

Existential Despair in Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*

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Abstract

Exploring existential despair in Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* serves to raise existential questions about human conditions, which include the disappointing and bitter sociopolitical realities of human life. In modern drama, despair is formulated in the philosophy of existentialism; a twentieth century philosophical thought that describes humanity's contemporary existential conditions. Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* is one of the works that highlights that philosophy and can be considered an existential manifesto. As a modern play, McDonagh's *The Pillowman* dramatizes existential despair as one of the sociocultural conditions that characterize life in the modern era. Through dramatic strategies like stage directions, monologues, plot and characterization the playwright exposes the Sisyphean struggle for survival. This paper seeks to explore the existential conditions; especially the existential despair faced by the modern man in Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*. Thus, this purpose was achieved through an analysis of the existential conditions faced by characters in the play understudy. That analytical study is grounded on the premise that, as a modern play, Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* showcases existential despair through the presentation of hopelessness, which results from the absurd realities of life. The study attempted to showcase that, as a work of modernism, the play understudy follows the vision of life as a quagmire of despair as described as the theorists of existentialism. Existentialism as a literary tool accomplished two goals, to emphasis on the absurd socio-cultural realities within the play, and the absurdity of life.

Keywords: Existentialism, Despair, Modernism, Modern Drama

Introduction

Existentialism espouses the concept of despair and can be defined as the feelings of anguish, hopelessness and desolation that arise owing to some disappointing phenomena and disillusion. Despair has been conceptualized by various philosophers and scholars, in various perspectives, depending on their different aims. Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death*, Jean Paul Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* are some of the books that fully explain the concept. Jean Paul Sartre, in *Existentialism is a Humanism* he explains that:

As for “despair”, the meaning of this expression is extremely simple. It merely means that we limit ourselves to a reliance upon that which is within our wills, or within the sum of the probabilities which render our action feasible. Whenever one wills anything, there are always these elements of probability. (14)

He later asserts that, “Beyond the point at which the possibilities under consideration cease to affect my action, I ought to disinterest myself” (14). These two statements by Sartre qualify despair as the disinterest of man when the results of a situation go beyond the expected probabilities and possibilities. This conceptualization underlies the loss of hope as a result of disappointment.

In the twentieth and twenty-first century, scholars have also conceptualised the idea of despair, to make the concept suit and address modern issues. Indeed, Mary Louisa Lum in *Existential Despair and Moral Decay in Oscar C. Labang's This is Bonamoussadi*, explicitly argues that “Existential despair emanates from frustration which grows as the individual witnesses the disheartening conditions that pervade his socio-political environment” (64). This conceptualization underscores two main

aspects that make up existential despair: the absurd life, which is referred to as “the disheartening conditions” (64); and disillusionment, which is qualified here as “frustration” (64). That disillusionment leads to the establishment of loss of hope which is a manifestation of existential despair.

From these conceptualizations, the common idea that is showcased is the loss of hope, which derives from the absurd life, and at the same time represents a manifestation of despair. Thus, analysing *The Pillowman*, this essay follows that conceptual framework. Pertaining to the play itself, McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* has been studied by previous critics, using existentialist lenses.

Ajda Baştan, in *Kristevan Intertextuality between Waiting for Godot and The Pillowman* explains that from the structure of the two plays, showcase existential questions. The author compares the life of Vladimir and Estragon with that of Katurian and is backward brother, highlighting the disappointing and despairing conditions in which they live. That article focuses on the intertextual presentation of the common existential features shared by the two plays. This endeavour lays emphasis on the illustration of existential despair in Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*.

Sobia Kiran, in *Artistic Portrayal of Death as a Refuge from Morbidity: The Pillowman by Martin McDonagh and 4.48 by Sarah Kane*, compares the existential realities faced by characters in the two plays, in relation to death. Talking about the characters in the two plays, the Sobia states that:

The bitterness of their existential experience has made them sadist and masochist but with a twist that death does not appear as a cruel act of violence rather it emerges as a shelter and refuge from the constant misery of life. (101)

Through this statement, the author underlies that both the characters in Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* and those in *4.48 Psychosis* die in order to escape from the horrible existential conditions of their respective lives. Through the use of an existentialist framework, Kiran illustrates the intertextual relationships of the two texts. Yet, this essay, also using an existential framework, focuses on the issue of despair, illustrating its main aspects, as outlined by Albert Camus: absurdity and the loss of hope, which make up the source and manifestation of existential despair, respectively.

