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Crush Humanity One More Time: Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* in Žižekian Terms

Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* dramatizes the interrogation and torture of a horror fiction writer, Katurian, whose stories have been re-enacted in 'real' life without his knowledge. The audience gradually finds out that the murders are the crimes of Michal, Katurian's mentally retarded brother, who had been physically tortured by his parents in childhood, until Katurian murdered them. Upon Michal's confession, Katurian has to kill his brother to save him from the suffering and torture to come. Subsequently, it becomes clear that the two interrogators also suffer from the violent childhoods they re-enact with the violence they inflict on their suspects. It appears that all kinds of violence in the play are somehow justified, and treated in such a complex way that it becomes hard to draw boundaries between victims and perpetrators. The depiction of violence can, however, also be examined in dimensions that trigger and shape each other: the violence of the totalitarian state directed against the individual and the artist; domestic violence; the fictional violence found in Katurian's stories. Read through Slavoy Žižek's theory of violence, which also highlights the interconnected nature of its several kinds, *The Pillowman* can be observed to create a panoramic view of its subject. Mahinur Akşehir-Uygur is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Manisa Celal Bayar University in Manisa, Turkey. Her areas of interest are satirical literature, contemporary fiction, and women's literature.

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MARTIN McDONAGH is a contemporary playwright of the new brutalist movement, who displays horrific sexuality, mutilated bodies, and blood on stage. Due to this extreme representation of violence and sexuality, Heath A. Diehl considers McDonagh a new breed of 'angry young man in his portrayal of anger and passion for social structures which no longer provide a means for organizing everyday life' (p. 108). Also referred to as 'in-er-face theatre', this new direction in theatre is principally based on sensationalism, and drags the audience outside the traditional and familiar forms of theatre by shocking them with its use of daring and unfamiliar techniques that aim to break taboos by displaying those taboos in an excessive way and making the audience uncomfortable (Sierz, p. 4).

Along with other contemporary dramatists such as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Anthony Neilson, Philip Ridley, Jez Butterworth, Joe Penhall and Patrick Marber,

Martin McDonagh is regarded as having contributed to a renaissance in British theatre. As Sierz suggests in *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*, 'They introduced a new sensationalism: whatever you think of in-er-face theatre – a sensibility which was characterised by explicit portrayals of sex and violence, with a fresh directness of expression, rawness of feeling and bleakness of vision – it certainly put new writing back on the map' (p. 21). Patrick Lonergan similarly argues that McDonagh employs a 'deliberate provocation of controversy . . . and the use of deliberately shocking images, language, and themes' (p. 65).

As an outstanding example of this movement his play entitled *The Pillowman*, with its obscene language and violent characters, transcends the boundaries of the acceptable and makes the audience question what it means to be a human being and the boundaries of what can be done by revealing our most damaging secrets. After a rehearsed

reading staged in Galway in 1997, the play premiered in October 2003 at the National Theatre, directed by John Crowley. It received an Oliver Award as Best New Play in 2004 and in 2005 was nominated for four Tony awards, winning those for set and lighting design.

The Pillowman dramatizes the interrogation and the torture of a horror fiction writer, Katurian, whose stories unknown to him have been re-enacted in real life. The play is set in a place named Kamenice, 'a very common place name in the Slavonic settlement areas of East Central Europe', which makes it a 'real' location which is not necessarily meant to be perceived as specific (Huber, p. 285). As the action unfolds, the audience finds out that the murders have been committed by Michal, the mentally retarded brother of Katurian, who was physically tortured by his parents in childhood until this ended when Katurian murdered their parents.

Like most other plays of McDonagh, *The Pillowman* also revolves around the issue of the conflict between siblings, and the most compassionate of these conflicts appears when Katurian murders his brother as an act of love. Upon Michal's confession, Katurian has to kill his brother to be able to save him from the suffering and torture that awaits him. Subsequently, it is clarified that the two interrogators also suffer from violent childhood traumas which they act out by inflicting the same kind of violence on their suspects.

