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## ***DEATH, ABUSE AND DESTRUCTIVENESS IN KANE'S BLASTED***

**Keywords:** *death; war; sadism, boundary situations; abuse*

**Abstract:** *In this paper I will explore the ways in which the characters relate to the event of death, ranging from one's demise caused by disease to the killings involved in war. Blasted confronts us with a compelling vision of horror and of the evils of war. Brutality and abuse taint even love and people are capable of atrocities as result of the emotional shock they suffered and war can compel them to cross the limits of rationality. This paper looks at the ways in which various deaths which are portrayed in the play, apart from creating an eerie, chillingly apocalyptic atmosphere, turn it into a forceful parable of human evil and its implications. To this end, we shall explore issues such as destructiveness, sadism, self-esteem, boundary situations. We aim to show that by portraying gory acts such as rapes, mutilations, killings, in a chilling atmosphere of war that erupts so suddenly, the play envisages a dystopian universe where even cannibalism is possible, providing an insightful portrayal of the problematic of death.*

Brutality and death, its ultimate consequence, is a variegated reality of human nature. Most of us shun them or are repelled by them. Sarah Kane chooses to address this ineffable experience of being in order to shake the audience's complacency as it provides a powerful insight into the fundamental violent nature of human condition. This play has a special resonance in our contemporary world plagued by war and terrorism. When reading the play it almost feels like an omen. Abuse is a pervasive phenomenon and what Kane wrote twenty-two years ago rings so true today, when we are witnessing the deep roots it has formed. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to study the ways in which the play interrogates the causes and effects of abuse and ultimately death over the subject. Death in this play surfaces as a multifaceted experience of human being. In Ian's case, it constitutes a deeply entrenched facet of his self-concept. Ian leads a deadened existence, his vital energy is sapped by hatred and preconceptions, while Cate is plagued by strange crises which turn into life-in-death states. The Soldier, on the other hand, is a living dead, consumed by the thirst for retaliation, which can be quenched only by wreaking havoc. He has become numb to pain, and can find release only by perpetuating it and punishing Ian's callous indifference. As this is a cultural and partly psychoanalytical approach, I will be looking at the findings of Erich Fromm, Marvin Hurvich among others, in order to account for the way the characters relate to their mortality, displaying attitudes which range from anxiety to acceptance or resilience. I will also refer to Karl Jasper's concept of "boundary-situation" and the way it can help illuminate the harrowing experiences that the characters undergo.

Death constitutes an overpowering influence in Ian's life. His job as a journalist consists in reporting the most gruesome crimes. Consequently, he is not

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impressed any more by the atrocities that man can commit as he has seen how much harm a human being can inflict on another. Death is therefore an event that he could exploit, by spicing it up and turning it into a story fit to be published. Nevertheless, nothing could have prepared him for the hellish experience he will undergo. In order to explore the ways in which he relates to the event of death, it is necessary first to study his self-defeating attitude so as to understand the manner in which the encounter with this boundary situation determines him to question his basic tenets of faith.

When he is given the chance to start afresh with Cate he spoils it with his advances. In fact, even if Ian professes his affection towards her, he nevertheless rapes her at night, making her bleed. Therefore, there can be no glimpse of hope in this respect as the play charts the death of love and affection in the face of extreme evil of war. Notwithstanding, even if he is not capable of showing any authentic feelings himself, Ian nonetheless longs for it and when left on his own following the disaster, embraces the corpse of the soldier who had maimed him, pointing towards the fact human beings are fundamentally social beings. The rebirth of hope resides in Cate who in those terrible moments of hunger and danger is capable of putting her life at risk in order to find food for Ian and the baby.

One of the major interests of the play is the manner in which the characters experience and perceive the event of death. Ian suffers from a terminal disease and refuses to get a lung transfer. Instead he gulps gin and smokes, a fact which suggests his desperate clinging to life. Freud contends in *Civilizations and its Discontents*, that life is the battleground of the pleasure instinct and the death instinct and that it should be interpreted in terms of these two opposed forces. The death instinct for instance expresses itself in “aggressiveness and destructiveness” (66). From this point of view, human beings struggle between the demands of culture and their selfish wish for happiness. If we are to study Ian’s attitude from this Freudian perspective, we could surmise that the result of his inadequate sublimation of instincts leads to suffering. One way of averting suffering is intoxication, and Ian readily indulges in this vice, even in moments of desperation.