Absurdity of Existence as the Source of Existential Despair

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus defines the concept of absurdity as: the “confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (14). This assertion puts the basis of the understanding of absurdity. In this excerpt, Camus insinuates that absurdity gets born from the clash between the real life conditions of the world, which are essentially irrational; and the desire of humans to make life meaningful. Camus aligns absurdity with the conditions of man in the world. He states that “the world is absurd” (14). The world being the embodiment of absurdity implies that, the life conditions proposed by the world is essentially irrational. Following that same logic, Camus revises his previous conceptualization of the absurdity, insisting on another detail. He defines absurdity, laying an emphasis on the man, not only on the irrational sociocultural and political circumstances of the world. He explains that:

This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said” (14). In this statement, he establishes that the world does not make up the whole source of absurdity. However, Camus adds that: “The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the

moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together (14).

This assertion implies that, both man and the conditions of the world create absurdity. Indeed, man has desires and objectives, which unfortunately cannot be achieved owing to the irrationality of the world. Therefore, existence remains meaningless: this is absurdity.

Through the elements of drama such as dialogues, characterization, plot and stage directions, Martin McDonagh, portraying existential despair, presents the characters' life as absurd. That absurd life is the source of loss of hope, and therefore the source of despair. Indeed, existence in *The Pillowman*, is as Basma Ali outlined in *Violence in Martin McDonagh's The Pillowman*: "a physical and biological warfare" (3). This comment by Ali demonstrates the extent of absurdity of existence in *The Pillowman*. That Absurd life in which existential despair has its roots, is seen through various aspects including: the gruesomeness of life, the purposeless of existence, and the strangely monotonous nature of life.

The gruesomeness of life, as one of the absurd realities in *The Pillowman*, orchestrates despair in the minds of characters. The most striking case that illustrates that gruesomeness is the "Tale of The Three Gibbets Crossroad". This is a frame narration written by Katurian the protagonist of the *The Pillowman*. Indeed, in the frame narration, Katurian tells the story of a man who is killed without knowing the reason why he is executed. The man wakes up, sentenced in a gibbet, along with three fellow prisoners who are rapist and murderer, respectively. While the other prisoners (rapist and murderer) end up being preyed upon, given food and removed from their gibbets (14), the man ends up being shot to death without being told why he is killed. The story insists that "As our Man is

dying, he screams out ‘just tell me what I have done!’. The last words our Man ever says are ‘we I go to hell?’ And the last sound he ever hears is the highwayman quietly laughing” (14-15). This frame story stands for a metaphor of the gruesomeness of existence. Through this tale, existence is described as an arena of unfairness and injustice, as “our man” is killed for an unknown reason, then mocked by his killer, while the other prisoners are favoured. Here, existence is presented as what Lum, in *Nkengasong and O’casey: An Existentialist Analysis of the Call of Blood and Juno and the Paycock*, called “a quagmire in which there is no villain... as all efforts results in anguish” (25). This frame narration showcases the play as the depiction of absurdity, which in turn results in existential despair. “Our Man” as the prototype of the modern man is entrapped in an absurd existence, wherein there is no solution to the gruesome issues that make life bleak. Katurian, as the author or storyteller, explains that this story is “supposed to be just a puzzle without a solution” (14). The story thus represents a horrible circumstance that has no way out.

The purposelessness of life is another element that makes up the absurdity of existence in *The Pillowman*, resulting in existential despair. Indeed, in Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*, existence is seen as purposeless, as *terra nullius* and meaningless; yet the quest for a purpose-based existence and a meaningful life leads to horror and bleakness. Further, the purposelessness of existence is showcased in the play through the frame story entitled “The Tale of the on the Town on a River”. The tale describes the pitiful and miserable life of Boy, a little isolated child whose life is perceived as senseless and purposeless. However, the very first day he attempts to give some meaning to his existence, generously offering a sandwich to an unknown man, he gets his toes cut off. Boy “did not get along with the other children of the town. They picked on and

bullied him because he was poor, and his parents were drunkards, and his clothes were rags, and he walked around barefoot” (16). Boy’s life is characterized by isolation, bullying, poverty and misery... yet Boy is a very kind child. However, looking forward to asserting himself as a “social animal” for the sake of social integration, Boy sees his toes getting cut off. He loses his toes in an attempt to socialize with the traveller. The cutting off of those toes is seen as a reward for Boy’s kindness and the result of his quest for social integration.

