

***The Pillowman* and the Creative Writing Classroom: Who Controls the Narrative?**

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Abstract

Who owns a story? This question is held under an interrogative flashlight in Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* (2003), a play set in a totalitarian police state where the protagonist, a writer named Katurian Katurian Katurian, finds himself in custody after a series of grisly child murders in his stories begin unfolding in real

life. As a creative writing teacher, the play's questions about the role of the author, especially as it intersects political and activist spheres and power dynamics within the classroom, are aspects I analyze through a braid of personal reflection, criticism, and pedagogical thinking.

I am sitting in a creative writing pedagogy course, and I am thinking about power.

Because I am always thinking about power. As a PhD student looking down the dimly lit road of a burgeoning career in education, I am constantly negotiating power: my own, that which I hope my students can find for themselves, and the ever-shifting position of educational budgets and protections in the mid-2020s US. For an entire semester's length, every Tuesday night for three hours, about ten of us graduate students met, clinging to driftwood in the swirling, uncertain current of contemporary academia, and discussed how to teach creative writing—all while keeping our own heads above water.



One of my favorite plays is *The Pillowman* (2003) by Martin McDonagh. In the very dark comedy set in a “totalitarian fucking dictatorship,” a writer of twisted fairytales, usually featuring gruesome acts committed against children, is being interrogated about a series of crimes that are eerily familiar to his works (McDonagh 18). The play is a whirlpool of stories within stories within stories, all told against a backdrop of violence and totalitarianism, posing intricate questions about the role of the writer in a state exerting narrative control over its citizens. Can writers be held accountable for their writing? Should writers consider the ethical implications of their writing while they're writing? How are we, as writers and teachers, seeing these power dynamics reflected in the classroom? Like most dramas, *The Pillowman* is critically underutilized in non-specialized creative writing classrooms despite its immense potential to generate these important conversations; many introductory creative writing courses are either multi-genre, prioritizing fiction, creative non-fiction, and poetry, or genre-specific to one of the genres above. Oftentimes, playwriting is relegated to theatre departments (if the departments have a playwriting curriculum; often, they do not).

Creative writers concerned with power should be concerned with *The Pillowman*. Through analyzing the play's messaging about reader-response to narratives, the fascist state's policing of writers through narrative, and the role of the play as an example of Walter Benjamin's revolutionary ‘now-time,’ I will demonstrate how use of the play in a

creative writing classroom will encourage students to think critically about their own ethical responsibilities as authors. I also want to use the play to analyze what it says about power and how hegemonic power dynamics are reflected in the creative writing classroom. And, if you haven't read *The Pillowman*, this is your last chance to stop reading and find a PDF—you don't want the twists and turns spoiled for you.

Katurian Katurian Katurian: The Writer

I sit across from my parents at an outdoor bistro table in Washington DC, picking cherry tomatoes off a slice of Margherita pizza. I am there to receive a national playwriting award and to see my play read in the Kennedy Center, the United States' national theater. The play is called *American Girl(s)*. They flew in on performance day.

I see the rest of my playwriting cohort drinking free wine at a table a few feet behind my parents' heads. A light April breeze carries the tinkling sound of their laughter and the scent of dead cherry blossoms.

"So," I ask, knowing, "What did you think?"

My mother's smile falters, her eyes darting to my father's face for rescue.

"Well," he says, "You're a very talented writer."

"Very talented," my mother nods.

"It's just," he says, searching for the words. "It's just—what do you think people will say?"



The protagonist (with the bizarre Kafka-esque naming convention) of McDonagh's play is Katurian K. Katurian, a writer of over four hundred stories. The play opens as Katurian is interrogated by two policemen (the 'bad cop' Ariel, and the dryly witty detective, Tupolski) over a series of crimes that oddly mirror Katurian's only published story and two that were never read by the public. The play is driven by a series of tensions, but by far the most significant, I think, is the tension between the 'fiction' of Katurian's stories and the sway they hold over the real world.

