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**Exteriorizing The True Face of Man: An Analysis of Contemporary
British and American Plays that Intend to Shock**

A Thesis Presented

By

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Contemporary American and British playwrights have been heavily criticized for the intensely violent and shocking nature of their plays. These plays stand out specifically because of those elements that have made audiences cringe in their seats. These playwrights have been accused of overwhelming audiences with the sole intent to shock. This is partially accurate. These playwrights are intentionally trying to shock, but along with that experience, they aim to unveil a picture of what they believe to be the realities of the human condition. Using various techniques, which make each play unique, the playwright provides an extreme experience for the audience and reader. Looking beyond that shock, audiences and readers will find that there is something to be taken from what was witnessed on stage. These playwrights hope to bring to light the underexposed truths about human behavior and society. This goal comes at whatever cost and with no regard to how ugly these truths may be. This thesis will analyze six plays, including Adrienne Kennedy's "The Owl Answers", Edward Albee's "The Goat or Who is Sylvia?", Peter Shaffer's "Equus", Martin McDonagh's "The Pillowman" and Sarah Kane's "Blasted", to explore each playwright's techniques, purpose and messages behind their shocking works.

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Curtain Rises

It is believed that true art must have purpose and effect. This factor separates simple entertainment from a real experience. The revolutionary text of French poet and playwright, Anton Artaud, called for theater to create urgency toward purpose and affect. This work, "The Theater and its Double", is a collection of essays originally published in 1938. In his first chapter, *The Theater and the Plague*, he brilliantly compares the phenomenon of plague to the duty of theatre. The plague, which ravaged hundreds of different cultures over thousands of years, exposed a myriad of human capabilities. Historical accounts tell of societies facing near extinction and inevitable doom whose members reacted by deciding to live decadently. This chaos overpowered all normal judgment and as Artaud claims, "The last of the living (were) in a frenzy: the obedient and virtuous son kills his father; the chaste man performs sodomy upon his neighbors. The lecher becomes pure. The miser throws his gold in handfuls out the window. The warrior hero sets fire to the city he once risked his life to save" (24). Artaud claims that the victim of plague exposed the darkest of human possibility in all its extremes. To Artaud, the actor must do the same on stage. In a direct comparison Artaud claims, "The plague takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures; the theater also takes gestures and pushes them as far as they will go..." (27). These extremes are not always promised to be pleasing. Playwrights might go to certain extremes that might cause discomfort but that feeling is

essential. Artaud confirms this idea further by stating, "If the essential theater is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is the revelation, the bringing forth, the *exteriorization* of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the *perverse possibilities* of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized" (30). Artaud would be pleased to know his idea of theater, exteriorizing the perverse possibilities of the mind, is present in today's British and American drama. This essay aims to analyze six plays whose aim is to expose the darkness of human possibility using a certain level of shock value to achieve their goal. The following plays all succeed at causing some kind of distress but with a greater, purgative purpose in mind.

Felt Inferiority in "The Owl Answers"

"The Owl Answers", Adrienne Kennedy's second play, explores the fragmented selves of an African American woman named Clara (also known as the Owl, the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard and She is Who is Clara Passmore). Clara is torn between these two opposing sides with which she cannot come to terms. Clara wants to deny her real self and only be associated with her Whiteness, which is represented through the images of Queen Victoria, Shakespeare, and William the Conqueror, etc. Her black mother and white father

also have different selves who represent these sides as well. She eagerly wishes to attend her white adopted father's funeral, but is denied due to the fact that she is of Negro descent. The characters that represent Whiteness keep her confined to the perimeters of this world to which she wishes to belong. The critic Barnsley Brown points out in the article *Passed Over: The Tragic Mulatta and (Dis)Integration of Identity in Adrienne Kennedy's Plays* that, "Not only does the group deny She an identity by calling her 'a Negro' but they also refuse She's claim to a white heritage and keep her locked in the Tower of London, barricaded within the wall of a Eurocentric tradition that encloses but does not embrace her" (290). When Clara turns to Anne of Boleyn regarding her father's death, Kennedy quickly changes her character to her Black Bastard Mother, as a harsh reminder of her felt inferiority. A central theme in the play is identity and how we define ourselves.

While the theme of identity is not a unique topic to center a play around, Kennedy must be given credit for her artistic decisions in presenting this work. Her stage directions, characters changes, and set design create a surreal effect, which heightens the play's message. Different sights and sounds and the constant changing of characters create a nightmare effect that resembles the world in which Clara lives. The audience or reader can share her sense of calamity and chaos. An example of this occurs in the first few moments of the play where, according to Kennedy stage directions, ""LIGHTS FLASH. Scene revolves clockwise one and one quarter turns. Bird flaps wings. LIGHT comes up on him" (41). Images such as lace, red rice, hair, wings, feathers, beds, along with

sounds of metal screeching, flapping of wings and praying create a disturbed and almost violent world for the audience or readers to place themselves in. Kennedy succeeds in giving the audience that same sense of fragmentation that Clara feels, with the mix of these images and sounds.

Clara's sense of fragmentation mirrors Kennedy's own life experiences. Several issues addressed in her plays are reflections of her own struggles with identity and self. *She Who Is* is rejected from her whiteness as well as from her blackness. Kennedy's characters reflect strong feelings of conflict that Kennedy experienced in her own life and then transfers onto her character. In an interview with Lisa Lehman, "Kennedy admits that she would like to write less 'torturous' material, finds her autobiographical writing 'an outlet for inner psychological confusions and questions stemming from childhood'" (Curb, 193).

"*The Owl Answers*" was produced in 1965, at the end of the Civil Rights Movement, which seemed a perfect time for a young African American playwright to succeed. But in fact she failed to fit within any American theatrical tradition of the time. According to Brown, "The political nature of this violent struggle between whiteness and blackness represented in Kennedy's early work has been misunderstood at best by many critics, who argued during the sixties and seventies that her plays were not the didactic as proponents of the Black Arts Movement" (232). Critics were troubled with Kennedy's work because there was no clear fit for her plays even within her own culture. We can attribute the lack of popularity to the controversial elements of her play or to the "volatile content of

Kennedy's play (that) does not make her plays either light viewing or reading" (Brown, 284).

Kennedy admits, "My plays make people uncomfortable so I've never had a play done in Cleveland" (Brown, 281). "The Owl Answers" as well as her first play "Funnyhouse of a Negro" were shocking and unwelcome, and for that reason Kennedy was not popular in the theater community despite the obvious talent of her playwriting. The New York Times featured an article on the opening of "Funnyhouse of a Negro" which reflects sentiments on most of Kennedy's plays; "By the standards of routine drama, the work that opened last night at the East End Theater is much less a play than a vividly illustrated short story. Nothing happens except that the nightmares of the girl, Sarah, are partly visualized and the figures that haunt her days and nights take form and give expression to her secret resentments and guilt" (Taubman). Clearly then, Kennedy's play did not comply with conventional standards for theater success. The reviewer also seems to completely misinterpret the play by regarding it as nothing more than a vivid nightmare.

