

# A queer reading of pain and catharsis in Sarah Kane

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**ABSTRACT:** This contribution represents a preliminary attempt to explore theatre and BDSM as intersecting performative *loci* of queer resistance through a reading of two works by British playwright Sarah Kane, the play *Cleansed* (1998) and the screenplay for television *Skin* (1997). Both works feature practices, such as degradation, spanking, and other forms of physical and emotional pain infliction traditionally found on the BDSM scene, especially in sadomasochistic interactions. While current criticism tends to pathologize the brutality displayed in Kane's early works, my contention is that here pain infliction and reception are enacted as anti-normative relational modes both in the interactions among characters on stage and in the relationship with their audience. The BDSM "scene" and the theatre stage here overlap as safe spaces to experiment with sadomasochistic relationalities, offering experiences of catharsis that can work at a deep emotional and political level to elaborate a resistant queer performativity.

**KEYWORDS:** Sarah Kane; BDSM; sadomasochism; catharsis; theatre; contemporary English literature.

Safe on the other side and here.  
Sarah Kane, *Cleansed*

A young white man is tied to a bed, while a black woman shaves his head fully. She then proceeds to scrub his scalp and other parts of his body with a stiff brush, while he screams in pain. In this way she removes a swastika he had previously drawn on his right hand. She then kisses the hand.

A woman is beaten and then raped by a group of unseen men. One man is beside her, holding her, guiding her through the pain. At the end of her ordeal, a second man comes in, kneels beside the woman and takes her hand.

The peculiar mixture of tenderness and brutality enacted here may remind anyone who is familiar with BDSM practices of the interactions featured in a Master/slave, and in particular in a sadist/masochist relationship. Yet these scenes are not to be witnessed in a dungeon or playroom, but in the theatre (the second) or on television (the first), while watching two works by British playwright Sarah Kane, the play *Cleansed* and the

short film *Skin*. And while Kane's work is already well-known for its use of graphic violence, these echoes of BDSM interactions question its superficial shock value to offer new insights in pain and catharsis as closely related phenomena, and in particular in the infliction and reception of pain as an anti-normative relational mode.

From this intersection with Kane's work, BDSM emerges not only as a recognizable set of practices, but also as a critical perspective, a way to read and interpret power relations. The intricate relationality at work in BDSM practices, and in particular in sadomasochistic relationships, is often represented in literature and the arts in a way that is morbid and "perverse": my contention here is that, on the contrary, its specificities may articulate an effective queer critique of existing power hierarchies, and in particular of heteronormative narratives and practices by exposing the violent nature of subject formation and supporting an ethics of care.

## 1. BECOMING A SUBJECT ON THE SCENE AND THE STAGE

*Skin* is a 10-minute-long film produced by Channel 4 in 1997, and describes through a rather naturalistic narrative, supported by rich and detailed descriptions of sets and action included in the screenplay (KANE 2001: 247-268), the relationship between Billy, a young skinhead, and Marcia, an Afro-Caribbean woman living across the street from him. *Cleansed* (KANE 2001: 105-151), on the other hand, is probably Kane's less studied and less staged play; this may be due, among other factors, to the vivid on-stage violence it features – one character has his throat slashed, another is brutally beaten up and raped, a third meets the end of the play with no tongue, hands, feet, and penis. This translates into quasi-impossible stage directions including, together with all of the above, daffodils bursting through the floor and rats taking away the aforementioned, cut-off feet.

As part of that movement known as in-*yer-face* theatre (see SIERZ 2014), Kane had already emerged as one of the most provocative writers of her generation since the opening of her first play, *Blasted*, in 1995, which featured different forms of violence and sexual abuse. However, compared to Kane's previous works *Cleansed* and *Skin* are threshold texts: they mark the passage between an earlier phase, still featuring well-defined *dramatis personae* and a sort of linear storytelling, to a later, explicitly post-dramatic moment, represented by *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), where the story does not follow a chronologically linear pattern and characters'

psychological coherence is dismantled to the point that they are identified only by letters (in *Crave*) or not at all.<sup>1</sup> Placed at this crucial turning point in Kane's writing, both *Skin* and *Cleansed* still nominally stick to the *dramatis persona* narrative device; however, they specifically focus on how characters' individual coherence is affected by their being at the receiving end of violence and pain, and how this experience becomes part and parcel of their process of becoming a subject. These characters 'become subject' through constriction and a certain amount of violence, literally enacting what Judith Butler writes in *Giving an Account on Oneself*: "what I can 'be', quite literally, is constrained in advance by a regime of truth that decides what will and will not be a recognizable form of being" (2005: 22).<sup>2</sup>

