Don’t Want to Be This
The Elusive Sarah Kane

Annabelle Singer

Darkness.
Light.
IAN masturbating.
IAN: cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt
Darkness.
Light.
IAN strangling himself.
Darkness.
Light.
IAN shitting.
And then trying to clean it up with newspaper.
Darkness.
Light.
IAN laughing hysterically.
Darkness.
Light.
IAN having a nightmare.
Darkness.
Light.
IAN crying, huge bloody tears.
He is hugging the Soldier’s body for comfort.
Darkness.
Light.
IAN lying very still, weak with hunger.
Darkness.
Light.
IAN tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the boards and lifts the baby’s body out.
He eats the baby.
He puts the sheet the baby was wrapped in 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.
It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof.
Eventually.
IAN: Shit. (Kane 1996:56–57)
“He can’t even die,” I roared hysterically, “Of course. He can’t even die!”

I was first introduced to Sarah Kane’s work amidst students screaming, “It’s SO violent!” in a course called “British Drama Since 1979” at Royal Holloway University of London. Most of my classmates were born in 1979, as was I, and this was the theatre of our lifetime—but Kane’s work proved challenging. Unlike our familiar film, television, and video game violence, Kane’s *Blasted* (1995) refused to distance us with a stylized wink or a gift-wrapped moral. It produced bizarre reactions. My classmates debated the playwright’s sanity in hushed tones just a few feet from where Kane was waiting to address us. To this day, I don’t know which—Kane’s work or the performance of outrage, conviction, and sorrow that was Kane’s life and death—drove me to spend so much time and energy trying to understand her work and her self. I have seen Kane in the flesh, but I have never seen her work performed.

A performance is neither inherent in the text nor inherent in the performance itself. Theatre and film or theatre and fine arts are not only separated by the phenomenological differences between each medium, but by the social infrastructure—the community, history, values, and conventions—in which that medium is cultivated. In this paper, I try to tease out the institutions that created the explosive performance of Sarah Kane’s career. Critics, academics, students, agents, theatre practitioners, audience members, and doctors all played a role. This performance of theatre at work invaded the public sphere in January 1995, when Kane was only 23, but became increasingly more private until and even after Kane’s death in February 1999.

Kane, like her work, has an intense relationship with her own mortality:

> Until the age of seventeen, I sincerely believed I had nothing to fear in death and the Second Coming would occur in my lifetime. I wouldn’t even have to die physically. [...] I committed the unforgivable sin, which is knowing that God is real and consciously deciding to reject Him. I believed in God but not in the lifestyle that Christianity demanded. I knew a lot of Christians who I thought were fundamentally bad people

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1. Pip Donaghy and Kate Ashfield in the 1995 production of *Blasted* at the Royal Court Theatre, London. (Photo by Ben Christopher/ArenaPAL)
and a lot of non-Christians who I thought were utterly beautiful, and I
couldn’t understand that, so I made a conscious decision to reject God
and gradually my belief subsided. According to the Bible, I am now ut-
terly damned. (in Benedict 1996:6)

There is no gray in Kane’s moral register: she refused the institution of Chris-
tianity and any God because those beliefs failed to weed out the good from the
bad. Kane follows keen observation and analysis with action to put it right
within herself—to the point of debunking long-held personal beliefs. She de-
determines her own truths:

[If] you’re not sure God exists you can cover your arse, living your life
carefully just in case, as the priest does, or you can live your life as you
want to live it. If there is a God who can’t accept the honesty of that
then, well, tough. (Benedict 1996:6)

Kane was a moral hardass who, through her plays, aimed to force others to
think through the ethical paradoxes of their lives. She hoped to produce
change in others as it had in her. Kane, however, struggled to balance her mor-
tal terror and moral vision, to balance the physical and mental reactions of her
audience. Can they, mustn’t they, function together?

Kane assumed that the most effective drama wedded thought and feeling. In
an article she wrote for the Guardian before her fourth play, Crave, moved to
the Royal Court in 1998, Kane explains the developments in her thinking
about drama:

Increasingly, I’m finding performance much more interesting than act-
ing; theatre more compelling than plays. Unusually for me, I’m encour-
gaging my friends to see my play Crave before reading it, because I think
of it more as a text for performance than as a play.

The sexual connotations of “performance” are not coincidental. Liv-
erpool’s [soccer player] Paul Ince publicly admits that he finds tackling
more enjoyable than sex. Performance is visceral. It puts you in direct
physical contact with thought and feeling. (1998c:12)

This visceral drama that Kane promotes bypasses interpretation and, in-
stead, directly confronts the audience’s thoughts and feelings through physical
reactions. The distinctions between “performance” and “acting” and “thea-
tre” and “plays” point to a different way of thinking about theatre. Kane in-
isted that she only became a playwright because she could find nothing she
wanted to direct. Her writing has always emphasized performance over texts,
action over speech, but Crave takes a step further. Kane refuses theatrical con-
ventions, like acts and actors, looking to a wider concept of performance. This
concept insists upon an intense connection with the spectator. It should be as
gripping as soccer: “I frequently walk out of the theatre early without fear of
missing anything. But however bad I’ve felt, I’ve never left a football match
erly, because you never know when a miracle might occur” (Kane 1998c:12).

Kane expects the theatre to speak to her experience by confronting the lim-
itations of the physical performer:

I saw the Jesus and Mary Chain at the foot of Edinburgh Castle a few
ights back, and found myself longing for a theatre that could speak so
directly to an audience’s experience. It rarely happens [...].
It [...] happened at the Mona Hatoum exhibition at the Scottish Gallery of Modern Art. In a tiny cylindrical room I watched a projection of a surgical camera disappearing into every orifice of the artist. True, few people could stay in the room as long as me, but I found the voyage up Mona Hatoum’s arse put me in powerful and direct contact with my feelings about my own mortality. I can’t ask for much more. (1998c:12)

Kane expected the theatre to take on the largest of topics: mortality, morality, human connections, and human suffering.

Blasted

A Play or a Phenomenon?

Blasted [...] Balefully or perniciously blown or breathed upon; stricken by meteoric or supernatural agency, as parching wind, lightning, an alleged malignant planet, the wrath and curse of heaven; blighted. [...] Cursed, damned. In low language as an expression of reprobation and hatred. (Oxford English Dictionary)

Blasted, Kane’s first full-length play, opened on 12 January 1995 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in London. It was part of Stephen Daldry’s first season as artistic director. Daldry turned the Royal Court into a showcase for new writing: “from autumn 1994, the Court doubled the amount of new productions in the [60-seat] Theatre Upstairs and focused on young writers” (Daldry in Sierz 2000a:38). Even so, “The Court didn’t really know what to do about Blasted. They were a bit embarrassed about it, so they programmed it just after Christmas when no one was going to the theatre and they hoped no one would notice” (Kane in Sierz 2000a:94).

The play starts out tamely enough with 45-year-old Ian and 21-year-old Cate in a hotel room in Leeds. “The stage immediately suggests the kind of chamber piece about relationships with which the British theatre-goer is so familiar” (Greig 2001:ix)—but this relationship is especially turbulent:

IAN: Don’t like your clothes.
CATE: (Looks down at her clothes.)
IAN: You look like a lesbos.
CATE: What’s that?
IAN: Don’t look very sexy, that’s all.
CATE: Oh. (She continues to eat.) Don’t like your clothes either.
IAN: (Looks down at his clothes. Then gets up, takes them all off and stands in front of her, naked.)

Put your mouth on me.

CATE: (Stares. Then bursts out laughing.)

IAN: No?

Fine.

Because I stink?

CATE: (Laughs even more.)

IAN attempts to dress, but fumbles with embarrassment. He gathers his clothes and goes into the bathroom where he dresses.

CATE: (eats, and giggles over the sandwiches.)

IAN returns, fully dressed. He picks up his gun, unloads it and reloads it.) (Kane 2001:7–8)

Predictably, Ian ends up raping Cate and Cate turns the gun on him, but that is only the beginning of scene two. By an hour into the performance, Cate has escaped through the bathroom window, a soldier has forced his way into the room and an explosion has rocked the hotel’s structure. The characters’ interactions in the second half are violent and fragile, like those of the first half. Now the soldier is racked with emotional vulnerabilities while Ian is the weakling:

SOLDIER: Col, they buggered her. Cut her throat. Hacked her ears and nose off, nailed them to the front door. [...] You don’t know fuck all about me.

