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David Harrower's *Blackbird*: Exploring the Psychology of a Sexual Predator

Paul Howl

David Harrower's play *Blackbird*, explores the lives of two people: Una and Ray. It is a play that deals with very mature and emotionally explosive scenes and themes. Years before the play begins, Ray, in his late thirties, rapes Una, a twelve year old girl. Fifteen years later, Una finds Ray, confronts him and slowly exposes the truth of his dark past. On the surface, this play may make a reader feel very uncomfortable and may create very intense reactions and opinions on the subject matter. It is understandable that a person would react in this fashion. On the other hand, David Harrower's dialogue between these two characters allows the reader to find empathy and possible redemption. This idea of empathy and redemption is very difficult to comprehend considering the unconscionable acts Ray committed on Una. For this reason, it is important to understand the word pedophile. According to Psychology Today's article, *Pedophilia* (2018), "Pedophilia is defined as the fantasy or act of sexual activity with children who are generally age 13 years or younger." (Definition section, para. 1). This is a typical definition, one that is easily understood and recognizable. Why do these people find the urge and obsession to have sex with children? What motivates them and causes them to commit such horrible acts? This article explores the psychology of the sexual predator and how that person connects to the play *Blackbird*.

Before we study *Blackbird*, it is important to analyze the psychology of the pedophile. To begin with, what is happening in the brain of the pedophile? Is it physiologically different from other people? There is significant evidence to show that there are structural abnormalities in the brain of a pedophile. Cochran and Cole (2010), determined that,

These abnormalities appear in the frontal and central regions of the brain. In particular, there is a decreased volume of gray brain matter in the central part of the brain. These areas play an important role in addictive behavior. In addition, the reward deficiency complication disturbs the neurotransmission of dopamine involved in compulsive and addictive behavior (Role of the Brain section, para. 1).

This contributes to pedophilia because the reward deficiency complication is connected to the compulsive and addictive behavior. These frontal and central regions of the brain control reward signaling and expectations. Dopamine regulates movement and emotion. When the areas of reward and emotions are reduced, there is a strong hunger for obsession. This is the start of the addictive behaviors.

In addition, it is also important to understand the pedophile from childhood to becoming an adult. Generally speaking, the childhood of a pedophile determines their growth and maturity into adulthood. Marshall & Marshall (2000) theorizes that, "Drunkenness, physical and sexual abuse, inconsistency, emotional neglect or rejection, hostility, criminal activities, social isolation and various other problematic circumstances were found to characterize the family backgrounds of sexual offenders" (p.251). This is a sad commentary on the life of a pedophile. It shows that the family background is very negative and dangerous. All of these elements create a perfect storm that eventually causes the pedophile to act out. One of the most dangerous elements is the idea of emotional neglect. The possibility that a parent is emotionally unavailable can create emotional turmoil for the child. When that unavailability occurs, a child eventually hungers for emotional attachment. They seek that in other individuals. As they enter adulthood, they find out that it is much more difficult to find that attachment in adults. Eventually they turn to children for that insatiable need.

Another major aspect of a child's distortion of life is their fear of rejection. Again, when the parents offer no support to their children, negative reactions will affect the child. Again, Marshall & Marshall (2000) support this idea:

Children who are products of this type of relationship have negative views of themselves and are desperate to be close to others, but at the same time, they are afraid of closeness for fear they will be rejected. When parents are cold and distant and lack emotional expressiveness, children will develop an avoidant style. Avoidant children see others as untrustworthy and will attempt to maintain a safe distance from other people to protect themselves. Both anxious/ambivalent and avoidant children are likely to have low self-esteem, poor relationship skills, and be unable to handle life's daily problems (p.251).

This whole idea of fear of rejection creates many social problems for the child. They desperately are searching for acceptance and approval from others but at the same time will avoid others because of a caustic fear of rejection. This ambivalence moves from childhood to adulthood and eventually the person hungers for a child to feed that appetite.

As the pedophile becomes an adult, the obsession takes over their life. They begin to search for underage children in malls, schools, parks, and a variety of other places. They create trust in the child by approaching them and telling them they have candy, or they have a puppy in their car. The pedophile may sound gentle and trusting but this is all a ploy to get the child where they want them and eventually molest them.

