Introduction

We are going to describe factors associated with the suicidal process in lives of Sarah Kane and Sylvia Plath as reflected in the late works of these two female authors who committed suicide when they were 27 and 30 years old. Antoon Leenaars and Susanne Wenckstern (1998) have written: “Suicide notes are probably the ultrapersonal documents. They are the unsolicited productions of the suicidal person, usually written minutes before the suicidal death.” Literary works of suicidal authors written in the time before their death can be read as such suicide notes.

It is possible that the suicidal process set off before Sarah Kane started to write her best play and before Sylvia Plath wrote the best poems of her life. They might have been either created in an attempt to set the suicidal process back (Viewegh, 1996) or as a pure manifestation of this suicidal process which might have brought about sudden burst of strong internal creative powers. In both cases we might take these works as suicide notes and poetic accounts on a dramatic search for the meaning of life and existence.

Nevertheless no suicide note is able to give a complete account of the suicidal mind. Such a note must be put in the context of the individual life as Shneidman said (1980) and in the context of broad theoretical formulations about suicide and personality functioning in general as stated by Leenaars (1988) if one wants to understand the motives lying behind.
Risk Factors for Suicide

Very concise description of risk factors for suicide has been offered by Leenaars (1988) and is based on studies of 10 theories of suicide. There are 5 subcategories included under the intrapsychic factors. These are unbearable psychological pain, cognitive constriction, indirect expressions, inability to adjust and disrupted ego strength. Interpersonal relations, rejection-aggression and identification-egression are then the three of interpsychic factors.

Risk Factors for Suicide in Life and Late Works of Sylvia Plath and Sarah Kane

Since there have been a lot of biographies of Sylvia Plath written, we may dare to say, that all these risk factors for suicide have occurred during her life with most of them being present also during the last eight months that were full of traumatic and stressful events and psychic suffering.

There are no poems left and probably even not written by Sylvia Plath between May 28 and June 30 1962. There are only few poems written during the time before and during the separation from Ted – 3 in July, only 1 in August and 2 in September – the month the couple separated. Then, October was the month when she created 25 poems, the most of the poems written during her last 8 months. In November she wrote 10 poems, then only 2 in December, 7 in January and 6 in five days in February.

We have analyzed the poems of Plath and the play 4:48 Psychosis of Kane\(^1\) using both 8 categories derived from risk factors for suicide as described by Leenaars and the categories that emerged from the works themselves. The most prevalent categories represented both in the works of Plath and Kane were cognitive constriction with its subcategory of tunnel vision and the category of rejection-aggression.

\(^1\) See also Čermák (2003) and Čermák, Kodrilová (2004).
Tunnel Vision

The tunnel vision means, that the suicidal person is unable to see the broader picture, concentrates only on suffering and finally sees suicide as the one and only solution.

The main protagonist of Sarah Kane’s play (2001) is searching for the meaning of death instead, as one might expect, for the meaning of life. The author might have hoped that the meaning of life would emerge spontaneously as a background for the figure of the death that is elaborated in detail in the play. Then she might have been able to elaborate the theme of life in an effort to find the balance between these two antagonists. If so, we must say that this method has failed and at the end Sarah is overwhelmed by her fascination for death. She got stuck in that tunnel represented in the play on various places in the form of light phenomena that are usually framed by darkness and contrasting sharpness of light as in this excerpts from her play:

_Hatch opens_

_Stark light (p.225)_

_Behold the light of despair_

_the glare of anguish_

_and ye shall be driven to darkness (p.228)_

At the end of the play, the image of sharp light is getting more frequent. The sharp light is stinging, hurting and blinding. It limits the view.

This view of perspectives is limited also in the poems of Sylvia Plath. In the last 4 months of her life the word “mirror” appears in 8 out of 20 poems with its occurrence increasing towards February, when she killed herself. At second of her “mirror poems” called **Brasilia** (Hughes & Plath, 1981, 259) she outlines a danger that might come:
O You who eat

People like light rays, leave
This one
Mirror safe, unredeemed

By the dove’s annihilation,
The glory
The power, the glory.

The view of different perspectives offered by the mirror that also enables reflexion of a subject as an object is disabled totally in the poem named *Contusion* which is the last of her 8 “mirror poems” (Hughes & Plath, 1981, 271):

The heart shuts,
The sea slides back,
The mirrors are sheeted.

In case of Sarah Kane, her whole play might be seen as a representation of the tunnel vision since the main theme of the play is the suicidal process itself. In case of Sylvia Plath the death is the main theme of 10 poems out of 51 written in the past 8 months of her life and the words “death” or “die” (or other words with the same meaning) occur 49 times in total in these poems. We dare to say, that these signs reflect the seriousness of mental state of these two authors which might theoretically have been dealt with if only would somebody have re-read these works with psychotherapeutic interpretation or feedback before they were transformed into the deeds.

**Rejection-aggression with and without autobiographical data**

Another phenomena present in the late works of Sarah Kane and Sylvia Plath is the rejection-aggression. We know about the two mighty rejections Sylvia Plath had to face during her life – her father's death when she was 8 and her husband’s abandonment when she was 30. These rejections are very strongly reflected in her
poems with the poem Daddy being the most revealing about her anger towards her two loved ones who were unable to meet her needs. The frustration from unsatisfied needs is another motive so much present in many of her poems. She writes in her poem Birthday Present (Hughes & Plath, 1981, 206):

   Can you not give it to me?
   Do not be ashamed--I do not mind if it is small.

   Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity

   And in the poem The Bee Meeting (Hughes & Plath, 1981, 211) she expressed what frustration she is really talking about:

   I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?

   A rejection-aggression phenomenon is the main theme in 12 out of 51 poems written during the last 8 months of her life. The aggressivity and harshness of her poems driven by a wish for revenge have probably been finally turned inward towards herself at the end of her life. So it might be in the case of Sarah Kane. Both of these authors were very frustrated, had some previous suicide attempts and facing the very fact of nobody being able to satisfy their needs and hunger for unconditional love, they decided to chose the solution of their own. In case of Kane we do not have the biographical data, but the phenomenon of rejection-aggression is so much present in the play, that we might anticipate the trauma raising from her relationships with her significant others. Sarah probably felt betrayed, rejected, abandoned and neglected. She wrote:

   Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you for rejecting me by never being there, fuck you for making me feel shit about myself, fuck you for bleeding the fucking love and life out of me, fuck my father for fucking up my life for good and fuck my mother for not leaving him, but most of all, fuck you God for making me love a person who does not exist, FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU. (p.215)
Tunnel vision and plan for suicide

The play is designed from the beginning as the plan for suicide, the author even mentions the way, place and time and as the drama is developing she elaborates the plan in more and more detail as if she was confirming her decision. She writes already at the very beginning of *4:48 Psychosis*:

*I have become so depressed by the fact of my mortality that I
have decided to commit suicide
I do not want to live. (p.207)*

Schneidman (1982) said that the role of writing may be “a death facilitating process in certain author's lives” and Leenaars & Wenckstern (1998) think that this was also the case of Sylvia Plath in last months of her life. They mention that her final poem Edge sounds like her own obituary. It seems that this last poem of Sylvia Plath has the same function as the last play of Sarah Kane. What is still in question is if she had been thinking about the death for her children too, when she was writing:

*The woman is perfected
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity
...
Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
...
Fortunately, Sylvia Plath has remained faithful only to the part about the milk, which she had brought to her still sleeping children before she sealed the doors of the kitchen and turned on the gas jets. Nevertheless, in this poem she killed her children metaphorically as the elements that – as her late poetry reveals – had been protecting and preventing her from the suicide.

**Indirect expressions and other risk factors for suicide**

In *4:48 Psychosis* the forthcoming final destruction of Sarah’s body is also signalized by the references to its non-acceptance, auto-mutilation and masochistic pleasure. She writes:

*Why did you cut your arm?*

*Because it feels fucking great. Because it feels fucking amazing.* (p. 217)

The feelings of the inappropriateness of the body are sometimes even intensified to the psychotic perceptions:

*my body decompensates*

*my body flies apart  (p. 238)*

The approach to the protagonist’s own body is expressed also through references to eating disorders, non-acceptance of her own sexuality and the low libido. The approach of Plath to her body is totally different from that of Sarah Kane, yet it still makes her suicide predictable. She used her body too to create the myth of Sylvia Plath which Butscher (1976) calls the „Bitch Goddess“ – the image of which is depicted so well in Lady Lazarus (Hughes & Plath, 1981, 247):

*Out of the ash*

*I rise with my red hair*

*And I eat men like air.*
Red together with blue are the most frequently used colors of Sylvia Plath’s poems written during her last months - red is used 23 and blue 28 times. They seem to symbolize two antagonistic elements – red as the symbol of earth (*Red earth, motherly blood* in *Brasilia*, p. 259), aggression and power (*A red/Shred in his little fist. – Balloons*, p. 272) and the color of heart (*red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly – Poppies in July*, p. 240). On the other hand, the blue is the symbol of the death (*They buzz like blue children/In nets of the infinite,//Roped in at the end by the one/Death with its many sticks. – Totem*, p. 268), emptiness, coldness and distance (*Stasis in darkness./Then the substanceless blue/Pour of tor and distances. – Ariel*, p. 239) and a danger symbolized by electricity discharge and lightning (*Flogged trolley. The sparks are blue./The blue sparks spill,/Splitting like quartz into a million bits. – Lesbos*, p. 228). It seems that Plath has interconnected these two elements into one in her poems and finally in her suicide, she transformed the coldness and despair of the blue loneliness into the anger and power of the red-haired myth-goddess which emerged not only from her late poetry but from the act of suicide itself, the act to which the very same goddess might have brought her.

**Conclusion**

In the play of Sarah Kane as well as in poetry of Sylvia Plath we have identified the presence of all the 8 main categories of risk factors for suicide as described by Leenaars (1988). Although we know just a little about Sarah Kane’s life, we know that while writing *4.48 Psychosis* she was studying the psychological literature on suicide and also committed her suicide the way described in her play. The question of the proportion between the esthetic stylization and elaboration of the authentic experiences and feelings will probably never be answered. Nevertheless, we believe that when the aim is to analyze the risks for suicide without any attempts to understand its motives, the biographical information is not necessary. The risk for suicide is evident in Kane’s play the same way it is evident in Plath’s poems. What can be done with suicidal people after their cries for help are decoded and heard is to be replied by psychotherapists. But we can try to hear calls for help similar to these expressed in the play of Sarah Kane:
Please, Don't switch off my mind by attempting to straighten me out. Listen and understand, and when you feel contempt don't express it, at least not verbally, at least not to me. (p.220)

DON'T LET THIS KILL ME
THIS WILL KILL ME AND CRUSH ME AND
SEND ME TO HELL (p. 226)
Literature


