

# **Sarah Kane: Complete Plays Study Guide**

**Sarah Kane: Complete Plays by Sarah Kane**

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# Plot Summary

This collection contains the five plays and one screenplay that constitute Sarah Kane's total canon. These works have a common set of themes and motifs, though their settings vary from modern England to a sort of metaphysical concentration camp to the nether-space of the disturbed mind. They are characterized by degradation, violence, suicide, and gallows humor.

Sarah Kane's first play, "Blasted", concerned Ian and Cate, a middle-aged racist journalist and a child-like woman, who enter a Leeds hotel room together years after the end of an affair. As an insurgent siege rages outside, Ian tries to convince Cate to have sex with him. He is dying of lung cancer and liver disease, and he implies that he may have carried out killings for the government. He rapes Cate, and the next morning, a rebel soldier breaks into their room. Cate escapes, and a bomb destroys the hotel room. The soldier rapes Ian and sucks out his eyes, then commits suicide. Cate returns to the blind Ian with a dying baby. Ian tries to commit suicide but cannot. Cate buries the dead baby and leaves to trade her body for food. Ian devours the dead baby and deteriorates to the point of death. Still, he cannot die, and the play ends with Cate feeding him bread and gin in the rain.

In "Phaedra's Love", Kane updates Seneca's tale of Phaedra and Hippolytus. Hippolytus the prince is in a rut, sitting in his room, occasionally receiving sex partners and wasting away. Still the people love him, as does his stepmother Phaedra. Against her daughter Strophe's advice, Phaedra professes her love to Hippolytus and has sex with him. He is nonplussed and abuses her. Phaedra accuses him of rape and kills herself. Hippolytus is excited by the notion of self-destruction and public revilement. Despite Strophe's attempts to defend him, Hippolytus turns himself in. His father, Theseus, resolves to kill him in revenge for Phaedra's death. Disguised as a commoner, Theseus incenses a mob to kill Hippolytus, but Theseus accidentally kills Strophe too. In despair, he takes his own life.

"Cleansed" takes place in a concentration camp where the psychopathic Tinker tests the bonds of love and fidelity. At the beginning of the play, Tinker helps the addict Graham commit suicide. Over the course of the play, he betters Graham's twin sister Grace into despair before giving her an impromptu sex change. He also tests the love that the suicidal boy Robin has for Grace and the love two inmates, Carl and Rod, have for each other. Tinker, meanwhile, is personally depressed because of his inability to make a loving connection.

"Crave" is a sort of tone poem, spoken by four voices, two male and two female. All the voices reflect individuals desperate and tormented because of their inability to make human connections. The characters involved in this play are as tenuous as the events. The central figure is definitely a young woman who, following years of sexual and emotional abuse, cannot accept love. She progresses from refusing affection to desiring it without relief. She appears to commit suicide at the end of Crave.



"4.48 Psychosis" involves a young writer suffering from crippling depression. Drugs fail to quell her suicidal thoughts, and she develops an infatuation with one of her doctors. When the doctor rejects her out of turn, the protagonist commits suicide.

Sarah Kane's screenplay *Skin* concerns Billy, a young skinhead living in south London. After beating a black man near to death, Billy begins a sexual tryst with a young black woman, Marcia. Marcia begins to abuse Billy, feminizing him, carving her name into his flesh, and scraping away his skinhead tattoos. After she has defeated Billy utterly, Marcia throws him away. Billy attempts to kill himself, but he is saved by an older black man who lives near him.



# Blasted, Scene 1

## Blasted, Scene 1 Summary

This collection contains the five plays and one screenplay that constitute Sarah Kane's total canon. These works have a common set of themes and motifs, though their settings vary from modern England to a sort of metaphysical concentration camp to the nether-space of the disturbed mind. They are characterized by degradation, violence, suicide, and gallows humor.

"Blasted" takes place in a modern expensive hotel room in Leeds, England. Ian, a violent racist tabloid reporter, brings the childlike Cate here for a romantic escape as an undefined battle commences outside. The author implies that ethnic minorities - like those engaged in civil war in the Balkans in the 1990s - are seizing control of Leeds. After Cate and Ian arrive at the hotel, Ian pours himself a drink, unholsters his gun, and takes a shower. In his absence, Cate examines the room, bounces on the bed and admires the flowers. Ian coughs wretchedly in the bathroom.

When Ian returns to the room, he and Cate drink champagne and eat hotel sandwiches, and he complains about the minorities of London and its surrounding towns. He mentions Cate's mentally disabled brother. Ian strips and asks Cate to have sex. She laughs, and he angrily dresses. He mocks Cate for not working, and she responds that she is trying to get into advertising. She begins to tremble in her defensive confusion and passes out. Ian tries to rouse her, and she wakes, laughing hysterically, before collapsing again. When she rouses, she and Ian discuss the possibility of dying. Ian knows his lung cancer is killing him, and he speaks sardonically about the end of his life. Cate pleads with him not to die.

Ian finishes his gin and receives a call to his employer. He rattles off a story about the ritual murder of a school girl. Cate talks about her former relationship with Ian. Evidently they carried on an affair when she was very young. He begins to kiss her, and she panics. He accuses her of leading him on. She apologizes, and Ian masturbates to orgasm using her hand. He asks her to have sex with him, but she protests that she has a boyfriend, Shaun. Ian seems jealous, but she assures him they have not slept together. She asks him why he stopped calling her, and he implies it was for her own safety.

Another bottle of gin is delivered to the room. Cate warns Ian that he'll die if he keeps drinking so much. Ian tells her that his ex-wife and son do not know he is dying and accuses Cate of being a lesbian. He goes on to wish death upon football fans. Cate asks him if he could kill her; he is not sure. Ian asks her about the assistant job at the advertising firm. She asks him if he has ever killed someone, and he refuses to answer her.

Ian tells Cate that she transports him to someplace happy, and she responds that she feels that when masturbating. He asks her to have sex with him, and she protests that she cannot. He tells her he bought flowers for her, and the lights go down.

## **Blasted, Scene 1 Analysis**

Blasted is the only play of Kane's canon to take place in a concrete locale, albeit one that seems removed from time. The author is fixated throughout her work on the atrocities of Hitler's Germany and the Bosnian civil conflicts. In *Blasted*, she transposes the latter's atrocities to modern Leeds, a commercial and industrial town in the north of England.

The dynamic of the first scene is between innocence and experience, represented in extreme forms. Cate is a childish woman, barely able to comprehend the intentions of her lover. Ian, conversely, is a disgustingly experienced man. He is consumed by hate and illness, and his past may involve a stint as a government killer. He clings to Cate as a oasis of safety and purity in a filthy world. She wants to extricate herself from him, but he apparently seduced her in her adolescence. Some part of her - the adult part, it seems - cannot exist apart from him.

Much of the action of this scene involves Ian's attempts to convince Cate to have sex with him. She is mentally an adolescent; so Ian relates to her like a teenage boy, complaining that she is teasing him and refusing to satisfy his need for orgasm. Cate only understands death through Ian; she constantly forces him to discuss the cessation of life, a theme that will become more important in the events that follow.



# Blasted, Scene 2

## Blasted, Scene 2 Summary

It is morning in the hotel room at the beginning of Scene 2 of "Blasted", and Cate is asleep. Ian reads the newspapers and searches the room for liquor. Sipping some stale gin, he is wracked with pains. He coughs, and Cate wakes up. Ian is wracked to the point of death but recovers. He lights a cigarette, tosses his gun on the bed and assures her he will die soon, then enters the bathroom.

In his absence, Cate dresses, destroys Ian's jacket and surreptitiously examines the gun. Ian reenters and invites her to breakfast. She refuses and points his gun at him. As he talks her down, she panics and passes out into a trance. While Cate is out, Ian masturbates while pointing his gun at her. She awakens, laughing, and demands to go home. Ian locks the door to keep her in, warning her it is dangerous outside. He explains that the militants outside want to kill him. Cate begins to kiss him as he explains that the government is bugging his phone; that is why he stopped calling her. She performs fellatio on him as he describes mass graves and killings he carried out for the government. As he orgasms, Cate bites down on his penis and then runs to the bathroom.

After a moment, Cate returns and asks if the government killers will come to the hotel. She tells him that he hurt her while performing oral sex last night, drawing blood from her labia. He defends himself, saying she does not love him, and every bad thing he did was for England. He says the ethnic militants kill children like Cate's brother. Cate tells Ian that he has changed and she no longer loves him. Despondent, Ian holds her before having another coughing fit. He draws a bath for Cate, who says she is aching. He orders breakfasts for them while Cate attempts to go to the bathroom.

When the breakfasts arrive, Cate begs Ian not to answer the door. He puts the gun to her head to quiet her shouting. She shouts at him that she is not scared, and Ian forces her to open the door. Ian begins to eat breakfast and asks Cate to stay another day. She refuses and stalks off to the bathroom.

