

TOWARDS HUMAN APOCALYPSE IN SARAH KANE'S BLASTED

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Résumé

Le titre onomatopéique de la pièce de théâtre de Sarah Kane intitulée Blasted, révèle une éventuelle désintégration mondiale de la race humaine due à l'irrésistible recrudescence de la violence. Comme, Dieu a détruit le monde par inondation aux jours de Noé, le monde d'aujourd'hui avance inexorablement vers une destruction totale, cette fois-ci à travers le jeu de la violence, le feu des canons, des bombes atomiques et nucléaires. Par conséquent, ce travail propose d'étudier Blasted comme un avertissement retentissant à l'humanité au sujet de l'escalade de la violence qui devient ainsi une menace dangereuse pour la vie humaine sur terre. En se fondant sur l'approche sémiotique et la théorie de la réception, cet article prouve que les expressions physique, verbale, sexuelle et psychologique de la violence, couplées de l'alcoolisme et de la toxicomanie, constituent des armes destructrices dans la pièce, conduisant progressivement l'humanité vers son apocalypse.

Mots-clés : *violence, alcoolisme, toxicomanie, apocalypse, race humaine.*

Abstract

The onomatopoeic title of Sarah Kane's play Blasted, accounts for a worldwide disintegration of human race due to the overwhelming growth of violence on earth. Just like, God destroyed the world by flood in Noah's days, the modern world is inevitably moving toward a total annihilation, this time through violence, gun's fire, atomic and nuclear bombs. As a result, this work purports to explore Blasted as a sound warning to humanity about the escalation of violence that becomes a dangerous threat to human life on earth. Based on semiotic approach and reader-response theory, this essay has shown that physical, verbal, sexual and psychological kinds of violence together with alcoholism and drug addiction constitute destructive weapons leading gradually toward human apocalypse.

Keywords: *violence, alcoholism, drug addiction, apocalypse, human race.*

Introduction

According to Christianity, apocalypse refers to end times, events prophesied in the book of Revelation concerning the second coming of Jesus the Saviour and the end of life on Earth. It infers the war of Armageddon that will lead to a global destruction, a worldwide disaster,

a cataclysmic event putting an end to life on earth. Read in this sense, Sarah Kane's play *Blasted*, symbolically and metaphorically highlights a process towards the end of the world. The play draws the audience's attention to the reality of violence and an eventual global annihilation of the planet earth squatting and wallowing in all sorts of violence. Semantically, to blast means to dynamite, which is to shatter, to destroy or to annihilate through explosives. As a noun, blast means a loud sudden sound, an explosion out of destruction of a mass of rock. Therefore, Kane's play is an alert, a sound warning about the risk the modern world is taking through the development of all sorts of violent acts, irrational behavior, war conflicts and arm race.

Consequently, leaning on semiotics and reader-response literary theories, this work aims at showing how Kane as a playwright, depicts violence esthetically as a permanent danger, a kind of Sword of Damocles hanging on the world's shoulders. The work intends to show how physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence together with alcoholism and drug addiction stand as dynamites in Kane's play ready to clear off the whole mankind. Besides, the work shows how the warning is loud through the use of a straightforward English language that lays bare naked the brutality and baseness of the modern man who has never learned lessons from a bloody past smelling gloom and horror.

In terms of structure, the work is divided into three main parts. The first part highlights war in terms of physical violence as a weapon of destruction in the play. The second part presents sexual violence in war times in the play as a threat to human existence on earth. Finally, the third part denounces alcoholism and drug addiction as tools of destruction of human life in the play.

1. War and physical violence as weapons of destruction

Today, physical violence appears across the world as an unavoidable means for solving all sorts of problems. Physical violence spares neither governments nor the populations. Physical violence is used at the high level in administration to bring discipline and order in the nation; it is also used at a lower level in the mist of the population by individuals to express their dissatisfaction and disagreement of the poor management of state affairs by political leaderships and governments across the

world. There is no single day without a case of violence. Violence ravages homes, communities, and whole nations. Human beings become obsessed with violence with no possibility of changing the strategies to address their challenges in terms of their sociopolitical, cultural and religious differences. A scholar will argue about the entrenchment of violence in human nature as follows: “violence is on an archetypal level as something inherent in us, not as the consequence of a social structure, as a political play would show...There is no escape or possibility of change, because that evil exists on a deeper level.” (Nikcevic, 2005: 264) This scholar’s argument is that the violence inherent in *Blasted*, is deep entrenched in human beings who always depend on violence for the resolution of their problems.

