

THE WEIGHT OF SIN: EXPLORING THE COMPLEXITIES OF GUILT AND MORAL REMORSE IN JOHN ARDEN'S SERGEANT MUSGRAVE'S DANCE

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Abstract: This paper examines how the play portrays guilt and remorse within the context of war and violence. Arden's play is set in a small English mining town. It unfolds against a backdrop of military tension and the atrocities of imperial conflict. The play reveals the complex inner turmoil that soldiers experience upon returning home. The purpose of this study is to analyse the internal and external conflicts that arise from the soldiers' actions. It explores how these emotions shape their identities, choices, and relationships. The study delves into moral accountability, a recurring theme in the play. It highlights the psychological impact of violence on soldiers and civilians alike. The research method uses a close textual analysis of key scenes, focusing on Sergeant Musgrave's inner struggle. Arden shows how a soldier's pursuit of justice can be corrupted by guilt and a thirst for revenge. Musgrave's guilt for the violence he has witnessed and caused drives him to take drastic actions. His remorse influences his decisions, pushing him to confront his past. This analysis shows how guilt and remorse affect not only Musgrave's sense of self but also the town's social fabric. It introduces an element of collective moral reckoning. The findings show that guilt and remorse powerfully influence the characters' actions. These emotions shape personal choices and affect community dynamics. This analysis suggests that *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* questions the morality of violence. It raises ethical concerns around justice, duty, and redemption. This paper argues that guilt and moral remorse are transformative forces. They impact individual and collective morality, making the play a compelling commentary on war and violence.

Keywords: Consciousness, Struggle, Knowledge, Dilemma, Violence, Remorse and Moral Growth

1 INTRODUCTION

Kenneth Tynan as a pivotal critic recognized and supported the theatrical revolution of the late 1950s and early 1960s in Britain. His contribution to the "formal advance of the British theatre by creating new languages for the stories they are concerned to tell" [1]. He is a "keen follower of the theatrical revolt led by Arden" whose *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* is a powerful play set in post-war Britain. It examines the moral dilemmas and psychological scars left by war. The story follows Sergeant Musgrave and his soldiers, who are sent to a northern English town. Their mission, initially for peacekeeping, quickly turns violent. The play delves into guilt, moral responsibility, and the consequences of sin. It critiques the societal indifference to the consequences of violence. The soldiers in the play wrestle with the impact of war on their actions and identities. Arden uses their inner turmoil to challenge societal complacency. The play reflects on the human psyche in times of violence. It also explores the difficulty of reconciling past actions with moral responsibility. The town's residents serve as passive witnesses to the soldiers' struggles. They mirror the larger societal indifference to the consequences of violence and sin. The play asks the audience to reflect on the moral dimensions of violence. It questions how guilt and remorse are felt both individually and collectively.

2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

This study explores the representations of guilt and moral remorse in *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*. It focuses on the internal and external conflicts faced by Sergeant Musgrave and his soldiers. The research problem centers on how the play constructs guilt as a psychological and social issue. The central question is: How does Arden depict the complexities of guilt, sin, and moral responsibility? This research aims to examine how guilt is portrayed both as a personal and societal burden. The study will explore how characters confront their guilt and what this reveals about moral responsibility. Arden's play addresses how guilt shapes both individual identity and the broader community. This study seeks to fill the gap in scholarship by analyzing guilt as a central theme. It will focus on its psychological and moral complexities. Previous studies have largely focused on the political aspects of the play. This research will offer a more focused analysis of guilt as a psychological and moral experience.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze guilt, sin, and moral remorse in *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*. The study will analyze the psychological burden of guilt in the character of Sergeant Musgrave and his comrades. It examines the tension between personal guilt and societal complicity, focusing on how the town and its residents reflect these issues. Investigate the interplay of remorse and redemption, exploring the characters' attempts to reconcile with their past actions. Evaluate the symbolic role of the town, which mirrors the characters' internal conflicts and reflects

the themes of moral responsibility. This study aims to provide a nuanced reading of the play, highlighting the moral and psychological dimensions of guilt and responsibility.

