

**IDENTITY CRISES, VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA:  
A CULTURAL AND PSYCHOANALYTICAL  
APPROACH TO POST-WAR  
AND CONTEMPORARY BRITISH DRAMA**



**LAURA MONICA TOMA**

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*To my dearly beloved husband and my family.*

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After all, the hard core of identity- the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ and even more importantly the continuing credibility of whatever answer might have been given to that question- cannot be formed unless in reference to the bonds connecting the self to other people and the assumption that such bonds are reliable and stable over time. We need relationships, and we need relationships in which we count for something, relationships to which we can refer in order to define ourselves (Bauman: 2004 68).



## Introduction

How can literary critics write about poetry and poets in critical terms without betraying them? This question is probably the most difficult of modern criticism; it has received the least satisfactory answers. It is obvious that there is no definite methodology to approach poems or to penetrate the mysteries of poetic creation. Very often critics make a hesitant and deceptive discourse unable to decide between thematic exploration and stylistic discoveries. Almost in all cases, the poet has become like the Osiris of Egyptian theosophy: his members are dispersed; discouraged readers are only unhappy Horuses (Laurie Edson. *Henri Michaux and the Poetics of Movement*).

Faced with this grim prospect, the literary critic may feel like a two-faced Janus. I would add another difficulty. How can one aspire to reveal the intricacies and peculiarities of a literary work without imposing his/her own interpretation as the only valid one or obscuring the intended message, if there is one? Then of course, I wrote a book on violence, trauma and identity issues, something which felt baffling at times and I faced challenges of all kinds. My purpose here is not to solve this old-age problem. I can only suggest ways of averting this danger, such as my taking into account various theories when doing research on a topic, always questioning my judgments and taking care to throw light over a subject and not obfuscate it. Literary criticism can feel sometimes like a Procrustean bed but there is nothing that a genuine passion for this field cannot solve.

Drama, by its very nature, is a living organism capable of absorbing societal and cultural influences, and thus to vividly and faithfully capture the concerns, conflicts, the shifting moods and social mores of each historical epoch. Post-war and contemporary British drama is undoubtedly no exception. If one wants to get a glimpse on how people lived and most importantly how they felt in a certain historical period, one can read a play or watch a performance and may obtain a deep insight into human affairs. Drama, by probing into consciousness and intersubjectivity, succeeds in encompassing the full range of human experiences from passion, love,

elation, to more violent ones, such as hatred, terror or you get into a universe peopled by Vladimir and Estragon, two individuals who have lost touch with their humanity. You get to see how frail we really are, how vain our aspirations are and we as well become “merely players” (*As You Like It* 622). In the end, drama addresses a very fundamental and basic problem: the problem of being human. It also responds to a very basic human need: that of communication. Sometimes we experience a cathartic release and feel joy when there is a happy ending and the villain is punished and hope that the same shall happen in real life. Drama shows us what is wrong with this world but it may also reveal to us what areas of our lives we must work on, because the plays often tackle themes which have a universal, almost timeless appeal, such as matters of the heart, revenge, social conflicts and family discord, among others. It also conveys emotions that are alien to us, engaging us in variegated, tumultuous crises, broadening our range of feelings and expanding our ability to experience intense, elusive, more exalted feelings. It may thwart our expectations; it may shake us from our apathy and most likely it will not leave us indifferent. On the contrary, we become intellectually and emotionally engaged, and maybe we even come to question our own attitudes towards certain topics. The best plays manage to do that.

With drama, you probe into the recesses of the heart and you delve into the most hidden impulses and desires the human mind can contain. That is not to say that other genres such as the novel, poetry or autobiography, do not allow such an insight, but they do it by other means. The beauty of drama lies in the fact that it does it in an unmediated fashion. You get to feel the raw emotions of the personages, you almost see Macbeth’s “dagger in the mind” (124) and begin feeling oppressed by life when it takes the form of a tale “full of sound and fury” (204); you even come to identify with Hamlet being torn apart between duty and hesitation. Drama therefore operates on various levels. While social dramas such as Clare McIntyre’s *Low Level Panic* or Nigel Williams’ *Class Enemy* centre on external contingencies, revealing pressing social and political problems such as consumerism and the objectification of the female body, unemployment, poverty, they also reveal inner, intrapsychic conflicts that torn the individual, and foreground the precariousness of his sense of identity and the radical split of self and the world. If plays such as Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* or Harold Pinter’s *Old Times* do not directly address such societal concerns, it does not mean that they do not have wider ramifications in responding for instance to the subtler forms of violence inherent in human relationships; the Sisyphean pursuit of the self or the ways in which