Sarah Kane’s play *Blasted* suggests that modern British society, and the whole world on a large scale, is full of violent acts such as rape and murder as a critic points out “*Blasted* implies that modern Britain is a society where potentially traumatizing events, such as rape and murder, are rendered inconsequential by the constant diet of them provided by the press.” (Buse, 2001: 186)

Helen Iball (2005) states that *Blasted*’s disordered personality sends practitioners and commentators running for the neat cover of binary opposition: the verbal versus the visual, theatricality (which is invariably ascribed to the ‘visual’ camp) as the antithesis of realism. Iball’s comment simply points out Kane’s characters’ obsession of violence. Kane’s drama is essentially and fundamentally characterized by violence. Her dramatis personae are psychologically and physically marked by violence of all kinds.

David Barnett (2008) also argues that whether expressed physically or verbally, Kane’s dramatic and Postdramatic works share the same aesthetics of extreme, excessive violence, and the same tendency towards self-conscious acknowledgement of its implications.

In *Blasted* Sarah Kane creates a situation of war in which physical violence is the order of the day. The situation in the play is horribly violent as people become cannibals for lack of food out of war. People lose their humanity because of war horror. A proof that war deprives them of their human qualities and moral values. In a war situation, the question is no more how to appear human, but it is a matter of life and death whereby every means is good to save one’s own life. The reader witness’s grotesque violence in the play wherein Ian literally feeds

allegedly on the baby's body chopping its flesh and breaking its bones as it were beef or mutton. Through this picture, Kane brings the reader to fathom the extreme danger of human violence and delight in war acts. The reader also witnesses Cate carrying bread while blood running down between her legs, a sign that she has been violently raped, her private part is mutilated. She is yearning for the bread in a situation of hopelessness the war creates. Man is created to live by the bread, but his passions and over ambitions lead him to eat his fellow human beings instead of bread because he loses his senses due to war break. Man becomes a wolf to man in a situation of war, which is quite abnormal and inhumane. Kane shows much horror and obscenities to the audience not because violence is good, but first and foremost because violence leads to dehumanization and gradually to human apocalypse or human total annihilation. After relishing on the baby's tender flesh what Ian has become is that he dies with the so-called relief:

Ian tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the floor and lifts the baby's body out. He eats the baby. He puts the remains back in the baby's blanket and puts the bundle back in the hole.

A beat, then he climbs in after it and lies down, head poking out of the floor.

He dies with relief. [...]

In these stage directions, Kane insists clearly that Ian dies with relief. Through these language esthetics, Kane implies that death which is seen as the peak of human pains and sufferings, becomes a relief for Ian for reasons the reader can fathom and think out. In fact, to be is to live and to live suggests many good conditions, now you are just to survive only on a baby's corpse why live again? Kane suggests that when life becomes hard to bear the better thing to do is to stop being. According to Graham Saunders (2009: 72), death is an overarching and overwhelming presence in Sarah Kane's theatre work, in terms of both stage action and theme. From her debut play, *blasted* (1995), through to *Cleansed* (1996) and *Crave* (1998), Kane's dramatic universe is peopled by characters charging towards their death, and usually encountering it in scenes of Grand Guignol excess and grotesque violence featuring spectacular displays of torture, body mutilation and dismemberment.

Here, as well as in the later plays, death is ambivalently presented as the only escape from the nightmare of living and, at the same time, as that which makes living a nightmare; as the moment of ‘complete sanity and humanity’ wherein, as Kane herself puts it, ‘everything suddenly connects.’

Ian’s death puts an end to his life challenges to survive in war horror. Ian’s death too infers human apocalypse which is a logic outcome of physical violence and war manifestations.

