PhD Thesis

The Empty I

Sarah Kane and the Aesthetics of the New Tragic

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DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where ***correction services** have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in (a) footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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STATEMENT 2

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Abstract

This study argues that Sarah Kane's work for the theatre proposes a new tragic aesthetic for the contemporary stage which in many ways transcends the limited genre definitions with which her work is generally associated. By realising a rudimentary tragic dialectic between the traumatised subject and an invariably unattainable 'other', it is argued that Kanejan theatre describes a new tragic mode which is primarily based on the psycho(patho)logical suffering it portrays. The study suggests that Sarah Kane's work introduces an aesthetic complex termed the 'empty I' which manifests itself through notions of 'empty space', 'traumatic loss' and 'impossible love'. Via an in-depth reading of the plays, it shows that the playwright's radical formal efforts are bound to an ongoing attempt to unite dramatic form with tragic content, and it is further argued that Kane's plays implicitly criticise a growing culture of missing ontological stability and problematic interpersonal relations. The new tragic aesthetic defined this way proves to be as much about aesthetisised traumatic suffering as it laments a deficient form of contemporary subjectivity. The thesis concludes with the suggestion that Kane's work implies a social rather than a theatrical reconciliation of the tragic disposition it depicts.

there is a loneliness in this world so great that you can see it in the slow movement of the hands of a clock.

Charles Bukowski

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This study is dedicated to my mother.

Introduction

There are only very few playwrights who could pride themselves on having revolutionised the landscape of British theatre (compare Urban 2001, 36); and there are even fewer who would be able to claim that they had done it by writing only the very small number of five plays. Sarah Kane, however, would certainly be one of them. Despite her untimely death in February 1999, Kane's work has had a major impact on the development of European and British drama;¹ her plays have so far been translated into several European languages, including German, Greek, Swedish, Polish and French, and they have become increasingly popular in both academia and in the theatre over the course of the past decade. The last two years have seen three major publications on the playwright and her work (with one more to be published in summer 2010),² and Kane's plays continue to be staged in the US, all over Europe, in Australia, in Israel, South Africa and in the UK.³ In short, more than ten years after her death, it seems that Sarah Kane is more popular than ever.

This recent growth in popularity, however, does of course not reflect the initial controversies the playwright's work had caused amongst both theatre critics and academics during the early stages of her career. When Kane's first play *Blasted* hit the British stage in January 1995, the play caused a public scandal which was only comparable to the premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956,⁴ and it quickly became one of the most controversial and most talked about plays of the decade. Kane's explicit portrayal of violence and shocking abuse made it straight to the headlines of the tabloids, and in what is probably one of the best known reviews of the past twenty years, the *Daily Mail*'s Jack Tinker notoriously named her debut a 'disgusting feast of filth' (Tinker 1995). For several years to come, the playwright was to be recognised more as the 'angry young woman' (Bayley 1995) who wrote *Blasted* than the talented young writer she was, and the initial scandal surrounding her first play would go on to influence the critical evaluation of her work for quite some time.

¹ Popular examples of Kane's influence are, for instance, Martin McDonagh's notorious depiction of trauma and traumatic memory in his 2003 play *The Pillowman*, Marius von Meyenburg's German version of explicit and abusive violence in *Feuergesicht* (2000) and David Gieselmann's highly acclaimed murder story *Mr Kolpert* (2000). All three plays depict abuse and violence in decisively traumatic environments, and all the aforementioned authors at least partially recreate some of the most defining characteristics of Kaneian style. Other plays which have arguably been influenced by Kane include debbie tucker green's *Stoning Mary* (2005) and Ed Thomas's *Stone City Blue* (2004). On the reception of tucker green and her apparent similarities with Sarah Kane see especially Billington 2005.

² Saunders 2009, Saunders and DeVos 2010, Iball 2008. Megson 2010 is still forthcoming as I am putting the finishing touches to this study.

³ There have already been three professional productions of Kane's plays in the UK since the beginning of this year alone. www.ianfisher.com provides an excellent overview of the most recent productions of Kane's work in the UK and elsewhere. Also see Iball 2008, 56 for an extensive list of international *Blasted* productions in more recent years.

⁴ Sierz even claims that *Blasted* led to a 'revolution in sensibility like the one initiated in 1956' (see Sierz 2002, 9).

