LITERARY DRUID
A PEER-REVIEWED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

VOLUME – 8, ISSUE – 1, JANUARY 2026 **E-ISSN: 2582-4155**
www.literarydruid.com

From Queer Abject to Queer Shame: Navigating the Spectrum of Queer Affect through Reparative Reading to Canonise *'The Banshees of Inisherin'* (2022) as a Body Horror

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19160084

Abstract

The Banshees of Inisherin released in 2022 is a modern day allegory set in the rural Ireland of 1923, rendering the ramification of violence and the cycle of hatred that sparks from quotidian pettiness. Conceptualised in a closed community of mundane survival, the cinematic plot functions like a classic tragi-comedy of existential dread, featuring two companions (read lovers) Colm and Padraic who abruptly drift apart for no apparent reason. This paper attempts to investigate the homosexual relationship between the two men through the prism of queer affect to explore the oscillating impact of the anti-relational (self-annihilating) death drive of the Sinthomosexual and the potential of gay shame as reparative affect. The paper draws its argumentative base from the theoretical paradigms of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Types of Reading) and Lee Edelman's Anti-relational queer theory (with focus on the potential of positive relationality as an alternate model of queer sociality). The queer reading also highlights the challenges and complexities of portraying homosexuality onscreen. It equally addresses the sub-generic possibilities of 'The Banshees of Inisherin' by classifying it as a biological horror aligned with the standard tropes of corporeal assault, desecration and agential violence.

Keywords: Reparative, Sinthomosexual, Queer Affect, Gay Shame, Body Horror.

Oh Brother, Where Art Thou? The Original Sin of Homosexuality as a Corrupting Presence in Inisherin

As flies to wanton boys
are we to the gods
they kill us for their sport.

King Lear, Act IV, Scene I

Introduction

Martin McDonagh's body of work often borders on the singular theme of potency of fate, predestination and the redundancy of free will. From the graphic plays that he has authored /staged to the nuanced cinema that he has created, his fictional world is one of existential crisis with often severely decimated provision for redemption. The grim vision that he portrays is often showcased through tragi-comedic genre interspersed with violence and cruelty, designed to provoke a certain breed of humour and laughter. The *on-yer-face* theatre that Martin McDonagh specialises in, often projects an almost Pinteresque world of absurdity and uncertainty, peopled by Beckettian characters (mostly tramps and drifters) who keep bumping into each other without empathy or human connection. The Banshees of Inisherin (2022) is set in one such phantasmagorical idyll, an Irish island of rustic folk who appear as stock characters with stereotyped vices as if translocated from a Jonsonian play.

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The sheer hopelessness of the characters trying to survive against a backdrop of a dysfunctional Church and absence of rule of law makes it a perfect vignette of post-modernist ontology. As typical of McDonagh's style of representation, the ace director attempts to queer the institutional building blocks of Ireland, namely Irish Identity, Nationalism, the Church, the Pub and the Police. This paper tries to critically look at the ideological sub-text of the cinematic discourse, specifically the rationale behind subverting identity markers like gender and sexuality. Colm and Padriac, the two central characters are caught in the flux of a tumultuous male-friendship that has a deep homosexual undertone.

After analysing McDonagh's oeuvre, Jose Lanters (2007) points out how "destabilising the very foundational elements of Irish nationalism, beginning with the nuclear family and extending to the public institutions of the state and the church" (17), McDonagh razes to the ground the fundamental signifiers of a quintessential Irishness. By subverting the fixed categories of not just the public institutions, the filmmaker also extends his iconoclasm to the bound categories of gender and sexuality by introducing homosexuality as an alterity within the framework of an imposed 'sameness'. To quote Lanters; "Consequently, the discourse of Irish nationalism has excluded homosexuality or branded it as foreign and corrupting" (Lanters, 2007). A queer reading of the cinematic discourse reveals certain aspects as antithetical to heteronormativity, for instance all the main characters, including the Priest, are uncoupled and there is very little focus put on depicting any hetero-conjugal relation. Interestingly, Dominic, the half-wit is sexually abused by an alpha male, his father, a man of law who eventually forces his son to take his own life. Again, this is a clever cinematic ploy to deflect from the taboo homoerotic elements that are part of the main plot. Death by suicide is a narrative stratagem popular in queer fiction. There is also an overwhelming milieu of exaggerated violence and melodrama in The Banshees of Inisherin (2022) with a connecting thread between hyper-masculinity and violence, *brute force* acting as *agent provocateur* to construct or disrupt agency. Colm and Padraic, closest pals burst unannounced into a scene of escalating violence, initially triggered by the former who decides one fine day that *he likes Padraic no more*. Colm tries to clarify his position by seeking absolution at the local church through a startling confession that *he has impure thoughts about men*.

