

**Haunting Trauma: An Analysis of *Beside Herself*
by Sarah Daniels**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine how the concepts of trauma and hauntology intertwine each other in the play *Beside Herself* (1990) by Sarah Daniels – a British contemporary woman playwright.

Sarah Daniels's dramatic plays present the critique of patriarchy as well as the stereotypes and prejudices in contemporary societies (Godiwala 2003: 121). The subject matter of Daniels's plays is also the problem of violence and abuse towards women (Griffin 2000: 194-211).

The main reference for the analysis will be the portrayal of Eve – the inner self of the protagonist Eveline. Incorporating the theory of trauma, the newly developed concept of "trauma culture" (Wald 1995: 95), as well as the concepts of hauntology theory (Jacques Derrida's deconstructive *spectre* and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *phantom*) the analysis will concentrate on such factors as: trauma/haunting resulted from child sexual abuse, the figure of the ghost as a part of double personality, the ghost as the personification of traumatic experience not only for the individual but also for the whole mankind and the way in which haunting trauma can involve the further life of the protagonist.

Keywords: *hauntology, spectre, phantom, trauma, memory.*

1. Introduction

The focal point in *Beside Herself* (1990) by Sarah Daniels is the female trauma resulted from sexual child abuse (Aston 2003: 40); however, throughout the play, traumatic memories can take forms that are closely connected to hauntology theory, such as Derrida's concept

of spectre developed in his *Spectres of Marx* (1994), that is “a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence and making established certainties vacillate” (Davis 2005, 376). The appearance of the spectre (that at some point may be similar to traumatic recurrent memories) may be difficult to accept, yet

Derrida calls on us to endeavour to speak and listen to the spectre, despite the reluctance inherited from our intellectual traditions and because of the challenge it may pose to them (Davis 2005: 377).

The individual’s attempts to deal with some traumatic experience as well as the appearance of spectre may meet the need to

redefine the existing rules, the object and method of study or deconstruct them, by probing into inconsistencies, challenges, ambiguities that appear when we try to apply them to a discussion of the spectral effect (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 2017: 10).

Just as traumatic recollections may appear unexpectedly in human’s psyche, also “haunting transforms the linear time of the calendar into a time of waiting and uncertainty, of not knowing who and when may arrive” (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 2017: 12).

Traumatic recollections may also take the form a phantom – the concept developed by psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok – that is “the presence of a dead ancestor in the living Ego, still intent on preventing its traumatic and usually shameful secrets from coming to light” (Davis 2005: 374). According to Abraham and Torok, the phantom’s aim is to “mislead the haunted subject and to ensure its secret remains shrouded in mystery” (Davis 2005: 374). Again in his remarks, Davis (2005: 378) points out that

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the secrets of Abraham's and Torok's lying phantoms are unspeakable in the restricted sense of being a subject of shame and prohibition. It is not at all that they cannot be spoken; on the contrary, they can and should be put into words so that the phantom and its noxious effects on the living can be exorcised.

Such an approach may also be useful in tackling the traumatic memories, according to which the possibility of the introduction of flexible memories during therapy can diminish the power of traumatic experience (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 178).

2. Trauma and its forms in *Beside Herself* - revisiting of archetypal models

In the *Prelude* of the play, Daniels presents the motive of collective trauma using the portrayal of some biblical female characters as the ancestors of guilt and shame for the future generations of women. Eve, the first woman created by God to accompany Adam and later seduced by the serpent, is thought to have sentenced the whole of mankind to a sinful life; Jezebel was told to popularise the cult of false gods among the Jews; Delilah contributed to Samson's decline of power; Lot's wife decided to turn into condemned city and became a pillar of salt as she objected to God's command¹. According to the biblical tradition, all these female characters are considered to be the reason for not only individual's, but also the whole generation's decline.

