

**Literary Interpretation of Traumatic Experience of War in
Karen Malpede's Prophecy**

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Abstract

Prophecy depicts the traumatic experience of Jeremy, an American soldier served in Iraq. This paper proves very important points. The first one is that trauma is best registered in drama because drama involves acting and it is through performance that witnessing is achieved. The second one is that the play shows that not only those who participate in war may be traumatized but also those who may be far away from the battlefield. The third one is that literature in general and drama in particular achieve justice when law fails to do so. Thus we believe that by the death of Jeremy, drama achieves justice for Jeremy commits a heinous crime that the American juridical system may not punish him for it.

Key words: Trauma, Drama, War, Jeremy, Justice.

Greek drama shows us that victory at war also has a disastrous effect on the psyches of the heroes. The plays about the Trojan War elaborate this effect. Agamemnon, for example, is slain by his wife upon his return home for his previous crime of killing his daughter as a sacrifice for the ships might move. Although Greek women were not combat veterans, war was seen as equally destructive. Contemporary playwrights also express such effects on different people whether they are combat veterans or people who live far away from the battle fields.

Karen Malpede's *Prophecy*¹ (2008) talks about Jeremy Thrasher, a young working class man who joined the army to get money to go to college. But he was traumatized by his experience in Iraq. His teacher Sarah directs Jeremy through a speech by Tiresias, the blind prophet in "*Antigone*". It seems that Jeremy is unable to complete the monologue without flipping out, due to a traumatic experience while he was serving in Iraq. Sarah is drawn to this young man because he reminds her of her old friend Lukas, who died in Vietnam. Meanwhile, Sarah's husband, Alan the head of a refugee relief organization is visited unexpectedly by Mariam. Through a couple of flashbacks we know that Alan had an affair with his assistant, Hala, who carries and delivers him a daughter (Mariam) who she rears in Lebanon. Hala in one of her speeches expresses the horrors of war and its destructive effects. At the end of the play, Mariam and Jeremy talk to each other and he explains his experience of war. Toward the end of the play, Alan comes in to announce that Jeremy has shot himself. The playwright attempts to dramatize how different people are affected by war. Among the characters are victims, participants, opponents, and avoiders of war and they come from a variety of backgrounds.

First of all, trauma comes from the ancient Greek meaning wound. It has been associated with physical injury until the end of the nineteenth century, and the concept started to shift from a physical blow to that of a shocking event, the impact of which is felt within the nerves and mind of the survivor. According to the American Psychological Association, trauma is, "*an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Long term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relations and even physical symptoms like headaches and nausea.*"² Ana Douglass believes that, "*there is no special kind of event that provokes a traumatized reaction; nor is there a universal sensitivity to stress that produces uniform reactions to similar events.*"

³ In her famous book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as , "*an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which*

the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena." ⁴

Dominic LaCapra states that traumatic events numb the senses to the moment of impact and therefore they cannot be registered at the time of their occurrence. It is only after a period of latency that the impact of the event is felt.⁵ Freud refers to the repetition of traumatic experience in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. He uses Tasso's story to show how trauma repeats itself through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his will. Tancred, the hero in Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*;

*Unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.*⁶

Caruth analyzes why and how Freud makes use of a literary text- the story of Tasso- to explain the concept of traumatic repetition. She states that trauma seems to be much more than pathology, or a simple illness of a wounded psyche. She adds that trauma is:

Always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and language. ⁷

The true power of trauma, as Caruth explains, is due to the fact that the person who falls victim to traumatic pathology does so precisely to the extent that he or she fails to be present to the event in the moment of its occurrence. Caruth points out that because the event was not assimilated as it occurred; it only comes into being belatedly. She adds: "*the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time*" ⁸

As for the representation of the traumatic experience, Caruth believes in the difficulty, or even the impossibility of an adequate representation of a traumatic experience. She proposes that

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder poses a limit case not only for psychiatry, but also for historical and literary analysis. She offers the following definition of **PTSD** (Post traumatic Stress Disorder) :