The absurdity that orchestrates despair in *The Pillowman* is also seen through the strangely monotonous nature of life; especially the life of Katurian and his “backward” brother, Michal. Indeed, the plot used by McDonagh here, is a series of a repetition of gruesome events. The lives of Katurian and his brother are cyclical, monotonous and iterative series of strange phenomena. Their adulthood seems to be the repetition of their childhood. In their childhood, the two characters go through harshness in different ways, and in their adulthood, that harshness comes back in the same manner and in the same form: the two brothers being locked up in two different and opposing rooms, one being tortured and the other suffering from the screams of the tortured one. “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother”, a frame play written by Katurian displays the childhood of the Katurian and Michal. Describing that horrible childhood, the stage direction explains that: “In the nightmare semi-dark of the adjoining room, it appears for a second as if a child of eight strapped to the bed is being tortured with drills and sparks” (23). In that adjoining room indeed, Michal was being tortured by his parents. The screams produced by the tortured Michal make Katurian suffer mentally to the extent of making him lose his talent for writing romance and uplifting works. These screams indeed turned him into a writer of gruesome stories. The frame play

explains that: Katurian's stories "got darker and darker due to the constant sound of child torture as is often the case" (23). In *Kristevan intertextuality Between Waiting for Godot and*

The Pillowman, Adja Bastan, comparing the elements of absurdity in *The Pillowman* and *Waiting for Godot*, calls that ordeal as a nightmare. The author, explaining the nightmare, declares that:

Nightmares are also mentioned in *The Pillowman*, when on the night of his seventh birthday, Katurian begins having scary dreams. In the next room at home, frightening noises, squeaks, punches, and a child's crying can be heard. When Katurian asks his parents what those noises are, his mother comforts him and calms him down just like Vladimir did in the other play. (527)

This explanation highlights both the torture of Michal by his parents and the disturbing of Katurian by the child torture noises. This "nightmare" as termed by Bastan does not stop in the childhood of Katurian and his backward brother. Instead, it reappears in their adulthood, making their life strangely monotonous and cyclical, and therefore absurd.

In their adulthood, the same gruesome issues are repeated as disclosed through the first stage direction in Act 2: "A cell. Michal sitting on a wooden chair, tapping his thighs, listening to the intermittent screams of his brother Katurian, being tortured a room away. A blanket on a thin mattress and a pillow lies a few yards away" (26). Here, the adult Katurian and Michal are once more locked up in two different rooms though there is a reversal. Katurian screams in one of the rooms from being tortured; and his brother suffers from the sounds of those screams. This reversal brings to mind the fortunes of Lucky and Pozzo in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The screams are so deafening that he cannot concentrate on

the recounting of the frame story, “The Little Green Pig”. This double appearance of the same event illustrates the monotonous nature of life in the play, indicating the absurdity of existence. It alludes to the strangely cyclical life that Beckett depicts in his *Waiting for Godot*; wherein the events that Didi and Gogo witnessed in the preceding day come back to the following day, in such a way that the characters can’t decide whether the events happened on that day or on the day before. *The Pillowman* describes this phenomenon, to illustrate absurdity in his play. Thus, from the realization of that absurd life, the characters get haunted by disillusionment, losing hope and therefore entering in the stage of existential despair.

Existential despair also arises from the absurd relationship between parents and children. Indeed, children are meant to be loved and cared for. However, Katurian, expecting love and kindness from his parents, comes to realize that his father and mother are cruel. This condition in which children are being hated and oppressed by their parents is part of what Albert Camus called in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: the “irrationals” (14) of the world, which he refers to as the absurd conditions of the world. That absurd relationship is specifically characterized by torture. Michal is tortured by his parents who should instead love him. In a conversation with Ariel, Katurian reveals that absurd condition and relationship that they (Katurian and his brother) have with their parents; especially he reveals how many times Michal had been tortured:

ARIEL: Oh. (Pause.) How old was he? When they started.

KATURIAN: He was eight. I was seven.

ARIEL: How long did it go on for?

KATURIAN: Seven years.

ARIEL: And you heard it all those years?

KATURIAN: I didn't know exactly what it was, till the end, but yes. (52)

This excerpt justifies the irrational or absurd relationship between Katurian, his brother and their parents. Vera Shamina, in *Scary Tales of Martin McDonagh: The Beauty Queen of Leenane, A Skull in Connemara, the Lonesome West, The Pillowman*, describes that absurd relation between Katurian, his brother and their parents negatively affects the writing and attitude of Katurian; and the life of Michal. Shamina explains that:

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 caring of his brother. (45)

This excerpt describes the absurd conditions in which Katurian and his brother lived as children of oppressive parents. This absurd relationship and interaction between the writer, the writer's brother and their parents cause Katurian's despair. Katurian gets disillusioned and despaired after experiencing absurd and irrational relationship. The absurd relationship between parents and children does not limit to the family of Katurian. In *The Lipple Applemen* and *The Little Jesus*, children are being beaten up and abandoned respectively.