I went to school.

I made love with Col.

Bastards killed her, now I’m here.

(He pushes his rifle in IAN’s face.)

Turn over, Ian.

IAN: Why?

SOLDIER: Going to fuck you.

IAN: No.

SOLDIER: Kill you then.

IAN: Fine.

SOLDIER: See. Rather be shot than fucked and shot.

IAN: Yes.

SOLDIER: And now you agree with anything I say.

(He kisses IAN very tenderly on the lips. They stare at each other.)

SOLDIER: You smell like her. Same cigarettes.

(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 smell-
ing IAN’s hair.
The SOLDIER is crying his heart out.
IAN’s face registers pain but he is silent.
When the Soldier is finished he pulls up his trousers and pushes the revolver up IAN’s
anus.)

SOLDIER: Bastards pulled the trigger on Col.
What’s it like?
IAN: (Tries to answer. He can’t.)

SOLDIER: (Withdraws the gun and sits next to IAN.)

You never fucked by a man before?
IAN: (Doesn’t answer.)

SOLDIER: Didn’t think so. Saw thousands of people packing
into trucks like pigs trying to leave town. Women threw their babies on board
hoping someone would look after them. Crushing each other to death. Insides
of people’s heads came out of the eyes. Saw a child most of his face blown off,
young girl I fucked hand up inside of herself trying to claw my liquid out,
starving man eating his dead wife’s leg. Gun was born here and won’t die.
Can’t get tragic about your arse. Don’t think your Welsh arse is different to
any other arse I fucked. Sure you haven’t got any more food, I’m fucking
starving.
IAN: Are you going to kill me?

SOLDIER: Always covering your own arse.
(The SOLDIER grips IAN’s head in his hands.
He puts his mouth over one of IAN’s eyes, sucks it out, bites it off and eats it.
He does the same to the other eye.)

SOLDIER: He ate her eyes.
Poor bastard.
Poor love.
Poor fucking bastard. (Kane 1996:45–47)

With the entrance of the soldier these atrocities become as commonplace as
the domestic violence preceding the blast.

In performance:

With no interval, Blasted was a grueling one hour and fifty minutes.
When I saw it, its power to shock was obvious. It clearly made the tiny
audience uneasy: two people walked out, others hid their eyes, some
giggled [...]. After it was over, the audience sat stunned for a few mo-
ments. In the cramped bar after the show people were discussing it fur-i-
ously. (Sierz 2000a:99)

Unmitigated horrors and numbing amorality leave a sour taste in the
mind. (Kingston 1995:35)

In an interview at Royal Holloway, where I studied in the fall of 1998, Kane
told the story of Blasted’s press night. The Royal Court Theatre Upstairs holds
two press nights because it is such a small theatre and the producers like to mingle the reviewers with “regular” audience members, rather than have a house full of critics. But because one of the Royal Court’s press nights conflicted with that of another production, all the reviewers had to come to the same performance of *Blasted*. Therefore, all but five of the audience members were critics, and all but three of the critics were white, middle-aged men. Kane and others have pointed to the particular offense these critics might have taken to Ian, a white middle-aged journalist who commits the atrocities in the first half of the play and falls victim to them in the second half. After the show, the lobby became an arena for competing headlines as critics penned their incredulous reports.

The new play in a 60-seat theatre became a news headliner, appearing not only in theatre reviews but also on *Newsnight* and in tabloids across the country. Most of the reviews proved sensationalist themselves. One of the most quoted of the reviews, Jack Tinker’s for the *Daily Mail*, starts out with the reviewer’s appalled reaction:

> Until last night I thought I was immune from shock in any theatre. I am not. Finally I have been driven into the arms of Disgusted of Tonbridge Wells. 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. (1995:5)

Then, he points to the money and national resources that were wasted on the play, when they should have gone to therapy for Kane:

> Why the 23-year-old Sarah Kane chose to write it is her affair. Presumably because she was given a grant by the hitherto admirable Jerwood Foundation in their quest to help new talent.

> Some will undoubtedly say the money might have been better spent on a course of remedial therapy. But the real question is why, with the cooperation of our Royal National Theatre, the Royal Court saw fit to stage it. (5)

About halfway through the article, he finally begins to comment on the play itself, but only by listing its most scandalous contents:

> We begin with a journalist indulging in all manner of graphic sexual activity with an underage and mentally retarded girl in his hotel room somewhere in England. Then we regress, by various implausible stages, from mere unlawful indecency to vividly enacted male rape, through to the barbaric cannibalism of a dead baby and on to simple defecation on stage. (5)

Finally, he makes some reference to a canonical drama, the supposedly universal standard by which we rate a play:

> Just for those academics who seek to justify any stage violence with the example of Gloucester having his eyes put out in *King Lear*, Ms. Kane has stern news for them.

> Here our hero not only loses his eyes after being severely raped, his torturer munches them before our own eyes which by now are standing out unbidden on stalks. (5)
While not always this scathing, few of the reviews delved into the themes or interpretations of this piece. Some admitted they saw talent in her work, but they hoped she would put it to better use:

It does not deserve attention, but it demands it. It made me sick, and giggly with shock. [...] Sarah Kane does know how to write. I hope she wakes up out of the nightmare of her own imagination. (Kellaway 1995:9)

Many simply explained their inability to analyze the play as evidence of Kane’s failings:

Yet the final scenes never do clarify Kane’s intentions, unless these are to point to how low a desperate man will stoop. Artfully constructed and distressingly watchable, its unmitigated horrors and numbing amorality leave a sour taste in the mind. (Kingston 1995:35)

Jeremy Kingston assumes that the final scenes will, if not resolve the various conflict of the play, at least reveal the point of suffering through all of this violence. Bick Curtis insists that “try as you might to contextualize it, her catalogue of inhumanity ultimately provokes revulsion rather than thought” (1995:46).

For Kane, the structure of Blasted was not intended to explain or justify its violent content, rather it reflected the chaotic structure of war itself:

I tried to draw on lots of different theatrical traditions. War is confused and illogical, therefore it is wrong to use a form that is predictable. Acts of violence simply happen in life, they don’t have a dramatic build-up, and they are horrible. That’s how it is in the play. (Kane in Bayley 1995:20)

In a letter to the Guardian, Reverend Bob Vernon agreed that this chaotic reflection is more accurate to his experience of violence:

Mr. Billington writes that “the reason the play falls apart is that there is no sense of external reality—who exactly is meant to be fighting whom out on the streets?” That’s a good question. My local shopping centre looks like Grozny, only two out of two dozen shops remain. The rest are reduced to shattered glass and wrecked steel shutters. Some housing estates in our city look like war zones too, burnt out houses, glass- and rubbish-littered streets, dazed and tranquilized people trying to survive. With so many casualties who is fighting whom out there? I don’t know either. (1995:21)

Kane effectively sets up and explodes naturalism to lead the audience into the chaos of civil war and domestic violence, when the familiar and mundane become uncontrollable, dangerous, and terrifying. Yet, if we are not forced to sort through this chaos, we can simply dismiss it and return to the familiar and safe. That is what seemed to happen to these critics: rather than sort through the atrocities they witnessed without guidance, they noted their reactions and faulted the play for failing the social realist standard: it did not reveal the good guys, the bad guys, and the moral. The production was, in some ways, too effective in emulating naturalism, not giving enough clues that there was a “metaphorical landscape” at work.
A Morality?

