



Intertextual Readings in Comparative Philosophical Perspective: Philosophical Reflections on Sarah Kane's Drama

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Abstract: Sarah Kane, as a representative writer of British theater in the late twentieth century, is known for her works that face the cruel reality and challenge social taboos. Based on Sartre's theory of intertextuality and under the perspective of comparative philosophy, this study analyzes, through the theoretical frameworks of philosophers such as Jung, Husserl, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Butler, the relationship between the "social dominant group" and the "marginalized characters" in Kane's three dramatic works *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love*, and *Cleansed*, which reveals the rich philosophical ideas of collective unconsciousness, existentialism, and gender fluidity behind the behavior of the characters in the works. The innovation of the study is to show how Kane skillfully uses the theatrical techniques of "strangeness" and "alienation" to make the audience think critically in a sense of alienation, thus making the play an effective medium to stimulate philosophical reflection.

Keywords: Sarah Kane; intertextuality; comparative philosophy; dramatic arts

1. Introduction

Sarah Kane, whose plays are filled with extreme violence and taboos, has been labeled a practitioner of "in-your-face theatre" or Aalto's "theatre of cruelty". Kane's plays unabashedly depicted the inner collapse of modern society, the indulgence in drugs, bloody violence, sexual abuse, and the fear of war, a blunt display that often provoked widespread controversy among theater and critics. The British press labeled her production of *Blasted* "a disgusting meal of filth" that was "like sticking your head in a bucket of slop". As she passed away, her work began to be reevaluated, and her profound humanism and courage to explore the boundaries of art were again recognized. As Sarah Kane herself said, "The plays never seemed to me to be about violence and cruelty. Both (violence and cruelty) are purely incidental when the plays are about how to continue to love and hope while love and hope remain."

Sartre's writing emphasizes "intertextuality," combining literary images with philosophical ideas to explore existential issues. [1] Based on Sartre's theory of intertextuality, this study selects three of Sarah Kane's plays, *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love*, and *Cleansed*, as the objects of study under a comparative philosophical perspective. Through multiple philosophical perspectives and profound textual interpretations, this study reveals the richness of humanism and philosophical discourse in Kane's plays, and explores how Kane makes theater an effective medium for stimulating philosophical reflection.

2. Collective Unconscious and Philosophical Ideas Behind the Behavior of Socially Dominant Groups in Sarah Kane's Plays

Psychologist Carl Jung defined the collective unconscious as the ancestral legacy of representational possibilities common to all humans and animals. [2] Archetypes are the most important part of the "collective unconscious", and one of the archetypes, the shadow, represents the dark side of the unconscious self. Husserl's phenomenology similarly argues that the structure of individual history is polished by past and collective experience by "drawing on experience." [3] In other words, only individual lives integrated into cultures and societies with a historical identity can be recognized.

Ian in *Blasted* is terminally ill, with only one lung lobe left after years of smoking and drinking. This does not prevent him from being deeply racist, sexist and homophobic. From the words "Tip the Arab who delivers the sandwiches" and "I'm sick of this city stinking of Arabs and Pakistanis" to his extreme behavior of violence, humiliation, aggression, and attempts to control the marginalized group of Kate, Ian reflects the collective unconscious in the male power system of the society and symbolizes the suppression of the "other" by the society. The soldier in the play is the external manifestation of Ian's inner "shadow." The soldier's almost parallel behavioral relationship between the soldier and Ian makes the latter an enlarged version of the former, and the two events have the same and homogeneous nature, from the soldier recounting the atrocities of his abuse of civilians during the war to the rape of Ian and the plucking out of his eyes and swallowing them. [4] Heidegger interprets death as a collapse of the world or a disintegration of meaning that robs us of our ability to understand

and recognize who we are. [5] Unable to move on from the memories of the tragic death of his lover or to seek solace in the abuse of others, the soldier's world disintegrates and he eventually drinks himself to death - when all the values, ethics, and meanings in the world fail to explain or alleviate his suffering, death becomes the only option.