*a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.*⁹

Peggy Phelan, in the introduction to *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, expresses the same view that Trauma is beyond representation saying that, “*trauma is untouchable [...] it cannot be represented. The symbolic cannot carry it: trauma makes a tear in the symbolic network itself*”¹⁰. This is not to deny the possibility that traumatic memories can be triggered through the witnessing of representations which, in themselves, may be read or received as traumatic. Hans-Thies Herman asserts that traumatic events “*shatter the construction of self*”.¹¹ Such assertion allows us to begin to plot the line between performance and trauma. So it would seem that theatre, more than any other art form, is perfectly placed to attempt a dialogue with, if not a representation of, trauma. Karen Malpede gives the reason for that saying that, “*[b]ecause theatre takes place in public and involves the movement of bodies across a stage, theatre seems uniquely suited to portray the complex interpersonal [and intrapersonal] realities of trauma*”.¹²

Scholars working in the field of trauma studies have concentrated on traumatic narratives but have paid very little attention to theatre, despite the obvious dramatic nature of the nightmares and flashbacks that constitute traumatic memory. Dominick LaCapra speaks of “*acting out*” and “*working through*” trauma.¹³ Mieke Bal says “*Re-enactments of traumatic experience take the form of drama, not narrative, and are thereby dependent on the time frame of the 'parts' scripted in the drama*”¹⁴

Karen Malpede examines the relationship between the historical traumas of the twentieth century and contemporary theatre. She claims that “*Listening to the victims of the century's rage produces a new way of seeing, called witnessing, compelled by an unflinching ability (the opposite of psychic numbing) to face the enormity of genocidal suffering and from within this terrible knowledge to somehow offer up surprising new, unsentimental affirmations of the*

human spirit" ¹⁵ She calls for a theatre of witness that," dramatizes moments of speaking the unspeakable, hearing the unbearable". ¹⁶

The play starts with Jeremy Thrasher Augury as he stops his teacher Sarah Golden on the lip of the stage telling her that he has looked up the meaning of his name Augury. Jeremy says that she has taught them to know every word before they act but he expresses his reluctance to do his role because there are no books in his house and no one in his family reads the Greeks. He insists that learning comes through books. Sarah comments:

Sarah: You know what, Jeremy; it's love. That's all it is. Forget about not having books. Give yourself over. The language is your lover and you are in bed murmuring to her, or him, for that matter. Once You love, the language opens itself up. You fall in. You start to vibrate with sense.
(185)

Sarah Golden does not realize that Jeremy's reluctance is part of his unrest that stems from his experience of war. Miranda Cruz, another student, comes to tell her teacher that she is ready to do her choral speech from Antigone. Throughout her performance, she complains that she works hard and she has a stomachache that makes her unable to sleep. Then Jeremy starts doing his role (Tiresias's speech) which is also from Antigone. The stage direction tells us that the presence of this young man (Jeremy) has moved Sarah more than she knows. While she starts writing on a half of her yellow pad, she speaks what is inside her mind. She has been snapped back into memory, "*Jeremy Thrasher grabbed me, like a hand from under the earth. I saw Lukas the minute Jeremy Thrasher started to speak.*"(188). The following dialogue shows how Sarah and Jeremy continue to speak in unison and their words seem to be in a contrapuntal duet. Sarah starts to remember her lover who has been killed in Vietnam war and Jeremy reads his part from Antigone:

*Sarah: The night we lay on the rug after love, and started
talking about the war.*

Jeremy: But no fire,

The god in the fire never blazed.

Not from those offering... over the embers.

*Sarah: Whole villages burning up, babies, charred,
In the arms of their mothers, because of our bombs,*

The speech continues till Jeremy starts to gather force, stand, trembling as he turns to the mirror, he continues:

*Jeremy: and so the gods are deaf to our prayers, they spurn
the offerings in our hands, the flame of holy flesh.
No birds cry out an omen clear and true_
They're gorged with the murdered victim's blood
and fat. (189)*

At this moment Jeremy is struck again by PTSD so he grabs the chair and flings it at the mirror which shatters into pieces. He runs from the room. Sarah is shocked by the violence of Jeremy and she not only has to help him deal with the trauma he suffers from but also has to re-examine her own past, her relationship with Lukas Brightman, a former student who fought in Vietnam and later killed. Sarah and Lucas had been lovers and Jeremy's struggles bring Sarah face to face with recollections and emotions from early 1970s.

