

Incest and Innocence: Janey's Youth in Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*.

By Kathy Hughes

Kathy Acker is known for her feminist postmodernism; her dismantling of language; and her overturning of the mores of dominant society to expose the fascism of the capitalist system and of white males in general. Michael Clune writes that “Acker’s treatment of the incest taboo and her celebration of masochism, show her transgressive machine in action, cutting away the malignant apparatus of sovereignty” (495). While the masochism in Acker’s work has been written about extensively by Clune, Karen Brennan, and Catherine Rock among others, Acker’s choice to make Janey a child of ten in her 1978 novel Blood and Guts in High School (hereinafter referred to as BGHS), has only been examined in full by Gabrielle Dane. How does Janey’s age contribute to the punk aesthetic Acker is known for? How does Janey’s youth drive home the message of patriarchal injustice Acker is trying to communicate? How does Acker’s choice to make Janey so young affect the language of Acker’s work? Critics have not directly answered these questions, but I believe that in her decision to make Janey a child, Acker has two goals in mind: One, the juxtaposition of the innocence of childhood with a taboo (sex) to create, as Catherine Rock and Rod Phillips write, a challenging aesthetic, an irony as morbidly humorous as it is heartbreaking; two, as Clune and Dane allude, to reinforce and underscore her message of injustice toward women in patriarchal society.

Rod Phillips, speaking of Acker’s plagiarism of Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter in BGHS, quotes Larry McCaffery, who writes that a modus operandi of punk aesthetics is

‘crossing images over unexpectedly.’ Often this is done, McCaffery writes: ‘By profaning, mocking, and otherwise decontextualizing sacred texts...into blasphemous metatexts’ (221). The Scarlet Letter, with its high position in the canon of American literature, is ripe for this type of approach. What, after all, could be more unexpected than a juxtaposition of Puritan and punk cultures? (174).

More shocking than the use of The Scarlet Letter in a post-punk pornographic manifesto is the more unexpected (and disturbing) image of a child having sex with her father. The juxtaposition between a child and sex is certainly a by-product of McCaffery's punk aesthetics. The sacred innocence of childhood is profaned by the taboo of sex, as in this scene where Janey confronts her father for his infidelity:

Janey: You told me that you were just friends like me and Peter (*Janey's stuffed lamb*) and you weren't going to sleep together. It's not like my sleeping around with all those art studs: when you sleep with your best friend, it's really, really heavy (Acker 9).

This disturbing juxtaposition of Janey's childish behavior in the same paragraph as her sexual behavior is an example of what Catherine Rock describes as Acker's "intermix[ing] of the sacred and the profane" and her "coupling of the debased and the delicate" (208). The innocent, loving request of a little girl who asks to sleep in her parent's bed for security and snuggling takes on a whole new meaning with Janey and is an example of this debasement that Rock speaks of. Before her father leaves for his date with Sally, the starlet he's seeing, he behaves like a loving father: he promises Janey he'll wake her up when he comes home; calls her "sweetie"; and says "yes" when she asks if she can "crawl into bed and sleep with him" (Acker 12). By now the reader knows that this ten-year-old girl will not get the comfort she needs, and when Johnny comes home at seven in the morning, she runs away from his sexual advances. However, wanting to please her daddy/lover, and prevent him from leaving her, she crawls into bed with him and performs fellatio. This whole scene would be heartbreaking if it was an adult woman trying desperately to hold on to her philandering lover. The age of the protagonist, and her relationship to the man who is hurting her, beats the reader over the head with the pain and the juxtaposition (the mingling of the "debased and the delicate" as Rock would say) between Janey's behavior and her age.

Janey's age serves as an ironic device, especially when seen through the lens of Freudian interpretation. Susan E. Hawkins writes that

Janey, as an incest victim, blames herself for her father's indifference and thus can't handle Johnny's romantic interest in the starlet. Conversely, Johnny's attachment to Janey and his need to free himself of it sound absurdly like the emotional struggles

disenchanted spouses experience in their attempts to leave a marriage made unhappy through their own midlife crises (646).

Johnny tells Janey that “You’ve completely dominated my life... for the last nine years and I no longer know who’s you and who’s me” (12). Johnny’s friend Bill (who also sexually abused Janey, “but his cock was too big” (10)) tells Janey that she has “dominated his life since your mother died and now he hates you. He has to hate you because he has to reject you. He has to find out who he is” (11). The irony of these statements, which Susan Hawkins alludes to, is centered on their Freudian implications. Karen Brennan writes that “Bill’s psychoanalysis refigures the family roles by casting Janey as the overbearing mother and her father as the daughter/son on the threshold of the Oedipal stage. The father-daughter relationship, for Bill, is really a son-mother relationship” and turns the Freudian theory upside-down and inside-out (258). Brennan’s use of Freudian theory for analysis of the text is rendered more ironic by Janey’s age. The father resents his daughter, who is only a child, for holding him back and smothering his identity the way the son resents the mother for the same reasons. Fatherly responsibility, and Janey’s dependence, do not matter to this man, as is made clear by his resentment for an incestuous relationship that he started when his daughter was an infant. Later, Janey tells Johnny that “It was always me, my voice, I felt like a total nag; I want you to be the man” (12). Janey, a ten-year-old little girl, believes that she has usurped her father’s position as the one with power in the relationship, a sign of her father’s emotional manipulation. Adding to the irony of Bill’s psychoanalysis is his remark that “There’s always been a strong connection between the two of you. You’ve been together for years” (16). This bizarre connection is also commented on by Janey, who tells Johnny, “When I first met you, it’s as if a light turned on for me. You’re the first joy I knew” (9). With this remark, Acker turns the natural infatuation a very young girl has for her father, as well as Freud’s Electra complex, inside out through sarcasm.