This study hypothesizes that *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* portrays guilt as a complex experience. It extends beyond the individual and implicates both personal conscience and societal indifference. Through Sergeant Musgrave, Arden explores how guilt becomes a collective burden. The play suggests that redemption is elusive, and moral responsibility is shared between individuals and society. The psychological weight of sin cannot be easily reconciled through individual efforts. It requires collective reflection and action. The play critiques both the individual and the society that perpetuates violence.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of moral and psychological themes in *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*. Most scholarship has focused on the political dimensions of the play. This study shifts attention to the emotional and psychological depths of the characters. It adds to the existing literature by examining how guilt is represented in the play. It also offers insights into Arden's portrayal of war's psychological toll. This research will deepen our understanding of the moral implications of violence. It will explore how guilt and moral responsibility are central to the play's critique of society. Moreover, it will contribute to broader discussions of redemption and responsibility in post-war contexts.

This study will focus on the theme of guilt in *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*. The main characters—Sergeant Musgrave and his soldiers—will be the central focus. Secondary characters and the town will also be analyzed for their symbolic roles. However, the study will not focus extensively on Arden's broader political critiques of war. It will focus specifically on the moral and psychological aspects of guilt. The play's social and historical context will be briefly noted but not the primary focus. The study will remain within the bounds of the text itself, with minimal reliance on external sources or performances.

This study will use qualitative methods, specifically close textual analysis. It will examine key scenes and characters in *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*. This approach will identify how guilt is represented through language, characterization, and symbolism. Secondary sources, including critical essays and academic articles, will provide context and support. The study will use psychoanalytic, philosophical, and literary theoretical frameworks. These will help deepen the understanding of guilt, moral responsibility, and redemption. The study aims to offer a comprehensive and focused analysis of guilt as the central theme of the play.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

John Arden indeed played a significant role in the development of socially engaged drama in the 1950s. "In the 1950s, he was arguably more important as a point around which supporters of a new socially engaged drama could congregate..." [2]. John Arden has a vision of theatre as a community-oriented. "Arden was ahead of his time. One of his dreams was of theatre as an all-day event that embraced the whole community..." [3]. John Arden's *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* deeply explores the psychological and moral consequences of war. The play probes the emotional burdens soldiers carry when returning from conflict. Arden aims a "more objective discussion of political issues than would be possible in a contemporary context" [4]. It highlights guilt, moral remorse, and the search for redemption. Musgrave expresses early on his internal struggle and the guilt weighing on him, stating, "There's a worm in my guts that turns" [5]. The characters, especially Sergeant Musgrave and his comrades, represent the personal and collective trauma of war. Musgrave "will demonstrate to the towns people the horrors of war and soldiery. He brings to the town the skeleton of Billy Hicks, a local recruit, to show what happens when one enters the Queen's service." [6]. Arden uses the play to examine the soldiers' internal conflicts and the broader moral implications of violence, power, and responsibility. Soldiers extend the symptoms of evils and horrors of war on the townsfolk passing through killing twenty-five of them [7]. A central theme of *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* is the psychological burden of guilt. In the context of war, this guilt is not limited to a singular event. It becomes a pervasive emotional condition in those who experience violence. Reflecting on violence Musgrave says, "Well, it's drove us mad-and so we come back here to tell you how and to show you what it's like." (Act III, I) Guilt shapes the characters' behaviour and defines their psychological journey. Guilt becomes a profound emotion that infiltrates the soldiers' consciousness. "A victim must be found, who can absorb guilt and save the community before it annihilates itself." [6]. This extended emotional state can lead to mental breakdowns, as Musgrave struggles with redemption.

