torture, by activating psychological mecanisms rather than relying on violent impressions, on hypostases of the tortured body. This is not the case of *The Pillowman*, where brutal scenes are numerous and explicit.

Erika Fisher also offers a counterargument to the Freudian perspective, through the example of Romeo Castellicci’s production of Giulio Cesare, placing on the stage actors with abnormal bodies, suggesting frailty, decay. This aproach is meant to hinder the suspension of disbelief, forcing the spectator’s imagination and increasing his/her participation in the artistic experiment.

As a matter of fact, contemporary drama seems to rely heavily on this kind of aggressiveness. Physical torture dehumanizes, it reveals the frailty of human beings, their vulnerability towards external forces. The dread and the pity of the Greek drama, aroused by the sense of nothingness against divine forces, are more vividly experienced in flesh.

In the case of McDonagh’s work, the choice of children as victims responds to these considerations. Defenceless, pure, they match the martyr’s profile, triggering ethical questions concerning the arbitrariness of justice. This is reflected in the story of the Pillowman itself, a character who pushes the innocents towards suicide before succumbing into a life of misery. The Pillowman betrays nostalgia towards a blissful stage in human existence, though a morally doubtful character, as Michal himself notices: his *“*main thing in life’s to get a bunch of kids to, at minimum, set themselves on fire (...) And he’s the hero! And I’m not criticising. He’s a very good character (...). he reminds me a lot of me” *(*McDonagh 36*)*. He thus checks two essential aspects. First of all, he transcends the moral acception of the term “good”, by applying a different criteria in judging the character, in the Wildean fashion. Secondly, he surprisingly manifests a sort of ill-natured empathy with the character.

The so-called theme of Katurian’s stories derives from personal experience, an indirect exposure to violent episodes. The fact opposes Katurian’s explicit disdain for “any writing that’s even vaguely autobiographical” *(*McDonagh 52*)*. The contradiction is amplified by his inconsistency in assuming responsibility. Initially, simply because he is not aware of the impact of his stories (fiction<life), then because, as he acknowledges their effect, however dreadful, he places fiction above life and he is willing to sacrifice himself and his brother in exchange of his stories (fiction>life): “If they came to me right now and said, ‘We’re going to burn two out of the three of you – you, your brother or your stories’, I’d have them burn you first, I’d have them burn me second, and I’d have it be the stories they saved” (McDonagh, 37). This is because “It isn’t about being or not being dead. It’s about what you leave behind”(McDonagh 41). Nonetheless, Katurian clearly obeys the mimetic scope of art (fiction=life), as he indirectly expresses the condition of veridicity: “There are no happy endings in real life” (McDonagh 41*).*

And the contradiction continues. On the one hand, he “just” writes stories. The restrictive adverb reduces his performance to the role of a mere agent of language and nothing more, “no axe to grind, no anything to grind. No social anything whatsoever” *(*McDonagh 8*)*. On the other hand, he distinguishes himself from the category of writers who *“only write about what they know because they’re too fucking stupid to make anything up” (McDonagh 52)*, lacking the gift of sheer innovation that indicates true genius. In his view, an autobiographical approach of literature is indicative of a sort of imaginative handicap, a cautious sounding of a familiar territory.

A Freudian key of interpretation might reconcile these apparently divergent tendencies, for his stories can be perceived as involuntary manifestations of childhood experiences, valves of past tensions. Katurian is not aware of the thematic unity, of this compulsive repetition meant to exorcize childhood traumas: “If there are children in them, it’s incidental. If there is politics in them, it’s incidental. It’s accidental” (McDonagh 13). The juxtaposition of the terms increases the distance between intention and consequence: “incidental” refers to the fortuitous and less important result of an activity, while “accidental” focuses on the lack of premeditation. Either way, as David Lodge explains “in perceiving and pointing out significant patterns of repetition, we do not need to be encouraged by the approving nods of the author over our shoulders” (Lodge 88).

After all, Katurian’s inconsistency reflects the more scrupulous opposition between *writer* and *author*. The former seems to rely mainly on the instrumental role (scribe, someone who writes), whereas the latter is more self-referential.

