

The Banshees of Inisherin (2022): A Parable of Irrationalism

A movie review. There will be spoilers.

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Pádraic Súilleabháin and Colm Doherty (the fiddle player) are old friends whose meetings are as regular as a clock – literally. They meet at 2 pm in the local pub for drinks every day as the bell tolls twice.

However, Colm is getting fed up and feels time is passing. He believes that he needs to start composing to leave something to posterity and decides to end his relationship with Pádraic. Being nice and good friends will all soon be completely forgotten about. He desires to get down to composing with his newly freed-up time instead of listening to Pádraic's 'dull' conversation every day.

Pádraic does not take the news well and is bewildered. Even Pádraic's sister Siobhán Súilleabháin is astonished. She confronts Colm who states baldly, 'He's dull, Siobhán', who replies, 'but he's always been dull'.

Colm's decision triggers an alarming set of events that lead to Colm self-mutilating and a series of tit-for-tat actions between himself and Pádraic.

These odd events appear to fit in with the general oddness that abounds on the island as everyone they come into contact with seems to have their own anger issues.

However, the strange thing is that Colm and Pádraic are actually the only two people on the island who are behaving calmly and rationally. They are always civil to each other (except once when Pádraic was drunk). There is no fisticuffs or use of weapons. In general they are the calmest two people on the island. They have polite discussions about their views of each other until the very end of the film. You could even say that everyone else around them is going mad while they are swimming in a sea of tranquility in the centre of the narrative.

Maybe that's the whole idea. To take two people who are descending into madness and depict this decline from their point of view. How do all the people around Colm and Pádraic appear to them as their madness reaches new depths? While Colm and Pádraic see themselves as wanting what the other cannot give, and negotiating and discussing their problems in a calm way, the island inhabitants show more and more surreal forms of behaviour. It's the island that's going crazy, not them. We see the island folk the way Colm and Pádraic see them. Colm and Pádraic are the only sane people as everyone else becomes stranger and stranger.

Check out the actions of the *dramatis personae*:

Garda Peadar Kearney 'never says hello' or is extremely violent and punches Pádraic in the face. He looks forward to going to the Civil War executions with glee (for '6 bob and a free lunch') but can't figure out if 'Free Staters are shooting the IRA or the other way around'. He laughs when he hears Pádraic's donkey has died.

Jonjo (the barman) and Gerry (a customer) form a comedy double act repeating each other's sentences (not surprising considering they used to be a very popular comedy duo in real life called the D'Unbelievables) and never seem to be disturbed by the horrific goings-on.

The shopkeeper Mrs. O'Riordan is absolutely obsessed with gossip and reading people's letters while listing off all the people who had no news. Garda Peadar Kearney arrives in with horror stories of murders and Mrs. O'Riordan says to Pádraic 'That's a lot of news. This man has no news. Don't you not, No-Newsy?'

During confession with Colm the priest follows him out of the confessional screaming, 'you will be pure fucked' repeating Colm's words back to him.

Dominic, the guard's son, is obsessed with the much older women around him, and Colm's fiddle students in the bar only seem slightly worried at Colm's horrific bloody stumps despite the illogic of a man with no fingers on one hand teaching them the fiddle.

In fact, only Siobhán, Pádraic's sister, and the old woman Mrs. McCormick seem to be aware of what is really going on.

When Siobhán confronts Pádraic about talking to Colm she warns him to leave Colm alone:

PADRAIC: Do you think?

SIOBHAN: Do I think?! Yes, I do think! He's cut his fucking finger off and thrown it at ya!

PADRAIC: Come on, it wasn't at me.

Siobhan escapes the madness and leaves the island before things get worse. She later invites Pádraic to the mainland but he has no interest and now has his cow and donkey living in the house with him.

Mrs. McCormick is an almost ghostly presence on the island and forecasts that two people will die on Inisherin 'afore the month is out'. She is soon proved partly right when Dominic is found drowned.

Meanwhile Colm finishes composing his piece of music and tells Pádraic he is thinking of calling it The Banshees of Inisherin. He believes that there may be banshees but states: 'I just don't think they scream to portend death anymore, I think they just sit back amused and observe.'

Pádraic's donkey chokes to death on one of Colm's fingers and as revenge he tells Colm the day and the time he is going to burn down his house. Again Colm reacts calmly and the guard is not called.

The next day Pádraic burns down Colm's house and meets him on the beach in front of the burnt-out remains. The old woman, Mrs. McCormick, arrives at the house and sits in a chair outside watching Colm and Pádraic talk, from a distance. Colm's calm response is that he was thankful that the dog had been saved (by Pádraic), and that he thought it was fair revenge for the death of the donkey.

Even their last conversation is cordial, almost matter-of-fact, as Colm thanks Pádraic for minding his dog and Pádraic replies 'anytime' from a distance.

The film ends with Colm staring out to sea, tilting, while Mrs. McCormick watches on from the house.



Colin Farrell, Brendan Gleeson, and Martin McDonagh at the premiere of the film at the 66th [BFI](#) London Film Festival

Martin McDonagh's rhetorical device of getting into the minds of two people who are going mad but are not aware of it is fascinating in that we see the other islanders also from Colm and Pádraic's perspective. The islanders' crazy behaviour serves to divert our attention away from the horrors committed by Colm and Pádraic who always appear calm and rational no matter how gruesome things get, thus making Colm and Pádraic appear to be normal. It is a valuable lesson.

In real life, we are often presented with irrational proposals or events that are presented in a rational, calm, logical way by rational, calm protagonists; and where objectors are presented in caricatured ways as hippies, do-gooders, conspiracy theorists, liberals, commies etc., and we are persuaded that all is fine. Then, and it is often years later, after cover-ups have been exposed, documents brought in the public domain, or unwilling participants reveal the awkward truth, that we finally understand who were the rational actors and who was actually crazy. This game plan is played over and over again until we cannot distinguish between the rational and the irrational, which of course, is the most subtle part of the whole operation.

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