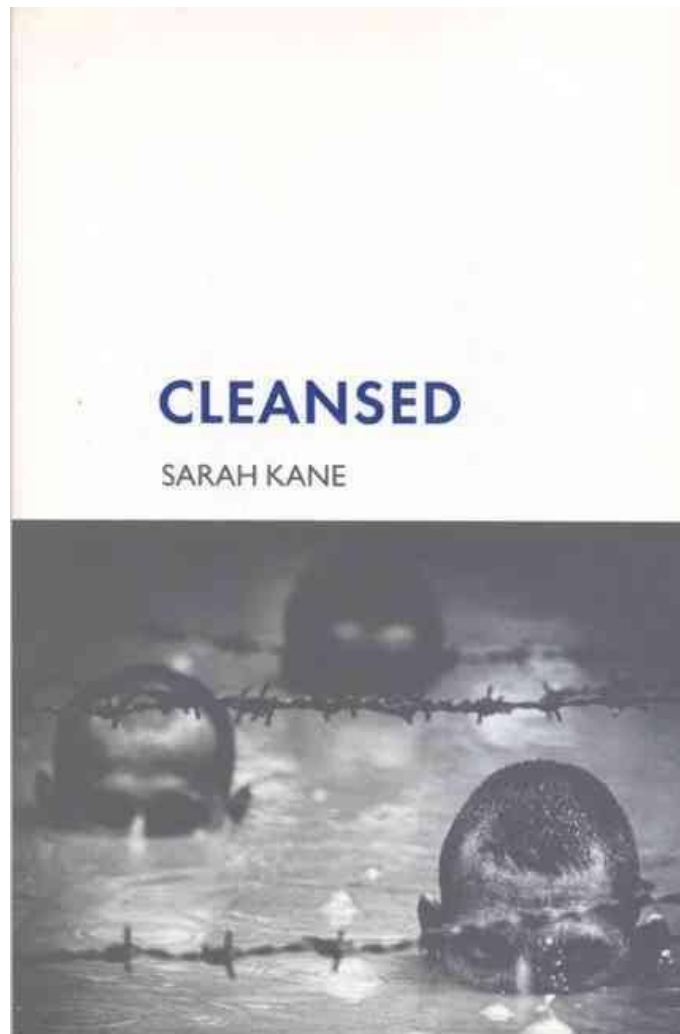


**The Center within Margins:  
A Study of Transgressed Boundaries in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed***

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***Cleansed***

*Cleansed*, the play at focus in this paper was written by Sarah Kane and directed by James Macdonald and premiered at the Royal Court's theatre in April 1998. *Cleansed* is set in what is described as a university but which functions more as a concentration camp, supervised by the merciless Tinker. The play presents social outcasts like sexually committed siblings with

the male partner being a drug addict, a troubled boy, a gay couple and a peepshow artist. The play *Cleansed* focuses on multiple areas in which didacticism operates. Some of the most pressing issues discussed in the play are education, sexuality, religion, social institutions, politics, materialism and language. Kane subtly integrates these fields and discusses how the individual is entwined or entrapped psychologically and physically with scant scope of liberation in sight. In fact, the characters of the play willingly reject the need for liberation. This paper aims at providing an understanding into how the process of didacticism works and the environment that is created to germinate the seed of willing submission.



**Sarah Kane 1971-1999**

### **First Scene**

The first scene of the play is set in the premises of a university. A university denotes a place of learning and maturation. After pulling the audience psychologically into this setting, the playwright abruptly throws them askew by showing that the characters in the scene are involved in the manufacture of drugs.

### **Tinker**

Tinker is the instructor or the person in-charge of the university premises. It also presupposes the fact that Tinker has been assigned the duty of institutionalizing the in-mates of the university, probably the students or the recruits. The medium used to achieve this act is drugs which can affect the person physically and psychologically. Most often, the addicts develop a sort of subordination towards the dealer to obtain regular doses of the particular drug. In this case, Graham is loyal to Tinker. Also, Tinker admits that he does not use the drug himself but only supplies to the inmates. This leads the reader to question as to why he is exempted from the use of the drug. It is evident that he is only a dealer which signifies that he is employed under a higher authority.

Probably, Tinker has excelled in his job of disciplining the inmates according to the dictates of the authority due to which he is uplifted to the position of a dealer. Thus, the university becomes a place where particular ideologies are propagated. Graham by asking an increase in the dose of the drug shows that he is enslaved to the ideology without understanding or perhaps, ignoring the consequences of the implication. This drugging can be compared to the fashioning of an individual by the society using institutions of religion, family, education etc. the

process of fashioning removes the inborn energy from a person and replaces it by an expected and accepted social behavior.