Not all critics misinterpreted Kennedy's plays. But to understand the messages in her play is also condemning. Kennedy is writing during a period where African Americans were empowered to take action against their oppressors. The Civil Rights Movement called for positive figures in the black community who would help serve as role models. Kennedy's plays were under rated because of the failure of her characters to represent this movement. She

Who Is is haunted by the complexity of her mixed identity and instead of using that as motivation for positive action; She Who Is lets it destroy her. In the article "Fragmented selves in Adrienne Kennedy's 'Funnyhouse of a Negro' and 'The Owl Answers' Rosemary Curb states, "Kennedy's female protagonists exhibit painful negative qualities (confinement, impotence, and desire for death) rather than freedom and independence, autonomous power and strength, life and vitality" (190).

Aside from these elements Kennedy's play is a painful experience full of controversial ideas and images. The shock value of this play transcends time. Present day audiences as well as audiences of the 1960s find the clash of sexuality and religion in this play disturbing and assaulting. Kennedy represents the clash of these two ideals with the male figures in her play, Goddamn Father who is the richest White Man in Town who is the Dead Father who is the Reverend Passmore and The Negro Man. It is implied that Goddamn Father is damned by God for his interracial relations with She's Bastard Black Mother. Reverend Passmore is another self of Goddamn Father and his actions of miscegenation are very taboo. Kennedy presents a religious in the community, who is meant to be void of inappropriate sexuality and turns him into a rapist. The coerced sexual relations with Bastard Black Mother are in the Reverend's hands. The Reverend, with images of his white dove, bible and robe, has stained his heritage with his relations with BBM. Anne Boleyn throws red rice at She and Reverend Passmore. Anne's act reflects a popular tradition in Christian wedding

ceremonies, which Kennedy has stained red to represent the underlying sexual taboo that created a biracial She. Once She loses hope in the Christian God, represented with the death of her father, She then turns to the Negro Man as God, only to be raped by him.

Kennedy also presents this taboo with the women in the play. BBM weeps for the death of Marys. BBM who was robbed of her innocence cries for all the virgins out there who will face the same fate and as a result would wish death upon them first, "Clara you were conceived by your Goddamn Father who was The Richest White Man in the Town and somebody that cooked for him. That's why you're an owl (laughs). That's why when I see you, Mary, I cry. I cry when I see Mary's, cry for their deaths" (30). Mary is a highly respected and adored figure in the Christian religion that Kennedy wishes to represent onstage as dead.

Kennedy's fluid interchange of selves allows her to intertwine messages about sex and religion. Each character has different selves who change in physical form but they are all the same person. Actor Joseph Chaikin created this technique named transformation. Chaikin came across this idea as he was undertaking the chief role in Brecht's "Man's a Man" for the Living Theatre in 1962. Chaikin was faced with the parable of his character that starts off as an innocent worker and then changes into a murderous soldier. These characters for Chaikin revealed, "a dramatic strategy which was to become the heart and signature of the Open Theatre: the actor in transformation from one role to another-before the eyes of the audience" (Coco, 26). Kennedy not only uses

transformation as a way to present ideas about sex and religion but also to help the audience understand She, a woman unable to maintain one identity.

Kennedy's use of imagery also helps her express She's plight with identity. This method also gives the play that element of controversy that characterizes Kennedy's plays. The affects she creates with the flash of images, lights and sounds resonate the sense of chaos She is experiencing. This surreal environment represents She's living nightmare. This nightmare implies deep meaning in the specific images Kennedy chooses to portray. One example is the dark bed that BBM drags on stage following the conversation between She and her Dead Father. The bed, representing sexuality, changes as the play progresses into a High Altar. It is important to note that Kennedy at times calls the object a bed and then at other moments an Altar. This object also seems to go through transformation. The final scene of "The Owl Answers" can be viewed as epitomizing Kennedy's attempt to mix sexuality and religion. At the end of the play She is raped, blood is spilled and everything burns on this altar/bed; there is really no difference:

SHE: Wrong, God?

NEGRO MAN: God? (They are upon the burning High Altar. He tries to force her down, yet at the same time he is frightened by her. The Dead Father who has been holding the candles, smiles.)

SHE: Negro! (MUSIC ENDS). Keep her locked there, guard. (They struggle.) I cry for the death of Marys. (They struggle. She screeches.) Negro! (She tries to get out of the room, but he will not let her go.) Let me go to St. Paul's Chapel. Let me go down to see my Goddam Father who was the Richest White Man in Town. (They struggle, he is frightened now.) God! (Suddenly she breaks away, withdraws the butcher knife, still with blood and

feather upon it, and very quickly tires to attack him, holds the knife up, aiming it at him, but then dropping it just as suddenly in a gesture of wild weariness. He backs farther. She falls on the burning bed. The Negro Man backs further out of the gate, She, fallen at the side of the Altar burning, her head bowed, both hands conceal her face, feather fly, green lights are strong, Altar burning, White Bird laughs from the Dome. She Who Is Cara who is the Bastard who is the Virgin Mary suddenly looks like an owl, and lifts her bowed head, stares into space and speaks:) Ow...oww. (Father rises and slowly blows out the candles on the bed.)

Kennedy's attempt to shock is also her way of waking us from the mundane, day to day lives we lead in which we ignore the realities of our multi-racial heritage. America in its blood is composed of all races and we cannot hold our European roots on a pedestal above the other cultures that built our great nation. Patti Hartigan argues, "Kennedy has created a surreal world in which romantic innocents are threatened by the persistent presence of racism. Rage lurks beneath the surface. Time is all topsy-turvy. History is fluid. Violence is inevitable" (112). Audiences were shocked at discovering the crumble of pushed boundaries at the expense of a powerful message about race, sexuality history and identity. Kennedy's use of techniques including transformation and personal, surreal imagery along with the already unforgiving context of the play make "The Owl Answers" a powerful experience.

“The Goat or Who is Sylvia?”: A Different Family Portrait

Playwrights who choose not to expose audiences to surreal, dream like images can still be very successful in providing as powerful and as shocking an experience as Kennedy. One such play is the 2002 play, “The Goat or Who is Sylvia?” by Edward Albee, who was Kennedy’s mentor. In “The Goat or Who is Sylvia?”, composed four decades after Kennedy’s shocking journey into private realms of identity and need, Albee challenges our definition of relationships and how we perceive family and the expression of love. Albee also tests the limits of social tolerance. He highlights the realities of our social norms, expectations and institutions. He asks audiences to place themselves in a scenario where our current social conventions are tested. Artaud would agree that this scenario “Is beneficial for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall...” (31).