Kane's debt to Artaud's theatre of cruelty clearly emerges here, although the playwright declared that, at the time of writing, she had not read Artaud's work (see SAUNDERS 2002: 91). Laurens De Vos (2011) explores the echoes between Kane's and Artaud's theatre, especially in the performance of violence and pain as a way of accessing the unconscious not through the disciplining act of narration (as happens in psychoanalysis) but through the body. This process resonates of some significant theorizations of BDSM experiences, and in particular of the 'masochist body' that emerges in the intriguing triangulation between Artaud, Deleuze and Guattari, and Foucault traced by James Miller in his exploration of the latter's theorizations on S/M. Miller evokes Deleuze and Guattari's 'body without organs' (itself an Artaudian formulation) to describe how the experience of 'suffering-pleasure' in Foucault both exposes and potentially subverts hegemonic processes of subjectivation:

Through an ordeal of self-chosen "torture", a human being might get beyond conventional ways of thinking [...]. Surrendering to a "kind of dissociative gaze

<sup>1</sup> Saunders comments that *Cleansed* marks an early move away from "the depiction and function of character" (2002: 88), yet he does not mention *Skin* as an experiment in the same direction; the book, by the author's own admission, does not feature a discussion of the screenplay as it is limited to stage plays only (xi).

<sup>2</sup> Although this is a far broader subject than this contribution may explore in full, one must remember that theatre has been, arguably since the inception of queer studies, identified as a privileged, 'safe' space to experiment with identity formation processes: Butler again, in a 1988 essay on *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, argues that "the various conventions which announce that 'this is only a play' allows strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life" (1990: 278), allowing a far broader spectrum of identities on stage that would be acceptable in everyday life.

able to dissociate itself”, one might then be able to see – at a glance, as it were – “the body totally imprinted by history, and history ruining the body”. Armed with this quintessentially Nietzschean kind of “knowledge”, the genealogist of “suffering-pleasure” might even be able to imagine *new* combinations of impulses and phantasms, *new* relationships of power, a *new* “style” of life – perhaps even a new “game” of “truth”. (MILLER 1994: 277; italics in the text)<sup>3</sup>

In Foucault’s idea (which is the one this contribution endorses), the masochist experiences a counter-process of subjectivation; this, in turn, allows a queer subjectivity to emerge. That sadomasochist interactions may ‘queer’ the bodies involved, shaping them in a way that challenges existing power hierarchies – heteronormative and otherwise – is the working premise of my analysis. Some strands of feminist thought have harshly critiqued this vision, especially in the case of interactions between a sadist man and a masochist woman, because they purportedly reproduce and eroticize existing patriarchal dynamics.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, theorists such as Patrick Hopkins argue that the ‘scene’ allows retracing normative behaviour as fantasy, thus depleting it of its power (see YOST 2007: 137). *Cleansed*, which stages a male, heterosexual torturer inflicting unspeakable – and arguably unstageable – torments onto four subaltern subjects (a woman, two gay men, and a transgender or genderfluid character) undoubtedly echoes patriarchal power structures; while *Skin*, where the white skinhead boy is enslaved by a black woman, may be considered to challenge existing racial and gender hierarchies in a self-evident, maybe even too literal way. However, my contention is not simply that BDSM may reproduce and/or overturn existing power relations; more radically, I intend to consider how sadomasochistic interactions can reconfigure normative processes of subjectivation by foregrounding the role pain and care play in the relationship between sadist and masochist.

In both *Cleansed* and *Skin* the character who suffers violence (irrespective of gender identification) experience a loss of the self by being subject to

<sup>3</sup> Quotations are from FOUCAULT 1971: 159 and 154; and FOUCAULT 1977: 153 and 148 (see MILLER 1994: 444 n. 114).

