

A Systematic Review of *Phaedra's Love* through a Psychoanalytical Approach

Abstract

First being staged in 1996, *Phaedra's Love* marks Sarah Kane's ferocious exploration of sex, family and violence through a distinctively modern display of human brutality between tragic characters previously echoed in Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Seneca's more contemporary *Phaedra*. The motives of each character are rooted in sexual and violent desires, both surpassing what one would consider normal while feeling innately human. Each character responds to their given circumstances with the most deviant and violent of actions, that remind the reader of the urges and impulses that they themselves subconsciously stifle. Whether the final intention is to stage Kane's work or to merely gain a more robust understanding, these characters almost require a psychoanalysis in order to find a sort of acceptance to the disturbing and disconcerting results that occur in the final pages. The intention of this paper is to apply Sigmund Freud's psychosexual and psychoanalytical theories to *Phaedra's Love* in order to foster a deeper discovery about the character's relationships, subtext and motivations. Freud's theories acting as the inspiration and basis for artistic exploration, has a strong presence in surrealism artist's work, such as Joan Miro, André Masson, and Salvador Dali. Surrealist art will serve as the visual and artistic element that will help forge an artistic compromise between Freud and Kane. In practice, these surrealist paintings can be used by a director or dramaturg as a visual aid to communicate the creative vision to the designers, actors and ultimately the audience.

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My Wife Nude Contemplating Her Own Flesh Becoming Stairs, Three Vertebrae of a Column, Sky and Architecture
by Salvador Dalí

Framework for Exploration

First being staged in 1996, *Phaedra's Love* marks Sarah Kane's ferocious exploration of sex, family and violence through a distinctively modern display of human brutality between tragic characters previously echoed in Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Seneca's more contemporary *Phaedra*. The motives of each character are rooted in sexual and violent desires both surpassing what one would consider normal while feeling innately human. Each character responds to their given circumstances with the most deviant and violent of actions, that remind the reader of the urges and impulses that they themselves subconsciously stifle. Whether the final intention is to stage Kane's work or to merely gain a more robust understanding, these characters almost require a psychoanalysis in order to find a sort of acceptance to the disturbing and disconcerting results that occur in the final pages.

Sigmund Freud is critiqued by many for his primal and callous views on sex, which is why the Freudian lens is an intriguing one to view Kane's blunt and merciless drama through. The radical choices and extreme actions taken by each character make *Phaedra's Love* both a compelling read and a difficult ask of a director and cast. Freud specifically outlines 5 psychosexual phases that we all go through in life, with each of these phases consisting of a conflict that ends up shaping who we are as individuals. These psychosexual phases could serve as a potential launching point for a production, where each character could be creatively approached through a Freudian lens, in order to foster a deeper discovery about the character's relationships, subtext and motivations.

Applying research to a production can be difficult, particularly when the play operates separately from the lens through which the play is being viewed. This poses the question: what bridges the gap between Freud's nonfiction scientific analysis and Kane's fictional work? If we broaden our scope from theatre to all artistic mediums, we should note that Freud's work is prevalent in early Surrealism. Surrealist poet and author of the *Manifesto of Surrealism* Andre Breton "recognized Freud's contributions to the study of the subconscious mind in the surrealist movement that saw its greatest manifestations in the artistry of Joan Miro and Salvador Dali" (Fischer). Surrealist art will serve as the visual and artistic element that will help forge an artistic compromise between Freud and Kane. In practice, these surrealist paintings can be used by a director or dramaturg as a visual aid to communicate the creative vision to the designers, actors and ultimately the audience.

The intention of this paper is to explore how *Phaedra's Love* operates creatively through a Freudian lens. Phaedra, Priest, Theseus and Hippolytus will be diagnosed as being in a specific psychosexual stage, and their actions will be examined and justified through that stage. For the purposes of artistic exploration, the ages tied to each stage will be ignored as the focus will be on

each stage's conflicts, struggles and principals, which will serve as the prism to observe each character. Surrealist art will serve as a secondary observational tool that provides a visual for a potential production, bridging theory to practice.

