

# *The Beckettian world of Sarah Kane*

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## THE BECKETTIAN WORLD OF SARAH KANE .

In July 2001 to coincide with the production of Sarah Kane's posthumous play *4.48 Psychosis* the Guardian newspaper ran a retrospective feature on the late playwright and her work. Amongst personal reminiscences from friends and colleagues and analysis of the plays and her reputation as a dramatist were a series of photographs. One of these, submitted by her friend Vincent O'Connell shows a smiling teenage Sarah Kane standing in front of a huge poster, which looks to have been made by hand and consisting of just two words 'Fuck Life'.<sup>1</sup> This phrase – the two closing words of Samuel Beckett's late play *Rockabye* (1980) – on the one hand reveals a perhaps surprisingly early teenage engagement with one of Beckett's lesser known late works, yet also both a vivid articulation of adolescent alienation and a later a recurring theme that came to dominate both Kane's life and work.

Out of the many influences on her work, above all it is the 'gaunt shadow'<sup>2</sup> of Samuel Beckett who has been as a constant presence throughout her drama. Kane herself has always been frank about the debt: 'I think my influences are quite obvious. Yes, Beckett, of course but not particularly consciously, because I'm practically unconscious when I write...But I was steeped in Beckett so it's not surprising that *Blasted* ends with an image of a man with his head poking out of the floor with the rain pouring through the ceiling onto his head.'<sup>3</sup>

This immersion in Beckett is in fact all pervasive, and extends from direct quotation and manipulation of well known phrases to reworkings of dramatic motifs and a language that often echoes the spare compelling rhythms of his work.

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Hattenstone, 'A Sad Hurrah', *Guardian Weekend*, 1 July 2000.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Billington. 'Review of *Crave*', *Guardian*, 15 August 1998.

Kane's debut *Blasted* is just such an amalgamation of themes, ideas and imagery from Beckett's two most well known plays, *Waiting for Godot* ( 1952 ) and *Endgame* ( 1957 ). Here, Kane appropriates Beckett's so called 'psuedo-couples'<sup>4</sup> and the mutually interdependent relationships between Vladimir / Estragon / Pozzo / Lucky and Hamm / Clov from *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Walter Asmus, who assisted Beckett's direction of his celebrated 1975 German production of *Waiting for Godot*, recounts a conversation with the playwright / director on the nature of these paired relationships: 'Gogo and Didi belong one to the stone, the other to the tree. That means they are connected, and at the same time there is always the tendency to go apart. He [Beckett] used this image of a rubber band: they pull together by means of a rubber band and then apart again, and so on.'<sup>5</sup>

As Fletcher and Spurling observe, Vladimir and Estragon 'have been joined in a sadomasochistic relationship for many years',<sup>6</sup> and a similar co-dependency is established between Ian and Cate in *Blasted*. The pair seem inextricably linked, with Ian's assertion that, 'we're one' (26), while Cate is always defined in terms of physical presence alongside her former boyfriend, and despite escaping and returning to the hotel room, it is only in her final scene with Ian where she acts independently.<sup>7</sup> While Beckett's characters torment each other verbally - often to pass the time or provoke a response, such as Estragon's pleased exclamation - 'That's the

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<sup>3</sup>Letter to Aleks Sierz, 18 January 1999.

<sup>4</sup>A term Beckett used in the English translation of his novel *The Unnameable* ( New York:Grove Press, 1958 ), p.297.

<sup>5</sup>Cited in Jonathan Kalb, *Beckett in Performance* ( Cambridge:CUP, 1989 ), p.175.

<sup>6</sup>John Fletcher and John Spurling. *Beckett: A Study of his Plays* ( London:Methuen, 1972 ), p.66.

