

## **A Cultural Materialist Reading of Martin Crimp's Cruel and Tender: Crimp's Approach to Ideology**

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### **Abstract**

*In the 1990s a new movement rose up in British theatre. This new movement was termed In-Yer-Face by Alex Sierz. The boom of new playwrights' attracted attention, censoring society from various angles in a very different style. Martin Crimp is an outstanding example of the contemporary playwrights who have gained recognition through their great contribution to British Drama since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Crimp's theatre focuses on both political and cultural concerns reflected from the society in which he lives by writing characters who are deeply lineated from contemporary society. In his plays, there is no hero or a happy ending, so clearly does his pessimism of the value of social morals echo through his plays. This article attempts to explore the way of how Martin Crimp criticize the power system and his reflection of society by analyzing and discussing his play Cruel and Tender in the light of cultural materialism. Cultural Materialism advocates that society in which literary texts were produced is inseparable part of literary texts. In this sense, a text reflects the political and economic structures of society. This is why Cruel and Tender is deeply analyzed in relation to its historical framework. Crimp uncovers the meaningless reason of war, political oppression on individuals, political corruption, and how people are affected by ideologies.*

**Keywords:** Martin Crimp, Cruel and Tender, Cultural Materialism, War, In-Yer-Face

### ***Crimp's Approach to Ideology***

I couldn't imagine writing a play that wasn't cut, linguistically, culturally, from the material of contemporary life...As for the background of terror, political hypocrisy, and a city destroyed for a lie. Martin Crimp

Beginning in the 1980s, the world has witnessed dramatic and devastating changes such as the fall of Berlin Wall, terrorist attacks on New York in 2001, the Afghanistan War in 2001, and the Iraq War in 2003. Prior to these dramatic World changing events, in Britain, Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister, constructed her entire country's economy. Her methods of privatization included the reduction of the funds for theatre projects throughout the 1980s, created stillness in theatre. It also caused forced the theatrical to raise its own funds becoming another form of entertainment like film. After Thatcher left office, there was a slight rise in the funds, provided for the theatre. British Theatre again entered in to the process of producing quality plays that challenged society. Many young writers such as Caryl Churchill, David Greig, Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, and Martin McDonagh, began to display an openly negative attitude towards social and political aspects of English culture. This period was named 'New Writing' by Martin Middeke and at the same time, 'In-yer-Face' by Alex Sierz because of the new playwrights' different and brutal language, unusual plots, and shocking imagery. Martin Crimp, who was born in 1956 in Kent, is part of this new generation of the 1980s playwrights. He is one of the most productive playwrights of this group, with radio plays, adaptations, and more than 15 full length plays. He interrogates society with his ironic and cruel language and sense of pessimism from multiple perspectives.

The aim of this article is to examine Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* in the light of Cultural Materialism analyzing Crimp's reflections on the ideology of British society and how he challenges this system of power oppression.

The contemporary theory of Cultural Materialism was first argued in the 1980s in Britain by Raymond Williams, one of the progenitors of cultural studies. The approach was furthered by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, who borrowed the term from Williams. Williams believes that culture consists of everything in our life. "It encompasses industry, democracy, art, and class" (Williams, 1958: xvi). In addition, culture can adapt to changes in "industry, democracy, art, and class" (Ibid, xvi). This is why according to Williams:

Cultural Materialism is a theory of culture as a (social and material) productive process and of specific practices of arts, as social uses of material means of production (from language as material practical consciousness to the specific technologies of writing and forms of writing, through to mechanical and electronic communication systems) ( Andrew, 2013:36).

He advocates that culture intermingles with the social and material processes of society. Williams bases his vision of Cultural Materialism in Marxism. Marx believes that none of us have the luxury of what we want because we are dependent creatures. Our way of thinking is under the control of ideology which is shaped by economic conditions and individuals live under the oppression of this ideology. Furthermore, both the economy and ideology are shaped by the upper class or bourgeois. Sinfield explains that it is with the help of this ideology "we learn who we are, who the others are, how the world works" (Sinfield, 1992: 32). He means that since birth we have been shaped by ideology and learn to live according to them. To depict society, economic, and political ideologies and their changes, literature reveals the historical and cultural attitudes of a given place and its people. Thus, Cultural Materialists draw attention to the crucial and indisputable link between literature and history.

