

Death Is Sacred:
Being and Non-Being in Sarah Hall's "Theatre 6"

MARIA-MIRUNA CIOCOI-POP-VECSEI
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania

Abstract

The short story "Theatre 6" is one of three post-apocalyptic short stories included in Sarah Hall's collection *Madame Zero*, first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 2013. The story is inspired by the real-life case of Savita Halappanavar, who died of septic shock at Galway University Hospital in 2012 because of being denied an abortion on grounds of septic miscarriage. The text paints a dystopian vision of a not so far away future where the Hunter fetal care act legislatively places the life of unborn babies higher than the one of mothers. The protagonists are a genderless anaesthesiologist, Dr. Rosinski, and a nameless patient, brought to a London hospital in septic shock, following a denied abortion in spite of a miscarriage suffered several days before. The time of narration is uncertain; however, the story is generally taken to be placed in a future where present-day anti-abortion tendencies have taken over the British judicial system. The story discusses the being/non-being dichotomy from a variety of perspectives: life-death, morals-hypocrisy, religion-secularism, male-female, empathy-bureaucracy, truth-duplicity. The ultimate question the text raises is what or whose life is sacred in a world that has jettisoned all semblance of sanity?

Keywords: Sarah Hall, being, non-being, life, abortion rights, feminism, post-apocalyptic fiction

Sarah Hall is a prose writer who has gained acclaim in UK and the English-speaking world (though she is still relatively unknown to the Romanian readership) for her compelling short stories, many of which paint a grim picture of a post-apocalyptic world where flashes of humanity briefly illuminate the general darkness, as well as for her novel *The Electric Michelangelo*, nominated for the Man Booker Prize in 2004. She was born and currently lives in Cumbria, teaching creative writing.

With a degree in English and Art History from Aberystwyth University, Hall's passion for literature and the arts shines through in her work. She has a keen eye for detail and a deep understanding of human emotions, which she skillfully weaves into her stories. Her writing explores a wide range of themes, from love and loss to identity and the complexities of human relationships. One of Hall's notable achievements is being the only author to be shortlisted four times for the BBC National Short Story Award, which she won in 2013. This recognition speaks to her mastery of the short story form and her ability to captivate readers with her concise yet powerful narratives. In addition to *The Electric Michelangelo*, Hall has written several other acclaimed works, including *Burntcoat*, *Sudden Traveller*, *Madame Zero*, and *The Wolf Border*. Each of these books showcases her versatility as a writer and her ability to delve into different genres and themes. Hall's writing is characterized by its lyrical prose, vivid imagery, and thought-provoking storytelling. She has a unique ability to transport readers to different worlds and evoke a wide range of emotions. Her works resonate with readers on a deep level, leaving a lasting impact long after the final page is turned. Hall is a talented British writer who has made a significant contribution to the literary world. Her novels and short stories have garnered critical acclaim and have touched the hearts of readers around the globe. With her powerful storytelling and insightful exploration of the human experience, she continues to be a prominent figure in contemporary literature.

Her first short story collection, *The Beautiful Indifference*, contains “seven staggeringly good stories steeped in sex and death,

risk and physicality” (Harrison). *Madame Zero* is her second collection of short stories, alongside *The Beautiful Indifference*, published in 2011. This volume of short stories is a remarkable collection that showcases her talent as a writer. In this volume, Hall delves into the depth of the female experience and the human soul with her piercing insight. The stories in *Madame Zero* explore a range of landscapes, both rural and industrial, as well as psychological landscapes. Each story presents a unique and sometimes conflicting world, where dark and sensuous elements intertwine. Hall's writing captivates readers with its vivid imagery and thought-provoking narratives. *Madame Zero* is a testament to Hall's skill as a short story writer and her ability to create compelling and memorable characters.