Apparently, all kinds of violence in the play are somehow justified and are treated in such an intricate way that it becomes really hard to draw the boundaries between the victim and the perpetrator. This complicated depiction of violence, however, can also be examined in ways that trigger and shape each other: totalitarian state violence upon the individual/artist; domestic violence; and the fictional violence found in Katurian's stories. Read through Slavoy Žižek's theory of violence, which also highlights the interconnected nature of several varieties of social violence, *The Pillowman* can be observed to display a panoramic view of violence in all these aspects.

The Monstrous Laughter

As a playwright McDonagh is appreciated for creating and triggering awareness and a critical outlook. Embraced as the bad boy of the English-speaking theatre, the general perception of his plays is that 'they are simply extremely funny, and exceptionally well-written' (Pilný, p. 229). Brian Cliff points out that McDonagh is especially praised for *The Pillowman* for its richness in containing extreme brutality and tenderness at the same time, as being unexpectedly fresh and morally ambiguous, and also marking a departure from his earlier work (p. 136).

However, although drawing much attention and praise, McDonagh is also criticized for displaying scenes of fierce violence on the stage and creating violent stereotypes of Irishness. Victor Merriman suggests that McDonagh is simply a media culture who tries to draw attention to himself by choosing excessive topics to attract the 'voyeuristic middle-class audience' (p. 254). Brian Cliff suggests that among the criticism directed to McDonagh 'even the most heatedly negative of these reviews almost uniformly admitted McDonagh's technical skills, but seemed to resent the play even more, precisely because of these skills' (p. 135). McGarth also points out that some members of the audience of *The Pillowman* could not even stand to see the rest of the play because of its crude violence and left the performance (quoted in Cliff, p. 135). As Jose Lanters points out, McDonagh is regarded as morally defective, a misogynist, and a racist as a result of his use of an 'orgy of random violence' (p. 9).

A remarkable aspect of McDonagh's representation of violence, however, is that, though it can be quite disturbing, there is also an absurd comicality or a dark comedy in his representation. He makes the audience experience a variety of conflicting emotions causing one to laugh at a terrible act of violence, arousing a conflict of emotion that triggers the audience to think more deeply both about the world that we live in and about ourselves.

Fintan O'Toole considers McDonagh's comicality as a version of alienation effect

that encourages an audience to start asking questions. Evaluating the comicality in McDonagh's *Aran Trilogy*, he suggests that it was an experience of six hours of 'laughing ourselves sick at some of the blackest, bleakest stories that have ever been told in the Irish theatre. We have laughed at the Famine, at murders and suicides, at children drowning in slurry pits, and old men choking on vomit' (p. 381).

As Marion Castleberry argues, however, 'humour is not designed to provide comic relief; instead, it intensifies the pain of the characters while focusing and clarifying the darker moments of the play' (p. 43). In other words, comedy or laughter brings things closer, within the range of touch, and this lack of distance renders the mechanisms that create violence subject to intervention. Such closeness enables the revelation, subversion, and alteration of the power mechanisms that underlie violence as an interconnected system of relations as Žižek considers it.

Žižek on Language and Violence

In *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek refers to a text by Jean-Marie Muller in which she suggests that 'speaking is the foundation and structure of socialization, and happens to be characterized by the renunciation of violence' and that 'it is actually the principles and methods of non-violence . . . that constitute the humanity of human beings, the coherence and relevance of moral standards based on both convictions and a sense of responsibility' (p. 61). According to Žižek, this leads to the conclusion that the implication of non-violence in understanding humanity is primarily based on the fact that people can speak.

