



A Lacanian Reading of Violence- Desire and the Body in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* and Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*

(1) **Ansam Riyad Abdullah Al-Maarroof** | (2) **Vian Hameed Saeed**

^{1,2}College of Education for Women, University of Tikrit, Saladin, Iraq

Email: ¹sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq.com, ²vianarkan995@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* and Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* dramatize the relationship between violence, desire, and the body through Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic framework. Central to the study are Lacanian concepts including the Real, the Symbolic, the Imaginary, the Mirror Stage, Desire and the Other, and the Name of the Father. The analysis emphasizes the Three Orders, the Mirror Stage and fragmented body, and the dynamics of lack and desire as crucial tools for understanding the psychic dimensions of violence and desire in contemporary drama. The argument advanced here is that both plays, though distinct in setting and form, reveal the Lacanian subject's perpetual struggle with desire, rooted in a constitutive lack and an unattainable *objet petit a*. In *Cleansed*, Kane depicts the eruption of the Real and the brutalization of the body, foregrounding *jouissance* in pain and the disintegration of the Imaginary self. In contrast, Arbery's play examines the violence embedded in the Symbolic order, where ideological rigidity and the Gaze of the Other produce psychic torment and an attachment to signifiers that fail to secure wholeness. The study asks: How does Kane's depiction of extreme violence reflect Lacanian symbolism? Why do Arbery's characters shape desire and identity through the Imaginary? How do both plays expose the destructive impact of societal norms on subjectivity? Through close textual analysis, this research demonstrates how the body becomes the site where unconscious conflicts of violence, ideology, and desire are enacted and endured.

Introduction

Contemporary theatre often serves as a crucible, forging unsettling truths about the human condition, particularly concerning the raw and often intertwined experiences of violence, desire, and the body. Playwrights Sarah Kane and Will Arbery, though employing vastly different aesthetic and thematic approaches, both delve into these elemental aspects of existence, compelling audiences to confront the psychic undercurrents that shape human behavior and suffering.

Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* (1998) is a work that achieved notoriety for its unflinching depiction of explicit violence and its harrowing exploration of love under conditions of extreme duress. Set within an institutional environment that functions more as a torture camp than a university (Cleansed National Theatre, May 2025).

The play relentlessly examines the limits of human endurance and the profound transformations, both physical and psychological, inflicted upon its characters. The body in *Cleansed* is a primary site of this violence, subjected to grotesque mutilations and forced alterations that mirror the psychic fragmentation of its inhabitants. (Gender, Violence and Queer desire in Sara Kane's *Cleansed*, May 2025)

Conversely, Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* (2019) dissects the anxieties, ideological fervor, and spiritual crises of a group of young conservative Catholics gathered in contemporary rural America. The play navigates the complexities of faith, generational conflict, and the psychological weight of deeply held belief systems. While the violence in Arbery's play is less overtly physical than in Kane's, it manifests as intense psychological pressure, ideological warfare, and existential suffering, with characters grappling with physical ailments that seem to echo their spiritual turmoil. (Thomas Colin)

The central thematic triad connecting this disparate works violence (both physical and psychological), desire (for love, meaning, transcendence, belonging, or ideological purity), and the body (as a site of pain, pleasure, transformation, and ideological inscription) provides fertile ground for psychoanalytic inquiry. Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, with its emphasis on the unconscious, language, desire, and the formation of subjectivity, offers a potent framework for understanding the complex psychic dynamics at play in these dramas. This study raises key questions: How does Sarah Kane's depiction of extreme violence in *Cleansed* reflect Lacan's concept of the Symbolism? Why do the characters in *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* direct their desires and identities through the lens of Lacan's concept of The Imagery, and how does this influence their interactions and personal beliefs? How do both *Cleansed* and *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* use Lacanian psychoanalysis to explore the destructive effects of societal norms and expectations on characters' sense of identity? This Lack fuels a perpetual desire that seeks, but never fully attains, an elusive *objet petit a*, the fantasized object that promises completion. In Kane's work, this drama unfolds through catastrophic encounters with the Lacanian Real, where the symbolic order collapses and the body is subjected to horrifying extremes, leading to a perverse *jouissance* found in suffering. Arbery's characters, in contrast, navigate the violences inherent in the Symbolic order itself, where the weight of ideology and the interpellating Gaze of the Other generate profound psychic torment, even as they cling to signifiers that fail to deliver the promised wholeness. In both theatrical worlds, the body emerges as the ultimate canvas upon which these unconscious conflicts are inscribed, endured, and made visible.