Sergeant Musgrave's guilt is central to the play's exploration of war's psychological impact. Musgrave begins confident in his cause, but as the play unfolds, he unravels emotionally. His guilt is both personal and political. On a personal level, Musgrave faces the violence he committed during the colonial war. "You see, the Queen's Book, which eighteen years I've lived, it's turned inside out for me. There used to be my duty: now there's a disease (28). Initially, he justifies his actions as part of his duty, but as the emotional toll grows, this justification becomes hollow. Musgrave recognizes the violence as senseless and dehumanizing. His internal struggle between duty and morality intensifies. His guilt is shown both subtly and overtly. His behaviour becomes increasingly erratic as he seeks retribution. His obsession with justice is distorted by guilt, leading to self-destruction. Musgrave believes that retribution can cleanse him, but this belief is ultimately futile. He understands the violence he participated in was not isolated but part of a systemic problem. He becomes aware of how the military system betrayed him and those he fought against. Musgrave feels both

personally and socially betrayed, leading to a deeper moral crisis. His guilt becomes intertwined with a sense of powerlessness. Musgrave grapples with the consequences of his actions, acknowledging the violence he has been part of. He says, "We was soldiers for sure, but soldiering brought us no peace" [5].

While Musgrave's guilt is complex, the responses of other soldiers offer contrasting perspectives. Arden uses Attercliffe and Hurst's emotional responses to show varying ways soldiers process their involvement in violence. Attercliffe and Hurst also exhibit the lasting effects of trauma. Their inability or unwillingness to confront guilt shows the difficulty of processing moral failure. Arden suggests that some cope by suppressing their emotions. This avoidance comes at a cost, as seen in Attercliffe's numbness and Hurst's erratic responses. These portrayals highlight the psychological diversity of soldiers. Attercliffe avoids confronting his guilt. Musgrave internalizes his guilt, but Attercliffe is emotionally detached. He suppresses guilt and refuses to acknowledge the moral implications of his actions. This denial acts as a defence mechanism to protect himself from the psychological strain of guilt. Attercliffe's numbness serves as a survival strategy, but it prevents him from taking responsibility. Hurst's response to guilt is more complex. Unlike Attercliffe, Hurst does not deny the emotional impact of war. However, he expresses his guilt erratically. His emotional responses fluctuate between anger, frustration, and apathy. At times, he seems resigned to the violence of war. He desires a return to normalcy, but his longing is tinged with futility. Hurst's guilt is a source of inner turmoil, making it difficult to process. His emotional instability reflects the complexity of dealing with moral consequences. Hurst's journey represents the fractured state of the human psyche after trauma. Unlike Musgrave, who seeks retribution, or Attercliffe, who avoids responsibility, Hurst's responses mix resignation and anger.

The varying manifestations of guilt highlight that war affects more than just the body; it takes a psychological toll. Arden critiques war's emotional cost. Soldiers are not only physically scarred but also haunted by their violence. The play reveals the psychological fragmentation caused by the moral contradictions of war. Soldiers struggle to reconcile their actions with their sense of right and wrong. This fragmentation emphasizes the destructive effects of war on mental health. Musgrave's breakdown is a key representation of war's psychological devastation. His descent into madness symbolizes guilt's overwhelming nature. The more Musgrave seeks justice through retribution, the more his morality distorts. His actions, aimed at redemption, only lead to alienation and despair. Musgrave's guilt consumes him, and he sees no way out. Annie, a townswoman, challenges Musgrave's presence, stating, "You've got the death on you, and you bring it here" [5]. Her words force him to face the impact of his actions on innocent lives, intensifying his remorse and contributing to his desire for atonement. "You think you're the only ones who've suffered? There's plenty of graves here already, Serjeant." (80) His obsession with revenge is a metaphor for how guilt drives irrational and self-destructive behaviour. The play suggests that clinging to guilt without seeking atonement leads to psychological chaos.