Suddenly, a loud knock comes at the door. Ian draws his gun and asks who is there. More knocks respond. Ian and the person on the other side of the door knock back and forth. Ian holsters his gun and opens the door a crack. A soldier forces his way in with a sniper's rifle, takes Ian's gun, and devours his breakfast. Ian attempts to hide Cate from the soldier, but the soldier says he can "smell the sex" (p. 37). The soldier confiscates Ian's passport and Cate's underwear. He bashes down the bathroom door, but Cate is gone. The soldier announces that the insurgents have taken the city. He begins to urinate on the bed. All of a sudden, an explosion destroys the hotel room.



## Blasted, Scene 2 Analysis

The stakes are raised significantly in Scene 2 of "Blasted". Ian has brutally injured Cate during their night of sex, and she wants nothing more than to leave the hotel room. Ian seems unwilling to allow her to go, locking the door and, at more than one point, aiming his revolver at her. Ian reveals himself to be not merely racist and misogynist, but a sociopath. He recounts stories of murders and mass-burials, all committed in the name of country. At one point, Cate nearly unmans Ian in an attempt to escape the room.

The reality outside of the hotel room becomes clear also. Evidently, an insurgent group is carrying out atrocities in the process of a revolution. Kane is painting a portrait of England as Serbia. A tyrannical government is responding to an ethnic separatist movement with brutal military force. The only result is universal degradation. This will become clear with the arrival of the soldier. This third figure's arrival obliterates the tight framing of the play. The hotel room, in the latter scenes of "Blasted", will become a hell-scape of war's worst effects.





# Blasted, Scenes 3-5

## Blasted, Scenes 3-5 Summary

In Scene 3, a mortar shell has destroyed the hotel room. Ian and the soldier are passed out. They awaken, and the soldier points his rifle at Ian. The soldier sucks down the last of the gin and demands a cigarette of Ian. The soldier asks Ian if he is military. Ian equivocally denies and explains that he is not English but Welsh. The soldier does not understand. He appraises Ian and asks about the girl whose panties he found in the room. The soldier talks about his girlfriend, Col. He says he misses sex, and he tells a story of raping all the women in a civilian family before torturing and killing the men. He castigates Ian for living a pampered life without horror. He says that a soldier raped and murdered Col. The soldier demands to know if Ian could rape and murder a foreign girl like Col. Ian protests that he would never rape or torture.

The soldier demands that Ian, as a journalist, report the atrocities he has told him. Ian tries to explain that he is not a war correspondent. He offers an example of the yellow journalism he purveys. The soldier, after a moment, demands that Ian turn over so he can rape him. Ian refuses and tells the soldier to kill him. The soldier puts Ian's gun to his head and kisses him. Then he rapes Ian while weeping uncontrollably. After he orgasms, the soldier pushes the barrel of Ian's gun into his anus, the same as a soldier did to Col before killing her. The soldier tells Ian he has seen horrors, and Ian's plight is nothing compared to them. He sucks out Ian's eyes and eats them.

In Scene 4, the soldier has killed himself, and Cate enters with a baby. Ian begs her to touch him. She says the soldiers have taken over Leeds and everyone is crying. She says a desperate woman gave her the baby, and it will not stop crying. Ian asks Cate to find his son, but she says she cannot. She asks what he knows about babies. He begs her to kill him, but she searches for something for the baby to eat. Ian begs her to sit with him, and she does. He asks her to find his gun and give it to him. She does, but removes the bullets first. She asks him not to kill himself, explaining that being blind is not the end of the world. She warns him he will go to hell, but he shouts back that there is not hell, heaven, or God. He tries to shoot himself but finds the gun is empty. The baby dies, and Ian says it is lucky. Cate starts laughing hysterically.

In Scene 4, Cate has buried the baby and is making a cross marker for it. Despite Ian's derision, Cate places the marker and says a prayer over the grave. She then leaves to trade sex to the soldiers for food. Ian tries to convince her not to, but he cannot muster a reason.

In a series of moments that follow, Ian masturbates, laughs uncontrollably, defecates, and attempts to strangle himself. Finally, mad with hunger, he digs up the baby and eats it. He crawls into the hole to die. Only his head pokes out from the ground, but as he perishes, rain pours from the ceiling onto his head. He is annoyed. Cate reenters, her



vagina bleeding, carrying bread, sausage and gin. She sits next to Ian's head and feeds him. The lights go out.

## **Blasted, Scenes 3-5 Analysis**

The final scenes of "Blasted" concern the horrors of war, as represented by the soldier. He challenges Ian to defend his aversion to the degradation he describes, scenes of carnage modeled on atrocities committed in the Bosnian civil war. Ian defends himself, arguing that though he has killed, he would never kill in the manner the insurgent revolutionaries do. The soldier responds by raping and partially cannibalizing him. Kane's purpose in showing this is simple and blunt: she wants to show the connection between racism, misogyny, and war crimes. In this world, no one can absent him or herself from complacency in carnage. As the soldier says, "don't think your Welsh arse is different to any other arse" (p. 50).

After the soldier's suicide, Kane focuses on Ian's struggle to die. Blind, starving, and degraded utterly, he wants only the release of death, and Cate refuses to help him. She tends to a baby that dies, and Ian envies the perished child. Ian hates himself for being unable to end his life. This dance with oblivion is characteristic of Kane's writing. The reader or audience cannot help but consider her own struggle with suicidal thought when observing Ian's need for nullification. The end of "Blasted", unlike Kane's later plays, is a moment of life and charity. Ian has resorted to cannibalism and failed to perish, but he has a companion, Cate, who feeds him bread and gin.



# Phaedra's Love, Scenes 1-4

## Phaedra's Love, Scenes 1-4 Summary

"Phaedra's Love" begins with Hippolytus, fat and slovenly, watching television while slumped on the couch and eating hamburgers. He blows his nose into a dirty sock. Then, he joylessly masturbates into another sock and eats another hamburger.

In Scene 2, Phaedra, Hippolytus's stepmother, consults a doctor about her stepson's malaise. The doctor says that he needs to change his diet and habits. Phaedra tells the doctor that Hippolytus never goes out, only sits around and calls people to him for sex. Evidently, Hippolytus is still very popular though, and Phaedra constantly tries to engage him. While the king, Theseus, is gone, Phaedra and her daughter Strophe tend the state. The doctor suggests that Hippolytus needs a real mother.

In Scene 3, Strophe is surprised to find Phaedra irritable and angry. She deduces that Phaedra is in love with Hippolytus. Strophe is shocked, being that she thinks the prince is a disgusting jerk. Phaedra, however, feels an intense connection to him, despite his remoteness and cruelty. Strophe warns her mother not to pursue the attraction. She warns her that the public would turn against them and so would Hippolytus, as he does with all his lovers. She begs Phaedra to take another lover, anyone except the prince. The scene ends with Phaedra resolving to get over Hippolytus.

In Scene 4, Hippolytus is watching television and playing with a remote car. Phaedra enters with birthday presents. He asks her the last time she has had sex. He is disgusted by the presents and the public's love for him. He cannot recall the last time he had sex or even left the castle. Hippolytus asks Phaedra what she got him for his birthday, and she says it is a surprise. He asks her why she married Theseus, and if it was because of his large penis. He says sex is his main interest, primarily because so many women want to have sex with him even though he is fat.

Eventually, Phaedra tells Hippolytus she loves him. He says he would not be made happy by sleeping with her, but she pursues him to try anyway. She says his life will no longer be meaningless if they are lovers, but he assures her they will never speak again if they have sex. He tells her to leave. Phaedra silently performs oral sex on him. He never stops looking at the television and orgasms in silence. He is clearly unmoved by the gesture. She asks to have sex, but Hippolytus refuses, saying he cannot feel love or jealousy. Phaedra mentions his former lover Lena, and he lashes out, taking her by the throat and warning her never to speak of Lena again. He caustically tells Phaedra that he slept with Strophe. Phaedra slaps him, but he responds that he actually gave Strophe an orgasm. As Phaedra is leaving, Hippolytus mentions that he has gonorrhoea. He says he hates Phaedra because she hates herself.



## Phaedra's Love, Scenes 1-4 Analysis

Unlike "Blasted", "Phaedra's Love" does not take place in a concrete location. The characters and plot, adapted from the play by Roman dramatist Seneca, are clearly Greek mythological, but the dialogue and trappings of story are all modern English. The cadence is British Londoner, and Hippolytus has hamburgers, a television and a remote control car. Like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Edward Bond - Kane's clear predecessors in the British theatre - Kane uses concrete references to create netherworlds, locations that exist out of time and history.