the structured sense of self is divided into various self-concepts. We ourselves sometimes feel as split selves that have touched the bottom of despair in certain situations and plays like these succeed in reflecting such ineffable emotions. Moreover, they also mirror one commonplace, basic situation— that of placing your trust in someone and being let down or simply the experience of waiting for something to happen or having an aim which we do not succeed in achieving. It may remind us of our current political situation, with politicians pledging to effect some changes but failing to do so. These plays show us that in the end the change must come from within us first of all.

The seven plays I have chosen are works of imagination and they strike us with their demotic language, the personages who seem damaged beyond repair but that nevertheless command our attention; also, the strange, minimalist setting, informed by claustrophobic overtones which make the sense of grief almost palpable. These plays foreground everyday issues, such as jealousy, disappointment, anger, crises of faith, but in such a compelling way that they combine to create an arresting picture of the frailty of human relationships, touching the right chord. Although they do not all touch upon transcendental, existential concerns, even the sense of hunger some of them express makes them poignant and credible, because even such a simple human need may in fact hide an ontological expectation. When reading the plays I have gathered in this book, we sense something uncomfortably voyeuristic, as we learn about the characters' most intimate thoughts and compulsions and we are given privileged access into their private worlds which often harbour unspeakable grief and torment.

I therefore chose drama as subject for this book because what I like about it in general and the plays I have chosen in particular, is the fact that it is a dynamic genre which has the amazing capacity of reflecting modifications of perception of different topics, changes in the political climate, or even of setting the tone for these kinds of changes<sup>1</sup>. With John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, for instance, for the first time on a British stage, offensive language is employed. This kind of verbal violence will escalate in a play such as Sarah Kane's *Blasted* which shocked its audience by portraying gory acts such as cannibalism, rape, eye gouging. This directly mirrors the rising levels of violence that culminated in the Balkan

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<sup>1</sup> If we refer for example to *La Celestina*, Fernando de Rojas's work dwells on issues such as the sense of honour, *amor heroes*, but also on themes which have to do with the transformations brought about by the Renaissance, such as individualism and emancipation, egalitarianism, existential pessimism.

war on which Kane was reflecting when she wrote the play. The appeal of plays like these consists in their timelessness because violence, be it verbal or physical, is on the rise even today and it takes great courage to confront it even in writing. That is why, I believe that one of the issues on which this book centres is of great importance nowadays when we are witnessing the deep and spreading roots violence has formed in our societies, not to mention the ravages of terrorism and the fear it instils. Consequently, I deem that a multidisciplinary approach to violence and to its consequences, especially trauma, will enable us to grasp the significance, the implications of this harmful phenomenon which continues to aggravate and which at times seems incomprehensible, so as to be better equipped to meet the challenges that may face us.

Embarking on the writing of this book has been an enriching experience both on a personal and a professional level. Stemming from a lifelong passion for theatre, the impulse to write this book also combined my interest in post-war and contemporary British literature with my wish to gain a clear insight into the fields of psychoanalysis and psychology. The book provides an in-depth analysis of dramatic structures and conventions along with the study of the socio-political milieu in which a play is set.

Along the years, the book suffered major changes in perception and interpretation. My research in this field started with anthologies such as Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst's *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*, David Krasner's *History of Modern Drama*, Mary Luckhurst's *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama: 1880-2005*. I had read Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, but I felt the need to find out more about the dramatic structure and conventions and so I read Martin Esslin's *The Anatomy of Drama* and then his eye-opening *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Literary criticism of post-war and contemporary drama has focused on topics such as "the absurdity of the absurd". Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* sets out to define and shed light on its standards and conventions. He contends that the theme of the plays written by playwrights such as Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet is the "metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition" (23-24). Moreover, he underlines the fact that in the case of the Theatre of the Absurd the formal innovation matches its basic postulates. The *Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama. 1880-2005*, edited by Mary Luckhurst, explores feminist and postcolonial agendas along with the question of the metropolis versus the region. Special attention is paid to issues of class and empire, war and terror. Other theorists examine ethical assumptions and political implications. In *British and Irish Political Drama*

*in the Twentieth Century. Implicating the Audience*, edited by David Ian Rabey, *Look Back in Anger*, *Chicken Soup with Barley* and *Class Enemy* are treated as political dramas which address “problematic social matters”, stressing the fact that they are preventable (2, 3). John Bull in *New British Political Dramatists* analyses various strategies of political theatre, focusing on four writers who produced plays they intended to be the driving force of social change. Michael Patterson pursues the same ends in *Strategies of Political Theatre. Post-War British Playwrights*. The fundamental postulate of his study is that “all theatre is indeed political” (3). He argues that in order to debate political issues, the writers adopted “conventional modes of Western theatrical discourse. These divide broadly into two strands, what one might call the reflectionist and the interventionist” (15).