<sup>7</sup>Although a case could be made that during periods when Ian is in the bathroom (3;25-6 ), we see Cate acting under her own volition.

idea, let's abuse each other'<sup>8</sup> - Kane's characters are more reminiscent of the overtly masochistic relationship played out between Pozzo and Lucky, or Hamm and Clov, where despite being given the opportunity to leave, a condition of servitude is preferred. The playwright David Greig, in his introduction to Kane's collected plays, considers that the line from *4.48 Psychosis*: 'Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander' (231), sets the pattern by which relationships are organised in Kane's work, whereby 'the three figures, always contained within the single body, serve as an honest and compassionate anatomy of the human experience of pain'.<sup>9</sup>

In *Blasted*, despite being raped by Ian and escaping from the hotel room, Cate still returns on two further occasions. Now blinded and helpless, his occupancy of the infant's grave under the floorboards of the hotel, as Kane herself pointed earlier, recalls the buried Winnie in *Happy Days* (1961), and the three imprisoned characters from *Play* (1962-3). The striking image of Ian occupying the makeshift infant's grave also recalls and in a sense dramatises Pozzo's well known speech, 'they give birth astride of a grave.' ( II: 82 ) from *Godot*. *Blasted* also ends in a frozen tableaux reminiscent of Beckett's pseudo-couples attempting to leave but being unable to do so, as Cate returns once more to feed her one time tormentor with gin and sausage.

Kane's use of the pseudo-couple is a notable feature of her work up until *Crave*. In *Phaedra's Love*, the eponymous queen talks of how much Hippolytus' presence draws and overwhelms even in his absence: 'Can feel him through the walls. Sense him. Feel his heartbeat from a mile...There's a thing between us, an awesome fucking thing, can you feel it? It burns. Meant to be. We were. Meant to be'(70-1). In her penultimate play *Crave*, where the four characters are

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<sup>8</sup>All quotations from Beckett's plays come from, *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* ( London:Faber 1986 ), p.70

<sup>9</sup>David Greig, Introduction to *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* ( London: Methuen, 2000 ), p.xvi.

replaced by the letters A, B, C and M, a still recognisable pairing of trapped and destructive relationships exists between A and C. The same relationship exists between M and B. He / she rejects M but is compelled to return. C also unsuccessfully attempts to escape from the influence of A, who refuses to relinquish their hold: 'don't say no to me you can't say no to me.'( 178 ) At the end of the play all four characters embrace an end which involves, 'Free-falling / Into the light / Bright white light'(200).

*Blasted* also reworks other well know Beckettian themes such as the activity of waiting and deferral of death. Here, Ian speeds up the imminent process of his own demise from lung cancer through drinking and smoking in order 'to enjoy myself while I'm here'(13 ).Whereas in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* music hall routines, game playing, bickering and questioning are employed to pass the time, in *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love* sex is the principal activity that attempts to fill the void. This is made explicit in Kane's reworking of the Phaedra myth and the queen's passion for her stepson. Despite Hippolytus admitting, 'I think of having sex with everyone', he gains no pleasure from the activity and only indulges in it because 'Life's too long' (79).

Ian and Hippolytus' enjoyment of the cruelties they inflict upon the women trapped with them are also reminiscent of the pleasure Hamm takes in *Endgame* with tormenting Clov. Beckett has described Hamm as 'the remains of a monster',<sup>10</sup> where his blindness and physical decrepitude renders his behaviour more pathetic than morally reprehensible. The same is also true of Ian as well as Hippolytus. Ian's terminal illness, and eventual sodomy and blinding at the hands of the

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<sup>10</sup>Beryl S. Fletcher et al. *A Student's Guide to the Plays of Samuel Beckett* ( London:Faber, 1978 ), p.22.

soldier, and Hippolytus' crippling depression act to make their characters more deserving of pity than condemnation.