This, according to Žižek, is questionable. He asks: 'What if, however, humans exceed animals in their capacity of violence precisely because they speak?' (p. 61). In his view the concept of non-violence is measured through the assumed standards of normalcy and the imposition of such a standard 'is the highest form of violence' in the first place:

This is why language itself, the very medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition, involves un-

conditional violence. . . . Language, not primitive egotistic interests, is the first and greatest divider, it is because of language that we and our neighbours (can) 'live in different worlds' even when we live on the same street. What this means is that verbal violence is not a secondary distortion, but the ultimate resort of every specifically human violence. (Žižek, *Language*, p. 2)

To discuss the violent potential of language, Žižek refers to Lacan's theory of the symbolic order. He suggests that Lacan takes Heidegger's notion of 'language as the house of being' and that he twists it as a 'torture-house' (p. 3). According to him, Lacan suggests in *Ecrits* that 'man is a subject caught in and tortured by language' (p. 4). He goes on to argue that:

This violence operates at multiple levels. Language signifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature. It dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous. It inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it. When we name gold 'gold', we violently extract a metal from its natural texture, investing into it our dreams of wealth, power, spiritual purity, and so on, which have nothing whatsoever to do with the immediate reality of gold. (*Violence*, p. 61)

Žižek explains his point further by using Heidegger's concept '*Wesen der Sprache*' highlighting the essencing quality of language, its power to attribute an essence or a meaning to an object. Heidegger refers to the violence of language as 'mythic violence'. Furthermore, this essencing not only violates the object by being reductive and unnatural but, through essencing, can also legitimize other acts of violence by contributing a mythical quality to them.

Basically, Žižek classifies the concept of violence as either subjective or objective. He argues that 'subjective violence is just the most visible portion of a triumvirate that also includes two objective kinds of violence' (p. 1). The kind of violence that is based on language or speech is one of these objective kinds of violence referred to as 'symbolic violence embodied in language and its forms, what Heidegger would call "our house of being"' (p. 1).

Besides this kind of objective violence that operates through the imposition of a mechanism of meanings, there is also what Žižek calls 'systemic violence' which he defines as 'the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems' (p. 2). Žižek contends that civilization is indeed a violent imposition of values and norms that are not implicit to human nature. Perhaps that is why, 'to paraphrase Walter Benjamin . . . every clash of civilization really is a clash of underlying barbarisms' (p. 177).

Žižek suggests that subjective violence occurs in the form of the distortion of the normal whereas objective violence operates within the normal.

Subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the 'normal' state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent.

(Žižek, *Violence*, p. 2)

Žižek accordingly suggests that symbolic and systemic violence resembles the 'dark matter' of physics. It is not a visible mechanism of violence, but it is known that it exists and operates its power upon members of society, and so 'has to be taken into account if one is to make a sense of what otherwise seem to be "irrational" explosions of subjective violence' (p. 2).

Language, Violence, and Oppression

So it is the kind of violence that is internal to the social system that surrounds the community and works through the imposition of power relations, 'relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence' (p. 9). Žižek explains his point using Lacan's concept of the master-signifier that maintains the symbolic system of meanings. He suggests that according to Lacan:

human communication in its most basic constitutive dimension does not involve a space of egalitarian intersubjectivity. It is not 'balanced'. It

does not put the participants in symmetric mutually responsible positions where they all have to follow the same rules and justify their claims with reasons. On the contrary, what Lacan indicates with his notion of the discourse of the Master as the first (inaugural, constitutive) form of discourse is that every concrete, 'really existing' space of discourse is ultimately grounded in a violent imposition of a Master-Signifier which is *stricto-sensu* 'irrational': it cannot be further grounded in reasons . . . Here Levinas was right to emphasize the fundamentally asymmetrical character of intersubjectivity: there is never a balanced reciprocity in my encountering another subject. The appearance of *égalité* is always discursively sustained by an asymmetric axis of master versus servant, of the bearer of the university knowledge versus its object, of a pervert versus a hysteric, and so on. (Žižek, *Violence*, p. 62)

This ever existing mechanism of discursive violence imposes the standards of normalcy, according to Žižek. The imposition of the 'presupposed standard of what the "normal" . . . situation is, [is] the highest form of violence' (p. 64). So this is why language, which is supposed to be 'the very medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition, involves unconditional violence' (p. 65).