Ken Urban explains that "a play such as Blasted dramatizes an 'ethics of catastrophe'":

Rather than distinguish right from wrong, the core of all moralistic enterprises, or conversely, flirting with a cynical amorality, where anything goes, Kane dramatizes the quest for ethics. Morality is made up of "constraining rules" which judge people according to "transcendent values," such as Good or Evil (Deleuze). Ethics, on the other hand, are subject to change, even optional, emerging from specific moments and certain modes of being. An ethics does not forsake the difference between good and bad, but views such distinctions as evaluations rooted in one's specific existence, not as judgments based on universal principles. (Recall Nietzsche's statement: "Beyond Good and Evil, at least that does not mean 'Beyond Good and Bad.' ") Kane gives us a world of catastrophe. As with Barker, hers is a theatre which offers neither solutions nor redemption. But Kane emerges from calamity with the possibility that an ethics can exist between wounded bodies, that after devastation, good becomes possible. (2001:37)

Here Urban summarizes what had become the dominant reading of Kane's work: Kane creates moral dilemmas, which she and her peers need more than moral answers. Urban, Sierz, Natasha Langridge, Heidi Stephenson, and even Mel Kenyon, Kane's agent, have mapped the moral dilemmas of Kane's work onto the moral void of Britain in the early 1990s:

The Strong Right is full of certainties, certainties which are abhorrent. The Left was full of certainties, certainties which proved to be bogus. So to write these big political plays full of certainties and resolution is completely nonsensical in a time of fragmentation. When you want to create a political piece of drama, there's no point in mimicking the form of resolution and certainty in a time of complete uncertainty. (Kenyon in Urban 2001:39)

Kane herself explains Blasted coyly. "I find discussion about the morality of the play as inappropriate as the accusations of immorality. I've never felt that Blasted was moral" (in Sierz 2000a:104). She asserts explaining the play to the audience "relieves them of the effort of working things out for themselves" (105). Forced to explain the play in hindsight and under the pressure of scandalous publicity, perhaps created this coyness. Kane admits:

Any opinions I have about Blasted have been put together with hindsight. Writing my first play really was a process of groping about in the dark, making connections that I understood on an instinctive level but couldn't (and didn't want to) necessarily articulate. (106)

During its creation Blasted underwent many stages in the writing process:

At some point during the first couple of weeks of writing [in March 1993] I switched on the television. Srebrenica was under siege. An old woman was looking into the camera, crying. She said, 'Please, please, somebody help us. Somebody do something.' I knew nobody was going to do a thing. Suddenly, I was completely uninterested in the play I was
writing. What I wanted to write about was what I’d just seen on television. So my dilemma was: do I abandon my play (even though I’d written one scene I thought was really good) in order to move on to a subject I thought was more pressing? Slowly it occurred to me that the play I was writing was about this. It was about violence, about rape, and it was about these things happening between people who know each other and ostensibly love each other [...]. I asked myself: ‘What could possibly be the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what’s happening in Bosnia?’ And then suddenly this penny dropped and I thought: ‘Of course, it’s obvious. One is the seed and the other is the tree.’ And I do think that the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peacetime civilization and I think the wall between so-called civilization and what happened in central Europe is very, very thin and it can get torn down at any time. [...] And then I thought: “What this needs is what happens in war—suddenly, violently, without any warning, people’s lives are completely ripped to pieces. [...] I’ll plant a bomb, just blow the whole fucking thing up.” (in Sierz 2000a:100–02)

Read this way, Kane’s work is a series of artistic problems or questions, and a series of compelling answers created and bound by certain constraints: What do I want to write about? Inhumane ethnic war. Do I ditch my current play and start a war play? No, the two are related. How do I relate what I’ve written and what I want to write? Themes are the same, confute location. How do I answer questions about morality? “The logical conclusion of the attitude that produces an isolated rape in England is the rape camps in Bosnia, and the logical conclusion to the way society expects men to behave is war” (104).

I went to find out. Color me naive but I spent 10 months in Asia studying the politics of modern warfare. Near the Burmese border, tucked away from the authorities in a small house down a dirt road, refugee women from all over Southeast Asia meet to join their disparate, illegal, support groups into one. I was allowed to join because I was the only one who could bear witness to their experience and communicate it to the outside world. They told me about rape and torture, about civilians “disappearing” or being shot on sight for carrying a weapon that was not a weapon. Only one woman’s voice cracked when she told me that she saw her parents murdered in Aceh, Indonesia, in 1999. With a gun to her head, one yelled at the soldiers that had burst into her home, when she was too young to know fear, she said. Another told me that without nongovernment organization (NGOs do the charity and civil work of these nations), the only option is to take up arms—and some of them have.

When I interviewed investors at the Thai National Bank to understand the financial ties that made refugees second-class citizens, I was struck by their gorgeous, shining, serene headquarters, by how the tuk-tuk driver knew how to get there without directions though we were far out of the city. Here was something worth bombing, whereas no one would miss a modest house down a dirt road. Among the refugee women, the only things to destroy were bodies.

Cleansed
A Discussion

Out of nowhere, I got an email from Jess Cully today. My head is still spinning. Yes, I was a friend of Sarah’s. I called her “Ducky,” she called
me “Tinker.” I loved her dearly and tend to think in her own way she loved me too. Even though I’m a straight male in his mid 50s. She once said I was one of the scariest and funniest actors she’d worked with.

For years in the ‘90s, I worked with the New Dramatists group in NYC. Yeah, she used to escape to New York and always had a room to live in and write in. And a space to develop and workshop her plays in progress. I didn’t know who the UK theatre critic Jack Tinker was, so I had no preconceptions of this “character” she had in mind when she asked me to help create it. For several weeks a director (I believe it was Liz Diamond), several actors and an empty black space. We’d improvise scenes and Sarah would write and giggle. Then we’d get together the next day with some new text. That’s how I became Tinker, and the work became “Cleansed.” I never saw an actual production of it. […]

Ducky could never come to grips with the idea that since she felt her plays were about hope, most everyone else thought they were about despair. (Nesci 2002)

In Cleansed, the stories of Carl and Grace are interwoven in 20 short scenes. It takes place in an institution, which is called a university but seems more like a concentration camp. Carl’s persecuted affair with Rod and Grace’s unending quest for her dead brother, Graham, drive the plot and the violence. Tinker, the doctor and drug dealer of this institution perpetuates the violence. Tinker both commits the atrocities and orders others, invisible voices, to commit them. Unlike Blasted, the violence runs in only one direction: Carl and Grace are victims of violence but never the perpetrators. Their love, which keeps their hope alive, also keeps them from fighting back, from realizing the injustice of their situation.

Cleansed opened at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs, London, in April 1998. The production was not only stylized, but minimalist:

The text demands an almost bald production and they [the director, James Macdonald, and the designer, Jeremy Herbert] pay it the highest compliment by creating highly stylized, carefully plotted, pristine visual images. Those expecting a splatter-fest will be disappointed. Everything is done through suggestion, which, of course, is far more harrowing. (Benedict 1998:18)

The suggestive, rather than literal, staging is not only more harrowing, but it enabled critic David Benedict to enter Kane’s world:

As a section of perimeter fence or a hospital bed are flown slowly down from above, red ribbons are used to indicate blood […]. Macdonald and Herbert take you by the hand, allowing you to become prisoner of Kane’s fierce but fiercely controlled imagination. Without this distanc-
Within this aesthetic, Kane propels you into her imagination, her reality, but the play is not so violent as to be “unwatchable.” Rather the “more harrowing” suggestive staging maintains her grip on the audience’s viscera: “Whether flinching or shuddering, your reactions to the violence are extremely physical” (18).

The play opens with Tinker “heating smack on a silver spoon [...] inside the perimeter fence of a university” (Kane 1998a:1). Graham enters and tells Tinker he wants out. At his request, Tinker injects Graham with a lethal dosage of smack into his eye.

Their relationship, and thereby the subsequent relationships between Tinker and other students/prisoners, is ambiguous; even they are unclear as to the intentions of their relationships. Tinker has to remind Graham that “I’m a dealer not a doctor,” but after the injection, before he slumps, Graham says: “Thank you, Doctor” (Kane 1998a:1,2). Graham has to ask: “Are you my friend?” and uses Tinker’s negative response as another reason he should give him a bigger dose: “Then what difference will it make?” (1). But Graham still tries to confide in Tinker—about his sister—though Tinker does not want to hear; and Tinker warns him that “It’s just the beginning” (2).