The greatest threat to a child is the Internet. A pedophile has free reign to search and find a child with complete anonymity. They feel very comfortable searching because they are alone at home. They can communicate with the child without fear of retribution. Finkelhor, Mitchell, Wolak & Ybarra (2010) support the claim that, "Another possible catalyst to sexual offending may be the anonymity that the Internet appears to afford offenders, who can groom and seduce victims from their homes under the assumption that they will not be observed" (p.24). The idea that a pedophile can create a relationship with a child online and in their home makes them feel very comfortable and powerful. They can manipulate the child to eventually meet them which in turn will lead to the sexual act. The abuser feels a sense of power knowing

that the child is trained to follow orders from an adult. This produces a great deal of fear in a parent because they don't know what their son or daughter is doing on the Internet.

Another great threat to a child is a teacher who becomes a pedophile. These teachers are in a position of power and use that power to manipulate a student. Jaffe, Straatman, Harris, Georges, Vink & Reif state, "Teachers can prey on students by granting them increased privileges in class, such as being a class monitor, as well as flattering them on their maturity. These behaviors manipulate the student into feeling special, a feeling which the perpetrator then exploits by sexually victimizing the student" (p.26). These extra incentives and compliments manipulate the student into thinking they are special which in turn produces more trust between the student and teacher. This leads to the sexual act; the student may feel this activity may be a feeling of romance between the two people. Arguably one of the greatest real life situations was the Tad Cummins and Elizabeth Thomas case. A teacher ran away with his student for three months. They were found living in a cabin in northern California. It is obvious they had a great deal of sex. Elizabeth was interviewed and told the media that she was still in love with Tad. Again, this is another example of manipulation and mind control.

Movies have a great deal of impact on how the pedophile is depicted. In the movie, "Trust" a young girl, 13, begins an online relationship with who she thinks is a young man. At first he tells her that he is in high school, then college and finally graduate school. He manipulates her into meeting him at a mall. He introduces himself and the girl is shocked because he is much older than what she thought he was. Still, he eases her fears and they go to a hotel room. He forces himself on her and rapes her. Then he disappears. The movie depicts him as a horrible person. He is a predator who hunts, finds a girl and eventually rapes her.

On the other hand, in the movie, *Lolita*, A teacher falls head over heels for a young teenage girl who happens to be his student. He is a very sensitive man who feels so much deep love for this girl. She becomes the love of his life. He is not cruel to her. He marries her mother but the mother dies. He takes

care of her but eventually has sex with her. This is a much different situation than the previous film. He is not the monster and predator that was depicted before. Here we see an unfortunate lonely man caught up in something that is very morally wrong.

As a result of defining and examining the idea of pedophilia, it is now time to move into detail with the play *Blackbird*, exploring the plot, characters and how it relates to the psychology of the sexual predator. This is the basic plot of the play: Una, a 27 year old woman, comes to visit Ray, a 55 year old man, at his office. They are clearly not comfortable in each other's company, and soon we found out why. 15 years before, when Una was only twelve, Ray seduced Una over the course of three months and finally took her away to a hotel for the weekend. Ray spent several years in prison for statutory rape, and Una was ostracized from her community after the incident. Now, she has found him by accident, and the play delves into their complex feelings for each other. Though clearly sexual abuse has occurred, the play that ensues is also part of a love story, a horrible love story, but a love story all the same.

Before exploring Ray as a predator, it is important to see Una as a victim and as a courageous survivor. Una is truly a victim and she has gone through a horrific experience. She had sex with Ray not realizing the permanent mental and emotional damage it would do to her. But she finds the courage to confront him at his office.

Una. We change, twelve-year olds.

We grow up to be older (Harrower, 2007, p.23).

Una is stating to Ray that she has become a much stronger woman and is ready emotionally to attack Ray and make sure he feels very guilty for what he did to her. She continues to make him feel guilty and tells him what she went through. In this passage, Una metaphorically compares her imprisoned life with Ray's time in jail.

Una. I did the sentence

I did your sentence.
For fifteen years.
I lost everything.
I lost more than you ever did.
I lost
Because I never had
Had time to to to *begin* (p.32).

Again, Una is hurling the insults at Ray and making sure he understands how this experience has changed her. She explains to him that she did his sentence; meaning that she felt like she was imprisoned more than he was and that she never had time to begin her life.

As a victim, Una must find the strength to tell Ray that she was just a young girl who was infatuated with an older man. She had feelings of young and innocent love for him. She explains to him that she would do anything he wanted.

Una. I'd have done anything you said.
I wanted you to be my boyfriend.
I wanted to sit beside you in your car and be driven into town.
And for people to see me.
See *us*.
I took a Polaroid of you and
with my friend
we kissed it
we
put it on my pillow and slept beside it.
And I
any excuse.
Brought you cookies and brownies that my mother made.
Asked you to sponsor me for a walk-a-thon (p.45).