At the start of the play, Katurian denies any responsibility he might hold over the fates of the two murdered children; as the writer who did

not physically commit any murders, he absolves himself of all accountability: “So, what, this is about stories with murdered children in [them]? Do you think I’m trying to say, ‘Go out and murder children?’” (13). But it’s deeper than that—talking to the officers, Katurian shares a belief that his stories are self-contained entities, incapable of being influenced by the real world and equally incapable of inflicting real change. He openly expresses annoyance with stories that reflect political themes:

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! (8)



“Just because one of the characters has something negative to say about Medicaid or World War II or whatever doesn’t mean that...” I hear my mouth shape dumbly. And then it shuts. I was about to say “doesn’t mean that I do,” but that would be a lie. I do have something to say. The pizza has grown cold on the table.

“The character said she hates America,” my mother says.

“She’s nineteen.”

“You just don’t go after World War II,” my dad says again. He’s repeated the sentence again and again, like saying it will unwrite what I wrote—will fix the patriotic daughter I broke.

“She’s a fictional character,” I say again. Even though I’m not.

My mom sighs and leans back. My cohort behind her rises, pushing in their chairs. They’ll walk back to the theater to see the next reading.

“I don’t know,” she says, at the heart of everything. “It seemed real to me.”



Katurian is so staunch in his stance that his stories are self-contained and self-referential that he aligns himself with the New Critics of the mid-twentieth century. This course of study determined to legitimize itself by, like more exact sciences, analyzing texts as ‘the text itself,’

deeming factors like the author's psychology and the sociocultural context in which the book was written irrelevant to finding meaning in the text. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, two influential New Critics, define New Criticism's central claim about interpretation in their essay "The Intentional Fallacy": "[t]he poem is not the critic's own and it is not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it)" (1199). By separating himself from his stories in this New Critical manner, Katurian denies any impressions his own history might have left upon his stories and refuses to claim responsibility for his stories' impressions upon the world.



A year later, in another springtime in another state, I'm putting together my syllabus for an introductory playwriting course. The "Required Texts" section is largely blank—only one play, *The Pillowman*, sits in Times New Roman at the top of the page. The swath of white space underneath swirls with invisible images of picked-at pizza, April, power, and shame.

I'm paralyzed with anxiety over perpetuating power structures—being a barrier of access to education, unwitting or otherwise—that manifest when one person stands in front of the writer(s) and passes judgement. A police detective, a parent, a teacher—while obviously not equivalent in bestowed power and ability to enact consequences, these figures are spiraling echoes of systems that suffocate new writers.

Writing plays is more important now than maybe ever before. In the advent of AI, playwriting performance is maybe the last place people can experience storytelling that must, by the nature of its embodied form, necessitate human involvement. It is one of the oldest forms of storytelling and is now entering its most significant renaissance to date.

I write plays. I love plays. But I'm one person, a person who oscillates hourly between knowing what I'm doing and floundering to grasp something, anything, that will let me pull myself up for air. Sometimes I, like Katurian, write with wild abandon and a little bit of spite, not considering readership, consequence. But sometimes I am eating pizza with my parents in DC, and I am flattened by the reality that people

will read what I write, and when I do, they will have things to say about it.

Now that it's me 'in charge' of a classroom of other writers, the writer is suddenly endowed with the power of writer-teacher. How in the world do I use it?

Good Cop, Bad Cop: Tupolski as Reader Respondent

Dry and analytical, Tupolski's main function is that of a careful, historicizing reader. Moving away from the New Critics, I think Tupolski's reading style in the play is most like Michel Foucault in his essay "What is an Author?". Written in response to both Barthes' "Death of the Author" and Foucault's own failing to account for the role of the author in his previous work, he proposes an author function that serves as an "organizing device permitting us to group certain texts together" (1389). Most critically, to believe that the author can organize texts, we must believe that "the author is the source of the text" and that the text is constantly moving "back towards the author, searching out an individual's biography, psychology, and intentions" (1389).

Tupolski's approach to reading Katurian's stories mirrors Foucault's approach—he is constantly pulling the text back towards Katurian, trying to uncover how Katurian's childhood influenced his twisted work and prove that he's capable of committing the murders within them in real life. For example, Tupolski asks Katurian to recite his story, "The Three Gibit Crossroads," about a man in a prison cell with his crime (which he cannot remember) written on the outside door, where the man himself cannot read it. He asks each person who passes to tell him his crime but is only met with increasing disgust until he is shot in the heart, dying without ever knowing the extent of the harm he inflicted on the world to earn his fate. After Katurian finishes, Tupolski admits that outwardly "[t]here's nothing in that story you would say the person who wrote this story is a sick fucking scummy cunt" (McDonagh 15), but thinks that the story is "a pointer" that "is saying [to Tupolski] on the surface I am saying this, but underneath the surface I am saying this other thing" (15).