Žižek explains the violent and inexplicable outbursts of violence within a society as the results of this invisible violent oppression mechanism. As Englander also suggests, 'violence is never truly without motive, but its motives may be so complex and elusive that it appears motiveless' (p. 55). Žižek agrees and uses Lacan's term *passage à l'acte*, which is 'an impulsive movement into action which can't be translated into speech or thought and carries with it an intolerable weight of frustration' (*Violence*, p. 76). Individuals who are continuously oppressed by the invisible symbolic and systemic violence of the social system react in the form of subjective violence, according to Žižek.

In this evaluation Žižek maintains that different versions of violence function as planes of an interconnected system. As epitomized in *Violence Expressed*, injustice and the marginalization of the lower classes create domestic violence as a reaction (Weiss and Six-Hohenbalken, p. 4). Seen from Žižek's point of view, marginalization as a form of systemic violence leads to domestic violence,

one among other forms of social violence seen as forms of subjective violence.

At this point he introduces us to another concept concerning violence, suggesting that as a reaction to the subjective violence that is the result of objective violence, there occurs 'divine violence,' in the course of which

God himself has lost his neutrality and 'fallen into' the world, brutally intervening, delivering justice. 'Divine violence' stands for such brutal intrusions of justice beyond law.

(Žižek, *Violence*, p. 178)

This kind of violence is seen as not a personal reaction, not a crime, not a religious, ethical or aesthetic activity.

Those annihilated by divine violence are fully and completely guilty: they are not sacrificed, since they are not worthy of being sacrificed to and accepted by God – they are annihilated without being made a sacrifice. . . . Divine violence purifies the guilty not of guilt but of law, because law is limited to the living: it cannot reach beyond life to touch what is in excess of life, what is more than mere life.

(p. 198)

To sum up: Žižek classifies violence into two basic categories: subjective violence which is the actual performance of a physical assault, and objective violence – the more subtle of the two and the more difficult to detect, classified as symbolic violence which is based on the deterministic and imposing nature of language and the systemic violence that emerges as a result of the smooth operation of economic and the social system at the expense of people's rights and freedoms. Lastly he mentions divine violence, which is mainly seen as insensible and triggered by a need to correct these categories of violence. All these categories and the intricate inter-relationships between them are represented in McDonagh's *The Pillowman*, in the form of state violence, domestic violence, and fictional violence.

State Violence

The most obvious treatment of state violence in the play is of course the subjective violence that Katurian and his brother Michal are subjected to throughout their interrogation. We are simply presented with a story

of an artist who is being punished for his art in a totalitarian state. He is made to confess to the crimes that he has not committed through physical and psychological torture. Katurian has had his rights read, been taken out of his home, blindfolded, and cruelly beaten for no reason of which he is aware (McDonagh, p. 6).

Eamonn Jordan points out that the state violence epitomized as the interrogation of Katurian and Michal is a criticism of the totalitarian attitude hidden beneath the hypocritical discourse of democracy displayed during the war in Iraq in 2003. He suggests that 'the interrogation techniques, notionally in the name of democracy, deployed by American army forces in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq have many parallels with the McDonagh play' (p. 175). No matter how one approaches the play, it depicts the state's imposition of subjective violence on its subjects through institutions such as the law, police forces, and prison.

However, this version of the violence inflicted on Katurian is only the tip of the iceberg, as McDonagh reveals during the course of the interrogation through the following conversation between Katurian and Officer Tupolski:

TUPOLSKI: Why would there be a linkage, your stories, you being taken here? It isn't a crime, you write a story.

KATURIAN: That's what I thought.

TUPOLSKI: Given certain restrictions . . .

KATURIAN: Of course.

TUPOLSKI: The security of the state, the security of the general whatever-you-call-it. I wouldn't even call them restrictions.

KATURIAN: I wouldn't call them restrictions.

TUPOLSKI: I would call them guidelines.

KATURIAN: Guidelines, yes.

TUPOLSKI: Given certain guidelines, the security of whatever, it isn't crime, you write a story.