Beckett's characters are often defined by their ability to endure, seemingly consigned to never being released from death. Richard Coe comments that, 'for Beckett's people, the boundary between life and afterlife becomes progressively vaguer',<sup>11</sup> where May in *Footfalls* (1975) or the protagonists in *Play* exist in liminal, indeterminate states. Again, here Kane is at her most Beckettian, where Ian in *Blasted*, after being blinded by the Soldier is left alone in the bombed out hotel room during which whole seasons pass. Eventually he crawls into the infant's grave where he 'dies with relief' (60). However, Ian's release into the afterlife is only granted for a short period, and he is brought back from the dead to continue life inside the shattered hotel room. In relation to this scene Kane has commented, '[Ian] dies, and he finds that the thing he has ridiculed - life after death - really does exist. And that life is worse than where he was before. It really is hell'.<sup>12</sup> As in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* the final scene avoids closure, and seems to suggest an infinite period of time stretching out for the couple. Ian's fear of 'not being' (10), earlier in the play returns to haunt him, and despite physically dying is brought back to life to endure indefinitely. As David Greig observes in his introduction to Kane's *Collected Plays*, the final image of Ian and Cate sheltering inside the wreckage of the hotel 'are not unlike those moments in Beckett where the human impulse to connect is found surviving in the most bleak and crushing places'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Richard N. Coe. *Beckett*, rev.edn (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), p.60.

<sup>12</sup> Letter to author, 31 October, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Greig, *Kane: Complete Plays*, p.x.

While this idea of a deferred state is returned to at the end of *Cleansed*, in which the mutilated figure of Grace is stranded indefinitely in her delusional state, 'safe on the other side'(150), Kane differs from Beckett in that predominantly her characters escape suffering through death.

Hippolytus in *Phaedra's Love* for instance willingly lets himself be ripped to pieces by the rioting mob outside the palace, ending the play with his dying words, 'if there could have been more moments like this'(103); the four characters in *Crave* collectively embrace their own destruction - while in *4.48 Psychosis* we learn that one of the speakers is 'charging towards my death'(207).

Whereas in Beckett individuals such as Victor Krapp in *Eleutheria* (1947) and the tramps in *Waiting for Godot* muse upon the subject, Kane's plays are notable in that on every occasion individuals either attempt, or finally succeed in taking their own life. By the time of *Crave* this has become an irresistible impulse, as it does in *4.48 Psychosis* with the speaker(s) calling on the audience to 'watch me vanish'(244). This is an important distinction to make regarding Kane's work from Beckett's, and calls to mind a comment made by the Irish critic Vivian Mercier as to 'why so few of Beckett's characters carry their distaste for life to its logical conclusion in self-destruction'.<sup>14</sup>

Part of the reason for this distinction might come from the two dramatists different responses to Cartesian models of selfhood. Whereas Beckett's characters seem to exist, albeit in a state of suffering between indeterminate states such as Mouth in *Not I* (1972), Kane has commented that the only point of unity and reconciliation is the moment when the subject takes their own life: 'With Hippolytus [in *Phaedra's Love*] is that in his moment of death everything suddenly connects. He has one moment of complete sanity and humanity. But in order to get there

he has to die. Actually that's a bit like the Soldier in *Blasted*. There, the only way he can ever learn what his girlfriend had to go through is when he's pulling the trigger. But of course the next moment is the moment of his death.<sup>15</sup>

In her last play *4.48 Psychosis* one of the speaker's asserts: 'Body and soul can never be married'(212), which for Kane is 'what madness is about'.<sup>16</sup> One of the speakers finds they gain a nightly moment of clarity when mind and body become one, yet the last lines of the play - 'watch me vanish'( 244 ) – seems to suggest the solution for this this rupture between mind and body is suicide.

