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The Nature of Contemporary Catharsis in Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*...

Abstract: Hester Swane, the protagonist of Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*..., one of the most subversive female characters in modern Irish drama, is a contemporary Medea. As her suffering becomes extreme and her despair escalates, she performs a mercy killing of her own child. Carr uses the Greek source and adds some contemporary (psychological) circumstances to create her play and her heroine. This results in a new type of tragedy and a new type of catharsis potentially experienced by the audience.

It is this relation between the fiction of art and the reality of life that is the main subject of the present considerations. Tragedy has always been more than a representation of a tragic experience. Its role of stirring emotions, however, should be reassessed and looked at from a perspective other than that of Aristotle's pity and fear. The workings of a tragedy upon the contemporary psyche are also to be demonstrated to be much different than just an abreaction and a discharge of emotional tensions or ventilation of feelings. These theories of catharsis should be reconsidered and the psychoanalytical perspective replaced with the most recent findings of cognitive-behavioural therapy in psychology.

The application of the emotion exposure procedure used in psychotherapy to the understanding of the nature of contemporary catharsis in modern tragedy introduces a link between theories concerned with the way drama affects the audience that were previously found exclusive: the dramatic theatre and the epic theatre. The contemporary tragedy, as it is demonstrated by the analysis of Marina Carr's play, engages viewers' emotions and empathy and awakens (re)cognition just like cognitive-behavioural therapy involves both emotion exposure and cognitive restructuring.

Stories serve to address psychic as well as physical suffering. Stories were invented to fill the gaping hole within us, to assuage our fear and dread, to try to give answers to the great unanswerable questions of existence. (Kearney 6–7)

Marina Carr's dramatic career has always been linked with the distortion of theatrical norms. Her pictures of reality are not just mimetic representations, but powerful images embracing vast areas of human existence and experience. Hester Swane, the protagonist of *By the Bog of Cats*..., is one of the most subversive characters in modern Irish drama: she represents a contemporary

Medea. The extremity of her human, womanly and maternal suffering is rendered in the play by a portrayal of the act of mercy killing of her only child and the subsequent suicide of the tragic heroine. Carr uses the Greek source and adds contemporary circumstances in the process of creating her play and her protagonists' psychological picture. The result is a new type of a tragedy and a new type of contemporary catharsis potentially experienced by the audience.

The intricate relation between the fiction of art and the reality of life is one of the most intriguing aspects of the nature and reception of dramatic works. Tragedy, for instance, has always been perceived as something more than just a representation of a tragic experience. Its nature has been linked to that of a scapegoat-ritual, yet evidently standing for something more than that. As Leech phrases it: "[A]ny successful tragedy makes us feel simultaneously that we have done with the situation and that we are still desperately concerned with it" (55). The notion of Aristotelian catharsis, purification or cleansing through the process of experiencing emotions of pity and fear, is one of the most often used concepts with reference to tragedy, but still not fully comprehended. A modest attempt being made here is to look at the way tragedy affects its audiences and to present a link between spectators' reactions, like a discharge of emotional tensions or ventilation of feelings usually related to the notion of cathartic purification, and mental processes responsible for cognition resulting from these experiences.

Psychoanalysis is a well-established school of literary criticism; however, we cannot forget that first of all it served as a therapy for mental disorders, being the so-called talking cure (Burzyńska and Markowski 47). The way Freud used it to examine human psyche is mirrored in the way psychoanalytical literary critics perceive meanings of texts. However, if we take a closer look at what stage psychology and psychotherapy are at today, one certainly cannot escape noticing that psychological study is far ahead of the discoveries of Sigmund Freud at the beginning of the twentieth century. Contemporary psychology has established a number of therapeutic methods in order to help people make adaptive changes. These methods follow particular theoretical perspectives and the most effective among them nowadays seems to be cognitive-behavioural therapy (Lawyer, Normandin, and Roberts) as the huge empirical support base for the application of its principles proves. My intention is to demonstrate that some of the techniques used in this kind of therapy can be compared to what contemporary playwrights like Marina Carr do to their audiences through their dramatic works. What is more, an application of procedures used in cognitive-behavioural therapy to the understanding of the nature of catharsis in modern tragedy introduces a link between theories concerned with the way drama affects audiences that were previously found mutually exclusive: the dramatic theatre and the epic theatre (Brecht, "Modern Theatre"). As demonstrated by a brief

analysis of Marina Carr's play, contemporary tragedy evokes viewers' emotions, their empathy and (re)cognition, just like cognitive-behavioural therapy involves both emotion exposure and cognitive restructuring.