4 MORAL REMORSE: FROM GUILT TO ATONEMENT

Moral remorse is a deeper emotional experience than guilt. While guilt arises from perceiving wrongdoing, moral remorse goes further. It involves an intense reckoning with one's actions and their consequences. This remorse compels the individual to seek atonement or redemption, transcending mere guilt to grapple with the moral implications of their actions. As O'Hanlon observes, "a moral, social, political significance which implies possibility of change ..." is vital, both on a personal level and within the broader societal context [8]. In *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*, this notion is vividly illustrated through the portrayal of moral remorse—not as a passive emotion, but as a powerful, albeit challenging, force for change. It involves a broader reflection on Musgrave's role in a morally bankrupt system. His remorse goes beyond the deaths he caused to his complicity in systemic violence. Musgrave's emotional journey is marked by self-realization and moral reflection. His remorse connects with his recognition that the violence he participated in was part of a larger, corrupt system. Initially, he viewed his actions as fulfilling his duty as a soldier. But his growing awareness of the system's violence forces him to confront the implications of his actions. Musgrave's remorse is thus tied to a moral awakening but also internal conflict. His search for redemption becomes a central part of his character arc. He longs for both vengeance and redemption, which creates a moral dilemma. His confusion between these desires shows his misunderstanding of true atonement.

Musgrave believes vengeance will cleanse him, but it only distances him from redemption. His pursuit of retribution against the townspeople becomes a metaphor for his struggle with responsibility. Arden uses this obsession to show how vengeance distorts morality and prevents healing. Musgrave's actions perpetuate violence, which demonstrates the futility of seeking redemption through revenge. Rather than finding justice or peace, he sinks deeper into emotional turmoil. The play shows that redemption requires introspection, not external punishment or vengeance. Musgrave's tragic journey emphasizes the impossibility of redemption through violence. In contrast, Musgrave's comrades, Hurst and Attercliffe, respond differently to their guilt. Their emotional responses highlight the varying ways individuals confront war's violence. Attercliffe appears emotionally numb, refusing to acknowledge his role in the destruction. His detachment is a defense mechanism, protecting him from the emotional burden of remorse. This denial prevents reflection and growth, showcasing how difficult it is for some to face their moral failings. Attercliffe's avoidance of atonement demonstrates his inability to process guilt.

Hurst's response to guilt is more complex. While, not as consumed by remorse as Musgrave, he is affected by the violence around him. His guilt is mixed with anger and frustration, revealing his inner conflict. Hurst longs for normalcy but is torn by a sense of futility. His emotional instability reflects the multifaceted nature of guilt and remorse. Hurst represents a character struggling with moral confusion, unable to reconcile guilt with his desire for peace. The differences between Musgrave, Hurst, and Attercliffe highlight the play's exploration of moral consciousness.

Musgrave is deeply introspective, while Hurst and Attercliffe are less aware of their moral roles. Their varying emotional responses reveal the complex nature of guilt and remorse. The play suggests that redemption is a personal journey, not a universal experience. The path to atonement is uniquely individual. Musgrave's profound remorse contrasts with Attercliffe's numbness and Hurst's emotional volatility.

Through these characters, Arden comments on the complexity of moral responsibility and redemption. He shows that the journey to moral clarity is fraught with contradictions and inner turmoil. Redemption requires confronting uncomfortable truths and taking responsibility. At a climactic moment, Musgrave condemns the very duty that led him to violence. He declares, "I spit on all the uniformed and ironed men that sold me this hate" [5]. Here, Musgrave begins to reject the justification of violence, marking a shift from guilt to a critical stance on institutional duty. Musgrave's inability to reconcile vengeance with redemption leads to his downfall. Characters like Hurst and Attercliffe live in moral ambiguity, neither fully redeemed nor condemned. *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* offers a nuanced portrayal of moral remorse. In a symbolic moment, Musgrave performs a "dance" representing his attempt to cleanse himself of guilt. He calls it "the soldier's last parade" [5]. This ritual signifies Musgrave's transition from guilt to a public act of atonement, as he grapples with his role in the cycle of violence. It shows how the emotional weight of war extends beyond guilt to moral reflection. The characters' responses invite the audience to reflect on the complexities of moral responsibility and redemption. In the concluding scenes, Musgrave openly acknowledges the cycle of violence he perpetuated, saying, "I tried to stop the blood, but blood breeds more" [5]. True redemption cannot come from vengeance or self-punishment but from understanding one's role in the moral framework of the world.

