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Gothic-postmodernism As A Hybrid Mode in McDonagh's The Pillowman

ABSTRACT

This study explores Martin McDonagh's "The Pillowman" through the lens of postmodern Gothic, unravelling the intricate interplay between postmodern elements and the Gothic genre in the play. The hypothesis posits that McDonagh employs postmodernist techniques to deconstruct traditional Gothic elements, offering a fresh perspective on the genre. The research employs a qualitative approach, conducting a detailed textual analysis of "The Pillowman." Drawing on postmodern literary theory and Gothic conventions, the study aims to unearth how McDonagh subverts and redefines Gothic tropes within a postmodern framework. The theoretical foundation incorporates postmodernist deconstruction and intertextuality to frame the analysis. The primary aim is to contribute to understanding how postmodernism intersects with the Gothic genre, enriching scholarly discussions on contemporary theatrical works. Two central questions guide the investigation: How does McDonagh navigate the postmodern terrain in "The Pillowman" while embracing the Gothic genre? In what ways does the play challenge and redefine traditional Gothic elements within a postmodern narrative?

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قوطية ما بعد الحداثة كوضع هجين في مسرحية مكدونا الرجل الوسادة

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الكلمات المفتاحية:

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الخلاصة:

تستكشف هذه الدراسة مسرحية "الرجل الوسادة" لمارتن مكدونا من خلال عدسة القوطية ما بعد الحداثة، وتكشف عن التفاعل المعقد بين عناصر ما بعد الحداثة والنوع القوطي في المسرحية. تفترض الفرضية أن مكدونا يستخدم تقنيات ما بعد الحداثة لتفكيك العناصر القوطية التقليدية، مما يوفر منظورًا جديدًا لهذا النوع. يستخدم البحث منهجًا نوعيًا، حيث يقوم بإجراء تحليل نصي مفصل لقصة "رجل الوسادة". بالاعتماد على النظرية الأدبية ما بعد الحداثة والاتفاقيات القوطية، تهدف الدراسة إلى اكتشاف كيفية تخريب مكدونا وإعادة تعريف المجازات القوطية ضمن إطار ما بعد الحداثة. يتضمن الأساس النظري تفكيك ما بعد الحداثة والتناس لتأطير التحليل. الهدف الأساسي هو المساهمة في فهم كيفية تقاطع ما بعد الحداثة مع النوع القوطي، وإثراء المناقشات العلمية حول الأعمال المسرحية المعاصرة. هناك سؤالان مركزيان يوجهان التحقيق: كيف يتنقل مكدونا في تضاريس ما بعد الحداثة في "الرجل الوسادة" بينما يتبنى النوع القوطي؟ ما هي الطرق التي تتحدى بها المسرحية العناصر القوطية التقليدية وتعيد تعريفها ضمن سرد ما بعد الحداثة؟

Martin McDonagh is an Irish-English playwright and screenwriter known for his darkly comic works. He has been nominated for three Academy Awards, winning once, has won three Olivier Awards, and has been nominated for four Tony Awards. His best-known plays include *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara*, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, *The Pillowman*, *The Lonesome West*, and *Hangmen*. McDonagh was born in London to Irish parents. His first six plays took place in Galway, his parents' home, where he spent holidays. His most well-known play is *The Pillowman*, which premiered at the Royal National Theatre in 2003. *A Behanding in Spokane* is his first play set in America and premiered on Broadway in 2010 (O'Hagon Interview).

Among his influences growing up were the films of Martin Scorsese, Sam Peckinpah, and Sergio Leone. McDonagh began questioning his faith at age 12 when he listened to his brother's punk rock records, especially the Clash and the Pogues music. When he was 14, he attended his first play, a London production of David Mamet's *American Buffalo*, starring Al Pacino, his favourite actor. In time, he discovered the work of writers such as playwright Harold Pinter, novelist Vladimir Nabokov, and short-story writer and essayist Jorge Luis Borges. McDonagh left school at 16 to pursue writing, taking inspiration from his brother, who had also quit early. For the next few years, McDonagh wrote grotesque stories, plays, and scripts while living on public assistance or working odd jobs, such as a supermarket clerk and a part-time administrative assistant in the civil service (Russell 1-3).