In the programme note for the Abbey Theatre, Frank McGuinness wrote: "*By the Bog of Cats...* is a play about sorrow. Therefore it must be funny" (87), thus underscoring a multitude of at times paradoxical contrasts underlying the structure of any play by Marina Carr. The playwright's imagination always fluctuates between the living and the dead. She "writes in Greek," as McGuinness phrases it (88), and seems to be embedded in the world of the classical ancient Greece with its myths and gods, yet she creates a very contemporary play about a strong, independent woman who withstands every pang of fortune only to commit suicide in the end. Set in Carr's native Irish Midlands, her plays typically raise issues of universal implications. Euripides' classic tragedy of betrayal and vengeance, the story of Medea's bloody revenge, is re-told by Carr as a tale of the rage of many women, not only Irish ones.

Marina Carr emphasized that her plays should be read and treated primarily as texts (Wallace 53). She has been appreciated as "a storyteller with a lyrical bent whose work combines poetic and narrative qualities" (Ni Dhuibhne 66). Her *By the Bog of Cats...* is then a story of women's suffering. The tragic reversal of fortune (peripeteia) starts when the forty-year-old Hester Swane is abandoned by the father of Josie, their child, for a younger woman and witnesses the wedding ceremony together with her daughter. It turns out that Hester's whole life has indeed been marked by a sense of loss, exclusion and abandonment. She is forsaken by her mother at the age of seven, left by her man, evicted from her house and marginalized, or even cast away, from the intolerant community of the Bog of Cats. When the ultimate blow seems inevitable, the taking away of her daughter, Hester decides to escape her sorrowful life together with the little girl.

The world we see is a world perceived through the troubled eyes of a suffering woman who transgresses norms out of a desperate need to win her man back. She is driven by passion and, like tragic heroines from the Greek tragedy, she is doomed from the beginning. Scene one features Hester trailing the corpse of a black swan after her (Carr 265). She is presented as functioning on the verge of two worlds: the one of earthly suffering and death, symbolized by the swan, and the supernatural one. She converses with the Ghost Fancier, who comes to take her life, but, apparently by mistake, comes a few hours too early. By saying: "Then I'm too previous. I mistook this hour for dusk. A thousand apologies" (266), the Ghost Fancier presents the viewers with prolepsis and does not leave space for speculation as to the future of the woman. In response, we hear a human voice of an ordinary mother, the voice any mother on earth can sympathise with:

HESTER. (*shouts after him*) Come back! – I can't die – I have a daughter. (267)

It becomes clear that following the formula of classical tragedy, Hester is about to commit some tragic error of judgment. In order for the audience to follow the process that finally leads to the heroine's tragic death, the playwright decides to immerse the viewers in the world of Hester's despair, to expose them to the most drastic psychic experiences (pathos) and, subsequently, to provoke them to try to analyze the situation in such a way as to evoke cognition and allow for some more adaptive ways of viewing the world to develop. A number of social factors and problems are addressed and *By the Bog of Cats...* seems able to move audiences' emotions while an attempt is made to restructure their way of thinking and ways of dealing with trauma. At the same time, some vital, provocative questions about the condition of society are asked.

One of the most effective psychotherapeutic techniques used in the treatment of a variety of psychological disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder, general anxiety disorder, depression and others, is emotion exposure. The goal of it is to elicit particular emotions so that the patient has the opportunity to practice techniques of controlling them. If we treat emotion exposure as the "behavioural" component of the cognitive-behavioural therapy, then it seems essential to remember the words of Albert Bandura, whose

social learning theory outlined the conditions under which behaviours can be learned in the absence of direct contact with the consequences. For example, behaviours could be learned via modelling simply by watching others perform the behaviour and perceiving the consequences. (Lawyer, Normandin, and Roberts 324)

When watching an on-stage re-creation of emotions, theatrical audiences are not only allowed to deal with their own past and present emotional experiences but they are also frequently granted insight into the emotional areas that would otherwise be denied them.