The stark contrast in the *manifestation* of violence overtly physical and visceral in Kane's *Cleansed*, and primarily ideological, linguistic, and psychological in Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* offers a compelling opportunity to explore the comprehensive explanatory power of Lacanian theory. Lacan's framework addresses not only the raw trauma associated with the Real, which is palpably evident in Kane's depiction of bodily horror, but also the structuring, and often oppressive, force of the Symbolic order, which is central to the ideological conflicts in Arbery's play. This suggests that Lacanian psychoanalysis can bridge these seemingly disparate expressions of violence, tracing them back to common psychic origins such as the fundamental Lack in being, the inherent failures and incompleteness of the Symbolic order to provide ultimate meaning, or the disruptive and terrifying force of the Real. Consequently, this paper will demonstrate that violence, in a Lacanian sense, extends beyond physical aggression to encompass the psychic damage inflicted by rigid ideological systems, the trauma of unfulfilled or impossible desire, and the inherent ruptures and alienations that constitute subjectivity itself. This broadened understanding of violence is particularly pertinent to contemporary drama, which increasingly grapples with these multifaceted forms of suffering. (*Essay on the play 'Heroes of the Fourth Turning and Jacques Lacan | Literary Theory and Criticism Class Notes*)

This analysis will proceed by first reviewing existing critical literature on both plays and on Lacanian approaches to drama. Subsequently, it will establish the key Lacanian concepts forming the theoretical framework. The core of the paper will then provide a detailed Lacanian discussion of violence, desire, and the body as they are articulated in *Cleansed* and *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, followed by a comparative analysis. Finally, the conclusion will synthesize these findings and consider their broader implications for understanding contemporary subjectivity and the critical purchase of Lacanian theory.

Methodology

The methodology of this study involves a qualitative theoretical analysis using the psychoanalytic framework of Jacques to interpret Sarah Kane's play *Cleansed* and Will Arbery's play *Heroes of the Fourth Turn*. This approach focuses on applying Lacanian different concepts such as the mirror stage, the desire, and body, to study how these plays portray the formation of identity, desire, and violence. It will include a close reading of the texts to identify key moments where Lacanian theory sheds light on character's psychological struggles, with a focus on their interactions with societal norms and how these norms shape their desires and behaviors. The analysis will be based on current studies of Lacanian theories (Lacan, 1949, 1966, 2006) and contemporary critiques of the plays (Oliver, 2011; Eagleton, 2009), highlighting themes of social and personal disintegration with intersection of psychoanalysis. Through this lens, the study aims to explore how both plays use violence and identity crises to critique the destructive effects of societal pressures on subjectivity of individual.

Literature Review

The critical landscapes surrounding Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* and Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* are distinct, reflecting the different natures of the plays and the eras of their premieres. However, both bodies of criticism acknowledge the profound psychological dimensions of the works, paving the way for a deeper psychoanalytic investigation.

Cleansed burst onto the theatrical scene amidst a storm of controversy, primarily due to its graphic depictions of violence and explicit sexual content.² Initial reactions were often

characterized by shock and disgust, with some critics dismissing the play as a gratuitous exercise in "In-Yer-Face" theatre, designed merely to provoke. Graham Saunders notes that Kane herself attributed such reactions to a refusal by critics to look beyond conventional dramatic forms, stating, "If they don't have a clear framework in which to locate the play then they can't talk about it". This difficulty in categorizing Kane's work, which deliberately eschewed realism for a more symbolic and visceral mode of expression, contributed to its early contentious reception. As it is clear in the quotation of "Love me or kill me" where it is said by characters involved in an incestuous relationship mirroring the dynamic between Grace and her brother Graham in Kane's play (*Cleansed*). (Kane, 2008)

Challenging aesthetics Sarah Kane has continued to challenge, provoke and push form, language and bodies in her radical theatre aesthetics. 'Almaarroof' (2024), n14 which offers a comparative reading of *Blasted* and Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, suggests that Kane's dramaturgy purposefully oversteps established limits of what occurs on stage in the theatre in order to recall audiences to the raw truth of emotions and the psychology of war. And it's not just sensationalism: It has a greater purpose, for the pulverizing of coherent subjectivity and mimetic representation. Such disturbance, as Almaarroof points out, places Kane's work in a tradition of political and experimental theatre that does not seek to solve but to disturb. This focus on fragmentation and breakage is consonant with Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic conceptions of the subject as originally divided and determined by lack, a process that ultimately is a search for an unobtainable object of desire (objet petit a). When it comes to Kane's theatrical experiments, in particular that of *Cleansed*, this can then be understood with Lacan's tri-partite orders of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary as staging the breakdown of the Imaginary constitution of self under the tension of traumatic desire and symbolic violence. As Almaarroof (2024) illustrates in her research on *Blasted*, the stage in Kane's context is no longer a place of recovery or closure, but of vulnerability and disintegration. It is in this sense that this aspect obliquely confirms the Lacanian reading of *Cleansed* that the present study proposes, the website of violence as a kind of implied or subtextual metaphoric arrest, as a metaphor in regard to both narrative and structure of the subject's confrontation with the Real, and as fragmented psychic and bodily coherence.

However, subsequent academic analysis has moved beyond the initial shock to explore the complex thematic underpinnings of *Cleansed*. Scholars have recognized the play's profound engagement with themes of love, suffering, gender identity, and societal critique. One thesis, for instance, argues that the extreme violence in the play serves not as an end in itself, but as a tool to amplify the experience and expression of love, pushing characters to demonstrate the extraordinary lengths they will go to protect their emotional bonds. Another critical perspective examines the play through the lens of gender and queer theory, highlighting how *Cleansed* explores the permeability of gender and sexual identities, often through the central metaphor of violence inscribed upon the body. This violence is seen as symptomatic of the societal pressures involved in assuming any gendered or sexual identity, and potentially as a brutal means of liberation from these norms. Furthermore, some analyses interpret the play as a critique of societal indifference to suffering and war, using its shocking imagery to awaken audiences from apathy. While psychoanalytic readings of Kane's broader oeuvre exist for example, analyses of *Blasted* and *Psychosis* have employed Freudian and Lacanian concepts (Kane, 2018) a specific, comparative Lacanian focus on "Cleansed" in relation to another contemporary work offers new avenues for exploration.

