

## Masculinity in Crisis: A Gender Study of *Blasted* by Sarah Kane

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### Abstract

Sarah Kane’s plays not only concern about women’s fate, but also pay attention to the existential crisis that men have encountered. As the representative of Kane’s male protagonists, Ian in *Blasted*, not only suffers from physical pain but also psychological nihilism. Due to the internal and external threats, the absoluteness of males’ power is debilitated. Meanwhile, with the progress of plots, the fragility of the man, as well as his craving for hope, truth and love is gradually surfaced.

**Key words:** *Blasted*; Masculinity; Crisis

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### INTRODUCTION

Sarah Kane is the leading figure of “In-Yer-Face Theatre” wave of the British theatre in the 1990s. This paper aims to analyze the masculine crisis in her first play *Blasted*.

### DISCUSSION

From the perspective of the social sciences, “masculinities are understood as a form of power relation, both among

men themselves and between men and women” (Pilcher & Wheleham, 2004, p.83). In the plays of the English playwright Sarah Kane (1971-1999), females are controlled by males through raping and gazing, which marginalize the powerless female into an inferior position. However, the relatively low status of females in patriarchy does not guarantee that males enjoy the absolute power at any moment in any situation. In fact, Kane’s male characters, represented by Ian in her first play *Blasted*, are trapped themselves into a dilemma in which they not only suffer physical trouble but lose themselves into psychologically nihilistic state. Males’ power is diminishing that it is hugely challenged by different internal and external forces, and the binary oppositional relations is also gradually collapsing in Kane’s work. In fact, “gender concerns are very much a concern of her plays, most particularly her representation of masculinities in crisis” (Aston, 2010, p.580).

In post-war era, two major factors cause the anxiety of British men. In the first place, headed by the publication of English version of Simone de Beauvoir’s *the Second Sex* in 1953, the Second-Wave Feminism which was initiated in America, overwhelmed the whole world in the 1960s and 1970s. Under the influence of its motto “the personal is political”, in Britain, women fought for their deserved rights and higher position in the family, workplace, as well as in the society, and generally achieved their goals. In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became the first female master of No.10, Downing Street, which can be probably served as a perfect and powerful example to resonate this world-wide movement. Another factor to cause the anxiety of masculinity is that, on the national level, “Britain’s role in the World War II, followed by undeniable proof of the ending of the British Empire, had generated great confusion in Britain’s national sense of identity” (Wyllie, 2009, p.51). In fact, “the social changes of the twentieth century (in the industrialized West) have undermined the gender hierarchy, and the

position of hegemonic masculinity within it” (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p.84). Against such background, Sarah Kane’s male roles are haunted by anxiety physically and psychologically.

In *Blasted*, Kane outlines the brief image of Ian at the opening stage direction that “**Ian is 45, Welsh born but lived in Leeds much of his life and picked up the accent**” (Sarah Kane, p.3).<sup>1</sup> And Kane further applies the detail, “gin” to fulfill the figure of Ian. In Scene One, after coming into the hotel room with Cate, Ian “*throws a small pile of newspapers on the bed, goes straight to the mini-bar and pours himself a large gin*” and straightly “*gulps down the gin*” (p.3). Later, he “*pours himself another gin, this time with ice and tonic, and sips it at a more normal pace*”. Successively, he “*goes to the mini-bar and pours himself another large gin and lights a cigarette*” (p.10). It should be noticed that the word “gin” is constantly mentioned with the acts of Ian throughout the play. Ian’s addiction to the gin directly resonates to his lung cancer which is illustrated in Scene Two.

*He takes the first sip and is overcome with pain.*

*He waits for it to pass, but it doesn’t. It gets worse.*

**Ian** *clutches his side—it becomes extreme.*

*He begins to cough and experiences intense pain in his chest, each cough tearing at his lung. (p.24)*

Trapped by bottles of gin and tortured by the terminal lung cancer, Ian views his morbid life with a passive attitude. When Cate persuades him to get a transplant to rescue his limited life, Ian rejects and replies that

**Ian:** Why? What for? Keep me alive to die of cirrhosis in three months’ time.

**Cate:** You’re making it worse, speeding it up.

**Ian:** Enjoy myself while I’m here. (pp.11-12)

According to Kane’s depiction, though Ian pretends to judge his limited life in a careless and nihilistic way, there are some details to reveal Ian’s cowardice towards death. For example:

Outside, a car backfires – there is an enormous bang.