<sup>4</sup> BDSM-positive criticism has challenged this notion extensively: for example, Langdridge and Baker (in their introduction to the collection *Safe, Sane and Consensual. Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*) state that “S/M has the potential to reveal or even subvert traditional gender dynamics with women themselves being able to work with consent in a way that recognises the influence of hetero-patriarchy and the potential impact this may have on their identities and practices” (2007b: 5); for a thorough resume of this debate see WEISS 2011: 148-150.

severe pain. By voluntarily (and this is key) submitting themselves to pain by the hand of another, these characters exceed socially determined patterns for subjectivation and experience a ‘transcendence’ that gives them access to different, queer relationalities and desires. The inadequacy of these subjects to conform to acceptable narratives takes the form of unresolved past traumas – Foucault’s aforementioned “history” – whether personal (the loss of a beloved brother in *Cleansed*) or collective (Nazism and slavery in *Skin*). This dynamics can be central to sadomasochistic scenarios: as Elizabeth Freeman argues in her exploration of the relationship between S/M and time, “the body in sadomasochistic ritual becomes a means of invoking history – personal pasts, collective sufferings, and quotidian forms of injustice – in an idiom of pleasure” (FREEMAN 2010: n.p.). This translation of pain into pleasure, however, does not happen through a re-elaboration or re-telling, as would be the case in a psychoanalytic setting, because the experience of acute pain also results in what Darren Langdridge defines a “shattering of language”: “pain is almost uniquely inexpressible in language and as a consequence [...] it is inextricably implicated in political and perceptual complications, and ultimately [in] the unmaking of the world” (LANGDRIDGE 2007: 85). By shifting agency from language to the body, S/M practices destabilize the hold social norms have on the body itself and thus, as Andrea Beckmann argues, “allow experiential insight into the instability of social constructions of determinisms of power and identity and thus into potentials for change” (BECKMANN 2007: 112).

Clearly, there is a utopian streak in this theorization of sadomasochism, and especially of the masochist experience; it should be apprehended as such, and it should not, in any respect, be considered as a generalized description of the experience of every masochist. It does, however, respond to Kane’s own rather utopian vision about the use of cruelty as a performative and narrative device. Indeed, to criticism levelled against the use of graphic violence in her work, Kane answered with a surprisingly traditional argument from Western aesthetics: catharsis. In a talk held at La Pergola Theatre in Florence in 1997 for the Italian premiere of *Blasted*, the playwright argued:

If we experiment in the theatre, such as an act of extreme violence, then maybe we can repulse it as such, to prevent the act of extreme violence out on the street. I believe that people can change and that it is possible for us as a species to

change our future. It's for this that I write what I write. (Kane, quot. in SAUNDERS 2009: 82)

Kane's avowed aim, therefore, is not only to represent violence and pain in order to criticize their pervasiveness in contemporary society, but to use the emotional unease experienced by her audience – and arguably by directors and performers of her plays – as a means of social change.

The BDSM scene and the theatre stage thus overlap in becoming 'safe spaces' where to experiment in utopia. However, this implies a broadening of the concepts of theatrical stage and of performance itself, which must be here considered not just as the product of the performers' interactions among themselves within the dramatic context, but as a process constitutively including the audience itself; as Erika Fischer-Lichte argues, "performance describes a genuine act of creation: the very process of performing involves all participants and thus generates the performance in its specific materiality" (2008: 36).<sup>5</sup> It is true that in Kane (and other dramatists of her generation such as Martin Crimp and Mark Ravenhill) it is the performing body which becomes the battleground where subjectivity is negotiated, where "fiction and reality can no longer be disentangled [...] the body as the real on stage" (DE VOS 2011: xx); however the masochist body, with its utopian, disruptive potential for change, can be identified not only in the performers', but most significantly in the audience's. Kane may be well defined sadistic in the way she inflicts painful spectacles on her audiences; however, pain alone does not define a sadomasochistic interaction, and Kane's works, in this respect, are first and foremost a performance of power enacted in the relationship among all the agents involved in it, including their audiences.<sup>6</sup>

*Cleansed* is far too notorious for having provoked extreme reactions among its spectators. In his review of the original 1998 production, David

<sup>5</sup> In the German original, Fischer-Lichte uses the term *Aufführung*, overlapping Max Herrmann's work on the meaning-making processes involving the bodies on stage with Butler's and Austin's theories on the performative: the term is consistently rendered in the English translation by Saskya Iris Jain as "performance", and it is in this specific sense that the term will be used in this article.