The play is full of this kind of confusion and conflict in the most basic conceptions of this world’s reality. Is this a university? Each scene is set in a specific part of the university: “on the college green” (Kane 1998a:3), “The White Room—the university sanatorium” (6), “The Red Room—the university sports hall” (10), etc., but each room is titled with a color, suggesting that its appearance and its distinction from the other rooms, rather than its university function, should be salient. Graham dies in this first scene, but he reappears in scenes with Grace, though only she realizes his presence. What are the rules of this place? Is Graham a figment of her imagination? Is he materialized through her love? Is Tinker a doctor? a dealer? a friend? a torturer? a lover? a sufferer? It seems he is all, but is he trying to help or trying to hurt? Is he responsible? He keeps saying he is not, but how can that be true? Who is responsible? This confusion over basic information is part of the moral ambiguity of the play; Kane refuses to tell us how to judge what is happening, rather we must interpret and analyze.

A Wealth of Interpretations

When reviewing Cleansed, the critics, perhaps feeling self-conscious from the limelight of the Blasted fallout, were carefully open-minded and refused to comment on anything besides their own experience of the performance. It was Kane’s admirers, three years after Cleansed was first released, who started to unravel the play. At the Iain Fisher website, one of the largest websites dedicated to Sarah Kane, the discussion that my classmates and I tried to have at Royal Holloway finally takes place.

Under the topic “Space in Cleansed,” the group tries to unpack the setting, a university that acts like a prison:"

I also came across another suggestion which I found interesting. University → universitas → universe. A small part of reality, microcosmos, where there are all the processes as in the “big world”. God made our world, Tinker—the bad demiurge—has it’s own small world too. (Jolka 2002)
I always assumed that ‘Cleansed’ took place in the same universe as ‘Blasted’, like ‘Blue Velvet’ and ‘Twin Peaks’ in the work of Lynch. Also I did read somewhere that they were the first of two parts of an unfinished trilogy.

From that I just assumed that the university campus had been overrun by the same invading force as Leeds in ‘Blasted’, though time had moved on and they were more established. Tinker reminds me of Josef Mengel, a Nazi scientist in the war who would commit atrocities on people, just to find out what would happen. His favorite subjects were twins, as he could experiment on one and use the second as a control. The removing of limbs to see how people would adapt was something he wrote in great detail. (Jaidin 2002a)

Location is important because we want to know how real or how metaphorical the violence. How close to our world are these staged atrocities? One influence on the violence in ‘Cleansed’ would be the TV news and newspapers in the UK at the time she was writing it. You had the horrors of the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, and the massacres in Rwanda. On more than one occasion the BBC and ITN were fined due to the graphic nature of the coverage of the Hutu and Tutsi conflict. (Jaidin 2001)

Jess Cully points out that Kane’s theatrical influences preferred an intimate relationship with reality:

While the play is primarily an allegory, I am sure Sarah meant the title to hint at the ethnic cleansing camps of former Yugoslavia.

She admired Jeremy Weller’s 1998 show Soldiers, presented by real veterans of the Yugoslav war who talked about their experiences, so perhaps she might have been open to the idea of real former ethnic camp inmates performing Cleansed? It would certainly have been interesting. (Cully 2002a)

But David points out that Greek Tragedy, Renaissance Theatre, and Shakespeare set the precedent for violence in Cleansed:

removal of limbs is about as Greek Tragedy as you can get, re: Rod & Carl, and I always find Tinker injecting Graham in the eye reminiscent of Oedipus putting his own eyes out with a brooch...<shudder> [...] Dismembering and severings onstage are also very Renaissance; they liked their gore. Lavinia in “Titus Andronicus” has her hands and tongue severed (offstage, though)...The most obvious Shakespeare allusion with “Cleansed” is “Twelfth Night”, the idea of one sibling being so devastated by the other’s death (Viola thinking Sebastian has drowned) that they adopt their dead sibling’s clothes/persona—justifying Viola’s disguising herself as a man as a means of trying to come to terms with her brother’s death by trying in inhabit his whole being. Think about Grace dressing in her dear brother’s clothes in “Cleansed.” (David 2002)

Such a history of violence in the theatre left Kane at liberty to use violence in her own work, as did biblical stories: “Carl receives 5 wounds, which I can’t
help but see as a reference to the 5 wounds of Christ, but I suspect that’s probably a kind of personal joke” (Towery 2002).

War, as well as religious and theatrical violence are all referenced, but in the original production, the concentration camp university is the most striking juxtaposition: “I’m sure Tinker is a guard [...] in the original London production, which Sarah would have had an input into, he wore a guard’s uniform” (Cully 2002b). Tinker was certainly not conducting the same experiments as the Nazi scientist, Mengele:

Tinker watches the “victims” BEFORE he cuts off their limbs etc. and not AFTERWARDS as Mengele. This indicates that his acting results from their behavior and not the other way round. (Chrisie 2002)

Though with the Mengele thing there are some parallels, when he would work with twins part of it would be not to see how the twin he harmed reacted, but the one who was forced to observe. Tinker is doing the similar thing though with lovers. Watching to see if there is any change in how Rod reacts to Carl before and after. (Jaidin 2002b)

Tinker, Rod, and Grace are also observers of pain and each reacts differently. And we are asked not to experience pain, but to watch another’s experience.

The Beauty and Horror of Sharing Pain

Pain is an individual experience—enter representation. The pain that is suffered by one is unknown by another. Only by communicating pain does it become believable and therefore real. In this way, experiencing pain becomes a divider between the one who suffers and others who do not, who must be convinced. Pain becomes a boundary, though not substantive. Even when pain is communicated, the full experience is not apprehended. Only a representation of “pain” (pain as we have understood it to be, to feel like) is communicated. Pain ensures the instability of even the material world because it is both undeniable and intangible:

So, for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiable present is it that “having pain” may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to “have certainty,” while for the other person it is so elusive that “hearing about pain” may exist as the primary model of what it is “to have doubt.” Thus pain comes unsharable into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed. (Scarry 1985:4)

Simultaneously, pain becomes a boundary between the experience of oneself and the experience of others and reminds us of the contingent nature of our own perception.

In discussing Cleansed and one of her inspirations, A Lover’s Discourse by Roland Barthes, Kane noted:

When I first read [Barthes’s equation of a rejected lover and a prisoner in Dachau] I was appalled he could make the connection, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it. And gradually I realized that Barthes is right: it is all about loss of self. When you love obsessively, you lose your sense of self. And if you lose the object of your love, you have no resources to fall back on. It can completely destroy you. (in Sierz 2000a:116)
So, while violence perpetrated destroys the self, pain communicated turns an individual’s reality into everyone’s reality. In response to their love’s pained reality, Tinker inflicts more pain, Rod sacrifices himself, and Grace follows Graham further to the edge of life. Grace insists on staying at the university and on wearing Graham’s clothes. She takes on his movements, and then:

**GRACE**: Love me or kill me, Graham.

*(He hesitates. Then kisses her, slowly and gently at first, then harder and deeper.)*

**GRAHAM**: I used to...think about you and...
I used to...wish it was you when I...
Used to...

**GRACE**: Doesn’t matter. You went away but now you’re back and nothing else matters.

*(GRAHAM takes off her shirt and stares at her breasts.)*

**GRAHAM**: Makes no difference now.

*(He sucks her right breast.
She undoes his trousers and touches his penis.
They take off the rest of their clothes, watching each other.
They stand naked and look at each other’s bodies. They slowly embrace.
They begin to make love, slowly at first, then hard, fast, urgent, finding each other’s rhythm is the same as their own.
They come together.
They hold each other, him inside her, not moving.)* (Kane 1998a:14)

Though Grace looks like Graham, he is still a separate person, a person to be mimicked, a person who can confess, a person who makes love. He has his own secret memories of thinking of her sexually. When they undress, we see that no matter how much Grace acts like Graham, she is still different, she is not a man. They use their sexual difference to gain intimacy, to have sex and discover they have the same rhythm, to come together.

Between the two of them, there is only one living body, but Grace refuses...
to lose Graham. They are closest as they suffer through a beating together; Graham teaches her how to survive the pain:

(\textit{GRACE is being beaten by an unseen group of men whose VOICES we hear. We hear the sound of baseball bats hitting GRACE’s body and she reacts as though she has received the blow. GRAHAM is watching in distress.})

[...]

GRAHAM: Switch off your head. That’s what I did. Shoot up and switch off before the pain moves in. I thought of you.

