



Lust and Loss in Ravenhill's *Shopping and F****ing* & Kane's *Blasted*: Troubling Trends in a New Culture

Eugene Ngezem, Ph.D.

Department of English, Clayton State University, 2000 Clayton State BLVD, Morrow,
GA 30253, U.S.A.

*As the modern world hangs on a string of utter moral collapse, several writers unleash moral restraints, thus bringing immorality to the market square to consumers who seem to yearn for the collapse of moral walls in their world. Harkening to such cravings, Mark Ravenhill's provocative title and play, *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), and Sarah Kane's flaming play, *Blasted* (1995), present morally bankrupt characters clothed in the garments of modern humanity. Glued to wild and recurrent sexual habits, suggesting, as it were, the unceasing erosion of human dignity, these characters cling, with menacing sternness, to sex at all times and in all lieu. Like burning candles that consume their own heights, chronic sexual drives and activities in the works of the foregoing playwrights depict our world and diminish the statue of humanity. Set in an economically dejected and drug-redden East End of London, *Shopping and F****ing* serves as a canopy under which sits rancorous, impulsive, and rampant sex and drugs with the attendant loss they create. In a similar vein, Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, set in a war-torn city, which duplicate the ruins of our societies, depicts depraved characters who have sex at whim and with impunity. Dangling on the skin of their own neurotic lasciviousness, depression, and depravation, Kane's characters, notwithstanding how despicable they are, ironically, are apt shadows of our present-day world. Previously perceived as too dreadful for the stage, these two plays, especially *qShopping and F****ing*, which has been translated into at least ten languages, depict, with telling finality, the congruent perspectives of two authors on addictive consumption and the collapse of moral probity.*

Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, which "reflects contemporary urban culture" (De Vos 47) and comprises "graphic pornography" (Schnierer 131) starts with Lulu and Robbie urging Mark to eat from a box of carryout food. Lulu insists, "You must eat.... It's delicious" and Robbie affirms, "That's right" (3). In the midst of this insistence, Mark vomits and Robbie yells "Shit. Shit" as Lulu responses, "Let's clean the mess up" (3). The insistence that Mark must eat because food is delicious and Mark's subsequent vomiting suggest the purgation of contemporary attitudes towards the temptation and insatiable consumption of all that which looks desirable, as humanity is perpetually dealing with "shit," "mess" which it creates and, at times, cleans. Brian summarizes the hurdles of characters when he tells Lulu and Robbie:
You know, life is hard. On this planet. . . . We work, we struggle. And we find ourselves asking: what is this for? Is there meaning? . . . We need something. A guide. A talisman. A set of rules. A compass to steer us

*Lust and Loss in Ravenhill's Shopping and F*****ing & Kane's Blasted: Troubling Trends in a New Culture*

through this everlasting night. Our youth is spent searching for this guide until we ... some give up. Some say there is nothing. There is chaos. We are born into chaos. But this is ... no. This is too painful. This is too awful to contemplate. (86)

After telling Lulu and Robbie, "My head's a mess. I'm fucked.... I can't control anything. My ... guts. My mind" (4), Mark reminds his two partners how he purchased them at a shopping mall from "a fat man" who told him "they're both mine. I own them. I own them but I don't want them – because you know something? – they're trash. Trash and I hate them. Wanna buy them? How much? Piece of trash like them. Let's say ...twenty. Yeah, yours for twenty" (5). The shopping center then becomes a place where sex partners are sold and bought at a cheap price, and where sex addiction breeds the loss of value, dignity, as the desired ones are reduced to garbage and discarded. Like clearance items in used stores, Lulu and Robbie were purchased at almost no cost, without their consent or objection, and have been Mark's sex objects since then.

Like Lulu and Robbie who yearn for sex and are owned, Gary, a male prostitute and a fourteen-year old boy whom Mark had earlier paid thirty pounds for sex tells Mark, "I'm not after love. I want to be owned. I want someone to look after me. And I want him to fuck me. Really fuck me" (56). He tells Mark: "You gonna take me home and fuck me? Alright. One day. Take me home." The loose sexual behavior and instant rejection are apparent when Mark has sex with Wayne, but refuses to kiss Robbie whom he has been sleeping with, suggesting randomized sex without love. The sexual encounter between him and his male friend, Wayne is a business transaction and not real love. To Mark, their sexual affair was "more of a ...transaction. I paid him. I gave him money. And when you're paying, you can't call that a personal relationship, can you? / What would you call it?" (18). Characters are sexual commodities in the play and are used at whim. Sex is commodified and has lost its connection with love, as Mark chooses paying for sex with the teenage Gary over making love to Robbie.