Phaedra: Anal Stage



The Burning Giraffe by Salvador Dali

Phaedra is one of the most difficult characters to analyze in the piece, as her sexual urges toward her stepson and her subsequent suicide are extremely strong motivations that are not supported by a lot of text or backstory. Therefore, Phaedra must be viewed through a Freudian lens to explain her repressed sexual feelings being expressed by her subconscious towards Hippolytus. It could be argued both Phaedra and Hippolytus are operating through the Oedipus Complex expressed during the Phallic Stage. Examining their opposite views and feelings towards sex and intimacy would prove the contrary notion. Phaedra ultimately condemns her sexual encounter with Hippolytus calling him a rapist, which would indicate that she operates at

a stage beneath Hippolytus. This interpretation will lead to an examination of Phaedra through the Anal Stage, beginning with the theme of holding on and letting go.

“Balancing the poles of holding on and letting go” (Erikson 119) is a theme represented in both Freud and Erikson’s second stage of development, though Freud means this physically while “Erikson suggests that the capacity to ‘hold on’ and ‘let go’ has emotional as well as physical dimensions. One’s holding on can be ‘destructive and cruel’—a restraint. Or it can be a ‘pattern of care’—to have and to hold. Letting go can mean lashing out destructively and it can also be a more healing kind of release—to let things pass and let them be.” (Binau 25).

Unpacking this idea, Phaedra is attempting to hold back her feelings towards Hippolytus, which is destroying her. In scene two the doctor is urging her to “let go”, as he tells her to move on. Phaedra decides to release herself from this destruction of holding, by “letting go” of her inhibitions and telling Hippolytus in a scene.

If we expand the scope beyond Freud and look at the Anal Stage through the psychosocial development lens, Eric Erikson now categorizes that stage as the Early Childhood Stage. In psychoanalyst Erikson’s Stages of Human Development, the corresponding stage to Freud’s is shaped by the polarities and conflict of autonomy vs shame and doubt, which forms an individual’s internal conflict. If we apply this psychodynamic as the motivations for Phaedra’s actions the actor and ultimately the audience can develop a more empathetic connection to her.

Phaedra deciding to kill herself could be viewed as either succumbing to shame and doubt, but it could also be the ultimate act of autonomy. Phaedra committing suicide is obviously tied to Hippolytus, but her exact reasoning is left ambiguous. Certainly, shame and doubt would be enough to drive Phaedra to suicide, but where exactly does that shame come from? Did the way Hippolytus shame her during and after sex drive her to suicide? Is she

worried about the shame this will bring to her royal family if the public finds out? Was the experience so extreme that she doubts everything and perhaps that is why she accuses him of rape before she kills herself? All of these are valid questions, but they all circle around the premise that Hippolytus actions *force* Phaedra to kill herself. But perhaps the stronger creative decisions spur from the autonomy lens where Phaedra *chooses* to kill herself. This leaves us with the question: did Phaedra kill herself and claim rape to *force* Hippolytus to feel? After extensive research on Kane's "In Yer Face" theatre style Aleks Sierz concluded that "Phaedra's suicide and her accusation of rape galvanize him (Hippolytus) into life – he's suddenly in touch with his emotions" (Sierz 111). In Scene 5 when the characters are reeling from Phaedra's death and accusations, there is textual evidence that shows that through Phaedra's autonomy vs shame conflict, that autonomy was the driving force behind Phaedra's actions.

Strophe: Deny it. There's a riot.

Hippolytus: Life at last.

Strophe: Burning down the palace. You have to deny it.

Hippolytus: Are you insane? She died doing this for me. I'm doomed.

(Kane 28-29)

This theme of self-autonomy is one that is established in Seneca, where Elizabeth Barry contends that "Kane restores the 'self's radical autonomy' that Seneca looks for in his philosophy to the act of death in her rewriting of the play". If the conclusion is that Phaedra is self-governing and autonomous in her actions, that would determine that Phaedra's dialogue in response to Hippolytus sexual actions is delivered more deliberately and coldly rather than out of emotion and shame. Kane vividly establishes that this life ending decision made by Phaedra leads to the demise of all others as "no choice is entirely without connection to or repercussion

for other human beings” (Barry 135). This leads to an even greater question: was this Phaedra’s plan? The answer to this question greatly shapes the creative decisions made by the creative team and the audience’s potential cathartic release.