(McDonagh, p. 7)

Besides Katurian being psychologically forced into being one hundred per cent agreeable, the reader encounters another kind of violence that is being concealed under the name of 'guidelines'. This dialogue is a perfect example of what Žižek might call systemic violence rendered invisible with discourse. He argues in *Violence* (p. 12–13):



From the Decadent Theatre production of *The Pillowman* (Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, 2017), directed by Andrew Flynn.



this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their 'evil' intentions, but is purely 'objective', systemic, anonymous. Here we encounter the Lacanian difference between reality and the Real: 'reality' is the social reality of actual people involved in interaction and in the productive processes, while the Real is the inexorable 'abstract,' spectral logic of capital that determines what goes on in social reality.

As explained by Žižek, the Real gilds over, conceals, or oppresses the reality, using the politics of fear as a part of systemic violence. The aim of this specific form of violence is to regulate the other. This is how the standards of normalcy are imposed on people to make them one-dimensional, obedient, non-questioning subjects.

The fact that the artist's full name is Katurian Katurian Katurian (McDonagh, p. 8) also contributes to the representation of the standardization enforced by the state. So the state uses not only subjective violence, through a politics of fear, it also uses systemic violence in the name of 'the security of whatever', the violence of the 'good'. Žižek explains this phenomenon through the logic of quantum physics, suggesting that what counts as violence is directly linked to its context. According to him:

the intricate relationship between subjective and systemic violence is that violence is not a direct property of some acts, but is distributed between acts and their contexts, between activity and inactivity. The same act can count as violent or non-violent depending on its context.

(Žižek, *Violence*, p. 213)

Walter Benjamin also highlights the institutionalization of violence through which violence is justified as a necessary evil, or as sanctioned and unsanctioned violence as Benjamin labels it (Benjamin, p. 279), suggesting that sanctioned violence is seen as acceptable and legitimate as long as it is used for a just end.

According to this view (for which the terrorism in the French Revolution provided an ideological foundation), violence is a product of nature, as it were a raw material, the use of which is in no way problematical, unless force is misused for unjust ends.

(p. 277–8)

Benjamin also conceptualizes systemic state violence as law-preserving violence, which he evaluates as 'a threatening violence' (p. 285). In a Machiavellian frame of thinking, it threatens for the sake of the common good to ensure security and order and the preservation of existing power relationships just as dramatized in the fictional totalitarian universe of the play. In this sense, the two police interrogators, 'while combatting subjective violence, commit systemic violence that generates the very phenomena they abhor' (Žižek, *Violence*, p. 206): 'If I do not kill I shall never establish the world dominion of justice' (Benjamin, p. 298). Benjamin's words offer an expression of the mind-set in just one sentence.

Domestic Violence

As police officers, who are responsible for the implementation of order, Ariel and Tupolsky thus become the pawns in the 'market of violence', as coined by Georg Elwert. Elwert explains markets of violence as 'arenas of long-term violent interaction, unrestrained by overarching power structures and mitigating norms, where several rational actors employ violence as a strategy to bargain for power and material benefits' (quoted in Schröder and Schmidt, p. 5). Although Elwert specifically limits his definition to warfare, it can obviously be applied to the operation of power relations within a state which can be as violent as war. 'In this view, war is a game played by strategically planning leaders or elites in which those who actually commit violence are no more than pawns' (p. 5).

McDonagh aims to create a mirror effect by representing the law enforcer and the perpetrator in the same image. The police officers who are supposed to be the guardians of a non-violent world are both the executors of state violence and victims violently acting out their own traumas as children. But the question here is, why these adults perpetrate such excessive and groundless violence against the children.

Through Žižek's frame of mind, the answer to this question would be unknowingly to react to the systemic violence they have been subjected to. According to Žižek, excessive bursts of violence that seem to be groundless and unreasonable can be explained as reactions to the oppression and restrictions of the systemic violence which he explains with Lacanian *passage à l'acte*, as defined earlier.