As in all of Sarah Kane's work, "Phaedra's Love" takes the notion of love as its theme and perverts it. Love is not a wondrous, saving thing. Rather, it is a weapon. It ravages and destroys, because it always comes into contact with cruelty and indifference. Phaedra, like all literary lovers, opens herself completely, but she opens not to another open heart, but rather to Hippolytus.

Hippolytus represents all abusive indifference that exists in life. He has sex without pleasure, and he contains no empathy. Like Ian in "Blasted", he bears the hallmarks of a sociopath. Unlike Ian, he feels no pain. Hippolytus is universally loved, but he cannot understand the concept of love. His torment - if one could call it that - is that he understands the existence of pleasure and pain but cannot feel either himself. As such, he is disgusted by those that do. Only the mention of an unseen former love, Lena, seems to rouse passion from him.



# Phaedra's Love, Scenes 5-8

## Phaedra's Love, Scenes 5-8 Summary

In Scene 5 of "Phaedra's Love", Hippolytus is examining his discolored tongue when Strophe enters, telling him to hide. Phaedra has accused him of rape, and Strophe wants to know if Hippolytus had sex with her. Hippolytus says he isn't sure, and Strophe hectors him for a definite answer. Hippolytus admits that rape is as good a word as any, and he perks up at the notion of being a rapist. Strophe says the public want to lynch him for the rape. She says she will stand by him if the accusations are false, but Hippolytus continues to get excited by the notion of being lynched. He tells Strophe that he informed Phaedra of their tryst, and also Strophe's trust with Theseus. Strophe fires back that she would die for the royal family. She attacks Hippolytus, and he holds her into an embrace. As he tries to calm Strophe, she tells him that Phaedra has hung herself, leaving her accusation in a suicide note. Hippolytus realizes that this is Phaedra's gift to him. He accepts the accusation and leaves to turn himself in, excited by the prospect of being hated.

In Scene 6, Hippolytus is visited in his cell by a priest. The priest tries to convince him to ask forgiveness, but Hippolytus is compelled by his own degradation. Hippolytus explains that he finds comfort in his solitude, that companionship is nothing but torture. He explains that there is no God. He explains that if there were one, God would see through a false final conversion before death. The priest tries to persuade Hippolytus to confess his sin and deny the rape for the moral good of the country. Hippolytus says that he has lived honestly and intends to die honestly. The priest is struck dumb by this. Hippolytus accuses the priest of hypocrisy, sinning knowing he will confess later. The priest performs oral sex on Hippolytus.

In Scene 7, Theseus weeps bitterly over the body of Phaedra as it lies on the funeral pyre. As Theseus lights the body ablaze, he vows to kill Hippolytus.

Scene 8 takes place outside of the court as various citizens debate the fate of Hippolytus, whom they now universally despise. Theseus and Strophe are among them, disguised. The citizens have come from the far reaches of the realm (including Newcastle), to murder Hippolytus. Theseus riles the crowd by suggesting that the prince may be acquitted. When Hippolytus is brought out, the crowd swarms him. Theseus kisses his son and throws him to the mob. They strangle him and cut off his genitals. Strophe tries to stop them, but Theseus, not recognizing her, rapes and kills her to the cheers of the crowd. Theseus cuts Hippolytus from groin to chest. Before dying, Hippolytus recognizes Strophe. The crowd and policemen disperse, leaving Theseus with the bodies of Hippolytus and Strophe. Theseus cuts his own throat and dies. Hippolytus opens his eyes to see vultures circling above. He is excited by the prospect of being eaten and dies. The vultures eat him.



## Phaedra's Love, Scenes 5-8 Analysis

Phaedra, the ostensible protagonist of the play, dies offstage, and Hippolytus, oddly enough, becomes the protagonist. Confronted with Phaedra's death and his own fall from grace, the prince is excited by the prospect of feeling something. Like the person who cuts herself to feel (as Kane is supposed to have done), Hippolytus accepts Phaedra's gift of pariah. He becomes a rapist. This enables him to feel pain, loss, and degradation. As he tells the priest in his cell in Scene 6, "[I] always suspected the world didn't smell of fresh paint and flowers" (p. 92). In the end, the entire royal family is killed attempting to redeem itself. Theseus intends to kill Hippolytus; Strophe to defend him. Hippolytus simply wants death. He becomes a figure of respect for the audience, uncompromising and uncompromised.

"Phaedra's Love" contains some of the first examples of Kane's determination to present unstageable moments to her director. An example is when Hippolytus's genitals are cut off, tossed on a barbecue, passed amongst children and fed to a dog. Another is when he is eaten by vultures onstage. In creating purely theatrical worlds, Kane challenged directors to make bold choices with her work. These guarantee a singular vision.



# Cleansed, Scenes 1-7

## Cleansed, Scenes 1-7 Summary

"Cleansed" begins with Tinker and Graham at the perimeter fence of the University. Snow is falling, and Tinker is cooking heroin for Graham. Graham asks him to cook a fatal amount, and Tinker indicates that doing so would begin a series of troubles. Eventually Tinker agrees and injects the fatal dose into Graham's eye.

In Scene 2, Carl and Rod are at the perimeter fence in the summer sun, and Carl is asking Rod to accept his ring. Rod is hesitant, saying that doing so might mean Carl's death. Carl says he would die for Rod, who hesitantly accepts the ring. Carl asks for Rod's ring. Rod is unsure, but gives it, warning Carl that he only can promise love for now. Carl warns Rod not to trust him, and they kiss.

In Scene 3, Grace and Tinker meet in the white room. Grace is Graham's twin sister, and Tinker explains that the university either burned or recycled Graham's clothing after he died. Grace demands his clothing, and Tinker calls in Robin, a nineteen-year-old boy. Robin gives Grace his clothing, and Grace faints after dressing. Tinker takes her to a bed, where he cuffs her. She asks to stay, but Tinker warns her he cannot protect her. She pleads, and Tinker gives her a sedative and leaves. When Grace awakens, she tells the still-naked Robin to dress in her clothes. Robin tells her he tried to kill himself. He is trying to get stable to return to his mother's. Grace asks him if he can write; he cannot.

Scene 4 is in the red room, the University's sports hall. Carl is being beaten, while Tinker questions him about his lover. Tinker orders a rod be inserted into Carl's anus, ostensibly to be pushed through him. Carl cries out for Rod to be tortured instead of him. Rod is tossed from a great height, and Tinker assures both men that they won't be killed. He cuts off Carl's tongue and forces him to swallow the ring from Rod's finger.

Scene 5 returns the audience to the white room where Grace is waking. Her hands are no longer bound, and Graham is sitting with her. He tells her he is clean and will never leave her again. Grace and Graham dance, and Grace begins to take on his features. She says he is his angel, and he tells her she is beautiful. They make love, and sunflowers begin to grow all around them.

Scene 7 takes place in the black room, the University showers, converted into a peep show. Tinker feeds quarters into a slot, and a nude dancer appears. He asks her to stop dancing and sit so that he can see her face. He cannot look at her, but he meekly asks to be her friend. He calls her Grace and promises to be anything she wants. The screen closes, and Tinker has no more tokens.

Scene 7 takes place in the round room, the University library, where Grace shows Robin how to write while Graham watches on. Robin tries writing his name. He asks Grace if she has a boyfriend, and she mentions that her last boyfriend tried to strangle her.



Robin asks Grace what she would change about her life, and she does not know. Robin would bring Graham back to life. Robin and Graham simultaneously tell Grace she is beautiful and they love her. Robin says he has never kissed a girl and asks Grace to be his girlfriend. She politely declines. Robin and Graham both say they love her and she will never leave. Tinker enters and burns the paper Robin has drawn a flower on.

## Cleansed, Scenes 1-7 Analysis

"Cleansed" likens love to torture. The metaphysical university/concentration camp, headed by the sociopath Tinker, is a laboratory of human love. There is Graham and Grace, Robin and Grace, and Carl and Rod. These relationships are tested against the stress of cruelty and their own frailty. Graham struggles against death to reach his sister; Robin has never kissed a girl; Carl is a hopeless romantic. In the horror house of the university, these relationships cannot hold.

Carl and Rod, in particular, illustrate the torture inherent in love. Carl swears complete and unreserved love to Rod at the beginning of the play. Rod is more pragmatic: he promises his love for the time being. In a scene that directly mirrors the final torture of Winston Smith in 1984, Carl is sodomized and beaten until he turns on Rod.

Tinker will place every character in this position by the end of the play. His role is to test the bonds of love, and he does so with the fastidious curiosity of Joseph Mengele, on whom he is clearly modeled. Still, in Scene 6, Tinker's demeanor changes. In his interaction with the erotic dancer, he shows a nascent desire to help Grace in some way.





