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“IT LURKS IN THE SAYING, NOT WHAT’S BEING SAID”: POSSIBLE WORLDS THEORY AND GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN MARINA CARR’S LOW IN THE DARK

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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 absurd 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 Made- Loure Ryan’s conceptions of the four kinds of fictional 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 APW 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 absurdity of a strictly enforced gender binary itself.

The Play

Setting: "Stage left: Bizarre bathroom bath, tabi and shower. A touch with hot salt and salt on it. Stage right: The men’s space: loo, urinals, unfinished walls and back doors drawn about!” (Carr 5).

Characters: Bender, "in her thirties, attractive by ageing."
Binder, "Bender’s lover."
Baxter, "in his mid-twenties, Binder’s lover."
Bender, "Bender’s daughter, in her mid-twenties, a spoilt brat, whimsical."
Baxter, "in his late-twenties, a spoilt brat, whimsical."
Curtains, "in his mid-twenties, Curtain’s lover."
Curtains, "in his mid-twenties, Curtain’s lover."
Curtains, "in his mid-twenties, Curtain’s lover."
Curtains, "in his mid-twenties, Curtain’s lover."

The men’s space: with toilet, one bed, a table, and tails on it.

As an absurdist piece, Low in the Dark contains no classic narrative arc. Instead, it focuses on repeating narrative elements, such as the role-playing scenes set on the left. The role-playing scenes would not have characterized the play as a heterosexual couple, with one character playing himself and the other character playing a partner of another gender.

Realizing Narrative Elements: Role Play

Butler: Do they know your mouth?
Bender: Yes, I do.
Binder: And my word!
Binder: Yes.
Bender: I want a bath.
Binder: I will buy you a present?
Bender: Of course well.
Binder: Want a bath.
Bender: No, you don’t.
Binder: You want me to help me.
Bender: No.
Binder: I think you are all the same. (Carr 42).

As an absurdist piece, Low in the Dark contains no classic narrative arc. Instead, it focuses on repeating narrative elements, such as the role-playing scenes set on the left. The role-playing scenes would not have characterized the characters in the same gender acting as a heterosexual couple, with one character playing himself and the other character playing a partner of another gender.

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 the reconcentrating 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).

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Repeating Narrative Elements: Role Play

Fantasy World

Wish World

Obligation World

Knowledge World

Conclusion

The role-playing scenes in Low in the Dark function as all four types of APWs: fantasy, wish, obligation, and knowledge. All of this is possible through the performance of gender. We see that gender is socially constructed through each 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. We, too, 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 a display of our knowledge about gender performance. In this way, when we interact with gender roles 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 us, 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 absurd 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 absurd, or at least it should not be. After all, when we think past some of the stranger aspects of the play, we might even recognize some elements of our own world within the text spaces expected by us, obligatory heterosexuality, and the absurdity of strict gender binary itself. What we can gather from the text 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 possible. Gender in this case becomes separate from how it is interpreted by the outside world, and we see it is not the manifestations of gender-specific to Vassilopoulou’s Carr’s Low in the Dark, but rather the fact that the gender is separate from the Dark and in the realm of the APWs in accordance with Butler’s notions of the distinction between ontological sex, gender identity, and gender performance (13). The meaning of the play lies in the fact that Carr makes the distinction through absurdity, not in the harnessed between our own conceptions of gender performance and those of the play in the words of the play itself. “It lies in the saying, not what’s being said” (Carr 9).

“Acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatorily repressive framework of reproductive sexuality” (Butler 136).

Abridged Works Cited