On her part, Cate loses blood profusely. Knowing that blood is life, Cate will surely die after losing much of her blood. Kane shows the scene of her horror: “**Cate enters carrying some bread, a large sausage and a bottle of gin. There is blood seeping from between her legs**”. (***Blasted*, Scene Five, p. 60**) In the scene, the audience can see Cate carrying not only a loaf of bread but also some wine, which means some drink. The symbolism of bread and wine accounts for yearning for life. Cate would like to live but her environment is against her life, everything is put together for her to perish, after all the scenes of her rape and bloodshed she will eventually die, her life will be destroyed. The biblical adage is eaten and drink for you will die. Cate eats bread and drinks gin to die afterwards.

Kim Solga argues that Kane surprises much with her scenes of horror, *blasted* is violently unpredictable, resisting the kind of audience premonition on which both naturalism and dialectical realism thrive and thus leaving the audience unprepared for what may come and how they might react. The unpredictability of Kane’s presentation of scenes underlines the unpredictability of horror once violence or war is broken out. Once war violence is broken out, no one controls it; it has to ravage and destroy everything in the process including people and their properties. In the play, it is not only Ian and Cate that are being destroyed, the whole fictional setting is under fire. Cate is informing us that everyone in the city is yelling and lamenting because soldiers are controlling everything: people, animals and goods. This scene is much telling:

Cate Everyone in town is crying. / [...] /**Cate**
Soldiers have taken over. / [...] / **Cate** A woman gave
me her baby. (***Blasted*, Scene Four, p. 51**)

Soldier Went to a house just outside town. All gone. Apart from a small boy hiding in the corner. One of the others took him outside. Lay him on the ground and shot him through the legs. (*Blasted*, Scene Three, p. 43)

This scene shows the reader a city emptied of its population because of war violence and torture. Kane's representation denounces the nonsense and irrationality of human behaviour expressed in violence and war. Kane suggests that whatever the problem, violence and war cannot be the appropriate means of solving it, because war violence is apocalyptic; not only is it destructive, but it also wipes out and clears off human existence. Christopher Innes (2002: 530) will corroborate saying: "So when the wall of the hotel is demolished by a mortar-shell and the room dismantled as the floorboards are torn, it represents the final disintegration of a corrupt civilization."

2. War and sexual violence as weapons of destruction

Across many cultures, sex is said to be sacred. Therefore, its use needs certain sane and sound conditions. However, in a war situation this sacred gift of God is vilipended and desacralized. Sexual violence is common in wartimes. Sex becomes a mere toy and a commonplace in war fronts, soldiers abuse all human beings they come across, they rape women, they rape girls, they rape children and they sodomize other men of the same sex. A Soldier would testify this in Kane's *Blasted*:

Soldier [...] Head crying in the basement. Went down. They held the men while I fucked the women. Youngest was twelve. Didn't cry, just lay there. Turn her over and – then she cried. Made her lick me clean. Closed my eyes and thought of – Shot her father in the mouth. Brothers shouted. Hung them from the ceiling by their testicles. (*Blasted*, Scene Three, p. 43)

Eckart Voights-Virchow (2010: 195) has it that in *Blasted*, Kane uses the motif of sexual violence, whereby Ian's rape of Cate is later revisited on him by the Soldier, who in turn uses the act of rape on Ian for a

specific purpose, namely to come to terms with the rape and murder of his girlfriend Col by a group of soldiers. In a vicious circle, Ian as a man rapes Cate as a woman. Then the Soldier who is a man rapes Ian another man because other soldiers have raped his girl-friend Col. It stands to reason that in *Blasted* Sarah Kane self-consciously tries to depict the traumas of war, rape, domestic violence and loss. Using the Bosnian war of the early 1990s as a central motivation, she tries to show the catastrophic images of bombings, pain, torture, hunger and mutilation, inhumanity, sexual violence, abuse, and rape that define war as a social plague. War afflicts man to the worst degree; it imposes all sorts of atrocities on man including sexual harassment and abuse.

