

1. Sarah Kane's *Blasted* Through A Psychoanalytic Lens

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Abstract:

*Psychoanalytic concepts which pervade our daily lives help us better understand human behaviors depicted, for instance, in literary texts; in fact, a psychological approach is an excellent tool for critical analysis and for solving a work's thematic and symbolic mysteries. Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, a good deal of the narrative progression deals with Ian and Cate's psychological behavior and their romantic relationship which has important implications for psychoanalytic criticism. The characters' behavior, narrative events, and images could be explained in terms of psychoanalytic concepts and different unconscious motives consisting of repressed wounds, fears, unresolved conflicts and guilty desires that operate in the main characters throughout this play. Applying Lacan and Freud's psychoanalytic techniques and psychological theories one can arrive at an interpretation of the play and of the motives behind the individual behavior.*

Keywords:

*Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, Psychoanalysis, Freud, Lacan*

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The Unconscious

Psychoanalytic concepts which pervade our daily lives help us better understand human behaviors depicted, for instance, in literary texts. Although no single approach can be used for manifold interpretive possibilities of a work, the psychological approach is an excellent tool for critical analysis and for solving a work's thematic and symbolic mysteries.

Since *Blasted*, a play by Sarah Kane lends itself to the psychoanalytic approach this paper focuses on some salient psychological elements throughout the play. The romantic relationship between Ian and Cate, portrayed in the play, has important implications for psychoanalytic criticism.

In *Blasted*, Ian, a middle-aged racist journalist rapes Cate, a child-like woman, in a Leeds hotel room. A rebel Soldier breaks into their room, rapes Ian and sucks out his eyes, then commits suicide. Suddenly a bomb destroys the hotel room. Cate returns to the blind Ian with a dying baby, buries the dead baby and leaves to trade her body for food. Ian tries to commit suicide but cannot; he devours the dead baby and deteriorates to the point of death. The play ends with Cate feeding him bread and gin in the rain. (Kane, 2001)

A central concept in psychoanalysis is the existence of the unconscious. Freud refers to the fact that humans are motivated by unaware and unconscious desires, needs, and fears. The unconscious, the storehouse or reservoir of fears, desires and conflicts, comes into being by repression, the expunging of painful experiences from consciousness; however, our unhappy psychological emotions are not eliminated by repression; we hang onto our repressed desires, wounds and fears in disguised distorted ways hence our unconscious behaviors (Tyson, 2006). In fact, adult behavior is the direct result of childhood experiences in the family which is an important factor in psychoanalysis. Ian and Cate have both lived their family conflicts. Cate's relationship with her mother and brother and that of Ian with

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his wife and son are emotionally distant relationships. Ian and Cate's interpersonal and romantic relations show their unresolved conflicts in their families. They both suffer from feelings of inadequacy and abandonment inflicted over them by their family. Since Ian was never satisfied sexually and emotionally with her wife, he acts it with Cate. There is a similarity between Ian's wife's treatment of him and Cate's inattention to him. What Ian really wants in wanting Cate is something he didn't receive from his wife.

Another issue, sibling rivalry or the competition for the attention of parents by siblings, is occurring now between Ian, her wife and Cate. His wife's attention to their child and Cate's attention to her lover, Shaun, reawakens his unresolved rivalry with a sibling. Ian and Cate both come in second in their relationships. Ian has already had a wife and Cate has a lover.

One source refers to good girl/bad girl attitude toward women as common among men with unresolved oedipal attachments. Unconscious competition with father for mother's love makes men categorize women as good girls or like Mom or bad girls or not like Mom. The same source states that sexual desire for the mother makes men feel guilty and dirty; hence seducing and enjoying sex with dirty bad girls not associated with mom and then abandoning them (Tyson, 2006). Ian's seducing Cate, a good girl, made her a bad girl unworthy of permanent commitment so he abandoned her to avoid feeling guilty for soiling her or in fact his mom.

Cate's case is also an example of oedipal attachment. Apparently, she is still in the competition, going in her unconscious, with her mother for her father's love so she has been attracted to Ian who already has a wife and his attachment allows her to replay her competition and to win this time. Once she has won Ian, however, he is not desirable anymore; so, she has lost interest in him. Even if as a child Cate won his father's affection or even if she has been sexually molested again she is attracted to Ian who already has a wife because she feels she should be punished for stealing her father from her mother, so she does not respond sexually to Ian to punish herself.

