

Analysis of that face by polly stenhham



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

That Face is a Post-Modernist play that first premiered in London, in 2007.

The play was written by Polly Stenham and was written in the style of Realism. *That Face* is considered a “ Realistic play”, however, there are also some underlying elements of Freudian ideologies, as seen in the Psychological Realism, as well as elements from Pinteresque. When you delve deep within the play, there are many Freudian images of repressed desires behind the relationship between the mother and son, Martha and Henry, as well as a few other symbols. The use of the different Pinter pauses within the play help create more tension and anxiety. This essay will examine each of these isms while providing a literary analysis for the play.

The play is about a dysfunctional family that is torn apart by the drug and alcohol addiction that the mother Martha has. They are also dealing with the fact that their father abandoned them to start a new life with a new family.

The children are then left to become the responsible ones in the family since the parents are lacking this quality. The play follows the protagonist, Henry who is being manipulated by Martha, who is the antagonist of the play.

Henry is wanting nothing more than to help his mother get better, but he also wants to have his own life and feel like he has a purpose in life. He does this by constantly caring for his mother, but also taking a risk by sleeping with a girl and not coming home one night, leaving Martha to fend for herself that night. However, Mia, his sister, wants Henry to understand that taking care of their mother is not his responsibility and that it's their father's decision to do what is best for their mother. The school calls their father because Mia got in trouble. She is going to tell her father the truth once he gets there so he can see for himself if he thinks Martha needs help resulting

in the family to become very broken and causes chaos until Martha decides to voluntarily go, which gives Mia the chance to step up and take the motherly role and take care of Henry.

The reason *That Face* is written in a “Realistic” fashion is that the play focuses on things that happen in the real world. In the real world, families deal with divorces all the time and the aftermath that comes with the divorce. Children are usually the ones that tend to suffer the most, and this play showcases the hardships that the children are dealing with, due to their family being broken. Realism is when the playwright is wanting to focus on human behavior and give the audience in a sense a reflection of what they may experience in their respective lives. For example, at the beginning of the play, we see a rebellious teenager, Mia, getting into trouble at her school for drugging a classmate of hers. Now, not everyone will be able to relate exactly to this situation. However, they might be able to relate to the rebellious stage of teenagers, and for them to get into trouble at school. Throughout the play, there are many examples of human behavior that many people relate too. One reviewer named Lucy Avery pointed out how people can see themselves in the play. “However, Stenham also says that she felt the audience at the Royal Court had not seen themselves on the stage in this way -a reminder to us all that if you get the right audience in front of a story that directly speaks to them, you’ve got the chance at a very successful play.” (Avery 2015).

When it comes to dialogue in plays that are representative of Realism, it’s usually very boring and dull and doesn’t seem to create much interest in conflict. However, this type of dialogue is good for revealing what the

character is about. For example, the way Martha speaks within the text lets us know how mentally unstable she is. She speaks with a childlike state of mind. She also has moments where she speaks complete nonsense, which helps us see how bad her addiction has caused her to dwindle into a dark hole. The dialogue in this play also does a good job of depicting conversations we may hear in an everyday situation, but also shows the struggles that families can face. We do see some Freudian imagery being used with the dialogue, which ties into the Psychological Realism, and Pinteresque. This paper will go further into depth about those images that are depicted within the text

These plays usually reflect what society and culture the play are set in. Most audience members can relate to these types of settings which allows the audience to be submerged in the play's atmosphere. This play is about an upper-middle-class family, that can afford a fancy nice house. Even though they can afford a nice place, the house is a mess that helps display the chaotic relationship that is going on with the family. The setting takes place in London, in a few different places. It starts off at a boarding school, where Mia and her friend Izzy are doing a hazing ritual. Stenham wrote the play to appeal to the middle-class audience, as well as the younger generation. At the Royal Court where the play first premiered, Dominic Cooke who runs the place says, " he said he wanted to address his key, middle-class audiences." (Billen 2008). Polly Stenham wanted to show how the upper-class people truly live. Many plays didn't show the reality of how people actually live, and this play was a way to showcase how people actually live in situations that are written in her play. According to Burnside's interview with Polly Stenham,

Stenham said “ I wanted to see something like that. I’d been going to the theatre since I was about eight and seen so many brilliant plays about people in quite destitute situations, but I noticed that I was always watching them with people wearing pearls. I thought there was a degree of voyeurism to that, I’d yet to see somebody turn savage on that class. It didn’t seem right.” (Burnside 2009). For Stenham to depict the play in such a setting, helps let the audience really connect with the play.

Looking at the style of Psychological Realism, it’s as if it’s a pinball of emotions just waiting to explode from your subconscious. The play had many parallels to that of things Polly Stenham experienced when she was growing up. Her parents divorced when she was young, and she attended boarding school. Her father was nothing like Hugh because her father was very caring, and she was very close to him. She wanted to mirror some of the things that actually occurred in her life, but she also wanted to focus on mental illness because it fascinated her. Stenham’s writing is really focusing on the human psyche of those who are suffering from addiction and those around the person with the addiction and how they are affected by it.