“The Goat or Who is Sylvia?” is about an above average middle class family whose patriarch has been having an affair with a goat named Sylvia. Martin, a successful architect and loving father and husband, confesses to his friend, Ross, that he has been having an affair with Sylvia, a goat. His confidante cannot keep the secret from Martin’s wife, Stevie. This is the beginning of the end for all the characters. Stevie is utterly distraught when she discovers the details

of the affair. Billy, their homosexual son, is equally disturbed and disgusted by his father's actions. Martin's love for Sylvia is genuine despite their difference in species. After several scenes of heart wrenching confrontation, Stevie exits, no longer being able to contain her emotions. She returns in the last scene with Sylvia's bloody head in her hands. Martin is devastated at the murder of his love and at the destruction of his family.

The play opened on Broadway on March 10, 2002 and successfully ran for three hundred and nine performances. This play won the Pulitzer Prize that year for Drama. The play was met with some disdain even though Albee has earned a certain established authority at this point in his career. Critics could not overlook the shock value of the play. Elysa Gardner, in USA Today, claimed "The Goat" was a "self indulgent mess, in which the cynical, disdainful view of family life that has informed some of Albee's more eloquent works reached its nauseating nadir" (Gainor, 2003). In a review in the Austin Chronicle, Barry Pineo states, "No joke. He falls in love with a goat. And again, it may be difficult for some, perhaps for many, to get past that singular fact, because whether you pronounce it with an 'est' as in 'best' or with an 'east' as in 'beast,' in a world that often seems to have moved beyond shocking, bestiality still has the power to cow even the most jaded among us". The topics Albee addresses are taboo to even the most seemingly forbearing audiences.

Albee, unlike Kennedy who did not appeal to the values of the Black community of the 60s, sets to appeal directly to his own contemporary cultural community. Albee “calculatedly setting his play in a world that closely mirrors that of his professionally accomplished and economically advantaged Broadway and, soon thereafter, regional theatre audiences, Albee refuses to allow a comfortable distance of denial from the environment he depicts or its connection with our lives” (Gainor, 200). Albee must be given credit for filling seats with the very same class of audience, that by the end of the play he will criticize and expose; that is just as daring an act as Kennedy’s. Albee realizes how unsettling it can be to discover our selves exposed or “impel(ling) men to see themselves as they are” (Artaud, 31).

Albee’s choice of characters, plot, and stage design help enhance the idea of a normal family and as result add to the shock value and overall transgressive message of the play. The early advertising for “The Goat” shows Martin, Stevie, Billy and Sylvia in a wonderful family portrait that you can find in millions of homes in America. Albee wants us to accept this family as the epitome of normal with a twist of well to do. Even the numerous items of furniture Stevie hurls around help paint this image of a conventional upper middle class family. Audiences can relate to these characters, which Albee uses to his advantage. He forces the audience to question our own actions if a situation of this nature presented itself. Albee states, “I wanted people to go to that play, and imagine themselves in the situation, and really think hard about how they would respond

if it were happening to them. That's really what I'm after. Put yourself there. How the fuck would I react?" (Bottoms, 243). Albee insinuates what he thinks most reactions would be.

Albee's characters represent mainstream society that abides by social constructions. Their way of thinking represents the majority views of society. Critics who were distressed by Albee's characters helped prove a point. It shows how the idea of a more socially tolerant society is nothing more than an illusion. Society presents itself as growing more tolerant of human relationships when the fact is that it holds more reservations than it is willing to admit. Homosexuality has become very acceptable, especially in the world of theater, but this does not mean that society has made many more strides towards total social inclusion. Audiences are more accepting of homosexuality and therefore more accepting of Billy's sexual orientation than Martin's. But, while homosexuality is more acceptable than bestiality, it still manages to make us uncomfortable. Martin and Stevie accept but do not necessarily embrace their son's sexual choice. In a conversation between Martin and his best friend Ross, Ross reassures Martin that Billy's lifestyle choice is nothing but a phase; "ROSS: Billy! Seventeen; It's a phase. MARTIN: Like the moon, eh? ROSS: He'll straighten out -to make a pun. *(To quash the subject)* Billy'll come out of it; he'll be OK. MARTIN: *(Reassuring if a bit patronizing)* Sure." (22). If our society can be reluctant to accept Billy then what hope is there for Martin?

To add to the shock value of this taboo, Albee adds an incestuous kiss between Billy and Martin, as Martin tries to comfort Billy. Billy feels so overwhelmed with the news of his father's action that he makes sexual advances on his father. The stage directions state, "(Billy) Starts kissing MARTIN, who doesn't know what to do. Starts kissing MARTIN on the hands, then on the neck, crying the while. Then it turns-or does it?-and he kisses MARTIN full on the mouth-a deep, sobbing, sexual kiss" (102). Albee leaves it up to the audience to decide what the implications of these actions are. We can be sure that jaws drop across the theatre. Audiences are forced to deal with homosexuality, bestiality and now incest.

Albee uses this play to illustrate how strong our prejudices can be against those who are different. The expectations and norms of our social institutions are so strong that we will destroy even the most honorable members of our society. Martin is a loving husband and father who is admired and successful, but his act is too taboo for any kind of forgiveness. Martin, the only architect at the firm who hasn't cheated on his wife, the only member of his therapy group who finds happiness in his relationship with Sylvia, is a person who deserves our sympathy and who sincerely wants help and understanding, yet he is ostracized and punished for his expressions of love. Stevie admits that the social guidelines against Martin are too overpowering, stating, "Something can happen that is outside the rules, that doesn't relate to The Way the Game is Played. Death before you're ready to even think about it-that's part of the game. A stroke that

leaves you sitting looking at an eggplant the week before had been your husband –that’s another...but if there’s one thing you *don’t* put on your plate, no matter how exotic your tastes may be is bestiality” (59). It is unfortunate that Stevie can see all these horrible occurrences as acceptable or as “part of the game” but something so fulfilling and emotionally satisfying as Martin’s love for Sylvia, as being too much. Audiences witness how the strength of our prejudices can destroy a beautiful family and the lives of each of its members, and this is what makes Albee’s play so shocking. All of the people in Martin’s life cannot bear the weight of the news of his affair. Martin’s sincere explanations of his romance mean nothing to his family and friends. His attempts at seeking professional help are completely ignored. No one can get over the sexual nature of the act that he insists on calling love.