In *Phaedra's Love*, King Theseus is the last of the play's major characters to make an appearance, and when he discovers that his son Hippolytus and his step-wife Phaedra have cuckolded him, Theseus turns his wrath on the innocent Strophisch for no apparent reason. He rapes Strophisch in full public view and brutally slits her throat. It is only after the tragedy that he realizes in horror what he has done, but it is only with a simple, "I'm sorry. Didn't know it was you." In the collective unconscious, this extreme violence and destructive behavior can be seen as a residual primitive animalistic nature of mankind from the distant past, which is aroused in times of mental anguish that the individual cannot bear. Theseus's atrocities are typical of shadow casting, i.e., the transfer of repressed negative emotions from within to another innocent object, by which he tries to re-establish his authority and status. This echoes psychoanalytic assumptions about the unconscious, particularly its conceptualization of violence and primitiveness, revealing a colonial element in its idea of violence as a "return" to the reproduction of base savagery. [6]

In *Cleansed*, Tinker, the "moral policeman," is influenced by long-accumulated power structures and social norms, and he builds his own barriers, the schoolyard in the play being a disciplinary feature of the social structure. Foucault's concept of panoramic openness focuses on the individual, on discipline, and replaces social sovereignty with the power of discipline. [7] It is the privilege of discipline that Tinker utilizes to inflict "justice" on the marginalized, and it is particularly direct and brutal in the case of Carl and Rod, a gay couple. Tinker first beat Carl, then cut out his tongue with scissors, then cut off his arms and left them to be torn apart by rats, until finally brutally cutting off his feet. In the case of Rhodes, Tinker's brutality was outright castration. Society views homosexuality as a "moral failing," so violence is used to suppress and erase their gender identity, embodying sexual repression in the shadows. Postmodernism focuses on deconstructing false closures and detecting the fluidity and permeability of life forms, rather than seeking a grounded and comprehensive theory of society. [8] The Tinker-controlled campus represents the social structure of false closure and seeks to exclude the diversity and mobility represented by marginalized figures.

According to Nietzsche, the individual justifies his or her existence through the pursuit of power and control, describing the superman as the controller and determiner of his or her own life and the lives of others. [9] The dominant social group in Kane's three works confirms its existence through violence and destruction, fully embodying what Nietzsche calls "the will to power". The individual's will to power is essentially the desire for power and the suppression of "dissent", and is in fact nothing more than a pathetic projection of shadows from the collective unconscious. The results sought by the dominant social groups do not bring them true freedom or self-realization, but instead lead them into deeper suffering and destruction. Ian is abused and his eyes gouged out by an enlarged version of his own "soldier", King Tertius is plunged into deep grief and despair over the death of his son, and Tinker confines himself to emotional isolation and mental shackles, seeking emotional solace only through the dancers in the box. This echoes Nietzsche's superhuman emphasis on creativity, spirituality, and the complete centralization of the will to power, which can lead to coercion, repression, and self-destruction. [10]

3. Philosophical Ideas Behind Marginal Characters in Sarah Kane's Plays

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism encourages human beings to create value through free choice and self-determination, embodying the essence of human spirituality. [11] In *Blasted*, Kate, who typifies the marginalized character, is an intellectually and physically challenged woman who has difficulty with speech and suffers from frequent syncope. The pain of her social marginalization is exacerbated by her violent repression by the dominant social group represented by her ex-boyfriend Ian. According to Beauvoir, biology is the main source of female oppression in a patriarchal society, while sexuality is another aspect of female oppression and exploitation. [12] Kate's situation mirrors this process of "othering", as her position in society is marginalized by her biology, gender identity, and social vulnerability. However, Kate chooses to forgive and redeem Ian as he is dying, and she feeds the dying Ian with the food she has exchanged for her body. Kate's act of redemption is not a submission to violence; rather, it is her refusal to be a victim who defines the meaning of her own existence by her own choices. When Ian says "Thank you" to her, it is not only a thank you for Kate's actions, but also an acknowledgement of her role as a redeemer.

Nietzsche's nihilism refers to a detachment from important values, similar to the collapse of an existentialist ideology or traditional moral system. [13] In *Phaedra's Love*, Kate's anti-hero, Hippolytus, is obsessed with video games, junk food, and promiscuity with his stepmother, half-sister, and people of all colors. He realizes that many of the people who approach him are not sincere, but are out for power and status. He compares birthday presents to "bombs" and considers all material and emotional things to be hypocritical. Hippolytus chooses to isolate himself from the consumer society, becoming a marginal-