The play follows four people, but this paper will be focusing on the inner world of the protagonist and the antagonist, who are both struggling from Martha’s mental illness and addiction. The playwright didn’t give a back story as to why Martha has been spiraling down into a deep depression and why she uses alcohol and pills as her scapegoat. It’s almost as if the playwright is leaving that detail out to create a much more complicated atmosphere within the play. When looking at Psychological Realism, characters who turn to drinking or drugs are usually drinking to escape

something. In order to figure out what a character's interior world is like, you have to probe the thoughts of the characters to see why they act the way they do. So, when we look at Martha, we have to look into the things that make her character tick. Martha is a very complicated character right from the beginning when we are first introduced to her. She wakes up from a night of a drunken stupor and things that happened that are not really discussed, we are only aware that some nonsense must have happened or was said that upset Henry because he was upset with her when he wakes up. This is when we first see how bad her alcohol addiction is. There is a part when Henry calls Martha out about her state of mind when she gets so drunk so doesn't remember anything.

Henry: I find that a sick justice. Whenever this happens, I wake up remembering it. Remembering everything you said, and you wake up weird and optimistic.

Martha: Please –

Henry: You can't really be sorry. Not if you don't properly remember.
(Stenham 20; Act 1. 2).

This quote is a good example of how Martha is drinking away her troubles because she doesn't want to deal with reality.

That Face has much Freudian imagery that is used to express desire as well as the fears and anxieties the characters all face. One of these images is the use of the word "soldier" that Martha calls Henry. This image of a soldier keeps being repeated throughout the play. I think that Martha is using this

phrase towards Henry because he has been there for her when her husband left them and wasn't there for her when she needed someone. She has in a sense idolized Henry in being her protector and hero. This admiration also leads to her dark desire of having sexual tension for her son. For example, Martha. Only a glass slipper will fit...

Henry keeps trying to put the shoes on her feet. While his head is at her waist level she hoops more necklaces over his neck.

War spoils for my soldier. He glitters. Look how he glitters.

She kisses his face. (Stenham 75; Act 1. 8).

Some of Martha's repressed desires are not just within the words that she speaks, but with some of the actions, she does to Henry. There are many instances that show how she touches or holds him with such perversion that it gets really weird and makes the audience uncomfortable. Andrew Billen writes in his review, " We come upon the pair after a wild night of something or other and there is a strong suggestion of incest, although it later turns out that their Oedipal relationship has not gone that far." (Billen 2008). There is an instance when Martha has become jealous and scared of losing Henry after she finds out that he slept with Izzy. She can't hold back her repressed feelings and ends up giving him a hickey on his neck, to match the one he had gotten from Izzy. Even though Martha has these desires for Henry, he doesn't seem to reciprocate those feelings back for her. He only wants to nurture and care for his mother. Martha's fears are becoming too hard to suppress and she's starting to slip.

Another element of Psychological Realism that Martha's character is showing is her fear of losing Henry. This fear has made her stay in a childish state of mind. She doesn't want to get help from a mental health clinic because she knows she wouldn't be able to see Henry anymore. She's also feeling threatened with the fact that Mia has shown up, she doesn't want to share Henry with anyone, and she feels Mia is getting in the way of that. Martha also tells the family once Hugh shows up that she tried to get help from him, but he didn't want to help her at all. He would rather send her to a cheap mental hospital where no one would know who she is. Martha is not the only one who is feeling fear. Mia is afraid for Henry because she has watched Henry throw his life away just to take care of their mother. She wants nothing more than Henry to leave their dad to handle her. She wants Henry to let go of the thought that he is responsible for Martha and that he should live a normal life. In the text, Mia tries to reason with Henry about how worried she is for his health. " You tried. You really tried, and I'll always love you for that. But she's worse. You can't handle it. Look at the state of you..." (Stenham 56; Act 1. 5). Mia is aware that Henry has been under a lot of pressure because of their mother, and she just wants to see him happy. However, Mia is not aware of how co-dependent Martha and Henry really are on each other.

Henry doesn't start to show fear and anxiety until Mia tells him that Hugh is coming home because she got kicked out of school. The instant he hears Hugh's name, it immediately strikes fear in him. He has a fear of losing his mother. There are many instances within the play where he expresses how much he doesn't want to lose her, and he would do anything to help her. He

even becomes aggressive about her wellbeing to his father, Hugh. The fear of losing his mother is beginning to make him become mentally unstable, as we see this happen by the end of the play. There is a part where Henry comes back from having a fight with Martha, he comes back to apologize and bring her flowers. His worst fear has started to become a reality when he realizes that his mother is gone, mentally. After finding a can of open cat food, he realizes she's not well and has been eating it. Henry's mental state is being to waver, especially when he starts to panic that he may have lost his mother already to her illness. For example, Henry pleads for Martha to let him help her get the help she needs.