Ben Brantley from The New York Times claimed the sexual acts were simply metaphor, stating, “The subject is not bestiality but the irrational, confounding and convention-thwarting nature of love” (Gainor, 204). Brantley is only partially right. Albee intends to make the sexual act very literal. Accepting this reality is required for us to complicate this issue. Albee has brought forth what Artaud called “perverse possibilities” of human life, and we must confront these possibilities in the theatre. Albee wishes to “Make us look at things that maybe we don’t want to look at because they’re too tough to look at. In other words make us participate in our lives more fully (Albee, 134). As tough as this scenario is, it is not up to the audience to understand why Martin has sex with a

goat but it is crucial that we understand the significance of its consequences to an idea of family.

While Albee's does want to emphasize the sexual nature of Martin, he also aims to focus on the real emotional aspect of Martin's relationship with Sylvia. Martin is one of the few individuals in Clarissa Atherton's therapy group that claimed to have romantic feelings attached to the animal they had relations with. He was also the only member that did not feel sad or who wanted to change. Martin claims, "I said, most of the people there were having problems, were ... ashamed, or-what is the word? -Conflicted ...were...needed to talk about it while...while I went there, I guess, to find out why they were all there...I didn't understand why they were all so ...unhappy; what was wrong with ...with...being in love ...like that. (STEVIE *gently separates hands, letting bowl fall between her legs, break*)" (70). Martin was looking for understanding. Martin is unique in this case because his feelings for Sylvia go beyond sex. If this weren't the case, we would have no play. Martin's situation is not a simple sexual fetish that can be cured. It makes us uncomfortable because this isn't a "phase" or something Martin is going to grow out of; he is in love. It is something deeper and this reality is shocking as well as terrifying. We can see Stevie's realization in the stage directions where she goes limp and lets the bowl fall and break. Her refusal to accept Martin's act is physically played out in the final scene where Stevie holds Martin's loved one's severed head in her hands.

Albee intends to shock audiences by forcing them to question the limits of their tolerance. He complicates our understanding of love and relationships and exposes us to the harsh realities of our societal pressures. Albee hopes audiences “will leave their prejudices in the cloakroom and view the play objectively and later - at home- imagine themselves as being in the predicament the play examines and coming up with useful, if not necessarily comfortable responses” (Albee, 56).

An Unbridled Exposé in “Equus”

Albee also titled “The Goat or Who is Sylvia?” a “Note on the Definition of Tragedy”. Tragic is defined in terms of the ancient Greek definition of the art in theatre. Tragedy in its Greek origins means goat song. In ancient Greece goats were sacrificed to the Greek chorus while singing a song, hence, goat song. Oftentimes actors would dress up as either goats or horses to represent satyrs, commonly associated with men with strong sexual desires, for dramatizations of mythological stories. It is not coincidental that Albee uses this particular animal in his play as the hero’s love interest. Horses were also commonly used animals. In “Equus”, Peter Shaffer’s 1973 play, horses serve as a kind of love interest for to one of the main characters, Alan Strang. Beyond this similarity, “Equus” is a uniquely shocking play because like Albee and Kennedy, Shaffer also manages to

bring forth revelations of the human condition and expose certain unspoken “dark nesses” to audiences and readers.

In “Equus”, psychiatrist Martin Dysart is presented the case of a 17-year-old boy, Alan Strang, who has committed a heinous crime. Strang has blinded six horses with metal spikes in a riding stable near Winchester, London. Dysart takes on the case. By the end of the play the details of the crime are slowly unraveled. We discover that Strang has received all kinds of complex and mixed messages from his mother, father and society. We learn that Strang had an early interaction with horses where his parents were involved, which seemed to ignite his fascination with the animal. Strang was raised with intense religious connections. After this particular experience, horses replaced Christian figures and become Strang’s symbols of spirituality. Strang then gladly accepts a job working as a stable boy where he can be closer to horses.

Strang’s religious emotions also become intertwined with his sexuality. Without the horse keeper’s knowledge, Strang rides the horses nude at night, in a ritualistic manor, as his intimate connection with his gods. He yearns for the feeling of man and horse becoming one. He yearns for oneness with his god. Strang meets a girl, Jill, who attempts to become sexually intimate with Strang at the stables, in a nude scene. Strang cannot stand the fact that his gods are in this stable witnessing his unsuccessful attempt at a “normal” adolescent sexual act. He then proceeds to violently blind the horses. Dysart unravels these discoveries

while he has a discovery of his own. Dysart questions the demons of his own profession, which he realizes forces him to “normalize” children. This normalizing is taking away “magic” or “vitality” that he realizes he envies in these mad, tormented children.

“Equus” premiered at The National Theatre at The Old Vic Theatre on July 26, 1973. The director of this production, John Dexter, was awarded the Tony Award for Best Play in 1975. Part of the audience was seated on stage, making the audience feel very involved in the play’s actions. The play was acclaimed for its unique costume and staging techniques. The horses were all played by actors wearing brown tracksuits and wire abstractions of horse heads and their all-seeing eyes still being very visible through the mask. In the text, Shaffer makes sure to note these details so the reader can keep them in mind before delving into the play.

Critics praised these artistic choices in the early production of the play. In a review of the original production, Clive Barnes of The New York Times states, “This is a very fine play and enthralling play. It holds you by the root of drama and it adds immeasurably to the fresh hopes we have for Broadway’s future” (26). But Shaffer was still met with some protests against his play. In a recent interview, Shaffer recalls reactions to the first production claiming “In England there was an outcry over the perceived cruelty to horses. In America, I was accused of cruelty to psychiatrists” (The Shubert Organization). Aside from the

violence in the play, the several nude scenes and nightmare like sequences of Alan's experience also manages to leave audiences quite shaken. In a New York Times review of the original production, John Gruen states, "...the impact on the audience is one of palpable terror. The scene made all the more terrifying by the sounds of pain that accompany it, is one of the most humbling peaks of Peter Shaffer's new play "Equus" (127).

This terrifying experience aligns Shaffer with the likes of Kennedy and Albee. Shaffer's techniques give "Equus" that shock factor that will help expose and purge Artaudean "dark human possibilities" of the human mind.