# Cleansed, Scenes 8-20

## Cleansed, Scenes 8-20 Summary

Scene 8 takes place in a patch of mud by the perimeter fence. Carl and Rod sit, and Rod wonders aloud why Carl so quickly betrayed him. Carl writes in the mud that he wants Rod to forgive him. Tinker cuts off Carl's hands. Rod says he cannot forgive Carl, and rats carry off the severed hands.

In Scene 9, the Woman says she will be Tinker's friend if he helps her. He asks what he should do. In Scene 10, Grace is being beaten in the red room. Voices call her a slag for sleeping with her brother. She calls to Graham for help. Graham looks on and tells Grace to speak with him. He tells her not to feel the blows, and she no longer does. Graham holds Grace's head in his arms while she is raped. She begins to bleed all over. Gunshots ring out, and Graham protects Grace. Daffodils sprout throughout the stage as Tinker enters. Tinker tells Grace he will save her. In Scene 11, Robin goes to the black room and watches the Women dance. After the screen closes, he weeps bitterly.

In the white room in Scene 12, Tinker and Graham sit with Grace, who sunbathes in a tin ray of light. Tinker promises her whatever she wants. Voices continue talking to Grace. Graham and Tinker hold her hands. She thinks she has testicles. Graham begs her not to lose him. Tinker administers electroshock to her.

Scene 13 takes place on the patch of mud by the perimeter fence. Carl and Rod sit. Rod wonders what Tinker would have done to Carl if Carl had not turned on him. Rod swears he would choose to die rather than let Tinker hurt Carl. They hear the Lennon/McCartney song "Things We Said Today." Carl dances for Rod. Tinker cuts off Carl's feet, and Rod laughs as rats carry them away.

In Scene 14, Tinker masturbates furiously and speaks abusively to the Woman, forcing her to touch herself for him. He refuses all of her pleas to save her. In Scene 15, Tinker happens upon Robin in the round room. Robin is asleep next to books, an abacus, and some chocolates. Tinker wakes him and demands to know where he got the chocolates. Robin says they are for Grace, and Tinker forces him to eat all of them. Robin wets himself, and Tinker rubs his face in it. He forces Robin to clean the urine with the books and burns the sodden pile. Grace enters, tranquilized, with Graham. They warm their hands by the fire.

In Scene 16, Carl and Rod is in the scorching heat by the perimeter fence. Rod sobs, and Carl holds him. Rod swears complete love and loyalty to Carl. Tinker puts a knife to Rod's choice and makes him choose. Rod chooses to die, and Tinker cuts his throat. He orders the body be burnt.

In the round room in Scene 17, Graham, Grace and Robin sit together. Grace is enamored of her hands, and Robin tries to work out how many days he has left on the



abacus. Grace will not respond to him. Robin takes off his hose and hangs himself. Grace does not move, but Graham yanks on Robin's legs to kill him. Tinker enters and takes Grace away. In Scene 18, Grace awakens on a gurney next to the unconscious Carl. Graham watches on. Tinker is there, and he explains to Grace that he has removed Carl's penis and attached it to her. He has also cut off her breasts. Grace cannot speak. Tinker calls her Graham and explains that he is not actually a doctor. Both Graham say goodbye to Grace and depart.

In Scene 19, Tinker tells the Woman that Grace is gone. He and the Woman kiss. Tinker thinks he has failed Grace, but the Woman silences him. She and Tinker make love. She cries and he orgasms. They hold each other, and Tinker says he loves the woman. She says her name is actually Grace.

In Scene 20, Grace, who has become Graham, and Carl, now a woman, sit by the perimeter fence in the rain. Grace can no longer go on with life. She is always with Graham now. She asks Carl to help her. They join hand to stump, and the rain stops. The sun comes out, blindingly bright.

## Cleansed, Scenes 8-20 Analysis

In the latter passages of "Cleansed", two essential plot threads emerge: Tinker's desire to save Grace, and Rod's decision to fully commit to Carl. The latter develops through an absurdly vicious running joke. Carl tries desperately to apologize to Rod for his betrayal, but he has no tongue. He writes until Tinker cuts off his hands; he dances until Tinker takes his feet. Meanwhile, Rod processes his feelings for Carl in the wake of the betrayal. By the time the life-and-death decision arrives, Rob has decided that he loves Carl as completely as Carl claimed he did in the beginning. It costs Rod his life.

Tinker becomes fixated on saving Grace. She has become reliant on the memory of Graham to get her through her daily torments, and Tinker decides that this indicates that she wants to become Graham. In typically cavalier fashion, Tinker removes Grace's breasts and affixes Carl's genitals to her. He realizes immediately that he has failed.

Still, "Cleansed" ends with three surprising acts of love. Rod dies for Carl. Later, Tinker and the Woman finally connect; Tinker's acceptance that he has failed Grace allows him to make love to the Woman, who becomes Grace. Finally, the wounded Carl and Grace comfort each other in the wake of their devastation. This connection between them - simple and unromantic - finally allows the sun to emerge.



# Crave, Part 1

## Crave, Part 1 Summary

"Crave" takes place in a nowhere place. There are no stage directions, only lines of dialogue spoken by four performers: C, M, B, and A. C and M are women; B and A, men. There is no concrete plot, though certain narrative threads appear and quickly dissipate.

The first half of "Crave" primarily concerns C and A. C is clearly a woman who has been damaged by an abusive childhood. She no longer speaks to her mother, and the dialogue implies that she was sexually abused by both her father and grandfather. M, who occasionally takes on the role of C's mother, speaks about how she got drunk and slept with strange men until she got pregnant.

In the first half of Crave, A is clearly in love with C. He begins the play assuring her that he is not a rapist or pedophile. Over time, his overtures to her grow to the point that he speaks for pages on end about his desire for her and his wishes for their happy life together. C, however, is clearly unable to allow another person into her life. She rejects A every time he gushes about his love and desire for her. She claims to want simplicity in her life, but experience has forced her to accept the unpredictability and danger of life.

In contrast to A, B is more aggressive, making threatening, insinuating and arrogant statements to an unseen, presumably female, counterpart. The indication is that whatever damaging male figure wounded C, B represents it.

At the mid-point of "Crave", A is lamenting the intense pain that he has caused C in his determination to love her.

## Crave, Part 1 Analysis

With "Crave", Sarah Kane disposes not only with the concept of a concrete setting, but also with the notion of setting in general. Kane also does away with characters and a linear plot. "Crave" - like "4.48 Psychosis" - is more tone poem than play, in many respects. It is intended as a chorus of voices that, perhaps, represent different individuals or fragmented components of one psyche. Indeed, these voices could be unrelated plot-wise, simply intertwining verses of a fugue of desperation.

The running theme of "Crave" - that which brings together all the disparate commentary - is the desire and impossibility of human connection. C is forever wounded by the abuse of her childhood and cannot connect. A desperately pursues a love that will not have him. M drinks and gives her body up to anyone who will accept. All of these people long for some sense of interconnection. This cannot ever happen, though, and the

desperation of the first part of the play will give way to despair and collapse in the latter half.



# Crave, Part 2

## Crave, Part 2 Summary

In the second half of "Crave", C discusses the disgust she feels with men and how she needs to be abused to have an orgasm. A, meanwhile, makes one final plea for her love and is, again, rebuffed. Both express the exhaustion and despair of not having love. C explains how sex is a painful and humiliating chore for her. She suspects the only meaningful thing she will do is die.

A begins to switch topic, discussing the affairs he is having. M, meanwhile, becomes a confidante, a mother or a psychiatrist alternately. She seems to browbeat the protagonist for drinking too much and sleeping around. C is sinking deeper into a suicidal depression spiral. She has switched from disinterest with relationships to desperation for one. A, in contrast, refuses to engage her. The dynamic has reversed between the two.

At this point, there is a litany of short interjections: yes's, no's, and shouts of anguish. C and M discuss physical manifestations of depression, from nausea to insomnia. A tells her that she has lost him, that he has moved on. He will not engage her any longer. B, taking on the role of C's father, indicates that he could not go on if his daughter killed herself.

In the final moments of "Crave", C begins to accept her own demise. A speaks a prayer. M narrated C's passage into death, and B speaks bitterly of his loss, signaling that he, too, is giving up. A, in the end, seems to reverse himself and want C back. C, in her death, says that she is "happy and free" (p. 200).

## Crave, Part 2 Analysis

"Crave", like "Blasted" and "4.48 Psychosis", takes despair as its central theme. In the early part of the play, C rejects all those around her (or her memories of them). In the second half, C realizes how isolated she is. A, who spoke of desperate love for her in the beginning, now rejects her. C slips into a massive depression, one that ends in suicide.

B's role in the play becomes clearer in the second half. He seems to take on the role of C's father, the man who sexually abused her in her youth. Kane allows B a level of pathos, though, as he expresses fear that his daughter will kill herself. He expresses bitterness, indicating that he will end his own life in response to his daughter's death.