The plot turns dicey at this point, and as the rural community becomes polarised on this 'buddy break-up', vestiges of affect tinged with queerness surfaces. While Colm, a man of the culture and arts hastily assumes melancholia and abjection (from social order) to supplant his sexual drive after his failed confession before the ineffectual priest, Padraic keeps playing the 'fecking gay boy' whose effeminate nature and timidity (when Dominic asks Padraic if he has ever seen a naked female, even if it his sister Siobhan, the latter assumes repulsion and indifference to heterosexual instincts) makes him an outcast in the community. The cinematic discourse strategically obscures sexual allusions in the context of covert homosexuality and harps on the repercussions resulting from sexual deflection. This paper further draws on the theoretical premise of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) who famously proclaimed how most critical practices, including queer scholarship engage in clichéd paranoid readings to uncover hidden forces of oppression in textual structures, reinforcing once again the dominant drive of understanding sexuality through negative effect. Additionally, an attempt is made in this paper to explore the statute of Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) that conceptualises the absurdist position of *Sinthomosexual*, a neologism that Edelman coined to theoretically define narcissist subjects who driven by an incessant death drive disrupt the scheme of heteronormative reproductive futurism. Analysing the cinematic

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discourse the paper tries to open a dialogue based along these lines to examine the reparative *affect* of gay shame and queer sociality that counters the *sinthomosexual*'s lust for self-annihilation and violence; to recalibrate the universalising cultural fantasy of a *Queer* as a *'figure of sexual difference'*. While the first segment of this essay pitches in on all the above governing ideas to queer *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022), the second and final segment decentres the popular generic possibilities of it (a tragi-comedy, an existential slapstick, a farce, a black comedy, a dystopia) to (re)canonise it as a sub-genre of horror; namely body horror that projects *the body* as a medium, a prop to depict corporeal malleability, making the act of mutilation a form of autonomous action, and the violence an agency that offers a foil to the lack that queerness is discursively constructed by.

Incredible Paranoid and Melancholic Rise

In the absence of overt narrative signifiers, reading the in-between spaces of textual ambivalence illuminates signification. *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022) may present a very straightforward account of disrupted comradeship, but what it implicitly suggests is a provocative tale of restrained homosexuality, a magnetic affect circulating intra-subjectively between two friends with same-sex proclivities; one obsessed with creating music while the other likened to a 'sissy' because of his inherent 'niceness', proximity to his sister and extreme fondness for his male friend.

Vito Russo in his extensively researched work on portrayal of homosexuality onscreen, *Celluloid Closet* (1981) observes; "Homosexuality in the movies, whether overtly sexual or not, has always been seen in terms of what is or is not masculine. The defensive phrase, 'Who's a sissy?' has been as much a part of the American lexicon as 'So's your old lady'. After all, it is supposed to be an insult to call a man effeminate, for it means he is like a woman and therefore not as valuable as a 'real' man. The popular definition of gayness is rooted in sexism. Weakness in men rather than strength in women have consistently been seen as the connection between sex role behaviour and deviant sexuality…..Although at first there was no equation between sissyhood (reflections of an overabundance of female influence) and actual homosexuality, the danger of gayness as the consequence of such behaviour lurked always in the background (Russo, 1981, 9)". Russo further points out that "Webster defines sissy as the opposite of male and the line between the effeminate and real man was drawn routinely in every genre of American film, but comedies more often allowed the explicit leap to the homosexual possibilities inherent in such definitions (Buster Keaton and Chaplin comedies)….Thus the effeminate man, the symbol of weakness, takes it on the chin for everyone, becoming the scapegoat for the unstated homoerotic activity of the real but insecure men around him (Russo, 1981, 17)". Padraic becomes the butt of male scorn in the whole of Inisherin (next to Dominic), from taking beatings from the local policeman to insults from his closest male friend, his only real confidante is Siobhan, his sister who believes in Padraic's 'niceness' as pure and pristine.

The opening scene is a spectacular example of Padraic's latent sexual orientation and his complicated relation with Colm, caught in the same frame with an exquisite rainbow and background score, it appears to be the perfect *pride stride* for Padraic as he walks to Colm's cottage to invite him for a drink at the pub. Juxtaposed against the free spirit of the rainbow, the statue of Mother Mary and the local policeman appearing in frames immediately after represent the imposing nature of Religion with a disquieting surveillance hovering over Inisherin and the hostile nature of the local peace keeping force. The rainbow flag that represents the diversity, unity and inclusivity of the LGBTQ community is a six striped flag (red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet) designed by an openly gay artist Gilbert Baker in

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1978 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017). Incorporating a rainbow in the cinematic narration as a symbol of inclusion and diversity (and the Pride flag it resonates with) to represent the sexual subjectivity of the protagonist Padraic is an intentional stratagem of the film maker. Since sexual orientation is not *seen* as identity categories like Gender or Race, queer reading of *gay characters* in *buddy films* remains a challenge for critics trying to identify that hotspot of visibility represented onscreen. In the absence of overt narrative codes, cinematic cues buried within the dialogue can open up sub-text/s of restrained homosexuality to foreground queer readings of implicitly drawn gay characters.