While in *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* is also consistently praised for its contemporary relevance and its unflinching engagement with the anxieties and ideological fissures of modern America (Thomas, 2018). The play does not shy away from presenting troubling viewpoints, including racist, homophobic, and transphobic statements made by its characters, alongside discussions of abortion, violence, and self-harm, prompting audience advisories regarding its mature content. The critical consensus suggests that the play's power lies not in endorsing these views, but in its willingness to listen to and humanize individuals who hold them, thereby fostering a more complex understanding of the cultural landscape. While the psychological depth of the characters and their intense emotional and spiritual struggles are widely acknowledged, comprehensive Lacanian analyses remain less common. "We're warriors in a culture war. We need to be strong. This country is on the brink of a metaphysical collapse. And people like you, with your nuance and your empathy, are part of the problem." The mentioned said by the Character Teresa which exemplifies the kind of rhetoric that the play presents unflinchingly intense, ideologically charged, and unsettling. Teresa is one of the most provocative voices in the play, and Arbery uses her character not to endorse these views but to confront the audience with their existence in American discourse. The line also reflects the psychological and spiritual anxiety that pervades the play (Arbery, 2019).

Lacanian psychoanalytic theory has been a significant force in literary and cultural criticism for decades on drama, offering sophisticated tools for analyzing texts, subjectivity, desire, the unconscious, the function of language, and the impact of trauma. Scholars have applied Lacanian concepts to a wide range of literary and dramatic works, illuminating the ways in which texts articulate the complexities of the human psyche. For instance, Lacanian readings often explore how characters' desires are structured by a fundamental Lack, how they pursue elusive objects of desire (*objet petit a*), how their identities are shaped by the Symbolic order and Imaginary identifications, and how they encounter the traumatic Real. (Lacanian reading of Lack, 2008)

While the critical reception of both *Cleansed* and *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* acknowledges their profound psychological dimensions, and Kane's work has attracted some psychoanalytic attention, there remains a valuable opportunity for a systematic, comparative Lacanian deconstruction. Such an analysis can move beyond identifying themes of violence, desire, and the body to articulating the precise psychic *mechanisms* by which these elements are structured and experienced by the characters. For example, while critics note the interplay of love and violence in *Cleansed* or the suffering and ideological battles in *Heroes*, a Lacanian approach can elucidate how desire itself might be constituted through, or intensified by, the violent disintegration of the body, or how the desire for ideological purity can inflict its own form of violence on the psyche and body. Lacan's concepts of Lack, the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary and the centrality of the body in these registers, provide the theoretical tools for such an articulation. (Ruti, 2008)

Theoretical Framework: Jacques Lacan's Psychoanalytic Theory

Jacques Lacan is psychoanalyst and psychiatrist was born in Paris on April 13, 1901. His intellectual journey was closely tied to the cultural and philosophical movements of the 20th century. Lacan's work was influenced by his medical training in psychiatry, but his philosophical interests soon led him to Freud's psychoanalytic theories. By the mid-20th century, Lacan had established himself as a leading figure in psychoanalysis, known for his

provocative seminars and writings (Lacan, 2001). Slavoj Žižek explains For Lacan, psychoanalysis is essentially not a theory and technique for treating psychological disorders, but a theory and practice that confront individuals with the deepest dimensions of human existence. It does not guide the individual on how to adapt to the demands of social reality; rather, it explains how resembles reality is formed in the first place. It does not only enable the human being to accept the truth that has been repressed about him; it explains how the dimension of truth emerges in human reality” (Žižek, 2007). Theories of Lacan are intricate and multifaceted, encompassing a wide range of concepts that challenge conventional psychoanalytic thought. Some of the most influential ideas introduced by Lacan will be explored.

Lacan famously posited that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (Lacan, 2018), meaning it operates according to linguistic principles such as metaphor and metonymy, and that subjectivity itself is an effect of the subject's entry into the Symbolic order of language and culture. This framework provides a nuanced lens through which to examine the complex interplay of violence, desire, and the body in dramatic texts. Lacan's theories in psychoanalysis provide a unique perspective for analyzing literature and drama. His focus on desire, the unconscious, and identity offers a framework for studying how characters in plays struggle with their sense of self, societal norms, and internal conflicts. This analysis addresses various Lacanian concepts, such as the Mirror Stage, the Symbolic Order, desire, body, Lack, and the real. So, Lacanian concepts of the Real, Symbolic, The Imagery, The Mirror Stage and Fragmented Body, Lack and Desire, *Objet Petit* will be used to explore the psychological and existential dimensions of the characters' experiences on both plays of Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* and Will Arbery's *The Heroes of the Fourth Turning*.