This growing preoccupation with nihilism in Kane's work also perhaps explains the considerable stylistic changes that take place in the five plays written between 1995-1999, which rapidly assimilate the far slower dramatic development that Beckett's work took from the 1950's until his death in 1989. Essentially this concerns the increasing tendency for the plays to withdraw into themselves: setting is made nebulous characterizat0n becomes reduced to 'men and women talking to themselves.'<sup>17</sup>

For Beckett, this move towards a formal reductivity in his work seems to have been part of a long foreseen project. As far back as 1931 in an essay on Proust Beckett remarked that 'the only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the sprit, a descent.'<sup>18</sup> Due to Kane's far shorter career, this trajectory seems to progress far more rapidly and intensely, and is marked

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<sup>14</sup> Vivian Mercier, *Beckett / Beckett* ( Oxford:OUP, 1977 ), p.238.

<sup>15</sup> Nils Tabert ed.*Playspotting: Die Londoner Theaterszene der 90er* (Reinbeck:Rowohlt, 1998 ), p.2.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Fletcher and Spurling, *Beckett: A Study of his Plays*, p.37.

<sup>18</sup>Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (London: John Calder, 1965 ), p.65.



by the change of style in *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*. Speaking in regard to Beckett's drama in 1968 Ronald Hayman took issue with this process of sparse reduction being worthy of praise, or those critics who saw the technique as a new way of presenting 'universal' insights on human nature contemporaneous to Shakespeare: 'Obviously the experience of a mind which is alone with itself is every bit as legitimate a subject as relationships with other people. But in concerning himself more and more exclusively with the experience of solitude both in his novels and in his plays, Beckett is concerning himself with a small area out of the totality of possible experience'.<sup>19</sup>

The erosion of formal character that Hayman finds so problematic in Beckett's later work is also shared by the dramatist Phyllis Nagy in regard to Kane's last three plays: 'Beginning with *Cleansed* she became the subject of her work - often in a very liberating and surprising manner, and sometimes in a very dangerous manner'.<sup>20</sup> This aspect of the writer becoming sole subject and addressee is also seen by Fletcher and Spurling in Beckett's later drama, which they conclude 'is neither humane nor friendly, for the simple reason that it is addressed to himself'.<sup>21</sup>

Beckett's lack of interest in his own plays by the time they came to be performed in front of the public is well documented, and while Nagy admires the formal construction and power of Kane's final two plays, she questions their authenticity as works for actual performance and their seeming refusal to formally acknowledge the presence of an audience:

There is only one character in both of those plays [*Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*], despite the number of voices present... There is a narrative both in *Crave* and in *4.48 Psychosis*, but there is not really what I would call 'character'. When you abandon character you abandon drama, so for me she has effectively abandoned drama... there is a diminishment of

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<sup>19</sup> Hayman. *Samuel Beckett*, p.80.

<sup>20</sup> Saunders, *Theatre of Extremes*, p. 156.

<sup>21</sup> Fletcher and Spurling. *Beckett: A Study of his Plays*, p.37.

dramatically viable image structure in both of the last two plays, which renders them, for me, viable works of experimental literature rather than viable works of drama.<sup>22</sup>

Peter Morris believes *Crave* 'is just Sarah Kane doing herself in different voices';<sup>23</sup> while Kane's agent Mel Kenyon believes, 'throughout her career, the effort was not to write monologues' - and that *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love* and *Cleansed* were in fact constructed from a spirit of writing against dramatic instinct. While Kenyon believes that the plays 'incredible restraint is part of their beauty,' eventually the effort proved too much and that, 'as a writer she thought "fuck it! I'm not going to write a play in the way they think I'm going to write a play."' However, what I should have noticed is that now she was refusing to deal with the outside world'.<sup>24</sup> Enoch Brater, speaking in relation to Beckett's drama calls this 'genre under stress' whereby, 'the theatre event is reduced to a piece of monologue and the play is reduced to something else, something that looks suspiciously like a performance poem'.<sup>25</sup> Fletcher and Spurling also identify much the same trait in Beckett's work: 'The truth is that [the plays are] intended in the first place to satisfy himself, as sole audience...'<sup>26</sup>

Kane's first three pieces of dramatic writing before *Blasted* had all been in the form of monologues, and in an interview with Aleks Sierz explained 'I needed to find out if I could write a full length play with more than one person in it'. The monologue privileges the individual with its mode of the confessional, and while it does not necessarily reject the audience out of hand neither does it overtly choose to include them. Asked in the interview with Sierz if she considered her audience while writing Kane was unequivocal: 'I suppose what I'm thinking about

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<sup>22</sup> Saunders, *Theatre of Extremes*, p.131

<sup>23</sup> Peter Morris, 'The Brand of Kane', *Arête*, 4 (2000), 142-152 (150).