Domestic violence is for the most part represented in the play in the form of child abuse, and we are presented with several dysfunctional families. Both the central plotline and the stories within the play revolve around parents or adults treating children badly. What's more, it is not only Katurian and his brother who are subjected to acts of domestic violence, but also the police officers Ariel and Tupolski. When this is revealed,

these two become both the executors of subjective and systemic violence and victims who re-enact their own traumatic experiences.

ARIEL: You know what? I would torture you to death just for *writing* a story like that, let alone acting it out! So, y'know what? (*Takes out from the cabinet a large, grim-looking battery and electrodes.*) . . . Fuck what your mum and dad did to you and your brother. Fuck it. I'd've tortured the fuck out of them if I had them here, just like I'm gonna torture the fuck out of you now too. (McDonagh, p. 53)

Right after Ariel utters these words, we find out that he was physically and sexually abused as a child and so is acting out his own childhood trauma when Katurian asks him: 'And who was the first one who told *you* to kneel down, Ariel? Your mum or your dad? (*Ariel stops dead still. Tupolski's jaw drops*)' (p. 54). Tupolski also reveals himself as he says: 'I'm just tired of everybody round here using their shitty childhoods to justify their shitty behaviour. *My* dad was a violent alcoholic. Am I a violent alcoholic? Yes I am, but that was my *personal choice*. I freely admit it' (p. 54). Furthermore, it turns out that Ariel has executed divine violence by murdering his own parents and justifying it as self-defence, just as Katurian has killed his own parents to save his brother from further physical torture and himself from psychological torture (p. 55).

Fictional Violence

Fictional violence can be examined both in terms of the fictionality of the play itself and of the violence expressed in the stories that Katurian writes. The central contention of the play is that art is not intended to influence real life. So Katurian continuously suggests that the violence in his stories is not intended to be re-enacted and that art does not have a message, its only purpose being to create a story.

According to Lanters, Katurian's refusal to be held responsible for the murders has a parallel with McDonagh's attitude towards the negative criticism of his work. He implies that it is not fair to be crucified for the fictional works he creates.

McDonagh has made this artistic disavowal explicitly: 'I don't think that Martin Scorsese can be held responsible because John Hinckley saw *Taxi Driver* many times and became obsessed with Jodie Foster' (quoted in Pacheco, p.29). Such abrogation of responsibility is a way of acknowledging that meaning is not inherent in a text but is rather constructed by readers on the basis of what they bring to it by way of context, similar to the way a detective solves a problem by interpreting clues, as in *The Pillowman*. (Lanters, p. 11)

McDonagh suggests that his intention is never to give specific messages, but only to tell stories. As Katurian claims:

KATURIAN: I mean, I agree. You read these things, these 'stories', supposedly, 'The police are all this', 'the government is all this.' All these political . . . what would you call 'em? 'The government should be doing this.' Please. Fuck off. You know what I say? I say if you've got a political axe to grind, if you've got a political what-do-you-call-it, go write a fucking essay, I will know where I stand. I say keep your left-wing this, keep your right-wing that and tell me a fucking story! You know? A great man once said, 'The first duty of a storyteller is to tell a story,' and I believe in that wholeheartedly. 'The first duty of a storyteller is to tell a story.' Or was it 'The *only* duty of a storyteller is to tell a story'? Yeah, it might have been 'The *only* duty of a storyteller is to tell a story.' I can't remember, but anyway, that's what I do, I tell stories. No axe to grind, no anything to grind. No social anything whatsoever. (McDonagh, p. 8)

Katurian insistently highlights the fact that by writing stories about children getting murdered he does not try to tell his readers to go and murder children. He is not 'trying to tell anything. It's supposed to be just a puzzle without a solution' (p. 14).

However, although McDonagh insists on the fact that his stories do not have messages, it is clear that they reflect the real-life experiences of people. For instance, his story entitled 'The Three Gibbet Crossroads' reflects Katurian's and McDonagh's experiences as writers, how they suffer from the systemic violence that forces them to keep within certain boundaries. In the story, a man wakes up in an iron gibbet not being able to remember what he is guilty of. There are two other gibbets that he can see on which he can read

placards that read 'Rapist' and 'Murderer'. The man tries to find out about his crime from the passers-by, but no one tells him what is written on his placard, But they despise him, and he dies without knowing what his crime is (p. 14–15).