He maintains a pessimistic outlook and the vices seem to be his substitute for the real joys of life. In fact he is only trying to numb his pain and to fill his inner emptiness with something which is sure to give him some, albeit short satisfaction. He seems to accept his impending death and talks about it with serenity, convinced that there is nothing or no one worthwhile fighting for:

Ian     I’m fucked.  
 Cate    Can’t you get a transplant?  
 Ian     Don’t be stupid. They give it to people with a life. Kids.  
 Cate    People die in accidents all the time. They must have one spare.  
 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. (*Blasted* 11)

Although arrogant and apparently self-assured, Ian is the more vulnerable of the two. In fact, his disregard for his own health points towards the fact that he is plagued by low self-esteem and this makes him experience his impending demise in a more painful way. This is an essential element to take into account because “self-esteem is

a key to psychological security: as we have seen, it helps buffer anxiety, blunts defensive reactions to thoughts of death, makes people more resilient, and fosters physical, psychological, and interpersonal well-being” (Sheldon Solomon et al. 28). Moreover, according to terror management theory, self-esteem “embeds us psychologically in a symbolic reality in which physical death is not the end of us” (Lifshin et al. 79). Ill, forlorn and feeling rejected by the significant ones, Ian does not enjoy the fact of having a solid self-confidence stemming from good relationships and is therefore helpless when confronting his own mortality. His denial of the existence of an afterlife shields him against the terrible fear of the unknown beyond death. Therefore, beneath the external acceptance of his impending demise, there lies a deeper fear of letting go, which shapes his worldview, as I shall argue later on.

Death represents an implacable force for Cate as well. Cate, who seems to suffer from some kind of disability, has been Ian’s “girlfriend” for some years, when she was even underage. Now she is striving for some independence as she tries to find a job. Ian tries to thwart her intention by calling her stupid. When she deals with unpleasant situations, Cate suffers fits and has difficulties in regaining consciousness. As Ian mocks her when he hears about her plans of applying for a job at an advertising company, Cate feels “confused” and faints several times, bursting out laughing after the first one and then collapses again and coming “round as if waking in the morning” (8). Her revelations point toward a surreal experience of non-being:

Ian Thought you were dead.  
 Cate Suppose that’s what it’s like.  
 Ian Don’t do it again, fucking scared me.  
 Cate Don’t know much about it, I just go. Can be away for minutes or months  
 sometimes, then I come back just where I was.  
 Ian It’s terrible.  
 Cate I didn’t go far (9).

Unable to face the harsh reality, Cate shuts off in her world. This process of scotomisation involves the concurrence of knowledge and repression. As she cannot overcome unbearable experiences, she builds a kind of mental shield by means of which she denies the unpleasant reality and rejects it. Another way of accounting for Cate’s fits is the mechanism of repression. Otto Fenichel contends that “the repressed pushes toward consciousness and motility; it consists of impulses seeking outlets. In this seeking activity it tends to produce ‘derivatives’, that is, to displace its cathexes onto associatively connected ideas that are less objectionable to the conscious ego” (15). Unable to contain the disturbing feelings that overwhelmed her, she gives in by finding an outlet in these crises, which help her avoid facing disturbing situations. Nevertheless, when the situation becomes critical she shows great force of character, compassion and is able to maintain her composure.

For Ian, brutality constitutes a way of being. Death and abuse are inextricably intertwined aspects of his personhood. His whole approach to life consists in using force in order to get what he wants. When he is frustrated, as he is in the case of his ex-wife, he describes her with disparaging remarks. When Cate rejects his advances, he verbally mistreats her, threatens her with a gun and he is physically abusive. Cate entertains an ambivalent attitude towards him. She wants to comfort him but at the

same time seems to loathe him as she wipes her mouth after he kisses her. His job, as mentioned earlier, is to reveal the most heinous crimes and other appalling incidents. He therefore makes a living by taking advantage of other people's misery.

Another aspect that the play focuses on is the depiction of the horror of war by means of various acts of terrible brutality. Ian confesses to Cate that he is a killer, and that he did it because he loved his land: "Driving jobs. Picking people up, disposing of bodies, the lot" (28). Cruelty can engender cruelty. Intolerance, discrimination and biased attitudes are the elements that fuel conflicts:

Ian It's my job. I love this country. I won't see it destroyed by slag.