In analyzing "Crave", the temptation is to assign concrete roles to each of the voices. In truth, the play is not a narrative but an enactment of a state of mind. Kane has taken to state of despair brought on by isolation and emotional betrayal and created a dialogue of a scattered, fractured psyche. Dueling voices argue, invoke, and reenact. The

freedom joyously expressed at the end is freedom from this dialogue. For C - or the personality C and the rest of the voices represent - silence is the promised end.



## 4.48 Psychosis, Part 1

### 4.48 Psychosis, Part 1 Summary

"4.48 Psychosis" has no dramatis personae or stage directions. It is a lyrical text intended to be performed for the stage, and individual directors are tasked with determining how many performers are involved in speaking the text and how the work is staged.

The play begins with statements of comfort offered the suicidal protagonist, phrases that assure her she will get better and people care about her. She describes her room at 4:48 in the morning, which seems crawling with unease. She expresses in clear and precise language the nature of her depression: she is sad and cannot foresee life improving. She wants to kill herself. This depression renders her unable to do anything, even writing or sex.

The protagonist clarifies that she does not desire death. She simply desires the end of life. She pictures her lover waking to find her dead. Then follows a series of declining numbers. The protagonist paints a bleak portrait of the hospital where she was last treated, all coffee and cloying doctors appraising her. One doctor seemed to care for her, though, and the protagonist has fallen in love with him.

In a brief dialogue that follows, the protagonist explains to this doctor her elaborate suicide plans. She accuses the doctor of hating the unhappy, and he says he wants her to stop blaming herself for unhappiness.

In the passage that follows, the protagonist laments the fact that her mind is forever disconnected from her body. She considers writing the truest thing she does, but she promises that these words will be the last she ever writes. Next, she discusses how the memory of her beloved doctor drives her mad. She wanders town and always settles in a pub she feels he might enter, though he never does. She curses the woman she imagines he is with. She curses him and her mother and father.

In another dialogue with the doctor, the protagonist admits to cutting herself. She says he has no concept of the pleasure cutting brings. The doctor says that she is ill.

The protagonist mourns the loss of a loved one - possibly her well self - and hopes for some way to fill the emptiness inside herself. In another dialogue, the doctor insists that the protagonist go on medication. She refuses, saying the drugs will ruin her ability to write. The doctor convinces her to try the treatment. What follows is a litany of psychiatric drugs and their awful side-effects. At the end of the list, the protagonist takes 100 aspirin and a bottle of wine in an attempt at suicide.



## 4.48 Psychosis, Part 1 Analysis

"4.48 Psychosis" is as much a poem as it is a dramatic text. Sarah Kane is dramatizing the experience she had every morning as she awoke at 4:48 AM, according to her colleague David Greig in the introduction. Greig goes on to say that Kane likely knew she would die before this text was ever staged. Indeed, the following quote from the play seems to indicate as much:

I write for the dead

And unborn

After 4.48 I shall not speak again (213)

The protagonist of this play bears more than passing resemblance to its author. She is a writer of working class London stock. She has faced critical pillory, suffered crippling depression, and attempted suicide before. As such, Kane's personal history casts a shadow on the text. Critics initially called the play a dramatic suicide note. Perhaps it is, but the text - while free form and associative - is definitely narrative, more so than "Crave". This woman's history and desires are clear, and the reader understands how her despair is connected to an unrequited love.

As the text reaches its midpoint, the reader can interpret this play as the crowding of unprocessed thoughts of a depressed individual in the morning of her suicide.





## 4.48 Psychosis, Part 2

### 4.48 Psychosis, Part 2 Summary

In the second half of "4.48 Psychosis", the protagonist emerges from her suicide attempt disoriented and panicking. She is terrified of dying and begs the heavens to save her from the torment and atrocity that makes life unlivable. The protagonist saves that she is responsible for the genocides of the Holocaust, the Kurds in Iraq, and the Balkans. She is disgusted with her own complicity. She begs her beloved doctor to look away from her.

In the passage that follows, the protagonist speaks in gnostic tones, prophesying the end of the world, but she concludes by announcing that Christ is dead, and she reasons that only those who insanely believe in God are considered sane. She says that at 4:48 AM, everything becomes clear for a time. She is not tormented and wracked with fears. Her doctor assures her she will get better, but the protagonist is dubious. She feels the only good part of herself is the part that loves him. Then follows a long list of onomatopoeic words, interspersed with statements of defeat and despair. Then the protagonist counts down from 100 by sevens. After this, the protagonist attempts to determine how she will become sane again. She lists a series of goals, including better self-understanding and avoiding pain. In the end, she says she wants to be free.

In the scene that follows, the doctor tells the protagonist that he cannot be her friend; he is her doctor. When she does not respond to him, he continues by saying she already has many friends who love her. Still no response, and in a mistaken rambling explanation, the doctor says that he hates his job and he needs his friends to be sane. He immediately apologizes, but the protagonist is wounded and angry.

The protagonist feels completely out of control of her body and mind. She knows this final disappointment will kill her. She now only regards herself in relation to her death. She has accepted that if there is an afterlife, she is going to hell. She is angry at the doctor for saving her life once only to drive her to suicide again. She takes all of her remaining medication. In her dying moments, she accepts that she is dying for someone who does not love her. She wishes her mother well and dies. She says she never knew herself and asks the curtain be opened.

### 4.48 Psychosis, Part 2 Analysis

Freedom, in Sarah Kane's work, is inevitably connected to death. C, in "Crave", and Hippolytus, in "Phaedra's Love", find their freedom only by leaving the world, and the unnamed protagonist of "4.48 Psychosis" finds it, at last, in suicide. Freedom, however, is not a lovely warm thing. It is cold and painful. The protagonist states that she does not desire death. At best, she can hope for total cessation. At worst, she will go to hell. This play takes the reader/audience as deeply into the mind of clinical depression as is



possible. In this sense, the work is as pure a manifestation of the Aristotelean aesthetic as can exist. The audience is invited into a surrogate experience he or she will likely never have: that of self-harm. An interesting note is that a reference to a dancing chicken at the very end of the play is a reference to Werner Herzog's film *Stoszek*, which Kane's friends say was the last film she watched before her suicide.

This section of "4.48 Psychosis" also contains an odd passage during which the protagonist claims responsibility for all the atrocities of the world. Going back to "Blasted", Kane has sought to connect the private torment of depression and emotional abuse with the genocides of Europe. "Cleansed", indeed, is a marriage between pained love and concentration camp torture. Clearly, this was a subject that haunted the playwright and compelled her to delve deeper into mankind's capacity for cruelty.



# Skin

## Skin Summary

"Skin" is a ten-minute film that Sarah Kane wrote for Channel 4. It concerns a skinhead called Billy and his pained affair with a black woman. The film begins in a flat in south London with Billy waking up to a friend leaving a message on his answering machine. Billy looks out his window and sees Neville, an old black neighbor, tending a marijuana plant. Across the way, he sees a black woman in a window and makes a rude gesture to her. Billy gets ready and leaves.

At a café, Billy and his skinhead friends eat English breakfasts. His friends tell him he needs to put some fat on, eat some meat. Billy makes a disgusting comment about what goes into sausage, and his pals spit out their food. Billy shows one of his swastika markings to a little black boy. The skinheads leave.

That day, the skinheads arrive at a black wedding. The wedding party and the skins face off until one of the skins bashes a ketchup bottle over a black man's head. A brawl ensues, and Billy repeatedly hits a groomsman with a brick. Billy flees as the cops arrive. Back at his flat, Billy washes a head-wound. Neville knocks on the bathroom door as Billy sits on the toilet. He is nonplussed. In his room, Billy sees the young black woman across the way, again. She beckons him over.

Billy runs across the street, and Kath - a young skinhead girl - opens the door for him and tells him where the black woman, Marcia is. Billy goes up to Marcia's room. He tentatively touches her; she is the first black woman he has ever touched. They kiss and furtively have sex. Billy quickly orgasms, and they go a second time.

Over an indeterminate period of time - hours or days or weeks - Marcia ties Billy up and beats him. She makes him eat dog food. She shaves him of all of his body hair, scrapes off his Union Jack tattoo, and carves her name into his back as she cries. Blindfolded, Billy crawls around the room looking for her. She dresses him as a woman and refuses all of his affectionate words. He begs her to like him and asks if she knows the man whose head he bashed in at the wedding. Against this will, Billy leaves Marcia.

At his own flat, Billy is disgusted as he looks at his bruised, scarred body. He changes his answering machine message to say he is dead. Billy swallows a bottle of pills and a beer. He lights a cigarette and looks out the window at Neville.

Kath enters Marcia's room. Marcia apologizes and Kath forgives her. They get into bed together.