<sup>24</sup> Simon Stephens, Interview with Mel Kenyon, Royal Court Sarah Kane Season: Resource Pack.

<sup>25</sup> Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism* (Oxford: OUP, 1987), p.3.

<sup>26</sup> Fletcher and Spurling, *Beckett: A Study of his Plays*, p.37.

when I'm writing is how I want a particular moment or idea to effect me, and what the best way of eliciting that response from myself is. And if it can make me respond in that way, then the chances are that there will be at least one other person who will respond in the same way'.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, I would also argue that Kane's work never fully becomes a private discourse with itself in the same way that plays such as *Eh Joe* (1966) and *Rockaby* (1980) do. In the 2001 revival of *Blasted*, part of a Sarah Kane season at the Royal Court, Benedict Nightingale takes issue with those critics who picked up on the Beckettian echoes in *Blasted*, and points out the essential difference between the two writers: 'Beckett's vision was metaphysical, Kane's moral, social, political and very much of our times'.<sup>28</sup> Even *4.48 Psychosis* has scenes in which there is recognizably more than one speaker; and while it will always be vulnerable to the obvious interpretation of essentially being a dramatic suicide note, the play also concerns itself with the treatment of the mentally ill individual in British society.<sup>29</sup>

Fellow playwright (and another significant influence on Kane's work) Edward Bond, despite misgivings that the territory of 'existentially spaceless' writers such as Beckett was 'also a place where Sarah Kane began to wander',<sup>30</sup> also argues that *4.48 Psychosis* creates a world for itself, and is not just a retreat into the writers psyche: 'You cannot talk of any play - as 'private' - because it always involves a world...For the play to have value we have to know what the play has to do with our world and the way we live in it...She [Kane] forces us in a sense to live with

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<sup>27</sup>Sarah Kane, Interview with Aleks Sierz, 18 January 1999.

<sup>28</sup>Benedict Nightingale, Review of *Blasted*, *The Times*, 3 April 2001.

<sup>29</sup>For a fuller discussion see Graham Saunders, 'Just a word on the page and there is the drama.' Sarah Kane's Theatrical legacy. *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13 (2003), 97-110 (105-6).

<sup>30</sup>Edward Bond, unpublished letter to Sean Holmes, 9 December 2002.

our own annihilation - by having to live with hers. The sacrificed victim always returns to haunt the sacrificers'.<sup>31</sup>

However, Beckett's trademark process in language of 'reduction, intensification and simplification'<sup>32</sup> increasingly became an integral element of Kane's drama from *Phaedra's Love* onwards. This manifested itself in both language and staging. With *Cleansed* for instance, Kane was looking for a purity of language approaching that of Büchner's *Woyzeck*, which she had directed in a production at the Gate Theatre in October 1997. She describes it as 'an absolute perfect gem of a play to look at for this. Anything remotely extraneous or explanatory is completely cut and all you get is those moments of high drama'. Taking this as the model for *Cleansed* Kane set out, 'to strip everything down; I wanted it to be small, and when I say small I mean minimal; poetic, and I didn't want to waste any words. I really hate wasted words.' Kane reworked the practice in a different manner for her next play: '*Crave* is at the other end of the scale, it's got more words than any of my other plays, but its actually half the length of anything else I've written. Again, there's no waste, I don't like writing things you really don't need, and my favourite exercise is cutting - cut, cut, cut'!<sup>33</sup>

This process also slowly manifested itself gradually in the ongoing staging of the plays. Despite setting *Blasted Phaedra's Love* and *Cleansed* in claustrophobic rooms, reminiscent of *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape* Kane's theatre was extravagant in it's conception of look and dramatic incident. While Ronald Hayman observes that in Beckett, 'scenically, a single tree is the greatest

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<sup>31</sup>Edward Bond, letter to author, 9 November 2000.