Cultural Materialism shares analogies with New Historicism, which evolved from the writings of Stephen Greenblatt and others in the 1980s. Most of its critics such as Peter Barry (2002) and Isobel Armstrong (1995), evaluate the difference between them by defining Cultural Materialism as British Wing, and New Historicism as American Wing. For Irene Rima Mayark, "both Cultural Materialism and New Historicism share a focus on power and ideology and a view that writers challenge political power by exploring its representations and exposing its inconsistencies" (1993: 23). In this respect, both theories assert that literature means writing the documents of society, policy, and economy rather than writing for enjoyment.

According to Jonathan Dollimore, a cultural materialist, "historical context undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text and allows us to recover its histories" (Dollimore, 1994:vii). He also argues that both the literary text and history intertwine into each other and thus are inseparable duality. This is why British theatre showed a tendency to discuss war and conflict in the plays written after the Iraq war began in 2003. Nicholas Hytner adapted Shakespeare's *Henry V* (2013), David Hare wrote *Stuff Happens* (2013), and Martin Crimp wrote *Cruel and Tender* which is one of the most outstanding adaptations by Crimp. It was staged at the Young Vic in 2004 and directed by Luc Bondy. Critics expressed their admiration with these words:

Spencer was enthusiastic: Nothing I have seen in the theatre to date so resonantly and provocatively captures our bewildering post-9/11 world, with its alarming amorphous war against terrorism and the ghastly aftershocks coming out of Iraq... Although skeptical of the play's politics, John Gross pointed out how 'it's a forceful, carefully worked-out play, and it has been given a brilliant, tightly focused staging... your nerves are so wound up that every detail counts, down to the smallest gesture or grimace (Sierz, 2006:65).

Crimp adapts Sophocles's *The Women of Trachis* to our contemporary world enriching the play with technological devices such as cell phones and television. Instead of using original character names; Heracles or Deianeira, as in Sophocles's play, Crimp prefers to change the names for contemporary ones. He also emphasizes the location of the house, which is near the airport, to draw attention to the change in timeframe. Although in the traditional tragedy, the chorus is used as a precursor of the upcoming events, Crimp challenges the traditional theatre performance, employing music and three different characters to drive the play instead of the original chorus.

The play, which is composed of three parts, begins with Amelia's remorse about her marriage. When she was eighteen, she gave up her education preferring to marry the General. Amelia confesses that she is not happy with her marriage because her husband is often far away from home. The General continuously goes to war, which is why he is always away. Amelia lives with a housekeeper, a physiotherapist, a beautician and her son. After the housekeeper reminds Amelia of her son's presence, Amelia wants her son, James, to look for his father.

James refuses his mother's wish, clarifying that his father is in battle. Both the Beautician and the Physiotherapist liken Amelia to a parrot that is imprisoned in a house. Amelia claims that the Beautician and the Physiotherapist cannot understand what she feels because they are neither married nor have children.

Meanwhile Richard, a journalist, enters to inform Amelia of The General's arrival. Amelia's enjoyment is spoiled by Jonathan, a government minister, when he brings two more people, a girl, Laela, and a boy, with him. Jonathan claims that these are children who were found in a drain in Gisenyi and were rescued by The General. Jonathan asks Amelia to take care of the children until The General arrives. That night, Richard comes back and explains that the girl, Laela, is the woman whom the General loves. Since Seratawa, Laela's father and the owner of the city, does not accept the General's and his daughter's relationship, the General destroys the city to reunite with Laela. To the General, Amelia is disappointed and she sends a pillow, which contains a magic chemical to gain the General's love, made by Jonathan. When James comes home, he blames his mother for killing his father. Amelia feels guilty about her actions and commits suicide. The General luckily survives, but he is in insufferable pain. Jonathan betrays the General and arrests him for his cruel and selfish actions during the war. After being arrested, the General wants his son to marry Laela and help the General to die. At the end of the play, Laela, who manages to learn English, James, and the boy appear as the new owners of the house.