The Pillowman was finalized and staged in 1999. Two detectives question Katurian, a writer who lives in a police state, about the violent content of his stories, which are similar to recent child murders. Katurian's brother Michal confesses to the murders and implicates him. Katurian tries to save his stories from destruction. The play shows how Katurian's troubled imagination developed through his brother's torture by their parents. The play received several awards, including the 2004 Olivier Award for Best New Play and two Tony Awards.

This study focuses on Martin McDonagh's play, *The Pillowman*, within the context of postmodern Gothic drama. McDonagh's work is celebrated for its dark themes, humour, and exploration of the human condition. However, his significant play, *The Pillowman*, has further elements related to postmodern Gothic. This study delves deep into the complexities of this play, revealing its interplay of postmodern and Gothic elements. The study explores questions about the human psyche that are raised in the play. This study seeks to explore the gothic side of McDonagh's work. McDonagh has blended postmodern and gothic elements into his play. The play's fragmented structure, intertextual elements, and focus on the dark and grotesque align with postmodernism, while its exploration of themes like alienation, cruelty, and the mysterious draws from the Gothic tradition. This study hypothesizes that 'The Pillowman' is a literary and theatrical intersection of gothic and postmodern genres.

Methodology

The study follows the postmodern theory of Gothic. It tackles the gothic components by placing the play among the giant genres of postmodern drama that have modified traditional gothic by changing and adding to its essential elements. The study also relies on primary sources like the play and secondary sources that include a critical commentary on the play .

Postmodern Gothic

Postmodernism is a broad movement that includes changes in the arts and intellectual writings from the 1950s to this day. Regarding literature, postmodernism has a specific spot in literary studies. The postmodern literary theory concentrates on the change in style and alternation of mediums. The most prominent books on postmodern literature are Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Novels*. To shift from modernism to postmodernism, the literary works witnessed much change towards raising questions instead of answering them. Postmodernist literary works ask about every condition of reality and the universe, raising the question, 'What is the world?' (Hutcheon 112).

In other words, postmodern fiction asks the reader about the world: "What sort of world is being created at each moment in the text, and who or what in the text can they believe or rely on, i.e., questions of ontology?" (Malpas 24). Postmodernist texts have an auditory orientation as well as a visual one. For instance, in *The Unnamable* (1958), Samuel Beckett's trilogy, he grants the reader an unaccommodated voice,

outcry, wheeze, and hassle. Thus, everything presented to the reader evokes an emersion of this voice and the aptness to repeal at any moment. During the first years of postmodernism in literature, they faced a sturdy and permeating linguistic turn. Postmodernism appeared in a wide range of fields and many different works. British critic Tim Woods addresses the issue as follows:

“It is in the field of literary studies that the term ‘postmodernism’ has received the widest usage and provoked the most intense debate. There have been many attempts to theorize the consequences and manifestations of postmodernism for literature, all usually running into problems of historical and formal definition” (qtd in Connor 76–80).

In this sense, postmodern literature is characterized by different features. Postmodern drama challenges traditional theatre and storytelling conventions by embracing non-linear narratives, blurring the lines between reality and drama, and incorporating self-reflexivity. It often draws from diverse cultural sources and employs irony, parody, and pastiche to deconstruct established norms and genres. Characters may lack clear motivations, reflecting the breakdown of traditional values in the postmodern world. Overall, postmodern drama reflects the broader postmodern cultural and philosophical movement by disrupting conventional theatrical style and inviting the audience to engage with complex, fragmented characters in an uncertain and ambiguous world (Stephan 21).

Gothicism in drama is one aspect of literature that has changed within postmodernism. Postmodern gothic drama is a theatrical and narrative style that combines traditional dramatic elements with postmodernist concepts, emphasizing ambiguity and the dissolution of conventional boundaries .