Of all of Salvador Dali’s works, *The Burning Giraffe* has some of the strongest links to Freud. Dali directly makes the connection stating "the only difference between immortal Greece and our era is Sigmund Freud who discovered that the human body, which in Greek times was merely neoplatonical, is now filled with secret drawers only to be opened through psychoanalysis" (Brenton). This painting would fit this Freudian telling of Phaedra as the secret drawers would represent her repressed feelings toward Hippolytus. Continuing down this path, the second figure would represent Strophe, whose similar feelings towards Hippolytus would not be represented by secret drawers as her feelings towards him are not repressed and have been acted upon.

There are two pieces of imagery in this painting that could be interpreted as foreshadowing when applied to Phaedra’s love. The figure and the burning giraffe he’s leading is often considered a manifestation of an unstoppable chaos caused by man, or a “masculine cosmic apocalyptic monster” (Brenton). This would represent the chaotic destruction of all the characters at the end of the play, which seem not to be a concern of Figure 1, Phaedra. Both figures representing Phaedra and Strophe, are only being held up by crutches which could be foreshadowing their ultimate demise. This would stand to reason why Figure 1 would have fewer crutches, as she dies first.

The Burning Giraffe would be a strong illustration to analyze with a cast to view the relation between Phaedra and Strophe. As shown in the painting, they are both grappling with

similar issues but are dealing with them completely separately. Strophe, figure 2, is *holding on* to something, where Phaedra has *let go*.

Priest: Latency Stage



The Temptation of Saint Anthony by Salvador Dali

The priest is an important role in the piece as he is the representation of hypocrisy, but he lacks a name, a backstory and an obvious self-purpose or super-objective. The biggest difficulty in both staging and acting out Scene 7 is the sudden action of the priest performing oral sex on Hippolytus, which for the reader or an audience member seems to arrive suddenly with little buildup. If this scene is framed on Freud's stages of development, where the priest begins the scene in the Latency Stage and transitions to the Genital stage it may provide structure and progression to a chaotic scene.

In the Latency Stage sexual feelings lay dormant, which mirrors the qualities most would ascribe to a priest. Dr. Tomy Phillip furthers the definition stating, "that sexuality is gradually repressed both because of the fear of the social consequences and because of the realization that the love object is unattainable" (Philip 181) which perhaps mirrors Kane's priest. In Freud's

theory the “love object” is a child’s mother, a figure that a child associates with love but cannot be with sexually. Our priest walks into the scene having repressed his sexual feelings for god, who he loves emotionally but cannot love physically, making God the love object.

Looking at the text through a Freudian prism, the priest moves out of the latency stage and into the genital stage as he transitions from loving god who he cannot love physically, to loving Hippolytus who he performs oral sex on. However, there is minimal textual evidence that the priest has love-like feelings towards Hippolytus which is one of the reasons the sexual act seems so disconnected from what a character would actually do. In Elizabeth Barry’s analysis of the play, she determines that Hippolytus “removes the mystique of religion” from the priest as he “seems to have acquired a new understanding of and access to “purity” from Hippolytus that can (unlike the spiritual purity he has been conditioned to seek) accommodate his own desire” (Barry 124) Barry’s outcome is true under the Freudian lens but the way the priest arrives at accommodating his own sexual desires is different. Hippolytus does not remove the mystique of religion, instead he becomes religion as he is now seen as physical manifestation of God; or the love object that the Priest can finally be with physically. This interpretation is textually supported by dialogue.

Priest: You’re not God.

Hippolytus: No. A prince. God on earth. But not god. Fortunate for all concerned. I’d not allow you to sin knowing you’d *confess* and get away with it.

This piece of dialogue starts the Priests movement up the Developmental Stages to the Genital Stage, as he now starts to view Hippolytus as God on Earth.

Hippolytus: Killed a woman and I will be punished for it by hypocrites who I shall take down with me. May we burn in hell. God may be all powerful, but *there's one thing he can't do...*

Priest: There is some kind of purity in you.

Hippolytus: He can't make me good.

With the application of the Freudian “love object” to this scene, the Priest interprets Hippolytus’ first line as the *one thing God can't do is be with you*, which would then prompt the priest's line to be delivered fully in the Genital Stage, which leads to him performing oral sex. Hippolytus last line in the scene can now be delivered God-like.

Hippolytus: Go.

Confess.

Before you burn.