<sup>32</sup>Charles Lyons, *Samuel Beckett* (London, Macmillan, 1982), p.3.

<sup>33</sup>Sarah Kane, 'Brief Encounter', public Interview with Dan Rebellato, London, 3 November, 1998.

extravagance he has ever allowed himself',<sup>34</sup> in Kane's theatre, amongst other things we see the stage set in *Blasted* torn apart from a mortar bomb (39); a vulture circling overhead in *Pheadra's Love* (103), while a host of daffodils burst through the stage in *Cleansed* (113).

Yet, by the time of *Crave* such stage directions had been abandoned entirely. While designer Georgia Scion and director and Vicky Featherstone in the first British production gave the voices of the actors a given a context in which to speak by setting the play in the genre of a TV chat show, one could see this decision to be essentially a palliative one: especially in the knowledge that one of Kane's early ideas was to set *Crave* completely in the dark, so that actors' voices would appear to come out of a void.<sup>35</sup>

While *Crave* in some respects imitates Beckett's practice of replacing names with letters in plays such as *Cascando* (1962) and *Play*, Kane's last play *4.48 Psychosis* had dispensed with any form of nomenclature entirely - to the extent that from the written text alone it would be difficult to ascertain even the number or gender of speakers. James MacDonald, director of its British premiere saw the last two plays as part of a dramatic process: 'with *Crave* she made another jump forward into an abstraction of character, and with *4.48 Psychosis* she realised she could go further - beyond Beckett even'.<sup>36</sup>

Both *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* certainly resemble Beckett's later drama in their attempts to also articulate, 'the image of a mind, alienated from its body'.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, this abstraction is accompanied by an intense scrutiny of the physical presence of the actor on stage by both dramatists in their later work. In part this is also shown from their shared practice of mutilating

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<sup>34</sup> Ronald Hayman, *Samuel Beckett*. (London: Heinemann, 1970), p.39.

<sup>35</sup> Saunders. *Theatre of Extremes*, p.137.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*; p.121.

<sup>37</sup> Lyons, *Samuel Beckett*, p.4.

and confining their protagonists on stage. Katherine Worth believes that in the case of Beckett the practice allows both playwright and audience, 'to concentrate on the fine shades of their inner life.'<sup>38</sup> Like Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot* in *Blasted* Ian is rendered blind while in *Cleansed* Carl is ritually mutilated by Tinker to the point where his tongue, hands and feet are removed. And while Beckett in *Not I* (1972), famously reduces the actor to a disembodied mouth, Kane goes further in reducing and refining physical presence - at least textually - to speaking voices rather than bodies on stage. Of course, the opposite can be argued, in that the voices in the text are ultimately embodied by the very physical presence of the actors on stage. This can be seen in the British premiere of *Crave* where director, designer and Kane herself eventually chose to almost exclusively confine the characters to chairs, a decision which forces an audience to scrutinise the actors continuously.

This concentration on the rhythm of language in *Crave* is just one feature of this most overtly Beckettian influenced play. There is a sense that at times the rhythms of the language dominate over meaning. This is something that Beckett incorporated into his own work, often through his characters mouthing fragments of well known biblical and literary quotation. He has commented:

I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them...There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine... 'Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.' That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters.<sup>39</sup>

Beckett uses this 'shape' as a basis for the discussion Vladimir and Estragon conduct over the differing accounts of the two thieves at Christ's crucifixion In *Crave* this process is developed further in that the shape and rhythm of the words at times become the true signifier of meaning:

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<sup>38</sup>Katherine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (Athlone Press, London, 1986), p.245.