Moreover, Cate experiences her longing for her father as her longing for Ian but she decides to leave him because she feels insecure and Ian cannot convince her that he really loves her or maybe Cate has lost interest in Ian because as an attentive lover he has already

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convinced her of his love so he cannot fulfil Cate's need of re-experiencing her abandonment by her neglectful father.

Defences and Core Issues

Several defences are at work in the play by which the repressed is kept repressed or "the contents of our unconscious are kept in the unconscious". Displacement, for instance, is "taking it out on someone or something less threatening than the person who caused our fear, hurt, frustration, or anger" (Tyson, 2006). Ian is angry because Stella, his wife, did not satisfy his sexual needs and slept with a lesbian so he takes out his anger on Cate by having rough sex with her. Also, Cate who has apparently been molested by her father or other men starts the arousal of Ian's sexual desire by kissing, licking and messaging him but ends it with a bite on his penis which causes a lot of pain.

Regression as a defense is "the temporary return to a former psychological state" either to "a painful or a pleasant experience" to avoid "some present difficulty". Regression is an opportunity for active reversal i.e. "the acknowledgement and working through repressed experiences and emotions" to relive a painful experience to cure it (Tyson, 2006). Cate and Ian meet each other again after some time probably because both want to avoid the unpleasant realities of their present life.

Some core issues, revealed when we experience anxiety, are also at work in the play.

Fear of intimacy is the "fear of emotional involvement" and to remain "at an emotional distance from others" to "protect ourselves from the painful past experiences" (Tyson, 2006). The relationship most obviously based on fear of intimacy is Ian and Cate's relationship. Ian and Cate's relationship does not seem to be a satisfying one because unconsciously they both desire something because of a psychological need that is the result of a wound.

Although Ian says he loves Cate, it seems that no deep emotional investment is seen in their behavior; a sign of emotional aloofness or fear of intimacy is that Ian remains interested in

Cate since she seems to belong to another person. The same can be said of Cate who is with Ian, a married man. Even when Cate starts sexual relation it ends in violent action.

They both divide their love and interest between two people which protects them from real intimacy with either. Because of his painful marriage, Ian starts an affair with Cate as a distraction. Using Cate, Ian can persuade himself that he doesn't need his wife and Cate can be a punishment for his wife.

Out of fear of intimacy, Ian drops Cate when their affair becomes serious and maybe after leaving her, Ian pursues Cate again since he understands that her interest does not focus exclusively on him but on another boyfriend as well; she won't break through his protective shell, so he is intensely interested in her.

Fear of intimacy is also apparent when they leave the room repeatedly because staying there for any length of time makes them close to each other. Maybe Ian's extramarital affair with Cate and her possession is to help him show his masculine power. Although Ian probably started pursuing Cate to keep himself from loving his wife, now he seems obsessively fond of her. Ian, also, maintains an emotional distance from his family by keeping himself too busy and Cate remains at an emotional distance by choosing two partners at a time.

Cate also does not form close ties with her mother or brother and does not spend time with them out of fear of intimacy. Cate's unconscious conviction that emotional ties to Ian will result in her being emotionally devastated makes her choose to break off her romantic relationship with Ian when it started to evolve.

Low self-esteem is to believe one is "less worthy than other people" not deserving "attention, love, or any other of life's rewards" and deserving "to be punished by life in some way" (Tyson, 2006). Ian has chosen Cate as his mistress, who is from the lower-middle-class, probably because of his low self-esteem and his need to exert power over others because he is emotionally insecure. Similarly, Cate's relationship to Ian is related to low self-esteem. The insecure or unstable sense of self makes Cate unable "to sustain a feeling of

personal identity” or of knowing herself so she’s “vulnerable to the influence of other people” (Tyson, 2006).

Cate’s emotional insecurity, like Ian, makes her try to impress others by sexual adventures. Although Ian left her for some time in the past, she is with him again since unconsciously she believes she does not deserve a better man.

Ian suffers from fear of abandonment, as another core issue, both physical and emotional since he believes Cate is going to desert him and doesn’t really care about him. He also suffers from a fear of betrayal i.e. the feeling that “our friends and loved ones can’t be trusted” (Tyson, 2006). He is suspicious of Cate’s being a lesbian and does not trust his son to tell him about his illness.