By setting those figures in a contemporary surrounding - they are in a supermarket, chatting with each other - Daniels tries to

¹ The descriptions of Old Testament figures based on *The Bible Gateway*:
<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-women-bible/Eve>;
<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-women-bible/Jezebel-No-1>;
<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-women-bible/Delilah>;
<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-women-bible/Lot-8217-s-Wife>.

establish a link between the contemporary womanhood and its Biblical (or even legendary) ancestors (Wald 2007: 117). From a psychoanalytic point of view, such presence of the *Old Testament* female characters might be considered as the Abraham and Torok's concept of phantom, as all these figures carry some secrets of being guilty. Such a perception of women's burden of guilt has remained until today, placing females as subordinate towards men in a patriarchal society. For centuries, women have been considered as silent, obedient creatures to their fathers, brothers and husbands; however, under the influence of the feminist movement, the contemporary women started to speak their own voice. Such a tendency is also present in Daniels' play, where the Biblical characters try to re-tell their stories, previously presented by men (cf Bakker 1996: 145-149). The symbolic scene in which they are cutting their hair might be considered as an attempt to get away from the stereotypical perception of their roles that were deeply perpetuated throughout history (cf Bakker 1996: 145-149). At the beginning, Eve stands that their stories are "The Burden of Guilt and the Two Years of Misrepresentation" (BH 97):

EVE. We spent an eternity condemned to wander these aisles alone (...).

DELILAH. (...) I was damned for being an evil castrating bitch. Because that's what everybody believes I am. But do they ever bother to try and imagine what it was like for me being married to a man for whom an afternoon's work was killing a few hundred people with the jaw-bone of a donkey?

MRS LOT. Come on, you must have done something.

DELILAH. It was his hair, weren't it? To cut a long story short - I did.

JEZEBEL. You didn't ask his permission, did you?

DELILAH. Don't you start. It really got on his nerves. It come half-way down his bum and it was always getting tangled up in his armpit when he was asleep. He was so strong, see, that

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if he woke up with a jerk he nearly yanked his own bloody head off. I done him a favour really. Now that you'd know it. (BH 98-99)

MRS LOT. Two strangers came to our home. And a mob of pimps and rapists gathered outside demanding access to them. Rather than offend the two guests who Lot had never laid eyes on before, he shouted out of the window to the mob that they could have our daughters instead, using as sales patter, the fact that they were both virgins. This is all totally forgotten. But s'pose Lot had got his own way, I'd have been powerless to stop them. (BH 101)

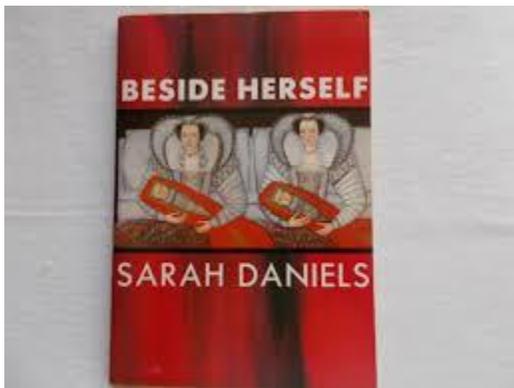
EVE. It was a snake but it didn't talk. Just being. That was my crime. When mankind gets found out he points at me. Her fault - seducer. Made from Adam, for Adam. His wife and his daughter - legitimizer of his will. (BH 102)

Here, the trauma held by future generations of women intertwines with the figure of Abraham and Torok's phantom, as "interpersonal and transgenerational consequences of silence" (Rand 1994: 168). According to Abraham (1994: 171), the phantom should be perceived as a "metapsychological" being, that "fosters our understanding and conceptualization of the transgenerational persistence of secrets, gaps and omissions, the transgenerational trauma and responsibility, as well as the sense of guilt caused by both keeping and revealing the past secrets" (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 2017: 10). The secrets and burden of guilt shared by biblical female characters, as they could not have been spoken through centuries, have also reflected in cultural trauma, as it became some sort of collective consciousness shared by other generations (Alexander 2004: 1, 5).

Those female figures also correspond strictly with Jacques Derrida's deconstructive concept of spectre, as that figure "seems to represent the conceptual and cognitive space between the past and the

future" (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 2017: 12) and its aim is to distort the relations between chronology, time and the past. Undoubtedly, the appearance of *Old Testament* characters in a contemporary surrounding (the supermarket) deforms time reference but its aim is to raise the issue of women's continuous responsibility for various aspects of family life (Aston 2003: 41). The appearance of the spectre may be difficult to accept, yet "Derrida calls on us to endeavour to speak and listen to the spectre, despite the reluctance inherited from our intellectual traditions and because of the challenge it may pose to them" (Davis 2005: 377). In that way, re-telling their stories by Eve, Jezebel and Mrs Lot might indicate the need to reject the established, patriarchal view on history and open up to different, possible meanings.