In Brian Cliff's evaluation, the central character of the story can be taken as 'the image of the writer oppressed by the totalitarian state, an image predicated upon what Michael Billington's review referred to as 'the dangerous power of literature' (p. 137). In this sense, the central character of the story has strong parallels with Katurian, who also has no idea about what he is convicted of. And of course this parallel also extends to McDonagh himself.

The Role of the Pillowman

Similarly, all the stories narrated in the play have some kind of reference to the violent events (systemic or subjective) experienced by Katurian, but the story entitled 'The Pillowman' has a more central importance to the play in comparison with the others. The Pillowman in the story is a puffy man made of pillow who tries to convince children to commit suicide to save them from the horrific lives awaiting them.

When the Pillowman was successful in his work, a little child would die horrifically. And when the Pillowman was unsuccessful, a little child would have a horrific life, and *then* die horrifically. So, the Pillowman, as big as he was and as fluffy as he was, he'd just go around crying all day long, his house'd be just puddles everywhere, so he decided to do just one final job and that'd be it.

(McDonagh, p. 32)

It is apparent that Michal identifies himself with the Pillowman, trying to save those children through mercy killings from the future violence to which they will be subjected. Furthermore, Katurian turns out to be the Pillowman as well, when he decides to kill his own brother to save him from the violence awaiting him as a murder suspect.

In Žižek's terms, Katurian murdering his parents as an act of love for his brother is an epitome of divine violence in the sense that God is personified in Katurian, descending

down on earth to put things right in a divine intervention. The Pillowman appears when there is no hope for justice and things should be put in order by a divine hand or in Žižek's words as a 'sign of the injustice of the world, of the world being ethically "out of joint"' (Žižek, *Violence*, p. 200).

However, Žižek also adds that this kind of divine justice does not necessarily have a meaning: in his words, it is a 'sign without meaning' although it is accompanied with a 'temptation to provide it with a "deeper meaning"' (p. 200). Katurian's murder of Michal is similarly attributed to feelings of love and mercy, violence driven by a higher feeling of brotherly love, while it turns out to be a 'means without ends' (p. 202).

It is obvious that even though the stories do not have a direct political message, they reflect the experiences and especially the childhood traumas of Katurian. In other words, writing through his traumatic experiences of violence is indeed healing rather than destructive. Because writing is equated to killing, it is equal to the acting out of the violent traumatic experiences.

That is why Michal acts while Katurian writes. Writing in this sense becomes a paradoxical medium for expressing the inexpressible. Unable to address his own traumatic experiences directly, Katurian works them through by writing them. However, violence has a dialectical nature in the sense that it is both imagined and performed. Within this dialectical relationship Katurian performs the imagining and Michal fulfils the performing. In this sense they can be seen as the split twins, the mind and the body – which leads us to another layer of violence in the play.

Tension Between the Faculties of the Mind

The fact that Michal acts and that Katurian writes makes it possible to consider them as the id and the ego at the symbolic level. Michal is retarded, innocent, childish, and funny but on the other hand he has a touch of primordial evil in him and there is an aggressive quality even in his innocence. Therefore, he represents the id, or the body, whereas

Katurian with his sense and hold over language represents the mind or the ego. The id – Michal – has been repressed violently all these years and reacts with the same weapon at last for which he is subjected to another kind of violence, this time by his brother, Katurian – ego.