Una's courage and persistence forces Ray to understand that she was just a child and that what she felt then was just a crush and nothing more. Although this persistence is an effective tool, Una is reliving those moments. Those feelings have stayed with her for many years after her time spent with Ray. Deep within her heart, she still feels those same feelings with Ray, but the rape overpowers those innocent feelings.

After Ray left her in the hotel room, Una went looking for him on the streets late at night. She was cold and afraid. She desperately wanted to find him, hold him and make herself feel safe, protected and secure. She never did find him and she describes to him how she felt.

Una. You left me alone.

Bleeding

You left me

You left me in love (p.60).

She has powerful feelings of betrayal, rejection, isolation and abandonment. Her excruciating pain is felt deep in her core. She desperately needed him and he wasn't there. The audience realizes that Una is fighting her innocent love she had back when she was a girl and the possible love she has for him now.

In exploring the psychology of the sexual predator within the play, the reaction to Una's visit is one of denial. This feeling of denial may go back to Ray's childhood and his feelings of emotional neglect and social isolation. Ray doesn't want to deal with those issues. Again, in this situation, he doesn't want to deal with Una and their past relationship. Initially, Una and Ray talk about Ray's office. Eventually, Ray makes it clear that she has no right to come into his office and try to confront him.

Ray. You don't have the right to my humiliation.

Where I work.

Where people are.

My colleagues.

Work colleagues.
Walking in, asking for me.
I've nothing to say to you.
I
You're a
some kind of a ghost
turning up from nowhere to
Go home.
Please.
Leave me alone.
Go home (p.19).

It is obvious that Ray feels very uncomfortable dealing with his past. He wants to distance himself from Una and not deal with the horrible things he did to her. On the other hand, he has moved on. He has paid his price by spending time in jail and he has cleaned himself up, got a job and moved ahead in his life. These actions may be honorable but they still connect to the psychology of a pedophile because he may be masking his true feelings of obsession for little girls.

Another aspect of Ray's denial is his reaction to his time spent in prison. Una is asking what Ray did with the photos he took of her. She states that she has seen hundreds of websites of children photographed on beds. Ray is explaining to Una that he burnt the pictures he took of Una. He is not like those sick bastards on the Internet.

Ray. What they called me.
Spat on, kicked.
Shit, human shit thrown in my face.
You know I wasn't one of them. (p.36).

Again, Ray is denying the fact the he has those same impulses, that he wants to look at Una as a young child. He explains to Una that he paid his price in

jail. He became a victim. The other inmates called him a child molester. This type of crime makes the prisoner a target. Inmates can hurt or even kill that type of person. Ray is trying desperately to make Una understand that he wasn't that type of person. This psychological aspect of the predator may be present here. The predator's insatiable need for approval and massive fear of rejection may be present in this situation. Ray needs Una's understanding that he is not a pedophile. At the same time, he fears that she will reject him.

Ray is again blaming what he thinks is the real predator; one that is not like him. He is trying to instill in Una that he cannot possibly be a horrible monster. These statements may again be an example of the denial that Ray is experiencing. This is connected to his psychological state of mind as a predator. He never wants to accept his responsibility for the rape.

Ray. They're always looking for ways to be near them.

To lure them.

These people are

very, very careful

are very very deceptive

the greater the deception

the greater the risk

the more they enjoy it (p.41).

Once again, Ray is desperately trying to separate himself from a pedophile. He is trying to describe the typical pedophile to Una. He is trying to impress her by defining a terrible and horrible person. The challenge is whether to believe that he is a horrible rapist or a man who has moved on; a man who is describing to Una that the child molester no longer exists in his mind and heart.

Eventually Una pushes Ray to tell her what he did to her. She finds out that Ray is having a relationship with another woman. Una asks Ray if he told the woman about their relationship.

Una. Tell me what you told her.

Ray. That when I was forty I had

I had an illegal relationship.

I had sex with a minor.

Una. And she was fine with that?

Ray. No.

Of course not.

But I

I told her what my life was like then.

I wasn't in a good way.

I had problems and I didn't

I couldn't handle them.

I gave in.

I broke apart (p.29).

This is another psychological aspect to the sexual predator. Real life becomes too much to bear and the accuser allows his fantasies to become a reality. He gives in to the emotional and physical longing of a twelve year old girl. On the other hand, Ray may not be wearing a mask of deception. He is being very honest with his new relationship. He has opened his heart and shared his past. This behavior shows his honesty, integrity and humility. This gives Ray hope and a possibility for redemption in his new life.