Summing up, this section presents and justifies the absurdity in which characters in *The Pillowman* live. As explained by Camus, absurdity here comes from the confrontation of the desires of those characters and the irrational conditions of the world in which they live. These absurd conditions lead to the rising of the feeling of

hopelessness, which appears as the manifestation of existential despair.

Hopelessness as the Manifestation of Existential Despair

In *The Sickness unto Death*, the concept of despair is defined by Soren Kierkegaard as follows: “Despair is the disrelationship in a relation which relates itself to itself” (21). This statement conveys that, despair is not the suffering of the self or the human; but the misrelation, or the lack of logic in human, which comes about the disillusioning conditions of the world. Indeed, despair is expressed when one’s hope has been altered by the conditions I which one lives. Lum summarizes and reframes Kierkegaard’s definition of despair; explaining that, when existence becomes so absurd owing to the “disheartening conditions”, hopelessness is the very feeling that get incited in man. This is a manifestation of despair. In Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*, the feeling of hopelessness that showcases the expression of despair in the minds of characters, is seen in various levels: The Pillowman (the protagonist of “The Pillowman”, a frame story by Katurian) as the image of hopelessness; the disillusionment and hopelessness of Katurian; then the expression of hopelessness by Katurian in regard to the afterlife.

The Pillowman is seen as the image of hopelessness. Katurian the protagonist, as a storyteller, produces a story entitled “The Pillowman”, in which there is a character named The Pillowman. He is a man made up of pillows. That Pillow-made man is seen in the play as an image of hopelessness, because of the nature of his job. His job consists of getting children “kill themselves and so avoid the years of pain that would just end up in the same place for them anyway” (31). This suggests that The Pillowman, upon the realization of the absurd nature of life, totally loses hope, and starts

preaching (to children) hopelessness, and death as a way out to avoid absurd life. The Pillowman's argument is that life is essentially horrible and there will be nothing better conditions in the future, therefore it is not worth living. The philosophy of The Pillowman is based on the total loss of hope, he negates any upcoming happy condition. Preaching hopelessness to young children, the Pillowman allegorically stands for the image, the embodiment and the representation of hopelessness. This embodiment of the loss of hope is a striking illustration of the manifestation of despair in the play. The preaching of death as a way out to avoid absurd life alludes to Albert Camus's concept of suicide. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus develops a sub section titled "Absurdity and Suicide" wherein he states that he explains the "relationship between the absurd and suicide, the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd" (6). Camus explains that Suicide is directly linked to absurdity because; the absurd conditions in which humans live actually lead humans to kill themselves in order to avoid further hardships or further troubles. He states that: "it often happens that those who commit suicide were assured of the meaning of life" (6). This statement entails that, initially, humans claim and expect to have a peaceful and enjoyable life, until they notice the contrary. That contrary is simply the advent of unexpected disappointing and absurd realities. Upon the facing of these unexpected disheartening conditions, humans, who were assured of a peaceful life, definitely commit suicide in order to get rid of the hardships of the world. This is the lecture of the Pillowman to the town's children.

The Pillowman convinces many of the town's children to commit suicide. One of such children is the Pillowboy, whom the Pillowman convinces him to commit suicide, after explaining and preaching the hopelessness of life to him. The boy in compliance, "poured the can of petrol all over himself" (33), then "he struck a

match and the Pillowman sat there watching him burn” (33). So, from the instruction of the Pillowman, the boy burns himself to escape from the existential drama of pain called life. Although sad, the job of The Pillowman is seen as an essential service from the perspective of existential despair. Though Camus insights that suicide is cowardice, the morbid reality of the adult lives of the children who escaped suicide indicates that one cannot escape hopelessness. Unfortunately, there is a downturn because, “whenever the Pillowman was unsuccessful in his work, a little child would have a horrific life, grow into an adult and who’d also have a horrific life and then die horrifically” (32). This is a clear indication that the loss of hope by The Pillowman is not random. Actually there is no hope, because the children who give themselves a chance to keep existing, hoping for a better future never see anything getting better. Instead, those children have a very horrible life and then end up dying very horribly.