These dark possibilities are presented in an exposé. Shaffer has created an intensely suspenseful play where the revelations are brought forth as painstakingly as are Alan's own struggles with his psyche. With each scene Shaffer brings to light small bits of information that will bring the truth closer to the surface. Shaffer keeps us at the edge of our seats up to the final moments of the play. Shaffer allows room for all kinds of questioning as to what exactly happened to Alan Strang; similar to what Shaffer felt upon hearing a similar news story, upon which this play is based. Shaffer heard the story of a young boy who blinded many horses in a stable in Suffolk. He never got any further information on the incident, but could not help imagine what might have been the events leading up to such a crime. "Equus" is his take on this true story. Shaffer transfers that sense of mystery and suspense into the play. Intentionally

or not, Shaffer has made the final revelations all the more intense. In an article by Walter Kerr, he calls this experience a “breathless discovery” stating, “The closest I have seen a contemporary play come – it is powerfully close – to reanimating the spirit of mystery that makes the stage a place of breathless discovery rather than a classroom for rational demonstration...” (87).

There are several other elements that also prove Shaffer’s “Equus” is far from a “rational demonstration”. Shaffer makes very particular choices about the horses in the play and this decision will also add to the impact of the play. In the notes before the play, Shaffer states “The actors’ own heads are seen beneath them: no attempt should be made to conceal them. Any literalism which could suggest the cozy familiarity of a domestic animal-or worse, a pantomime horse should be avoided. The actors should never crouch on all fours, or even bend forward” (xvii). It should be noted that Shaffer uses the phrase “cozy familiarity”. Shaffer is trying to avoid allowing the audience any comforts. Instead he uses large horse like masks to give them a domineering and mythical presence. These horses represent Alan’s gods. With this detail in mind, Alan’s insecurities in the stable are contextualized. These animals serve as his ultimate judges. Their presence as gods intensifies the feeling of terror and desperation before Alan commits his violent act. Alan fears the wrath of his god’s and “cozy” barnyard animals would not help visualize those fears.

Shaffer decides to further illustrate horse as God with his use of “Equus Noise”. Equus noise signals the presence of Equus the God. The actors create the noise in a choric effect consisting of humming, thumping, and stamping but never neighing and whinnying. To have realistic horse noises would hinder Shaffer’s goals. It would hurt the shock value of the play. The experience becomes more intense. These noises, along with the stage elements discussed earlier, bring audiences into a nightmare sequence. In real time Dysart is having a session with Alan but the memories are reenacted, or as Dysart suggests to Alan, “ab-reaction”, on the same stage. Like Kennedy, Dysart has created a nightmare scene that we are experiencing with Alan. All these elements come together to make a frightening scene. The scene reads:

The boy turns round, hugging himself in pain. From the sides two more horses converge with Nugget on the rails. Their hooves stamp angrily. The Equus noise is heard more terribly.

DYSART: The Lord thy God is a Jealous God. He sees you. He sees you forever and ever, Alan. He sees you!...*He sees you!*ALAN:*[in terror]* Eyes!...White eyes-never closed! Eyes like flames-coming-coming! ...God seest! God seest!...No!... Pause. He steadies himself. The stage begins to blacken. *[quieter]* Equus...Noble Equus...Faithful and True...Godslave...Thou-God-Seest-NOTHING! He stabs out Nugget’s eyes. The horse stamps in agony. A great screaming begins to fill the theatre, growing ever louder. Alan dashes at the other two horses and blinds them too, stabbing over the rails. Their metal hooves join in the stamping. Relentlessly, as this happens, three more horses appear in cones of light: no naturalistic animals like the first three, but dreadful creatures out of nightmare. Their eyes flare-their nostrils flare-their mouths flare.

In a review of the actor who originally plays Alan, Peter Firth, critic John Gruen commented on the play's effects stating, "The role demands slow and carefully placed exposure when the dark cave of the boys mind becomes flooded with self revelation and when the austere and terrifying imagery of horse-Christ-sex-pain-flagellation-mutilation is brought to harrowing light and life, Firth creates a stage presence that leaves indelible after images, half-lit memories out of nightmares" (127). Gruen points to an important element in the context of the play. Like Kennedy who transcends time with the clash of sexuality and religion, Shaffer does the same with a similar clash of "horse-Christ-sex-pain-flagellation-mutilation". His search for oneness becomes more than strictly spiritual. He cannot help but see his attempted intimacy with Jill as a betrayal. Alan's feelings of devotion become so intense that they grow to a sexual level. Shaffer's clash of religion and sex has a shock value that will help him present his message.

The messages Shaffer wants to depict in this play can be as terrifying as the very images he presents on stage. There is something troubling and dark about a deeply disturbed young man. Alan comes to be this way at the hands of his parents who are the basis of his views on religion and sexuality. The problem is that these ideas do not complement each other. These values contradict each other and clash in a way that leaves Alan having to put things together in the best way he sees fit. His father denounces his mother who is deeply religious. The great American playwright, Eugene O'Neill, would be quick to say that

Alan's illness is to blame on his family, a destructive force we can never escape, but the pressures of societal norms have also created this troubled young man; as is insinuated in his constant repetition of television jingles. Alan was not able to "properly" handle the messages of these outside factors. Society then quickly condemns this young man as nothing more than a criminal or worse, a mad man. His own parents think Alan might be a product of evil and the victim of the Devil. His parents do not take full responsibility for Alan's actions. Shaffer might be implying that as a society we are reluctant to take responsibility for the persons we create, yet we are quick to punish them for their mistakes.

Luckily, society has created an entire profession dedicated to help undue these mistakes. Dysart specializes in treating children in hopes of making them *normal* members of society, but he has his own inner conflict to deal with. Dysart feels that he is doing children a disservice by taking away that within them that makes them special but that society has deemed abnormal. In a confession to the audience Dysart admits,

The Normal is the good smile in a child's eyes-all right. It is also the dead stare in a million adults. It both sustains and kills-like a God. It is the Ordinary made beautiful: it is also the Average made lethal. The Normal is indispensable, murderous God of Health, and I am his Priest. My tools are very delicate. My compassion is honest. I have honestly assisted children in this room. I have talked away horrors and relieved many agonies. But also-beyond question- I have cut from them parts if individuality repugnant to his God, in both aspects (74).

Dysart envies these children for a kind of individuality that he lacks. He cures them from a “magic” that society has deemed unfit. Shaffer can be arguing that our current social constructions should not be forced guidelines and that we should embrace difference and individuality instead of treating it like a plague. Like Martin in Albee’s “The Goat”, Alan was also punished for not following social norms. Martin’s “magic” was destroyed as Dysart will destroy Alan’s gods.

Shaffer creates a frightening experience on stage using particular techniques to enhance this experience. His choice of costume design, sound effect and staging design add to the power of the play. Shaffer presents a young man deeply troubled and ostracized from society because of his failure to balance the bombardment of images and messages from institutions that are meant to “properly” socialize. The nightmare like sequence that Shaffer creates forces us to accept the depth and darkness of the human mind. Perhaps most shocking is that those individuals, whom society tries to rid of their “ghosts”, are the same ones we might envy because unlike the rest of us they have found a way to be in touch with mysteries and uncertainties of atavistic man, or, as Alan Strang puts it in “Equus” to gallop.

