

Scary Tales of Martin McDonagh: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane, a Skull in Connemara, the Lonesome West, the Pillowman*

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ABSTRACT

The essay addresses the poetics and rhetoric of plays by Martin McDonagh – a most prolific and ingenious modern playwright in the English language. His popularity nowadays equals that of Shakespeare and Chekhov, all the more so since he has made quite a name for himself in cinema with his last Oscar winning film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. His works arouse much controversy among both critics and viewers. The aim of this essay is to show different sides of his bright talent through the analysis of his early psychological dramas set in Ireland (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (1997) and *The Lonesome West* (1997) on the one hand, and a provocative, overtly postmodern later play *The Pillowman* (2003), on the other.

Keywords: *In-Ye-Face* theatre, postmodernism, parable, conflict, psychological drama, Ireland.

Introduction

It is hard to overestimate the contribution of Irish authors to both British and world drama: just remember the names of G. B. Shaw, Samuel Beckett, and Oscar Wilde. This list has been recently supplemented by another bright name – that of Martin McDonagh, whose plays are successfully running not only on the leading stages of London, but also all over the world, including in Russia. Martin McDonagh was born on March 26, 1970 in London to an Irish family of a worker and a cleaning woman and has dual citizenship – Irish and British. Today he is considered the leading living Irish playwright. In addition, he made quite a name for himself in the cinema by writing scripts and directing several films, among which is the Oscar winning *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. When Martin was still a boy his parents moved back to Galway, Ireland, leaving him and his brother John Michael, who later became a director and screenwriter, to finish their education in London. Martin would visit his parents over the summer, and it was during these visits that he got acquainted with the life of the Irish hinterland: perhaps it was then that he realized his Irish roots and felt an attachment to this harsh

land, which would later be the scene of his first two most famous trilogies. The first trilogy (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (1997) and *The Lonesome West* (1997) unfolds in the town of Leenane on the west coast of Ireland, and the second (*The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997), *Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) and *The Banshees of Inisher* (still unpublished) is set on the Aran Islands. However, the texts of McDonagh's plays are just beginning to be introduced into scholarly discussions. As Patrick Lonergan, the author of the first monograph on his work, rightly points out in this regard: "he is admired far more by audiences and theatre-makers than he is by critics and academics" (Lonergan, 2012, p. xv).

Still, lately English academicians have increasingly turned to the plays of McDonagh, recognizing him as one of the leading representatives of modern theater. In this regard we can distinguish the works of P. Lonergan (Lonergan, 2012), I. Jordan (2014), L. Chambers (2006), Russell R.R. (2007) and J. Kelleher (2016). In my essay I will try to address the most distinct features of his rhetoric and poetics on the basis of the *Trilogy of Lennane* and his most paradoxical play – *The Pillowman*, which in my viewpoint demonstrate different sides of McDonagh's bright talent.

Family dramas

Let us take a closer look at the first trilogy, which has become a kind of calling card for the playwright. All three plays are set in the characters' squalid homes or against the background of a harsh rural landscape, even in a cemetery (*A Skull in Connemara*). People drink a lot on stage – not the famous Irish whiskey, but moonshine; they swear, fight, eat chips and cookies, make tea, fry something on the stove, and often use obscene language. Here is the routine in all its manifestations, frighteningly recognizable, although it takes place in the remote Irish hinterland, in the West of Ireland. It is not the mythologized *wild West*, with its romantic attractiveness, but the *lonesome West*, as the playwright calls it in the eponymous play.

The plays of the first trilogy are set in the 1990s, but this is a world without time, the backyards of civilization, so similar in all countries. At the same time the stage space is extremely limited, which, on the one hand, creates the feeling of a cage that for all its apparent amorphousness very tenaciously holds the characters in its grip, and on the other hand – provokes the growth of internal tension. At first glance, not much is going on. The action is reduced to a minimum, mainly being the dialogues of rather tongue-tied characters, which despite being quite funny by themselves do not carry any communicative message. The source of the comicality here is the outright idiocy of the characters, a fact which is sad in itself. There is no tangible plot development – the action seems to be marking time. Despite the active contradictions and quarrels of the characters with each other, eventually it becomes clear that they conflict not so much with each other as with the environment, with their worthless existence: and, unable to change it, they take revenge on the others for their failure. The dramatic conflict in McDonagh's plays, as in the plays of Russian *new drama*, is simulative: the hero seems to interact with other characters, with the environment, but the situation has no progress.