Today, Sarah Kane is mainly known as the figurehead of a whole generation of playwrights of the British nineties who sought to convey their social critique by employing explicitly shocking in-yer-face aesthetics (cf Sierz 2001a), and although her unexpected suicide in 1999 initiated a somewhat belated (re)appreciation of her work, in the majority of cases, that work is still more associated with the controversies it caused than with the numerous aesthetic challenges and formal innovations it entails. Despite the fact that recent years have indeed seen an upsurge in academic and theatrical interest, there is still a strong sense of the 'unappreciated artist' in the air when conferences or symposia are held, first nights of plays are usually still accompanied by whispering confirmations of Kane's suicide, and especially younger audiences have come to name Sarah Kane among their favourite playwrights not because they appreciate the unique quality of her work but mainly because they know of its notoriety. In other words, an appreciation of Kaneian aesthetics has been long overdue, yet in their traditional approaches to Kane's notorious reputation and to the circumstances rather than the particulars of her aesthetics, even the most recent studies hardly ever leave the critical framework set out by Saunders's (2002) and Sierz's (2001a) pioneering discussions on the subject. This study, to some extent, seeks to remedy this situation.

Contrary to the above, the main argument of the following chapters will be that Sarah Kane's plays propose a new tragic aesthetic for the contemporary stage which in many ways transcends the limited genre definitions with which her work is traditionally associated. By realising a rudimentary tradic dialectic between the traumatised subject and an invariably unattainable 'other', it is argued here that Kaneian theatre describes an aesthetic complex which I term the 'empty I' and that manifests throughout the plays' dystopic settings, their depictions of traumatic loss and the notion of 'impossible love' they dramatise. It will become apparent that there exists a clearly discernible line in Kane's work from her earlier plays through to her later and more experimental ones. It will be shown how the playwright's radical formal efforts are generally bound to an ongoing attempt to unite dramatic form with tragic content, and this study will argue that Kane's plays implicitly criticise a growing culture of missing ontological stability and problematic interpersonal relations. In keeping with the long standing connection between tragic theatre and philosophic reasoning, Kaneian drama will be identified as a theatrical means for the administration of an aesthetic 'overdose' which is aimed at illustrating that 'life is not as it should be, we are not as we should be' (Sands 2008, 84), and it will be argued that Kane's plays remind us of what we 'cherish in the act of seeing it destroyed' (Eagleton 2003, 26). The new tragic aesthetic this study seeks to introduce this way proves to be as much about aesthetisised suffering as it laments a deficient form of contemporary subjectivity, and it will be concluded that Kane's work implies a social rather than an aesthetic reconciliation of the tragic disposition it depicts.

To this end, the following has been subdivided into four separate parts. Chapter one will first outline the long standing tradition of violence in modern British theatre since 1956, before then turning to a detailed introduction of the *in-yer-face* generation and its main characteristics and aesthetics. As will become apparent, Sarah Kane's theatre is as much indebted to the *avant garde* of modern drama and playwrights such as Howard Barker as it is related to the idea of illustrative social criticism in the plays of Edward Bond and Howard Brenton, and it is not least to these many-layered influences that her work stands out from the range of new plays by young writers who were produced during the British 'nasty nineties' (see Sierz 2001a, 30).

In a second step, chapter two will turn to an in-depth discussion of Kaneian theatre in relation to the idea of a new tragic aesthetic. In keeping with the tragic tradition, the chapter will start by introducing several philosophical approaches to the discussion and will go on to relate them to Kane's theatre in general. Introducing Eagleton's remarks on the notion of a new or contemporary tragic, the sections then seek to identify the new tragic aesthetic Eagleton speaks of as a theatrical 'mode' in Kane's plays, and they will outline how they draw on philosophical tradition while still introducing a new form of tragic theatre which is defined by a 'mutual confession of finitude and frailty' (Eagleton 2003, 288). In keeping with Eagleton's request for a contemporary notion of the tragic *pharmakos*, I will argue that Kane's particular form of tragedy positions an aesthetic concept of an 'empty I' at the core of all of its traumatic plot structures and settings. It will be shown how the Kaneian notion of tragic suffering perfectly complies with Eagleton's suggestions for the new tragic's return in the psychological and in the Lacanian Real, and the chapter will consequently outline a theoretical framework which relates trauma and the tragic dialectics of the deficient subject and the unattainable 'other' to aspects of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. I will close with a preliminary overview of the empty I's numerous manifestations in Kane's idiosyncratic realisations of empty space, the perpetually unattainable 'other' and her notion of 'impossible love'.

As the first one of two chapters with extensive textual analyses of Sarah Kane's work, chapter three of this study will subsequently turn to a detailed discussion of her earlier plays *Blasted* (1995), *Phaedra's Love* (1996) and *Cleansed* (1998). As will become apparent, Kane's earlier plays already portray many of the defining characteristics of the new tragic aesthetic Kaneian theatre represents as a whole. Especially the plays' preliminary introduction of traumatic loss and empty space will be shown to portend much of the playwright's later and more experimental style, and while *Blasted*'s second half can thus be seen to introduce the notion of abusive trauma in an ontologically unstable environment, *Phaedra's Love* proves to be the first one of Kane's plays to introduce the overall notion of 'impossible love' which defines her later work. The chapter will illustrate how *Cleansed* fulfils many, if not all, of the formal requirements of the new tragic mode Eagleton suggests, and I will show how it

provides a vital stepping stone for Kane's later and more abstract plays. It will be suggested that the play's illustrative portrayal of a deficient self and an utterly unavailable 'other' in fact describes the first instance in Kane's work in which the notion of the 'empty I' is realised as a genuinely tragic disposition.