<sup>6</sup> In these terms, Kane comes even closer to Artaud's original conception of theatre of cruelty, which is equated not necessarily with sadism, but with another element of the BDSM acronym, discipline: "this cruelty is not sadistic or bloody, at least not exclusively so. I do not systematically cultivate horror. [...] From a mental viewpoint, cruelty means strictness, diligence, unrelenting decisiveness, irreversible and absolute determination" (ARTAUD 1958: 101).

Benedict commented that, although director James Macdonald's staging was marked by a "distancing degree of stylisation", the show still was "often unbearable to watch" and exacted bodily reactions from the audience: "whether flinching or shuddering, your reactions to the violence are extremely physical" (1998: n.p.). The 2016 production directed by Katie Mitchell for the National Theatre, on the other hand, made use of updated theatre technology to make torture and mutilations especially vivid: actor George Taylor (playing Rod) stated that "all of the stage directions, we tried to realize as literally as possible. The sunflower came up from the stage, so the daffodils came out through the stage; Carl's hands *were* cut off, Carl's feet *were* cut off, Carl's tongue *was* cut out using the best stage prosthetics".<sup>7</sup> The result was a literally unbearable show, with reports of people fainting or leaving the theatre before the end of the play: Michael Billington commented critically about the "sense of fatigue" induced by exposure to such a spectacle (2016: n.p.), while Holly Williams wrote of having "felt literally nauseous afterwards" after witnessing performances "good at conveying extreme pain", concluding: "I've rarely been so overwhelmed by a show, but I've also never longed so much for one to end" (2016: n.p.).

The deep unease caused by watching what is known to be, after all, a fictional rendition of violence can be traced to the mechanism of empathy, recently emerged as a very productive tool in literary studies. In particular, Stefano Ercolino's work on positive and especially negative empathy may prove a useful framework here: theatrical performance activates 'mirror neurons' which have been recently discovered to be at the origin of "basic empathy" (ERCOLINO 2018: 249), thus explaining the "flinching and shuddering" mentioned by Benedict.<sup>8</sup> While in a sadomasochistic relationship power hierarchies are staged even as the experience of pain may achieve different (and even extreme, whatever this may mean for anyone involved) levels of materiality, theatre stages violence in a ritualistic frame, and pain specifically is performed at the emotional level and inflicted on the audience as well as on the performers, making it a collective experience of

<sup>7</sup> The interview is available in the National Theatre featurette *Sarah Kane: Staging the Unstageable*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7Z\\_5JhnkTA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7Z_5JhnkTA) (accessed 27 August 2019); emphasis by the speaker.

<sup>8</sup> Although studies in the role of neurosciences in spectatorship are still in their infancy, there has been significant attention devoted to the topic in Italian theatre studies: see in particular BORTOLETTI 2007 and SOFIA 2013.

both positive and negative empathy: the characterization of the relationship between perpetrators and victims as a combination of care and brutality activates a process of conflicting character identification, and more specifically what Ercolino (following Jauss) calls “cathartic identification” (252)<sup>9</sup> with negative characters. This may resonate with Kane’s own idea of the representation of violence on stage as cathartic, as spectators find themselves shuddering in unison with the suffering body, but also in the position of voyeurs and thus at least partially complicit with the perpetrators of violence onstage.<sup>10</sup>

Naturally, the removal of the material body from the immediate experience, as happens with *Skin* (which exists only as a film) or even with *Cleansed* if one reads the play instead of watching it performed, may diminish these effects, but not erase them completely.<sup>11</sup> Reading both texts can also result in a distressing experience, especially if one practices what Raymond Williams, in a little known work on how to work on a dramatic text, calls “exercise in dramatic imagination [...] a faculty which no living study of the art of drama can do without” (WILLIAMS 1968: 5): an exercise of visually imagining the text on stage, supplementing the lack of the performance itself as object of analysis. Whether material or imaginary, then, it is this “stage” that partakes of the BDSM scene; a superimposition that proves particularly effective in teasing out the queer potential of BDSM. Indeed, if relegated to the private sphere these practices easily feed into a liberal, free-market notion of individual choice and make S/M, as Weiss argues, “politically neutral” (2011, 166). On the contrary, becoming a part of the public discourse on sexuality and power may contribute to casting BDSM, in its many incarnations, as a queer critique of heteronormativity.