Cate It's wrong to kill.

Ian Planting bombs and killing little kiddies, that's wrong.

That's what they do. Kids like your brother. (30)

Ian's discourse reveals his demagoguery which he employs in order to justify killings. He is intent on manipulating Cate by appealing to common prejudices. What is not understood or accepted is portrayed as being threatening, turned into a scapegoat. Discrimination is therefore symptomatic of a society which entertains biased attitudes and the media has an important contribution in perpetuating these ideas, by capitalizing on people's apprehension and fear of the unknown. When Cate retorts that she does not believe in killing, Ian mocks her by telling her that she needs to grow up when on the contrary, the girl, who is still immature, seems to be the voice of reason in this case. Nevertheless, Ian is convinced that one should be prepared to retaliate in order to protect oneself and not back down and accept the situation as it is.

Ian's personality is defined by destructiveness and in order to understand his attitude towards death, we need to explore also what is at the root of his violent behaviour. Erich Fromm defines destructiveness as being one potential answer to "existential psychic needs" which can be satisfied in various ways, such as hate, sadism, destructiveness, narcissism (226). Ian is unable to maintain strong affective ties with anybody, relating to others "symbiotically" (233), by trying to control them, which takes the form of sadism. Ian struggles to solve his "existential split problem" (235) by focusing on his job and this social role. In fact, his cynicism and contempt enable him to perform it successfully but also bring about his fall. One of the most vital psychic needs that Fromm mentions is effectiveness, which is essential for his identity. In Ian's case, the need to effect is satisfied also by having power over the others. Ian enjoys having power over Cate, a naïve young girl, apparently suffering from a kind of disability, of whom he can take advantage under the false pretence of tenderness and care. In the case of interpersonal relations he feels potency to "effect fear and suffering" (237). He is inspired by the need to control and to subjugate. Confronted with the prospect of life, this is what excites him, and renders his existence worthwhile. Erich Fromm links the increase in violence and destructiveness in the society with people's lack of a "genuine sense of meaningfulness" (267). Ian cannot derive meaning from positive relations and is focused instead on his mortal self. He displays a sadistic character, a fact which is visible in his desire to hurt Cate. He threatens her with a gun, he hurts her and he eventually rapes her at night, proving the fact that for him a relationship is satisfying only when it implies domination.

Ian also displays signs of mental cruelty towards Cate as he often offends or makes fun of her. This is therefore another instance of sadistic attack which is meant to demean the other. The quintessence of sadism consists in exerting absolute control over the other and we can notice this trait in Ian's case, as he assaults Cate even when she is having a blackout and she is completely vulnerable because a sadist is driven only by the "helpless" according to Fromm. Feeling impotent in the face of death, Ian can gain a sense of omnipotence when he hurts Cate as this illusion has the potential to make him feel human and alive. This attitude is best explained by Fromm when he defines sadism as an answer to the problem of being born human:

The experience of absolute control over another being, of omnipotence as far as he, she, or it is concerned, creates the illusion of transcending the limitations of human existence, particularly for one whose real life is deprived of productivity and joy. Sadism has essentially no practical aim; it is not 'trivial' but 'devotional'. *It is the transformation of impotence into the experience of omnipotence; it is the religion of psychical cripples* (290).

The burden of living and its limitations can be appeased by Ian only by transforming his incapacity of changing his circumstances into ascendancy over another person. Masud Khan likewise argues that it constitutes "a compulsively repeated effort to create experience that will disguise and partially substitute for the absence of a sense of being alive as a human being" (Ogden 70). Unable to find in his barren existence another source of vitality or other motivations, Ian lures Cate into that hotel with a view to kindle in himself a sparkle of vitality and he can do that only by engaging in sadistic practices. He does not get along with his ex-wife or his own son because they proved to be persons who cannot be mastered. As he could not control them, he just dismisses them. In this sense Fromm underlies the fact that being "afraid of life" (291) and of what is uncertain, the sadist cannot love what he cannot control.