A significant moment in a sequence of Hester Swane's outbursts of pain and anguish comes when she enters the wedding of her former partner. She is wearing her old wedding dress and veil (Carr 311). This is, in fact, the last moment in the play when she still tries to appeal to other people's empathy. She addresses the ones responsible for her suffering: she begs Carthage, the bridegroom, to come home with her and their daughter (313), asks him to let her live in the house at least (314), and argues she just cannot leave the place as she must wait for the mother, who abandoned her as a seven-year-old girl (315–16). She expresses herself even in front of Carthage's mother, who has always hated her:

HESTER. Have you ever been discarded, Elsie Kilbride? – the way I've been discarded. Do ya know what that feels like? To be flung on the ashpit and you still alive? (313)

As Hester does not find sympathy in anyone, she feels more and more humiliated up to the point when she understands that her only choice is revenge.

In his 1928 *Tragedy in relation to Aristotle's Poetics*, Frank Laurence Lucas stated that

[i]t is the perpetual tragic irony of the Tragedy of Life that again and again men do thus laboriously contrive their own annihilation, or kill the thing they love. . . . For the most poignant tragedy of human life is the work of human blindness – the Tragedy of Errors. (qtd. in Leech 62)

Although the audience may observe Hester's suffering with compassion and somehow identify with her suffering and despair, when recognition concerning the final outcome of her actions comes, one certainly comprehends that even in the most difficult situations and agitated state of mind, one should never resort to revenge and let self-destruction take over. It is not that, as Binstock puts it, "any mental illness will benefit from an emotional paroxysm" (499). Our witnessing of extreme emotions of the kind presented in *By the Bog of Cats*... seems to serve similar aims as the emotion exposure technique in cognitive-behavioural therapy: to prevent emotional avoidance and to make a conscious effort to combat problems associated with it possible (which in psychotherapy is called "emotional awareness training"; Allen, McHugh, and Barlow 232).

All the subsequent actions of Hester Swane after the dramatic self-disclosure at the wedding inevitably lead to the final catastrophe. She sets fire to the house of Carthage and his newly-wed wife and meets her murdered brother's ghost. During the encounter with the apparition, Hester does not express any remorse for the fact that she once killed him; she only discloses her reasons for doing so: fury and jealousy about their mother (Carr 317–21). The conversation with the ghost exposes Hester's major fault and weakness: the inability to cope with her past and with the fact of having been abandoned by the mother in particular. Living in the past and cultivating old wounds makes any future impossible. When Hester decides to commit suicide and says goodbye to her daughter, she realizes that the seven-year old will always be waiting for her, just like she has been waiting for her mother to come back all her life (337–39). This is Hester's anagnorisis, a discovery and a change from ignorance to knowledge. From the viewpoint of the audience, however, the mercy killing of her child and suicide are acts of subversion. Hester lets the unthinkable happen and, unlike the mythical Medea, she is not elevated at the end. She transgresses the limits of the mortal realm but the audience is left with a feeling that her fate could have been avoided.

In *Groaning Tears*, Elise P. Garrison admits that one of the motives for suicide in the Greek world was to avoid further suffering (29). However, citing Aristotle's *Nichomechean Ethics*, she states that it is

the mark of a coward to die to escape from poverty or love or anything painful, because it exhibits softness to escape from what is troublesome. This kind of person does not die because it is noble, but only to escape evil. (30)

Garrison underscores that the Greek tragedians played the role of moral educators of society. Although ancient Greek societies differ considerably from contemporary ones, it is not impossible to draw some parallels. The major one here is that an individual's functioning is necessarily related to the social environment he or she lives in. As Emile Durkheim states, suicide rates are a measure of the health of the social body (qtd. in Garrison 36).