Kane's drama deals with themes of destructive love, sexual craving, pain, physical and psychological dimensions of cruelty, issues of distress, melancholia and death which is the apocalypse. By examining these specific topics, she questions and breaks down the established notions of audiences. In these texts Kane attempts to explore the possibility of change acknowledging that the world is viscerally violent. Being a woman, Kane considers that sexual abuse due to wartimes should be the worst crime man could commit. Sex is not a taboo in her dramatic text because this is the crude fact of daily life in a warlike world inclined to violence. Through the exhibition of sexual abuse, Kane aims to sensitize her audience by bringing to its awareness the excesses of a violent world which is ours. For her, our world needs a better image, human beings deserve a world better than ours, a world free from sexual abuse, violence and war. Today's world deprives humanity of its dignity and worth through the abuse of sex in wartime. This agenda serves as a background to Kane's graphic representation of sexual violence in time of war. Without serious sensitization and consciousness on the part of the public and the state, our world is heading straight for an irreversible apocalyptic catastrophe.

In Scene Three, after a mortar bomb has blasted apart the hotel room, the Soldier inflicts upon Ian the same atrocities perpetrated by another soldier, in the past, upon his girlfriend: he rapes him, pushes a revolver up his anus, and finally then proceeds to do the same to the other eye. This scene shows us that evil always begets evil. Men should abstain from evildoing to avoid its expansion in retaliation sense. Someone who is offended is likely to seek vengeance. Retaliation is part of human nature, to help control it, one needs to be careful towards other

people by not mixing and messing with their intimate sexual partners. Everybody should mind his own business. The war situation is helping the Soldier to avenge himself on innocent people namely Ian and Cate because his girlfriend has been raped by other soldiers not by the people he is raping. Actually, his revenge is blind. His fellow soldiers rape his girl-friend and he comes to rape innocent civilians in his yearning for fighting back. Through the Soldier's insane retributive logic, Kane connects the spiraling global violence of armed conflict with the mechanisms of violence inside the couple: the left by the explosion acts as a powerful visual symbol of Cate's violated body, marking out Ian's primal and private act of violence as the seed of the full-scale destruction of war.

In a more metaphorical sense Ian is also being punished for his refusal to report the Soldier's eyewitness account of the horrors of war, dismissed by the hack as an unmarketable news item and one at any rate lying outside the province of "a home journalist, for Yorkshire." On yet another level, though, the Soldier's torture can be seen as a practical demonstration of the exact ritual required by killing, following his allegations that Ian – who carries a gun, apparently works in intelligence for the regime, wishes for a new Holocaust targeting "the queers [...] wogs and fucking football fans," introduces himself to the Soldier as a colleague "of sorts", and claims to have killed people and disposed of bodies – is actually totally unskilled in the art of death. The fact that the Soldier shoots himself after completing his ferocious routine, whereas he refrains from pulling the trigger on Ian, is also significant: having ascertained the latter's unpreparedness, he denies him the privilege of dying. It should also be noted that the Soldier is simply discovered dead in Scene Four, revolver in hand and brain splattered. Definitely, he has committed suicide out of desperation. As it goes, he who lives by the sword will die by the sword.

Besides, sexual act is meant to procure pleasure but the sexual foreplay between Ian and Cate is terribly painful because in Scene two Cate, bites Ian's penis as hard as she can when Ian tells her that he is a killer; then Ian lies down yelling with pain and unable to speak. Cate uses her sexuality to strike back at Ian. The stage direction reads: "*She bites his penis as hard as she can. Ian's cry of pleasure turns into a scream of pain. He tries to pull away but Cate holds on with her teeth*" (*Blasted*, Scene Two, p. 31).

Christopher Innes corroborates (2002: 532): “At the same time it is noticeable that, as in *Blasted*, almost all the horrific violence that marks Kane’s plays is based on sex, or relates specifically to genitalia.”

3. Alcoholism and drug addiction as weapons of destruction

Alcohol intake and cigarette smoking are common in wartime like in *Blasted*. In wartime, soldiers and other people are exposed to drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes to increase violent effects on their brain, mind, mood, thoughts and perceptions.

According to N.W. Gilpin and G.F. Koob, when the brain is exposed to alcohol, it may become tolerant - or insensitive - to alcohol’s effects. Thus, as a person continues to drink heavily, he or she may need more alcohol than before to become intoxicated. As tolerance increases, drinking may escalate, putting a heavy drinker at risk for a number of health problems - including alcohol dependence. Even as the brain becomes tolerant to alcohol, other changes in the brain may increase some people’s sensitivity to alcohol. Desire for alcohol may be a transition into a pathological craving for these effects. This craving is strongly associated with alcohol dependence.