“Theatre 6” is one of three stories in the collection reflecting a dystopian, post-apocalyptic vision. The other two stories are “One in Four,” where against the backdrop of a global flu pandemic the readers are introduced to a letter from a disgraced scientist to his wife. In this short story, the postapocalyptic vision is centered on the scientist's horror over a virus turning humans into mere tools for its reproduction, thus creating a process of profound dehumanization. The story “Later His Ghost” describes a post-apocalyptic world where strong winds ravage the planet, making survival a challenge for a young man and a pregnant woman sheltered in a barn. According to Kate Clanchy, “None of these stories offers any redemption, personal or global: instead . . . they say bluntly, insistently, in Hall's smooth, clear prose, ‘Look, this darkness is here’.” Apart from her obvious interest in post-apocalyptic fiction, Hall's imagination also testifies to her deep attachment to her rural England roots, with many of her texts highlighting the destruction of England's wild places:

Hall is from Cumbria, and one can imagine that a place like that, beautiful and remote and inhabited continuously for a thousand years, might suggest such concerns to a writer. But this perspective also feels urgent to our present moment, when even regions where weather and ecology have been mercifully stable until now, like

England, are changing through our interference in ways we can see unfold before our eyes. (Mitchell, *Madame Zero* by Sarah Hall)

Hall, who is a novelist, as well as a short prose writer, contended that short stories are much more difficult to write than novels, firstly because of the former's spatial limitations, and secondly because the short story as a genre goes much deeper into the dark and grotesque aspects of the human psyche: "When you are limited to that kind of word count, it can be very hard. . . . It [the short story] is a place for dark psychology and a potent literary dosage. When I start out it usually stems from a thought, or something I heard in the news that gives me a shape. I like reading stories that give you a huge wallop, one you don't see on the surface. I don't like squibs" (qtd. in Flood).

"Theatre 6," one of the three stories in *Madame Zero*, concerned with dystopian, post-apocalyptic circumstances, is based on the true story of Savita Halappanavar, whose death, among other factors, brought about the repeal of Ireland's Eighth Amendment. Halappanavar, a 31-year-old dentist, died in October 2012 at Ireland's Galway University Hospital, after being denied an abortion, even though she was already in septic shock, because there was still a fetal heartbeat for three days after the diagnosis: "The consultant said it was the law, that this is a Catholic country. Savita [a Hindu] said: 'I am neither Irish nor Catholic' but they said there was nothing they could do" (Mitchell, "On This Day") In May 2018, Halappanavar's image was used as part of the *Together for Yes* campaign which sought to change Ireland's legal stance on abortion. On May 25, 2018, the Irish people voted 66.4% in favour of repealing the Eighth Amendment. After "Theatre 6" was broadcast on Radio 4 in 2013, the author explained, in a blog for the BBC website, that the story had been conceived as a response to the death of Savita Halappanavar: "I wish Savita Halappanavar had been more fortunate, but wishing cannot make it so. Nor can speculation about the types of system that allowed her death. Perhaps my story is a protest story; almost certainly it is" (qtd. in Baume).

Therefore, the story thematizes the pair of binary opposites being / non-being from the point of view of a post-apocalyptic, dystopian nightmare, where abortion has become illegal, even when the life of the mother is threatened. The time of narration is never specified; however, the story is commonly read as taking place sometime in the not-so-distant future. Considering, however, the real-life case which inspired it and some of the present-day tendencies in certain parts of the Western world, one would be tempted to think that what the story depicts is something which might happen anytime, in our immediate temporal and spatial vicinity, recalling Adam Stock's statement according to which "We live in dystopian times" (1). Abortion, seen as either death or murder, depending on one's political perspective, thematizes non-being in a complex and thought-compelling manner. The question the story ultimately poses (recalling the inscription above the hospital chapel Dr. Rosinski passes by) is, whose life is sacred, and who decides on the answer(s) to this question?

"Theatre 6" thematizes being and non-being in a variety of manners. From the very beginning of the story, this dichotomy is present in the image of the geese the protagonist, Dr. Rosinski, whose gender is never revealed, dreams of. The geese are gathered tightly together on a field, unable to fly, while the doctor is trying to cycle her/his way through them. The image is recalled cyclically at the end of the story, where, after leaving the hospital, Dr. Rosinski passes a river and an open field, where she/he notices a flock of black birds flying southwards. The hopelessness and feeling of imminent death or at least disease/decay in the story's opening (the sick geese, unable to fly) is turned around in the end, with the image of the dark birds escaping and flying towards a friendlier climate. Non-being thus turns into being, hopelessness into hope, and disease into vitality and the hope of a new beginning: "You cycle through the hospital grounds, past the crematorium and across a small park, then along the river. The field is empty. The grass glistens under the wheels of your bike. When you look up there is a long dark vee of birds in the sky, migrating south" (Hall 57). Another instance of the being / non-being dichotomy

identifiable here is the one between the life oozing out of the wild, unexplored fields, untouched by man, and the lifelessness of the hospital grounds and crematorium, which, instead of inspiring hope only recall death. Nature stands for being, man-made landscapes for non-being, destruction and decay.