*A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama* edited by Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst tackles issues such as the role played by the British and Irish playwrights and theatre-makers as “ethical witnesses and cultural commentators”. Mark Taylor-Batty in *Ethical Speculations in Contemporary British Theatre* edited by Eric Monforte and Mireya Aragay analyses the link between the war and the media in *Blasted* by Sarah Kane. Pinter’s *Old Times* has been studied in terms of the memory games it discloses, the treatment of time or the way the rehearsals for a production can enhance the critical understanding of the play, as Stephen Martineau and Lawrence I. Eilenberg did in *Contemporary British Drama, 1970-90* (1993). As I advanced in my research, I found out that there were themes which were not subjected to sustained critical attention. Many surveys of British drama study the prevailing genres and styles, establish the texts and playwrights in a social and political context. That is when I realised that a piece of work that would centre on three theoretical issues such as violence, trauma and identity crises, a work that would involve several challenging, representative plays is needed. Thus, I hope that this book will fill this gap, by providing a focused analysis that will involve classical and also up-to-date critical and cultural theories, and that it will contribute to our understanding of British drama. I start from the premise that these provoking, riveting plays can only profit from this encounter with theory.

The theoretical framework of the book underwent various changes along the years. I had read Freud extensively and also Jung and Otto Fenichel before beginning my research, but I felt the need for a more up-to-date perspective on the topics I set out to analyse. What began as an inquiry into the post-war and contemporary British drama centred on the alienated self, identity crises and violence expanded and incorporated also

the concept of trauma, as I realised that the emotional shock it involved was a key element in studying the way the characters constructed their identity and strove to maintain a coherent self-concept. If initially I wanted to focus on issues such as the neurotic character, defence mechanisms, the fragmentation of identity and the breakdown of communication, among others, as I began to read about more modern psychoanalytical theories, I came to the conclusion that the concept of trauma could illuminate the characters' mental breakdown, their estrangement and their fragile, brittle sense of identity. As I advanced in my research, I decided that a pluralistic approach to the plays would be more suitable as it could offer a more balanced perspective and it could account for processes that psychoanalysis could not do in the same satisfactory manner. That is why I opted for a cultural approach to the plays and I chose as a complementary theoretical engine for my explorations sociology, social psychology, ontology. These were studied as interconnected fields of study and not as separate disciplines. In this respect, for instance, I analysed identity and violence as they appear in psychoanalysis and sociology. In my research, I have always tried to find a balance between these disciplines and also to see how various concepts evolved along the time. That is why, for example, I resorted to classical texts such as Aristotle or Frye's, but also the latest studies written by Hans-Thies Lehmann, John Orr, Anne Ubersfeld, for drama studies. I study trauma starting with Freud, Breuer and Janet and until Cathy Caruth, Caroline Garland, Werner Bohleber, Judith Herman. With violence I intend to offer a multidisciplinary perspective and study it as it has been defined by sociologists such as Erich Fromm, Stuart Hall, Stanley Cohen, Michel Wieviorka, but also from the point of view of social psychology and look into the findings of Roy Baumeister, Ervin Staub, Jennifer Crocker. We also refer to psychoanalysts such as León Wurmser, Rocco Lo Bosco, Danielle Knafo, Leo Rangell. I therefore aim to offer a multilateral perspective on violence and to this end I shall refer to verbal violence, physical abuse, war, vandalism, criminology. Identity is not a stable, monolithic concept. On the contrary, it is an unfolding process, dynamic and conflicted. I intend to look into personal identity, group identity, racial identity and posttraumatic identity. That is why I surveyed it from multiple points of view: social/political philosophy (Charles Taylor), sociology (Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Richard Sennett), social psychology (Roy Baumeister), psychoanalysis (Erik Erikson, Karen Horney, Christopher Lasch), political psychology (Molly Andrews). In order to explore the concepts of subjectivity and intersubjectivity I have also referred to works by Emil Cioran, Gabriel Liiceanu, Constantin Noica, Miguel de Unamuno, Jean-Paul Sartre. Their writings helped me expand on notions such as

self-construction, the interplay between self and the other, human finitude, the paradoxical nature of human beings.