To undertake a Lacanian reading of *Cleansed* and *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, several core concepts are indispensable: (Evans, D. 1996)

The Three Orders: Real, Symbolic, And Imaginary

Lacan proposed that human subjective experience is structured by three interlocking orders or registers:

The Real: This is perhaps Lacan's most elusive concept. The Real is not synonymous with "reality" as commonly understood. Instead, it signifies that which is prior to symbolization, resistant to it, and ultimately unrepresentable within the Symbolic order. It is the domain of the impossible, the traumatic kernel that underpins reality but can also shatter its coherence when it irrupts. The Real is associated with raw, unmediated experience, primal drives, trauma, and death. In dramatic terms, it can manifest as moments of unspeakable horror, bodily disintegration, or the breakdown of meaning, as is powerfully evident in the extreme situations depicted in *Cleansed*. Tinker's "*Love me or kill me,*" Is a haunting line, uttered by the character Tinker, a sadistic figure who acts both as tormentor and caregiver, encapsulates the paradoxical drive toward destruction and desire that Lacan associates with the Real. Tinker is often silent or ambiguous in his motivations, but he exerts violent control over others in the play. This line distills a moment where violence, desire, and the impossibility of true emotional. (Saunders, 2022)

The Symbolic: This order encompasses the realm of language, law, social structures, cultural norms, and the big Other (the repository of societal codes and expectations). It is through entry into the Symbolic, often marked by the Oedipus complex and the Name-of-the-Father (the

primary signifier of law and prohibition), that the subject is constituted as such. The Symbolic order shapes desire, dictates social roles, and provides the framework of meaning through which individuals understand themselves and the world. The ideological frameworks, patriarchal power structures, and particularly are the conservative Catholic doctrine in *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* as potent manifestations of the Symbolic. A strong example of the Symbolic order in the Lacanian sense operating in *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* appears through the character Justin, a devout Catholic and former soldier who articulates conservative values shaped by religious doctrine and cultural norms. Justin speaks this line during a discussion about faith, duty, and the ideological lineage that binds them as conservative Catholics. Justin's statement clearly situates the characters within the Symbolic order, they are not autonomous creators of meaning but subjects constituted by pre-existing structures religious tradition, Catholic doctrine, and inherited ideological codes. His use of the terms formed, given, and receive underscores the Lacanian idea that the Symbolic precedes and constructs the subject. (Green, 2019)

The Imaginary: This register is associated with images, identifications, and the formation of the ego. It is primarily structured during the Mirror Stage (see below). The Imaginary is the realm of illusion and the fantasy of wholeness and mastery. It governs the subject's relationship with their own image and with others perceived as similar or ideal. Characters' self-perceptions, their ideals, and the potential for these are to be shattered or revealed as illusory fall within the domain of the Imaginary. "I think I'm supposed to be a kind of prophet. Like, I was born for this moment." Teresa says this in a fervent monologue about her role in the political and spiritual crisis of modern America. She sees herself as a figure of grand purpose and insight. This line embodies the Imaginary register because Teresa is identifying with an idealized image of herself the prophet, the truth-teller, the heroic voice in a fallen world. It's a fantasy of wholeness and control, in which she sees her ego as unified, purposeful, and exceptional (Law & Liberty, 2019).

The Mirror Stage and the Fragmented Body

Occurring between six and eighteen months of age, the Mirror Stage is a crucial moment in the development of subjectivity. Lacan describes the infant, who initially experiences its body as a collection of uncoordinated sensations and partial drives a "fragmented body" recognizing its reflection in a mirror (or through the mother's gaze). This image appears as a whole, unified form, an "Ideal-I". The infant jubilantly identifies with this image, which forms the basis of the ego. However, this identification is a fundamental alienation, because the perceived wholeness is an external illusion that masks the underlying fragmentation and lack of motor control. This primordial experience of the fragmented body remains in the unconscious, threatening to resurface, particularly in moments of trauma or psychosis. The deconstruction of bodies in "Cleansed" can be read as a violent return to, or exposure of, this fragmented state, while characters in both plays grapple with maintaining a coherent self-identity against forces that threaten to expose its illusory nature. As it is clear in the quotation "I look in the mirror and I don't know who I am." Which is said by Grace and it reflects reveals a collapse of the ego-illusion. Her confrontation with her reflection (the mirror being a direct allusion to Lacan's stage) doesn't restore identity it shatters it. Trauma has resurfaced the primal experience of fragmentation, physically and psychologically. This is not just metaphorical: characters in *Cleansed* endure literal bodily mutilation tongues cut out, limbs amputated reflecting Lacan's notion of the "body in bits and pieces" (*corps morcelé*). Grace's inability to recognize herself mirrors Lacan's claim that ego-formation is founded on misrecognition (*méconnaissance*). The

mirror no longer reflects an "Ideal" instead; it confronts her with alienation, trauma, and loss. The unified self she once believed in is gone, violently deconstructed. (Lacan, 1990)