<sup>9</sup> Ercolino’s argument on the role of character identification in triggering negative empathy is too complex to be summarized here, and a full exploration of its possible relevance for Kane’s work is far beyond the scope of this essay; for further reference see, together with ERCOLINO 2018, also FUSILLO 2017.

<sup>10</sup> I thank Marco Pustianaz for this insight.

<sup>11</sup> There is no reception history as regards TV audiences’ reaction to *Skin*, but I will here mention a personal experience: while delivering part of this contribution in the context of a panel on “Performance and Performativity in BDSM”, I projected a short excerpt from the film (the one mentioned at the opening of this article). Although the audience had, after all, come to attend a panel dealing with BDSM, their reaction at the screening was palpably one of unease and discomfort, so much so that I felt the need to resume my paper with a self-referenced joke on the lack of a trigger warning in order to ease the tension.



As I move to the analysis of the individual works and therefore from the relationships activated in the performing space to the ones portrayed in the two texts, this critique of hegemonic power dynamics will now be traced into Kane's portrayal of relationships which are not explicitly configured, but can be read as S/M relationships. My contention is not that Kane had any interest in BDSM practices, and that reflected in her work; I am also not arguing that her works might profitably be staged through a mainstream BDSM aesthetic.<sup>12</sup> As a critical lens to explore the intersection between power, desire and subjectivation, BDSM illuminates how Kane's works stage and to a certain extent rewrite the relationship between existing hegemonic narratives and marginal or subaltern subjects. Hence, my contention here is twofold: on the one hand, to show how a BDSM framework may 'queer' Kane's apparently bleak portrayal of oppression in the face of non-conforming desire, identifying *loci* of resistance and empowerment where traditional readings only find victimization and defeat; on the other, to explore whether Kane's own vision may offer new insights to disentangle BDSM from the current increasingly mainstream imaginary to reclaim its potential for subverting heteronormative relationships and practices.

## 2. PATTERNS OF PAIN AND CATHARSIS IN *SKIN* AND *CLEANSED*

*Skin* starts off as a rather naturalistic narrative about Billy and Marcia, a white skinhead boy and a woman of African descent, who live across the street from each other in a South London neighbourhood.<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of the short film, Billy sees Marcia from his window and "grabs his penis and makes wanking gestures at her. She stares and then laughs. Billy laughs too" (KANE 2001: 250).<sup>14</sup> Then the audience follows Billy as he spends

<sup>12</sup> It may be worth mentioning that there are very sparse but consistent reports of BDSM influences in the first dramatization of *Blasted* in Italy at the Teatro La Pergola in Florence; however, the attempt was so badly received that it did not make it into a full production. Dimitri Milopoulos, at the time working with the production, shared some memories of this staging during the roundtable "*I sing on the boundary. Sarah Kane oltre i confini*" organized by Sara Soncini at the university of Pisa on May 30, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Scene 2 is set in a "café in South London" (251), while scene 3 (the wedding) is explicitly located outside "a church in Brixton" (254). Brixton, home of a long-standing Caribbean community, had been the setting of the infamous 1981 Brixton Riots, which had brought racial conflict in UK metropolitan areas at the attention of the public opinion.

<sup>14</sup> The film is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2ZjplLullc> (Accessed: August 5, 2019). My analysis concerns both the script and the film: differences between

some time in a pub with his gang of skinhead friends, and then as they thrash a wedding reception of the black Brixton community, where Billy gets heavily hit in the back of the head and then uses a brick to hit someone else “over and over, as hard as he can, hatred and revulsion all over his face, blood pouring from his head” (255). After this, the scene cuts to Billy, back to his neighbourhood, going to Marcia’s apartment across the street.