Unable to value the people in his life or to find anything sustaining to give meaning to it, he remains sullen and brutally cynical, devoid of any empathy. When it comes to actually killing somebody, Ian maintains the same haughty attitude; he overbearingly claims that taking someone's life is "easy as shitting blood". Even when he has to cope with the absurdity of war and its evil he is still certain that "Everything's got a scientific explanation" (53). Determined to prove that death was not stronger than him and that he had control over his fate, Ian wants to commit suicide but Cate gives him a gun without bullets. The death of the baby Cate had tried to save constitutes the final stage of decay in that eerie, unnatural atmosphere, pointing toward the fact that not even the most innocent can escape its clutches. Not even in such an extreme situation, can Ian show some compassion and he only blurts "Lucky bastard" (54). He has reached the bottom of selfishness. Cate bursts out laughing, "hysterically, uncontrollably", pointing towards the fact that there is no reason for all that obliteration. A heavy winter rain falls, as if there was a need to wash away all that blood shedding and sinfulness. Nevertheless, in those critical moments, what remains pressing for him is the need for connection, although he can no longer fulfil it in a destructive way, as he does at the beginning of the play, because Cate is the one who is in control now, and he therefore has to beg for her presence.

Karl Jasper's concept of boundary-situation that he explores in *Philosophy* can help illuminate the agonizing experiences that the characters undergo. By boundary-situation Jaspers means situations such as suffering, struggle, death, guilt, all of which "belong to Existenz" (179). Boundary situations allow one to interrogate his place in the world and the common humanity, as it "reveals the dubious character of the world's being, and of my being in the world" (184). When confronted with a boundary-situation, each of the characters longs to be understood and to be near someone, in that they "seek our own being in the other" (186). All the characters long to be with someone as solitude is unbearable in the dark night of the soul. The Soldier wants to touch Ian, in order to dispel the demons of his troubled consciousness. Ian embraces the corpse of the dead Soldier in a likewise attempt. Cate takes care of a baby even if she does not have anything to eat herself and even risks her life for the man who had done her so much harm. The death of a loved one is a boundary situation "total in character" and it comes to be "existentially shattering" as we can notice in the Soldier's case because it causes a radical transformation of his persona, damaging his sense of realness and aliveness. War and the life-altering event of losing his girlfriend in such a brutal way, plunge him into an abyss and existence turns into a perpetual torture. Death for him then becomes a necessity and something even banal and as he plainly confesses to Ian the murders he had been involved in. Those horrendous killings in which he had been involved and the death of his girlfriend had desensitized him and left him totally numb. As for his own death, he feels no fear, on the contrary he embraces it, committing one last appalling act, that of suicide. Thus, death for him comes as a relief, the solution to the utter despair to which he succumbs. As Kierkegaard said, despair is self-consuming but this self-consumption essentially involves impotence as "the despaired is not able to do what he wills, namely, to consume himself" (278).

Confronted with the prospect of his own death, Ian also faces a boundary situation, one which is "crucial" according to Jaspers. Ian is terminally ill and he struggles to convince himself that he is not afraid of dying and when Cate offers some champagne in Scene One he retorts that he does not want to make it easier for him. Cate, as well, argues that she is not afraid either; she is only concerned about her mother. Nevertheless, when confronted with the real thing, only Cate preserves her strength of character while Ian's behaviour verges on the insanity. Having found nothing of value in his life, Ian succumbs to "nihilistic despair". After the next step on the path of his moral and physical decay, namely the disfigurement he suffers, he comes to question God's existence: "No reason for there to be a God just because it would be better if there was" (53). He finds no comfort in God's existence and neither does he believe in the soul's journey to a better place after death, tunnels or lights: "Can't die and come back. That's not dying, it's fainting. When you die it's the end" (53). Karl Jasper's approach to Existenz "forced" by the boundary situation of death offers an insight into Ian's approach to the finality of death:

The fear of existential nonbeing is so different in kind from the fear of vital nonbeing that despite our use of the identical words, nonbeing and death, only one fear can truly reign. Nothing but the assurance that that will fulfill existential fear can relativize the fear of existence. By its certainty of being, Existenz enables me to control my craving

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for life and to find peace in facing death with the calm knowledge that it is the end. Existential death, on the other hand- when no faith, no assurance of being, has become a communicated reality in historic consciousness- is what turns the prospect of biological death into utter despair (189).