Lack and Desire

For Lacan, desire is not simply the wish for a particular object but arises from a fundamental and constitutive Lack-of-being (*manque à être*). This Lack is inaugurated by the subject's entry into the Symbolic order, which separates the child from a fantasized state of maternal plenitude and introduces the law of prohibition. Desire is thus the metonymic movement from one signifier to another in an endless and ultimately futile attempt to fill this primordial void. It is what drives the subject's quests for love, meaning, connection, or ideological certainty, as seen in the characters of both plays. Lacan distinguishes desire from need (biological requirements) and demand (articulated requests, which always carry an implicit demand for love). Desire is the surplus that remains once need is subtracted from demand. "I want to be with him. I want to be him." It is said by Grace (speaking of her dead brother Graham) in *Cleansed*, Grace's desire goes far beyond mourning or familial love she seeks fusion with her brother, ultimately undergoing a sex change operation to physically become him. From Lacanian perspective this is not a biological need or a conventional demand for comfort. Rather, it is a desire that expresses a fundamental lack-of-being, a desire for a lost unity (maternal or brotherly), which can never be truly recovered. (Sierz, 2001)

"I want to believe that my suffering means something." Is said by Teresa, a zealous Catholic intellectual, is tormented by her inability to reconcile suffering, faith, and ideological purpose. She constantly seeks validation from the Church and her peers, while displaying symptoms of psychological strain. From Lacanian Perspective this is not a demand for relief from pain, but a desire for meaning, for symbolic affirmation a quest to fill the void left by the absence of a unified truth or divine certainty. Her desire stems from lack, not need: she wants her pain to have symbolic value, to be recognized and given coherence within the religious-political framework she clings to. (Kundera, 2004)

Discussion Section A Lacanian Reading of Violence, Desire, and the Body

Applying the Lacanian theoretical framework to *Cleansed* and *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* illuminates the profound psychic dynamics that underpin their representations of violence, desire, and the body. Though their theatrical methods and settings differ dramatically, both plays expose the subject's precarious existence within the Lacanian schema.

Trauma and Bodily Disintegration in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*

Cleansed plunges its characters and audience into a nightmarish space where the boundaries of the self and the symbolic order are systematically dismantled. The play's setting a "university" converted into a "concentration camp and place of torture" immediately signals a zone where normative societal structures have collapsed, creating an opening for the irruption of the Lacanian Real.

The extreme, graphic violence that permeates *Cleansed* including torture, systematic mutilation, rape, and death¹ can be understood as manifestations of the Real. This is the domain of that which resists symbolization, the traumatic core that shatters the coherence of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Tinker, the sadistic "doctor" and overseer of this institution, acts as an agent of the Real, orchestrating acts of brutality that defy language and rational

comprehension. The play's relentless depiction of bodily violation tongues cut out, hands and feet severed, penises removed, breasts amputated, and eyes gouged pushes beyond representation into the realm of the unrepresentable, forcing an encounter with the raw horror of existence stripped of symbolic mediation. As one analysis notes, the violence of enforced gender identification is "quite literally inscribed on the bodies of the characters, in acts which are often horrific and brutal". These acts are not merely symbolic; they are the real made flesh, an "obscene, sadistic ritual". Trauma and Bodily Disintegration is clear in the lovers Carl and Rod are subjected to repeated torture that literalizes their love. Their physical mutilation becomes a representation of a love that cannot be spoken within heteronormative structures. Tinker forces Rod to watch Carl's dismemberment, making the emotional bond a site of unbearable trauma in the Paly:

Carl (to Rod): "*If you love me, you'll let me die.*"

This statement collapses desire and death into one the Lacanian death drive (*jouissance*) becomes the only mode through which love can be realized in Kane's world. Their desire, which cannot be integrated into the Symbolic order, re-emerges as grotesque repetition and physical violation (Angel-Perez, 2006).

The Fragmented Body, the systematic physical deconstruction of characters like Carl, who endures progressive dismemberment, and Grace, who undergoes a forced gender reassignment to become her dead brother Graham, directly evokes Lacan's concept of the *corps morcelé*, the fragmented body. Prior to the Mirror Stage, the infant experiences its body not as a unified whole but as a collection of disparate parts and sensations. "Cleansed" can be seen as stripping away the Imaginary illusion of the unified body the Ideal to reveal this underlying, primordial state of fragmentation. The exchange of clothes, cross-dressing, and surgical alterations are not just about changing identity but about the literal deconstruction and violent reconstruction of the body, exposing its malleability and vulnerability. The play graphically illustrates the terror of the body's potential to revert to a state of disconnected parts, a core anxiety that the ego, formed in the Imaginary, strives to repress (Wright, 1991).

The intense suffering depicted in *Cleansed* and the characters' astonishing endurance, particularly their unwavering attempts to find and maintain love amidst unimaginable horror, can be interpreted through the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*. This is an "enjoyment" or intensity that lies beyond the pleasure principle, often found in pain, transgression, or the proximity of death. The characters do not merely suffer passively; their love, as one thesis argues, "Grows stronger" in the face of violence. This suggests a dynamic that transcends simple aversion to pain or a desire for pleasure. Rod's declaration to Carl, "I love you now. I'm with you now. I'll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray you," made in the shadow of impending torture, points to a love that finds its most profound expression at the limits of endurance. This can be seen as a form of *jouissance* a painful, excessive "satisfaction" derived from pushing against the absolute limits of being. Tinker, as the orchestrator of this suffering, might be viewed as an agent who facilitates access to this perverse *jouissance*, a figure who embodies the cruel superego injunction to "Enjoy!" even in, or especially through, pain. (Žižek, 1999)