In *Beside Herself*, the concept of individual trauma is present in the protagonist's inner self – Eve, whose haunting presence epitomizes Evelyn's trauma of sexual child abuse. That "ghost" accompanies the protagonist at her every turn, yet Evelyn may be unaware of its presence. When Evelyn enters her father's house, saying "It's only me"



(BH 105), Eve seems to retort silently with her presence, which makes Evelyn "visibly shaken" (BH 105). Here, the supernatural character corresponds with Derrida's remarks of spectre, according to which it "never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back" (1994: 99). Moreover, the spectre's appearance

remains beyond the control of human mind and cannot be foreseen, as "this disturbance is not a singular occurrence, but a general

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mechanism—a principle perhaps—of the passing of time” (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 2017: 12).

From the very beginning, Evelyn’s reaction to her father is very bizarre and implies significant difficulties in their relation. From one hand, she acts with an utmost but distant courtesy towards her father; on the other, she acts like the machine that only performs her children’s duties and is not interested in any much intimate conversation. Such a strained and artificial atmosphere is even strengthened by Eve’s remarks during Evelyn’s conversation with her father:

GEORGE. (*pouring the tea*) I thought you’d like a cup of tea. (...)
EVELYN. No. (*nicely*) I’ve already had one thanks, dad. (...)
EVE. Thanks, Dad. Only me. Nobody. Nothing. (BH 105)

It is not recognizable at the beginning what sort of abuse Evelyn experienced in the past, but Eve seems to express all hidden emotions and thoughts of Evelyn:

GEORGE. (*hurt rather than angry*) I don’t care about shopping. I’d prefer a bit more of your company.
EVELYN. I know.
GEORGE. I’m not asking much.
EVE. (*sarcastic*) You’ve never given much. (...)
EVELYN. (*shakily*) It’s all right. It was only an accident. No real damage done.
GEORGE. (*sits down again, miserably*) Oh, God. I can’t bear getting old.
EVE. Then drop dead. (BH 108)

Considering Abraham and Torok’s concept of phantom, Eve personifies not only the taboo connected with Evelyn’s past traumatic experience, but also the inner side of her personality, which Evelyn tries to hide at all costs. According to Aston (2003: 40, 41) Eve is

Evelyn's "abused, childhood self" and "can speak that which her adult self represses; cannot bring herself into words". In fact, by being kind and distant to her father, Evelyn attempts not to let her real feelings – anger, hurt – come into light, but keeps them hidden instead. According to Wald (2007: 117, 119), "Eve is a leftover of the past, which 'rots' Evelyn's sense of self as long it is not addressed". (...) Eve's gestures, verbal comments, and her interaction and communication with Evelyn display Evelyn's inner conflicts, fears, and her repressed memories". Wald (2007: 119) also points out that Eve's presence is recognised only to Evelyn, who communicates with her in many situations, and this

not only creates dramatic irony, but engenders two concurrent levels of action in many scenes: one level which presents an external reality and Evelyn's interaction with the realistic *dramatis personae*, and a second, interdependent level, which depicts Evelyn's inner reality. The simultaneity of these two levels of reality reflects the concurrence of the traumatic past and the present in Evelyn's post-traumatic perception.

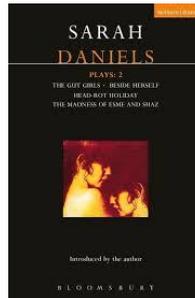
The figure of Eve corresponds strictly to the experience of trauma, as it is

an event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organisation (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973/1967: 465).

The appearance of Eve beside Evelyn during her conversation with the father also bears the marks of traumatic memories; Janet points out that "certain happenings would leave indelible and distressing memories – memories to which the sufferer was

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continually returning, and by which he was tormented by day and by night” (qtd in van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 158).



According to Janet, while suffering from traumatic recollections “the subject is often incapable of making the necessary narrative which we call memory regarding the event: and yet he remains confronted by difficult situation in which he has not been able to play a satisfactory part, one to which his adaptation had been imperfect, so that he continues to make effort in adaptation” (qtd in: van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 160). Here, Eve’s appearance serves not only as a “ghostly” reminiscent of Evelyn’s past shameful secret, but also as a traumatic flashback, as Evelyn is not able to express her painful feelings. However, Eve’s spectrality might indicate a need to confront her painful memories, as “the ghost not only distorts the self-sameness of the present but it also forcefully announces the need for transformation and change, for ‘something-to-be-done’” (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 2017: 12). Evelyn’s need to reject her past perception in order to deal with the trauma would not be simply “a return to the past but a reckoning with its repression in the present, a reckoning with that which we have lost, but never had” (Gordon 2004: 183”).