The cognition of the relation between Hester Swane's fate and the social factors arises when one takes into consideration the way Marina Carr draws the picture of the community of the Bog of Cats. There are at least three moral maladies within the community as enumerated by Rosana Herrero Martin: materialism, intolerance and psychic abnormality of some of its members. All these vices are best represented by the figure of Hester's mother-in-law, Mrs Kilbride. When she first enters the stage, she behaves in a verbally abusive way towards her granddaughter, Josie. She does not let the girl win in a game of snap; calls her thick (277), "little bastard" (278) and "little coward" (279); offends the girl's mother (277, 280) and boasts about her savings (280). She photographs her shoes during her son's wedding ceremony and implores the bride and the bridegroom to ask how much they were. Her materialistic ostentation typical of the newly rich does not allow her to remain silent about the shoes' price so she obviously feels compelled to state:

MRS KILBRIDE. (*smug, can hardly believe it herself*) A hundred and fifty pound. The Quane herself wouldn't pay more. (304)

Mrs Kilbride's wedding speech discloses a severe psychological problem related to the way she perceives the role her son plays in her life. What she says is both pathetic and appalling:

MRS KILBRIDE. When his father died he used to come into bed to sleep beside me for fear I would be lonely. Often I woke from a deep slumber and his two arms would be around me, a small leg thrown over me in sleep. . . . If Carthage will be as good a son to Caroline as he's been a husband to me then she'll have no complaints. (*Raises her glass*). (311)

Another element of the cultural psyche of Ireland is demystified whenever the character of Xavier Cassidy enters the stage: preoccupied solely with land and money, careless even about his wife's and child's deaths (Carr 305). It

becomes clear that the true reasons for Hester's downfall, mental breakdown and suicide are aberrations within the contemporary money-drawn society. Bertolt Brecht proposed that "to portray social processes as seen in their causal relationships" ("Street Scene" 85), a new technique of acting and a new type of theatre are necessary. In order for theatre to gain practical and social significance, it seemed essential for Brecht to exclude emotional engagement on the part of the audience who was to remain aloof to reason and critically assess instead of sympathizing. As it is seen here, the two elements: involving the audience emotionally and bringing it to the point of recognition concerning social issues, do not have to be mutually exclusive.

When cognitive-behavioural psychological theories were first formed, researchers and clinicians simply became sceptical as to the separation of human behaviour and cognition. Behavioural therapy generally avoided focusing on mental events, such as thoughts, whereas, as empirical studies started to confirm, dysfunctional thoughts tended to diminish as a result of behavioural change (Lawyer, Normandin, and Roberts 324). Similarly, emotions aroused by a theatrical play, the sympathy of the audience towards tragic heroes and heroines may not necessarily possess a purging, cleansing power *per se* (certainly not with reference to societies), but by making viewers emotionally involved in the tragic fates of the protagonists, a concern for larger social and political issues can be induced.

The relationship between the fiction of art and the reality of life is a complex one. As Świontek notices, psychological processes within a theatrical viewer's psyche result from a simultaneous acceptance of something he or she treats as real (thanks to the theatrical illusion) and something which is denied this reality, some element that is treated merely as an image, although the two things are in fact the same scenic sign. The complementary nature of the mechanism described by Świontek implies the workings of distance and identification, conventionality and reality (165). The distance that arises from the awareness that there is a clear borderline between the reality of life and the fiction of art makes theatre a perfect place for emotional and cognitive excursions that can only be dreamt of by many psychotherapists. Recently, virtual reality technologies have been incorporated in the exposure-based therapies in clinical psychology (Lawyer, Normandin, and Roberts 327). Yet, as early as in 1976, Martin Esslin stated:

Play is a simulation of reality. That, far from making play a frivolous pastime, in fact emphasizes the immense importance of all play activity for the well-being and development of man. . . . When a fine play in a fine performance coincides with a receptive audience in the theatre, this can produce a concentration of thought and emotion which leads to an enhanced degree of lucidity, of emotional intensity that amounts to a higher level of spiritual insight and can make such an experience akin to a religious one, a memorable high-point in an individual's life. (19, 26)

At the same time, theatre often brings into open burning social issues of the time so the theatrical situation is a perfect environment for both personal and social change, or, at least, for increased awareness.

Tragedy writers across the ages have always employed pictures of the most difficult experiences a human being can potentially face. In reality, a tragic event is nearly always simply devastating, but the theatrical portrayal of madness, trauma and despair is something generically expected. Emotion exposure and cognitive processes that result from such portrayals are powerful tools in the hands of contemporary playwrights and directors. Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats...* is a play capable of stirring strong emotions of every abandoned woman and of every mother, whereas a cognitive restructuring of the classical understanding of the role of fate in human life can be best summarized by the Catwoman's words: "Curses only have the power ya allow them" (276).

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