On finding Colm sitting lonely in his cottage with his dog Sammy, Padraic asks him; *'*Are you *coming out* to the pub Colm?*'* If 'coming out' can mean going out with someone for a social event, it can also mean expression/disclosure of self-identity in terms of sexuality and gender. The term refers to the process of telling someone else how they identify in terms of their romantic orientation, sexual, orientation, or gender identity (LGBT Center, the University of North Carolina). The Irish Pub holds a central position for mapping Irish national identity by reinforcing masculinity and traditional Irish culture. The spatiality of the pub offers elements of inclusion or exclusion, '*coming out' (in terms of sexual reckoning)* to (before/in front of) the pub may lead to total ostracization and the possibility of social marginalisation. Allison Macleod (2021) in her work reviewing queer belongings in recent Irish films states "that poverty, the growing influence of the Catholic Church, and the increasing segregation of men and women into separate social spheres in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, led to hard-drinking groups becoming a form of remission for men and central to the cultural definition of masculinity in Ireland….The institutionalisation of male drinking practices within the pub further became a means of governing these practices even as they themselves constituted a rebellion against familial, religious, and economic obligations. Male drinking practices within the pub constitute a profoundly gendered national expression that is deeply imbricated within a struggle for power." (Macleod, 2021, 165) Though the Pub confronts Padraic and Colm with a persistent query 'Have ye been rowing?' it eventually becomes a rhetorical question that serves as a cinematic refrain with almost every character interrogating the couple about *rowing.* If in British slang *rowing* signifies 'having an altercation', The Dictionary of sexual terms on the other hand define Rowing (the boat) as 'Masturbating two males at the same time'. The response to this bizarre query, is always ambivalent (at different points).

Padraic: We have not been rowing.

I don't think we've been rowing.

Have we been rowing?

Another intriguing connection in semantic terms can be formulated with the synonym of *Rowing* which is *cruising* and which in gay terminology signifies *'an act of looking for sexual partners'*. Though originally deployed as a code word in closeted gay community, the term is now assimilated within heterosexual vocabulary (A Modern Gay's Guide, 2023). Again, the fact that 'Rowing' is a sport can lead to other synchronic (associated/co-existent) significations; Merriam Webster defines the noun 'Sport' as a 'source of diversion: recreation', 'a sexual play', and 'a physical activity engaged in for pleasure'. That the entire gamut of the enigmatic equation between Colm and Padraic unfolds through the loaded term 'Rowing' is a reminder of how cinematic cues are subtly deployed to confront the challenges of representing homosexuality onscreen.

While some textual interpretations are based on 'homosexuality as an established cultural pattern', classical psychoanalytical studies of gayness look through the Freudian

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prism of sexuality as a primal drive in the shaping of personalities. Elaborating on the genealogy of homosexual behaviour, Marcelo M. Hanza in his brief essay, The Dichotomist Male: Theoretical Models of Male Homosexuality (2007) observes; "Homosexuality, as it is represented in today's culture, is a topic of varied social, political, biological, psychological and religious controversy. The term 'homosexuality' can be defined as any sexual activity between members of the same sex. In attempt to determine causation or reveal the mechanistic properties involved in homosexuality, two major areas of thought have been derived. The 'nature' view is in the realm of the biological sciences and stresses biological or genetic predispositions towards homosexuality. Contrastingly, in the social sciences, there is the 'nurture' view that stresses psychological and sociological factors leading to homosexuality rather than genetic variables (Hanza, 2007, 86)". Marcelo M. Hanza further points out that certain 'clinical psychological theories refute the idea that there is a direct genetic link between heredity and homosexuality' and 'seek to identify the various social and relationship roles, along with the ideation of sexual orientation, in order to explain various motivating factors of homosexual behaviour.' Along with the popular Freudian conception of the 'castration complex' many other psychological theories (for example Joseph Nicolosi's work) promote the idea that male homosexuality originates through the lack of association/identification with a masculine identity (absence of a father). This study, along with drawing inputs from theories such as these, also takes up a slightly different approach by heeding *Affect*, specifically the wide expanse of *Queer Affect* to look at how Colm and Padraic swerve between diverse emotions like paranoia, rage, disillusionment, melancholia and eventually abject to activate or deactivate their respective agencies. The deployment of extreme violence forces us to consider another conundrum: *Is Violence a normative mode of Queer Agency?* The fact that Colm wants to part ways with his closest buddy Padraic is (probably) based on sexual urges he tries to repress; Colm's confession before the ignorant local priest only proves how dysfunctional the Church is with its logic of conservatism and dogma.

> Priest: It isn't him you have the impure thoughts about, is it?
> Colm: Are you joking me? I mean, are you fecking joking me?
> Priest: People do have impure thoughts about men, too.
> Colm: Do you have impure thoughts about men, Father?
> Priest: I do not have impure thoughts about men. And how dare you say that about a man of the cloth?
> Colm: Well, you started it.

This expository scene is set in the confession box of the Church and is very carefully composed in terms of its storytelling. As the repartee takes place between Colm and the priest (both are dressed in black), there appears a dark space in the extreme left side of the frame in which Colm appears representing the emptiness and dullness that he regrets in his life. However, as the conversation elevates to a climactic pitch, a glowing white cross adorns the same frame in which Colm is placed, symbolising Christ's redemptive presence in the world of sin and sinners. The said confession scene is comprised of zoom-in shots of the two characters Colm and the priest, focusing on their individual emotional stand points and clearly outlines and demarcates the stark conflict of religion and the physical senses/creative and aesthetic pleasure.