**Ian** *throws himself flat on the floor.*

**Cate:** (*Laughs.*) It’s only a car.

**Cate:** ... You’re scared of things when there’s nothing to be scared of...

**Ian:** I’m not scared of cars. I’m scared of dying. (p.28)

In addition, Ian’s separated family is another factor to deepen his nihilism. In the hotel room Ian confesses to Cate about his family life that “I loved Stella till she became a witch and fucked off with a dyke” (p.19). Hidden information can be obtained that Ian’s ex-wife,

Stella is homosexual and it is her homosexual orientation that leads to the disruption of their marriage. And Ian’s hatred towards homosexuality is rooted. For example, Ian habitually debases her with viciously words “witch” or “sucking gash”, when mentioning Stella. In addition, the relationship between Ian and his son, Matthew is haunted by an estranged atmosphere. In *Blasted*, Matthew hates Ian, and they rarely meet or communicate with each other. The quotation “I’ll send him an invite for the funeral” (p.18) apparently implies their tense relations. Thus, getting divorced with his wife and getting alienated with his son, Ian, who hardly gets any warm or tender from his family, now is a rootless soul living a wandering life.

Besides his family life, Ian’s job is another factor to push Ian into a deeper status of self-exiling. Illustrated by Kane, Ian is “a home journalist, for Yorkshire” (p.48) who writes stories. However, “when he produces a revolver, ‘check it is loaded and puts it under his pillow’. Ian’s role as a hit-man” (Saunders, 2002, p.42) who has “signed the Official Secret Act” (p.29) with a secret organization is getting transparent. In that organization, Ian does the jobs under its orders; such as “stood at stations, listened to conversations and given the nod...Driving jobs. Picking people up, disposing of bodies, the lot” (p.30). But, Ian perceives that he is under the surveillance of this organization for his phone is tapped and he is being listened to when he talks to people. Even worse, this organization is seeking opportunity to shoot him for “things” Ian has done. These premises interpret the reason why Ian loads his revolver at any moment and gets nervous when telephone rings or the door are knocked. In daily life, the telephone ringing or the knock on the door is hardly considered as a threat for people, but people may curiously wonder what would happen when telephone or door functions. James Hollis judges that the telephone or “the door becomes an extension of one’s identity” (Hollis, 1970, 20). They are also applied as metaphors to expose Ian’s inner fragility and the sense of insecurity towards his mysterious job.

In fact, *Blasted* “is a play that asks uncomfortable question about British identity” (Saunders, 2002, p.51), and this nationhood is displayed by the character, Ian, who is born in Welsh but lives in Leeds for most of his life, naturally picks up the accent of Leeds. In Ian’s eyes, “English and Welsh is the same. British” (p.41) and due to his loving of this land, he is willingly involved in the secret organization and “done the jobs they asked” (p.30). However, Ian’s narrow “sense of national identity is based almost entirely on a sense of a racism” (Saunders, 2002, p.51). For instance, he derisively debases the black people and the Arabs as “nigger” and “wogs”. The following quotations can also demonstrate Ian’s racial discrimination and his inclination about racial purity:

**Ian:** English and Welsh is the same. British. I’m not import.

<sup>1</sup> All the quotations from the play is from the version *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*. London: Methuen Publishing Ltd., 2001; hereafter the quotations will be only marked by page number.

**Soldier:** What's fucking Welsh, never heard of it.

**Ian:** Come over from God knows where have their kids and call them English they're not English born in England don't make you English. (p.41)

Besides his racial prejudice, Ian's attitude towards God is revealed through his dialogue with Cate in Scene Four when Ian attempts to commit suicide for he has no tolerance of starvation.