Gothic-postmodernism focuses on the psychological and philosophical implications of terror in postmodernist literature, similar to the terror found in early Gothic works. It emphasizes the importance of the Gothic sublime and its preoccupation with the “unrepresentable” as the genre's core. The term "Gothic-postmodernism" is defined by Maria Beville as a hybrid mode that arises from the “interplay of Gothic and postmodernist characteristics within a given text. The Gothic still exists in postmodernist literature, and "terror" serves as a connecting and powerful link between the Gothic and the postmodern" (8–9). By defining the Gothic as the literature of terror, the study aligns Gothic-postmodernism with the same concept. This study focuses on the contemporary terrors in Macongh's writing, specifically his presentation of fear and violence as main items of postmodern Gothic in his play, *The Pillowman*.

Gothic literature is often characterized by ambiguity. The Cambridge Dictionary online defines ambiguity as “a situation or statement that is unclear because it can be understood in more than one way.” (Cambridge Dictionary) Gothic literature is renowned for the ambiguity that arises from inventive storytelling methods, such as unreliable or mentally unstable

narrators, multiple narrators, weaving stories within stories, and playing with non-linear timelines. Within the Gothic tradition, there is a distinctive allowance for many interpretations, surpassing the flexibility found in other narrative traditions (Crow 130). This method is found in *The Pillowman*, as the narrated horrors are presented through the eyes of different characters with multiple ideas that are meant to terrify the audience and make them lost in the mystery of who speaks what objectively

This study aims to analyze Martin McDonagh's play, 'The Pillowman,' within the framework of postmodern Gothic drama. The study aims to introduce and explain the meaning behind 'postmodern' and 'gothic'. After presenting them to the reader, the study aims to apply the theoretical framework drawn from these two types to the analysis of McDonough's *Pillowman*. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the fields of theatre, literature, and cultural studies. Firstly, it offers a fresh perspective on a celebrated work by Martin McDonagh. Secondly, it adds to the body of knowledge regarding the development of contemporary drama. Moreover, this study is of value to scholars, students, and enthusiasts interested in merging literary genres. Also, this study aims to offer a deeper understanding of the thematic concerns of *The Pillowman* and its place in the broader context of contemporary dramatic literature.

Discussion

The Pillowman is set in an unnamed totalitarian state where Katurian Katurian, the protagonist, is a

writer known for his disturbing and macabre short stories, often involving the abuse and murder of children. Katurian is brought in for questioning by two detectives, Tupolski and Ariel, who are investigating a series of child murders that seem to be inspired by Katurian's stories. As the interrogation progresses, it becomes clear that Katurian's works are at the centre of the investigation, and the play raises questions about the responsibility of artists for the impact of their creations on society. The narrative is interwoven with flashbacks that reveal Katurian's troubled childhood and his relationship with his mentally ill brother, Michal. Michal becomes implicated in the crimes, adding complexity to the plot. The play explores the blurred line between reality and fiction as Katurian's stories start to mirror the events in his life. Throughout "The Pillowman," McDonagh challenges the audience to question the nature of storytelling, the morality of art, and the role of artists in society through an ambiguous series of events that unfold gradually to uncover the mystery of events. The gothic genre, encompassing fear, horror, mysteries, and the ambiguity of events, is reprinted clearly in this play .

The play has eight short stories, and Katurian wrote all of them except for the one Tupolski tells near the end. Katurian's stories have dark fairy tale titles like 'The Little Apple Men' and 'The Tale of the Three Gibbet Crossroads.' Taking on the role of the kind policeman, Tupolski begins recounting Katurian's narrative from "The Little Apple Men." The tale is about a young girl crafting cookies shaped like an apple to escape her abusive father. She plans to secretly insert

a razor into the cookies to kill her father, but tragically, she dies when he compels her to consume the deadly deserts. Strikingly similar events happen in the neighbourhood of Katurian's house, where the lifeless body of another girl is discovered, having died with a razor in her throat, just like in the story. This grim pattern of child torture and murder resonates within this play, with reports of similar atrocities happening to other children in the neighbourhood of the writer. Eventually, the reason behind Katurian's arrest becomes clear: a series of child murders closely mirroring the narrative in his own stories.