After the accident Miranda meets Jeremy. The stage direction tells us that Jeremy is eerily calm and he is split off from what he has just done. Sarah comes in and the following dialogue reveals that Jeremy does not realize what has happened:

Sarah: Jeremy, What happened in there?

Jeremy: What'd you do to your hand?

Sarah: I was picking up the glass.

Jeremy: Glass?

Sarah: What do you think?

Jeremy: I guess I don't know.

Sarah: You threw a chair.

Jeremy jumps up.

Jeremy: At you? Not at you. I wouldn't do that.....

Sarah: Not at me. Not at anyone, Thank God. At the mirror.

Vickroy states that being confronted with a traumatic experience, victims do not comprehend what has happened to them. And what the mind cannot grasp, it does not integrate into memory.¹⁷ The dialogue proves that once Jeremy is confronted with PTSD, he is unable to comprehend what he does because his mind cannot grasp it and thus it does not integrate into his memory. Jeremy, in a later scene and in an answer to Sarah's question of what happens to him, confesses that as he does his speech of the blind prophet, "*And that's when it hits me, shit, fuck, like a truck, it hits*" (196). So, Jeremy describes that the traumatic stress strikes like a truck stripping him the ability to live up to the present and to comprehend what he does at the moment.

Earlier Sarah is also traumatized when she starts to touch Jeremy's hair unconsciously thinking of her former lover:

Jeremy: You touched me.

Sarah: Your hair.

Jeremy: My hair, face, so what, you touched.

Sarah: I'm sorry.

Jeremy: Sorry! I guess.

Sarah: Sorry, yes.

Jeremy: That's not what I thought.

Sarah: I was thinking of someone else.

Jeremy: Great. The husband in the next room.

Sarah: Not him.(194)

Alan, Sarah's husband, has realized his wife's obsession with the boy, "*You are obsessed by that boy. You have always been obsessed.*"(191). After a long silence, Alan starts to snore and the doorbell rings. It is three o'clock in the morning. Jeremy comes to apologize. He confesses that he has not been able to sleep. In his discussion of what has happened, he states that he has freaked out and he gives a detailed explanation in which he discusses the idea of sin and forgiveness:

Jeremy: ... I was doing the speech of the prophet, see Tiresias's speech, the blind guy, and he's giving this prophecy when all of a sudden, he's saying that the fat isn't burning, that the altars are glutted with the fat thigh bones smoking, that the gods aren't hearing.... They won't take our offerings. (194)

The idea here is that Tiresias expresses gods' anger for they do not accept any offering. What frightens Jeremy is not that he does not believe in God's forgiveness, "I was brought up to believe in forgiveness. In redemption." (196), but the idea that God can't bear to listen, "How it is when the gods can't bear to listen. They can't bear to hear anymore. They've already heard it all. You can't ask for forgiveness. The gods aren't hearing. They're fed up with us, sick. We're cut off. I got scared." (ibid). Jeremy reveals what is hidden inside his mind. Though he believes in forgiveness, yet he is skeptic whether God will listen to his appeal and forgive him for his heinous crime he commits in Iraq.