The ambiguous, “phantom-like” Eve’s actions are also visible at the community assemblance at St. Dymphna’s. For instance, when the members of community start to talk about the child abuse, Eve attempts to deflect Evelyn’s attention from the painful memories (*cf* Wald 2007: 119):

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GREG. (*courteously to NICOLA*) I think it's misleading and potentially dangerous to suggest that abused girls end up as women on psychiatric wards. (...)

EVE. Count on one hand. Dirty white, blue grey... blue grey... blue grey...

GREG. We do have to be careful in the present climate not to make unfounded or rash judgements based on partial information.

NICOLA. I do know.

EVE. Try and remember the name of the pencils in the box. Ivory, black, gunmetal, terracotta.

NICOLA. GP's have always pleaded ignorance. Now with the present backlash their ability to avoid the fact is frightening. Without medical evidence no one is believed. They come up with the most unlikely explanations rather than put their necks on the line. Their ability to avoid the facts unless haemorrhaging is actually occurring is frightening.

EVE. Count on the other hand. Copper beech, golden brown, raw sienna. (BH 131)

Here, Eve's actions seem to correspond strictly with a phantom's need to prevent the shameful secrets from revealing them to the public; however, as the protagonist's inner, abused self, Eve may also try to protect Evelyn from harrowing recollections.

Finally, the scene in which Evelyn's talks openly with her father about the child abuse is the act of "shameful secrets coming into light" (Davis 2005: 374) and, at the same time, confronting her trauma and a possibility of overcoming trauma. When Evelyn decides to reveal her repressed emotions, Eve is at first frightened and "so cold" (BH 181) but later she even encourages Evelyn to talk:

EVELYN. (...) Can you remember - taking me to the zoo?

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GEORGE. Well, of course, at my age, I can't remember every detail.

EVE. You bastard. I can.

EVELYN. You had a bloody season ticket.

GEORGE. There's no need to be like that. Yes, yes, I do, now you come to mention it, vaguely. You were very taken with all the money in that pond.

EVELYN. I didn't like going.

GEORGE. Yes, you did. Don't you remember that ghastly, ornamental rockery fascinated you.

EVELYN. (*quietly*) I remember screaming at the back of your car.

GEORGE. Bonny you might have been but you could also be wilful and obstinate.

EVE. Just tell him. Tell him.

EVELYN. I remember being raped by you. (BH 182-183)

By revealing repressed emotions, Evelyn has a chance to connect her distorted psyche with an integral whole. That is symbolically stressed at the end of the play, when "Eve holds out a large bath towel towards Evelyn. Evelyn takes it and slowly starts to wipe her hands and face and neck, carefully, taking pleasure in it. She repeats the action with Eve" (BH 186). Wald suggests that Eve's disappearance at the close of the play signifies Evelyn's overcoming of trauma; however, most therapists, among which Herman (1992: 211), state that "resolution of trauma is never final; recovery is never complete". Thus, Daniels creates a utopian vision of Evelyn's story, where "full detraumatization" is possible (Wald 2007: 127). Also considering Derrida's remarks on the unpredictability of ghost's appearance, it is highly predictable that traumatic recollections embodied in the character of Eve will still haunt the protagonist in the future.

Conclusions

In *Beside Herself* the concepts of trauma and hauntology theory are closely interspersed with each other. Throughout the play, traumatic memories take the form of Derrida's spectre, that whose aim is to question the previously established way of perceiving and thinking about the world (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 2017: 10). The spectrality of the *Old Testament's* female figures and Evelyn's inner self, Eve, manifest themselves in a need to challenge all previously established rules of meaning and structures in order to establish some new conventions. Moreover, those above-mentioned characters correspond to the Abraham and Torok's concept of phantom, as both the collective sharing of secrets through generations (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 2017: 10) and, moreover, individual trauma that need to be held in secret.

In *Beside Herself*, the appearance of supernatural characters also signifies the possibility for overcoming trauma – that could be done by both dealing with painful recollections and talking openly about them. However, the concept of hauntology assumes that the appearance of ghosts cannot be predicted and is sudden in its essence (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 2017: 12); thus the utopian vision of fully overcoming trauma presented by Sarah Daniels is in fact not likely to be fulfilled.

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