(Kane 34-35)

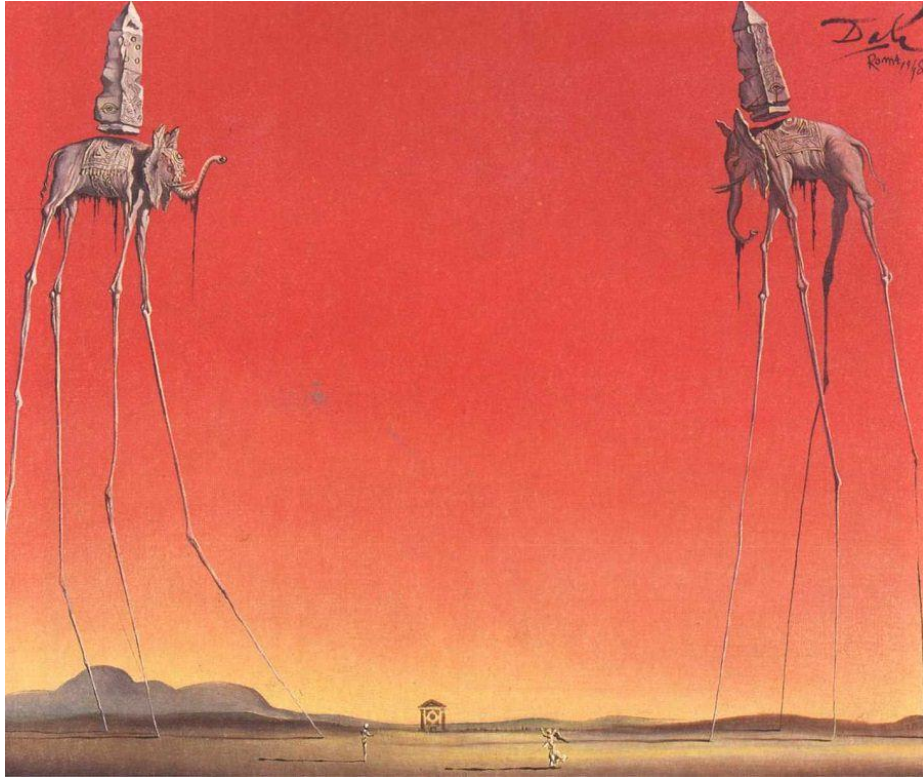
Supporting the text of Scene 7 with Freud Stages of Development, allows there to be subtextual progression to the scene that ends with a climactic flourish. Looking at the Priest as a character that is evolving in to a typical human rather than a character that is regressing into sin, gives the actor more character development to sift through. Using the Freudian lens also allows this scene to not be labeled as *the gay scene*, as the Priest's psychosexual feelings are not confined to gender because his true love is God.

The Temptation of St. Anthony was originally painted by Salvador Dali with the hopes of it being chosen as a reference for a movie, so it is fitting to use it as a theatrical reference. Much of the Priest's scene, and the show as whole, centers around the theme of temptation. St.

Anthony who would be the representation of the Priest, is using religion as a defense mechanism against temptation. The horse represents strength, which would most likely coincide with Hippolytus, who is ushering in a parade of temptation.

Much of Dali's work depicts lust and sex, but *The Temptation of St. Anthony* shows the temptation of both the male and female body. The interpretation of this scene does not follow along the traditional guidelines of homosexuality, because the Priest performs oral sex on Hippolytus not because he is male but because he is God-like. Therefore, the painting used for referencing the conflict showed in this scene should not be inherently homosexual. Dali uses both phallic imagery and breasts to create a parade of temptation that does not live in the modern polarities of gay and straight. Dali's depiction of temptation can "be seen in the work not only by the appearance of three nude human forms, but also the tall tower on the back of the final elephant in the parade, which has less-than-subtle phallic connotations" (Breton). This still follows along Freudian lines, as he does not commit to the division of gay and straight until puberty. One of the most important themes explored in the painting is the temptation of human sexuality.

This comparison to Dali's *The Temptation of St. Anthony* brings about a chain reaction of question questions about where the Priest goes after the scene that could be explored with the actor: does he drop the cross to let temptation in? Or does he return to a state of Latency? Could he join the parade of temptation? Maybe he becomes an elephant with phallic imagery? Then could the Priest be represented in Dali's Elephants?