The second instance in the story where being vs. non-being comes up is when discussing legislation and hospital policy. Dr. Rosinski, who remains not only genderless, but also relatively emotionally uninvolved throughout the story, ponders on the repercussions of the Hunter fetal care act, which forbids doctors to save the mother by performing an abortion, and instead compels them to do the impossible to save what is termed “uterine life.” Doctors and hospitals who are proven to have attempted to save the mother to the detriment of the fetus receive disciplinary letters, and many doctors are discharged or publicly ostracized:

Since the new legislation came in two years ago, the hospital has been fined several times, and a review is underway. . . . in other hospitals medics have been charged and struck off, their names listed on the back pages of the journals. One or two have even been attacked in the street. . . . Products of conception is not a permitted term anymore. Nor septic abortion. There is a new language, which must be written, if not spoken. Pre-birth crisis. Unsalvageable uterine life. . . . God’s Jurisdiction, is how the prime minister described it in his speech to parliament. (Hall 52)

Being and non-being are thus also discussed through the lens of language, which shapes and creates, or destroys and annihilates, reality. Being and non-being are determined by the words one uses to refer to the world and reality. Dr. Rosinski goes one step further and asks her-/himself: “If everyone acts with duplicity, do they arrive at a kind of truth?” (Hall 52). The question is as complex as can be and forms the ideological backbone of the entire story. It also mirrors one of the answers Hall provided during an interview for *The Guardian*. When asked “What do you want to see or read?”, her response was: “Something that’s trying to find a human truth” (qtd. in Anderson). Reality, or “being,” to use the term the present

article focuses on, is largely determined by what society deems to be the truth at a certain point in time. There is no absolute, timeless truth to guide us. Therefore, being and non-being are determined exclusively by the social understanding of reality and morality. Being and non-being are concepts just as frail as truth and lies, and alternative realities are being created ceaselessly.

Connected to this aspect of the story is also the one of religious belief and the so-called sanctity of life. It is quite obvious from the provisions of the infamous Hunter fetal care act alluded to in the story, that in the society depicted, fetal life is more “sacred” than the one of the mother. Ironically, because of refusing to perform the abortion on time, the woman’s uterus cannot be saved, which will render her incapable of having children at a later time in life, should she wish to do so. The obsession with one life leads to the “loss” of many other lives: the woman might pass away at a later point (just like Savita Halappanavar), and even if she survives, she will not be able to bear any other children, should she wish so in the future. This leads the reader to the inevitable question: what or whose life is sacred and who is to decide on such crucial matters? Being and non-being, life and death, are mysteries outside of the reach of human beings, thus making (human) decisions on such matters always complicated. Furthermore, trying to justify any decision in this respect by resorting to what the British Prime Minister terms “God’s jurisdiction” is problematic from a variety of perspectives. Religion is also a matter of being and non-being, as the existence of God cannot be proved. Thus, moral decisions are made in the name of a being whose existence cannot be certified, and moral systems are built upon an illusory sense of “being.” The absurdity of the society depicted in “Theatre 6” is that it places more value on the unseen and unproven, on non-being, than on tangible, living beings, like the agonizing mother, who, even if she were to survive, will probably be “dead” inside after the traumatic experience.

The story also masterfully discusses being and non-being through the lens of empathy and the lack thereof, especially in relation to the medical profession. In order to be able to do their

jobs efficiently, doctors have to emotionally detach themselves from the hospital environment and consequently from human suffering. Dr. Rosinski does it, and so do all of her/his colleagues, from fellow doctors to nurses. While they remove the agonizing woman's uterus, a fellow doctor starts a casual conversation with Dr. Rosinski about her/his bicycle. Detachment becomes the only way of "being" in a world that constantly challenges human sanity. Tragedies become everyday matters that no longer impress or shock anyone: "You can see fear in her eyes, under the disorientation of illness and shock, fear that used to be selfless, but is now for herself as well as for the baby. Such cases are common enough not to make the newspapers anymore" (Hall 51).