**Cate:** It's wrong to kill yourself.

**Ian:** No it's not.

**Cate:** God wouldn't like it.

**Ian:** There isn't one.

**Cate:** How do you know?

**Ian:** No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia. No fucking nothing. (pp.54-55)

God, in Ian's eyes, "doesn't make sense anyway" (p.55). He denies the existence of God, as well as his meaninglessly messed-up life.

On the one hand, tortured by the terminal lung cancer, he is an anxious middle-aged man with narrow sense of nationhood and atheistic attitude toward religion. On the other hand, Ian is also a vulnerably rootless soul that he could not get any consolation from his family or any sense of security from his job. The outward corruption of his body, together with his inward corruption of his moral, push Ian's life into a "stink" status that it's hard for him to exhibit males' power in patriarchy. In a short, Ian in *Blasted* is a dying man in crisis who lives a life with little significance and little self-recognition.

Tortured by physical trouble and psychological nihilism, Kane's male protagonists also experience threats from other males. In *Blasted*, with the males' relations getting tensed, the fragile nature of men is fully unfolded, which further worsens their existing crisis and compels them into the situations of self-destruction. At the end of Scene Two, with a bomb being bombarded, the luxury hotel room in Leeds is instantly changed into a war zone. The soldier stages and begins to master the stage with Ian. In Scene Three, after knowing that Ian is a journalist, Solider drinks up the last mouthful of gin and illustrates to Ian the atrocities he has seen and done to the women, as well as the inhuman humiliations his beloved girlfriend Col has suffered in the war, so as to make Ian "proving it happened" (p.47).

Obviously, soldier's touching sorrow for losing his girlfriend in the war could not be understood by the untouched bystander, Ian. Burdened with huge sorrow, Soldier transforms his desperation into cruelty and repeats the atrocities his girlfriend Col has suffered on Ian's body. With no exaggeration, Soldier's atrocities push the barbarity of *Blasted* into a suffocating extreme. It is worth to mention that the action that Soldier holds his rifle to Ian's head functions as a resonance to the physical abuse Ian has conducted on Cate in Scene Two, when "he puts

the gun to her head, lies between her legs, and simulates sex. As he comes, Cate sits bolt upright with a shout. Ian moves away, unsure what to do, pointing the gun at her from behind (p.27). In that scene, Ian puts his gun to Cate's head and forces her to make love with him. By comparing these two similar scenes together, it can be said that "the soldier makes an explicit parallel between the closeted violence enacted on Cate and the plethora of violence he has witnessed and enacted" (Tycer, 2006, p.95). It is Soldier's acts that make Ian's power being stripped off. In this circumstance, Soldier is the active power-holder; while Ian is transformed from a perpetrator into a passive victim, and his position is naturally degraded into an inferior status.

With solider exactly copies what the appalling insult his girlfriend Col has suffered in the war on the body of Ian, the relations between Ian and soldier get tenser than ever. Both of them are entrapped into a mental frustration. The reenacted violence turns Ian into an empathetic sufferer to experience the horror Col has gone through in the war and propels him to reflect the brutal physical and mental insults he has perpetrated on Cate. But the soldier hardly feels any release from the reenactment of violence he has vented on Ian. He "can be seen as suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, remaining trapped in cyclical manifestations of violence" (Tycer, 2006, p.96). Tortured by the sorrow of losing his beloved girlfriend, the desperate soldier cries his heart out and pulls the trigger to embrace death, for his death is the only possible way to mourn and experience his girlfriend's tragedy. In the tense relations between Ian and soldier, Ian is changed from a perpetrator into a victim; while the soldier, the war survivor and victim, now is transformed into a perpetrator and dies at last. At this moment, the boundaries between the perpetrator and victim are blurred and the crisis of masculinities is aggravated in Kane's depiction. In fact, it can be said that "almost all Kane's work explores a diseased male identity" (Saunders, 2009, p.30).

The above analysis makes it safe to conclude that Kane's male protagonists are physically tormented by body corruption and confronted with nihilism in mentality. At the same time, Kane's male characters are threatened by their tense relations with other males, which further plunge the masculinities into a deeper crisis. Their lives fill with no meaning and human emotions, sex or power could not enlighten their nihilist world. Under the cover of cruelty, they are so fragile that they actually long to be cared, understood and loved by others.

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