The DC play is now on its fourth cast in its humble reach across the Midwest. Sometimes, I am invited to attend rehearsal. I am asked questions.



While Tupolski doesn't explicitly say what he means by the story being a 'pointer,' one interpretation is that Tupolski is implying that Katurian is the prisoner, ignorant to the true weight of his actions but still deserving to pay for them. Katurian's story, told at the beginning of the play, is mirrored by the play's end as he is shot and executed. This thread doesn't require knowledge of Foucault to unpack with undergraduate students, only some well-placed discussion questions (What's the significance of Katurian's stories being framed as fairytales? What is this story 'pointing' to?) and close reading.

The important thing about Tupolski pointing to Katurian's story and drawing autobiographical conclusions is that, paired with Tupolski's position as a police officer, he is using his power to punish Katurian for his writing. In a totalitarian state, killing a writer is one form of controlling the narrative. By eliminating writers outside of the state's pocket, the state's printing machine can perpetuate whatever story it needs to.



Where did the play come from?

It came from power. It came from a world that I can shape entirely on my own, where things play out how I tell them to. The play is power. The playwright, power's executor.

And if the play is the only power I hold, I will grip it until my knuckles are paper white.

'Now-Time' and the Play as Political

Based on the above interpretations of Katurian as New Critical and Tupolski as Foucauldian, here's where my train of thought went first when tying fascism in: New Criticism and Katurian are anti-fascist. Tupolski and his clinging to Foucauldian ideals is fascist. Katurian's reader-response approach is anti-fascist because the writer is totally

erased—if the text stands on its own, no one can be held accountable or punished for its contents. Tupolski's insistence on the author's presence in the text is, in this context, a fascist act of shackling a writer to his work and any real-world harm that emerges from it.

But in the world of the play and upon further inspection, this logic doesn't hold up—McDonagh is simultaneously critical of fascist states and both Tupolski and Katurian's interpretations of Katurian's stories. By positioning Katurian and Tupolski's ideas next to each other in a performance text, McDonagh gives the audience a unique, suspended space to analyze these thoughts critically—an example of Walter Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*, or 'now-time.'

In 1940, Benjamin, a historian, theatre artist, theorist, and contemporary and friend of theatrical greats like Bertolt Brecht, wrote "Theses on the Philosophy of History," an essay that identifies the revolutionary potential of suspended time. It is the steady forward march of time, which Benjamin calls "the storm...[of] Progress" (260), that aids fascism in its attempt to control a national consciousness, a trend Benjamin witnessed firsthand writing in Germany in the nineteen thirties and forties. A society that never turns around to acknowledge that "they owe their existence not only to the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries" (258) is a society that a fascist state can dazzle with the potential of progress and technology, ultimately exploiting their labor: "Nothing," Benjamin writes, "has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current" (260).



If I am the writer-teacher, then my students are writer-students. To them, I drop the 'teacher' and 'student,' ensuring that we're all just writers, on the same plane. For the sake of clarity I'll stick with the hyphens.

The play is *power*: it is a physical, tangible space where time stands still, and the audience and actors experience a story together while breathing the same air. The playwriting classroom is a generator. It is a space where students learn the importance of preserving this living, ancient, storytelling medium, one that's survived the rise and fall of regime after regime. It's important that this power is distributed amongst

the writer-students creating their first performance worlds, places where forces like fascism, racism, or discrimination are either intentionally radically absent or held under the writer's interrogating flashlight, shining a light on their misdeeds. A system where the writer-teacher stands at the front of the room and talks while writer-students sit still and listen is a surefire way to guarantee that the play's power never sparks for them; that all the energy in the room is siphoned back to the writer-teacher turned oppressor.



If progress is a tool of fascism, Benjamin argues that the ideal tool of an anti-fascist revolution would be a kind of liminal space in which time has stopped completely, which he calls *Jetztzeit*. This space is not empty, however; *Jetztzeit* "is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled with the presence of the now" (263). It is a space where enveloped subjects can deeply consider history and their position within systems they inhabit. It allows, Benjamin argues, for thinking itself to be realized in its freest form: "Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well" (264). Ultimately, now-time is a space with the potential for "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (265).