(\textit{There is a flurry of blows which GRACE’s body reacts to, but she does not make a sound.})

GRAHAM: I used to put my spoon in my tea and heat it up. When you weren’t looking press it on your skin at the top of your arm and you’d (a crack) scream and I’d laugh. I’d say Do it to me.

GRACE: Do it to me.

GRAHAM: You’d press a hot spoon on me and I’d not feel a thing. Knew it was coming.

If you know it’s coming you’re prepared.

If you know it’s coming—

GRACE: It’s coming.

(\textit{The blow comes.} \textit{GRACE’s body moves—not with pain, simply with the force of the blow.})

GRAHAM: You can surf it. (Kane 1998a:24–26)

Through his own experience with pain and resulting disembodiment, Graham teaches Grace how to “surf it.” Graham can affect Grace’s material experience. And after the beating, Graham shares Grace’s pain by sharing her wounds:

(\textit{GRAHAM presses his hands onto GRACE and her clothes turn red where he touches, blood seeping through.} \textit{Simultaneously, his own body begins to bleed in the same places.}) (Kane 1998a:26)

Graham’s ability to disembodify saves Grace: he teaches her to do it too. But her wounds embody Graham: he bleeds empathetically. Graham’s experience is an “unthought” physical reaction, implying that his empathy is not just a mental projection, but an experience of the pain itself. Because pain is frequently communicated through an uncontrollable—often unwanted—physical condition: bleeding, a broken bone, a tumor, Kane can exploit this property in performance. From the physical evidence of pain, the audience cannot deduce the individual’s exact experience of pain, but because Grace and Graham have identical physical reactions, they deduce that they are sharing the same experience of pain, and thus collapsing the boundaries between self and other.

Kane demands to know, however, if this coexperience and subsequent communication can also collapse the boundaries between life and death.

The disembodiment Graham teaches Grace has disastrous consequences: she is unable to protest Tinker’s shock therapy. Grace’s lucidity has evaporated
and she does not understand what Tinker is doing. She cannot even tell the difference between him and Graham:

(Grace lies sunbathing in a tiny shaft of light coming through a crack in the ceiling.)

(Graham is on one side of her, Tinker the other. [...]
Graham takes one hand, Tinker the other.)

Grace: My balls hurt.
Tinker: You’re a woman.
Voices: Lunatic Grace.
Grace: Like to feel you here.
Graham: Always be here.
And here.
And here.
Grace: (Laughs. Then suddenly serious.) They keep calling me.
Tinker: That’s what I’m saying.
Graham: Love me or kill me.
Tinker: Can make you better.
Grace: Love you.
Graham: Swear.
Tinker: Yes.
Grace: On my life.
Graham: Don’t cut me out.
Grace: Graham.
Voices: Frazzle it out.
Tinker: Tinker. (Kane 1998a:28–29)

Tinker, who does not hear or see Graham, suggests to Grace that he “can make her better” by affixing the balls that supposedly hurt. But Grace, now disembodied herself, can only attend to Graham and the Voices and not her own body or Tinker. Tinker has to correct her when she refers to Graham instead of him. As she swears to love Graham, she simultaneously shuts out Tinker and seems to comply with him. Loving Graham, refusing to cut him out, actually puts Grace into Tinker’s hands. When Tinker suggests he “can make you better,” she replies with “Love you” and she reassures him “On my life.” Tinker thinks he is giving Grace what she wants even though it destroys her. We cannot say Grace would necessarily protest the sex change—with it she can become Graham—but, in this state, we know she does not realize what Tinker is suggesting, nor does she realize that she is even complying.

The electroshock therapy, which precedes the surgery, leaves Grace undone. She “doesn’t respond” to anything, even a dear student/inmate’s suicide (Kane 1998a:36–38). The surgery is actually the only thing that revives Grace/Graham:
GRACE: (Touches her stitched-on genitals.)

F— 

TINKER: Do you like it?

GRACE: F—

TINKER: You’ll get used to him.
Can’t call you Grace anymore.
Call you...Graham. I’ll call you Graham.

(He begins to leave.)

GRAHAM: Tinker.

TINKER: (Turns and looks at GRACE.)

GRACE and GRAHAM: Felt it. (Kane 1998a:39)

Only now can Grace speak again. Now she has the body of Graham, now they can really feel the same through the same body. At the end of this scene, Graham exits and in the last scene “Grace now looks exactly like Graham,” she is “Grace/Graham.”

Through this systematic dehumanization, Grace has overcome the physical limitations of her body and recovered her brother, but the price is her self. Kane’s final image:

(CARL and GRACE sit next to each other.
GRACE now looks and sounds exactly like GRAHAM. She is wearing his clothes.)

(CARL wears [...] GRACE’s (women’s) clothes.) (Kane 1998a:43)

Grace no longer exists as a single subject; she has dispersed. She also put this process in motion: she came to this institution, and she disregarded herself in retrieving Graham. In this last vision we see Grace’s determination and dehumanization. Grace/Graham, in the midst of the paradox, struggles with two voices:

GRACE/GRAHAM: You bastard how dare you leave me like this.
Felt it.
Here. Inside. Here.

And when I don’t feel it, it’s pointless.
Think about getting up it’s pointless.
Think about eating it’s pointless.
Think about dressing it’s pointless.
Think about speaking it’s pointless.
Think about dying only it’s totally fucking pointless.

Here now.
Safe on the other side and here.

Graham.

(A long silence.)

Always be here.
Thank you, Doctor. (Kane 1998a:43−44)
Isn’t it beautiful? [And [Grace] is the perfect name for Tinker’s woman.]

And it’s interesting how much Tinker physically manipulates, punishes, and probes the other Grace [i.e., other than the Grace of God] in his effort to win her. It reminds me of the flagellants who beat themselves to become closer to god. Tinker beats grace instead. It also reminds me of the men who thought or think they could become closer to god by trying to intellectually understand god.

The message is beautiful. Love and surrender. “Sacrifice” and you will be “saved.” Lose yourself and you will be “found.” It’s all the traditional rhetoric, but it has so much more of a profound effect. It’s like she’s REALLY telling the story of Christ. Love and total surrender. It’s pretty much what Christ was saying and pretty much what he did. Kane shows us how difficult it is and how painful, but also how beautiful. And I also love how it really has nothing to do with religion (as practiced) but everything to do with being human. […]

And the resurrected Christ in Graham. Christ arisen and all Christians (all who believe in Him) struggle to imitate Him in order to have everlasting life.

Grace imitates Graham. She doesn’t think of him as dead, as Christians thinking of Christ living in them. Grace says she feels like Graham inside.

She says to Tinker treat me like a patient. She wants to undergo the struggle of Graham. To feel his pain, as Christians long to feel the pain of Christ. True believers feel the pain of Christ and receive the stigmata, the 5 wounds of Christ. (Stephanie in Pino 2002)

This kind of faith may have been a point of inspiration, but I don’t think Kane saw surrendering to love or God or grace as beautiful. Kane left God because she felt the Church was impure.

Impaling [like the impaling that Carl suffers to force him to betray his promise and reveal Rod as his lover], besides being a reference to the character Rod and the penis, is also one of those things you read about the Ottomans doing to the Serbs back in the day. I think the idea was to set the impaled person up in a public area as a sign to others as well as an individual punishment. (Towery 2002)

The violence, the watched suffering, is not beautiful; it is a warning. Experiencing Christ’s suffering may bring us closer to him, but watching a human’s pain forces me to ask: What is the difference between him and me? Watching another give up on life, forces me to ask: how did I choose life?