This self-referentiality questions the author’s responsibility, which has been subject to a series of debates concerning the criteria employed in literary evaluation, revealing a shift of focus in the relationship between author, work, and reader, translatable in *The Pillowman* as the cycle between reality and fiction. We shall examine the evolution of the triad in search of a more coherent ethical view upon art, supported by McDonagh’s text.

As Foucault points out, “the coming into being of the notion of ‘author’ constitutes the privileged moment of individualisation in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences*” (*Foucault 403*)*. This state of authorial self-awareness was achieved through many prolific hesitations.

Thus, in oral literature, the texts circulated anonymously, their transmission required the efforts of memory and interpretation. Shakespeare himself did not sign his texts, presenting them as mobile scenarios, continuously transformed by the members of his theatrical company. This obviously reduced to a minimum the responsibility of the author.

The oral diffusion of literature is illustrated in Katurian’s choice of status, that of story-teller. He embraces the belief that “the only duty of a story-teller is to tell a story” (McDonagh 8). He misrepresents the bitransitivity of the verb “to tell”. Indeed the activity requires a listener and Katurian addresses Michal for the role, but he disregards the fact that the listener cannot remain passive. He reacts to his stories through his own possibilities, physically, trying to validate them through a primitive method, imitation.

In written literature, the role of the author is still questionable. The confusion persisted in the cases of pseudonyms or plural paternity. Foucault reveals how the importance of this attribution to an author varies according to textual typology. Thus, he notices that before the 17th or the 18th century, “ancientness” was regarded as a sufficient guarantee of the status of the literary works, while scientific texts required the identification of the author in validating their theories. After this period, a reversal occurred and the author’s function increased in literature[[3]](#footnote-4). Katurian makes this dissociation, by referring to a quite different textual taxonomy: “I say if you’ve got a political axe to grind, if you’ve got a political what-do-ya-call-it, ya write a fucking essay” *(*McDonagh 8*)*. This comment and the question that he addresses Tupolski seem to exclude political convictions from the general axiological system: “But how does that story sum up your world view anyway? Or your view of detective work, or whatever?” (McDonagh 60)*.* Moreover, his stories are supposedly concrete, spontaneous, free of any purpose, whereas essays, through their very etymology, imply endeavour, a dose of intentionality.

The individual role of the author was diminished up to the Classical Age, when art began being seen as creation of the individual spirit. Nonetheless, as Romul Munteanu states, ever since antiquity the biography of great creators was source of historical, psychological or social clues, of experiences that had marked the artist’s consciousness, being somehow projected into the work, either deliberately or not. The directions of exploration were multiple, depending on various factors (Munteanu 52). Such factors are tackled in McDonagh’s play: the author’s intellectual evolution and traumatic experiences from childhood. The historical and political influences are dismissed by Katurian himself, denying any ideological purpose.

With the Romantics – opposing the classical public role of promoter of moral values, imitating and influencing reality – the individualism in literature is equated with privacy and subjectivity. The Romantics add an expressive dimension to the mimetic and pragmatic purpose of literature, favouring aesthetics over ethics. One of the Romantic elements exploited in *The Pillowman* is the theme of suffering as catalyser of creativity, aspect which encounters a certain ethical resistance. Katurian is submitted to a sort of sadistic scientific experiment, meant to enhance his creativity, to the prejudice of his psychological equilibrium and of his brother’s physical and psychological integrity. Although reproachful of such a method, he appropriates this attitude when he admits being willing to choose fiction over life, his stories over his brother.

The focus on the author is rendered by Sainte Beuve’s critical method, according to which the text is a reflection of the author’s life (biographism) and intentions (intentionalism). This angle of interpretation is predominantly psychological (later to be radicalised, through the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis, to psychobiography), while social and historical aspects are only peripherial. Such an approach is applied in *The Pillowman*, as the interrogatory reveals biographical details and questions the author’s intention, meeting his ferm negative: “I’m not trying to say anything at all” (McDonagh 13).