Moreover, there is considerable empirical evidence that there may well have been less autonomy in self-fashioning in the sixteenth century than before, that family, state, and religious institutions impose a more rigid and far-reaching discipline upon their middle-class and aristocratic subjects. Autonomy is an issue but not the sole or even the central issue: the power to impose a shape upon oneself is an aspect of the more general power to control identity—that of others at least as often as one's own. (Greenblat 1)

### **Customer/Student**

Another interesting detail that strikes the readers is the relationship that the dealer shares with the customer/student. Tinker lives within the premises of the university; however, he does not share any cordial relationship with any of the inmates. Graham asks Tinker the nature of their relationship and if they are friends. Tinker admits that they are not friends and that he is a dealer and not a doctor. Since they are not friends, it is evident that Tinker need not work for the benefit of Graham. Yet, Graham complies with Tinker. Moreover, despite confessing that he is not responsible for the consequences of the increase in the dose, Graham accepts the drug. The drug is injected near his eyes thereby signifying a distorted vision with an overdose of the ideology.

### **The Second Scene**

The second scene of the play looks at another set of inmates who share a homosexual relationship. It is seen that Carl and Rod “sit on the college green just inside the perimeter fence of the university” (3). They are shunned to the margins of the university premises nevertheless they are within the boundaries. Their position can be related to physical elimination in totalitarian societies as stated by Giorgio Agamben:

Modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system. (2)

### **Scene Three**

Scene three of the play introduces Grace, the sister of Graham who had been killed in the first scene. As the scene progresses, it is seen that Grace shares an incestuous relationship with Graham. On reaching the university, she meets Tinker who lies to her that he had not been present when Graham died and that Graham’s body had been incinerated. Graham had been dead and none of his family members other than his girlfriend-sister had come in search of him. This also points to the negligence of families to understand how their children become indoctrinated. Therefore, the family inadvertently caters to the needs of the hierarchy that demands loyal submission.

On questioning Tinker, Grace realizes that Graham’s clothes had been given to a teenager inmate of the university by the name Robin. Overwhelmed with grief, Grace asks Robin to undress and hand over Graham’s clothes to her. She instantly wears Graham’s clothing and weeps profusely while Robin is left naked. Kane subverts the notion of gaze in this scene by

juxtaposing a naked male body with a female body. She subverts the existing power relations in “gaze”- a tool used by men as opined by feminists like Laura Mulvey:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (19)

### Notions of Sexuality

Notions of sexuality dictate the individual to derive pleasure from a naked female body whereas the naked male body cannot become a source of pleasure. Due to this reason, a naked female body on stage is blasphemous while the naked Robin would only invite a trivial discomfort. This shows how sexuality and the propriety associated with it is didactic in nature. It is also seen that during the moment of extreme grief, when Grace is mourning the death of her beloved, Tinker handcuffs Grace and injects the drug into her. History has often shown that the proliferation of a particular ideology and its immediate acceptance is mostly during the peak moments of discomfort and loss. Dictators have always excelled by manipulating the masses during such moments of betrayal, loss, failure and even poverty. As soon as the drug is injected, Grace takes a voluntary decision to stay in the university.

### Scenes Four and Five

Scenes four and five are the most crucial chapters of the play as it discusses didacticism through religion and language. Tinker who had observed the relationship between Carl and Rod arrests Carl and tortures him for his misbehavior. Despite being furious with Carl, Tinker tells the henchmen, “Don’t kill him./Save him” (10). This statement made by Tinker has got religious undertones. Tinker in the beginning of the play says that he is only a dealer and not a doctor. But, the mannerism of Tinker shows that he is a ‘doctor of the society’ officiating a cleansing of the so called ‘ill elements’ of the society. As a healer he is destined to save the people. By injecting the didactic notions in the inmates, he is saving them; thereby becoming a savior.

Subsequently, while torturing Carl, Tinker asks him “What’s your boyfriend’s name?” (11). Carl’s answer is, “Jesus”. This reply made by Carl is highly ambiguous. It could mean that he is made to believe in Jesus forcibly or it is probable that he had just called out to Jesus in great pain. There is also a possibility that he considers Rod, his lover as his ‘Jesus and Saviour’. As Derrida says in another of his coinages, the meaning of any spoken or written utterance, by the action of opposing internal linguistic forces, is ineluctably disseminated... There is thus no ground, in the incessant play of difference that constitutes any language, for attributing a decidable meaning, or even a finite set of determinately multiple meanings (which he calls “polysemism”), to any utterance that we speak or write.(Abrams55)

Further, Tinker says, “Close your eyes. Imagine it’s him”. For which Carl replies, “Please God no I” (11). This sentence is syntactically incorrect, but the playwright has deliberately used this language to propel the readers into the confused state of mind in which Carl is in. “Please God no I” could mean 1) If I please (give satisfaction) God, I do not exist 2) I have not pleased God 3) Please(request) God, don’t do this to me 4) Please(request) God, annihilate me. This

ambiguity is extended when Carl says, “ROD NOT ME” (11). Kane, through this game of words is showing how language can become futile when one desperately needs a ‘single’ and ‘universal’ meaning. Kane also suggests the arbitrariness of language which is also shown in the seventh scene where Grace teaches Robin to read and write. Robin is confounded when he realizes that the alphabets do not resemble the sounds. Kane thus reveals how ideology is dependent on a medium which is highly unstable, plural and arbitrary.