Through this is created an epitome of symbolic violence as conceptualized by Žižek. Michal is broken both for the sake of and by Katurian as the reality is broken by the Real through the essencing quality of language. However, McDonagh also highlights the problematic nature of language as an elusive, unstable plane breaking the illusion of the Real. Through this frame of mind, the commentary of Lanters and O'Toole on another play of McDonagh applies equally to *The Pillowman*. Lanters and O'Toole suggest that in McDonagh's plays language is no longer a means to reflect reality and is

so destabilized in the play that the possibility of real communication seems on the verge of collapse at any moment. Characters constantly mistake each other's meanings, twist words around to their own ends, or simply cannot distinguish truth from fiction. As Lanters points out, McDonagh's characters 'all speak in short, paratactic sentences and are prone to repetition, banal pronouncements, and stating the obvious. . . The treacherous surface of words keeps drawing attention to itself and hence prevent true depth of feeling.' (Quoted in Castleberry, p. 46)

As highlighted in the play, all the characters suffer from this quality of language and, in this respect, the interpretation of Lanters and O'Toole obviously echoes the Žižekian concept of symbolic violence, violence stemming from the fluid or rather slippery nature of language.

The police officers thus become the superego in this equation and in this way we are presented with violence channelling back and forth between each corner of this triangle. The police officers as superego are supposed to be the voice of common sense but practically they are no different from the id – Michal – in their tendency to violence because the superego also operates in the mode of systemic violence. Englander explains the

violent relationship between the faculties of the mind in Freudian terms:

Freud believed that aggression was a normal but unconscious impulse that is repressed in well-adjusted people. However, if the aggressive impulse is particularly strong or repressed to an unusual degree, then some aggression can 'leak' out of the unconscious and the person may be aggressively against a random, innocent victim. Freud called this displaced aggression, and this theory might explain an attack of 'senseless' violence, labelling it as aggression that was too repressed and has broken through the surface. (p. 73–4)

As Freud puts it, the over-controlling of the individual by the tools of systemic and subjective violence through ego and superego is reacted to in equally and senselessly violent ways. Katurian – the ego, the mind – responds to this violence by writing through and Michal – the id, the body – by acting out.

The modern valuing of the mind above the body is also represented through the different treatment by the parents of the brothers. Whereas Katurian – the mind – is treated with love, Michal – the body, the id – has been tortured and repressed. Whereas the mind is continuously cherished and nurtured, the body is continuously repressed and tortured, as expressed in Michal's letter to his brother Katurian: 'They have loved you and tortured me for seven straight years for no reason other than an artistic experiment, an artistic experiment which has worked' (McDonagh, p. 23–4).

This is the fate of the modern individual subjected to systemic violence. So although the play communicates the intricate nature of violence on the surface level, it also reveals the violent tension between the faculties of the human psyche through characterization in the play. It not only shows us the violent nature of the social relations but also the violence executed within the human psyche.

McDonagh's works are considered to be works of contemporary gothic by some and he is even thought of as the Marquis de Sade *de nos jours*. Regardless of how he is labelled, he aims to show us the dark aspects of human experience without whitewashing or being didactic, and by placing violence at the core of the sincerest and most personal

experiences. McDonagh is marked by the reflexivity of his work, avoiding the construction of his story around a single message that would be agreeable to everyone in the audience and enabling them through the controversial issues and ambiguity in his plays to interpret the action in relation to their own lives and environments (Lonergan, p. 76).

In *The Pillowman*, the concept of violence is depicted as more complicated than it appears, and it is difficult to draw the boundaries between the victim and the perpetrator. The individual is represented as being subjected to violence throughout his/her social and internal experience, and it is argued that individuals who are subjected to too much violence, systemic or subjective, become responsive in violent ways. The function of art within this intricate, complex set of relationships is a healing one, as one brother commits the murders while the other only writes them.

McDonagh tells us a story and in his story he reveals the concealed mechanisms that operate the system of violence founded to ensure public stability through language, the universe of meanings it provides, and the politics of fear.

Therefore, he indeed tells us a story which is drafted by a power outside himself – just like Picasso, in the anecdote that Žižek tells us: a German officer visits Picasso's studio in Paris during the Second World War. Upon seeing *Guernica* the officer asks, shocked: 'Did you do this?' and Picasso replies 'No, you did this!' (*Violence*, p. 11).

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