4.48 Psychosis: Sarah Kane's "bewildered fragments"

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Sarah Kane’s 4.48 Psychosis was completed a few months before she killed herself in 1999 and was performed posthumously a year after. Although it is almost impossible not to view her last play as a suicide note, yet a more attentive reading invites us to liberate her from the so-called ‘Sylvia Plath’s syndrome’ which, prioritizing the biographical, distorts and impoverishes any other textual meaning. Among those meanings that are usually cancelled down by the mythologizing of the author (the dead author, in this case), this article focuses on Abjection, that which, according to Kristeva, remains outside the signifiable and threatens the integrity of the ego border. In the psychotic subject (enacted by the anonymous voice/s of the play) the notion of a stable and coherent identity (one that would keep the abject under control) is seriously compromised and the boundaries between the “me” and the “not-me” get blurred. The resulting scenario is that of the dissipation of a definable subject, an evocative metaphor for the postmodern self. Either if Kane is to be related to Artaud (in her articulation of explicit violence and pain with a cathartic purpose) or if 4.48 Psychosis is regarded as ‘experiential’, it must be noticed that the provocative, confrontational and brutal language provided by the ‘in-yer-face’ theatre seems the best medium to express the disturbing aspects of the abject self.

Sarah Kane (1971–1999) was an English playwright. Her plays deal with themes of redemptive love, sexual desire, pain, torture — both physical and psychological — and death. They are characterised by a poetic intensity, pared-down language, exploration of theatrical form, and the use of extreme and violent stage action. Her last play ‘4.48 Psychosis’, was completed shortly before she died and takes its title from the time — 4:48 a.m. — when Kane, in her depressed state, frequently woke in the morning. This, Kane’s shortest and most fragmented theatrical work, dispenses with plot and character, and no indication is given as to how many actors were intended to voice the play. It has been described as having as its subject the ‘psychotic mind’. Five-and-a-half years ago Sarah Kane burst upon an astonished world with Blasted at the Royal Court’s Theatre Upstairs. Now her final play, 4.48 Psychosis, gets a posthumous production at the same address. What is staggering is the contrast between the two occasions. In just over five short years Sarah Kane moved from disrupter of the peace to dramatic icon. Judging 4.48 Psychosis is difficult. How on earth do you award aesthetic points to a 75-minute suicide note? - which is what the play, written shortly before Kane’s death, effectively is. Three actors - two women and a man - sit under a vast tilted mirror in Jeremy Herbert’s spare, beautiful design and explore the rage, pain, turbulence and self-exvation that leads to suicide. It is not a play in the familiar sense of the word.