Neville, meanwhile, discovers the dying Billy and drags him to the bathroom. Billy vomits into the toilet as Neville encourages him. Billy smiles weakly at Neville.



## Skin Analysis

Sarah Kane's only screenplay, "Skin", is markedly more upbeat than any of her plays. It accounts for the capacity of humanity to change. It features moments of deep compassion between natural foes, and it looks upon suicide not as a release into ambiguous freedom but as coward's way out. The screenplay takes place in south London in the 1990s and focuses on the subculture of skinheads. Like Beckett before her, Sarah Kane places her narratives in nether-spaces but peppered them with distinct local details: dialects, references, etc. "Skin" exists in a distinct time and place, but part of this setting becomes a nether-space: Marcia's room.

Throughout all of Kane's work, sex and affection are weapons, and one could read Marcia's vicious and vindictive cruelty to Billy as guilt surfacing in the skinhead's consciousness in the wake of his possibly hate-killing. Perhaps his romantic rejection by a black woman underscores his pathetic and inexplicable rejection of her culture in England. In a Kane play, Billy would likely succeed in killing himself. Here, his guardian angel - the old black neighbor Neville - saves him. Billy smiles and weeps in agony, but he has clearly been changed. His tattoo is gone, his body is bruised, and he cannot go back to the person he was before.

Kane's full cannon - five plays and a screenplay - reflects a damaged psyche trying to cope not only with emotion imbalances but also with the social ills that surround it: genocide, racism, systemic cruelty. The public was incensed by her work not merely for its sexuality and brutality, but also for the mirror it held up to society. In Sarah Kane's corrupt existence, no one is merely a victim. One is always complicit in cruelty and one is always affected by it. In many cases - indeed, for Kane herself - cessation of life is the only true escape.



# Characters

## Ian

In "Blasted", Ian is a racist, middle-aged tabloid journalist. He is divorced and has a teenage son named Mathew. He implies throughout the play that he does clandestine work from the British government, including delivering messages, overseeing mass burials, and even killing. Ian had an affair with the mentally challenged Cate when she was in her teens.

At the beginning of "Blasted", Ian brings Cate to a posh hotel room in Leeds. He is getting away from his paper and government demands as an insurgent battle rages outside. The first night, Ian tries to convince Cate to have sex with him, explaining that he needs her and that he is dying of lung cancer and liver disease. He regularly brandishes a revolver. Cate rebuffs him repeatedly, and eventually he rapes her. The next morning, Cate will not speak to him and wounds him during fellatio in revenge. During breakfast, a rebel soldier breaks into their room. Cate escapes, and a bomb destroys the hotel room. The soldier accused Ian of being a sheltered fool. Ian is shocked as the soldier discusses atrocities he has committed. The soldier rapes Ian, penetrates him with the revolver and sucks out his eyes, then commits suicide. Ian despairs in his hunger and blindness, Cate returns to the blind Ian with a dying baby. Ian tries to commit suicide but cannot, since Cate has removed the bullets from his revolver. As the baby dies, Ian curses God and tries to die. Cate buries the dead baby and leaves to trade her body for food. Ian devours the dead baby and deteriorates to the point of death. Still, even crawling into a grave he cannot die, and the play ends with Cate feeding him bread and gin in the rain.

## Cate

In "Blasted", Cate is a childlike young woman who goes to a hotel in Leeds with Ian. She is wary of Ian, who had an affair with her when she was a teenager before cutting off communication with her. Cate is given to fits of panic where she passes out and wakes up laughing. In the hotel room, Cate is insistent that she will not have sex with Ian, saying she is mad at him and she has a new boyfriend. She becomes distressed whenever Ian gets angry, brandishes his gun, or has a coughing fit. Ian makes repeated passes at Cate, which she rebuts, and he eventually rapes her, injuring her genitals. The next morning, Cate is obviously angry at Ian. She destroys his jacket and thinks of shooting him with his own gun. She performs fellatio on him and nearly bites off his penis. She is in the bathroom when the soldier enters the room, and she then escapes.

Cate returns with a dying baby to find the room destroyed by a mortar and Ian blinded and starving. She gives Ian his revolver but removes the bullets so he cannot kill himself. She tries to tend the baby, but it dies. She buries it with a prayer, defending the notion of God's existence to the angry, ranting Ian. Cate disappears to trade her body to



soldiers for food. She returns to find Ian submerged in a grave, trying to die. She sits beside him and gives him some of her food and gin.

## Soldier

The soldier is an Eastern European militant besieging the city of Leeds at the beginning of "Blasted". After the insurgents take Leeds, the soldier storms Cate and Ian's hotel room. The soldier devours the food and gin in the room, but a mortar round destroys it and nearly kills both Ian and the soldier. The soldier talks to Ian about the atrocities he has committed, including torture and rape. He talks about his beloved Col, who was raped and murdered by government forces. The soldier rapes Ian; then he pushes the barrel of a revolver up Ian's anus and threatens to shoot. Soon thereafter, the soldier commits suicide.

## Phaedra

In "Phaedra's Love", Phaedra is the wife of the king Theseus. As the play begins, Phaedra is desperately in love with the prince Hippolytus, who is caught in some sort of rut. Phaedra consults a doctor and her daughter Strophe about Hippolytus, and both warn her to care for him as a mother, not a lover. Phaedra visits Hippolytus on his birthday and declares her love to him. She also says she has a surprise present for him. Hippolytus refuses to love her, but he accepts fellatio. Afterward, he says he does not love her, informs her that he has gonorrhoea, and reveals that he has also slept with Strophe. Phaedra hangs herself immediately after. Her birthday surprise for Hippolytus is that she publicly accuses him of raping her in her suicide note.

## Hippolytus

Hippolytus is the prince and son of Theseus in "Phaedra's Love". As the play begins, Hippolytus is depressed. He sits in his room, watching television and masturbating. From time to time, he has sex with random people, but he has no lovers or friends. He has nothing but contempt for humanity, but the people love him. Phaedra, his father's wife, comes to him on his birthday saying she has a surprise for him. She professes her love, but Hippolytus refuses to accept. She performs oral sex on him, but Hippolytus abuses her afterward, informing her that he has gonorrhoea and revealing that he slept with Strophe, her daughter. Phaedra accuses him of rape and kills herself.

Hippolytus is excited by the notion of the destruction and public revilement that follows. Despite Strophe's attempts to defend him, Hippolytus turns himself in. A priest tries to convince Hippolytus to repent for the people's sake, but Hippolytus refuses to be false. His father, Theseus, resolves to kill him in revenge for Phaedra's death. Disguised as a commoner, Theseus incenses a mob to kill Hippolytus. They tear him limb from limb, and he marvels at the excitement of the violence and the vultures coming to eat him.



## Tinker

Tinker is a drug dealer and doctor, and he is the commander of the university and concentration camp in "Cleansed". Tinker is a psychopath who dedicates himself to the cruel undermining of relational bonds. At the beginning of the play, he kills the addict Graham with an overdose of heroin. When Graham's twin sister Grace enters the play, Tinker sedates her and keeps her in the institution. Tinker tortures the inmate Carl into betraying his lover Rod. Then, he proceeds to cut off Carl's tongue, hands, and feet to prevent him from communicating with Rod. Tinker also prevents the depressed boy Robin from taking comfort from Grace, driving him to suicide. Tinker regularly visits an exotic dancer, begging for her friendship and pretending she is Grace. In the latter scenes of the play, Tinker gives Grace electroshock therapy and performs a haphazard sex change on her. Realizing this is not what she wants, Tinker returns to the exotic dancer and makes love to her.

## Grace

Grace is the protagonist of "Cleansed". She comes to the university/concentration camp when her brother Graham dies. Meeting with Tinker, she demands Graham's clothes. Tinker gives them to her - taking them from the boy Robin - and sedates her. When she wakes up in the camp, she is kept company by her brother Graham. He watches over her for the play, helping her through the beatings, rapes, torment, and electroshock Tinker forces on her. Grace, while incarcerated in the camp, tries to teach Robin how to read, but he develops an infatuation with her. She continuously and gently rejects him, and after she is lobotomized with electroshock, Robin kills himself. Grace finally is transformed into Graham after Tinker removes her breasts and vagina and attaches Carl's penis to her. The play ends with Grace/Graham and Carl comforting each other.

## C

In "Crave", none of the voices comprise a single character, but C seems to represent the central damaged female protagonist. C is sexually abused by her father and grandfather as a little girl. Growing up, she has abandoned both her family and the notion of human contact in general. She refuses the impassioned dedication of A. She cannot feel sexual pleasure without abuse, but by the time she wants to accept the love of A, it is too late. He has moved on. C, despairing, takes her own life.