An instance of queer affect is equally conveyed through a particular scene in the pub where Colm surrounded by ladies is playing his fiddle with musical accompaniment (singing by one of the women present); across the table at the other end of the room is seated a

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nervous Padraic behaving like a jilted lover attempting to condemn his own jealousy through hard drinking. Tormented by constant queries in the pub, the same evening, (Is Colm there with you? But he is always there with you!) Padraic is alarmed when the pub master provocatively suggests; 'All the ladies love Colm, always did', to which Padraic's half-hearted retort, 'That's not true' enunciates distinctively the love dynamics of a complex homoerotic relationship. Heather Love in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the politics of Queer History* (2007) explores this negative turn in queer studies where queerness is contradictorily treated as both 'abject' and 'exalted' and as a kind of 'romantic exceptionalism'. Since the association of homosexual experience lived at the subjective level seems to be always tied up with loss and melancholia, Love (2007) asserts the need to exploit negative affect for action and volition. Thus, the feeling of queer shame should be less self-repulsive and more reparative and restorative.

In a similar ideological vein, Lee Edelman in his *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (*2004) introduces the figure of the *sinthomosexual.* Lee Edelman's work on anti-relational queer theory examines selected examples from political discourse, literature and other cultural products to look at how the whole idea of futurity and its concomitant hope is fetishized through the figure of the'child'. The *sinthomosexual*, a coinage created by Edelman, hence, stands opposed as a deviant figure to the Child, a symbol of heteronormative reproductive futurism. The *sinthomosexual*, according to Edelman is miserably motivated by the death drive which is profoundly anti-social by nature. As Edelman registers:

> "For the death drive marks the excess embedded within the Symbolic through the loss, the Real loss, that the advent of the signifier effects. In other words, while desire is born of and sustained by a constitutive lack, drive emerges in relation to a constitutive surplus" (Edelman, 2004, 9)

Edelman believes that it is this surplus that eventually produces a profusion of *jouissance*. As a figure of divergence, *a Sinthomosexual* is thus emblematic of negative social values, stands for social aversion and antagonism which eventually speeds up the spiritual damnation of the *Sinthomosexual*.

Edelman's insistence then that "Sinthomosexuality also speaks, as neologic signifier to the "sin" that continues to attach itself to "homosexuality"' is in essence played out in The *Banshees of Inisherin* (2022) through the anti-social drive of the *sinthomosexual* Colm Doherty whose depraved lust for self-annihilation on the pretext of aesthetic pursuits (arts and culture as having more meaning than aimless chattering with a dull companion) positions him at odds with the symbolic (social) order. As Colm decides to abruptly part ways with Padraic, dismissing Padraic's claims that 'Colm is nothing but depressed', our *sinthomosexual* cites the 'dread of death' as what motivated his move. Colm starts by alienating himself from Padraic by refusing to share any space of affability with him, particularly visible in scenes where Colm denies receiving Padraic at his home by abandoning his own domestic space (Colm's abode) and later by refusing multiple times to share a pint (drink) with him in the pub. Padraic's visiting Colm's abode to invite him for a drink is striking in its visual props; Colm's house displays his empty bed and empty chair along with the wooden puppets and masks that exhibit and vocalise the narrative theme of hollowness and decay of social (human) relations. Colm's departure from his own house with only the props of masquerade left behind to represent him evokes the complexities of disguise and identity crisis. When Padraic discovers Colm walking away from his house through a telescope, this cinematic prop underscores the growing distance between the two (the telescope appears again in a later scene with the same symbolism).

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By attempting to mend their relation, Padraic forces Colm to an eventual conversation outside the pub later on; the specific scene in terms of its framing and composition (where the two men are in the same frame in a wide angle shot) again, accurately depicts where the two men stand in their complex equation; juxtaposed against the majestic sea lined by rocks and mountains, Colm's position is in the same frame with the rocks while Padraic sits with the sea in the backdrop (Colm exhibiting rock solid determination for detachment and Padraic displaying 'niceness' and calmness in mending their differences, each natural element corresponds to each character semantically). In another scene at the pub sometime later, when Padraic's bitterness flares into a certain hostile reaction (Padraic calls Colm's composed tune 'a shite tune'), both the men reluctantly sit down for a drink once again but strategically, this instance, the sea represents Colm while the rocks Padraic (their sitting positions are altered according to their oscillating temperaments) suggesting a terrible rift and an irreversible damage (the rift semantically depicted at a later scene as well where a landscape divided into two paths appears before the duo as a cinematic signifier). Colm's realisation that his life (and time) is slipping away if he engages in conversations with a 'limited man', forces him to account for his own creative impulse, his cultural drive to produce music. Coupled with that is his death drive that paints the grim temperament of Colm, whose status of non-agency (caused by his inability to contribute to the arts and culture) rapidly spikes to that of *volition and action* when Colm unceremoniously announces *severing his fingers off* as *ritual sacrifice* directed to a social order that often treats non-conformists and transgressors (Colm's infamous confession of harbouring immoral thoughts about men can be counted as a form of sexual transgression) with the penalty of castration.

The escalating violence bespeaks of how the agency of a *sinthomosexual* is articulated through brutality and gore, enacting in its turn the power dynamics of social relationships in the miniature island where the actual institutions (and their icons) are either depleted of power or are inept and redundant (the constancy with which every other scene highlights the statue of Mother Mary, the Cross and the Church are emblematic of the inconstancy and impotency these religious icons convey in spite of their gigantic façade and imposing nature). These religious signifiers only represent hollowness, conformity and surveillance through their presence in Inisherin. When Colm decides to self-mutilate himself, the barbaric act vocalizes the *sinthomosexual*'s excesses, his *jouissance* which eventually engulfs Padraic and the pastoral peace of the insular island. Again, the liminal subtleties of intimate conversation bring us to the brink of a corporeal orgy where the visceral effect of the severed fingers hint at the self-terminating proclivities of sinthomosexuality.