On the other hand, there are biographies that focus rather on the intellectual and artistic becoming of artists, as a series of reactions towards contemporary events. Katurian’s evolution as an author is described in his autobiographical story “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother” as a process requiring “love and encouragement” as well as torture. This artificial stimulation somehow brings doubt upon his innate abilities, his “wonderful but overactive imagination” being in fact externally stimulated, while the two brothers exchange roles.

Nonetheless, the rupture between the author and his work is unavoidable. With statements such as Rimbaud’s “Je est un autre”, the authorial supremacy is severely affected and the author is placed under the ruling of his work. Paradoxically, biographical elements are no longer revelatory for the interpretation of the work, fact which spares the author as real human being of ethical judgement. This firm distinction between the artist and the real human being, the member of society, whose petty mundane experiences are irrelevant in understanding the work, makes an ethical approach inappropiate in the direction of the author.

Structuralism and postructuralism radicalised the separation between author and his work; declared dead by Barthes, the author hides behind his work, now a territory of interraction between various linguistic and cultural codes, whereas deconstruction still associates the different meanings of a text to an authorial identity, more precisely to a literary collective paternity, revealed by the theories of intertextuality.

As Mavrodin points out, the author is the necessary, but not determining condition for the genesis of the work. The literary work as product of an impersonal I, could not exist without the support of a personal I, whom he nonetheless does not express (Mavrodin 88), at least not directly. Thus, Katurian’s stories were the product of certain “favourable” circumstances, and were possible due to his specific responsiveness towards external factors. It is this particular responsiveness (genetic or conjectural) that makes him irreplaceable, a distinctive voice. But this subtle specificity must smother the personal tone as “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing”. Moreover, “as soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins” (Barthes 397).

Katurian aspires to practise this sort of intransitive writing that would exonerate him from any sense of guilt, as he refuses life, retired within the narrow space of his room: “That’s all I do. That’s my life. I stay in and I write stories” (McDonagh 12), “I don’t cut stuff. I just clear stuff” (McDonagh 9). Again, the adverb reduces his role, which becomes peripheral. The slowing down of real life accelerates the rhythm of his stories.

The compositional aspect refers to an association between ethics and structure, more specifically to the ethical implications deriving from an architectonic approach of literature, as rendered in Tupolski’s line: “All this story is to me, this story is a pointer (...) It is saying to me, on the surface I am saying this, but underneath the surface I am saying this other thing” (McDonagh 15). This vertical disposing of semantic layers, in accordance with literature’s metaphorical and symbolical attributes, is obviously much too rudimentary. The simplification thus performed is not only quantitative, should we contrast it with the already classical example of the seven layers of interpretation in Shakespeare’s works, but also qualitative. The abrupt correspondence oversimplifies the fragile concord between intention and consequence, as well as the tight interconnectedness between form and content, between the what and the how, and all derivative oppositions (poetry versus prose, abstract versus concrete).

We shall proceed systematically by verifying the legitimacy of the term “pointer” and focusing on two major acceptions, meant to engage the mentioned variables. One we shall name- quite conventionally- aesthetic, the other moral. In their very point of convergence is where the conflict of the play becomes most acute, as Katurian supports the former, whereas the other characters challenge the later.

Aligning to the “art for art’s sake” conviction, Katurian empties his stories of any utilitarian purpose whatsoever, perceiving them as gratuitous experiments, as free wanderings of the mind. By gratuitous we exclude intention, consequence (but not effect), as well as the possibility of a solution: “It is supposed to be just a puzzle without a solution” (McDonagh 14). As stimulants of imagination the stories are nevertheless supposed to intrigue, to trigger a crisis, insolvable through rational means, yet compensating this drawback through a vivid effect:”Well I mean you’re right, the idea is, you should wonder what the solution is, but the truth is there is no solution, because there is nothing worse, is there? Than the two things it says” (McDonagh 14). To this intense effect Katurian attributes a characteristic with predominantly moral connotations. And indeed the violence in the stories is charged with moral signification, it is meant to shock, to disturb the senses, and, at a more penetrant observation, to make us wonder about the degrading side of human nature, about the origin of evil, as rendered in its most primitive manifestation.