In an attempt to broaden the range of theoretical perspectives, the book therefore brings forward the contributions of some of the most prominent Romanian philosophers and essayists. The book also benefited from the valuable contributions of Romanian literary critics and historians such as Romul Munteanu, Ion Zamfirescu, Mihnea Gheorghiu, Nicolae Balotă.

The corpus I chose to work on is British drama. In the process of writing this book I encountered some difficulties and I had to make difficult choices as post-war and contemporary British drama is such a complex phenomenon, with so many talented, genial playwrights. Finally, after careful investigation and consideration, I arrived at the number of seven plays which are the most representative for the three themes I focus on. They pertain to different dramatic traditions such as the Theatre of the Absurd, In-Yer-Face theatre or Kitchen-sink drama. Nevertheless, my selection did not stem from a need to find a homogeneous pattern, but from a desire to offer a more comprehensive view of the concepts I set out to study and apply. Consequently, these plays allowed me to explore a vast range of human experiences as the characters have different backgrounds and a different status and psychological profile while others do not even have a discernible identity to stake out. Some remember too much while others choose to forget even what they did the previous day. This motley collection of personages shows us the fact that while we are living a sheltered life, others have to cope with hardships that are hard to imagine; it also enabled me a better understanding of human nature because I dealt with personages who are highly conflicted individuals, riven with contradictions and dilemmas that threaten to besiege the self. They are compelling characters, who have the appeal of real people. These stirring, courageous plays can allow one to arrive at a better understanding of Britain's contemporary history as the playwrights wonderfully succeed in mirroring the ethos, the anxieties, the social conflicts that swept the country in the last fifty years, and the impact it had on individual lives. They show us what war can do to people, how the education system failed its students, the way destitution and racism corrode one's subjectivity, the fact that abuse causes unmitigated terror that infiltrates one's sense of identity. The plays vibrate with energy and with a zest for life although they graphically exhibit the visceral nature of trauma and violence. These plays afford a disturbing

experience, sometimes dispiriting, sometimes heartening, forcing us to look beyond any ethical reductionism.

Another difficulty that I encountered was the nature of the topics I chose to concentrate on, namely trauma, violence and identity crises. Identity has become a pressing concern in the globalized world and the multicultural societies we live in. As Bauman asserts, we are now passing through a “fluid” phase of modernity in which society no longer exerts “straightforward coercion” so therefore identity has become negotiable, revocable and something to be invented. Identity has a precarious, forever incomplete status and is subject to ambivalence (*Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vechhi*).

At the beginning I felt that I had before me an arduous task, that of tracing the aetiology of violence and its effect on individuals. Upon entering the microcosm of the characters, I began to realise that there is no unique “explanation” for this phenomenon that has become entrenched in our societies and that no single theory can capture its multivalence. If before embarking on this research, I had a somewhat reductive view, based on my research on the issues of sadism and aggressiveness which formed the basis of one of the chapters of my diploma paper, which consists in a psychoanalytic approach to D. H. Lawrence’s *The Prussian Officer*, I surmounted this obstacle by taking recourse to various theories and concepts such as attachment theory, person-based identity, masculine identity status, group membership, self-esteem, to name only a few, which provided me with the notions necessary to arrive at a better understanding of the subject of violence but also of the plays.

I also came across another difficulty, namely the fact that in some of the plays, the perpetrators seem to appear as traumatized as well and being exposed to aggression led them to repeat the cycle of violence. I decided to pursue this idea and to investigate its implications. That is when I decided to tackle trauma, from the point of view of both victim and perpetrator. My aim was to fathom the reality of trauma and to account for its impact on self-concept. What I discovered were some hard truths about the depressive stupor trauma can inflict and the extent it shatters an individual’s self-concept and determines even a radical reassessment of the tenets of faith. I should underline the fact that the three topics I set out to inquire into are inextricably linked, with one leading to another, as violence engenders trauma which in turns causes identity crises. In the end, what the personages want is something fairly simple but so difficult to obtain. The characters hanker for the security that human bonds provide and that is a major source

of identity. They wish to be understood but this wish is never granted because it is reiterated in the most twisted, aggressive manner and so they succumb to despair. The other remains a stranger and failure to connect paves the way to further destruction. What are the consequences as concerns identity shift? How does the self cope with the overwhelming experience of being subjected to trauma and violence? How can we account for the collapse of intersubjectivity and what are the implications for the self-concept? Therefore, in this book I shall try to answer these fundamental questions that arise in the plays.