During the play, Katurian narrates two stories, 'The Writer and the Writer's Brother' and 'The Little Jesus.' These are the most violent and disturbing tales, and the play specifies that they must be performed for the audience. In "The Little Jesus," foster parents who thought the child was Jesus abuse, torture, and crucify her. This story has a significant impact on the audience, mainly because they initially believe Katurian's brother, Michal, committed a similar murder. However, it is later revealed that Michal is innocent. The play explicitly shows the disturbing details of 'The Little Jesus' on stage, where a young girl is beaten, crucified, and buried alive. As the directions state, 'The dreadful details of the following are all acted out onstage' (70), emphasizing the significance of violence in this gothic play. The past haunts the characters in Gothic fiction. It creates a mysterious link with the present. Also, the villains in this type of fiction are not always clearly shown but are gradually revealed (Cicek 80–81). Embracing the role of the lousy policeman, Ariel

provokes Katurian. Ariel threatens to interrogate Katurian's mentally disabled older brother, Michal, unless he cooperates. Michael has endured a life of torment since birth. This experimental violence has left Michal physically and mentally ill. Katurian has endured the agonizing cries of his brother for years. While Michal is unconscious from pain, Katurian kills his parents one night and buries the bodies in the backyard well. Katurian, employed at a slaughterhouse, also takes Michal to a particular school for mentally disabled students. Tupolski informs Katurian that Michal is being interrogated in the next room, stirring nervousness and anger in Katurian.

Within the play, Katurian shares his stories with Tupolski and Ariel, who become witnesses to his narratives. As the plot unfolds, it is revealed that Tupolski and Ariel, too, have their traumas. Ariel describes his history of an abusive childhood, while Tupolski talks about the heartbreaking loss of a child. This exchange of personal stories deepens the understanding of each character's past and contributes to the complexity of their relationships. At this moment, the mystery surrounding the crimes and possible murders brings these different characters to common ground. They have all faced painful experiences during childhood that resonate with them continuously. The childhood traumas make the tortured children in the stories, as well as in the actual crimes, closely related to the detectives and the writer Katurian (Dean 37).

Tupolski and Ariel attempt to elicit a reaction from Katurian by describing the alleged torture inflicted on Michal. They introduce a black box containing tiny

toes. The situation escalates until Tupolski intervenes. Katurian then recounts "The Writer and the Writer's Brother," a story mirroring his own life involving the torture of his brother, Michal. Despite Michal's discomfort with the story's ending, Katurian finds inspiration in its real-life roots. In a reversal of roles, Katurian, who once listened to his brother's torture, is now subjected to psychological and physical violence. When brought to Michal's room, Katurian discovers that Michal was never tortured. Ariel instructs Michal to simulate screams of torture, aiming to inflict psychological trauma on Katurian. Michal, accustomed to violence from childhood, expresses that being on the listening side is less painful. This disturbing revelation leaves Katurian disturbed, and he finally confesses to the truth that he is the one who has committed all murders. According to Catherine Rees, the smaller stories within the play serve a Gothic purpose and highlight moments where power dynamics are fluid. While the prison setting may initially convey a cruel and traumatic experience, *The Pillowman* complicates this by suggesting that power can also emerge from silent listening, bearing witness, and being an audience to traumatic stories. Forcing someone to speak, as seen with Ariel and Tupolski interrogating Katurian, is a violent act that denies an individual's right to silence. Torture, another element in the play, is employed to extract narratives, emphasizing the power of interrogators to elicit speech and act as an audience rather than providing their accounts of violent events (71).