Elephants by Salvador Dali

Theseus: Genital Stage



In the Tower of Sleep André Masson

Viewing Theseus through Freud's Stages of Development it is relatively conclusive that he is functioning in the Genital Stage as his actions are fully formed and without hesitation. Freud does not offer a lot of distinction during this stage, because to Freud there is little difference between individuals' psychosexual dynamic once they hit puberty. This is not the case in Erikson's work as he divides the Genital Stage into four separate developmental periods. The age of Theseus, and all of the characters for that matter, is left unmentioned in Kane's rendition making it challenging to determine which of the later periods he is in. If we are simply correlating Theseus' actions and motivations with one of Erikson's conflicts during development, then it becomes clear he is in his 60's or onward as he is fractured between the polarities of integrity vs despair.

The integrity vs despair conflict is most apparent in Scene 7. This is an extremely difficult scene as it is almost all stage directions, which makes the incorporation of this inner conflict pertinent as it can be the motivation for his movements.

Theseus kneels by Phaedra's body

He tears at his clothes, then skin, then hair, more and more frantically until he is exhausted

Be he does not cry.

He stands by the funeral pyre- Phaedra goes up in flames

Theseus: I'll kill him

(Kane 35-36)

The term integrity is relative, as no one would consider raping and killing a woman that disagrees with your sentiment as a form of principle or morality. But for Theseus the only conviction that he has now is seeking revenge against Hippolytus for the death of his wife. Theseus chooses not to grieve and instead enact on his version of integrity, which is seeking what he views as justice for Phaedra. This choice to suppress grief and this conviction, which Theseus views as righteous, to enact as much pain to Hippolytus as possible must be shown in the scene through minimal dialogue. Attempting to incorporate Erikson's conflict into the scene will most likely lead to a slowing in pace but an increase in action as the audience needs to see Theseus choose integrity-based stance to oppose all those that take the side of Hippolytus, which creates a modest justification for the horrific actions taken by Theseus at the end of the play.

Some questions do arise when making the claim that Theseus is in the Late Adulthood Phase and is processing his integrity vs despair conflict. Why does his wisdom that he would've

obtained from old age not subdue his violent reactions? Why do his actions mirror those of someone in Early Adulthood? Erikson has determined that those in the Young Adult Stage have a propensity to “repudiate, isolate, and, if necessary, destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one's own” (Erikson 136). This would also be a valid explanation for Theseus’ actions at the end of the play. Secondly, Theseus could simply kill the woman that speaks in defense for Hippolytus, but decides to rape her first, which is its own form of twisted intimacy. Ultimately, there is a crucial question that determines the interpretation and practical application of the Stages of Development: Has Theseus been operating under the conflict of Early Adulthood or as has the death of his wife transitioned him from the late adulthood conflict to operating like someone in Early Adulthood? Both choices are equally substantiated and will net in the same brutal result but either choice drastically changes Theseus’ journey.

Another surrealist artist who took inspiration from Sigmund Freud was André Masson, whose automatic drawing style was based on drawing straight from the subconscious. An immediate visceral response is elicited when viewing his paintings which is matched by *Phaedra’s Love*. All of his work has connection points to Kane’s and Freud’s, but *In the Tower of Sleep* encapsulates the chaos that ensues when Theseus finds out about his wife. Masson painted it directly from his memories of war as the “the tower, in dream symbolism, represents elevation, pedestal, and inaccessibility, with phallic connotations. Masson’s subconscious flashback explains the chaotic composition of the painting, almost psychotically thrown together like a horrible nightmare with its plethora of complex motifs” (Ries). Theseus’ actions come from a place of integrity, as his rage he commits to what he views as getting justice for his wife. Although there is morality in Theseus’ purpose, the end result is chaos, violence and rape which are all depicted in *In the Tower of Sleep*.

Much has been made of the difficulty in staging the final scene. The grotesque actions displayed by the characters are extremely difficult to duplicate on stage in a way that stays completely truthful to Kane's violent vision. The same brutal sexual imagery is also displayed in many of André Masson's works. The same rage that Theseus and crowd feels is depicted in his work. Perhaps this opens the possibility of using Masson's work as the visual on stage while the actors act the dialogue but not the actions. This poses a question for a director: can paintings supplement the action for a violent unstageable scene?



