

The Fall of Innocence: Child Sacrifice as a Mirror to Modern Despair in British Drama

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Abstract:

Modern British drama features a disturbing trend: the recurring symbol of child sacrifice. This paper brings to light the fact that this brutal act reflects a profound sense of despair in contemporary society. Unlike classical tragedies where gods or heroes fall from grace, these plays depict the loss of innocence in children, the very symbol of hope for the future.

The paper explores how child sacrifice reflects a societal decline by drawing on the works of John Ditsky and Peter Hays. In a world without hope, children become not a source of optimism but a burden. Playwrights like Philip Ridley use this shocking imagery to create a sense of catharsis in the audience and to force them to confront the darkness of the world they live in.

This paper concludes by highlighting the similarity between the “luck” factor in Greek tragedies and the social decay depicted in modern drama. Both show the vulnerability of human values and the potential for their destruction. The playwrights' use of child

sacrifice serves as a powerful call to action and urges audiences to reject despair and fight for a future where children can flourish.

Keywords: (Child Sacrifice, Modern British Drama, Despair, Loss of Innocence, Catharsis).

In modern British drama, there is a recurring symbol of child murder; child sacrifice becomes a symbolic act through its illustration of children's fall from fortunes. In modern tragedy, time goes backward; instead of seeing a god fall from fortune or heaven, we see the children that never grow old to become gods or heroes. There are few surveys of the symbolic act of killing children in modern drama, and this paper would venture to add to this existing literature an additional claim.

John Ditsky, in his survey of a wide range of English and continental plays, from ancient Greece to the modern period, makes the argument that the dramatist is trying to make a point clear; characters (parents) in drama sacrifice their children, their future, in an attempt to preserve their present. In addition to him, Peter Hays in his article "Child Murder and Incest in American Drama," by analyzing six Anglo-American plays points that the child murder is "a gruesome and painful symbol of the sacrifice of an extension of self, of perverted values and thwarted development in self" and in others (435).

On using children on stage, Ditsky quotes Edward Albee, “Put a child on stage, people listen to the child. The child can’t carry a message very well,” but Ditsky believes that “the child can *be* the message” even if the child is not present on the stage (4). The dramatist places the child on stage, or withdraws it, or destroys it, which mirrors or resurrects the ancient rituals of sacrifice, especially in which the innocents are sacrificed to gods to be allowed to continue their own lives. In Greek tragedies, children also served as tools of moving the plots such as the tragedy of Medea. They are highly abstracted and idealized. That is why they are, as we have seen, typecast as very young and helpless, and compared to lambs or chicks. Because of their immaturity, and their subsequent lack of responsibility and initiative; they cannot be active participants in the action (Sifakis 72). So, their main function would be to deliver the message of the author-god.

Furthermore, a child is a symbol of hope and continuance for the future. But this could also be reversed in a degenerate society. Because in fallen societies such as the ones we have read in modern British drama, the essence of the society has become that of chaos and insecurity, children no longer represent hope but a source of fear and anxiety. Children can become a source of fragility and weakness in morally

corrupted worlds. Adding to the points already made by Ditsky and Hays that by sacrificing children, the parents are trying to secure the present for themselves as characters in a corrupt Modern society, the role of children as being a symbol of hope is abused in a twisted way. Because they are reminders of innocence and hope, they are removed by the characters from their sight and thus their consciousness.

Violence is not new in the world of the British literary scene. The Elizabethan drama was full of murders and violence. In real life, people would go to witness executions and have “fun.” Child abuse is also nothing new. In some ways, Charles Dickens was the first in the English scene to put the atrocities done to children on paper. Children would be used in mining and chimney cleaning for their small size and not many people condemned it. Then why it feels so outrageous that it is done in modern drama. Some would argue that the modern sensibility does not tolerate such scenes any longer especially that of child murders. For this question, the dramatists have a different answer.

Philip Ridley in *Mercury Fur* has re-worked a new kind of Greek tragedy, but instead of fallen gods or noble people, we are witnessing the fall of insignificant individuals who are drowned in a sea of violence and decadence and enact their depraved state of mind on children. Ridley’s

point in depicting child objectification and his eventual murder is not to shock only but as Francis Bacon says to “to throw us back into life with more passion.” For Aristotle, the purpose of tragedy is “through compassion and fear produces purification of the passions” (Aristotle Poetics1449b). Through catharsis, one can reach a certain emotional cleansing. By emotional cleansing, it is possible to say that Aristotle meant “an education for the emotions” because “Tragedy ... provides us with the appropriate objects towards which to feel pity or fear” (Lear 105). The modern man has replaced the gods or noble heroes of the ancient time with children. Instead of having faith or hope in gods, children are revered sometimes to the degree of worship. Thus, the drama we witness since the 50s depicts the fall and the misfortunes of the children. If the parents are trying to secure the present for themselves as characters, the authors sacrifice children to secure the future for the audience through awakening the sense of fear and horror and pity in them, to remind them what at stake is in here, to educate them toward purification of their darkness as the Greek would say.