In *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, Alex Sierz explains that Crimp "began his career in the early 1980s, the Thatcher era" (2013:7). He was critical of the policies of both the Thatcher and Blair governments and could not contain his criticism of the ideology of his country leaking into his playwriting. War, which is a constantly recurring image, is one of the central concepts used in his plays, because he witnessed both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. When Iraq war began in 2003, the same year Crimp wrote a short play called *An Advice to Iraqi Women* which was staged at the Royal Court. He tried to explain meaningless of war. Then, in *The City* (2008), Crimp mentions "a secret war" (2008:22) where people are murdered violently. However, the characters in the play do not show reaction or repulsion when they listen to the violence of war and the reason for the war is the same as the reason for the war in *Cruel and Tender* (2004); destroying terror.

In the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet have great power. While the Prime Minister is responsible for the decision to make war or treaty with the other countries, it is the foreign secretary and the Foreign Commonwealth Office that carries out actual foreign policy matters on a day to day basis. Margaret Thatcher has great importance in contemporary British history both because of being the first woman Prime Minister of Britain, but also for her different incredibly conservative economic and social policies and her longevity as leader being elected three times. Her policy of economic privatization was an apparently reduce inflation but was caused by rising Neoliberalism in Britain. Theatre was also influenced by Neoliberalism becoming a source of entertainment rather than criticism. Sierz mentions the tragedy of theatre in the period with these words; "Productions became product, and audiences become consumers" (2013:9). Whereas some people admired her because of her strict ideology of economics, some reacted negatively. At last, "Thatcher was brought down in part by her former secretary, George Howe, who ... made a resignation speech that was a catalyst for a rebellion that ended Thatcher's leadership" (Gaskarth, 2013:122). After Thatcher's leadership ended and John Major, the next conservative Prime Minister lost the election, Tony Blair became the Prime Minister. Blair was warned by Thatcher about the unreliability of Foreign Commonwealth Office which coloured his view of the effectiveness of this office. Gaskarth argues that "Blair's involvement in negotiating a number of policies of international significance in his first term, such as the Anglo-French defence agreement at St. Malo, the Amsterdam and Nive Treaties, intervention in Sierra Leone, and the Northern Ireland peace process, led him to identify foreign affairs as an arena in which he could achieve policy aims" (2013: 131). As described by Gaskarth, Blair overzealously made a number of political arrangements to fulfill his aims. In 2002, Bush, president of United States, declared that both Iraq and Al Qaeda terrorists, who planned and carried out the 9/11 attacks, were in cooperation. After Blair announced his commitment to Bush to take part in Iraq war, in 2003 both the United States and the United Kingdom invaded Iraq. According to their announcement, the reason of the war "was to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, to end Saddam Hussein's support for terrorism, and to free the Iraqi people" (Flynn, 2008:215). While some people found the decision justified, some of rejected their rationale, deeming that the real reason was political in nature. In 2001, Blair explained that "Whatever the technical or legal issue about a declaration of war, the fact is we are at war with terrorism. It is a war between the civilized world and fanaticism" (Rentoul, 2013:591). Thus, they declared war against terror.

In *Cruel and Tender*, war is one of the themes that Crimp consistently returns to. Throughout the centuries the ideology of war has been addressed in different ways. In Shakespeare's plays, *Iliad*, *Trojan Woman*, and many other plays the hero or the commander's success is evaluated through his heroic actions during war. However, Crimp does not make any comments on the General's military achievements.