In a detailed article entitled "Men Who Purchase Sex, Who Are They? An Interurban Comparison," Danielle C. Ompad et al wrote about men buying sex: 26.5 % paid for sex in São Paulo, 8.8 % in Britain, 12.9 % in Norway, 13.1 % in Denmark, and 25.4 % in Spain" (1166-80). Indeed, Ravenhill wrote in a culture in which sex was a hot and cheap commodity and consumed wherever and under weird circumstances.

In the drug rehabilitation center, he gives Wayne money because he wants to lick his arse. Sex loses the value of intimacy and occurs in bizarre moments: While Robbie's health is precarious, as he "*sits bruised and bleeding*" (34) in the accident and emergency waiting room, Lulu "*slips her hand into Robbie's trousers and starts to play with his genitals*" (32). Lust produces the loss of respect, restraint, and decency. Additionally, characters are too addictive to sex to the extent that during interview with Brian, Lulu is reluctant to remove her jacket to display her acting acumen, but quickly removes her blouse without hesitation. Robbie's reference to sex as "Lick and Go" (19) speaks to loose sexual behavior in the play. To Mimi Kramer, *Shopping and Fucking* constitutes part of "the subgenre of so-called smack-and-sodomy plays, in which drug use is rampant and sex is graphic, brutish and usually anal" (71-72), suggesting, as it is evident around the world and particularly in our western world, which rests under a lust-redden culture, devoid of genuine love.

Lust and Loss in Ravenhill's Shopping and F*ing & Kane's Blasted: Troubling Trends in a New Culture***

Like some who go to shopping centers not to sell or buy, but to rob others, Ravenhill's sex maniacs are victims of violent sexual robbery or say attacks. Gary who prides himself in selling sex to the highest bidders complains that his stepfather has been raping him and his complaints to the council yielded no punishment or solution to his pain: "he's fucking me. Once, twice, three times a week he comes into my room. He's a big man. He holds me down and he fucks me..... Listem. I tell her he's fucking me – without a condom.... He's my stepfather. Listen, he's my stepfather and he's fucking me" (40-41). Lust in this case ends with the loss of filial gratitude, the loss of precaution against STDs, and the loss of trust in public officers who should protect victims like Gary. Moreover, Robbie and Mark take turns in having sex with the underage Gary and we are told that "he [MARK] fucks him viciously" (83). Robbie tells Gary that excessive and violent sex will kill him, "It'll kill you" and he responds, "It's what I want" (84). As a consequence of lustful men who attack or violently violet him, Gary loses purpose in life, as he chooses death over life.

Additionally, the lust for drugs, materialism, and food constitutes the backdrop of these wild and incessant sexual activities. Mark loses good health, Lulu loses her dignity, and Robbie loses intimacy with Lulu. Lindsay Jo in 'Partying hard', 'partying sometimes' or 'shopping': young workers' socializing patterns and sexual, alcohol and illicit drug risk taking," states:

More of the party hards were engaging in high-risk sexual practices than their counterparts in the other groups. Almost one in four of party hards were at sexual risk compared with one in six of the party sometimes group and fewer than one in 10 of the shoppers. The party hards were significantly more likely than their counterparts to have had three or more sexual partners in the previous 12 months" (1-14).

The play which starts with food ends when "Mark, Robbie and Lulu take it in turns to feed each other as the lights fade to black" (91) just as they have taken turns to have incessant sex with each other and to lose much along the way. As the lights fade to black in the paly, Ravenhill's characters, who are metaphors for the many sex maniacs in our topical world, fade into the dark corners of shopping centers for loveless sexual infatuation and attendant loss of human worth. Like Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane presents a sexually infested play, as well.

Contrary to *Shopping and Fucking* in which sex is yearned for by all characters, Sarah kane's *Blasted*, published a year earlier, depicts a world wherein sex is forced upon others and is accompanied by acute pain and cannibalism. Avid drive towards smoking, drinking, sex and food abounds in the play and speaks to consumerism. Set in a "very expensive hotel room in Leeds [England]-the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world" (3), Kane presents a tabloid journalist, Ian, and a Soldier, who both have severe and violent sexual drives, and a young lady who is only sporadically concerned about sex. The play starts with Ian talking about his stench and that of the city, and like Ravenhill's Mark, who vomits at the start of the *Shopping and Fucking*, Kane's Ian is heard "coughing terribly in the bathroom. He spits in the sink...." (4). He is sick of consumerism or say of the excessive consumption of alcohol and cigarettes, yet he is obstinately glued to the foregoing and sex till his death. Like his counterparts in *Shopping and Fucking*, he chooses consumerism over a healthy, fulfilling life.