Core issues can result from or cause the emergence of each other (Tyson, 2006). Fear of abandonment, for instance, makes Cate liable to develop a fear of intimacy. Since she believes that she will be eventually abandoned by Ian, she doesn’t get too close to him to avoid being hurt when abandoned. Her low self-esteem also leads to fear of abandonment and fear of intimacy; she thinks she’s unworthy of love and she expects to be abandoned by Ian; her feeling that she is less worthy than others also leads to an emotional distance.

Cate’s stuttering and fainting can be explained by psychoanalysis as well. Repressed impulses find tortured expression in the form of neurotic symptoms in the play. Repressed desires that have taken refuge in the unconscious manifest themselves “in unguarded moments, in slips of the tongue, for instance, or in unintended puns, or in our dreams” (Bertens, 2001) (Bertens, 2001) hence Cate’s stammering.

Symbols and Imagery

If we consider the work as analogous to a dream, recurrent dream symbols related to death, sexuality and the unconscious reveal how characters project their unconscious desires, fears and wounds onto characters, setting and events.

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Freud believes that most human actions are motivated by “sexuality” and “forces over which we have very limited control” (Guerin, 2005). Ian and Cate both have suppressed incestuous desires.

One can interpret imagery in the play in terms of sexuality. According to psychoanalysis “all concave images” be “female or yonic symbols” and “all images whose length exceeds their diameter” are “male or phallic symbols” (Guerin, 2005).

Male and female imagery occur throughout the play. Ian’s gun might be functioning as a phallic symbol expressing sexual aggression. It is an agent of masculine sexuality and sexual instinct.

Female imagery includes the room in which they are trapped; it is a mother image; it may depict the unconscious fear of control. The bathroom that is in the back may be a stand-in for the unconscious. It is a symbol of the interior of a female body; a vaginal metaphor. Mother fixation in the play or “the death wish or longing to return to the womb” (Guerin, 2005) is also manifested in Ian’s obsession with washing and his constant going to the bathroom. As a female-maternal imagery, the bathroom may also suggest a mysterious serenity related to the womb. Lacking female or maternal affection it is a return to the womb.

Several times in the play they eat and order food and according to Tyson any “kinds of food as well as the containers in which food is delivered” or anything that stand in for the breast and in turn for emotional nurturing is considered as female imagery (2006).

The child Cate carries may represent her wish for a successful relationship and death of the child shows a failed relationship, lost innocence and the child within her that is wounded.

Water in bath in the back may suggest “the Freudian death instinct, the unconscious instinct in all living things to return to nonliving state and thereby achieve permanent surcease from the pain of living”; Psychoanalysts consider “water in any form...as a female symbol, more specifically as a maternal symbol” (Guerin, 2005). Water symbolizes sexuality and emotions; it is changeable, it is both soothing and destructive. Symbolically, Ian and Cate

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repeatedly take refuge in the bathroom. The rain also gets heavy in the play by the degree of sexual aggression.

Death Work, Gender and Dominance

Another psychological issue worth mentioning is the death work. Death has an important role in our psychological experience. Freud believes that all human beings have a death drive or Thanatos which is the result of “something in our biological makeup as a species” (Tyson, 2006).

One can see acts of psychological and physical self-destruction in both individuals and nations throughout the play. Ian and Cate show degrees of self-destructive behavior both physically and psychologically: Cate by masturbating or encouraging Ian to kill her by gun and Ian, by not curing his lungs. Another form of self-destructive behavior is seen in the war in the play.

Since death is an integral part of other psychological experience so differences in the psychological makeup of individuals in the play make them respond to death in various ways. Fearing the death of oneself or others may be because of the fear of abandonment (Tyson, 2006).

Ian fears when Cate faints and both are afraid to get too close to each other to be able to bear the pain of loss better in case any of them dies. Fear of death is also responsible for fear of intimacy and fear of life as a result (Tyson, 2006). Cate says that she’s not afraid of death and is just concerned about her mother and brother that in fact, her fear of death results in her fear of being intimately attached to life hence her rejection of Ian’s love and withholding sex.

Moreover, since life results in death that is the ultimate loss one may try to remove him/herself from it by “doing as little as possible and by feeling as little as possible” (Tyson, 2006) so Ian believes she will never find a job and she is emotionally dead at least to Ian.

Death work plays a great role in Ian’s psychological being. According to Tyson “the greater our fear is”, regarding death, “the greater our fascination becomes” (2006). Ian tries to show

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he is indifferent to death as he does not stop smoking, but he asks Cate about death several times throughout the play.