Linguistic signifiers (Verbal cues like Dialogue) is a major component of Mcdonagh's cinematic universe that intentionally craft a space to explore the liminal caverns of sexual repression and as the *repressed tries to return* (Colm's classic coming-out) through ritual acts of self-cleansing, decapitation and disembodiment are in order. Whilst exploring alternate critical practices of queer scholarship, this study focuses on the continuum of queer affect which essentially is a vanishing point of diverse theories of queer ontology/identity. In *Feeling Down, Backward, and Machinic: Queer Theory and the Affective Turn* (2020) Wen Liu points out how theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her Paranoid Reading (2003) attempts to understand the repercussions of a theory of queerness as "it is structurally bounded with paranoid affect ever since the AIDS crisis" (Liu, 2020,5). The melancholia that has been generated because of this *'backward turn of suffering and homophobia*' necessitates the evolution of alternative queer methodologies. Wen Liu states how Sedgwick turns to Silvan Tomkins's theory of Affect and his notion of Shame that "disrupts the theoretical

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attachment between sexual shame and "internalized homophobia" that has been taken for granted in the construction of queer subject" (Liu, 2020, 6) Liu couples Sedgwick and Tomkins to analyse how Shame becomes an antithesis to 'Distress' but rather as Tomkins puts it, "Shame is only felt when interest or joy has been activated" (Liu, 2020, 6). According to Liu, this reparative practice surprisingly opens up other focal points that are not restricted by the anxious paranoid position, and thus, moves away from the 'Death-drive' driven homophobic-centred readings that traditional psychoanalysis of non-binary sexualities offer. Gay shame is thus a reparative affect that engages with collectivity, opening and sociality, thus, often refuting anti-relational queer theories which have traditionally spawned a profusion of queer negative effect. As the plot of *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022) traverse from the position of the *Self-destructive sinthomosexual'* (Colm) to that of the *'nice and shy effeminate male'* (Padraic) we see how queer feelings swing from 'negative affect' to 'reparative affect' as '*niceness*' and '*kindness*' invade the *sinthomosexual* at the climactic pitch; it is exactly then that Colm succumbs to the pleas of sanity offered by Padraic to renounce his violence and his position of abjection from sociality (his *will to violate* does not move beyond the mere mutilation of his fingers). At the end, the brutal act becomes a farce and Colm increasingly descends into acknowledgement and acceptance of his predicament. And it all happens because of his estranged partner Padraic, the *shy and nice man* whose persistent faith in the love of humanity (including kindness towards animals) makes him a redemptive figure, a queer rebel who resists the flow of counter-productive, anti-relational and anti-social affect displayed by Colm. Perhaps Martin McDonagh intended to create a lucrative model of gayness that is shy, kind and faithful and that which can act against the self-annihilating *sinthomosexual*.

'*Niceness'* is one of the most exuberant productive affects that the cinematic narrative depicts, not only does it have a utopian potential but it is also opens up alternate forms of social realities and possibly, alternate temporalities and futurities against heteronormative futurism. Padraic's niceness is however, never explored, it is a virtue without being virtuous, though it helped him coalesce into the insular community that Inisherin was. It was Padraic whose Christ-like innocence shines even when abandoned by all and sundry, this model of queer shyness, thus, serves as a reparative affect that not only recalibrates the power dynamics of the plot, but could have possibly provided a cathartic end to it. Tragically enough, *niceness did not last*. When Colm abandons violence and offers truce, the niceness that encapsulated Padraic's gay affect is replaced by vendetta. Padraic's eventual aggression in the pub when he witnesses Colm's growing closeness with the local policeman officer Kearney (a molester himself who routinely assaults his own son Dominic), is the beginning of the end. Padraic's ire further explodes when his miniature donkey chokes to death on Colm's severed fingers and he decides to pay a visit to Colm at his house, once again. This time Colm is more composed and talks about his fruitful musical composition, the tune that he calls 'the Banshees of Inisherin'. The ambience of Colm's house in this scene represents once more the dynamics of the volatile relation between the two men; two puppets are caught in the same cinematic frame; the hanging one representing Colm whose fate is trapped in an interstitial, limbo like space while the puppet sitting below in a posture of placation replicates Padraic who much like a wayward child threatens and begs to be taken back into the relationship. Eventually, Colm's horrendous act of self-mutilation is countered by Padraic's equally monstrous act of burning down Colm's house with Colm in it (despite Padraic's warning Colm stayed back); the spectacle of burning mimicking the unseen violence of the civil war across the mainland (occasionally alluded to in the narrative through gun and rifle