Facing Our Nightmares in “The Pillowman”

Alan blinding horses is an extremely violent act. If we could stomach the

violence in this play we might have a chance at making it through, Martin McDonagh's "The Pillowman". "The Pillowman" is by far one of the most violent contemporary British or American plays. McDonagh's dark comedy is considered a brilliant work. Some critics praise his work for illustrating the importance of storytelling and the importance of imagination and its affect on society. On the other hand, there many critics who denounce the play, claiming that it has no real message and that it simply serves as entertainment. Both sides have some value to their arguments and upon consideration of both, the result is a revelation about the human condition that makes "The Pillowman" deserving of a spot in this essay.

"The Pillowman" begins in the interrogation room of a totalitarian government where Katurian Katurian has been brought in for questioning regarding the murder of two children in a fashion identical to those in some of his short stories. Katurian has written some 400 stories, most of which feature the horrific and unusually tortuous deaths of small children. After several hours of torture from detective Ariel and Tupolski, Katurian is reunited with his brother Michal who is also a suspect. We discover that Michal, who is mentally different, had been committing these murders on real children. While they are reunited in a cell onstage, we learn that Michal and Katurian are products of a sick experiment conducted by their parents. Their parents kept Michal locked up and tortured for years, while Katurian was pampered without his knowledge of Michal, in hopes that Katurian would become a great writer. Katurian does

become a great writer but in turn his brother was damaged beyond repair. A young Katurian discovers what his parents had done and kills them in their sleep. When Katurian discovers that his brother committed the crimes based on his own stories, he proceeds to kill his brother with the intentions that he will escape the pain that is sure to follow. Katurian admits to all the murders, including that of his parents, in exchange for the survival of his stories. Katurian is executed in cold blood but the “bad cop” detective Ariel keeps the stories on file till fifty years after Katurian’s death.

“The Pillowman” was first presented at the Cottesloe auditorium of the National Theatre in London on November 13, 2003. It then premiered in America at the Booth Theatre in New York on April 10, 2005. John Crowley was the director for both of the productions. The New York production was expanded in that some of Katurian’s stories were acted out on stage. These stories were performed in a stylized dream like state resembling a gothic fairy tale illustration. McDonagh was awarded the Oliver Award in London for Best New Play in 2004 for “The Pillowman”.

Critics have praised McDonagh’s other works but “The Pillowman” stands out for obvious reasons. One reason is that it is his most gruesome work to date. Ben Brantley of The New York Times reviewed the play stating, “Even those familiar with this British dramatist’s blithe way with murder, mutilation and dismemberment, from works like ‘The Beauty Queen of Leenane’ and ‘A Skull in Connemara’ may be jolted by the events described and simulated so

picturesquely in his latest offering (advisory note: severed fingers and heads, electric drills, barbed wire, and premature burial all figure prominently)" (30). His latest offering is loaded with these kinds of gruesome events. McDonagh's work is not all blood and gore; there is also an intellectual aspect to the play that makes it all the more disturbing. One example is when Katurian retells the story of the Pillowman; "The last thing he heard was the screams of the hundred thousand children he'd helped to commit suicide coming back to life and going on to lead the cold, wretched lives that were destined to them because he hadn't been around to prevent them, right on up to the screams on their sad self-inflicted deaths, which this time, of course, would be conducted entirely alone" (47). These words are enough to send shivers down anyone's spine. They certainly add to the shock value of the overall play. Later in his review Brantley adds, "And one electric shock of a moment in the first act jolts comfort food-fed Broadway audiences the way the shower scene in 'Psycho' must have slapped moviegoers four decades ago" (30).

We expect, as in the plays analyzed previously, that "The Pillowman" must have an alternate purpose for all this shocking content. Some view the play as a story about the power of storytelling and the potential of theater. Others claim that the play is about censorship and the place of subversive art in a repressive state. Still others claim the play is about the power of imagination and the consequences of that power with no one to control it. Even further still, some critics claim that there is no message at all. In a follow-up review Charles

Isherwood's writes, "From the thickets of ghoulish incident can be extrapolated a teasing manifesto proclaiming meaninglessness as a prime virtue in entertainment...In the end, McDonagh treats the serious themes that hover at the edge of the play like unwelcome guests, banishing them to the murky shadows" (Evans, 9). To complicate matters further, McDonagh himself has admitted that he avoids analyzing his own work, preferring to view it as just storytelling and entertainment.

Upon taking consideration of all these clashing viewpoints, it can be said that McDonagh is making a unique revelation about the human condition. McDonagh has proven that we have lost the ability to take story for what it is; simply a story. There is this need to analyze, suggest, prod and poke at the meanings behind these stories when in actuality its only storytelling for the sake of storytelling. There can be many readings of this play and they may all have some validity. But there is something to be said about the fact that we cannot rest without attaching a grand purpose to art. Art seems to be pressured into being something that is larger than life, but perhaps art has forgotten to be what it is essentially; just art. In other words what makes this play truly shocking is that it requires us to do nothing more than listen and witness, but listening and witnessing always lead us deeper into an unexplored realm, realized in nightmares and onstage.

The obvious "messages" in the play seem almost too easy for such a talented playwright like McDonagh. Life imitating art and the danger of

censorship are so cliché. These are ideas that have been used over and over again. If this is what McDonagh is trying to express, then why so much violent content? To say that parents have to raise their children properly, so they do not become deranged murderers is too simple of a message. To say that the imagination is a powerful tool is too obvious. But McDonagh has a darker, more subversive purpose. In the play Katurian teaches Michal that we need to learn to take things for what they are and nothing beyond that;

KATURIAN: Why are we being so stupid? Why are we believing everything they're telling us?

MICHAL: Why?

KATURIAN: This is just like storytelling.

MICHAL: I know.

KATURIAN: A man comes into a room, says, 'Your mother's dead', yeah?

MICHAL: I know my mother's dead.

KATURAIN: No, I know, but in a story. A man comes into a room, says to another man, 'Your mothers dead'. What do we know? Do we know that the second man's mother is dead?

MICHAL: Yes.

KATURAIN: No, no we don't.

MICHAL: No, no we don't.

KATURIAN: All we know is that a man has come into a room and said to another man, 'Your mother ids dead.' That is all we know. First rule of storytelling, 'Don't believe everything you read in the papers.'

Audiences and readers can interpret this play as they see fit but we should also take "The Pillowman" for what it is, a very entertaining, and haunting ghost story.