At this point, the ostensibly naturalistic language of the screenplay, and of the film’s correspondingly visual style, crumbles: what follows is a fast-paced montage showing Billy and Marcia as they engage in sex, fights and other practices which consistently see Billy as the submissive partner. He is tied to the bedstead, slapped hard on the face, and made to eat dog food out of a bowl. Marcia overpowers Billy physically and subjugates him psychologically: in particular, Billy becomes obsessed with Marcia’s black skin, towards which he shows both worship and identification: in a scene included in the script but not in the film, a blindfolded Billy kisses and licks different parts of Marcia’s skin “as she presents different parts of her body to his face” (261). In another, described in more detail in the script but just glimpsed at in the film, he puts on her clothes, “layer by layer, until he’s dressed as a woman” (263). In her turn, Marcia enacts rituals of subjugation and ownership over Billy’s white skin: she writes her name on his back with a knife, and scrubs his tattoos with a rough brush – significantly, in the film she concentrates especially on the Union Jack and the ‘Mom’ on the chest, while Billy wails in pain.

Marcia and Billy’s relationship flips over received black/white and man/woman hierarchies through an explicit S/M ritual. As Anne McClintock argues, “the economy of S/M is the economy of conversion: slave to master, adult to baby, pain to pleasure, man to woman, and back again” (1993: 87). Billy’s attempt at empowering through a skinhead persona are enacted in the early scenes of the film showing him with his ‘mates’, and while Saunders notes that Billy’s behaviour “suggests an individual who is a recent convert or an outsider to the group” (SAUNDERS 2009: 26) – he refuses to eat the very English fare offered in the café, and is troubled by a black child who is looking at him through the café window – this does not reduce, but on the contrary emphasizes performativity in Billy’s process of identity building as an English white male. Yet the history of white supremacy his

the two will be mentioned when relevant.

body is trying to incarnate is radically displaced by his encounter with Marcia, who inscribes on him the same powerlessness black enslaved people experienced during slavery. If, as Freeman argues, the “continuity between history and eroticism” emerge in the fact that “bodily response is somehow linked to history” (2011: n.p.), Billy is dispossessed of his own bodily reactions, as he relinquishes to Marcia all the power he had been trying to perform through his skinhead persona.

Both script and film also devote attention to conveying Marcia’s own subjectivity. As it is common practice in sadomasochistic interactions, she alternates the infliction of pain with gestures of kindness, stroking Billy’s back as she pours dog food into the bowl in front of Billy’s face (261) or licking the blood from the wounds she inflicts as she cuts her name on his back (262). Yet she also expresses feelings that show, though in a rather muddled way, her own emotional investment in the acts she is perpetrating: “she is terrified” (261) while Billy smells and licks her skin, or “cries silently” (262) while licking his blood. After Billy leaves, she is last seen crying on her bed, comforted by her flatmate Kath and muttering a cryptic “I’m sorry” (267). Significantly, both script and film refuse a depiction of her treatment of Billy as righteous retribution, although Marcia may be identified as a potential victim of Billy’s own racially motivated violence: when Billy, in his final moments in her apartment, tries to contextualize their interaction in this sense by asking her if she knew “that bloke at the wedding [who] got his head smashed in” (264), Marcia’s answer is non-committal: “Not personally” (264). Catharsis is offered then not in the interaction between Billy and Marcia, but in its opening to the larger community of the neighbourhood: cast away by Marcia, Billy is left among the shattered remains of his identity building process and, back to his apartment, tries to kill himself. He is saved by his old neighbour, also black, pointing to Kane’s utopian sense of how the experience of pain, when accompanied by care, may trigger catharsis in an audience still haunted by the history of slavery and troubled by racial diversity.

Where *Skin* enacts a literal capsizing of received gender and racial hierarchies by having a black woman subjugate a white man, *Cleansed* features a male character, called Tinker, who tortures four characters: a gay couple, Carl and Rod; Robin, a boy who spends most of the play dressed

as a woman; and Grace, a woman in love with her brother Graham.<sup>15</sup> The location is defined in the first stage direction as a “inside the perimeter fence of a university” (KANE 2001: 107); yet the play is dedicated to “the patients and staff of ES3” (105), the Eileen Skellern 3 Ward where Kane had just spent some time after her first major breakdown, thus evoking the psychiatric facility as another overlay of the play’s setting. In addition, due to the severe tortures that take place in it, the place may also be considered a form of prison or an internment camp: on the back cover of the Bloomsbury edition of the play, the place is defined as “an institution designed to rid society of its undesirables [where] a group of inmates try to save themselves through love” (KANE 1998).