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sounds). This flux of uncontrolled emotions that swerve and swing back and forth between the pair, strongly demonstrate the potential of queer affect in voicing irreverence against societal and systemic insouciance. The final scene presents a new conundrum; despite the halting of gunshots across the mainland, there is a hint of a new strife on Inisherin, between two men whose turbulent relation transgresses the bounds of religion, politics and law (the institutional figure heads of Irish national identity). Allegorically, the Irish Civil War (June 1922- May 1923) aptly resonates with the melodramatic action on the bigoted island of Inisherin, operating almost like an extended metaphor, cross-referenced cautiously by the cinematic narrative to convey the polarised state of politics that has always been part of Irish history and civil life. As the antagonising spirit of corrupt power (manifest through the church and the legal force) pits man against man (superbly paraphrased by Officer Kearney when he mentioned going to the mainland for the execution of a couple of IRA lads by the Free State lads and then gets confused if it was 'the other way around' and how 'simply easy it was when we were killing the English'), the issue of 'sameness' and 'difference' as calibrated through the binary of 'us' and 'them' actually reveals an internal splitting in the fragmented nature of Irish (sexual) identity (Colm's struggle to gauge his homosexual instincts with the parameters of compliance of the local Church that results in his acknowledgement of the abject in himself, paired with Padraic's devolution from demonstration of 'niceness' as a gentle gay man to his eventual, climactic aggressive (anti-social) instincts apparently directed against a gossip-mongering Inisherin where the fear of being 'the rumoured couple' may have caused the rift between the two men in the first place). When Colm mentions that his final tune hints less at the original Irish folkloric female spirits (The Banshees) who used to portend death but rather the modern Banshees who 'just sit back and observe, amused', the appearance of Mrs Mccormick in the last scene, sadistically observing Colm and Padraic as they separate is a cinematic allusion to the voyeuristic audience that has always been part of McDonagh's cathartic endings. This ambivalent cessation to *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022) is a typical device of equivocation that McDonagh's body of work brags of. Ultimately, the way out of the moral conundrum rests with the audience who have always been complicit with Mcdonaugh's narrative stratagems, something that he inherits from his theatrical background.

The Terminal Birth of Horror

Maria Doyle in 'Breaking Bodies: The presence of violence on Martin McDonagh's stage' (2007) observes how the visibility of violence both in terms of object destruction and in desecration of the body is a constant part of McDonagh's stage plays. She further points out that 'McDonagh has been categorized as one of Britain's "New Brutalists", a group of young playwrights devoted to generating a "visceral response" in the audience through a new level of "verbal and physical atrocities"' (Russell, 2007, 97). Evidently, such depiction of structural violence bound with narrative mobility is something ubiquitous in McDonagh's body of work that largely stems from his cinematic vision. Since McDonagh's ideological stance rests on transgressing categorical limits of fixed, normative entities like identity, sexuality and gender, subverting the discursive bounds of corporeal reality becomes his pivotal preoccupation in The *Banshees of Inisherin* (2022). Hence, *Body* assumes the status of *narrative signifier* that alludes to (signifies) its sheer fragility through demonstration of uncontrolled violence leashed upon it for its total revamp. The idea of breaking corporeal boundary is to essentially reflect upon the mutability and malleability of the body and the ridiculous nature of its social and cultural construction. Desecration and mutilation of the body in *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022) makes a case for the horror sub-genre *body horror*

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that features similar gore and violence as part of its generic conventions. This segment of the paper attempts to (re)canonize *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022) as a body horror with identification of the popular tropes of the sub-genre in cinematic texts.

Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz in *Mutations and Metamorphoses: Body Horror is Biological Horror* (2012) defines Body Horror as "a genre trope that showcases often graphic violations of the human body, is also justifiably called *biological horror*….It brings an extreme level of gruesome disregard for the human body… This popular horror trope is characterized by the manipulation and warping of the normal state of bodily form and function (Cruz, 2012, 161)". Cruz points out that body horror "plays on our natural aversion to pain and damage to the human body" and "Ultimately, it relishes the destruction of the organic form to the point of unnatural evolutionary insignificance (Cruz, 2012, 168)." Furthermore, "Body horror typically pushes the physical form of its subjects to their limits and beyond. Though the visuals can feel like an empty spectacle to the uninitiated, body horror is a subgenre that is prone to social commentary (Cruz, 2012, 168)".

When Colm makes the unceremonious announcement of severing his fingers as an act of resistance to reproach Padraic's proximity, his sinthomosexuality stands in direct opposition to the symbolic order: the heteronormative society; a society that either imposes binaried conformity or forced assimilation. For a *sinthomosexual* integration remains an impossible solution, his aversion for society springs from his own unique alterity that plays out in *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022) as a form of *(self) abjection from social order*. Self-demolition and an untamed death drive serves as Colm's *jouissance* as he starts splashing his own blood in a novel rite of passage. This ritual act of self-mutilation appears as a symbolic feat of castration directed against a society and its institutions, namely the Church whose apathy to sexual deviance is striking. Colm's coming-of-age/coming-out tale becomes one of spiritual damnation as his monstrous act of sexual awakening equates him to the gothic villains of the early centuries whose presence in the horror canon resonated with collective social paranoia for all forms of non-normative sexualities. To expedite this argument further, let us borrow some observations of Laura Eldred from her work (2007); 'Martin McDonagh and the contemporary gothic'; " Gothic works generally include a rather Byronic hero; dark, atmospheric locales; and a suspicion of the foreigner" and "strive to inspire discomfort and fear, and to centre anxiety upon a monstrous other, which is generally expelled or killed by the end of the tale….The first answer to why McDonagh uses gothic material is that he is a fan of horrific and violent entertainment, especially films" and has a "tendency to adopt and reinvent classic horror film plots by adding his own extra-gory, postmodern twists (The play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* has inter-textual references to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*)….Furthermore, these characters can be read as monstrous because they challenge traditional definitions of a nationalistic, Catholic, Gaelic speaking, rural Irishness. McDonagh loves to parody the Gaelic Romantic vision of Ireland…The horrific images and monstrous characters of McDonagh's texts often subvert romantic, nationalist images and histories, as he forces his audience into identification with, and often qualified sympathy for, characters who destabilize traditional ideals of Irish national character…The gothic provides a way to organize national identity: that which must be expelled, which cannot be admitted, is made into a monster and exterminated (Russell, 2007, 113)". It is evident that Colm's self-abjection is born out of his abjection for the normative pillars of Irish national identity: the Church and the Family, ostracized from both by his self-acknowledged sins his moral damnation is complete and graphically externalised through his corporeal violation. The Banshees of Inisherin (2022) functions like a typical body horror which features the grotesque (almost