*Le fauteuil, Bull Fighting
The Andalusian Reapers, Gravida by André Masson*

Hippolytus: Phallic Stage and Oedipus Complex



Tristan and Isolde by Salvador Dalí

There is a clear overlap between *Phaedra's Love* and much of Freud's psychoanalysis work, as they both take inspiration and reference ancient Greek playwrights. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* serves as a fictional model to depict Freud's theories on the psychosexual relationship between kids and their parents. *The Phallic Stage* consists of a conflict that Freud has coined the Oedipus Complex. He asserts that one of the reasons that *Oedipus Rex* has stood the test of time is due to its ties to our own subconscious as "his [King Oedipus'] destiny moves us only because it might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him". Freud asserts that the sexual desires displayed in *Oedipus Rex* are the same feelings that our own subconscious is trying to repress, as he contends that "it is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father" (Freud 5). As a boy is attaining sexual desires, it is the natural order according to Freud that those subconscious feelings would start with his

mother. As the child's feelings towards his mother intensify, the child begins to see the father as an obstacle with forms the Oedipus Conflict.

When viewing the relationship between Hippolytus, Strophe and Phaedra with the context that their inspiration stems from ancient Greece, the fact that they are not related by blood softens their incestualized dynamic. The modern family unit lives outside of traditional biology, and the lack of relation does not dilute the abhorrence of their acts to a contemporary audience. The exploration of Hippolytus having an Oedipus Complex will be viewed through the modern lens.

Hippolytus' actions can be viewed through the Genital Stage in the literal since where he has suppressed feelings for his mother which creates a rivalry with his father, but Freud's scope goes beyond that. The Genital Stage is crucial for what Freud considers a normal sex life, for if the Oedipus Complex goes unresolved this could lead to a detachment between affection and sex. Freud describes these effect that an individual would deal with as a "whole sphere of love in such people remains divided in the two directions personified in art as sacred and profane (or animal) love. Where they love they do not desire, and where they desire they cannot love. They seek objects which they do not need to love, in order to keep their sensuality away from the objects they love." (Freud 5). This connects to Hippolytus incapability to express love in a way that seems human.

The role of Lena in the script is an unusual one because she is only mentioned once in the play and does not appear physically. An audience will not know the backstory of Lena and Hippolytus so her mentioning should serve the purpose of framing Hippolytus' inability to love and have a normal sex life. As detailed in *An Existential Analysis of Kane's Hippolytus*, the character's "love for Lena perverts into his attempt to suppress all desire and avoid further pain.

But desire constitutes human subjectivity. Attempts to quash it are akin to killing oneself while still breathing. He eats, he has sex, but he cannot feel anything at all” (Looney).

As Sarah Kane has taken ancient Greek tale of Hippolytus and Phaedra as her artistic framework Salvador Dali did the same with the 12th Century tale *Tristan and Isolde*. A love affair between a knight and a princess ends tragically Trystan dies of despair while Isolde commits suicide. This is an interesting painting to view Hippolytus and Phaedra’s relationship through, because the two figures cannot live without each other as they die simultaneously. Through this interpretation Hippolytus and Phaedra’s fates are tied together. Maybe the female figure in the painting is not Phaedra but is instead Lena. Through this perspective his fate could’ve been tied to Lena’s, and with her death came the death of his emotionally. That creates another layer of subtext to why he can’t feel emotionally connected.

Tristan and Isolde evokes the emotions of forbidden love, which is seen in almost every character in the play, except Hippolytus because he doesn’t have feelings for anyone he has sex with in the play. Perhaps the female figure in painting is the embodiment of strong feeling whether they be positive or negative. The urge to feel pain is one that Hippolytus is attracted to through at the play, much like how Tristan urges to feel Isolde in the painting. Hippolytus’ urge to feel is made apparently clear at the end of the play when vultures are devouring his body,

Hippolytus: If there could be more days like this. (manages a smile)

(Kane 41)

Conclusion

The viscous and extreme actions taken by the characters in *Phaedra's Love* make it a powerful and addicting read but a difficult staging task. By exploring the piece through Sigmund Freud's Stages of Development it supports the characters' actions and exposes new layers of motivation and subtext that actors can explore. Implementing theories into practice and communicating them to a creative team and an audience has its difficulties. Using surrealist art, which has Freudian influences, as a secondary lens and a visual aid creates a bridge between the theoretical research and the creative work. The ultimate intention is to open new dialogues between theory and art, creating a conceptual approach to Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*.

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