When he returns home, all the people at home are in a rush. While Amelia wears her most elegant dress, the other women run to complete all preparations before his arrival. After his deceit is uncovered and his personality revealed, Crimp forces audiences to question the effective of his success during the war. Moreover, Crimp reveals the evil political intentions behind war ideology and rejects any justification for war. In *War and Words*, Sara Munson Deats states that when we, as individuals, begin to formulate our personal attitudes toward war, we also encounter confusion and frustration, because, inevitably, to some degree our sense of reality grows out of the present view of society. Consequently in developing our beliefs, we may simply be mirroring the conflict and jumbled mix of society's attitudes toward war (2004:65).

In this sense, Crimp manages to reflect both his own thoughts and society's negative reactions towards war effectively. He also challenges political power with the character of Jonathan who mischievously deceives both Amelia and The General. Jonathan depicts the ideology of the government:

Jonathan: ... Because if you want to root out terror – and I believe we all of us want to root out terror – there is only one rule: kill. We wanted that city pulverised – and I mean literally pulverised – the shops, the schools, the hospitals, the libraries, the bakeries, networks of fountains, avenues of trees, museums – we wanted that so-called city turned - as indeed it now has been – irreversibly to dust (2004:13).

Jonathan advocates that the only solution to get rid of terror is war. This is why the General goes to war. However, Jonathan is obliged to explain the real reason why the General destroyed the city. The General pulverizes the city of Gisenyi, because of Laela, his lover. Laela's father had refused their relationship and The General responded by destroying the city because of his ambition and manipulation. Even though The General claims that he "has burnt terror out of the world for people" (2004:57), he does not mention why he destroyed the city. Moreover, at the beginning of the play, Amelia asserts that The General does not comprehend the meaning of war. She posits:

Amelia: ... that the more he fights terror  
The more he creates terror –  
And even invites terror ... (2004:2)

Thus Crimp clearly refuses to accept the ideology of war and reveals the corrupted and manipulative reality behind war and deceptive power games. It does not mean demolishing terror, but creating more terror. Crimp also illustrates violence of war. At the beginning of the play, Amelia clarifies that they were thrown out of the city to a place near the airport in view of her husband's acts murder:

Amelia: ... he is accused of war crimes – murdering a civilian.  
They say he dragged this boy off a bus  
And cut his heart out in front of the crowd (2004:2).

In fact, when it is thought the death results of wars, violence of war seems more terrifying. The General also admits that war is full of crimes. He says:

The General: ... So don't you talk to me about crimes  
Because for every head I have ever severed  
Two have grown in their place  
And I have had to cut and to cut and to cut  
To burn and to cut to purify the world –  
Understand me? (2004:58).

In this sense, war not only means the destruction of a city or the murder of many people, but it also brings out and increases violence in and by human beings. On the other side, without Amelia and The General, the other people in the house do not care about the brutal consequences of war; murder. During the play, Crimp does not speak highly of The General as Sophocles does in *The Women of Trachis*. In addition, he is not completely cast as a villain. Crimp leaves the decision to the audience. However, he is depicted as one of the most unsympathetic characters in the play. His heroic achievements during the war are rewarded with betrayal of Jonathan. Jonathan makes sure the General is imprisoned for his actions.

Ironically, the soldier, who arrests the General, is the one whose life The General saved during the war. His disloyalty to his wife causes, Amelia's death and his own physical pain. After Amelia learns that her husband deceived her while she was patiently waiting for him, she prepares a chemical poison. Crimp may have drawn the idea of a chemical poison from one of the reasons for the invasion of Iraq.

In 2003 Iraq was accused of having chemical weapons and this is shown as the cause of war between Britain and Iraq. Crimp also draws our attention to the destructiveness of modern technology by using a chemical poison.

Sinfield claims that "relations between the strong and the weak - in the household, at school, at work, in the local community and the state - were characterized by personal cruelty and the exercise of autocratic power" (1992:167). In the play, Amelia, Laela and the other women in the house are cruelly oppressed by The General. The General feels proud and glad when he hears that Amelia committed suicide because of him. In addition, he behaves violently to the other women in the house to satisfy his ego and to gain full control over the women in the house as he does to his men in the army. He hurts the Beautician and accuses the Physiotherapist of sexual interaction with his son, thus his violent oppression is obvious in the play. On the other side, the play also reveals the hypocrisy of the ideology of war and Crimp depicts no one, who takes part in this ideology, positively. Richard, a journalist, betrays The General and explains the real story of Laela to Amelia. Jonathan, who molested Amelia once, is unfaithful to his wife. He also betrays The General and instead of hiding the General's arrest for his dignity, Jonathan unabashedly arranges journalists and cameras to record his arrest. Iolaos, a soldier, is the one who not only cannot help The General but fastens his wrists.