Kane's relentless staging of the Real and the fragmented body moves beyond mere shock value, a criticism leveled by some early reviewers. Instead, it serves to directly implicate the audience in a confrontation with their own repressed anxieties concerning bodily integrity, mortality, and the precariousness of the Symbolic order. The audience is forced to witness "distressing

atrocities" and "upsetting nakedness and overt acts of brutality", making the play a "hard watch". From a Lacanian perspective, the Real is inherently traumatic, and the Gaze involves the subject being constituted and often unsettled by being seen, or by seeing what should not be seen. By presenting the seemingly unrepresentable, *Cleansed* aims to bypass intellectual defenses and evoke a visceral, pre-symbolic reaction in the spectator. The audience is placed in an uncomfortable position: on one hand, they might identify with Tinker, the observer of suffering; on the other, they are compelled to psychically endure the trauma alongside the victims. This creates an uneasy complicity, where the theatrical Gaze itself becomes a site of disturbance. The play thus becomes a Lacanian event, challenging the spectator's own Imaginary sense of wholeness and forcing an encounter with the Real, making the theatrical experience itself a site of potential psychic disruption and, perhaps for some, a disquieting form of *jouissance* (Wallace, 2010).

The Tyranny of the Symbolic: Ideology, Lack, and the Gaze in Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*

Heroes of the Fourth Turning shifts the locus of violence from the explicitly physical to the psychic and ideological, exploring the pressures exerted by a powerful Symbolic order on its subjects. The play is set at a backyard after-party near a "tiny Catholic college" in Wyoming, where four young conservative alumni have gathered to toast their mentor, Gina, the newly inducted college president. The conservative Catholic ideology espoused by the characters and embodied by Transfiguration College represents a potent Symbolic order a system of signifiers, laws, and cultural narratives (the "Law-of-the-Father") that attempts to provide ultimate meaning and structure to their lives. This ideology, with its "Great Books" curriculum and "strong dose of conservative theology not least on matters of sexual morality" ⁹, offers a comprehensive worldview.

Emily and Kevin are characters who struggle with the limitations and psychological consequences of this worldview. Emily, despite her suffering and chronic illness, clings to a quiet, mystical faith rooted in love and empathy. Kevin, on the other hand, is fractured his alcoholism, guilt, and sexual repression reveal how the ideology has failed to offer him a livable path.

Kevin: "I don't know who I am without being against things." This captures the existential fallout of a totalizing worldview, when identity is based entirely on opposition, self-collapses when the battle is unclear.

However, the play meticulously reveals the cracks, anxieties, and internal contradictions within this seemingly rigid system. The "spiritual chaos and clashing generational politics" that erupt among the characters demonstrate that the Symbolic order, while powerful, is never complete or fully satisfying. Gina, the elder stateswoman representing an older form of conservatism, finds herself at odds with Teresa's more aggressive, Bannon-influenced MAGA politics, illustrating the inherent instability and evolving nature of even seemingly monolithic Symbolic structures.

Desire Born from Lack the characters' fervent beliefs, their intense spiritual crises, their political zeal, and their often desperate desires for meaning, for martyrdom

Kevin: "He likes the idea of a coming war as it offers a chance for martyrdom", (Kane,)

Justin's contemplation of entering a monastery, "since creating some sort of conservative Catholic enclave entirely divorced from the modern world doesn't look very realistic" ⁴, is another expression of this search for an absolute that can suture the Lack. Their desires are not simply for the tenets of their faith but for the fantasized completion that these tenets promise.

While the violence in *Heroes* is primarily psychological, the body is not absent; rather, it becomes a crucial site for the inscription of ideological pressures and the manifestation of psychic suffering. Emily, Gina's daughter, is in "constant pain from some unrevealed disease".⁴ Her suffering is a central focus, and she is described as the "clearest exemplar of the play's investigation of suffering" within a religious culture that is often "hostile to the body, anti-sexual, anti-female". Her physical pain can be interpreted as a somatic expression of the immense psychic pressures of her upbringing and her struggle to reconcile her faith with the suffering she witnesses and experiences. It may even represent a form of *jouissance*, a painful bodily "enjoyment" that is inextricably linked to her spiritual and ideological condition. The play's intense discussions of abortion, birth control, sexuality, and even self-harm ⁴ further underscore how the body becomes a battleground for ideological control and a locus of profound existential and moral conflict.

Arbery's play powerfully demonstrates that the violence of the Symbolic order, while not necessarily involving physical bloodshed, can be profoundly damaging to the psyche. This psychic violence arises from the way the Symbolic structures and often constricts desire, leading to a state where the subject's longing becomes ensnared in a repetitive, unsatisfying circle. The characters pursue various *objets petit an* ideological purity, divine validation, a utopian past, a revolutionary future that their Symbolic order itself defines and promises as fulfilling. However, because these objects are, by Lacanian definition, unattainable stand-ins for the fundamental Lack, and because the Symbolic itself is inherently incomplete (lacking a final, all-encompassing signifier that could guarantee its truth), their quest is doomed to repetition and frustration. This leads to the "spiritual chaos", the intellectual bullying (Teresa, ⁸), Kevin's despair and alcoholism ⁴, and Emily's debilitating pain. The "culture war" they feel they are fighting ⁴ becomes an externalization of this internal, irresolvable tension, a projection of the violence inherent in their relationship with a Symbolic order that demands an impossible allegiance and promises an unattainable wholeness. The play thus suggests that extreme ideological commitment, far from providing solace, can become a source of profound psychic violence by trapping desire in an impossible pursuit, highlighting the inherent dangers and insufficiencies of any totalizing Symbolic system.