Moreover, an intention does exist, though external to the author. His stories do not just happen. They are conditioned by his family environment. Katurian’s parents “implant” in him all the necessary ingredients for his becoming as an artist, they condition his development.

Nonetheless, the texts acquire an aesthetic function as they are supposed to carry a sort of unspoken elusiveness. They do not “represent” or mean something, they simply are, but, as Wimsatt and Beardsley point out, only this time referring to poetry, a poem “can be only through its meaning – since its medium is words- yet it is, simply is, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant”(Wimsatt and Beardsley 384), that is, we are not qualified to perform a fragmentary analysis, we lack the tools to disentangle the intricate texture of the literary text, given the fact that form and content are so irreversibly intertwined. The very possibility of a formal alternative questions literary value, up to the point of making the work unjustifiable. This interdependence is probably more visible, yet not exclusive - in poetry, which “acquires its meaning and unique identity by virtue of its verbal organization” (Lodge 3), that is, the signifying medium is language, wheareas in the case of prose, the medium is life and language “merely a transparent window through which the reader regards this life – the writer’s responsibility being merely to keep the glass clean” (Lodge 5).

Contrasted with philosophy, poetry is more concrete in its address to the senses (to feel) rather than to the mind (to think about). As opposed to prose, it is more abstract in its pursue of an eternal truth, whereas prose is roughly a concatenation of events, organized according to temporal, spacial and causal coordinates. This causality cannot evade an ethical judgement regarding the disposal of events and the intentions that determined that precise order. Given these considerations, we are tempted to wonder whether poetic devices had not served better Katurian’s self-styled autonomous writing, whether they had not been more adequate for a gratuitous exercise of imagination. We would be tempted to approve, had it not been for Katurian’s implicit wish to reflect real life, to exploit it as raw material (“There are no happy endings in real life”), an attitude probably more congurent with prose.

On the other hand, the aesthetic nuances of the term “pointer” might refer to the artist’s capacity to see “underneath the surface”, to bring things to the surface, to raise the shallow veil of habit and defamiliarize/denaturalize them, point them to the world as if they had never been truly seen before.

As far as the moral acception is concerned, there must be made a distinction between the types of morality that the play represents. The initial confusion in determined by the difference between the social and psychological morality that the stories distort, as accounts of harmful acts towards other human beings, whereas Katurian suspects his stories might have severed political morality, being associated with ideological issues. Nonetheless, the kind of morality that best fits Katurian’s claims is aesthetic, which is not an overlapping between *virtue* and *beauty* in the Platonian sense, but rather an extension of traditional morality based on conventions in the rarefied space of aesthetics, as the ultimate effect of artistic emotion is the suspension of the self. For Katurian, the artistic process is amoral, or, at least it obeys the rules of a different kind of ethics, akin to aesthetics.

In conclusion**,** the play reveals the malignant effects of a purely mimetic approach of literature that alternates the role of the reader from a primitive consumer of entertaining material to a receptacle of ready-made precepts. Moreover, it deals with an authorial tendency of withdrawing behind the formally accomplished work, claiming an aesthetic self-sufficiency that does not quite adapt to its expanding tendencies, its dialectic nature, charged with ethical significance.

Thus, literature’s ethical value derives from its flexibility, openness, as well as a fair and subtle distribution of responsibilities, whose points of variation are the author, the reader, and the work itself.

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2. In “Postmodern Ethics” Zygmund Bauman questions the popular celebration of an ethical decline in the postmodern era and the subsequent substitution of ethics with aesthetics, by providing an alternative of ”moral rebirth”, through the rejection of modern means of tackling moral issues (8) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Foucault points out that, starting with the seventeenth or eighteenth century, „literary discourses came to be accepted only when endowed with the author function. We now ask of each poetic or fictional text: from where does it come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstances, or beginning with what design?”(410). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)