The notion that a man can fall in love with an underage girl produces a very negative, intense and emotional reaction by most people. They will assume that this is an excuse for the man to have sex with a girl. In the play, David Harrower creates characters that are much more complex. They are not easily defined. Ray understands that he did something very wrong and he feels very guilty. He has desperately tried to move on with his life. When Una confronts him, it brings back all of those emotions and powerful feelings. In the play, Ray tells Una how he feels about her.

Ray. Whatever was happening

whatever I was thinking
thought about
was in me
made me believe I loved you.
Made me walk across the grass, the
get on my knees and crawl under the branches.
And hold your hand and
and kiss you (p.50)

This is not the voice of a pedophile. It is not a manipulative monster, intent on attacking a child. It is a broken, torn and emotional man who is making an immoral decision.

After Ray has sex with Una in the hotel room, he feels fear and he runs away. She looks all over town for him but cannot find him. Eventually she is found by a couple walking their dog. They bring her home. Ray is terrified but worries about Una. Eventually he goes to a phone booth and turns himself in.

Ray. When they found me I was on the floor of the phone booth.
Hugging my knees.
Crying my eyes out.
Because I'd lost you.
I, I hadn't protected you.
It does make me feel better.
That I was coming back.
It does.
Whoever I was then.
It makes me feel better (p.65).

Ray has tremendous guilt. He knows what he did was terribly wrong and he will pay the price for it. But he found decency in his heart and he called the police. He sat on the ground of the phone booth crying his eyes out because

he loves this innocent and sweet girl.

There is a pivotal turning point in the play that causes the two to come together. Una opens up to Ray about her present life. He is touched by what she tells him. He tells her that the room is a pig-sty and they kick around old trash on the floor. He is winded and sits. She kneels. He breaks down and tells her how he truly feels about her.

Ray. To see you now.

And you to be unhappy.

And I am the cause of that.

I never wanted to hurt you.

I did think about you.

I do think about you (p.77).

They kiss, take off most of their clothes, lie down and start kissing. Suddenly he turns away and tells her that he can't have sex with her. Una feels rejected and disappointed. This moment is very telling because it is difficult to know if he has moved on or not. We are not sure if he rejects Una because of her age or because he does not want to relive the past. In his psychological state of mind, he disengages himself from her because he fears he will feel those same feelings from the past. In any case, there is tremendous sympathy for both Una and Ray because they momentarily have a strong desire to come back together. We see a very warped and broken love affair that desperately wants to connect again.

The final shocking moment of the play occurs immediately after the previous scene. There is a knock on the door as someone is asking for Peter. A small girl enters. She looks about twelve years old, the same age as Una when she was young. We come to find out that Ray has a relationship with the girl and her mother. Ray is very nervous and uncomfortable and asks the girl to leave. The girl sees Una and asks Ray who she is. Ray tells her she is a friend. Ray forces her to go. Una is completely shocked and disgusted. Once again he has betrayed her trust. She strongly believes he once again will

rape another young girl. Ray assures Una that he would never do that to this innocent girl. He would never do that again.

Ray. I would never do that.

I would never.

Believe me.

You have to believe me.

Never.

I've never

loved

never desired anyone that age again.

Ever.

Una. Just me.

Ray. Yes.

Just you.

You were the only one.

I have to go to them.

Una. No.

Ray. They need me.

Una. No.

Ray. Let me.

Let me go.

Let me.

Una. You can't.

Ray. I have to.

Una. Ray (p. 83).

We realize that Una is going back in time and truly loves Ray. She is desperately trying to hold onto the past. She wants him to hold her, love her and take care of her again. We also realize that Ray has moved on. He has a life and a family. But the question remains: Is he involved in the family relationship to enjoy a healthy daughter, mother, father relationship or once

again, has he become a predator and is he ready to rape another girl again? This is the masterful writing and plot sequences of the playwright David Harrower. He leaves us hanging and he leaves that question in our minds.

In conclusion, the evidence has shown that the psychology of a sexual predator is one of compulsion and addiction. That person cannot control their insatiable urges. They act out again and again. Blackbird describes a man who in many ways is a pedophile. He finds those urges to have sex with Una and he eventually succumbs to them. A child becomes a victim to his horrible actions. But is there a saving grace for this man? Can we find sympathy for him? We come to find out that he has moved on and changed his life. He has paid his dues in prison. He has succeeded in a new career and he has not repeated the same patterns. This is a man who truly desires to find redemption and find peace in his life. The problem is that he has a new family which includes a young girl. David Harrower forces us to make a choice: Is Ray a predator or is he a man that has found peace in his life? There is a strong argument that shows he has become a decent man. He has gained confidence in himself and found a new life. Redemption can be found even in the most horrible people.

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