Psychosis 4.48

Untangling Art and Suicide

I am sad
I feel that the future is hopeless and things cannot improve
I am bored and dissatisfied with everything
I am a complete failure as a person
I am guilty, I am being punished
I would like to kill myself
I used to be able to cry but now I am beyond tears
I have lost interest in other people
I can’t make decisions
I can’t eat
I can’t sleep
I can’t think
I cannot overcome my loneliness, my fear, my disgust
I am fat
I cannot write
I cannot love
My brother is dying, my lover is dying, I am killing them both
I am charging towards my death
I am terrified of medication
I cannot make love
I cannot fuck
I cannot be alone
I cannot be with others
My hips are too big
I dislike my genitals

At 4.48
when desperation visits
I shall hang myself
to the sound of my lover’s breathing

I do not want to die
I have become so depressed by the fact of my mortality that I have decided to
commit suicide
I do not want to live
[...]
This is becoming my normality (Kane 2001:206–08)

4.48 Psychosis was written in the fall and winter of 1998/99 when Kane suc-
cumbed to her most debilitating episode of depression (Greig 2001:xv–xvi).
She had previously been hospitalized in the fall of 1997. Kane hanged herself with her shoelaces in the early morning hours on 20 February 1999. 4.48 Psychosis had been commissioned for a production that summer but the play’s performance was put off until June 2000, when it was produced at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs. It was directed by James Macdonald, who directed the original productions of Blasted and Cleansed. “Macdonald split the play’s voice into three: two women and one man. The three voices, in part, representing the division of a person into victim/perpetrator/bystander” (Greig 2001: xvii).

The stage picture consists of a white stage floor, a white-topped table, two chairs, and three actors: one male and two female. The back wall of the stage is a forty-five degree wall of mirrors sloping upwards towards the audience, so the stage can be watched directly or can be observed from above through the mirrors. This arrangement allows the actors to sit, stand or even lie down flat and still be seen. Video projections are used onto the whole stage, half of the stage or the table top, and the table is also used for writing lists of numbers (backwards, so they can be read through the mirrors!).

The acting cast of Daniel Evans, Jo McInnes, and Madeleine Potter was extremely impressive. After opening with probably the longest (deliberate) pause I have ever witnessed on stage, one person spoke without looking at anyone else and no one moved. The person being spoken to could easily be identified by the smallest subtle changes in her face. The
“scenes” were clearly played out even though no attempt was made to create “characters” for either the doctor or the patient. The speaking of the verse—sometimes spoken individually, sometimes spoken in chorus by two or all three—was clear, precise and had a feeling for the sound of the language rarely seen in modern theatre. The fact that leading voice coach Patsy Rodenburg was employed for this production indicates that this was a priority for the director. (Chadderton 2000)

At times a conversation between patient and therapist becomes clear. At times we seem to witness the conflicted, racing, fastidious thoughts of a suicidal mind.

After Kane’s death there were two camps: one saw her entire body of work in light of her suicide, the other mourned her death, but declined to even try to connect her death and her work. The first group reinterpreted Kane’s work in light of her mental anguish: Kane’s agent commented that “existential despair [...] makes artists tick” (in Gentleman 1999). Even before her death, a critic for the Daily Telegraph noted, “you feel her work owes much more to clinical depression than real artistic vision” (Sierz 2000b). Many critics chose the first camp:

[O]n the opening night of 4:48 after the production all the journalists came together in the bar. The discussion: What Exactly Was It About? None of them wanted to say a bad thing—did they understand it...one wonders. Well apparently their joint conclusion and even now the most popular choice—“a 70 minute suicide note.” (Jamie 2001)

The second group insisted on seeing Kane’s work outside of the frame of mental disease or suicide: “Sarah Kane’s career as a mental patient was briefer and much less exceptional than as a dramatist—the only freakish thing about her was her talent” (Tushingham in Sierz 2000b); but fellow playwright, Anthony Nielson reveals the anger that motivates this second group’s position:

It worries me when Sarah Kane’s agent Mel Kenyon talks about “existential despair” being “what makes artists tick” (Playwright Kane kills herself, February 24). Nobody in despair “ticks”—and for Sarah Kane the clock has stopped. Truth didn’t kill her, lies did: the lies of worthlessness and futility alike, but we canonise one and stigmatize the other. They both battle the same banal forces: crazy and irregular tides of chemicals that crash through the brain. Far from enhancing talent, these neurological storms waste time, narrow vision and frequently lead, as here to, to that most tragic, most selfish of actions. (Neilson 1999)

To these witnesses, mental disease interrupted—not enhanced—a promising career.

In 1999, I put myself in the second camp as I truly believed her plays were not the product of mental illness.11 The problem with turning a blind eye to her suicide, though, is that maybe the first group is right and the plays are insane. Is there a fundamental link between the relentless truth-seeking that Kane applied to her writing and that she applied to herself? Can they be unraveled? Kenyon suggests that the act of writing and the habitual self-criticizing prevalent in 4.48 Psychosis were compelling each other:

The only thing I ever wondered about was whether the connection made with the outer world was becoming less and less, therefore she was
having to dig deeper and deeper to create. There were times when I wanted her to embrace doing an adaptation or something just so that she’d relieve herself of the need to go further inside. (Hattenstone 2000:26)

Simon Kane admits 4.48 Psychosis is about “suicidal despair,” so it is understandable that some people will interpret the play as a thinly veiled suicide note, but he challenges us to look further as “this simplistic view does both the play and my sister’s motivation for writing it an injustice” (in Sierz 2000b).

According to the American Heritage Dictionary psychosis means “a severe mental disorder, with or without organic damage characterized by derangement of personality and loss of contact with reality and causing derangement of normal social functioning.” Psychosis is characterized by a severe distortion of reality. It is often marked by delusions or delusional thinking. The title 4.48 Psychosis refers to the early morning hours when Kane wrote, when she felt the most sane, though these were also the hours when she appeared the most insane to others. But 4.48 Psychosis was also based on The Sorrows of Young Werther, Goethe’s novel “about a young man who kills himself because of unrequited love” (Gibbons 1999). It also contains references to other suicides: “the chicken’s still dancing/the chicken won’t stop” (Kane 2001:243) is lifted “from the Herzog film Stroszek. It was the last film seen by Joy Division singer Ian Curtis before he committed suicide. As a tribute the words are scratched into the vinyl of the post-humously released LP” (Fisher 2001). Can 4.48 Psychosis teach us about suicidal despair—not Kane’s in particular, but about that state of mind?

THE CHEMICAL LOBOTOMY

I dreamt I went to the doctor’s and she gave me eight minutes to live. I’d been sitting in the fucking waiting room half an hour.

(A long silence.)

Okay let’s do it, let’s do the drugs, let’s do the chemical lobotomy, let’s shut down the higher functions of my brain and perhaps I’ll be a bit more fucking capable of living.

Let’s do it.

[...]

Symptoms: Not eating, not sleeping, not speaking, no sex drive, in despair, wants to die.

Diagnosis: Pathological grief.

Setraline, 50mg. Insomnia worsened, severe anxiety, anorexia (weight loss 17kgs), increase in suicidal thoughts, plans and intention. Discontinued following hospitalization.

Zopiclone, 7.5mg. Slept. Discontinued following rash. Patient attempted to leave hospital against medical advice. Restrained by three male nurses twice her size. Patient threatening and uncooperative. Paranoid thought—believes hospital staff are attempting to poison her.

Melleril, 50mg. Co-operative.

Lofepramine, 70mg, increased to 140mg, then 210mg. Weight gain 12kgs. Short-term memory loss, no other reaction.
Argument with junior doctor whom she accused of treachery after which she shaved her head and cut her arms with a razor blade.

Patient discharged into the care of the community on arrival of acutely psychotic patient in emergency clinic in greater need of a hospital bed.

Citalopram, 20mg. Morning tremors. No other reaction.

Lofepramine and Citalopram discontinued after patient got pissed off with side affects and lack of obvious improvement. Discontinuation symptoms: Dizziness and confusion. Patient kept falling over, fainting and walking out in front of cars. Delusional ideas—believes consultant is the antichrist.

Fluoxetine hydrochloride, trade name Prozac, 20mg, increased to 40mg. Insomnia, erratic appetite (weight loss 14kgs), severe anxiety, unable to reach orgasm, homicidal thoughts towards several doctors and drug manufacturers. Discontinued.

Mood: Fucking Angry
Affect: Very angry.

Thorazine, 100mg. Slept. Calmer.

Venlafaxine, 75mg, increased to 150mg, then 225mg. Dizziness, low blood pressure, headaches. No other reaction. Discontinued.

Patient declined Seroxat. Hypochondria—cites spasmodic blinking and severe memory loss as evidence of tardive dyskinesia and tardive dementia.

Refused all further treatment.

