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“It Lurks in the Saying, Not What’s Being Said”: Gender Performativity and Possible Worlds Theory in Marina Carr’s Low in the Dark

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Abstract

Low in the Dark by Irish playwright Marina Carr is an absurdist play that focuses heavily on concepts of gender as performance. It does so mainly through role-playing scenes in which two same-gender characters reenact a heterosexual relationship. These scenes can be tied to Marie-Laure Ryan’s conceptions of the four kinds of textual alternative possible worlds (APWs) within possible worlds theory: fantasy, wish, obligation, and knowledge. An analysis of the play’s role-playing scenes in conjunction with gender performativity and these four types of APWs reveals the constructedness of gender norms within the work, which further calls into question a strictly policed gender binary both in the world of the text and our own world. Further, the relationship between Carr’s work surrounding the gender binary calls into question the nature of what makes her work absurd: not the mismatch between the characteristics of gender performance that we observe in Low in the Dark, but rather the obfuscation of a strictly policed gender binary itself.

The Play

Setting: “Stage left: Bare bathroom, bath, tub and shower. A touch with hot and cold calls on it. Stage right: The men’s space: lights, em, unfinished walls and blobs drawn about!” (Carr 5).


The role-playing scenes in Low in the Dark function as all four types of APW: fantasy, wish, obligation, and knowledge. All of this is possible through the absurdist nature of gender performance. We see that gender so integrally forms much of these types of APWs in the role-playing scenes, we can also see the ways in which gender in the actual world functions as each of these types.市县, experience gender as a fantasy or wish for ourselves and others, or possibly an obligation in a socially regulated framework, which all the while functions as a reaction to or display of our knowledge in regards to gender performance. This is what we refer to with gender in our everyday lives, we are interacting with our own and other people’s APWs, not something necessarily external or “natural” in a sense of “non-constructedness.” Some of this, too, may participate in our own forms of role-play as we come to terms with our fantasy, wish, obligation, and knowledge worlds in regards to gender performance.

Still, the gender performances of Low in the Dark may look back in comparison to our own notions of gender, but differences in notions of gender performance between the actual world and the world of the text are not what makes Low in the Dark absurdist, or at least it should not be. After all, when we think past some of the obvious aspects of the play, we might even recognize some elements of our own world within the text spaces explored by us, obligatory heterosexuality, and the absurdity of a strict binary gender itself. What we can gather from the work instead is that gender functions in the play much as it does in the actual world, although some of its literal manifestations may look different. When we consider gender performance as a function of APWs, either fantasy, wish, obligation, or knowledge, we put it into the realm of the play. Gender in this case becomes separate from how it is interpreted by the outside world, and we see this not as the manifestations of gender specific to Marina Carr’s Low in the Dark, but rather the fact that the actual gender is separate from the Dark and it’s in the realm of the Dark in accordance with Butler’s notions of the distinction between ontological sex, gender identity, and gender performance (3). The meaning of the play lies in the fact that Carr makes this distinction through absurdity, not in the skirmish between our own conceptions of gender performance and those of the play.

Conclusions

In fiction, the writer relocates to what is for use a mere possible world, and makes it the center of an alternative system of reality. If this recentering is indeed the gesture constitutive of fiction... [fictional worlds] refer to a system whose actual world is from an absolute point of view an alternative possible world (APW)” Ryan 24.