And yet for all the lack of dynamics there is a movement – a movement into the past, which allows us to talk about the analytical composition of McDonagh's plays. The most exemplary in this respect is the second play of the trilogy, *A Skull in Connemara*. The plot is based on a real and at the same time absolutely monstrous situation, which gives it a surrealistic touch, characteristic of many of McDonagh's plays: due to the overcrowding of the village cemetery it was decided to exhume the remains buried several years before to make room for the new dead. This is what the main character Mick is doing. At the

same time this situation acquires a metaphorical meaning, actualizing the famous English proverb about a *skeleton in the cupboard*. Mick has to exhume the remains of his beloved wife, whose death he is responsible for since she died in a car accident when Mick was driving drunk. However, there are other opinions – people in the village gossip that Mick first struck his wife on the head in a fit of drunken rage and then simulated an accident. That is why the hapless village police officer Tom Henlan steals the skull of Mick's wife and saws a hole in it in order to re-open the case and get at least one successful investigation to his credit. The audience will never know what really happened – this quality is also characteristic of most of McDonagh's plays. One thing is evident: Mick is conducting a constant dialogue with his past, and, breaking rotten bones with a hammer, is trying to destroy it.

Maureen (*The Beauty Queen*) also has her "skeleton", which her mother gloatingly exposes by producing a certificate: as a result of a nervous breakdown Maureen was treated in a psychiatric clinic. This later explains the fact that she came up with a happy ending to her relationship with the local man Pato, and only the news of his upcoming marriage brings her back to reality. And the "skeleton" itself is actualized when Maureen, after learning that her mother has burnt a letter from Pato in which he asked her to leave the village with him, kills the latter. However, in the village this death was qualified as an accident.

In the play *The Lonesome West*, the "skeleton" is sticking out of the cupboard from the very beginning: although, thanks to the testimony of one of the Connor brothers, it was recognized that their father had died in an accident, they do not conceal the fact that Coleman simply shot the old man because the latter criticized his hairdo, and Valene covered it up because, thanks to this, he inherited all the old man's money. Later, they calmly relate all of this to the local priest, Father Welsh.

As follows from the above, all the plays in the trilogy are somehow related to the family theme. But they have nothing to do with patriarchal family values, which are believed to still be alive in the remote rural Irish districts. In these plays the family is a bloody battlefield, where brother raises a hand against brother, husband against wife, son against father, and daughter against mother. This allowed Michael Billington to write in his review of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* that "McDonagh offers a suave assault, through the bitter mother-daughter relationship, on the Irish faith in the sanctity of family" (Billington, 2010).

The whole village of Leenane is shown in these plays as one big family where everyone knows everything about

everyone, literally and figuratively washing each other's bones, loving and hating each other. These people are capable of barbaric cruelty and at the same time are as naive as children. This creates a special kind of humor in McDonagh's plays. Even outright cruelty and revenge here often takes on the character of a childish sadism: one brother cuts off the ears of his brother's favorite dog, the other urinates into the latter's beer (*The Lonesome West*); a moronic teenager fries a hamster in the microwave and complains that the door is not transparent and he cannot see the process (*A Skull in Connemara*); in order to annoy her daughter, a mother empties her night pot into the kitchen sink, while the daughter purposely buys her the biscuits that the latter hates (*The Beauty Queen*); a son shoots his father because he criticized his hair. (*The Lonesome West*). All of them are at one and the same time executioners and victims, and all dream of escaping, leaving the province. But where to? To London, where they call you 'Irish mug,' or to America, where you're just a stranger? Maureen (*The Beauty Queen*) has already been to London and does not seek to go there again, and her fleeting hope of happiness with Pato in America is rudely destroyed by her mother's intervention. They are all losers. No wonder the hapless police officer Tom Henlan from *A Skull* is reported to have inexplicably committed suicide (*The Lonely West*). He sat on the shore, thought about something for a while, then went into the water further and further until he disappeared beneath it.

The only person in the entire trilogy who seeks to change something is the Catholic priest Father Welsh. He is mentioned in all three plays but he only physically appears in the last one – *The Lonesome West*, which becomes a logical conclusion of the entire trilogy. He, too, has failed. When he arrived in Leenane he was fascinated by the peace and quiet of this place but soon realized that this peace was deceptive. Eventually he also escapes – escapes from life, committing suicide – the most terrible sin for a priest. But before he dies he leaves a letter for the brothers Connor that sounds like an appeal to all the characters of the trilogy: " Could the both of ye, go stepping back and be making a listen of all things about the other that do get on yere nerves, and the wrongs the other has done all down through the years that you still hold against him? And be reading them lists out, and be discussing them openly, and be taking a deep breath then and be forgiving each other them wrongs, no matter what they may be?...Would that be so awful hard now?" (McDonagh, 1997 p. 43).