Besides the job of The Pillowman, which conveys a sense of total hopelessness, other facts showcase existential despair in the play. Indeed, Katurian also expresses the feeling of hopelessness, and just like The Pillowman, he preaches that hopelessness to his backward brother, Michal. Katurian, owing to the disheartening conditions and absurd realities of his existence, get disillusioned and ends up getting the feeling of hopelessness. From his personal experience, as a writer, he acknowledges that nothing ends happily in real life. Indeed, as a victim of a series of horrors, he teaches his brother: “There is no happy endings in real life” (41). Indeed, Katurian has totally lost hope for the existence of happiness in life. For him, nothing in real life ends happily. This is a declaration that is informed with hopelessness. Thus, just like The Pillowman, Katurian believes that existence is essentially a series of sad and

horrible events and phenomena; and nothing will ever get better in the future. Despair is thus seen through the words of Katurian.

The hopelessness of Katurian as his expression of existential despair, goes beyond the real world. Indeed, in his despair, Katurian goes further, claiming that, even in the afterlife, nothing better will occur. Rather, the afterlife, will be as horrible as, or even more horrible than the life they are living. Michal thinks, in the afterlife, “at least we will be together in heaven, whatever happens. And hang out with God and that. Have races” (39). Katurian extinguishes Michal’s hope explaining him that, his afterlife will be hell-like. Katurian asks his brother: “Do you want to know where you are going to, when you die?” (39). He then explains:

You are going to a little room in a little house in a little forest, and for the rest of all your time you are going to be looked after not by me, but by a person called Mum and a person called Dad. And they are gonna look after you in the same way they always looked after you, except this time, I’m not gonna be around to rescue you. (39-40)

Indeed, Katurian lets his brother understand that, dying does not mean the end of suffering. He insists that the same horrors that happened in childhood which were repeated in adulthood will obviously come back in the afterlife, and in a worse manner. This may probably be the highest expression of despair. It is a clear indication that the characters in *The Pillowman*, owing to their absurd life full of disheartening conditions, end up being in despair.

In exploring hopelessness as a manifestation of despair, one notices the lack of hope expressed by Katurian to succeed in changing society through his artistic creations. For theorists such as Vladimir Propp and Viktor Shklovsky, artistic creation is mainly made up of two parts: the fabula, which is the straight forward

manner of telling as story; and the syuzhet, which is the way in which the fabula is told. Shklovsky details these concepts in *Art and Techniques*. In *Steps Towards a Formal Ontology of Narratives Based on Narratology*, Valentina Bartalesi, Carlo Meghini and Daniele Metilli explain these concepts from the perspective of Viktor Shklovsky: “Russian formalist distinguishes between fabula, defined as a series of events taking place at a certain time at a specific location, and a syuzhet, which is the particular way the story gets narrated” (2-3). The fabula is the message of a narrative. Thus, it includes the social function of literature, allowing literary texts to teach moral and intellectual values. The outlining of a good fabula is thus the way in which a writer transforms his society. However, in *The Pillowman*, Katurian, as a writer, does not hope for the transformation of his society through his artistic productions. He believes that society is absurd and irrational, and that “there are no happy endings in real life” (41), and there will possibly be no happy endings. Therefore, he crafts gruesome stories. These stories do not improve the perception and the conditions of life in that society; but they instead contribute to spreading of darkness and horrors in society. Indeed, Katurian is disillusioned by the absurdity of his existence and that of his brother. He expresses the feeling of hopelessness, believing that, since “there are no happy endings in real life”, there is no use writing edifying stories; instead, he should write the gruesome ones that depict the horrors of life. The frame play “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother” indicates that, before being disillusioned about the realities of life, Katurian was a writer of romantic stories. These were meant to bring social improvement in the community, teaching love and romance. Yet, after understanding that existence essentially includes horrors such as child abuse and torture, “his stories got darker and darker and darker.” (23). The stories getting darker simply implies that Katurian

has lost hope for the change of society. Therefore, he starts producing gruesome fabulas. The feeling of hopelessness goes to the extent of Katurian believing that he cannot help his own brother who is being tortured by their parents, as dramatized in “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother”. All these feelings of hopelessness are the manifestation of despair. Indeed, Katurian understands that existence is essentially gruesome and there will be no improvement.

Conclusion

Overall, despair, as one of the most striking concepts in existentialism, can be read in many modern plays, especially in Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*. This endeavour particularly focused on the analysis and textual illustration of the concept of existential despair in Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*. As a broad concept in the field of existentialism, the concept of despair has been defined and conceptualized in various ways. The various conceptualizations led to the formulation of definition that shaped the framework of this study. Thus, following the above-elaborated existential analysis, it is clear that from the frame plays and frame narrations of the play, the actions and reactions of characters, Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* can be seen as a play reveals existential despair. This finding aligns with the aforementioned hypothesis that, as a modern play, Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* showcases existential despair through the presentation of hopelessness, which results from the absurd realities of life

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