



CONTEMPORARY THEATRE IN ENGLISH

WORKSHEET 5 – SARAH KANE'S *BLASTED* (1995)

Preliminaries

1. What is your general reaction to the play? Did you like/dislike it? Why, in each case? Try to articulate your thoughts while looking for an answer and be as explicit as possible.
2. Is *Blasted* a naturalistic/social-realist play? Which of the paradigms studied would best define the play?
3. What are the most immediate socio-political contexts to the play? What was the situation in the 1990s and what led to the coining of the label 'cool Britannia' and to a 'post-ideological' Britain? What major events took place in Europe after 1989 that you can relate to *Blasted*? You might find Helen Iball's pages from her book *Sarah Kane's Blasted* (2008) and Ken Urban's study of the play (2011) useful, as well as the chronologies in David Ian Rabey (2003) and David Lane (2010).
4. What is 'in-yer-face' theatre, why did it emerge and what were its main characteristics? Does it encompass other movements within the arts world? Does *Blasted* belong to this trend and in what sense is the play shocking and 'experiential'? You might find Aleks Sierz's (2001 & 2002), Urban's (2004 & 2011) and Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Sierz's chapter (2011) useful for a contextual study of the theatre produced in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.
5. What are the implications in the use of the title?
6. Read some of the reviews the play received and analyse their main traits. Why do you think they were so aggressive and how does Kane explain such hostility?

Dramaturgical Strategies

1. In terms of formal experimentation, how does the play operate dramaturgically? Which elements would you identify as being particularly relevant, and why?
2. How is *Blasted* structured? How does its 'fractured' dramatic shape work? What does it intend to replicate and how does this contribute to the creation of meaning? Is it effective in its putting together of form and content? In this sense, how do you read Kane's words when she says that "What makes the play experiential is its form. [...] In *Blasted*, the form and content attempt to be one. The form is the meaning" (as cited in Sierz, 2001, p. 98)?

3. Read the following quotes, both on the paramount importance of form:

“But much more important than the content of the play is the form. All good art is subversive, either in form or content. And the best art is subversive in form *and* content. And often, the element that most outrages those who seek to impose censorship is form” (Kane as cited in Stephenson and Langridge, 1997, p. 130).

“The shock wasn’t about the content, not even about the shock of the new, but about the familiar being arranged in such a way that it could be seen afresh. The press was screaming about cannibalism live on stage, but, of course, audiences weren’t looking at actual atrocities, but at an imaginative response to them in an odd theatrical form, apparently broken-backed and schizophrenic, which presented material without comment and asked the audience to craft their own response. The representation of violence caused more anger than actual violence” (Kane as cited in Stephenson and Langridge, 1997, p. 131).

What is particularly striking about the form of *Blasted* and why do you think it imbues the play with such a subversive potential?

4. Thinking about the connections between domestic violence and open warfare, Kane famously said that “‘Of course, it’s obvious. One is the seed and the other is the tree’. And I do think that the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peacetime civilization and I think the wall between so-called civilization and what happened in central Europe is very, very thin and it can get torn down at any time” (Kane as cited in Sierz, 2001, p. 101). How can Kane’s words be understood and do you think the play translates that effectively?

5. Rape occupies a central place in the play. As Kane said, “*Blasted* raised the question ‘What does a common rape in Leeds have to do with mass rape as a war weapon in Bosnia?’ And the answer appeared to be ‘Quite a lot’” (as cited in Stephenson and Langridge, 1997, p. 131). In this sense, Cate’s rape significantly take place off-stage, whereas Ian’s rape is shown. Why do you think this is the case?

6. Discuss the use of character in the play and the effect achieved through its specific treatment.

7. Analyse Ian and Cate’s relationship in scenes one and two. What are its main traits? Then compare it to scenes four and five. What developments take place through the play and how do they affect their relationship? What reversals can be seen in their roles? How can this be read? Could we say that *Blasted* is a feminist play?

8. The character of the Soldier occupies a central position in the play and seems to accompany a shift in the play’s mode of representation. Why do you think he is used in the play and is his use effective? How does the mode of representation change and what are the aims behind it?

9. Analyse the use of time and space in *Blasted* and think about their signification as powerful formally experimental elements. How does the treatment of time affect the structure of the

play and how can the use of rain be understood? Then think about the different spaces that can be found in the play. Finally, read Mireia Aragay's chapter "Relational Spaces: From the State of the Nation to Globalization in Contemporary British Theatre" (2013) and discuss her analysis of space in the play.

10. How does language evolve through the play and how could this be read? Think about the way in which each character makes use of language and think about its possible meanings. Finally, analyse Ian's 'dissolution' scene at the end of scene five and the way in which language and stage directions are used. What happens to language at the end of the play?

11. Discuss the use of the stage picture. What are its most defining elements? How can it be read and what are its implications?

12. How can the ending of the play be read? In what ways can Cate's actions and Ian's final words convey an element of hope?

13. *Blasted* can be seen as an ethical reflection on the pervasiveness of violence in contemporary western societies, the connection between violence and masculinity, and the unwillingness to show any kind of empathy towards less privileged peoples. Bearing in mind its preoccupation with the connections between local and global violence, the representation of genocide, and "how the political and the personal impinge on each other" (Royal Court Educational Pack, n.d.), how does *Blasted* resonate ethically at this moment in history?

14. *Blasted* is a very rich play in terms of intertextual connections. Read Graham Saunders's chapter from his book *'Love me or Kill me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (2002) and comment on the most representative ones.

15. How would you stage *Blasted*? What would be your directorial proposal to elements such as the change of settings, use of time and space? Then watch the excerpt from Daniel Jeanneteau's (as filmed by Mammar Benranou) staging of *Blasted* at Shizuoka Performing Arts Center (SPAC) (2009) and analyse their rendering of the play.

Reference List

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Visual Material

- Jeanneteau, D. and M. Benranou. [Directors]. (2009). *Blasted*. Shizuoka Performing Arts Center (SPAC), Japan.