In his student's guide to modern Irish drama, Geoffrey Dawson identified several features that are characteristic

of most plays by Irish playwrights. Here are some of them: a cold, often sad and dreary landscape, a characteristic rhythm of speech, straightforward humor, naturalistic scenography (a kitchen, often poor lodgings or a bar), a universal addiction to alcohol, everyday actions on the stage, dysfunctional families, family breakdown, tragicomic elements, and a dream of escaping from the clutches of this pathetic routine to start all over again (Dowson, 2015). As we have shown all this is fully characteristic of McDonagh. It may seem that this allows us to draw a conclusion about the obvious national identity of his drama. But at the same time McDonagh's image of the Irish hinterland takes on a broader meaning, and the national gives way to the universal: his plays depict the margins of modern civilization, inhabited by the adult children who are unable to grow up, crushed by the senselessness of their existence. This, perhaps, is largely the reason for the success of his plays on the stages of different countries, in which the audience can easily recognize their own hinterland.

In his later plays, McDonagh leaves his homeland and sets the action in different places – an unnamed totalitarian state in *The Pillow Man*, in the USA (*Behanding in Spokane*) and in London (*The Hangmen*). Moreover, he quits the naturalism inherent in his earlier plays and often resorts to postmodern techniques. The most illustrative in this respect is his play *The Pillowman*, which has caused the most controversy among critics.

Fairy Tales Not for Children

While McDonagh's previous plays, despite their intertextuality and some other postmodern features, still fully fit into the aesthetics of the realistic psychological theater, *The Pillowman* completely breaks with it. The architectonics of the entire play balance on two mutually exclusive principles. On the one hand, there is a fairly coherent, realistic layer that can be retold. In a certain totalitarian state in Eastern Europe, terrible murders of children start to take place. These murders repeat to the letter the situations described in the stories of a certain writer named Katurian. During the investigation the police officers – Ariel (young, neurotic) and Tupolsky (elderly and reasonable) – find out that Katurian's parents set up a kind of experiment with him in childhood. They noticed the boy's extraordinary creative abilities and decided to develop them in a rather peculiar way: when he was 7 years old, every night he would hear a child's heart-rending screams from behind the wall, while his parents insisted that it was just a figment of his imagination. The boy's stories got better and better,

and darker and darker. At the age of 14 he won the first prize in a literary competition but soon after learned that his parents had been tormenting his older brother in a secret room for all these years: as a result of this experiment, the older brother became mentally retarded. Katurian killed his parents and started taking care of his brother. As the play opens, Katurian is being interrogated, and hears the screams of his brother Michal from behind the wall, whom, as it turns out later, the police officer Ariel did not beat, but simply asked to shout as loudly and pitifully as possible. Katurian is mostly concerned about the fate of his brother and his stories; he is ready to give his life for them. However, learning that it was his mentally retarded brother who made his scary stories real, Katurian kills the latter to save him from suffering and accepts the blame. He is ready to accept death, begging for only one thing – that his stories should not be destroyed.

Thus, the play clearly articulates the main issues that are often addressed in literature – the moral responsibility of an artist for his/her creations, as well as the responsibility of parents for the actions of their children and the legitimacy of restricting the freedom of creativity. These important questions are presented in a metatheatrical form. From the very beginning it is realized through the very form of interrogation in which the policemen clearly assign their roles: “I forgot to say, he is a bad cop, and I am a good one.” “Me and Ariel, we have this funny thing, we always say, “This reminds me” when the thing hasn’t really reminded us of the thing we’re saying. It’s really funny” (McDonagh, 2003).

Therefore, the concept of “play” – one of the key concepts of postmodernism – is introduced from the very beginning. Michal is forced to play – that is, to scream as if he is being tortured, and he is very happy when he is praised for his good performance. Michal in his turn decided to act out his brother’s stories, according to him, not knowing what would happen. The concept *world’s a stage* merges in the play with the concept *world’s a text*: “we do not know that the children died, they just wrote about this in the newspaper” – says Katurian (McDonagh, 2003). The reality of the suffering brother becomes Katurian’s texts, which in their turn materialize in reality. In the finale, the executed Katurian gets up and, removing the bag from his head, says that in the last moments of his life he came up with an interesting twist for the story about his brother: when the Pillowman invited Michal to die in order to avoid suffering, the latter chose to suffer for the sake of his brother, who in the future would become a good writer. Thus, the text again takes over.