5 PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE PLAY'S SOCIAL COMMENTARY

In *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*, John Arden intricately explores the psychological transformations of the soldiers as a way to critique not only the personal toll of war but also the systemic forces that perpetuate violence. These transformations are crucial to understanding the play's larger social commentary, which critiques the military-industrial complex, colonialism, and the dehumanizing effects of institutionalized violence. The emotional breakdowns of characters like Musgrave serve as metaphors for the disintegration of society's moral fabric under the weight of systemic violence, offering a searing critique of the political and military structures that dehumanize both the individuals who participate in war and the societies that enable it. Early in the play, Musgrave hints at his internal transformation when he states, "There's a worm in my guts that turns" [5]. This metaphor reveals his growing discomfort with the violent actions he once justified, setting the stage for his moral shift. "I signed up for glory, not for burying lads I called brothers." (25)

Musgrave's internal collapse is a central feature of the play, and it serves as a powerful metaphor for the broader psychological devastation caused by war. Initially, Musgrave is presented as a soldier who embodies duty, discipline, and the values of the military institution. However, as he begins to reckon with the moral implications of the violence he has enacted, he undergoes a profound psychological transformation. The guilt and remorse that consume him are not just responses to his individual actions but reflections of the larger, societal systems that perpetuate violence. As Musgrave becomes increasingly obsessed with the notion of justice and retribution, his internal conflict grows. His descent into madness symbolizes the breakdown of any coherent moral framework within the institution he served. Musgrave challenges the very principles he once served, expressing disdain for institutionalized violence. He declares, "I spit on all the uniformed and ironed men that sold me this hate" [5]. This statement underscores his transformation and Arden's critique of how militarism manipulates individuals. The more Musgrave seeks vengeance on the townspeople—whom he believes represent the corrupt system—the more he is consumed by his own guilt and the futility of his actions. His breakdown illustrates the destructive power of war, not only in physical terms but also in the moral disintegration it causes. Musgrave's attempts to reconcile his past actions with his need for redemption ultimately fail because his understanding of justice is warped by his guilt. Reflecting on the futility of violence, Musgrave admits, "We was soldiers for sure, but soldiering brought us no peace" [5]. This line highlights the psychological toll of war. Musgrave realizes his actions have led to turmoil and isolation, not glory. Malick argues that modern drama focuses on "the inner psyche and consciousness of the isolated individual" [9]. Musgrave's struggle reflects this shift in emphasis.

The portrayal of Musgrave's psychological transformation serves as a commentary on the moral decay of institutions that use violence as a tool of political or military ends. Initially, the soldiers are presented as mere pawns in a larger conflict. However, as the play progresses, Arden reveals their humanity, showing how deeply affected they are by the violence they have witnessed and enacted. Musgrave's breakdown, in particular, highlights the psychological toll of war—how soldiers, often seen as invincible figures of strength and authority, are profoundly damaged by the brutal, dehumanizing violence they are forced to partake in. This transformation underscores a central theme in Arden's work: the dehumanizing effects of institutionalized violence. Arden's critique of the military-industrial complex is palpable throughout the play. Musgrave addresses the townspeople, urging them to see the role they play in perpetuating violence. He states, "Don't look to me for salvation; look to yourselves!" [5][8](Arden, 49). This call for personal accountability reflects Arden's social critique, urging society to take responsibility for the systems of violence it sustains. The soldiers' struggles with guilt and remorse serve as a direct indictment of the system that dehumanizes both the soldiers and their enemies. The soldiers' emotional and psychological distress is an inevitable consequence of being enmeshed in such a system. Their inner turmoil reflects the ethical contradictions of war, where soldiers are asked to commit acts of violence in the name of duty, while simultaneously grappling with the profound moral consequences of those actions.