Being and non-being are also presented in relation to gender issues and women's invisibility in "Theatre 6." Not accidentally, both of the story's main protagonists, the agonizing woman and the doctor who tries to save her, remain nameless. Furthermore, the doctor's gender is never revealed, also hinting at women's social invisibility. "Being" as a term is associated with the male gender, while non-being characterizes womanhood. Women are perceived as second-class citizens, whose life is worthless or at least negligible. Dr. Desai, the male surgeon, casually chit chats about bicycles while a woman is on the point of losing her life because of absurd and inhumane legislation. While the story quite clearly poses the issue of female invisibility, one should not rush to simplistically label Hall a feminist writer. Her overall concern seems to be more with a world bereft of essential humanity, regardless of gender: "Lazy critics may seek to label her a feminist writer, or an erotic or dystopian one but while these categories are significant to Hall's work, she is very evidently a writer fundamentally opposed to classifications and constrictions" (Lavin).

Last but not least, being and non-being are present also in the story's use of second-person narration. Directly addressing the protagonists as "you" creates an overlap of protagonist and reader, forcing the latter to identify with the characters. An axis of "being" is thus created between characters and readers, allowing for identification and the development of empathy and understanding.

Employing a wide variety of narrators is one of Hall's distinguishing narrative features, conveying to her writings an air of haunting and prompting readers to escape their emotional comfort zones: "Hall distinguishes herself across an extraordinary range of stories, in full command of a protean style which adapts itself easily to each situation and narrator. Her prose, which can seem both understated and lushly evocative at the same time, haunts and sometimes unsettles" (Mabbot).

The story's end is open: the reader does not find out whether the woman survives. A hint of hope is offered by the image of the dark birds escaping and flying southward, which might be an allusion to the necessity of escaping societies which have become engulfed in injustice, absurdity or religious totalitarianism. The question is: will there be any place left to escape to, considering present-day global political tendencies towards authoritarianism and more or less overt tyranny? Humans have the power to shape their reality, to create being and non-being – but how they choose to do so differs greatly from one epoch or social context to another.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Hephzibah. "Interview. Sarah Hall: I Used to Almost Fear Opening a Book." *The Guardian*, 18 June 2022, www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jun/18/sarah-hall-burntcoat-interview-i-used-to-almost-fear-opening-a-book.
- Baume, Sara. "A Short Story Based on the Death of Savita Halappanavar. *Madame Zero* Review: Sarah Hall Excels in Murky Territory in This Short-story Collection." *The Irish Times*, 8 July 2017, www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/a-short-story-based-on-the-death-of-savita-halappanavar-1.3140968.
- Clanchy, Kate. "*Madame Zero* by Sarah Hall Review – Exceptional Short Stories." *The Guardian*, 7 July 2017, www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/07/madame-zero-sarah-hall-review.

- Flood, Alison. "'Master' of Short Story Sarah Hall Becomes First to Win BBC Prize Twice." *The Guardian*, 6 Oct. 2020, www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/06/master-of-short-story-sarah-hall-becomes-first-to-win-bbc-prize-twice.
- Hall, Sarah. "Theatre 6." Faber and Faber, www.faber.co.uk/journal/read-theatre-6-from-sarah-halls-madame-zero-short-story-collection. Accessed 6 Jan. 2023.
- Harrison, Melissa. "*Madam Zero* by Sarah Hall – Base Instinct." *Financial Times*, 21 July 2017, www.ft.com/content/e9cc62c6-6ad6-11e7-b9c7-15af748b60d0.
- Lavin, John. "What We're Reading: *Madame Zero*." *The Cardiff Review*, 7 Nov. 2017, www.cardiffreview.com/post/2017/11/07/what-were-reading-madame-zero.
- Mabbot, Alastair. "'Extraordinary' Review: *Madame Zero*, by Sarah Hall." *The Scotland Herald*, 30 June 2017, www.heraldscotland.com/life_style/arts_ents/15371848.extraordinary---review-madame-zero-sarah-hall.
- Mitchell, Emily. "*Madame Zero* by Sarah Hall." *Washington Independent*, 26 Aug. 2018, www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com/index.php/bookreview/madame-zero.
- . "On This Day: Savita Halappanavar Dies after Being Denied an Abortion in Galway." *The Irish Central*, 28 Oct. 2022, www.irishcentral.com/news/savita-halappanavar.
- Stock, Adam. *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought: Narratives of World Politics*. Routledge, 2019.