In her book *Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Marie Bonaparte considers Poe's "fatal weakness for drink ...as a form of escape that enabled him to remain faithful to his dead mother, through a rigidly enforced chastity that was further ensured by alcoholic overindulgence" (Guerin, 2005). Ian may also drink gin for the same reason.

Gender and dominance are another psychological aspect of the play. Ian as the male character exerts dominance over Cate by his speech and actions. While Ian assuming his domineering role expects her to fulfill his demands and desires, Cate's slip of the tongue while talking shows lack of assertiveness and autonomy especially in a sexual relationship.

At the beginning of the play and during rape Ian dominated Cate but the morning after rape Cate's harsh sexual act depicts her fantasy of female dominance. The first sign of her independence is when she leaves Ian and the hotel; in the end, Cate, who feeds Ian, becomes an object of power and Ian, blind and weak is reduced to a helpless figure.

Another interpretation is related to penis envy. Upon realizing they lack a penis, little girls "develop a sense of inadequacy" but eventually give up their desire and "want a baby instead" (Bertens, 2001). Cate's repressed desire for a baby is hidden behind the image of the baby she's been given so in the end when Ian goes down the tomb of the child and dies, the phallic oppressor is destroyed by the tomb, a symbolic vagina.

However, if the tomb in which the child is buried is an image of the womb, by eating the child Ian shows his ultimate power over Cate. To possess phallus, Cate carries a child, but Ian destroys this phallic symbol by eating it although Cate has tried to bury this symbol of oppression.

Blasted and Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Apart from the Freudian approach, some of the main concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis can be applied to the play. Lacan talks about three stages in the psychological development of the infant.

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The infant cannot differentiate itself from its environment in its early months but gradually develops “a sense of itself as a whole” in the preverbal Mirror Stage.

In the next stage, the Imaginary Order, as “a world of fullness, completeness, and delight” the child feels “a union of mutual satisfaction” with the mother though this feeling of connection with mother or the Desire of the Mother is illusory. The Symbolic Order initiates with “the child’s acquisition of language” and the “experience of separation from others” especially from mother which is an “experience of loss” (Tyson, 2006). The hotel and the bathroom which involve private world seem to embody the Imaginary Order where Ian and Cate spend more time as a rejection of the Symbolic Order. Cate’s chronic fainting upon Ian’s attempt for sex can be considered as nostalgia for the Imaginary Order and her conflicted relationship to the Symbolic Order.

Ian and Cate unconsciously seek substitutes for the lost union with the mother, in the Symbolic Order. Ian tries to recapture the feeling of union of the Imaginary Order by finding a true and perfect partner and maybe Cate by sexual freedom and the baby may be a stand-in for the state of fantasy union; but none can sustain a feeling of complete fulfillment hence Ian’s leaving Cate for a period and Cate’s attempt for an emotional distance.

Ian and Cate have exited the Imaginary Order and are in the new world of the Symbolic Order with its rules and restrictions, so the hotel may hold for their return to the preverbal state of the Imaginary Order. Moreover, by frequently washing themselves and going to the bath, Ian and Cate experience regression to the Imaginary Order.

Lacan refers to the lost object of desire of the Imaginary Order as *objet petit a* (Tyson, 2006). Although Ian and Cate have drawn to the hotel in search of *objet petit a*, the search is unsuccessful since the baby is dead in the end and Ian is blind without having Cate.

According to Tyson, the phallus is “a metaphor for patriarchal power” and a “sign of the Symbolic Order” (2006). In the play, the gun as a phallus symbol may represent the Symbolic Order and an authority figure. Moreover, according to Lacan, the Real, “is the uninterpretable dimension of existence”. The soldier with no identity may be seen as a

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representation of the Lacanian incomprehensible Real about which “we can know nothing about, except to have the anxious feeling from time to time that it’s there” (Tyson, 2006).

Since a good deal of the narrative progression deals with Ian and Cate’s psychological behavior and their romantic relationship, character’s behavior, narrative events, and images could be explained in terms of psychoanalytic concepts in *Blasted*. Different unconscious motives consisting of repressed wounds, fears, unresolved conflicts and guilty desires operate in the main characters throughout this play. Applying Lacan and Freud’s psychoanalytic techniques and psychological theories one can arrive at an interpretation of the play and of the motives behind an individual behavior.

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