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kafkaesque) transformation of the body and its dismemberment as a formula trope to disgust (and queer) the viewing experience of the spectators and to snap them out of their (straight) zones of sexual complacency. The ritual mutilation that Colm performs takes him further away from the heteronormative (symbolic) axis in an anti-assimilationist gesture. The epiphanic moment of his revelation (coming out) becomes not just one of monstrosity but also of historical contingency, specifically in an unempathetic Inisherin where gossips and not 'lived realities' are in rife. This brings us closer to the concept of *abjection* that acts as the generic backbone of body horror, wherein monstrosity springs from within, making body the classic trope of myriad metamorphoses. Brigid Cherry in her well researched book on Horror (2009), draws attention towards the zone of unsettling 'cognitive dissonance' which generic conventions of body horror produce (much like the emergence of homosexual behaviour to dislocate and disrupt normative sexual codes) by locating the source of narrative apogee in the domain of abjection.

"In Kristeva's model, abjection is linked to an adverse reaction such as disgust, nausea or horror caused by being confronted with an object that threatens to disrupt the distinction between self and other (or subject and object in Lacanian terms). Thus to be in a state of abjection is to feel revulsion when confronted by objects that threaten to cross (or do cross) the boundary. Kristeva suggests that this causes a collapse of meaning which results in the feeling of revulsion. There are obvious links to intended affect/s of horror cinema here. Abjection clearly applies to the object that is boundary between life and death itself: the corpse, which is seen in all kinds of horror film monsters. The corpse is particularly abject because it is not just that part of self which is expelled to become non-self, but is disintegration of self entirely (literally out of life and into death, 'I' is eradicated since 'I' no longer exists). But meaning may also collapse (and thus disrupt the boundary between self and other) around things that confront the self with the trauma of one's own death: open wounds, blood, pus, vomit, faeces, and so on (again, all of which are repeated motifs in the horror film) (Cherry, 2009, 112)."

As a body horror classic, it typically creates a cinematic spectrum of the strikingly odd principles, an impotent Church juxtaposed against a rowdy pub in a god-deserted space where the presence of the all protective spirit of Virgin Mary is just a spectral entity weighed against the powers of sorcery in the figure of the eerie fortune teller; Mrs Mccormick (whose deathly presence in the setting only spawns decadence and despair). The Church is presented as a bright, colossal building in white, (sunlit on sunny days) while the interior is grim, bound by decorum and code, with the figure of the Priest (also clad in white) as overbearing and authoritarian. Even the holy cross and the statue of Mother Mary seemed to have abandoned that space, placed at some distance away from the Church, both seem apparently dissociated from the Church establishment. The pub, on the other hand, is full of music and merriment; if everything is morbid and orchestrated within the Church, everything in the pub, poised against it, is carnivalesque, vibrant and pulsating (If the pub is symbolic of the life forces the Church on the other hand is of sin and death). And as the plot approaches its climactic pitch the setting turns more and more gothic. Mcdonaugh's Inisherin, remotely set, is placed off the coast of Mainland Ireland where a terrible civil war has pushed thehuman population almost to the brink of zombification. Those left on Inisherin are shrouded in deep mystery or dark depression, either abandoning the island (like Siobhan, Padraic's sister) or ending up dead (like the dim wit Dominic). It is a zone of entrapment and persecution where escape comes only to those who manage to shun violence. Colm's fear of castration is vivid and real, manifest in his 'losing his own body parts/fingers' as an act of self-abnegation denoting