<sup>39</sup>Harold Hobson, 'Samuel Beckett: Dramatist of the Year', *International Theatre Annual*

‘Normally, when I am writing, I know what the intention and the meaning of the line is. With *Crave* I knew what the rhythm was, but I did not know what I was going to say. There were a couple of times I used musical notation, only the rhythm without actual words.’<sup>40</sup>

Although T.S Eliot’s *The Wasteland* (1922), is of primary importance in shaping *Crave* through direct quotation, as well as borrowings from its themes and structure,<sup>41</sup> the critic Michael Billington observes that, ‘you can actually hear the rhythms of *Godot*’.<sup>42</sup> At times this comes from direct quotation such as the use of its famous opening line, ‘nothing to be done’ ( 182 ), but is at its most explicit in the following exchanges:

A Life happens  
B Like flowers  
C Like sunshine  
A Like nightfall  
C A motion towards  
A It is not my fault. (191)

**Vladimir** They make a noise like wings.  
**Estragon** Like leaves.  
**Vladimir** Like sand  
**Estragon** Like leaves.  
**Vladimir** They all speak together (58)

While Beckett’s later drama is also predominantly language driven, it differs from Kane’s in that there is always a central anchoring visual image to each play: the wide brimmed hat on the centre of the table in *Ohio Impromptu* (1981); May’s measured and obsessive pacing in *Footfalls* (1975), or the unveiling through light of The Protagonist in *Catastrophe* (1982). In *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* such distinct images have been abandoned, and in their place it is left to the

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(London, 1956), p.156

<sup>40</sup>Johan Thielemans. ‘Rehearsing the Future’: 4th European Directors Forum. Strategies for the Emerging Director in Europe ( London: Director’s Guild of Great Britain, 1999 ), p.12.

<sup>41</sup>See Saunders, *Theatre of Extremes*, pp.102-5.

actors, director and designers' interpretation of the drama rather than the playwrights' conception.

However, this is not to say that such explicitly realised imagery by the dramatist is not present. It is perhaps better to say that it is *buried*. In the case of *Crave*, one reason behind this might be the strong adoption it seems to make of the structure and imagery from Beckett's *Play*. Despite introducing a fourth character, Kane retains Beckett's device of replacing nomenclature with letters to designate character, and despite foregoing the memorable image of the imprisoned speakers in urns there is the same sense of entrapment and limbo. Both plays also examine the damage that the pursuit of love can inflict on the characters who appear compelled to talk about their obsessions and betrayals involving their trapped counterparts. Vicky Featherstone, the director of *Crave*'s British premiere believes that in Kane's play, 'they are four voices in the darkness - and only exist to speak because people will listen to their sorrow.'<sup>43</sup> Both plays also use repetition to suggest a circular Dantesque vision of hell for the protagonists, although Kane's speakers seem more aware of their counterparts than Beckett's.

Also employed in both is the central motif of light. In *Play* Anna McMullan believes the use of light functions as a stark interrogatory tool directed at the speakers, associated with 'revelation and judgement.'<sup>44</sup> While the final stage direction of *Cleansed* - '*The sun gets brighter and brighter...until the light is blinding*' (151) - also exposes Grace and Carl to the same state of exposed vulnerability; and while the physical image is absent from *Crave*, the idea still holds revelatory experience through the speakers embracing it through a comforting yet ultimately nihilistic oblivion: 'free-falling / Into the light / Bright white light' (200). It is also an image of

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Billington, 'Review of *Crave*', *Guardian*, 15 August 1998, p.12

<sup>43</sup> Saunders, *Theatre of Extremes*, p.132.



simultaneous solace and destruction in *4.48 Psychosis*, where the speakers often repeat like a mantra, 'Remember the light and believe in the light' (206).