A couple of long flashbacks, we discover that Alan once has an affair with his assistant, Hala. His wife, Sarah becomes infertile due to an illegal abortion performed years before. Hala carries and delivers him a daughter, Mariam, who she rears in Lebanon. Alan realizes his dream of becoming a father through Hala. But Alan does not meet Mariam. When Sarah first knows of this affair, she becomes furious and sinks onto the rug remembering her first love Lukas when they protest against the secret invasion of Cambodia. Lukas is another victim of war:

Sarah: "It's okay," Lukas said, "Whatever happens to me it will be fine. There is no time for personal happiness, now," He learned to talk that way at Columbia." Little kids are being napalmed. This shit has to stop. "I'll give up Alan for you. I'll call him in Cambridge right now." I reached for the phone. But Lukas was only nineteen. He was more frightened of me than of Vietnam. (203)

Charles, the dean of the acting school, decides to put Jeremy Thrasher somewhere else and Sarah wants him to be in her class. Charles gives his justification for his decision:

This Thrasher boy has had something stirred up, Not, I think by the Greeks. When that happens, We are no longer effective teachers; pedagogy flies out the window...mirrors become shattered. Next time, a student could be harmed. Then, I could not give your class back to you, Sarah, or any class, for that matter. (205)

This quotation reveals an indirect accusation to Sarah that in one way or another she is responsible for what happens to the boy for Charles thinks that Jeremy is not stirred up by the Greeks and at the same time Charles also fails to guess that the boy may be traumatized due to his experience of war. In another memory scene which belongs to the year 1982, Alan and Sarah discuss his affair with Hala:

Alan: Hala is pregnant again.

Sarah: How Abrahamic, Alan, really, truly, how profound. Ishmael, is that what you'll call it? You can start the cycle over again. (208)

In the next scene Jeremy tries to read his lines but he has trouble remembering them. He cannot go on. Something stops him. He cries out, "*Shit! I'm not into it. It's terrible, isn't it?*"(213). Sarah tells him that it is pretty bad then he tries to find justification to what happens to him because he knows the lines but he feels he has lost them. He feels he does not have them anymore. Sarah realizes that there is something hidden that terrifies him. Sarah tries to make him relax and she goes to him and begins to rub his shoulders. Jeremy gets better and better and he starts to speak so real that it takes him back to the moment he has been hiding. He explains to Sarah how he asks the Haji(an Iraqi citizen) to show him the IED(improvised explosive devices):

*Jeremy: ... I had my gun, I took my gun. Talk or I'll blow
your fucking brains out. I kicked that bastard until
he bled. Where 's the fucking IED?*

Sarah: Jeremy.

*Jeremy: Where's the bomb, rag head? Tell me, I'll let you
Go. I'll let your sorry ass live. The motherfucker
grabs at my leg. I take my rifle, hit him hard.
His jaw breaks. Blood spurts out and bone.*

.....

Jeremy: Shut the fuck up. It doesn't stop. I can't take my hand off. I don't know she is pregnant. I see pieces of baby fall out. He's down on his knees, begging and we're crying. We are, all of us crying. My gun is on the floor next to her. Her hair comes loose from that scarf. Her black hair spreads out on the floor. He's kneeling, stroking her hair. (214)

Later in the same scene, Jeremy meets Mariam who has come to visit her father. She is dressed in jeans with a hijab on her head. When Jeremy sees her, he jumps, terrified of the woman in the hijab. Sarah comforts him that the girl is her husband's daughter.

Sarah, in a flashback, is seen talking to her former lover, " *Lukas, What did you see in Vietnam? What where you going to say? Who did this to you, Lukas? Please, tell me.*" (222). Sarah said that Lukas was trembling and she heard him roaring inside like the ocean, " *Lukas slumped in his chair. His fingers fell from mine. He was gone.*" (223)

Sarah adds, " *I couldn't tell him I carried his child... two weeks later, Lukas was dead. Lukas used himself up trying to speak. Lukas wanted me to know.*" (ibid). The question is what Lukas wants Sarah to know. The answer seems to be very simple. Lukas is traumatized by the war. He is another victim of it.

In her meeting with her father, Mariam expresses her hope to know him. Alan says that he is still an executive director. She starts to inquire the noble work of her father and the destructive role of war that is waged in the Middle East, " *The good people in the United States continue to think they are good because of the work you do here helping refugees.. The more refugees your country makes, the more people like you try to help.*" (227). She adds outrageously, " *Why is it always Muslims who must die? Why does the balance never tip the other way? There is a bomb ticking right now inside my bag. Please answer soon.*" (228). Alan tries to comfort her stating that her grandfather never wasted his time in revenge but he kept saving the lives of people from Nazis. Mariam seems to be greatly affected by the Lebanese civil war.