It is the misogynist dynamics of the patriarchal family (the type that Freud was primarily concerned with) that Acker is attacking with this irony, according to Karen Brennan. By ignoring the traditional family roles—by making the daughter into the controlling mother/wife and the father the hen-pecked son/husband—Acker is rendering the family unit extremely unstable, the consequences of which spread out into society (Brennan 258-259). It is this patriarchal, capitalistic society that Acker sees as promoting injustice toward women. Using Brennan’s

theory, Janey, as a female and a child, is especially powerless, both in her family and in society at large.

Michael Clune, in his article “Blood Money: Sovereignty and Exchange in Kathy Acker,” discusses how Acker uses incest to visualize a truly free market, one in which “the weeds of sovereignty can be pulled out by their roots” (497). If Claude Levi-Strauss is correct, and the incest taboo encourages economic relations between different families and tribes through the exchange of women, then Acker’s flouting of the taboo is a refusal of the principle of women as legal tender (Clune 496). As Brennan pointed out, the Oedipal roles have been switched in Janey’s family—the father is the child, the child the mother, and the little girl is “the man” in the relationship. Brennan refers to a drawing Acker has captioned “boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father” (8). The drawing features a man in two poses from the neck down and naked from the waist down. Brennan’s analysis of the picture leads her to the conclusion that the headlessness of the father is symbolic of castration, and his nudity “transforms the daughter into a pornographer and the phallic father into a sex object, a consumable product” (256). Through her sexual relationship with her father, the little girl becomes the subject and the adult male the object. The little girl has the power to emasculate. The most powerless member of society—a female child, the daughter—has power over the most powerful—the adult male, the father. As the family dynamic is rendered obsolete by the reversal of roles, so is the societal dynamic. After all, as Kathryn Hume writes, “The family represents the most personal form of Acker’s hostile world scenario” (491). While Marjorie Worthington writes that abortion in Acker’s work is “a means for gaining power by taking it through what those in power would call unnatural means” (“Posthumous Posturing” 246), following Clune’s line of reasoning, incest operates in the same manner as Worthington’s abortions, for it is through her sexual relationship with her father that Janey is able to objectify him.

However, while Clune sees the incest and pedophilia of BGHS as Acker’s way of undermining societal restrictions, feminist critics see them as a reflection of society as it actually is. Catherine Rock writes that while Acker “opens language and text to marginal sexual and social spaces” (206) and thus demonstrates an affinity with deviant sexual behavior, Hume writes that “patriarchal incest becomes the archetypal image for men controlling women” (491) in BGHS, particularly in a capitalistic context. Acker’s tale of childhood incest and sexual abuse provides a “counter-discourse to hegemonic ideologies of marriage, family, heterosexuality, and

stable bourgeois identity” (Rock 207) and the power plays that come with these ideologies, power plays that consistently exploit women. Following Rock’s line of reasoning, Acker’s choice to make her heroine a child underscores her beliefs: in a capitalistic, patriarchal society, all women are as powerless as children.

Making Janey a child drives home the point that Acker is trying to make about the misogyny of society not only symbolically but linguistically. Acker used straightforward, direct, visceral, and obscene language to remove the dilating effects of propriety. Christina Millietti writes about Acker’s use of “stupid language,” or language that is primordial and thus powerful (8):

In contrast to writing that similarly invokes topics of a sexual nature, but that simultaneously obfuscates them in prose, she makes sexuality viscerally negotiable so that she can confront her reader’s conventions directly. By paring ‘propriety’—a learned social skill—from her writing, Acker enables an explicit discussion of the sexual spectrum that is unique to her work. (8)

Through this clear, unpoetic, and ugly language, Acker reveals the horror of Janey’s victimization and the victimization of all women:

That night, for the first time in months, Janey and her father sleep together because Janey can’t get to sleep otherwise. Her father’s touch is cold, he doesn’t want to touch her mostly ‘cause he’s confused. Janey fucks him even though it hurts her like hell ‘cause of her Pelvic Inflammatory Disease. (Acker 9-10) Johnny returned home (what is home?) and told Janey he had been drinking with Sally...She [Janey] lay down on the filthy floor by his bed, but it was very uncomfortable: she hadn’t slept for two nights. So she asked him if he wanted to come into her bed.

The plants in her room cast strange, beautiful shadows over the other shadows. It was a clean, dreamlike room. He fucked her in her asshole cause the infection made her cunt hurt too much to fuck there, though she didn’t tell him it hurt badly there, too, cause she wanted to fuck love more than she felt pain (21).