Ultimately, within *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* the harrowing journeys Kane makes into her own psyche are what really unites her with Beckett. Ronald Hayman writing in 1970 observes that neither a well known Beckett enthusiast such as Harold Pinter, 'nor any other Beckett followers have inherited his purity or his integrity.'<sup>45</sup> However, I would argue that Sarah Kane has consciously followed what Hayman calls Beckett's 'unshakeable fidelity to his own vision,'<sup>46</sup> and despite making a case that Kane's work has more of an engagement with the outside world than Beckett's, her concerns predominantly occupy a metaphysical terrain. This aspect of her writing places her far closer to being a follower of Beckett - certainly closer than her own contemporaries writing in the mid 1990s. Whereas writers such as Joe Penhall, Mark Ravenhill and Nick Grosso chose to look at aspects of contemporary, often urban Britain, Kane like Beckett increasingly took a path of 'the mind turn[ing] in on itself, analysing the conditions of living, and the nature of the energy that drives [us] on'.<sup>47</sup>

From the repetition of Hamm's curse in *Endgame* - 'The bastard! he doesn't exist,' to Ian's epiphany in *Blasted*, 'The cunt' (57) - Kane's drama - like Beckett's before has unsparingly interrogated questions concerning the reason for suffering, the existence of God and the afterlife and the nature of love as both an ecstasy and hellish torment. There is also the feeling that Kane is more earnest concerning matters of religion and damnation than Beckett's often mocking or

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<sup>44</sup>Anna McMullan, *Theatre on Trial: Beckett's Later Drama* (London:Routledge, 1993), p.17.

<sup>45</sup>Hayman, *Samuel Beckett*, p.79.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid*;

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid*; p.75.

contemptuous response. In Ken Urban's view, 'for Kane, hell is not metaphysical; it is hyperreal, reality magnified,'<sup>48</sup> and which may come from the residues of her former Christian faith.<sup>49</sup>

Despite using a dramatic form that on the surface might appear unfriendly or difficult, Beckett and Kane's perhaps most lasting legacy has been their ability to simultaneously occupy the plateaux of avant-garde and popular culture. Fletcher, Smith and Bachem argue that Beckett's formal methodologies in 'setting out the metaphysical doubts that torment us,' have quickly passed from being innovative to seem natural and inevitable.<sup>50</sup> Johnathan Kalb however believes that it is the relative speed of Beckett's inclusion that made it possible for him 'to smuggle certain progressive ideas across the boundary of mainstream culture'.<sup>51</sup>

Kane's work, albeit on far more modest scale is known to a considerably younger audience, who may not know of her initially as a dramatist. This has come about through dissemination of her drama by several pop artists. For instance, lines from *Crave* form the basis of the song, 'An Echo A Stain' on Bjorks' album *Vespertine* (2001), as does the song '4.48 Psychosis' on The Tindersticks *Waiting for the Moon* (2003).

While Peter Morris argues that Kane's death in 1999 has seen her 'reconfigured as a kind of easily-assimilated icon, like Duchamp's urinal now placidly enshrined in some vast museum',<sup>52</sup> and, 'far from being eternally avant-garde, she too has become a commodity, a trademark, at last: Brand Kane'.<sup>53</sup> Beckett too has become a brand - his distinctive features emblazoned on such disparate products as t-shirts promoting the Irish Tourist Board to advertizing Microsoft

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<sup>48</sup> Ken Urban, 'An Ethics of Catastrophe': The Theatre of Sarah Kane, *Performing Arts Journal*, 69 (2001), pp. 36-46 (45).

<sup>49</sup> Saunders, *Theatre of Extremes*, pp.22-3.

<sup>50</sup> Fletcher et al, *Student's Guide to the Plays of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber) p.22.

<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Kalb. *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), p.158.

<sup>52</sup> Morris, 'Brand of Kane', p.142.

computer software. Ultimately, the importance of the both dramatists legacy is dependent on the energy and relevancy that come from revivals of their work.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p.152.