## A

In "Crave", the voice of A generally takes the role of C's dogged suitor. He spends the beginning of the play convincing C that he is not a rapist or a pedophile. When they begin - presumably - to sleep together, A is put off the lack of pleasure C feels. He speaks in extended monologues about the love he feels for C, and the good life he wants for the two of them. C constantly rejects A, though, and he grows bitter. By the





time C returns to him, he does not want her. He says the A that loved her unconditionally is gone.

## The Protagonist

The protagonist of "4.48 Psychosis" wakes up at 4:48 AM. She is a young writer suffering from crippling depression. She cuts herself and makes elaborate plans for her own suicide. She feels personally culpable of suffering everywhere. The protagonist repeatedly states that she cannot foresee her life improving. Doctors try to convince her to go on psychiatric medication, but she fears it will stymie her ability to write. The protagonist develops an infatuation with one of her doctors, and that doctor convinces her to take medication. The drugs fail to help, and the protagonist attempts suicide. Soon after recovering, the protagonist tells the doctor she loves him, and the doctor rejects her out of turn. The protagonist commits suicide.

## Billy

Billy is the protagonist of "Skin". He is a young, thin skinhead living in south London. As the film begins, Billy wakes up and goes out with his fellow skins. After breakfast, they ambush a black wedding, and Billy beats a man nearly to death. The next day, he notices the young black woman across the way in her window, as she beckons him over. Billy runs across the street and goes up to the woman, Marcia's, room. She is the first black woman he has every touched and they kiss and furtively have sex.

Over an indeterminate period of time - hours or days or weeks - Marcia ties Billy up and beats him. She scars and humiliates him. He begs her to like him, and she throws him out. At his own flat, Billy is disgusted as he looks at his bruised, scarred body. He swallows a bottle of pills and a beer. Billy's neighbor, an old black man, gets him to the bathroom. Billy vomits into the toilet as the neighbor back and encourages him.

## Marcia

In "Skin", Marcia is a young black woman who lives across the street from the young skinhead Billy. She herself is involved with a young female skinhead, Kath. On the day that Billy attacks a black wedding party, Marcia beckons him over. Billy goes up to Marcia's room. He tentatively touches her; she is the first black woman he has every touched. They kiss and furtively have sex. Over an indeterminate period of time - hours or days or weeks - Marcia ties Billy up and beats him. She makes him eat dog food. She shaves him of all of his body hair, scrapes off his Union Jack tattoo, and carves her name into his back as she cries. Blindfolded, Billy crawls around the room looking for her. She dresses him as a woman and refuses all of his affectionate words. Though he begs her to like him, she throws him out. Later, Kath enters Marcia's room. Marcia apologizes and Kath forgives her. They get into bed together, and Marcia cries.





# Objects/Places

## Leeds Hotel Room

The chic hotel room in Leeds is the setting of "Blasted". Ian takes Cate to this hotel to escape the insurgent siege enveloping the city. It is high-end, though Ian regularly denigrates it as dingy. Room service regularly delivers gin and food to the room as Ian tries to convince Cate to have sex with him. The hotel room is hit by a mortar and destroyed at the end of Scene 2. After this, the destroyed room becomes an infernal vision.

## Revolver

In "Blasted", Ian carries a revolver, which he leaves around the hotel room. Cate points it at him when she becomes frightened of him but does not fire. During one of her fits, Ian points the gun at his face and masturbates. Ian uses the revolver to force Cate to open the hotel door and bring in breakfast. When the soldier enters the room in the second half of the play, he takes the revolver away from Ian. After the soldier rapes Ian, he pushes the revolver barrel into Ian's anus and threatens to fire. After Ian is blinded, Cate gives him the revolver but removes the bullets so he cannot commit suicide.

## Hippolytus's Room

At the beginning of "Phaedra's Love", the prince Hippolytus never leaves his room. It is a filthy mess, filled with empty crisp packets and dirty socks. Hippolytus lies on his couch masturbating and watching television. Occasionally, he receives sex visitors. At one point, Phaedra goes to Hippolytus's room with birthday presents. There, she professes her love to him and performs oral sex on him before he rejects her outright.

## The Patch of Mud

The Patch of Mud is at the perimeter fence in the university/concentration camp of the play "Cleansed". Throughout the play, Carl and Rod sit on it in the rain, surrounded by rain. There, Carl tries to apologize to Rod for betraying him. Tinker always arrives at the end of these conversations to cut off one of Carl's extremities, which are carried off by the rats. At the end of the play, Grace and Carl comfort each other in the patch of mud.

## The Black Room

In "Cleansed", the Black Room used to be the showers of the University. They have been converted into a peep show, when Tinker - and at one point Robin - watch the



Woman dance. At the end of the play, Tinker and the Woman have sex in the Black Room.

## The University

The University in "Cleansed" has been converted into a concentration camp that is commanded by the dealer/doctor Tinker. Horrible tortures, murders, suicides and medical experiments take place there, all designed by Tinker to test the bonds of human relationships. It is, in many regards, a metaphysical concentration camp, a manifestation of the torment we all put each other through in love.

## Medication

Medication is a point of contention "4.48 Psychosis". The unnamed narrator, suffering from crippling depression, refuses to take it for fear that it will destroy her ability to write. Her beloved doctor convinces her to take it. It does little good and yields awful physical side-effects. After the narrator is rejected by her doctor, she commits suicide by taking all of the medication.

## The Union Jack Tattoo

The Union Jack is a tattoo on the right arm of Billy in the short film "Skin". When he is being tortured by Marcia, the tattoo is scraped off by a harsh brush.

## Death

Death becomes the central goal for almost all of Kane's major characters: Ian, Hippolytus, C, the protagonist of "4.48 Psychosis", and Billy. What is interesting is that no one believes in God or expects anything better from death. They see it only as an end to suffering in life.

## South London

"Skin", Sarah Kane's short film, takes place in South London. In the film, it is a rundown working class area that is a powder-keg of minorities and skinheads. As such, there is one major brawl at a black wedding party that is the result of racial hatred.



# Themes

## Social and Personal Suffering are Connected

Suffering and cruelty run throughout all of Sarah Kane's work, and though her pieces are intimate - dealing with individuals and their private struggles - they nonetheless contain analysis of larger social struggles. In this collection, the social and the personal are inextricably linked.

Indeed, the final cries of anguish Kane wrote, in "4.48 Psychosis", involve a chronically depressed woman expressing guilt over the atrocities of Bosnia and the Holocaust. To the suicidal individual, she implies, no person is innocent in a world where people suffer grave cruelties. "Blasted" is dedicated, in fact, to linking the cruelty of a dysfunctional affair with the unequivocal brutality of the Bosnia conflict.

"Cleansed", however, is the most unabashed linking of atrocity and depression. The individuals contained in Tinker's concentration camp are all struggling to forge a relational connection with someone else. Tinker's dedication is to testing these connections. Across the board, the connections lead to dead. Love literally kills in Kane's setting. This could explain the public revilement of her work, which is unflinching not only in its content but also in its thematic. There is no recourse in her universe, least of all in love.

## Some Pain Is Beyond Relief

Sarah Kane committed suicide at the age of twenty-eight. This fact is inescapable as one reads her body of work. One must be careful not to view the work she wrote through the prism of her death, but the death has permeated it. Self-destruction is always on Kane's mind.

For many characters in Kane's canon - Ian, Hippolytus, C, Billy, and the protagonist of "4.48 Psychosis" - death is the final recourse from unremitting suffering. Ian's suffering, it seems, is the internalized guilt over foreign atrocities that Kane repeatedly expresses made concrete. Hippolytus and C cannot connect with others. The protagonist of Kane's last play is wracked with the torments of a fractured and depressed psyche. These characters see nothing but pain in life and make the decision to end it.

What is unbearable sad about this is that all accept that the other side of death is nullity at best and further torment at worst. An audience experiencing this simultaneous terror of death and embrace of death experiences something of the oblivion of suicide. It is a surrogate moment, a moment of empathy. Still, it is likely not one of understanding, since the overarching desperation of these moments carries an intensity not often touched in fiction. Audiences are used to catharses that lead to relief: for many of Kane's characters, there is no relief to be found.



## Human Connection Is Almost Always Folly

What makes life worth living? Many would say other people, but how many of our relationships are truly pleasurable? Sarah Kane's work makes the unusual leap into disappointment that, surely, many individuals experience in life.

Audiences are used to watching wounded individuals heal through love, but Kane dramatizes the other side of that equation. Many wounded individuals have their worst fears about humanity confirmed and are further degraded. Certainly, her first stage couple, Ian and Cate, are abusive and doomed to failure. The pairings of "Cleansed" cannot withstand Tinker's cruelty. C in *Crave* is perhaps the most pathetic example. Abused by her father, she cannot accept A's seemingly unconditional love. By the time she decides to accept it, A has moved on. C is unable to forge a relationship with family or lover. Her only recourse becomes death.