McDonagh does make another revelation about the human condition that has a stronger connection with the idea of "perverse possibilities" discussed in Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty". As grotesque and horrifying as the accounts in

his play may be, they are nevertheless something we want to tell and hear. All of the characters in the play are storytellers. They each have stories to tell and most are not pleasant. Most shocking is that some of the most gruesome stories are real life incidents in the lives of the characters. Katurian lives through the “low whirring of drills, the scritchety-scratch of bolts being tightened, the dull fizz of unknown things electrical, and the muffled screams of a small gagged child...” (31), as Michal experiences these tortures first hand. Tupolski’s experienced a violent alcoholic father and then the death of his son in a horrible drowning accident while Ariel’s father “crawled into bed with (him) every week from the age of eight” (82). These stories are just as painful as those in Katurian’s stories. McDonagh might be trying to convey the fact that as human beings we feel a sense of relief when we hear stories about atrocities that make our lives seem less unbearable in comparison. Stories about the sufferings of others make our own lives seem brighter. As audience members, who might not have perfect lives, these stories can prove that we can be better off than others. Better off than the girl in “The Little Jesus”, or the man in “The Pillowman” or the brothers in “The Writer and his Brother” or any of Katurian’s other stories.

Michal had a happy ending. After his parents were killed he and his brother lived together and he got to go to school and better himself. Katurian reads his twisted stories before bedtime as a way of putting Michal to sleep with ease. Michal can see that there are a lot of other far worse unhappy endings in life. For that very reason we will never want to stop hearing or telling stories, as

dark as they maybe. The storyteller will live on because we need him to be, because we cannot accept that we are the only ones who live in nightmares. The implications of such an insight into the human mind makes "The Pillowman" a terrifying experience equivalent to early burial, severed body parts, and slow torture.

A Method to the Madness in "Blasted"

Like McDonagh, the late Sarah Kane has also shared criticism for her brutally violent plays and for what the exact purpose of such graphic stage violence may be. In her play "Blasted" she depicts a wide range of violence onstage, including cannibalism, rape, homosexual rape and murder to name a few. Kane's play does not skimp on the atrocious, and as a result, her plays experienced much harsher criticisms. But despite the atrocities in her play, it can be argued that there is a method to her madness. Kane's "Blasted" parallels Artaud's work in a very literal sense. Artaud's observations of human behavior during the ravages of the plague closely resemble Kane's observations concerning the circumstances of war. Kane's "Blasted" is modern glimpse at the dark and "perverse possibilities" of mankind.

“Blasted” is centered on two characters, Ian and Cate, who are staying in an expensive hotel room in Leeds. The first two scenes are fairly linear. Ian, a journalist, is portrayed as a racist bigot. Cate is portrayed as the vulnerable love interest. Ian constantly makes sexual advances on Cate, which she refuses. But we learn that during the first night, not shown on stage, Ian has raped Cate. In the third scene the plot and stage are disrupted from a blast, brought upon by the war going on outside. Along with the blast comes the third character, a Soldier. Soldier brings with him the violence and chaos of the outside world. The Soldier shares stories of the horrible atrocities he has faced during the war. The Soldier then rapes Ian and later sucks out and eats his eyeballs. When the Soldier exits, Cate returns to the hotel room with food and a baby. The dialogue at this point is very fragmented. Blinded and left for dead, Ian seeks security from Cate. The baby dies in Cate’s arms and she proceeds with a stylized burial in the hotel room floor. Cate exits. In and out of darkness we witness Ian deal with raw human emotions and finishes by eating the dead baby. Finally, Cate returns to the hotel room to feed herself and Ian.

Upon it’s opening few audiences sat long enough to see the final touching scene between Cate and Ian. Kane’s play sparked an onslaught of controversy, as stomachs and minds were turned inside out. “Blasted”, Kane’s first play, was produced at the Royal Court Theatre in January 1995. The play is currently being produced at the Soho Rep Theatre in New York City. The play is viewed as a

social commentary of sorts, directly commenting on the atrocities of war but as a whole presenting the realities of human behavior. Kane is quoted saying, "...there isn't anything you can't represent on stage. If you are saying you can't represent something, you are saying you can't talk about it, you are denying its existence, and that's an extraordinarily ignorant thing to do" (Saunders, 24).

Controversy was inevitable for several reasons. Initially critics failed to see any message behind the play. Most critics could not see beyond the gruesome plot points. Jack Tinker of the Daily Mail stated, "For utterly and entirely disgusted I was by a play which appears to know no bounds of decency, yet has no message to convey by way of excuse" (Saunders, 37). Critics did not mention certain plot points in their reviews and scared away audiences from seeing the play for themselves. Michael Billington of The Guardian warned his readers that, "the play contains scenes of masturbation, fellatio, frottage, micturition, defecation - ah those old familiar faeces! - homosexual rape, eye gouging and cannibalism" (Saunders, 9). Critics failed to see any metaphorical significance in the play. For example Ian's consumption of the dead baby is more than an act of cannibalism but a representation of desperation, loss of hope and the hunger for human survival.

Another reason for the controversy was due to the fact that this type of theater was fairly new to British audiences. It was the beginning of what dramatist Aleks Sierz coins "in yer-face" theatre. In Yer Face Theatre "is the kind

of theatre which grabs the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message" (Sierz). This theatre wanted to break normal boundaries by shocking audiences with its imagery and language. Similar to Kennedy who brought something unexpected from her African American counterparts in the world of art. "Saved" (1965), a play by Edward Bond, was also produced at the Royal Court Theatre and met with similar criticism for its depiction of violence and choice of subject matter. Bond's play can be considered a predecessor to Kane's work. When "Blasted" arrived at the Royal Theatre, Bond came to Kane's defense saying, "The humanity of 'Blasted' moved me. I worry for those too busy or so lost that they cannot see its humanity...But I do know this is the most important play on in London" (Saunders, 25). Kane was influenced by Bond's play and the impact it had on London society (Saunders, 24). Kane realized, as Bond did, that there was nothing, no aspect of humanity or its cruelty that she could not represent on stage.

"Blasted" features acts of rape, suicide, torture, cannibalism, masturbation, bowel movements, homosexuality, death and murder. The sheer number of these acts in one play is something audiences are not use to seeing. The intermingling of brutality, sexuality and violence bombards audiences. Having all these elements in one play adds to its controversial nature as well as stresses the play's overall message of what Artaud called mankind's "depths of latent cruelty".