Mercury Fur was met with derision and walkouts in its first premiers, something that may have not been shocking but was surprising for the writer. The same story had happened to Sara Kane, some 13 years ahead

of him and Edward Bond's *Saved* in the 1960s. As Philip writes in a Guardian interview in 2005:

Why is it that it is fine for the classic plays to discuss – even show – these things, but people are outraged when contemporary playwrights do it? If you go to see *King Lear*, you see a man having his eyes pulled out; in *Medea*, a woman slaughters her own children.... But when you try to write about the world around us, people get upset. If I'd wrapped *Mercury Fur* up as a recently rediscovered Greek tragedy it would be seen as an interesting moral debate like *Iphigenia*, but because it is set on an east-London housing estate it is seen as being too dangerous to talk about. What does that say about the world we live in? What does it say about theatre today?" (qtd in Gardner para 2)

The world depicted in *Saved*, *Blasted*, *Frozen*, are worlds in which women are barely mothers. The presence of women is either diminished or threatened by some larger-than-life threat or change. The good ones are already dead as we read in *Mercury*, Naz's mother's last words before being beheaded by a group of thugs. "Don't hurt me kids" (156). In *A Taste of Honey* and *Top Girls* and *Look Back in Anger*, women in search of love, ambition, and approval have abandoned their motherhood roles. However, this status of womanhood and motherhood is only a symptom of

the declining of the moral values in the society and a certain lack of optimism which has led to the ultimate enemy of humanity; despair. Children in one way or another have always been viewed as an investment for the future; whether economic-wise or emotional-wise. In addition to this, children for the modern man not only represent hope for the future but a reason for being decent. By abusing them, killing them, or removing them, it becomes much easier for the modern man to lose his dignity. Man loses his dignity both because of and to survive the harsh reality of the world he finds himself in. Because he does not want to be vulnerable, he becomes strong at the expense of the ones weaker than him.

This vulnerability is also nothing new. Martha C. Nussbaum in her book *The Fragility of Goodness, Luck, and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* argues that for the ancient Greeks, vulnerability came from a sense of caring for one's family, friends, and virtues, simply caring for human values or in general caring about "being able to act rather than simply to be" (xxix), and it made them vulnerable because it put them at the mercy of luck. Any uncontrollable unseen external factor could easily destroy their stable life and that was what depicted in their tragedy; this sense of falling, of the destruction of balance and human values. (Nussbaum xxix). As we see in modern drama, social decay and political

incompetence have replaced the “luck” factor that throws life into chaos. Because of this chaos, man has forsaken his values, caring only about himself, and therein lies the true vulnerability; so instead of becoming courageous for the sake of his family and friends, he has become selfish and greedy; always at a conflict regarding his interests.

In *Top Girls*, Churchill challenges the notion that there should be a conflict for a woman between career (ambition) and family. She asks the questions why men should be absent and why the government should not re-structure the nature of careers or demands from women. In *Saved*, Bond asks the questions why government indifference, lack of education, and unemployment must lead to a child’s death by the negligence of the parents, why is it that a child is saved only when it is killed? It is also true that people still think that poor parents must face a tragic choice between educating their children and using them for child labor or even worse, never having them being born as is the case in *A Taste*. In *Mercury*, parents kill children to relieve them from the pain of living in the world as the story of Darren goes that was hit by a hammer on the head, “It wasn’t hate! It was the opposite of hate. They hit me cos they loved me. Okay? They loved me so much they wanted to save me from ... from bad things” (166). While this may seem like an act of parental love, it could also be seen as an

escape from taking responsibility for letting the world go astray to the degree that one cannot fix it anymore. What the British playwrights try to show is that none of this needs to be. It is not necessary to conflict. There needs not to be a choice between killing children and saving the present or even the future.

As the Greek tragedians reflected in their philosophy the vices and virtues of the society, war and violence were not something inherent in human beings or something necessary; they were the result of “greed, laziness, and lack of imagination,” and they believed that all suffering can be put behind by a just political system (Nussbaum xxxii). As the Greeks did not resign and challenged the vices, the playwrights we studied in this course tried to do the same. Although the choice of child abuse or murder may seem a violent tool, it has proved that it has been an effective tool.

A good life for the Greeks meant to flourish one’s virtues which meant to act justly in public life and love and care for others, otherwise, according to Aristotle, such a life is not worth living. Thus, for the Greeks, it was important to form a just society through political discourse and public education. The same thing is still true for modern man. A life in which children can easily be sacrificed is a blasted life that may not be worth saving and that is the message that all the playwrights strive to convey,

sometimes through love, and at times through the compelling force of moral obligation to not look away from our reason for hope in the future; namely the children.

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