Lust and Loss in Ravenhill's Shopping and F*ing & Kane's Blasted: Troubling Trends in a New Culture***

Like Ravenhill's Mark, Kane's Ian uses the word "fuck" frequently and indeed performs sexual acts often in the play, as he tells Cate, "I'm fucked" (11). He quickly and sexually engages a reluctant Cate, who is far younger than him, in a sexual act. Notwithstanding Cate's resistance, we are told that "apparently still in pain, [Ian] takes her hand and grasps it around his penis, keeping his own hand over the top. Like this, he masturbates until he comes with some genuine pain" (15). After kissing Cate passionately, Ian turns his back and Cate once more "wipes her mouth" (17), signaling an unrequited, forced love. Ian continues to sexually abuse her, as he locks the door to prevent her from leaving.

Notwithstanding the asexual nature of Cate, she is lured into Ian's sexual frenzy as she "sucks his nipples," "undoes his trousers," "begins to perform oral sex on [him]," "bites his penis as hard as she can," and his "cry of pleasure turns into pain" and Ian "tries to pull away but Cate holds on with her teeth" (30-31). After biting Ian, Cate complains that she was hurting, becomes disgusted after noticing Ian's blood and pubic hair in her mouth. Cate loses her dignity, gentility by resorting to lust and violence. Sex, like in *Shopping and Fucking*, produces grave pain and blood: The young Cate complains, "I can't piss. It's just blood" (34).

The intrusion of Soldier takes the sexual passion and violence to an acute level. As soon as he enters the hotel room, he states "I can smell the sex," "closes his eyes and rubs 'Cates knickers' gently over his face, smelling with pleasure" (37). As a premonition to the sexual hurricane and death in the play, a mortal bomb blasts a huge hole in the hotel room and Soldier tells Ian "I am dying to make love" and boasts of the pain he and his fellow soldiers committed outside of town: "They held the men while I fucked the women. Youngest was twelve. Didn't cry, just lay there. Turned her over and – Then she cried. Made her lick me clean.... Shot her father in the mouth. Brothers shouted. Hung them from the Ceiling by their testicles" (43). Like Sarah Kane who died by hanging herself by her shoelaces in a bathroom at London's College Hospital, Soldier kills his victims by hanging them. Soldier further boasts of stabbing a woman between her legs, on the fifth stab snapped her spine" (46). Hanging men by their testicles and stabbing women between the legs point to cruelty and to excessive focus on the genitals, thus signaling a world glued to lust and the attendant loss of compassion, empathy.

As Soldier asks Ian, "You never fucked a man before you killed him?" (47), Ian reads from the newspaper, "Kinky car dealer Richard Morris drove two teenage prostitutes into the country, tied them naked to fences and whipped them with belt before having sex" (48) and reports of priests and teachers who rape and shoot kids (48). Lust has taken over love. After reading the stories and as a premonition to the brutal sexual experience and maiming Soldier will inflict on him, Soldier tells Ian "going to fuck you" and inquires if Ian prefers to "be shot than fucked and shot" (49). Without hesitation or empathy Soldier "holds the revolver to Ian's head.... Pulls down Ian's trousers, undoes his own and rapes him – eyes closed and smelling Ian's hair....pulls up his trousers and pushes the revolver up Ian's anus" (49). Soldier ends up sucking out Ian's eyeballs and eating them and Ian exhumes and eats a dead baby and masturbates even when he is blind and about to die, yelling "cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt" (59). Characters are too addicted or lustful to the extent that they consume anything and everything, even when they are maimed and dying.

Lust and Loss in Ravenhill's Shopping and F*ing & Kane's Blasted: Troubling Trends in a New Culture***

As the foregoing discussion and preponderant of evidence have demonstrated, one would safely insist that while Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* and Sarah Kane's *Blasted* are revolting, perceived as too extreme, and abhorred by some, they depict, as it is the case in our current society, a world in avid consumerism and acute sexual collapse. The playwrights show, in unambiguous terms and with telling finality, that our contemporary world is fenced on all sides with pillars of sex, drugs, alcohol, food, and violence, as characters are prone to die from lust, consumerism. Elizabeth Kuti in her article, "Tragic Plots from Bootle to Baghdad" says,