In the play, when Tupolski shares his own story, he becomes emotionally dependent on Katurian's approval, revealing vulnerability and seeking endorsement from his audience. Although violent acts in the play, particularly the enacted stories on stage, portray wicked parents as instigators of extreme violence, the audience's role as witnesses is crucial in giving those moments significance and meaning. The Gothic horror's meaning depends on the audience's bodily responses—gasps, jumps, and quickened heart rates—indicating that the Gothic genre's essence relies heavily on audience reactions (Rees 71–72).

The play has transformed gothic from being classically based on horror tales in mansions and ghosts of the dead to something relatively uncommon to the old tales, such as parental abuse and child murder. The postmodern era has allowed writers to experiment with genres and writing styles as much as they desire. McDonagh is one of the significant dramatists who has used this liberty to present an uncommon gothic drama. The playwright uses a Gothic element such as grotesque in: "I think it would be quite a sight," Tupolski muses, "to see a man's body twisted up in the shape of a question mark." (Act I) The image of a body contorted into a question mark is used to disturb the mind of the audiences. It is unsettling and evokes a sense of physical and emotional distortion. It creates the grotesque to highlight the dark and violent themes of the play. The grotesque amplifies the precariousness of human existence.

Another element is Uncanny which is used as in "But the child, he... he didn't seem afraid at all,"

Katurian says, recalling a disturbing encounter. "He just... smiled at me. A smile that went right through me." (Act II) in this quote, there is something which familiar becomes strange to create a sense of unease in the mind of the audiences. The unsettling smile of the innocent child creates a sense of ambiguity. It suggests the presence of hidden motivations or unseen forces. This use of the uncanny keeps the audience on the edge.

The playwright uses the supernatural elements as Gothic element as in "I heard a voice," Katurian confesses. "A woman's voice... singing. It was beautiful... and sad." (Act II) . It is to give presence to the disembodied voice. This unexplained phenomenon adds a layer of mystery and suspense to the play, a layer of mystery and suspense to the play, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. The audience is left to question whether the voice is real or a figment of Katurian's imagination, further enhancing the gothic atmosphere and raising questions about the nature of reality and perception. McDonagh employs classic Gothic elements in *The Pillowman* in a postmodern way. weaving these elements into the play's fabric help McDonagh create a tense and unsettling atmosphere that both entertains and challenges the audience. Gothic are used to explore themes of violence, censorship, and the power of storytelling, adding a unique dimension to the play and contributing to the development of the Gothic-postmodern mode.

Conclusion

The Pillowman is a theatrical production authored by Martin McDonagh, which delves into the

realm of the "Gothic-postmodern" genre. This particular style amalgamates traditional Gothic themes with a contemporary postmodern mentality. The theatrical production incorporates traditional Gothic motifs such as the grotesque, the bizarre, and the supernatural in order to generate a sense of unease and apprehension. Nevertheless, McDonagh's use of postmodern humour and reflection serves to subvert the aforementioned themes, so engendering a distinctive aesthetic encounter. The inclusion of metafictional elements and the use of untrustworthy narration within the play contribute to the amplification of its ambiguous nature, so instilling uncertainty among the audience about the authenticity of the narrative. Hybridity engenders not just a sense of disquiet but also fosters a propensity for critical analysis on the anxieties and uncertainties prevalent in the postmodern era. Through the use of the Gothic genre's capacity to evoke a sense of dread, McDonagh compels the audience to face their own apprehensions pertaining to violence, censorship, and the impact of narrative. The play juxtaposes these anxieties with the exuberant and rebellious characteristics of postmodernism, so engendering a multifaceted and intellectually stimulating dialogue about the challenges and possibilities inherent in our contemporary milieu. The play "The Pillowman" serves as evidence that the use of the Gothic-postmodern style may effectively delve into unsettling subject matter, while simultaneously raising thought-provoking inquiries about the nature of reality and truth in a light-hearted and contemplative manner. The remarkable aesthetic appeal of *The Pillowman* is in its capacity to elicit both amusement and sorrow concurrently,

engrossing us in the depths of our imaginative faculties while simultaneously compelling us to embrace the indeterminate and equivocal nature of the postmodern era.

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