Comparative Analysis: *Objet petit a* and the Elusive Nature of Desire

Cleansed and *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* powerfully illustrate the Lacanian concept of desire as driven by Lack and oriented towards an elusive *objet petit a*. However, the nature and form of this *objet* differs significantly, reflecting the distinct psychic economies of each play.

In *Cleansed*, the *objet petit a* often manifests as the desperate, almost primal pursuit of love and human connection in the face of annihilation. Grace's search for her dead brother Graham, culminating in her desire to become him through physical transformation, and the unwavering bond between Carl and Rod, tested to the point of death and dismemberment, exemplify this. This "extreme love" is a desire that persists not just despite its impossibility, but perhaps because of it. In a world where the Symbolic order has utterly collapsed and the Real reigns with terrifying immediacy, the *objet a* becomes the fantasized salvation or wholeness found in the Other, even if that Other is dead, or if achieving connection necessitates enduring

unspeakable torture. The pursuit is raw, visceral, and tied to the body's capacity to love and suffer (Kirshner, 2005).

In *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, the *objet petit a* is more frequently tied to abstract ideological or spiritual ideals, constructed and valorized within a highly structured and articulated Symbolic order. Teresa's fervent desire for a "saved" Western Civilization and her belief in an impending "shooting war" ⁴, Kevin's yearning for martyrdom, Justin's search for a pure, monastic existence, and the group's collective longing for certainty and divine validation represent various manifestations of the *objet petit a*. These ideals are pursued with an intensity that reveals them as fantasized solutions to their underlying Lack. It promises a sense of purpose, belonging, and transcendence that the mundane world, and even their internal struggles, deny (Cunningham, 2019).

The contrast is telling: in *Cleansed*, where the Symbolic is decimated by the irrupting Real, desire latches onto the most fundamental, embodied human bonds as its *objet a*. The object of desire is almost pre-symbolic in its intensity and immediacy. In *Heroes*, where the Symbolic order is hypertrophied and all-encompassing, desire is channeled into the highly abstract, mediated, and ideologically saturated objects offered by that very system. This comparison underscores Lacan's crucial point that there is no "natural" or pre-ordained object of desire. Desire is always structured by the Symbolic, and the *objet petit a* is ultimately a placeholder for the fundamental Lack, taking on different guises depending on the subject's specific inscription within the Symbolic order and their particular encounters with the Real and the Imaginary. Both plays, however, powerfully demonstrate the Lacanian principle that this pursuit is endless, as the *objet a* is, by its very nature, that which is perpetually lost and sought, ensuring that desire itself remains the enduring, if often painful, condition of the subject.

Cleansed by Sarah Kane Lacan's Mirror Stage and Violent Identity Rupture

Lacan's Mirror Stage posits that identity is formed when an individual first recognizes them in a mirror. However, this self is an *illusion* an idealized whole that contrasts sharply with the fragmented experience of the real self. This disjunction creates a lifelong tension. In *Cleansed*, the characters are trapped in a space where their identities are stripped, distorted, and violently reshaped. Violence here becomes the metaphor for the painful process of reconciling their perceived (ideal) self with their real, wounded self.

Grace: "You're dead. You died. I didn't. You died and left me behind." (*Cleansed*, Scene 1).

It highlights Grace's identity crisis after the death of her brother. Her self-image (partly formed in reflection of him) is fractured, forcing her to reconstruct a new identity through *pain*, *loss*, and *transformation* themes central to the Mirror Stage. (Cohn, 2021)

Tinker's brutal interventions on the characters can be viewed as external forces mirroring Lacan's "real" that continuously destabilize any coherent self-image the characters try to construct. Identity is thus not only formed through recognition but constantly deformed by external authority.

Heroes of the Fourth Turning: The Big Other and Ideological Identity

Lacan's concept of the Big Other refers to the symbolic authority (e.g., God, society, law) that governs our desires and shapes our identities. In *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, the characters wrestle with deeply ingrained conservative, Catholic ideologies *family*, *God*, *American*

exceptionalism as they try to make sense of themselves and the world. "I feel like my body is failing me and I'm supposed to ignore that because I'm supposed to fight for something more important than myself." Said by Emily, her words demonstrate a split between personal suffering and the demands of the Big Other (religion, ideology). Her desire for self-care is incompatible with the collective call to sacrifice, creating an identity tension similar to the Lacanian subject torn between the imaginary self and the symbolic order (Lacan, 2006).

Another key character, Justin, is torn between his patriotic convictions and his doubts about contemporary conservative discourse, "I don't want to be in the war. I just want to know what side I'm on." said by Justin in *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, this statement reveals a desire for clarity and ideological belonging, but also a Lacanian anxiety: the realization that identity is not a fixed essence but a position within a discourse. Justin's identity conflict reflects his awareness that the Big Other (ideology, God, nation) does not guarantee coherence (Lacan, 2006).