All potential settings resonate of Foucault’s insights in *Discipline and Punish* about the role of corrective institutions in the administration of power (see FOUCAULT 1995). As a consequence Tinker has been interpreted as an incarnation of Bentham’s panopticon (BIBER VANGÖLÜ 2017) or as himself a victim in a broader totalitarian mechanism (KÜMBET 2017): surely his portrayal works at least to a certain extent as a frontal attack to authority, given also his being homonymous of the notorious theatrical critic Jack Tinker, who had virulently attacked *Blasted* from his column in *The Daily Mail* (see GUTSCHER 2014: 19). Tinker is also a ‘speaking’ name: in English, a tinker is one who “repairs, adjusts, or works with something in an unskilled or experimental manner” (OED); how exactly this characters tries to ‘fix’ the subjects that come under his care opens to a more nuanced interpretation of the relationalities at work in the play.<sup>16</sup> A fatal ‘fix’ is what the audience sees Tinker administering to Graham in the very first scene of the play, shooting heroine straight into his eye (KANE 2001: 107-109); when in Scene Three Grace arrives looking for her brother and Tinker tells her he is dead, the woman insists to stay (although this appears to be a male-only facility):

GRACE: I am not leaving.

TINKER: You are. You won’t find him here.

<sup>15</sup> Differently from *Skin*, in *Cleansed* none of the *dramatis personae* is characterized in terms of race or skin colour; this of course does not exclude a racially diverse casting.

<sup>16</sup> The following analysis of the play focuses on the relationship network including Tinker, Grace, Graham, and a character initially just called Woman: a full analysis of the play is far beyond the scope of this contribution, and this specific configuration, including the only two women characters featured in the play, allows me to tease out its ‘repetition with difference’ of the heterosexual matrix through a BDSM framework.

GRACE: I want to stay.  
TINKER: It's not right.  
GRACE: I'm staying.  
TINKER: You'll be moved.  
GRACE: I look like him. Say you thought I was a man.  
TINKER: I can't protect you.  
GRACE: I don't want you to.  
TINKER: You shouldn't be here. You're not well.  
GRACE: Treat me as a patient. (114)

Grace gives herself up to Tinker: her avowed aim is to elaborate the loss of her beloved but also, more subtly, to confront the impossibility of this love in a regime of truth which endorses heterosexual desire – and thus may incorporate her more easily than Carl, Rod, or Robin – but forbids incest. Grace's impossible desire is both to love and to be Graham: when asked what she would change about herself, she answers “My body. So that it looked like it feels. Graham outside like Graham inside” (126).

Grace's process of becoming a subject thus entails confronting and, to a certain extent, embodying her queer, anti-normative identity. Her path towards subjectivation, as that of the other characters subject to Tinker's 'treatments', is constituted by violence and pain: this is what makes Sierz comment about the play's “somasochistic feel. People are cleansed by pain and terror; Grace is burnt clean by torture” (2001: n.p.). During the long, excruciating Scene Ten, set in the Red Room, she is repeatedly beaten by a group of male “Voices” while Graham, effectively taking up the role of Master, accompanies her through the pain:

GRAHAM: Grace [...] Speak to me.  
GRACE (*does not move or make a sound*)  
GRAHAM: Can't hurt you Grace. Can't touch you  
GRACE (*does not move or make a sound*)  
GRAHAM: Never. (131)

While the Voices administer pain and at the same time humiliate Grace verbally (“Gagging for it/ Begging for it/ Barking for it/ Arching for it/ Aching for it”, 132) as the scene escalates, Graham enacts the “wise use of the gaze” (FUSILLO 2020: 327) that mark the Master's relationship with the submissive: “GRACE is raped by one of the VOICES. She looks into GRAHAM's

*eyes throughout. GRAHAM holds her head between his hands*" (132). The scene also features a visually shocking embodiment of "mirroring effects" (FUSILLO 2020: 327), which on the one hand intensifies the corporeal correspondence between Grace and Graham, while on the other disentangles their bodies from any form of self-aware 'I' by "an interval, a liberating gap between the effect and the 'self' as its cause" (FREEMAN 2011: n.p.). Mirroring his sister's body, Graham's seems both to produce and to experience the pain he is inflicting her: "GRAHAM presses his hands onto GRACE and her clothes turn red where he touches, blood seeping through. Simultaneously, his own body begins to bleed in the same places" (132). The scene closes with Tinker entering and assisting Grace in surfacing at the end of her ordeal:

*He [Tinker] goes to GRACE and kneels beside her. He takes her hand.*

TINKER: I am here to save you. (133)

While Tinker and Graham both take up the role of the Master/sadist, Grace is consistently cast as the slave/masochist part of the relationship. It is significant that the whole experience is devoid of sexual innuendos: on the contrary, when in a previous scene Grace and Graham make love on stage, their encounter lacks any tinge of brutality or pain, its regenerative quality literally embodied by a sunflower "burst[ing] through the floor and above their head" (120). This scene finds a counterpart in Scene Nineteen (the last but one in the play), where Tinker makes love to the Woman, a character featured in short sections between the torture scenes featuring Grace, Robin, and Carl and Rodd. She significantly makes her first appearance right after the aforementioned scene of lovemaking between Grace and Graham, in a peep-show booth incongruously situated in the shower of the university locker room (121). In this and subsequent interactions, Tinker keeps inserting tokens into the booth, asking to see the Woman's face and trying to reconfigure the client/sex worker relationship in one of friendship ("Can we be friends?, 122) or service ("I'll be anything you need [...] I won't let you down", 122). Since this very first encounter, Tinker also starts calling the Woman "Grace", creating an explicit overlapping between the two couples, Graham/Grace and Tinker/the Woman, and thus anticipating the shared role in Grace's ordeal played by the two men. This superimposition, and more generally his interactions with the Woman, may also allow the audience to experience empathy towards Tinker, as these scenes

make it impossible to play the character exclusively as a ruthless torturing machine. On the contrary, when after two more, very conflicting meetings the Woman crosses the partition between herself and Tinker, makes love to him and calls herself “Grace” (149), the play seems to offer him the closure refused to Billy in *Skin*, capitalizing on the straightforward but still resonant superimposition between the Woman and the “grace” Tinker appears to be desperately searching for in his interactions with her.

The Woman hence seems to take over the role of Grace, right after this character has concluded her own, excruciating journey towards subjectivation. In the scene right before the Woman’s transmutation into Grace, the character who bore this name throughout the play relinquishes it, together with her own prior identity. In Scene Eighteen, Grace wakes up after the surgery that removed her breasts and attached a severed penis (Carl’s) to her body; at this point, she also experiences loss of language:

GRACE: F- F-

TINKER: What you wanted, I hope you –

GRACE: F- F- F- (146)

It is Tinker himself, who will a few lines later mourn the loss of Grace (“She’s gone”, 146), who seals the success of Grace’s transformation into her brother by giving her his former name: “Can’t call you Grace anymore. Call you... Graham. I’ll call you Graham” (146). The actor playing Graham is on stage at this moment, and the two speak together as the body that once was Grace and now is still her (or the actress playing her) but *also* Graham speaks again as if for the first time: “GRACE AND GRAHAM Felt it” (146). “Felt it” is Grace/Graham’s return to language, to a world that is not the same as the one which condemns her love and makes her not at home in her body.

Through severe torture Grace’s world, the world that made her love object unfit and her body fractured, is shattered, and she attains the sort of transcendence that quite literally transforms her into a new, queer subject. Yet, as Miller notes, “there were risks, Foucault knew well: the kind of ‘truth’ obtained through an ‘ordeal’, he had stressed, was always ‘ambiguous’ and ‘reversible’” (1994: 277). There are risks: the body that emerges on the other side of Grace’s journey is not whole, fabulous, or triumphant, but a wounded, bleeding, makeshift body which can, nonetheless, experience and maybe offer catharsis. The result of this experience is not a celebratory

wholeness, but a declaration of vulnerability and of the subversiveness of feeling the pain – the pain of not being at ease, the pain of the body as it negotiates its own desire while becoming a subject under any regime of truth. As Grace’s final monologue makes quite clear, numbness is acquiescence, while pain means survival and allows access to a different sort of ‘safe space’:

GRACE: And when I don’t feel it, it’s pointless.  
Think about getting up it’s pointless.  
Think about eating it’s pointless.  
Think about dressing it’s pointless.  
Think about speaking it’s pointless.  
Think about dying only it’s totally fucking pointless.  
Here now.  
Safe on the other side and here. (150)

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