### **Ambiguity in Language**

The ambiguity in language slips into the ambiguity of the plot when the dead Graham converses with Grace. In the next scene Grace is being taught how to talk and walk like Graham. She learns quickly to survive in the university environment. The playwright, by introducing a scene that is highly surreal is also hinting at the resurrection of Christ. Surrealism in art is scantily tolerated while surrealism in reality is revered. This reveals how religion is didactic and how it has successfully manipulated and enslaved generations.

Tinker enters a peep-show booth where he slips in tokens to become a voyeur. While looking at the dancing woman, he masturbates. Tinker tells the woman that she is in the wrong place for which she replies that she likes the place. He tells her that she is doing something wrong in being in this environment. The woman is completely aware of the mistake she is committing. This seems to have shaken Tinker because he instantly asks the woman if he could be her friend. He also tells the woman that he is a doctor and he will “be anything you need” (16). This throws light upon three important issues discussed earlier: the ability of the savior to transform according to the needs of the ‘hopeless’, the mental and physical doctor/healer who injects ideology into the trapped individual and gives punishment for committing a mistake and the hidden humanistic passions of Tinker who drops coins in a peep-show booth. It should also be noted that Tinker is seeing to his sexual pleasure while befriending the woman. This shows how relationships are built on personal gain which is unethical. This scene concludes with Tinker addressing the woman as ‘Grace’. The audience is unsure if the woman is Graham’s sister or if Tinker is just calling the woman as ‘Grace’, probably hinting at how he generalizes all women as objects of voyeuristic pleasure.

### **Scene Seven**

In the seventh scene of the play, Kane explores another set of illegitimate relationship between a man and a woman. The conversation takes place between Grace and Robin who has fallen for the charm of Grace. Graham is also seen as observing the couple. Robin proposes to Grace and asks her personal questions regarding her previous romantic relationships. Grace says, “He bought me a box of chocolates then tried to strangle me” (18). It is evident that Graham had left Grace to join the university. In the first scene of the play, when Graham talks to Tinker, he also mentions about his sister but Tinker forbids him to speak. So, the separation between Grace and Graham would not have been mutual. This hints at the feasibility of incestuous relationship in the society. While talking to Robin, Grace calls him ‘Paul’. Nevertheless, she tells Robin that she did not share any ideal emotion with her boyfriend yet had often made love to him. Kane is showing how the love making can become an activity for satisfying bodily needs. Grace is evidently speaking against the norms of the society that demands sexual relationship only after the legalized marriage between a man and a woman. Her reference to Paul may also hint that she

would have had another sexual partner apart from Graham. The consequence of such relationships is seen in the succeeding scenes where Grace is beaten up and raped by henchmen upon the instruction of Tinker. Also, Carl and Robin are further tortured cruelly for not learning and complying with the dictatorial system. Despite being amputated, Carl still shows his love for Rod and asks his forgiveness.

### Scene Eight

In scene eight, the audience is presented with a dumb Carl who is trying to apologize to Rod. When Carl writes on the mud, begging Rod for forgiveness, Tinker is watching from a distance. Tinker waits till Carl has finished writing and then cuts off both his hands. Tinker waited till Carl has finished making a ‘mistake’ or a sin and then punished him. Tinker acts like an almighty god, who watches over the people and gives them free will to act and punish them once they have sinned. Towards the end of the scene, Rod reads Carl’s apology, wears the ring removed from the amputated arm and says “I won’t lie to you Carl” (23). Rod is not ready to sugarcoat his words or console Carl. He has accepted the existential crisis that Camus’s Caligula felt, “Men die, and they are not happy” (13)

### Scene Nine

Scene Nine shows that Tinker has obviously started feeling emotions besides sexual desires for the anonymous lady in the booth. This shows that no matter how much Tinker tries to separate himself from the normal desires of life, he feels natural temptations. The dealer, the priest who had dedicated himself to a life in the asylum to correct those who are abnormal according to social standards has fallen in love with an outcast. Scene ten is an allusion from the Biblical story of the stoning of Mary of Magdalene. Grace is being beaten up by unseen and unnamed entities. In the script, it is given that “Grace is being hit by an unseen group of men whose voices we hear” (24). The voices represent the society, for whom the incestuous Grace is a sinner who deserves punishment. We see Grace calling out to Graham as if he is her saviour