Techniques

Sarah Kane uses extreme violence in order to depict the brutal fragmentation of identity. This violence symbolizes the struggle of characters to reconcile their inner selves with the external expectations imposed upon them. This aligns with Lacan's theory that the ego is formed through external images and societal pressures, resulting in a disconnect between the ideal self and the true self. On the other hand, the play *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* uses intellectual and ideological conflict instead of physical violence. The characters engage in intense debates about politics, religion, and morality, embodying their internal struggles as they attempt to balance their desires with the expectations of the "Big Other." While the emotional and ideological confrontations in this play are not physically violent, they represent a psychological battlefield.

The language in *Cleansed* is often simple and poetic, which emphasizes the emotional brutality of the characters' experiences. The dialogue is frequently fragmented, reflecting the disconnection and alienation felt by the characters a central Lacanian concept. The surreal violence and fragmented language highlight the struggle to comprehend a world in which societal norms have been distorted.

While In *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, the dialogue is marked by deep intellectual and philosophical reflection. The characters' extended discussions of politics and faith reflect their search for meaning and self-identity within the structures of their society. This verbal exchange mirrors Lacan's concept of the "Big Other," as the larger societal forces to which they belong shape the characters' interactions (Medialdea Molina, 2020).

Symbolism

In *Cleansed*, violence itself serves as a symbol for the internalized societal expectations that shape the characters' identities. The physical pain and suffering of the characters symbolize the psychological burden of trying to conform to an idealized societal image of the self that does not match their lived experience. The disturbing images in the play (such as mutilation and body trauma) reflect the symbolic destruction of the ego.

In *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, the characters' discussions about tradition, faith, and ideology symbolize the deep-rooted societal forces that govern their behavior. These forces function as the big Other, shaping how the characters see themselves and interact with each other. The setting a rural, conservative community symbolizes the societal pressure the characters experience. (Fink, 1997)

Setting

The setting of the play of *Cleansed* is intentionally abstract and nightmarish, representing a place where societal norms have collapsed, and extreme violence dominates. This disorienting environment symbolizes the fractured characters' psyches and embodies Lacan's idea of the "mirror stage," where the ideal self is separated from the reality of lived experience. This setting serves as a metaphor for the harshness of the external world and the internal pressures that distort identity (Evans, 1996).

The setting of *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* takes place in a specific, conservative American town, which highlights the ideological and societal pressures that shape the characters. The environment is rooted in reality, yet the characters' struggles with their beliefs reflect how the "big Other" (society, religion, politics) plays a dominant role in shaping their sense of self and their desires (Rebellato, 2009).

Conclusion

Applying Lacanian framework, what *Cleansed* and *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* uncover is not just the psychic violence of desire but how modern day ideological extremism works and undermines societal anthropophilia. Kane's brutalist institution and Arbery's conservative Catholic gathering, not mere image-props but microcosms of a world in which the Symbolic order collapses, leading humanity to desperate (and usually destructive) attempts to suture the Lack. The collapse of social forms in *Cleansed*, where the dismantling of societal norms compels characters towards the raw Real via corporeal disfiguration, is but a mirror of crises unfolding today in which systemic disaster (war, pandemics, etc.) countenances moments when we collectively admit meaning has its limits. The torture program in *Tinker*, a tableau of Scandinavian militants too frostbitten with nihilist impotence to give good training, hearkens back to the jouissance that comes from authoritarianism making control omnipresent not just over the bodies and lives but even so far as gusto itself. That ideology of the *Heroes*, Teresa wanting her "metaphysical war" or Justin taking his vow at a monastery, mirrors our own fragmented landscapes, where political and religious dogmas are gewgaws and give us balance but also provide the gunpowder in casus belli.

Unsatisfied desires, Lacan warns, know only escalation, and in that sense they might serve us polished up on a plaque over the provision table at Pansy Hall, an eternal fuel for fighting. Public Books *Atlas Obscura* Grace's change and Teresa's messianic impulse, these struggles mirror those of our own era: the qanoon phenomenon, fascist opportunism, fealty to ideology absolutism and purity politics. As Kane's characters come apart at the seams under the violence of systems, contemporary subjects shatter as they are reduced to algorithmic echo chambers and hyper-mediated bauble worlds. His reactionaries yearn for a lost golden age, and in doing so, they exemplify the Lacanian paradox: the more doggedly we pursue closure of the Symbolic order, then by necessity do we invoke, in return, an explosion to make Real its inexorable presence now (e.g., January 6 insurrection; climate denialism). The following table clarifies the Lacanian applications in both plays:

Table 1:

Concept	<i>Cleansed</i>	<i>Heroes</i>
Real	Bodily mutilation as trauma	Ideological collapse as psychic rupture
Objet petit a	Grace's desire to become Graham	Teresa's quest for ideological purity

These plays diagnose a condition people might call universal: the human subject, which Lacan says is itself constituted by Lack; in other words, we are forever lost in trying to recover something that was never there, will either destroy itself or the world in its quest for the impossible objet a. (The same could be said of late capitalism.) Kane and Arberry are staging these crises to force the question: when the Symbolic order breaks down, do we run into our hallucinations of whole, or confront that void with a radical empathy? And their works also suggest that, however troubled, the latter might be ultimately our only way out of the cycle of violence.

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