Henry. So I can go and know you're safe. So I can look Dad in the eye when he comes. So I can know that I helped you somehow. Please. This one thing. (*Urgently*.) I don't want you to get sectioned. I won't be able to visit you. It'll be like before, remember? I don't know where they'll take you. I don't know if they'll let you out.

Beat.

If you volunteer yourself, if you come with me, then you can leave. Then you can choose. Please. Please. I'm fucking begging you. (Stenham 66; Act 1. 6).

Another thing that links this to Psychological Realism is when Henry gets drunk. Henry has used the trope of getting drunk to finally spill out all the emotions and feelings he has suppressed. If you think about subtext, you're saying one thing, but you really mean something completely different. Most of the time, a character doesn't know what that something really means, because it's coming from within their subconscious mind. One rule to the

psychological realism in the play is that the characters are repressing certain feelings and because they have been repressed, they can't be understood. Henry's subconscious feelings are just spewing out of him when he gets drunk with Martha, and he doesn't have a filter to suppress his emotions anymore. For example, Henry is addressing everyone in the room, about how much they have affected him.

Henry. None of you understand. Do you? None of you. Five years. I've tried. And tried. None of you fucking understand. Anything. About it. All the blood she's kicked. From. My. Heart. And now you piss on me too. You piss on all I've done. I might as well piss on me. (Stenham 91; Act 1. 8).

At this point, Henry has completely cracked and lashes out at the family. When Henry defiles himself by urinating on himself in front of everyone, it's almost as if he is now reverting back into the childish state that Martha was in because she realizes the damage she has caused to Henry and even Mia, then she decides to go voluntarily to a clinic. This makes Henry break and becomes dependent on Mia at the end.

When looking at the elements of Pinteresque, there is usually a long awkward drawn-out silence that usually causes a sense of fear and anxiety. The use of language as a means of communication has lost its purpose and words are often void of meaning. For example, there is a point where Martha has started talking to herself, in a sense that she has become schizophrenic, and even treats Henry as if he was a stranger to her:

Martha. Yes. I start Monday.

Pause

Excuse me. Who are you?

Henry. Your son, Henry.

Martha. That's funny, I did have a son, called Harry, actually. Well, he died, about five hours ago. I'm a little upset. So if you would just— (Stenham 60; Act 1. 6).

There are many instances of Pinter Pauses that are shown throughout the play. Some of these pauses are pregnant pauses that cause tension in the room to almost be unbearable. There are also some ellipses pauses in between words that really build the tension between characters that the words are being spoken too. This comment about the play really shows how powerful the use of the elements Pinteresque style is within the play. Then there are some instances where there are long drawn out pauses to give more of a dramatic moment. Tim Smith from The Baltimore Sun had something to say about the tension that was on stage from Center Stage's performance of *That Face*, " Josh Tobin taps into Henry's neuroses with impressive nuance and brings startling intensity to the climactic scenes." (Smith 2017).

In the end, looking back on all of the different modernist ism's we reflected on, there were two isms that I really felt Polly used as inspiration to create *That Face*. Polly really wanted to show a dysfunctional family, torn apart by substance abuse, and mental illness. In order to really make this play provocative, she utilized using different elements from the different ism's to

really bring the story to a creative tension-filled drama that exposes many underlying elements of Freudian imagery and metaphors that are intertwined within Psychological Realism and Pinteresque.

Works Cited

- Anna Burnside. “ Letting rip at the middle classes; POLLY STENHAM ; Toxic behaviour by the bourgeoisie was overdue a savaging, says the young playwright – and she’s only just begun to explore it”. The Sunday Times (London), October 4, 2009. [https://advance-lexis-com.proxy-bc.researchport.umd.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:7WSJ-YHC0-YBWN-K3XR-00000-00&context=1516831](https://advance.lexis-com.proxy-bc.researchport.umd.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:7WSJ-YHC0-YBWN-K3XR-00000-00&context=1516831). Accessed May 12, 2019.
- Avery, Lucy. “‘A Play Is a Backward Explosion’, That Face by Polly Stenham, December’s Playwright #12newplaywrightsin12months.” *Lucy Avery Writes...* , 16 Dec. 2015, lucyaverywrites.com/2015/12/16/a-play-is-a-backward-explosion-that-face-by-polly-stenham-decembers-playwright-12newplaywrightsin12months/.
- Billen, Andrew. “ Truly a Middle-Class Act.” *America’s Current Affairs & Politics Magazine* , www.newstatesman.com/theatre/2008/05/mia-henry-school-amplifies.
- Smith, Tim. “‘That Face’ at Center Stage Looks at Ultra-Dysfunctional Family.” *Baltimoresun.com* , 23 Apr. 2017, www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/arts/artsmash/bs-ae-that-face-review-20170421-story.html.
- Stenham, Polly. *That Face* . Faber & Faber, 2014.