The disturbing content of the play may seem unrealistic, but Kane represents with brutal honesty the realities of our social condition. "Blasted" is based on the Bosnian civil war that had begun in the 1990s. Kane states, "I think with 'Blasted', in which the domestic first half of the play set in a Leeds hotel room, is suddenly transformed into an undisclosed war zone, reflects the sudden change in subject matter during the process of writing. The impetus for this change in direction was brought about by the Bosnian civil war that ensued after 1990 when, with the collapse of Communism, the former state of Yugoslavia splintered in various republics" (Saunders, 38). Kane realized Britain's disconnect with what was happening in the rest of Europe and decides to address this in her play.

The Bosnian Civil war was plagued with various war crimes including ethnic cleansing, mass rapes and genocide. Soldier tells Ian the story of how he engaged in these kinds of war crimes, "Heard crying in the basement. Went down. Three men and four women. Called the others. They held the men while I fucked the women. Youngest was twelve. Didn't cry, just lay there. Turned 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" (43). Kane does not want to limit the experience to stories. These atrocities are represented on stage with the gruesome violence between the characters. Soldier rapes and tortures Ian in a similar fashion to the women he

has raped and tortured in battle. As stated in the stage directions, "The Soldier turns Ian over with one hand. He holds the revolver to Ian's head with the other. He pulls down Ian's trousers, undoes his own and rapes him- eyes closed and smelling Ian's hair. The Soldier is crying his eyes out. Ian's face registers pain but he is silent. When the Soldier has finished he pulls up his trousers and pushes the revolver up Ian's anus" (49). Kane's blunt violent imagery reflects a reality which society can no longer choose to ignore. Kane has forced audiences to witness what we only vaguely read about in newspapers. Certain critics realized this effort as "its attempt to range beyond personal experience and bring wars that rage at such a convenient distance from this land" (Saunders, 53).

"Blasted" depicts harsh images that our modern society has been exposed to in movies, video games, and the internet. Society has become desensitized to these issues. But Kane was able to actually disturb modern audiences who we thought were desensitized to these realities. "Blasted" succeeded in awakening audiences who had become nonchalant towards violence and chaos on screen but not on stage. Kane has resensitized audiences to make them feel again what they have otherwise accepted as normal. Kane awakened audiences who had been isolated from the realities going on in the larger context of the world, similar to Ian and Cate who try to isolate themselves from the realities going on outside. Both worlds are blasted.

It can be argued that Kane's work is excessive. Is it not possible for Kane to express her messages without putting audiences and readers through so much reflected torture. Was all this violence necessary to express her views? Some can argue it is not necessary. But to do so would be to hold things back. Like the victims of plague, who held nothing back because tomorrow was not guaranteed, why not feel the same about the power of theatre? Kane puts it all out there because anything else would not be true to her vision as an artist. Kane does not live in the totalitarian state that Katurian does, and so she has the right to express herself fully. She understood the need to create a spectacle. She wants to recreate the environment she feels humans live in. In an interview, Kane states "I've only ever written to escape from hell-and it's never worked-but at the other end of it when you sit there and watch something and think that's the most perfect expression of the hell that I felt then maybe it was worth it" (Saunders, 1). If she presents this "hell" on stage perhaps audiences and readers will have a better grasp of reality or a better look at life with the mask removed. Artaud would applaud Kane for not being afraid and creating "a spectacle unafraid of going as far as necessary in the exploration of our nervous sensibility" (Artaud, 87). Kane holds nothing back to reach the depths she feels are necessary in presenting her ideas.

In *An Ethics of Catastrophe The Theatre of Sarah Kane*, Ken Urban states, "...the action most crucial to 'Blasted' is the explosion at the end of scene two,

where the hotel room is literally blasted apart. In that movement, the audience leaves the space of realism. Ian and Cate's relationship has devolved into rape and violence, with Cate fleeing the bathroom window. Suddenly an unnamed soldier enters. He overpowers Ian, pisses on the bed, and with his hand on his penis, he sneers, 'Our town now.' With that, we enter hell" (8). A soldier of war changes Ian and Cate's world. Kane serves as our soldier, who has written this play to expose us to realities we have ignored. Mortar is used to blast Cate and Ian's world. Kane's particular presentation of issues of sexuality and violence are used to blast ours. Audiences and readers know of these atrocities but until now have not experienced the shock of "Blasted".

A close analysis of the final moments of "Blasted" best shows Kane's technique or shock value, along with an empowering message. Kane's use of violence is not just for the sake of using violence. When Cate leaves Ian to get food we see Ian go through the deepest and inner most desires and fears of human nature. These images are very disturbing but audiences need to look past the physical presentation and focus on the ideas being expressed directly. Ian is presented coming in and out of darkness. In the light we witness Ian's decay;

Darkness.
Light.
Ian Masturbating.

Ian cunt cunt.
Darkness.
Light.
Ian strangling himself with his bare hands.
Darkness.
Light.
Ian shitting.
And then trying to clean it up with a newspaper.
Darkness.
Light.
Ian laughing hysterically.
Darkness.
Light.
Ian having a nightmare..." (59-60)

These images seem disturbing, but they are placed for more than mere shock. In what Ian believes to be his final moments he has nothing but himself. He holds nothing back and simply acts according to his most basic animalistic desires. In "Love me or Kill Me; Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes", Graham Saunders claims that this scene reflects "the almost total destruction of the old self in order to make room for the new" (65). The final scene can be interpreted in different ways. What Kane wanted audiences to understand is that there is "a method to her madness". There is deep context to the audacious images in her plays. Kane hoped that the initial shock of her play forces audiences to interpret.

We found ourselves safe and sound in our seats. Along comes a strong blast composed of images of cannibalism, rape and murder. We are now exposed. We are forced out of the darkness and into the light. We can no longer ignore the world around us. We must now confront questions of existence, human brutality, death and sexuality. Kane has blasted our world.

Curtain Falls

The playwrights discussed in this essay have tantalized our senses with a wide range of dark imagery. These horrors have made audiences squirm in our seats and allowed us no room for comfort. All the plays touch upon the boundaries of conventional theatrical presentations. These playwrights use expressionistic techniques and intense levels of reality to expose the essence behind their plays. What they do share is a common goal; to expose the realities of mankind as brutally, and as honestly as possible. They go to the furthest extremes to expose ideas about human society and behavior. Whether it is through dream like sequences, special costume and staging or just in the language of the play, they all attempt to uncover attributes of the human condition. Critics and audiences might be reluctant to experience because of their overtly violent, bloody nature. It can be very hard to look at oneself honestly. We must give credit to these playwrights who have unmasked the deepest truths of the human race. In Artaud "Theater of Cruelty" he states, "The theater, like the plague, is in the image of this carnage and this essential separation. It releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities, and if these possibilities and these powers are dark, it is the fault not of the plague nor of the theatre, but of life" (31). We cannot blame the playwright for bringing to light with such force, the realities of life we would rather not see.

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