The extremity of the sexual violence portrayed in *Shopping and Fucking* (although in this scene it is only intimated, not enacted explicitly onstage) inevitably led Ravenhill's play to be bracketed with Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995). The two became perhaps the key texts of a whole movement of 1990s 'New Brutalism' or 'in your face' theatre. (457-469)

Like in our world where sex is sold or auctioned, characters in the foregoing plays sell sex as a commercial commodity and are also violently robbed of it. Caridad Svich, in his 2003 article, "Commerce and Morality in the Theatre of Mark Ravenhill," says Ravenhill's characters are "Enslaved to commerce." David Alderson's 2010 article, "Postgay drama: sexuality, narration and history in the plays of Mark Ravenhill" lampoons "the extent to which sex has become a financial transaction." Characters consume sex with whoever they meet, wherever, and under all conditions and have tremendous loss as an aftermath of their lust. In a recent article entitled, "Casual sexual relationships: Identifying definitions for one nightstands, booty calls, fuck buddies, and friends with benefits," Jocelyn J. Wentland and Elke Reissing argue that "casual sexual relationships (CSRs) are common forms of sexual encounters among young adults" (167-177). Like a hurricane which tears everything on its path and leaves a pile of rubbish, the characters of Ravenhill and Kane lose their humanity as they sexually bruise each other, leaving behind pain, blood, and death as they consume or tear everything on their path to excessive lust and loss. While it is true that "in-yer-face playwrights use direct, filthy language [and] words like "fuck" and "cunt" figure prominently in their plays [and]...transgresses boundaries and challenges moral values" (Basabe), writers merely capturing the moral decadence that besets their modern world.

Works Cited

- Basabe, E. Alejandro. "In Yer Face. The reception of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* on the British stage of the nasty nineties. 1995-2001". *Journal of Language Studies* 4.3 (summer 2020): 1-26. Print.
- David Alderson's "Postgay drama: sexuality, narration and history in the plays of Mark Ravenhill". *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13.1 (2003): 82.
- De Vos, Jozef. "Ravenhill's Wilde Game." *Crucible of Cultures: Anglophone Drama at the Dawn of a New Millennium*. Ed. Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi. New York: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2002. 47-55. Print.
- Horan, Thomas. "Myth and Narrative in Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*." *Modern*

Lust and Loss in Ravenhill's Shopping and F*ing & Kane's Blasted: Troubling Trends in a New Culture***

- Drama* 55.2 (Summer 2012): 251-266. Print.
- Jo, Lindsay. 'Partying hard', 'partying sometimes' or 'shopping': young workers' socializing patterns and sexual, alcohol and illicit drug risk taking." *Critical Public Health* 13.1 (2003): 1-14. Print.
- Kane, Sarah. *Blasted & Phaedra's Love*. London: Methuen, 1995. Print.
- Kostić, Milena. "Pop Culture in Mark Ravenhill's Plays *Shopping and Fucking* and *Faust is Dead*." *Brno Studies in English* 37.1 (2011): 161-172. Print.
- Kuti, Elizabeth. "Tragic Plots from Bootle to Baghdad." *Contemporary Theatre Review*. 18.4 (2008): 457-469. Print.
- Kramer, Mimi. "Three for the Show." *Time*. 150.5 (1997): 70-72. Ebsco. 17 May 2008
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=9707302967&site=ehost-live>>.
- Ompad, C. Danielle et Al. "'Men Who Purchase Sex, Who Are They? An Interurban Comparison.'" *Journal Of Urban Health: Bulletin Of The New York Academy Of Medicine [J Urban Health]* 90.6 (Dec 2013): 1166-80. Print.
- Ravenhill, Mark. *Shopping & Fucking*. London: Methuen, 1996. Print.
- Schnierer, Peter Paul. "Coward, Orton, Ravenhill and the Decline of the Unsayable." *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* 15.2 (2008): 121-134. Print.
- Swager, Roger. "Evolution and Applications of the term consumerism: Theme and Variations." *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* 28.2 (Winter 1994): 347-360. Print.
- Svich, Caridad. "Commerce and Morality in the Theatre of Mark Ravenhill." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13.1 (2003): 81-95. Print.
- Varman, Rohit and Russell W. Belk. "Consuming postcolonial shopping malls." *Journal of Marketing Management* 28.1-2 (Feb 2012): 62-84. Print.
- Wentland, Jocelyn J and Reissing, Elke. "Casual sexual relationships: Identifying definitions for one nightstands, booty calls, fuck buddies, and friends with benefits." *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 23.3 (2014): 167-177. Print.