I have been powerless. So have many others. All writers face forces that try to steal their power away: shame, political threats, poor grades, legal consequences, disappointing loved ones, academic systems. So why would my classroom echo a system that's burned everyone in the room? Why wouldn't it be a 'now-time,' a *Jetztzeit*, of our own?



Plays might be a rare instance of now-time occurring outside of an academic debate. The viewers of a live performance are suspended in a reality where the pulse of progress in the outside world is paused—audience members are not working, caring for children, or, ideally, on their phones in digital space while watching a play. Plays themselves are a bizarre kind of time vacuum; the actors meet at the same time every evening (or at a two o'clock matinee, sometimes) and repeat the same story for the entire length of that production's run. Time has, effectively, become suspended, like Benjamin's now-time needs to operate.

The other most important aspect of now-time is the ‘thinking’ that occurs in the suspended state. Theatre scholars, like David Allen and Eero Laine, have already identified the act of watching a performance as a pedagogical space. In their essay “The Integrated Spectator: Theatre Audiences and Pedagogy,” Allen and Laine argue that the learning process that occurs in a theatrical space is twofold: audiences think critically about what they see on stage, and the performers “discovered that audiences played crucial roles in [their] creative processes” (599). Audience and performer engage with each other and the material of the play in this suspended, reactive space; if, according to the article, “pedagogy is understood as creating conditions for the construction of knowledge” (600), then “theatre is a pedagogical space, one that includes spectator and performer, each ‘linking what one knows with what one does not know’” (601).

The following is an example of a scene from *The Pillowman* where, in a now-time, theatrical space, the audience and performers might consider what they know about fascism and what each character knows, or does not know, about it:

Much of the comedy and horror of the play is rooted in McDonagh’s critique of the totalitarian state through Tupolski’s contradictions. Tupolski tells Katurian a story he made up about an old man throwing a paper airplane from a tower; a little deaf boy on some train tracks leaps to catch it, saving himself from the train at the last second. Tupolski directly states: “the old wise man [...] represents me” and “by the brilliance of throwing that paper plane at that very moment, I shall save that idiot from that train, I shall save my fellow man from those criminals” (McDonagh 89-90). However, the text of the story makes it seem as though the old man throwing the paper airplane was unintentional, an afterthought, or a coincidence, a point that Katurian identifies: “I just thought the boy happened to catch it, that it was an accident” (90). Tupolski, a representative of the fascist state, is attempting to literally control the narrative by centering a fascist as its hero, a fact that isn’t evident in the original text.

The audience witnesses Tupolski’s contradictory, self-aggrandizing behavior performed by live human beings in front of them. Although

the characters are fictional, the uniqueness of a theatrical space is the physical embodiment of it, a sense of ‘realness’ in the room. Through the now-time effect, audiences sample this fascist behavior in a place where A) theatre triggers images of real fascist behavior because of the live performances’ proximity to ‘real life,’ and B) they are free to consider that behavior in a rare moment of arrest outside of the march of progress.

***The Pillowman* in the Creative Writing Classroom**

I value plays in general, *The Pillowman* specifically, and Benjamin’s now-time because the combination of the three works so wonderfully to create a present, revelatory moment, one that pulls audiences’ and writer-students’ eyes away from the fascist promise of progress and allows them to face the reality of the present.

So, how can we put all three in a creative writing classroom?



First, as I’ve done in this essay, I would start with power. After reading the play aloud, especially a section like Tupolski’s story about the boy and the airplane, I would engage in a discussion about how power works in the play. How did power shape Katurian’s stories in lieu of his childhood? How does Katurian exercise power fantasies in his stories? How does the corporal power Tupolski and Ariel hold affect how Katurian claims ownership of his stories?

As these discussions happen, writer-students might have questions about the structure of the class and how power will be distributed there. If they don’t, I’ll bring it up. Felicia Rose Chavez states in her book, *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*, that when it comes to creative writing classrooms, “membership necessitates mutual participation” (21). If I set and enforce all the rules in the space, participation is not mutual; it is mandatory, and writer-students, like Katurian, have no say in building the systems they create within.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. Alternatively, we can “revise [our] workshop goals to convince participants they are experts in their own right” (Chavez 26), creating a system that values all voices and opinions.