100 aspirin and one bottle of Bulgarian Cabernet Sauvignon, 1986. Patient woke in a pool of vomit and said “Sleep with a dog and rise full of fleas.” Severe stomach pain. No other reaction. (Kane 2001:221 and 223–25)

The preceding list includes two main types of drugs: Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) and phenothiazines. Today phenothiazines are only used in extreme cases because they can cause side effects like constipation, weight gain, and heart irregularities. Small overdoses can be lethal. These older drugs seem to be the drugs that are most effective on the patient above: she is “calmer” and “co-operative” and no side effects are noted. Phenothiazines work by inhibiting a neurotransmitter, dopamine, in some brain centers. They were discovered by accident: thorazine was being used as a “pre-anesthetic sedative” in France in 1951 when its calming properties were observed (Nicholi 1988:483).

Originally, neuroscientists explained the biological mechanisms of depression in terms of the drugs that treated it: “they theorized that depression must result from a deficiency of these chemicals [the neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin that drugs effect]. Yet a multitude of studies failed to prove this” (Goode 2002). Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, drugs became a diagnosis: Prozac works, therefore the patient must be deficient in serotonin. The actual mechanisms of depression, and other mood disorders, are still unknown.

My friend, a psychiatrist, tells me:

You seem to be searching out the Why of this woman, whereas human behavioral science researches the What. Behavioralism never presumes to understand the inner motivations, concerning itself more with topography and treatment of negative behaviors. And diagnosis in psychology,
while a tool, is never a truth. The DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] reads like a list of symptoms to check off, eight out of ten means you have this disorder, etc. As you’ve seen neuroscience is the least debatable, most medical, branch of the tree, and unfortunately the most recent. At this point, there is no litmus test we can do for a given diagnosis. (Theroux 2002)

By “no litmus test,” Theroux means that even with a list of a patient’s symptoms and a list of drugs that work on him or her, we know neither what is malfunctioning nor why it is malfunctioning. Unfortunately, the patient in 4.48 Psychosis, like me, is searching out the why: perhaps she has been “born in the wrong body.” The therapist, however, ignores her intense inquiry as though ignoring a child’s inappropriate questions, hoping the child will lose interest.

“IT FEELS F**KING GREAT”

Sometimes I turn around and catch the smell of you and I cannot go on I cannot fucking go on without expressing this terrible so fucking awful physical aching fucking longing I have for you. And I cannot believe that I can feel this for you and you feel nothing. Do you feel nothing?
(Silence.)
Do you feel nothing?
(Silence.)
And I go out at six in the morning and start my search for you. If I’ve dreamt a message of a street or a pub or a station I go there. And I wait for you.
(Silence.)
You know I really feel like I’m being manipulated.
(Silence.)
I’ve never in my life had a problem giving another person what they want. But no one’s ever been able to do that for me. No one touches me, no one gets near me. But now you’ve touched me somewhere so fucking deep I can’t believe and I can’t be that for you. Because I can’t find you.
(Silence.)
What does she look like?
And how will I know her when I see her?
She’ll die, she’ll die, she’ll only fucking die.
(Silence.)
Do you think it’s possible for a person to be born in the wrong body?
(Silence.)
Do you think it’s possible for a person to be born in the wrong era?
(Silence.)
Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you for rejecting me by never being there, fuck you for making me feel like shit about myself, fuck you for bleeding the fucking love and life out of me, fuck my father for fucking up my life for good and fuck my mother for not leaving him, but most of all fuck you God for making me love a person who does not exist, FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU.

—Oh dear, what happened to your arm?
—I cut it.
—That’s a very immature, attention-seeking thing to do. Did it give you relief?
—No.
—Did it relieve the tension?
—No.
—Did it give you relief?
(Silence.)
Did it give you relief?
—No.
—I don’t understand why you did that.
—Then ask.
—Did it relieve the tension?
(A long silence.)
Can I look?
—No.
—I’d like to look, to see if it’s infected.
—No.
(Silence.)
—I thought you might do this. Lots of people do. It relieves the tension.
—Have you ever done it?
—...
—No. Far too fucking sane and sensible. I don’t know where you read that, but it does not relieve the tension.
(Silence.)
Why don’t you ask me why?
Why did I cut my arm?
—Would you like to tell me?
—Yes.
—Then tell me.
—ASK
ME
WHY.
(A long silence.)
—Why did you cut your arm?
—Because it feels fucking great. Because it feels fucking amazing.
—Can I look?
—You can look. But don’t touch.
—(Looks.) And you don’t think you’re ill?
—No.
—I do. It’s not your fault. But you have to take responsibility for your own actions. Please don’t do it again. (Kane 2001:214–18)

Originally understood as a cry for help or a failed suicide, many now interpret self-mutilation as a complex coping mechanism:

“There is no hazy line,” says Lindsay, a fifteen-year-old cutter. “If I’m suicidal I want to die, I have lost all hope. When I’m self-injuring, I want to relive emotional pain and keep on living. Suicide is a permanent exit. Self-injury helps me get through the moment.” (Strong 1998:32)

Psychologists theorize that blood-letting holds together a broken psyche:

“I used to have a picture of my mind as this round black blob in my hands, and little bits would break off, and then more and more bits, until there were hundreds of bits that kept dropping and couldn’t hold together,” says Josie, a twenty-nine-year-old Australian college student who was severely neglected by her mother and sexually abused by her father. “It would just keep fragmenting and disintegrating until it was
smaller than sand. Then there would be no thoughts, just emptiness, like a black hole that was sucking me in.” (Strong 1998:32)

As a child the patient used dissociation to escape trauma. Dissociation produces an escape from physical and emotional reality. We all use dissociation in limited amounts, like daydreaming, but some slip “chronically into states of numbness and emptiness under stress” (Strong 1998:38). Before cutting, the mind that employed depersonalization to escape pain is now in danger of disintegrating. “It’s really a life-threatening situation to have that experience,” says San Francisco psychologist Michael Wagner. “It’s equivalent to feeling that you are no longer going to exist.” Ironically cutting provides a sense of reintegration, like a jolt of reality to the vanishing self. The sensation of pain and the sight of blood break through the deadening depersonalization and prove that the cutter is alive, human, whole: “I feel so unreal in those states, like I’m disappearing [...]. With the pain, cutting and burning bring me back into sharp focus” (in Strong 1998:40).

Cutting oneself is an impulsive self-injurious behavior (SIB), as opposed to stereotypic, psychotic, or compulsive SIB which include everything from head banging to castration to hair pulling and nail biting. Cutting is precipitated by “escalating dysphoria” which may be “fear, shame, anger, loneliness, and panic” (Simeon and Hollander 2001:118).

Neurobiologists theorize that SIB is a result of low serotonin levels, as this contributes to impulsivity and aggression. Or, they theorize, it “may be linked with a desire to release endorphins, and decrease distress by increasing the presence of natural painkillers” (Theroux 2002). Currently, scientists are investigating how physical pain may be related to mood disorders. One of the most promising new lines of research revolves around Substance P, a neurotransmitter that is released by intense physical pain and appears “to play a key role in the regulation of emotions” (Stahl 1999:77). Drugs that block the actions of Substance P are currently being tested to treat depression.

Patients that feel relief after cutting tend to suffer from analgesia, a mechanism whereby the body suppresses its ability to feel pain. They “indicated improvement in areas of depression, anxiety, anger, and confusion” (Russ et al. 1992:501) after cutting, whereas patients without analgesia reported no improvement (Simeon and Hollander 2001:126). If these individuals do not have normal pain perception, they may also have malfunctioning perception and response to stress. Creating extreme pain may allow them to respond to stress as others do. Similarly, experiments on individually housed monkeys:

suggest that animals exhibiting SIB have a blunted stress response, which is indicated by less arousal [than control animals] when exposed to external stressors. [...] If this is the case, then SIB may function to increase stimulation from a typically low level of arousal or conversely may serve to keep animals from becoming too aroused. (Schroeder, Oster-Granite, and Thompson 2002:159)

In monkeys, SIB varied with sex, species, and amount of days they were housed alone suggesting that a mix of hormones, genes, and environmental factors contribute to the behavior.