Following the formal change Kane's work describes towards her later plays, chapter four will finally provide an in-depth analysis of the playwright's last two plays, Crave (1998) and 4.48 Psychosis (2000). It will be argued that, far from qualifying as typical examples of 'postdramatic theatre', Crave and 4.48 Psychosis prove to realise the new tragic aesthetic as an entirely introspective dramatic mode which further develops and substantiates the idea of a new tragic aesthetic. I will suggest that both plays describe a decisive turn inwards which illustrates a far more intimate and explicit realisation of the 'empty I' complex than in Kane's earlier plays, and in a second step, I will then go on to show how Kane's last play 4.48 Psychosis successfully achieves a dramatic representation of the traumatic aporia which lies at the heart of the new tragic itself. It will become apparent that Kaneian theatre successively develops into an entirely experiential version of tragedy, and the chapter will close with the suggestion that, in its exceptional immediacy and its achieved style, 4.48 illustrates an active tragic disposition which is as devastating as it is socially relevant. It will be suggested that the (Kaneian) new tragic can only allow for one valid conclusion: to rectify the pathological dystopia it depicts via social rather than theatrical means.

Theoretical approach

This study makes use of a theoretical approach to Sarah Kane's work which is, for the most part, primarily based on psychoanalytic theory. Drawing on a combination of trauma studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the following chapters will make frequent use of Luckhurst's (2008) comprehensive overview on trauma and traumatic narratives, and it will be greatly indebted to Atze and Lambek's (1996) and in particular Caruth's (1991, 1995, 1996) and LaCapra's (2002) pioneering works on trauma and its applicability to literary criticism and to narrative genres in general. As will become apparent during the following, the notion of an 'empty I' and its relation to the idea of a new tragic dialectic between the traumatised self and the evasive 'other' in Kane's work draws heavily on Lacanian theories of psycho(patho)logy, and it is in particular Eagleton's claim that the 'traumatic horror at the heart of tragedy' returns from the Schopenhauerian metaphysical to the Lacanian Real in new forms of the tragic genre (compare Eagleton 2003, 225) which will influence many of the Lacanian readings of Kane's plays. Although the somewhat limited scope of this thesis will unfortunately not allow for a detailed overview of Lacan's extensive body of work, chapter two will provide a brief introduction to key concepts of Lacanian

psychoanalysis as they are used for the purposes of this study. The chapter will illustrate that trauma studies and Lacanian thought are in no way mutually exclusive, and both approaches will therefore form a valid basis for subsequent analyses of Kane's plays.

This thesis seeks to employ Lacan's descriptions and conclusions on the nature of the psychological subject descriptively rather than philosophically, and its analyses of the new tragic aesthetic in Kaneian drama thus generally try to see Lacan's ideas as an explicative tool rather than an opportunity for abstract reasoning. Secondary references to Lacan's work will mainly be made in relation to his underlying distinctions between the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary and the emergence of the symptom in psychoanalytical discourse. It will also be shown how *jouissance* is to a great extent denied in Kaneian drama due to the pathological disposition between the craving self and the unattainable 'other' it portrays. Together with a more general notion of trauma studies and a deliberately hermeneutic approach to the texts themselves, it will become apparent how Lacanian theory may serve as a pertinent means for aesthetic interpretations of Kane's plays.

Secondary literature

Drawing on but decidedly departing from the above mentioned views of Kane's work and her idiosyncratic style in general, this study proposes a critical (re)evaluation of Kane's plays which has as its primary objective the identification of their main aesthetic characteristics and their innovative formal idiosyncrasies. To this end, the following will make extensive use of especially Saunders's (2002 & 2009) and Sierz's (2001a) contributions on the plays' individual histories and circumstances, yet it will not provide a detailed overview of the limited secondary reading available on Kaneian drama in general. In addition to the abovementioned authors, individual articles, book chapters and the critical reception of particular plays will be introduced at the beginning of each individual chapter, and where this seems appropriate to the discussion, each section will also take into consideration the respective production histories of the plays. Newspaper articles, interviews, letters and occasional website references will further complement the range of secondary reading undertaken for the purposes of this study.

Unless stated otherwise, all quotations from Kane's work were taken from the *Complete Plays* (Kane 2001). References to individual plays generally first state the scene and then the page (e.g. 1:39). For plays without discernable scenes, references occur in the form of (*Crave*, 187) or are indicated by page numbers only.

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