Moreover, the approach of the investigators to Katurian’s stories is very similar to the approach of some traditionalist critics to a postmodern work:

TUPOLSKI. This is a story, it starts off, there is a little girl, and her father treats her badly...

KATURIAN. He slaps her around and that. He’s a ...

TUPOLSKI. You seem to have a lot of st... He’s a what?

KATURIAN. What?

TUPOLSKI. The father

ARIEL. “He’s a ... something, you said.

TUPOLSKI. He represents something, does he?

KATURIAN. He represents a bad father. He is a bad father. How do you mean represents”?

TUPOLSKI. He is a bad father?

KATURIAN. Yes, he slaps the little girl around.

TUPOLSKI. This is why he is a bad father.

KATURIAN. Yes.

TUPOLSKI. What else does he do to the little girl, “he is a bad father”?

KATURIAN. All the story says, I think, is the father treats the little girl badly. You can draw your own conclusions.

ARIEL. Oh, we can draw our own conclusions, now, can we?

KATURIAN. Hah?

ARIEL. You’re telling us we can draw our own conclusions now, are you?!

KATURIAN. No! Yes!

ARIEL. We know we can draw our own fucking conclusions!

KATURIAN. I know.

ARIEL. Hah? KATURIAN. I know.

ARIEL. Fucking ... hah?! (Ariel gets up and paces.)

TUPOLSKI. Ariel’s getting a bit aggrieved because “We can draw our own conclusions” is, sort of, our job. (Pause.) And the first conclusion we are drawing is exactly how many stories have you got “a little girl is treated badly,” or “a little boy is treated badly”?

KATURIAN. A few. A few.

ARIEL. “A few.” I’ll say a fucking few. The first fucking twenty we picked up was “a little girl is fucked over in this way, or a little boy is fucked over in this way?”

KATURIAN. But that isn’t saying anything, I’m not trying to say anything ...

ARIEL. You are not what?

KATURIAN.What?

ARIEL.Not what?

KATURIAN. What, are you trying to say that I'm trying to say that the children represent something!

ARIEL. "I am trying to say...?"

KATURIAN. That the children represent The People, or something?

ARIEL. (Approaching.) "I am trying to say." He's putting words into my fucking mouth now, "I am trying to say," let alone draw our own fucking conclusions ... (McDonagh, 2003).

And just like a postmodernist writer, Katurian tries to convince his investigators throughout the interrogation that "the only duty of a storyteller is to tell a story," defending the author's absolute freedom both in the choice of material and from any responsibility for the possible consequences of what he has written.

One of the major themes of the play is the theme of childhood. In fact, all of Katurian's stories are associated with child abuse, which, as it turns out, took place in the childhood of the police investigators as well: Ariel was abused by his father and finally, like Katurian, killed him, explaining his neurasthenia. Topolski's father was a hopeless drunkard. By putting the children's suffering in the texts, Katurian, on the one hand, denounces the monstrous cruelty, but on the other, unwillingly provokes it.

The theme of parents and children acquires a metaphorical meaning by merging with the theme of authorship, which in turn is one of the characteristic metaphors of postmodernism: the postmodern artist constantly feels and realizes his/her connection with literary ancestors, simultaneously destroying and deforming this dependence. It is notable that the playwright uses the thriller genre, which is so often exploited by postmodernism – just remember *Perfume* by Süskind, *The Trial of Elizabeth Cree* by Ackroyd or *Decorator* by Akunin. In all these novels, beauty and art are created through mortification and appropriation, which in turn can be interpreted as an ironic self-reflection by postmodern artists. Detective elements, which at the beginning seem to determine the plot of the play, also turn into a purely literary game, as much greater attention is paid to the texts created by Katurian than to the criminal events that have taken place.

Step by step, the reader unravels numerous literary allusions, starting with an obvious reference to Franz Kafka's *The Trial* – when Katurian, just like Kafka's hero, cannot

understand what he is accused of for a long time – and ending with Dostoevsky's "tears of a tortured child", which in turn mark two oppositely charged poles. The juxtaposition of these poles generates the incredible tension of the play. On the one hand is the eternal existential guilt that prevails over everything and everyone, and on the other is a passionate search for an answer to the question of whether even the most beautiful creation can justify the tears of a tortured child. This question is addressed in the story of a girl who thinks she is Jesus and her parents condemn her to a martyr's death.