The only relationships in Kane's work that have the tinge of pure love are forged not of generosity or affection: they are born of desperation. It is misery that allows Carl to comfort Grace in "Cleansed" and Cate to feed the dying Ian at the end of "Blasted". Perhaps the only moment of true unsolicited kindness in her work is Neville's saving the dying Billy in "Skin". The old man has no reason to save the young skinhead, but he does nonetheless. They exchange a brief moment of connection as Billy wretches into a toilet, and this is perhaps the happiest moment Sarah Kane ever committed to paper.



# Style

## Point of View

Because Sarah Kane's canon consists entirely of dramatic texts, they defy traditional conceptions of point of view. However, the works can be divided in a certain respect between those told in the first person and those told in third person.

Sarah Kane's earlier work - that written between 1995 and 1998 - is told in a more standard narrative form. "Blasted" and the screenplay "Skin" both distinctly take place in real locations in England: Leeds and south London. Even "Cleansed" and "Phaedra's Love", which exist in fictitious or metaphysical realms, are told from an outsider's perspective. They involve dialogue between several characters and dramatic conceits that imply of voyeuristic third party perspective for the audience.

On the other hand, Kane's two final plays - "Crave" and "4.48 Psychosis" - are first person works. These texts resemble poems more than traditional plays, consisting almost entirely of interior ruminations from the perspective of a damaged psyche. Indeed, "4.48" Psychosis has not character names or stage directions, simply stanzas. As such, the audience is privy not to a situation or conflict, but rather to an internal life. These pieces, then, are more akin to the confessional works of an author like Henry Miller or Bret Easton Ellis than a more traditional dramatist like Harold Pinter.

## Setting

Sarah Kane's work is never completely realistic in its portrayal of setting, but as her career progressed - and her grip on her own emotional life weakened - she began to do away with traditional setting. Two of her earliest works - the play "Blasted" and the screenplay "Skin" - take place in real locales during the nineties. Still, both are distinctly disconnected from naturalism. "Blasted" injects the civil wars of the Balkans in to the northern town of Leeds. "Skin" takes place in modern south London, but it contains a bedroom that exists out of time.

In works like "Cleansed" and "Phaedra's Love", Kane kept traditional settings in a general sense - a university library or a room in a palace - but no objective time or place. These locations were signifiers: the royals of "Phaedra's Love" exist in the halls of privilege, and the inmates of "Cleansed" are in a metaphysical concentration camp. Although "Phaedra's Love" maintains the names of the Greek myth and involves a funeral pyre, there are also references to Newcastle and Christianity. All of these fictitious settings are distinctly modern and distinctly British.

Kane's last two plays - "Crave" and "4.48 Psychosis" - dispense with setting all together. The references and dialects are modern and British, but there are no locations. The setting is interior, the interior of the mind, and invariably this mind is breaking apart.



## Language and Meaning

Sarah Kane's writing is invariably working and lower-middle-class British in its dialect and viciously vulgar in its execution. It reflects a uniformly gritty sense of time and place. Kane's characters exist in an unforgiving world, the world of awful news reports we hear and try to forget. It is a world of incest, war atrocities, suicide, and heartbreak.

Most telling about the dialogue of Kane's work is that no one, regardless of career or supposed social station, speaks the Queen's English. Hippolytus, the prince; Tinker, the supposed doctor; and the unnamed psychiatrist of "4.48 Psychosis", all speak with the working class patois of the author, all eh's, rashers, and slang. They exist at the street level, implying that every character is a variant on the author's default character type of the striving depressive. The voices all reflect a desperate, dying craving, complete with the profanity and casual racism that can characterize this class of Briton.

Also notable about Kane's writing is its use of unattributed quotations from a wide range of sources. Kane refers to herself as "last in a long line of literary kleptomaniacs" in "4.48 Psychosis" (p. 213). Her sources include the Bible, Shakespeare, Nirvana, Joy Division, and Werner Herzog. These are texts that bring artistic clarity to the maelstrom in her mind. She uses them to frame the poetry of her work and draw a line from the past to the present.

## Structure

The development of structure in Sarah Kane's canon can be reflected best, perhaps, in the structure of her first play "Blasted". The play, ostensibly, has one set: a hotel room. In the first of five scenes, the set never changes; contentment aside, it could be Noel Coward play. At the end of Scene 2, however, a mortar destroys the room, and from there time and place break apart. By Scene 5, time is completely indeterminate, and the setting is as much hell as it is Leeds.

Kane's plays never have act breaks, only scene breakdowns. They are intended to be performed in one sitting. "Phaedra's Love" and "Cleansed" have eight and twenty scenes respectively, and they take place in numerous, seemingly metaphysical locations. These scenes range in length from half a page to ten pages, and some have no dialogue whatever. Interestingly, though, none have scenes in which the characters break the fourth wall and speak to the audience.

In "Crave" and "4.48 Psychosis", these are no scenes and almost no stage directions. In "Crave", Kane gives no indication of how directors should stage the litany of four voices, denoted only by single letters. In "4.48 Psychosis", Kane does not even delineate character. The work resembles an ee cummings poem more than a traditional dramatic text. Staging and casting are left entirely up to the director.

"Skin", being a screenplay, is clearer in creating an image for the director. It has twenty-four shooting scenes ranging from a half a page to five pages in length.



## Quotes

"Ian: When I'm with you I can't think about anything else. You take me to another place.

Cate: It's like that when I have a fit.

Ian: Just you.

Cate: The world doesn't exist, not like this."

Blasted, p. 22

"Can't always be taking it backing down letting them think they've got a right turn the other cheek ... some things are worth more than that have to be protected."

Blasted, pp. 32-33

"You don't know ... about me.

I went to school.

I made love with Col.

Bastards killed her, now I'm here.

Now I'm here."

Blasted, p. 48-49

"Can't switch this off. Can't crush it. Can't. Wake up with it, burning me. Think I'll crack open I want him so much."

Phaedra's Love, p. 71

"Last line of defense for the honest man. Free will is what distinguishes us from the animals ... And I have no intention of behaving like ... [an] animal."

Phaedra's Love, p. 96

"I used to ... think about you and ... I used to ... wish it was you when I ... used to ..."

Cleansed, p. 120

"And the rats eat my face. So what. I'd have done the same only I never said I wouldn't. You're young. I don't blame you. Don't blame yourself. No one's to blame."

Cleansed, p. 129

"Nice-looking lad.

Like your brother.

I hope you -

What you wanted."

Cleansed, p. 145

"Listen. I am here to remember. I need to ... remember. I have this grief and I don't know why."

Crave, p. 171



"And I am shaking, sobbing with the memory of her, when she loved me, before I was her torturer, before there was no room in me for her ..."

Crave, p. 177

"Let the day perish in which I was born  
Let the blackness of the night terrify it  
Let the stars of its dawn be dark  
May it not see the eyelids of the morning  
Because it did not shut the door of my mother's womb."

Crave, p. 189

"I had a night in which everything was revealed to me. How can I speak again?"

4.48 Psychosis, p. 205

"of course I love you  
you saved my life  
I wish you hadn't  
I wish you hadn't  
I wish you'd left me alone"

4.48 Psychosis, p. 240

"I have no desire for death  
no suicide ever had"

4.48 Psychosis, p. 244

"BILLY: Why don't you like me?  
MARCIA: Why don't you like me?  
BILLY: Can I stay?"

Skin, p. 264





## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the connection between social atrocities and personal pain. What do the depressives of Sarah Kane's work feel about the ills of the world? To what extent are they responsible for them, and why do they invariably feel responsible?

How do human beings connect to each other in Sarah Kane's narratives? Is a pure and loving relationship between two people ever possible? Discuss why individuals in Kane's universe cannot fully connect to one another.

Discuss setting in Sarah Kane's work. How do even her most concrete locations have a seeming ephemeral quality about them? What could they represent beyond simply a university, a hotel room, etc? At what point does Kane forgo all sense of location and why?

What role does suicide play in the works of this collection? What drives individuals in the play and films she wrote to suicide? Discuss whether the texts of this collection provide a sense of empathy for those who commit what to many is unthinkable.

Sarah Kane's work is a sort of found art piece, consisting of tidbits borrowed from other work. How does Kane use excerpts, adaptations and references to create a cohesive work? What is the significance of the found-art she uses?

How does Sarah Kane use sex as both a weapon and a means of redemption? Discuss how sex can serve many roles in a relationship. How are people able use it for good and evil aims in the course of human relationships?

How does Sarah Kane's life cast a shadow over the works that survive her? Discuss how an author's life and death can reflect of be reflected in their writing? Is it possible to works like "4.48 Psychosis" as anything other than an explanation of her death?