With writer-student input, the writer-teacher can listen to what their goals are for their writing and better adapt the course to serve their needs. This might look like changing the way we grade; writer-teachers might offer feedback by way of mutual participation in workshops, discussing the work with the writer present and are able to question and contribute. Letter grading is reserved for process over product—I grade for attendance, participation, and completion of drafts.

By treating writer-students as equal participants, the writer-teacher can dismantle the power structure that might hinder writer-students' ability to create freely. I've seen it happen; grading for attendance encourages students to be *in the room*, and *in the room*, writers talk. We talk, and we learn, diligently, how to listen.



Power dynamics between writer-teachers and writer-students can become additionally complicated by other existing power structures, including, as an example, race. As a white teacher in a diverse state school, I turn to Chavez's book for some additional support navigating my role. Chavez focuses heavily on the experience of writers of color in writing workshops. In the United States and other countries, people of color face additional barriers to entry and power structures that keep them from "egalitarian access to art-making" (34). It's important to deconstruct these systems in class by establishing an actively anti-racist space, a practice which Chavez details in her book. Some methods include encouraging students to speak as often as possible, infusing the space with the sounds of our voices as they exist. This method works beautifully in a playwriting class, where the writer and their peers can voice and hear the writer's work in performance.

While characters in a book are fixed, characters on stage must be performed by real actors—in this way, writer-students can learn that they, through their writing, can create opportunities for and uplift the voices of marginalized communities. In my class, I encourage students to cast their work using their classmates—that way, they have agency over who voices which characters and can hear their work as close to intended as possible. Combined with the now-time effect of freezing the fascist march of progress to allow the contemporary moment to breathe,

putting people on stage that reflect the current moment creates powerful revolutionary potential.



Finally, *The Pillowman* is a useful tool for writer-students navigating how they can advocate for themselves and their work. After discussing the systems working against Katurian, you might collaboratively create a list of power structures working against new playwrights trying to get their work seen—academic responsibilities, financial burdens, the state, family, etc. Then, as a class, work through potential solutions; where can we apply for funding? What opportunities are free and relatively simple to apply to? What kinds of conversations can we have with family surrounding our work? What lines are we willing to cross, and which ones, for self-preservation or time or other reasons, are we resisting for now?

There might not be solutions for everything. There's a fine line, too, that each writer-teacher will have to navigate in regard to power vacuums—by giving up some of our own power, are we allowing in other forms of coercion? How can freedom and responsibility coexist? But, by collaborating as a class, you're working to establish that now-time, that community where, in here, we are fighting for each other, right now. And that's a start.

The End

At the end of the play, Katurian is proven 'innocent' in the eyes of the state because he falsely confessed to Michal's killings and claimed that the final victim was killed. When said victim turns up alive and unharmed, modeled after Katurian's only story with a happy ending, Ariel pushes to set him free. However, despite the state's willingness to let him go, Katurian willingly confesses to the murder of his parents: "I killed my parents. I killed my parents" (McDonagh 98). By doing so, Katurian takes responsibility for his own actions and the actions that occurred because of his stories. He is executed for all of them. But still, he isn't totally free from coercion; Katurian's primary goal in surrendering himself is preserving his writing: "[i]f I tied myself to [the murders], like you wanted, at least I'd be able to save my stories" (99).

This ending is a kind of beginning for the creative writing classroom—a now-time thinking space for new writers to interrogate what this ending says about the role of the writer and who controls the narrative. Although Katurian takes personal responsibility for his actions when he could have preserved his own life, the fascist state is still ultimately in control of how his stories continue after his death. Tupolski intends to burn the file of his stories, which are only saved by an act of goodwill by Ariel. What does this say about the role of writers when they write? What communal action can we take to preserve the stories of others, to preserve our own? How can we, as writer-teachers, encourage our writer-students to thrive by crafting an anti-racist space that challenges the power dynamic status quo?



Walter Benjamin took his own life the same year he wrote “Theses on the Philosophy of History” to avoid being captured and murdered by the Third Reich.



As I finish this essay, I am still thinking about power.

I am still writing—plays, this article, things my parents, other readers, may like, may not like.

I write. I do yoga with my mother on Thursdays, and sometimes I talk about what I write.

Sometimes, she smiles.

I am thinking, if we cannot control the narrative,

If we dismantle classroom power structures,

Where will the power go?

Will it finally be free?

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Biography

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