But what I suffer when I die, in the absence of any return, is *the absolute of not knowing*; in the void from which I do not get myself back any more in my own living form that would leave me satisfied to be, I impotently face the congealing point of my existence (195).

Ian's self-assurance crumbles when faced with the terrible loneliness after Cate goes to find food. He tries to end the struggle by committing suicide, which reveals the fact that he is not at all at peace with the suffering that death entails. Furthermore, his desperate clinging to life is revealed in his act of digging up the dead body of the baby and eating it. Ian becomes the victim of a psychotic episode and he engages in a macabre act of cannibalism. According to Ernest Becker, psychotic breaks are the result of repression which "no longer works, when the forward momentum of activity is no longer possible". That is when, "the fear of death emerges in its purest essence" (23). Having witnessed so many abominable acts and being a victim himself, he is convinced that death is the last stage and there are no more reassurances.

In the dark night, facing his sins, Ian holds in his arms the dead body of the Soldier, a fact which points out his being subject to an annihilation anxiety which is "uniquely concerned with threats to, or disturbances of, the capacity to function or to exist" (Hurvich 67). Suspended between life and death, this capacity is impaired and he regresses to an almost animal state, forced by the dire circumstances in which he is trapped. Jasper's description of the "loving struggle for Existenz" and finding solace in religion may help cast light on Ian's crisis:

The specter of loneliness looms as an expression of existential nonbeing when I did not love, and thus did not become a manifest Existenz. My consciousness, the phenomenon of possible Existenz, will face the brink of an abyss. A solution may seem to lie in community with deity, in the shelter of a religion that becomes my way to withdraw from the loving struggle, to subsist quietly as an isolated I, and neither to dare nor to tolerate having myself doubted (215).

As seen, Ian does not take this path and does not find consolation in religion. He only takes comfort in communion with another person and when the specter of imminent death looms, he enquires after his son Matthew and bids Cate to tell Shaun the truth. If Cate still finds strength in God, Ian maintains his nihilistic view. There can be no God as nothing makes sense: "No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia. No fucking nothing" (52).

Ernest Becker argues that "the symbol of death can be transmuted and transcended by man-belief in immortality, the extension of one's being into eternity" (24). Ian does not find any shelter in religion as Cate does, and so he is unwilling to invest his hopes in a superior force which would be capable of saving him. Cate, on the other hand, finds solace in praying not for herself, but for the baby, and one might surmise that faith is what empowers her and moreover her determination to save Ian

and the child. Therefore, in an unselfish act, she manages to find food by selling her body. Caring for others seems to be the way to fight death and avoid succumbing to despair. In fact, the fragile Cate that we see at the beginning of the play, who was prey to bouts of anxiety, turns into a mature, courageous individual, capable of taking fate in her hands, showing resilience in the face of death. At the end of the play she sucks her thumb, as this can be her only reaction to the absurdity of a war which had brought so much gratuitous devastation.

In conclusion, death emerges as a complex, almost palpable reality in the characters' lives. For Ian it is a way of making a living but it also constitutes the element that leads to his transformation into a humbler individual as a result of the enormous suffering he has experienced. As he is rendered powerless, by becoming blind, now he is at the mercy of Cate, who is capable of showing greater magnanimity than he did. Consequently, the characters face the event of death and cope with it in different ways, contact with this boundary situation leading to their assigning new meanings to it. Lost in a morass of killings, rapes and other atrocities, Soldier treats death as a necessary evil in a land rendered lawless by war. Therefore, he no longer has the capacity to be sensitive towards other people's pain as not even his death causes any apprehension to him in the middle of such havoc. Suicide or attempted suicide are responses to the brutality that the war engenders. The only trace of humanity that transpires from his confession is the immense grief that the death of his girlfriend causes him. Following Karl Jasper's line of argument, we have analysed the ways in which Ian deals with a boundary situation such as death. If at the beginning he seems to defy death by proclaiming his indifference to his terminal disease and his unwillingness to get a transplant, at the end of the play this mask of self-containment that he projected falls, revealing a vulnerable individual, who desperately clung on to life. Cate, on the other hand, shows a surprising degree of resilience in the face of death and resolve in risking her life in order to bring food to Ian, pointing towards the fact that there can still be hope if we manage to transcend our weaknesses and show more compassion.

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