Maladapted to life, the characters are forced to grapple with gnawing resentment or corrosive feelings of shame as the reality of trauma becomes an oppressive presence in their lives. If Oedipus, upon finding out the truth, gouges out his eyes, the characters I have studied are blind from the beginning, blind to the other's needs, blinded by their hubris. After such Gadarene rush, nemesis is sure to fall upon them. Caught up in a cyclone of emotions, the characters give up self-realisation. As their hearts fester with bitterness, they are unable to develop human connection and so are left alone to cope with some value gap. Others have to face the extremes of evil and upon plumbing the depths of abjectness, they become morally bankrupt and the anxious quest to alter their lives comes to an abrupt end. In the end, even for the most demoralized ones, like Vladimir and Estragon, or for those caught in the apparently inescapable net of guilt, narcissistic demands and existential angst, satisfying the emotional hunger by fostering intersubjectivity, would have led to a restoring of the crippling low self-esteem.

In Iron's case, there is an unconscious need for human interrelatedness which goes unsatisfied as result of a defective process of individualization. In order to maintain his leader status among his peers, he adopts a misanthropic attitude and relates to people in destructive ways. Confronted with lingering uncertainties surrounding their existence marred by poverty, the other boys from *Class Enemy* resort to aggression and they remain in that classroom because in that environment they can talk and share ideas and there is the hope that a teacher will come and listen to them. Emotional disconnection is debilitating and remaining in that familiar place which retains a positive connotation, shabby as it is, is preferable to venturing in the urban jungle full of unforeseen dangers.

Una, the protagonist of the play *Blackbird*, also feels the vital need to connect with someone who can truly understand her, even if that person is her abuser, because she yearns to be recognized as a victim firstly by him.

Only then can she rebuild a sense of self-worth which had been damaged by the traumatic experience of the abuse but also by the lack of support from her family, the judicial system and the community, who denied her suffering. Trauma sabotages attachment relations so Una ends up surrendering part of her subjectivity. The personages from Sarah Kane's *Blasted* do not enjoy true intimacy although they long for it and they struggle to achieve it in the most deviant ways. In the dark night of the soul, when one is left alone and blind, even the cold body of the one who disfigured him provides a little warmth. Ian, the hard-boiled journalist who shows contempt even for God, begs Cate to touch him as he hankers for human affection. In the end, Cate proves the fact that kindness and mercy prevail even amidst all the havoc wreaked by war and that intersubjectivity is to be fostered if one is to survive.

The book is divided in seven chapters, each dealing with one specific playwright and one specific play. I did not provide a chapter that outlines our theoretical and conceptual framework because at the beginning of each chapter I included a detailed presentation of the theories that inform my analysis. Moreover, I intersperse discussions of the implications of the concepts I bring up throughout the chapters. In this way, I believe that readers can follow our arguments more easily, taking into account the complex nature of the themes I set out to study. On the other hand, this strategy is useful because I can show more easily the ways in which a certain theory helped me in my inquiries or the ways in which a certain concept served to illuminate particular aspects of the play.

In the first chapter, focusing on *Waiting for Godot*, I propose a rethinking of Beckett's play through Emil Cioran's thought. Kindred spirits, the two authors delve deeply into the problem of being human, revealing quiddities of existence: the fact that human beings are not masters of their own destinies; that death is an inescapable fact and that birth is the accident that leads to the tragedy of life. The pursuit of happiness is only a phantasy; individuals in fact do not flee from pain as this endows life with a sense of purpose. With Vladimir and Estragon we enter into a universe where lucidity brings discomfiture and the attempt to fill the hours proves futile. In the first section of the chapter, I provide an outline of the Theatre of the Absurd and in the second one I try to elucidate the dramatic structure and principles of the play.

In the next section, I dwell on the authors' *Weltanschauung* as being informed by the same stricken awareness of the unreliability of divinity. The personages are outcasts who struggle in vain for recognition from an elusive