ized Other. His lifestyle and his misanthropy fit into Nietzsche's philosophy of nihilism, in which he goes to nothingness due to an internal breakdown and a total rejection of all external value systems, including family, society, religion, and power. According to Sartre, malice is a refuge and a decompressor in the face of inner nihilism, providing a way to "construct" oneself and the world out of nothingness.[14] When Hippolytus' stepmother Phaedra expresses her love for him and performs oral sex on him, Hippolytus returns the favor by maliciously revealing that he is in fact having an adulterous affair with her daughter. He temporarily suppresses his inner emptiness by hurting others, causing Phaedra to commit suicide in utter humiliation and despair. According to Tolstoy and Heidegger, only at the "moment" or "sensation" of death does existence reveal its true face, and life has no predetermined meaning.[15] Phaedra leaves a false accusation that Hippolytus raped her before committing suicide, and Hippolytus refuses to speak the truth to justify himself in the face of the atrocity. While vultures circled down and began to peck at his body, Hippolytus laughed and said, "How wonderful it would be if there were more times like this in life!" This is the moment when Hippolytus finally puts an end to all the falsehoods of his life, and death instead gives him a certain sense of reality.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performance is concerned with the ways in which gender identity is embodied and expressed, rather than a reflection of some underlying physical reality.[16] Cooler theory introduces a wider range of gender identity possibilities that challenge the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, thereby influencing and changing the way we view the concept of gender.[17] In Sarah Kane's third play, *Cleansed*, the homosexuals Rod and Carl represent the socially rejected "other". Their gender and sexuality are deconstructed in a way that not only challenges societal expectations, but also breaks the gender binary. Carl's identity, even after the loss of his male symbol, is still reinvented in his emotional relationship with Rod, where gender fluidity is represented. Plato's eros represents an increasingly selfless love for beauty, a love that leads to a more total commitment to its pursuit and fulfillment. [18] When Grace has an incestuous relationship with her deceased brother's soul, the sunflower that appears on stage symbolizes the purity and unique value of life. In Plato's perspective, Grace's quest for a pure, transcendent love is the beauty of the highest spirit. Kane does not shy away from the tragic fate of marginalized characters in the face of social oppression. Unable to get a response from his teacher Grace, Robin loses his emotional support and eventually goes to self-destruction. This echoes the image of the soldier in *Blasted*, which illustrates Heidegger's understanding of "death"- when the inner world gradually disintegrates and collapses, death becomes the only relief.

4. The Utility of Strangeness and Alienation in Sarah Kane's Drama

"Strangeness" is a concept proposed by Shklovsky, a Russian formalist in the 20th century, which refers to the artistic treatment of everyday familiar things to keep them at a certain distance from the aesthetic subject, so as to produce an unfamiliar sense of beauty.[19] In three of Kane's plays, this technique of strangeness is skillfully used. For example, the cozy little hotel room in *Blasted*, the college campus in *Cleansed*, and love and affection are all familiar life scenes and relationships, but Kane fills them with inhuman atrocities and twisted and perverted love, so that the audience is completely unfamiliar with the place, morality, emotion, and pain, and is forced to maintain a rational distance and enter a new aesthetic experience, pondering in the strangeness the concepts behind these familiar. Brecht's "alienating utility" emphasizes the dialectical relationship between the actor/character and the audience, requiring the audience to maintain an emotional and intellectual distance from the stage.[20] Kane's "strangeness" is similar to Brecht's "alienating utility" in that it aims to distance the audience from the stage emotionally and intellectually, thus prompting them to become critical observers and thinkers rather than mere emotional receivers. This effect is similar to the emotional detachment and rational reflection achieved by "Breaking the Fourth Wall." However, the traditional way of "breaking the fourth wall" is usually for the characters to speak directly to the audience, or even to question their existence, which explicitly reminds the audience that they are "watching." However, Kane's "strangeness" is more implicit, as she shakes the audience's empathy through distortion, extreme emotion and moral fragmentation, causing them to calmly back away from the shock, creating a sense of detachment, and thus achieving the purpose of Brecht's "alienating effect", which is to lead the audience into rational observation and philosophical reflection.

5. Conclusion

Based on Sartre's theory of intertextuality, this study analyzes the philosophical ideas behind the behaviors of "mainstream social groups" and "marginal characters" in Sarah Kane's three representative dramatic works *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love*, and *Cleansed* from a comparative philosophical perspective. The study reveals that Kane's plays are not merely uncomfortable scenes of horror, but are full of humanistic care and rich in philosophical connotations such as the collective unconscious, existentialism, nihilism, and gender fluidity. The innovation of the study is to show that Kane's play becomes an effective medium to stimulate philosophical reflection by guiding the audience to think critically in the midst of alienation

through the techniques of "strangeness" and "alienation". It is this bold and innovative expression and deep concern for the marginalized that made Kane one of the most influential playwrights in Europe during her lifetime.

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