Alcohol can cause dependence because drinking is perceived as a pleasurable activity by the individual, whilst withdrawal feels distressing. In time, tolerance develops, so a greater quantity of alcohol is needed to obtain the same effect. Together, these factors encourage the development of dependence.

According to the Department of Social Protection Alcohol Dependency, excess alcohol consumption has toxic effects on everybody’s system. Alcohol-dependent patients often have nutritional deficiencies, multiple physical illnesses and social problems, which predispose them to further diseases such as pneumonia and tuberculosis.

Karl Mann and Falk Kiefer (2009) argue that alcohol induces mood disorders, and anxiety disorders can develop not only whilst the individual is consuming excess amounts of alcohol, but up to 4 weeks following cessation.

In *Blasted*, alcohol intake and cigarette smoking have disoriented and manipulated the soldiers and the civilians to harm one another. First, before the soldier attacks Ian and Cate he has realized that both of

them, especially Ian, were smelling cigarettes. The wartime has surely pushed Ian into alcohol overdrinking and heavy cigarette smoking to drown his worries. But Kane has shown that alcohol and cigarette are not solutions in wartime; instead, the two substances foster violent behaviour. The character of Ian is shown abusing alcohol namely neat gin and cigarettes which instead of helping him out of war trauma, cause him more trouble because he develops mental derangement, suicidal and killing drives and finally a deadly disease which is lung cancer which makes him uneasy coughing terribly in the play in scene one for instance.

Owing to their smelling, the Soldier has noticed that Ian and Cate are heavy smokers. Both stinks, have coughing and epileptic fits that make them much more vulnerable in wartime. Cigarettes and alcohol expose them to sexual violence and suicidal drives. These substances precipitate their tragic end in the play. Christopher Innes argues that when Ian pointed a gun to Cate, she was unconscious due to an epileptic fit:

... with a gun held to her head while she lies unconscious in one of her fits. Yet he too is in the last stages of lung-cancer, probably combined with cirrhosis of the liver – though in contrast to her ailments as a heavy smoker who consumes a bottle of gin before breakfast, these are symptoms of self-destructiveness – and she in turn assault him with violent sexual foreplay, scratching and biting, then performs oral sex on him at the climax of which she bites his penis, leaving him prostrate ‘in pain, unable to speak.’

(Innes, 2002: 531)

Kane has shown that both Ian and Cate are heavy smokers and drinkers. This habit causes them act abnormally and irrationally because cigarette and gin have poisoned their brain and weakened their mind. Their disorientation is caused by alcohol and drugs. Alcohol excess is a chronic and variable condition with possible consequences affecting the physical, psychological, mental and social functioning of the sufferer.

Alcohol and drugs have acted on Ian and Cate's brain leading them to anxiety, depression, hopelessness and worst of it to killing mania. For, it is clinically revealed that, anxiety and depression are frequently associated with alcohol abuse. An anxious person may appear ill at ease, and they may be tearful, sweating or shaky. A person who is depressed may look sad, speak in a monotone, and have a flat affect and a downcast gaze. They may be tearful and preoccupied with guilt or hopelessness about the future. With people who abuse alcohol, the risk of suicide is relatively high. Koob (2003)

Conclusion

From the beginning, this work leaning on semiotics and reader-response literary theories, has set out to show how Kane as a playwright, depicts war violence esthetically as a permanent danger, a kind of Sword of Damocles hanging on the world's shoulders. Therefore, the investigation into Kane's *Blasted* has shown that physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence together with alcoholism and cigarette smoking in wartime, work towards exterminating people and their goods. Therefore, Kane's *Blasted* is an urgent and loud warning in a straightforward English language that lays bare naked the brutality and baseness of the modern man who has never learned lessons from a bloody past made of gloom and horror. According to Elaine Aston (2003: 83), Kane considered that contact with 'art'/ theatre could bring about change, this meant that she worked with a view of theatre having a post-theatrical sequel: a reawakening of perception, an invitation to see things differently. Thus, Kane's drama aims at the audience's awareness raising for the improvement of human behaviour in order to avoid human apocalypse. The danger is that if there is no change in human behaviour in terms of violence control, our world will be surely blasted one day.

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