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corporeal mutilation and loss.If Sigmund Freud classified the fear of emasculation as castration anxiety, Colm's act of desecration is symbolic and metaphorical, the loss of fingers (of an artist) perhaps equates both; a loss of creative potency and of masculinity. In his work, The Dichotomist Male: Theoretical Models of Male Homosexuality (2007), Marcelo M. Hanza discusses how in "the study of motivation, one of the most fundamental and innate factors assimilated into human behaviour is that of sexual reproduction (Hanza, 2007, 86)". Hanza goes on to explain how "Sexual reproduction is concerned with passing on one's genetic material, in order to perpetuate the survival of one's genes….Identifying both biological and psychological research pertaining to homosexuality is especially relevant to the study of motivation because, interestingly, homosexual behaviour seems to contradict standard theoretical explanations as a major source of motivation (Hanza, 2007, 86)". For Colm, the only point of motivation that could offset (heteronormative) sexual reproduction as in 'perpetuating the survival of one's genes' was his creative legacy, his composition of music that could help him transcend his sexual ambivalence. The denouncing of his 'fiddle fingers' is thus, not just an act of self-abjection but also a denouncement of his artistic legacy; and the corporeal loss symbolic of emasculation. The corpse eventually becomes a site/space of disgust and revulsion, as Colm's villainy not only vocalises through his deliberate act of self-mutilation but also in its orchestrated exhibition as he melodramatically casts his severed fingers after the gory act at Padraic's cottage door. The scene of blood bath is further exacerbated as Padraic chances upon his miniature donkey Jenny lying dead by choking on the fingers. Corpse after corpse haunts the grisly narrative as Dominic, the halfwit fool is suddenly discovered dead in a riddle that yet again baffles the Inhabitants. If Colm's abjection springs from his sexual identity and its social equation with monstrosity, the innocent deaths of humans and animals alike appear as concomitant part of the horror setting. Like in traditional Slasher cinema, our homosexual drifter (with violent instincts) haunts Padraic till *the hunted becomes the hunter;* Padraic's eventual transformation into a vengeful killer disrupts the last vestiges of hope as he burns down Colm's cottage (with Colm inside). However, the violence seems irredeemable, it does not end the cycle of evil and ill-omen that circled the island (intermittently reinforced through the premonition and charged vision of Mrs Mccormick). This also brings us to the mythical *Banshees* who are female spirits in Irish mythology, symbolising death and decay. These signifiers of demolition and nihilism feature well in this biological horror which toys with the corporeal limits of human flesh and the realities of transgressing normative categories of sexual identity. The mutation of the body starts right from its core and accelerates to its total disintegration, bringing down, in the process, the very order of existence.

There is no end to this relentless show of gore, sadistic torture and foul play forced on the audience as part of the spectatorship ritual. Against the backdrop of devastation, the serene beauty of the island, however, keeps reverberating like some distant cathartic appeal that jolts the viewer from a 'fourth wall illusion'. Startle effects abound, the classic example of which appears in the scene where Padraic discovers his dead donkey Jenny, the gradation of action and the final release has the aptness of shock that such horror trope engages with. The psychological impact of cinematic horror is further accelerated through the graphic nature of sound effect, namely the grim background score that keeps reverberating like a refrain throughout the melodramatic action, often intervened by loud operatic music underscoring the meandering and fluctuating chemistry of Colm and Padraic. These two alternating modes of sound effect help create an aura of eerie suspense punctuated by unpredictable moments of abrupt violence. Pinned against such an ambience of morbidity,

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not only does the body break down in extraordinary corporeal atrocity, so does the mind through trauma and repugnance for the inadmissible other, creating an environment of total dissolution and decadence that leaves the spectator bound in anticipation of more.

Conclusion

Hence, the core investigation of this academic study is the complex world of sexual divergence and gendered realities that question the hetero-patriarchal status of the rural community of Inisherin where gossip and tell-telling seems to be the only teleological pattern of existence and historical continuity. The gradual diffusion of the closeted relation between the two men, Colm and Padraic mimics the insular nature of the community which remains untainted even at the height of the Civil War; this is exactly how Homosexuality is '*hidden in plain sight'* in societies where extreme sexual conservatism often leads to uncontrolled proliferation of sexual desire, a ramification of regulation and monitoring. Inisherin is imagined as a closed community grappling with a volatile social fabric that seems to be forever tied up with the institutional godheads of corruption: the Church and the Police, therefore, the emergence of sinthomosexuality in such a normative setting is far from awe. *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022) depicts an account of repressed sexuality through an oddly paired couple and their socially awkward interactions, cocooning underneath a latent, homoerotic relation between them and their desires to '*confess*' and *'come out'* that ends in a shattering apogee. Eventually, Violence acts as volition for some of the social agents, but by its unforgiving and irreversible nature violence fails to resolve the quandary, throwing Colm, the *sinthomosexual*'s act of self-mutilation in dispute and impasse; however, gradually when Colm starts reckoning the prowess of his sexual orientation and is close to acceptance and forgiveness, Padraic is a changed man. That model of gay shame that was exemplary from the beginning of the plot through the character of Padraic, retracts to a regressive plane, demonstrating how the wavering nature of queer affect can articulate desire and violence to embrace or renounce both. This ghastly violence and butchery that the circumstantial desecration unlocks, qualifies the cinematic discourse within the cult of biological horror, with all the parameters of the subgenre exhibited in the unfolding of the plot. This paper reclaims The Banshees of Inisherin (2022) as a classic body horror examining the corporeal site as a conduit for sexual rebellion. The unwary spectator commutes through the lair of the *sinthomosexual* only to reach the final destination of exploitative cinema (Horror tropes are part of the exploitative genre where the usual ploy is a lone female pursued by a deranged killer; the clichéd trope is reversed ideologically here to depict a homosexual as the deranged killer grappling with his own sexual alterity, persecuting abstract social norms through acts of terror and abjection), where human flesh (in this case the 'severed fingers') act as the transcendental signifier of what the text could not contain in terms of sexual diversity.

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Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil
Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil
Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.