GRACE. Graham Jesus save me Christ  
VOICES. He can never (crack) never(crack)...Save you (crack). (25)

### Language Devices

The deliberate omission of punctuation marks makes the dialogues ambiguous and multiple meanings become valid. Grace’s cry of pain could also mean that Graham is called out to as if he is Jesus. Graham tells Grace to shut herself off, and to be prepared for what is coming. As the scene follows, Grace is brutally raped to which she does not react but instead shuts herself off and avoids acknowledging what is happening to her. Graham teaches her how to be prepared to receive death “If you know it’s coming you’re prepared” (26). However, Tinker appears at the end of the scene and tells the wounded Grace, “I’m here to save you” (27). This shows that the individual is forbidden to choose death, further creating a parallel with religions like Christianity where suicide is a sin.

### Scene Eleven

In scene eleven, Robin visits the Black Room and uses his one and only coin to watch the lady in the booth dance. But unlike Tinker who masturbates, Robin sits and cries and we can assume that he is impotent. Robin had already expressed his love for Grace, but he knows that he

cannot please her sexually. This desperation must have led him to try himself in front of the dancer. As an impotent person, Robin represents another section of the social outcasts. The following scene shows Tinker offering Grace a chance into a new life. But as the scene progresses, both the audience and Tinker realize that Grace is only interested in being with Graham or as he is dead, be Graham herself. Tinker gives her an electric shock and the script says that “bits of her brain are burnt out” (29). Considering what happens towards the end of the play, we can assume that the part burnt out is her feminine side which includes her love for Graham and care for Robin. She will no longer be Grace but a body in transition which has lost all its feminine qualities and yet to acquire male qualities. In scene thirteen, Rod is found promising to Carl that if it was him that was caught, he would never have said Carl’s name. Rod makes a statement that characterize what society is doing to outcasts. “Can take away your life but not give you death instead” (30). This is what is happening to social outcasts; they are deprived of their right to live their own life and are forced to follow the norms of the society. The violence of didacticism has forced them to a situation where their identity is lost and they live as zombies, neither alive nor dead. The scene ends with Carl’s legs being cut off as a punishment for the love dance that he performs for Rod.

### Scene Fourteen

Scene fourteen presets a final attempt from Tinker to hold himself together as he was. He tries to face the dancer as if she is just a prostitute to him. The scene ends with his confession that “I’ve always known” (32). In the coming scenes, Robin is fed the chocolates that he had saved for Grace by Tinker. Tinker knows that Grace has changed and that she will not care for Robin or his presents. When Robin cries and urinates out of fear, his books are torn to soak the floor. Grace, who comes in watching the torn papers ablaze, does not react to Robin, instead warms herself in the fire.

Rod makes another statement for Kane that “There is only now” (36). If there is neither a glorious origin nor a promised heaven, then there is no meaning in didacticism. If life has only a meaning in the present, then all that needs to be done is to live it. Rod decides to open himself up in front of Carl and accept his love whole heartedly. And they reject all norms and make love then and there. When Tinker pulls them away and asks which one of them is to be punished, Rod accepts death at the hands of Tinker. Thus after Graham, Rod becomes the character who finally gets what he wishes. In the very next scene, Robin follows through suicide. Tinker has given up his control over the inhabitants and their desires are approved. Rod gets to die. Robin, whose earlier attempts to suicide had been interfered with, resulting in his stay in the asylum, has finally killed himself. And in chapter eighteen, both Grace and Carl gets their sex changed through surgery. Carl, the homosexual wanted to be the wife of Rod and his penis has been surgically removed. That penis has been stitched on to Grace, whose breasts are also removed, making her Graham as she had wished. In the following chapter, Tinker gives in to his feelings for the dancing girl, and the man in charge of the asylum for correcting social outcasts makes love to a stripper.

### Final Scene

In the final scene of the play, Kane uses Grace/Graham to state how important feelings are for a person. Both Grace and Carl raises their hands to the sky and the play ends with whole

place blinded in bright light which stands for freedom and hope, which was something not expected out of Kane's play.

### Criticism of Oppression

*Cleansed* is analyzed as a criticism of the oppression and torture performed in the name of fashioning and disciplining. The play has in its center the character Tinker, who represents any authority and in a wider sense all totalitarian ideologies and grand narratives which claim the right to use violence to discipline the other. All characters in the play experience unconventional love, restrictions on their right to love and the pain of it being taken away from them. Kane brings on stage homosexuality, incest, love for a prostitute and haunting of the dead lover. These outcasts are held in the asylum in order to exorcise their behavioral deformities. Through their suffering Kane point fingers at the society, reminding them that they are either afflicting or assisting the same torture while trying to normalize those who move outside social norms. Freedom becomes just a sugarcoated word when people become subjects and are fashioned according to the discourses set by the authority and violence becomes the tool when hegemony fails to produce the expected results.

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