Conclusion

How can you figure out if you are sane? This is a Strange Loop indeed. Once you begin to question your own sanity, you get trapped in an
ever-tighter vortex of self-fulfilling prophecies, though the process is by no means inevitable. Everyone knows that the insane interpret the world via their own peculiarly consistent logic; how can you tell if your own logic is “peculiar” or not, given that you have only your own logic to judge itself? I don’t see any answer. I am just reminded of Godel’s second Theorem, which implies that the only versions of formal number theory which assert their own consistency are inconsistent... (Hofstadter [1979] 1999:696)

I never thought she was crazy. Even after I finally believed that she had killed herself. Even philosophizing “crazy” as a construct for which I lay the boundaries, I never put that boundary between myself and Kane. Others did. I never thought she was abnormal for an artist.

Kane was not alone in representing explicit violence or sex. Many artists, mostly performance artists, have gone further. In the height of the body art movement in the 1960s and ’70s, Chris Burden dangled by his feet six feet off the ground, holding a camera, and dropped in Movie on the Way Down (1973). Today, Franko B bleeds real blood from real wounds in his performance I Miss You (2001). These performers do what Kane only refers to, but conceptually, they all three commit the same act: they “take literally.” Burden and Franko B take performance literally: its fleeting nature, its spectacle. They take these same aspects of the body literally. In comparison to other media, performance brings us face to face with our mortality. Kane might say the same thing but, really, she takes a different theatre tradition literally, that of Pinter, Bond, and Beckett: that of moral turmoil. The spectacle aspects of her work, the bloody or offensive, were slowly edited out over the years. She replaced realistic violence with figurative staging in Cleansed. By Crave there was no physical violence.

The stage directions that involve murder and dismemberment must be “modified” to be staged, but directions involving sex need not be. Pornography is common, but Kane declined to reap the benefits of that spectacle. The sex staged in Kane’s work was unremarkable. In Cleansed:

Grace and Graham got into bed and made the movements of love-making under the sheets. The Woman, in her costume of bra and panties, sat on Tinker’s lap, still in his guard’s uniform; she undid his zip to give the suggestion of pulling out his penis, but didn’t actually get it out. In that position they made the movements of having sex, but she kept her underwear in place. (Cully 2003)

Kane wanted a visceral theatre experience. But she did this by building dramatic tension, not by presenting the audience with a visceral experience. As a testament to her dramatic skills, Kane’s plays provoked shock without using these more realistic portrayals of sex and violence.

I never thought she was crazy, I thought “crazy” was just our own inability to make sense of another’s way of thinking. Kane’s thinking never lacked sense; it was rigorous and agile. At Royal Holloway, no question asked of her was one she hadn’t asked herself already. She pulled responses out of the recesses of her memory with a hint of boredom. But, inevitably, she would turn the answer into an opportunity to explore a much more nuanced dilemma. Her statements were always true, if only because they couldn’t be proved otherwise: “[Jeremy Weller’s Mad, 1992] changed my life because it changed me, the way I think, the way I behave. If theatre can change lives, then it can change society” (Kane in Sierz 2000a:93).

It strikes me only now that perhaps she too was unsatisfied with her answers.
Kane hated program notes and other forums where an artist explains her work. A good artist disciplines herself to communicate with her audience only through her work. This leaves many things unsaid. Trying to gain insight into Kane’s mind, I can only turn to my own. But the conclusions I can draw from here are no different than “it changed my life because it changed me [...]. If theatre can change lives, then it can change society”: true by default.

Notes

1. Not for lack of trying. In the spring of 2001, the Royal Court in London staged a revival of her works. I had tickets and planned to cross eight time zones to see Kane’s work in its original home. However, my passport was stolen at the airport. Getting a new passport within 24 hours involved quite a performance, complete with costumes, makeup, car racing, careful deception, and outright lies. But San Francisco traffic prevailed and I did not make the flight that would have gotten me to the last performances.

2. Crave, “a virtually actionless piece of word-music” and a bold new direction in Kane’s work, was first performed at the Traverse Theatre, 13 August 1998 (Billington 1998:12). In the first run, the author appeared as Marie Kelvedon, to free the play from Kane’s reputation for extreme violence and obscenity. In the program, Kelvedon’s bio reads:

   Marie Kelvedon is twenty-five. She grew up in Germany in British Forces accommodation and returned to Britain at sixteen to complete her schooling. She was sent down from St Hilda’s college, Oxford, after her first term, for an act of unspeakable Dadaism in the college dining hall. She has had her short stories published in various literary magazines and has a volume of poems Onzuiver (“Impure”) published in Belgium and Holland. Her Edinburgh Fringe Festival debut was in 1996, a spontaneous happening through a serving hatch to an audience of one. Since leaving Holloway she had worked as a mini-cab driver, a roadie with the Manic Street Preachers and as a continuity announcer for BBC Radio World Service. She now lives in Cambridgeshire with her cat, Grotowski.

Kane’s sense of humor was firmly rooted in theatre history.

3. Kane did not verbalize this way of thinking about theatre until late in her career, but her intent on producing a visceral experience is evident in the extreme reactions her earlier plays produced. Critics, whether they liked her work or not, could not fail to mention the extreme physical responses they had to it. Later in her career, as she articulated the significance of physical intensity over theatrical conventions, Kane was freed from many formal considerations, like blocking, characters, scenes, etc. These are entirely absent from Crave. Prior to Crave, Kane’s work, though extreme, upheld these basics tenets of “what makes a play.”

4. The Jesus and Mary Chain formed in Glasgow in 1984. They released Psychocandy in 1985. “The feedback, simple yet catchy songs, and basic drum beat were unlike any recordings of the time” (Skies 2003).

5. A colleague who has lived in Britain and America explained that Newsnight is the British version of a TV program like Fox Files, not exactly hard news.

6. In Britain, therapy is reserved for the most mentally unstable and therefore carries a stigma that does not exist among the shrink-seeking middle- and upper-middle-class Americans.

7. Many later articles quoted the more outraged original reviews as “proof” that the play was useless obscenity. These articles were even further removed from the play itself; rather they just found a story in the Royal Court’s insistence that the show go up and go on, and in the “rape play girl’’s” lack of response to the media onslaught.

8. Vernon had not seen the play, he was responding to Michael Billington’s review in The Guardian. He disputes the basis of Billington’s critique, that a play about war should specify the opposing sides.

9. However, “the critics” are not a homogenous group. David Benedict of the Independent, one of the few supportive critics, explains: “we all knew which critics wouldn’t like it. It is horrifying but I thought it was wonderful. It is astonishingly controlled, meticulous and brave. You could have heard a pin drop” (in Braid 1995:3).

10. My research was funded by a Fulbright Grant from the Institute for International Edu-
cation, a body of the U.S. government. I am by no means an expert but it was an enlightening and draining experience.

11. I am reprinting these excerpts as they appear on the website, complete with spelling mistakes and grammatical errors as fixing the grammar can change the authors' intentions. Also, many of the contributors are not native English speakers.

12. These excerpts are found under a different, later topic: "Cleansed."

13. In the past few years I have come to realize that those who critique art actually believe that their discourse unlocks the mysteries of the creative process. For instance a Freudian critic believes that Kane, whether consciously or not, must be writing about her relationship with her mother and father in Cleansed. To me, having gone through my own creative processes, these methods of critique only guided us to ask new questions, they were not answers in themselves. I believe Kane’s account of the process of writing Blasted: she groped in the dark, asking questions and answering them with her dramatic reflex.

14. I’m summarizing and connecting a multitude of studies here. A scientist would never propose what I have laid out without much more evidence. Pain perception is very complex: pain travels through many pathways in the body depending on where the noxious stimulus is and what kind of pain it produces. Much more research is needed to untangle the relationship between physical and emotional pain; but pain is hard to study because it is unethical to administer in extreme amounts on humans and it is difficult to measure pain verbally or nonverbally. But, “more than any other sensory modality [pain] is influenced by emotional state and environmental contingencies” (Kandel, Schwartz, and Jessel [1991] 2000:489–90).

15. Some performers do mutilate their bodies. Orlan has undergone multiple plastic surgeries in her performances. But I don’t know of anyone asking others to undergo mutilation for a piece they haven’t written.

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