Millietti demonstrates Acker’s visceral language by comparing a passage from Empire of the Senseless (which also has a victim of pedophilic incest for a protagonist) to Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita. The contrast between the styles of the two authors underscores the significance of the straight forward, visceral language, a language untamed by the mores of society, in Acker’s work (Millietti 8-9). While Nabokov uses the beauty of poetic, intellectual language (the language of

the patriarchy) to veil the horror of pedophilia, Acker's visceral, simple language, the language of the body, not the mind, shakes up the reader and forces a confrontation between the reader and his or her conventions (Milletti 8-9). Janey, as a child, does not have the socialization to throw the veil of intellectual language over the horrors of her daily life, thus Acker does not utilize poetics when describing her life. Milletti quotes Acker herself, who called her method of writing "stupid" and describes it as "primary"—like the cry of a baby (Acker 64, qtd. in Milletti 6). Acker's choice of writing style and choice of child protagonist thus work together to create a strong, visceral response in the reader, and thus allows the "terrorist language" Milletti ascribes to Acker to ring clear.

Gabrielle Dane examines Acker's use of language from a Freudian perspective, particularly from Freud's work with hysterics, who express mental anguish from trauma and repressed sexual desires in physical ailments (232). Dane calls Acker's writing "hysterical" because "as the repressed found expression in Dora's hysterical symptoms, so it erupts in the mad and erotic 'antidiscourse' of Acker's text. Exploding into a violent kaleidoscope of obscenity and taboo desire, the novel takes the reader, in effect, on an uncensored tour through the phantasy-life of a hysterical psyche" (246). Acker's work bounces from genre to genre, from location to location, from voice to voice, like a child who wants to experience and express everything. Acker's text, and its fragmentation and blurring of genres and voices, is a physical and linguistic manifestation of the childhood incest, and the aftermath. The lack of boundaries between genres, and this multiplicity of voices, reflects for Dane "the splintered psyche of an abused little girl" (247). Janey has no boundaries, and feels compelled to repeat the abuse first inflicted on her by her father with other men and eventually Everyman. The voice changes in the novel from Janey to Hester Prynne to Erica Jong; the style leaps from stage dialogue to poetry to fairy tales. All these different voices and styles, Dane writes, reflect the splitting of the personality of a sexually abused child (248). The fairy tale and the childlike map of Janey's dreams is a "foray into a childhood (always already) denied Janey" (Dane 248). Acker's fluctuating, experimental style adds a layer of poignancy to her choice of a youthful protagonist, and Janey's youth adds power to the visceral hysteria of Acker's prose.

Dane, in her article, shows that by demonstrating the horror of sexual abuse through a text that reflects the splitting and permeability of a sexually abused child and through explicit pictures of an adult male with an erect penis, Acker refutes the Freudian hypothesis that the

memory of sexual abuse is actually nothing more than a repressed wish on the part of the woman for her father to seduce her (246). The horror of Janey's young life—the rapes; the sexually transmitted disease; the kidnapping and forced prostitution; the imprisonment; and finally the death from cancer at age fourteen—is further cemented in the reader's mind by the way Acker writes it; while Nabokov makes pedophilia seem like true love, Acker shows it as a terrifying act of violence on the body and the psyche of a young child—and as a metaphor for how women are treated in society.

With her unconventional language, Acker seeks to free herself from the prison of a male dominated language. Janey, Dane writes, is “fallen into the alienated locus of speech, a prisoner in patriarchal language” (248), a language reinforced by capitalism, as seen in the dialogue between Mr. Fuckface and Mr. Blowjob, the capitalists.

Mr. Fuckface: You see, we own the language. Language must be used clearly and precisely to reveal our universe.

Mr. Blowjob: Those rebels are never clear. What they say doesn't make sense.

Mr. Fuckface: It even goes against all the religions to tamper with the sacred languages.

Mr. Blowjob: Without language the only people the rebels can kill are themselves (136).

Dane sees this dialogue as an accurate description of the position of women and minorities in capitalistic society. Language molds perception, and those that control the language—what is said and what is not said; and how something is said—can control the minds of their society. In a culture in love with the binaries of male/female and mind/body, patriarchal societies have a male-centric language. Marjorie Worthington writes that Western societies typically equate the male with the mind, rationality, and speech, and the female with the body and with irrationality (“The Territory Named Women's Bodies” 391), and Acker turns these binaries against the system that uses them in BGHS by turning the language of the patriarchy inside out, using it in a feminine, pre-rational fashion. Janey, as a female child, is the best mouthpiece for this counter-language.

It is my belief that while Acker's work could have made as much an impact on the reader with the protagonist being of age, but her choice of a child as the heroine increases the visceral intensity of her words and corresponds with her use of experimental language and technique to

reflect the injustice toward women in a patriarchal, capitalist society, as Dane and Clune write. It also is in keeping, as Rock, Hume, Phillips, and Hawkins write, with Acker's punk aesthetic of mixing the sacred with the profane, and enhances the irony of Acker's playing with the mores of the society.

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