In fact, both Iolaos and the General resemble toys in power games. In *Faultlines*, Alan Sinfield clearly advocates:

The contradictions inscribed in ideology produce very many confused or dissident subjects, and control of them depends upon convincing enough of the rest that such control is desirable and proper. Soldiers have to believe that they are different from terrorists...and most of us have to be persuaded to agree. (1992:245).

In *Cruel and Tender*, The General does not feel guilty about his crimes. When Jonathan comes to arrest him, he declares:

The General: ... that what I have one  
Is what I was instructed to do  
And what I was instructed to do  
Was to extract terror like a tooth from its own  
Stinking gums ...  
That I am not the criminal  
But the sacrifice ... (2004: 67-68).

In fact, The General is the one who does he is ordered to do. Crimp reveals the power of ideology and how people are taught to do what they are ordered to do and how they unconsciously obey the rules without thinking about the results of their actions. Ironically, even if he sticks to the ideology of power, he is betrayed by the politics of power. Furthermore, the soldier, Iolaos, is the obvious indicator of power ideology. Even if he does not want to arrest The General who saved his life, Jonathan forces him and he handcuffs The General regardless of how he feels about the situation. Lastly, Jonathan is also a victim of the power ideology. He is not the one who decides The General's arrest. After he talks on the phone, he confesses that The General puts the government in a difficult position, thus Jonathan is only one of many people who do what he is told.

In *Cruel and Tender*, Crimp does not use a chorus as in the original play. Instead of a chorus, he prefers to utilize the three women characters who service Amelia, Laela, and The General. Amelia does not have to go out to fulfill her needs because there is always one of the women to do it for her. The byproduct of this service is her, alienation from society. At the end of the play, Laela takes over the duties of Amelia in the house, and becomes alienated herself because three women begin to satisfy all of her needs. The first time that Laela speaks is the moment when she explains her all consuming desire for a dress in a magazine. This illustrates Crimp's emphasis of the ideology of economy and how technology affects people, evoking their desire to consume. Crimp understands the system of ideology from the perspective of cultural materialism. Sinfield argues that "ideology produces, makes plausible concepts and systems to explain who we are, how the world works" (1992:32). Indeed, Crimp affirms Sinfield when he states that, "I do not think there is an issue about choruses. And I think it is to do with the society we live in, because I think we live in a society of individual units" (Laera; 2011:218).

Thus, the reason behind Crimp's usage of the three women characters from the lower classes is to stress both the ideology of class difference and how the ideology of economy further alienates people.

As a result, Crimp effectively reflects contemporary society and the ideologies of his time. He is aware of the importance of history, so he prefers to adopt a tragedy like Sophocles's *Trojan of Women* rather than write a new play.

He illustrates his negative attitude towards ideology by showing the absurd causes of war and power of the system to annihilate the individual. Although he does not mention the name of the war in the play, images such as a chemical poison and the speeches that he used; "root out terror" (2004:13), refer to the Iraq War. Unlike Sophocles's hero, Heracles, The General is not depicted as an enormous, effective, and powerful hero. Crimp leaves all judgement about The General to his audiences. He also reveals the corruption of political policy through the character of Jonathan who gives The General the grounds for his failure. Furthermore, Crimp delineates how economic ideologies make people alienated, so he also uncovers the negative effects of capitalism on people's lives and how it makes people "birds in the cage". All of the characters in *Cruel and Tender* cannot decide for themselves and further, and decision made has great personal and social cost. In conclusion, they are the victims or puppets of the power of ideology.

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