In another memory scene, Sarah and Hala talk through mobiles. Hala speaks of the horrors of war and its destructive affect on people. According to Hala, different people are traumatized by war:

There's a concept the therapists have, secondary traumatization, it happens from the things you hear things that the people tell you. They tell you and you see it all in front of you." (235)

So Hala wants to say that traumatic experience is never restricted to those who participate in battlefield but it also may happen to those who hears, listens, or watch the horrible scenes of war on TV.

Towards the end of the play, Mariam and Jeremy talk to each other. Alan comes to the scene and he tries to admit the idea of forgiveness, " *We must, in order to live. Forgive. Ourselves, too. That's the one thing we must do.*"(245). Jeremy's answer reflects his fear of the idea that there are things that cannot be forgiven by others, " *Look. I'm a Catholic. I haven't been to confession for years. I feel like, I don't know. There are things no one forgives.*"(ibid).

Jeremy explains to Mariam his experience of war and the image of people the army tries to depict in their minds, " *They tell us everyone is armed and dangerous. They tell us all the women have bombs under their robes. They just look pregnant. That they'll blow themselves up just to kill us. They tell us not to trust.*"(246). Jeremy pulls off her hijab and tells her that she is very beautiful. He runs his hands through her hair but Mariam frees herself and stands, " *I won't listen. I don't want to know. Go to your priest if you need forgiveness. Go ask your government for help.*" (246) Then Mariam pulls the hijab out of his hands and asks him, " *Why is it an Arab who must forgive?*" (ibid), and she exits leaving Jeremy completely undone:

Jeremy: Forgive, please. Fore, but bode, that has the feeling, Foul, yes, deaf. Splatter and burst. Cut off, gorged on the flesh. With such beautiful hair. Cracked jaw bones glisten, No, Please. Stop. No, not listening, glutted with blood, not good, not good enough." (ibid).

In the final scene, Sarah remembers her former lover, Lukas, who is seen across the stage. Alan comes in and looks at her. He seems to be unable to speak. She guesses something wrong has happened:

Sarah: No. Don't, Alan. Alan: I'm so sorry, my darling. That was the police on the phone. Jeremy Thrasher shot himself this morning...A note pinned to his shirt: "I'm not good enough. Forgive." (248)

The death of Jeremy marks the victory of the literary justice where legal justice is sometimes inadequate or insufficient to the task of doing justice. Shoshanna Felman believes that literature has a critical and vital role to play in the age of historical traumas and trials because literature—like the law, but in its own terms—is committed to the notion of justice. Felman suggests:

What indeed is literary justice, as opposed to legal justice? How does literature do justice to the trauma in a way the law does not, or cannot? Literature is a dimension of concrete embodiment and a language of infinitude that, in contrast to the language of the law, encapsulates not closure but the trauma to be closed that literature does justice.¹⁸

The playwright succeeds in showing the audience how trauma is best registered and witnessed. It is through performance that Jeremy is seen struck by PTSD as if he is struck by thunder and fails to be present to the moment. At the same time, the play shows how Jeremy cannot remember what he has done when he is struck by PTSD. The play also shows that other characters, who are far away from the battlefield, also may suffer from trauma due to their watching or hearing the horror of war.

Notes

1. Karen Malpede '*Prophecy*' in *Acts of War: Iraq and Afghanistan in Seven Plays*. Karen Malpede, Michael Messina, and Bob Shuman. Eds. Evanston, Illinois. Northwest University Press. 2011. All quotations are taken from this edition.

2. **<http://www.apa.org/topics/trauma>. 10-2-2014**
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6. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.
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9. Ibid, p,4.
10. Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public
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11. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans. by K.
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13. Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss." *Critical
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16. Ibid, p,301.

17. Laurie Vickroy. *Trauma and survival in Contemporary Fiction*. Charlottes- Ville,VA: The University of Virginia Press, p, 12. 2000.

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