This inevitably involves the question of the author's moral position. As is well known, postmodernism denies traditional values, which does not mean the denial of moral categories as such, but rather a rejection of their absoluteness and universality in favor of a plurality of interpretations. All of McDonagh's works are riddled with ambiguity, dictated by the inconsistency of human nature and of life as such, and in this case almost everything presented in the play is ambivalent. Due to the sufferings of his brother Katurian became a good writer; he writes good stories but they provoke murder; he kills his parents but thus restores justice; in his story the beautiful image of the girl-Jesus turns into a perversion of generally accepted moral norms by adults; in another of Katurian's stories, a mysterious wanderer cuts off a boy's toes in gratitude for his kindness, and then it turns out that the wanderer was the Pied Piper of Hamelin, who would rid the city of rats, but, after the citizens refused to pay him, would lead all the children of the city to death, except for one lame boy, who could not keep up with the others and thus was saved.

The most paradoxical is the title image of the Pillowman. This is a benevolent creature invented by Katurian who comes to children in the days of their happy childhood and tries to persuade them to leave life before it becomes a nightmare. Few agree, and those who refuse later bitterly regret that they did not heed the persuasions of the Pillowman. All this seems to testify to an overwhelming relativism permeating the play, and everything ultimately depends on the audience and reader's interpretation. As P. Lonergan justly points out: "Audience members who demand that a play must convey one specific 'message' will thus find themselves identifying not with Katurian but with Ariel and Tupolski: men who are limited in their perspective, brutal in their outlook and violent in their impulse to reduce every - thing to one narrow 'truth'." (Lonergan 2012, p. 110). If it is the duty of a writer to tell a story, then it is the business of the readers and critics to interpret it. Besides the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, there are other references to

the tales of the Brothers Grimm, which, being borrowed from folklore, abound with examples of child abuse. Just recall *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Armless Girl*, which also once shocked readers and overturned traditional moral concepts. In this regard I side with the argument of Jose Lanters, who writes: “what is sometimes understood as the “perverted” morality of Martin McDonagh must be reconsidered... and defined as his way of expressing morality based on conditional truth and embodied in the text of the play, and not the morality that is based on the idea of universal absolute truth” (Lanters, 2007, p.9).

And yet, despite the above, the playwright, as Joan Dean puts it, “seeks to reconcile postmodernism and moralism” (Dean, 2009, p. 169). The cynical, skeptical McDonagh, as in his other plays, gradually and discreetly leads his audience to the light. As it turns out, the halfwit Michal, realizing what a turn his games have taken, does not kill the third child. He chooses the most positive story of a green piglet that didn’t want to be like others; Michal paints the girl green and sends her to play with piglets. Moreover, in the end he asks his brother to destroy all the stories that can cause evil. This enables us to speak about the parable element of the play. According to E. Balburov and M. Bologova, parable is a “palimpsest of moral memory” (Balburov, Bologova, 2011, p. 44). This “moral memory” distinctly shines through the play’s numerous layers of meaning. It does not mean that all the meanings are reduced to a common denominator. S. Makhotina is right in saying that “as a rule a parable includes not only a superficial, situational meaning that can be easily read at once but also several layers of deep meaning that differ, and sometimes are directly opposite to the surface one (Makhotina, 2001, p. 7).

By bringing Katurian back to life in the finale to say that in the last minutes of his life he invented another story, the author again blurs the line between text and reality, turning everything into a game. Against this background, the image of Michal can be perceived as a metaphor for a modern man lost in the world of simulacra, of blurred concepts of good and evil, looking for a foothold and finding it in a simple fairy tale that teaches good. Thus, the modern artist, using the multi-layered metaphor of the parable, creates a hyper-narrative that can be interpreted in a much broader sense than its surface elements allow.

Conclusion

Although British critics consider McDonagh one of the key figures of *In-Yer-Face* theater (Sierge, 2001), in my

opinion his dramas stand out despite the fact that we can find many features characteristic of this theatrical movement – provocative duality, deliberately shocking imagery, themes and language. However, McDonagh’s plays are, above all good drama – multi-layered and metaphorical, which unlike many *In-Yer-Face* plays depict not just social types but full-blooded characters, who despite their vices evoke the sympathy of both the audience and the author himself. Despite their genre and stylistic diversity, McDonagh’s dramas are always filled with pain and compassion, a desire to see the human in any person and if not to point out the way, then at least to awaken this human element. To my mind this should be the course of true art, which does not exclude experiments and innovations but first and foremost appeals to the human.

Martin McDonagh apparently understood this from the beginning and, unlike many of his colleagues, seeks to promote the humanistic function of art by awakening “good feelings” with his lyre, which also brings him closer to the best traditions of world theater. With his plays he not only terrifies and shocks his public but also makes people think about the diseases of modern civilization and ultimately look into oneself.

Competing Interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

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