The emotional breakdowns of the soldiers also represent the breakdown of moral and ethical clarity. One of Musgrave's soldier's states that "All wars is sin, Serjeant..." (34) Musgrave, in particular, struggles to make sense of the violence he has enacted and witnessed. His inability to reconcile his actions with his moral compass becomes an overwhelming burden. His emotional unraveling highlights the futility of trying to achieve justice through violence. Arden suggests that the pursuit of revenge or retribution only exacerbates the moral confusion and psychological strain that war imposes on individuals. "What I brought here was no blessing, no salvation – but death, death in the name of justice." (85) Musgrave's quest for redemption through vengeance ultimately isolates him further from any meaningful sense of closure or moral resolution. Instead of achieving catharsis or atonement, his breakdown becomes a symbol of the impossibility of finding moral clarity within the chaos of war. Musgrave expresses his disillusionment with the military system that shaped him. He declares, "I spit on all the uniformed and ironed men that sold me this hate" [5]. This line reflects a pivotal moment in his transformation, as he rejects the military ideals he once embraced.

The play's social commentary extends beyond the individual level, addressing the larger societal and political forces that enable war. The soldiers' struggles with guilt and remorse reflect the broader moral failings of the systems they serve. Musgrave's moral and psychological crises are not just personal issues; they are indicative of the failures of the military establishment and the larger political systems that perpetuate conflict. Arden critiques these systems by showing how they exploit the soldiers' humanity, forcing them to commit acts that go against their moral sensibilities, while simultaneously denying them the opportunity to process their actions or seek redemption. By focusing on the emotional and moral consequences of war, Arden challenges the audience to reflect on the ethical responsibilities of both the individuals who participate in conflict and the societies that enable such violence.

Arden's depiction of the soldiers' internal battles—Musgrave's intense guilt, Attercliffe's emotional numbness, and Hurst's fluctuating responses—serves as a microcosm of the broader societal and political malaise that war engenders. Through these psychological transformations, the play forces the audience to confront uncomfortable truths about the ways in which war dehumanizes individuals and perpetuates cycles of violence. Musgrave's journey, from a man seeking vengeance to one consumed by guilt and remorse, encapsulates the devastating effects of war, both on the individual and on the broader society. *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* serves as a powerful critique of not only the personal toll of war but also the institutionalized systems that perpetuate violence. Serjeant Musgrave's Dance, in which mutineer soldiers join those who would be appropriately separate from war destruction, are viewed in a dance of death [10]. Arden's portrayal of the soldiers' psychological transformations critiques the military establishment, the political forces that drive war, and the moral failure of societies that condone such violence. "Musgrave envisions the workings of his own plan to "perform God's dance" and thus to inform the world of the futility of violence and war." [11]. "What's left when the blood runs dry? Just ghosts—marching to the same beat." (100) "Musgrave's psychological unraveling in the final moments reflects his internal collapse and realization of futility. Serjeant Musgrave and his three soldiers, Attercliffe, Hurst and Sparky symbolise, "anti-war lesson." [12]. Through the characters' inner turmoil and breakdowns, the play critiques the destructive power of war, offering a poignant reminder that war is not just a physical battle but an ethical, psychological, and social one. His climatic change is seen in his mark, "And what if the dead rise up not as witnesses, but as accusers?" (65).

6 CONCLUSIONS

In *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*, John Arden explores the psychological weight of guilt through his protagonist's journey. Sin and remorse are complex forces that drive self-examination and the desire for atonement. Musgrave's struggle is both a personal journey and a broader critique of violence justified by duty. His remorse evolves from paralyzing guilt into a force for change, illustrating Arden's nuanced view of morality within systemic injustice. Arden critiques institutional violence, exposing war's toll on individuals' psyches. Musgrave's inner conflict demands personal accountability. He challenges the glorification of war and urges a confrontation with structures that perpetuate violence. Arden suggests that true atonement requires both personal and societal moral awareness. These findings are significant to discussions on trauma and moral injury, especially in military and psychological contexts. Arden's work offers insights not only in literature but also for understanding guilt's effects on those involved in violence. It enriches interpretations of post-war narratives, showing how remorse can drive healing and social responsibility. One limitation of this study is its focus on Musgrave's personal experience, which may not capture diverse cultural responses to guilt. Arden's ambiguous view of atonement allows for varied interpretations, potentially affecting the generalizability of these findings. Future research could explore similar themes in other war literature or analyse how audiences from varied backgrounds respond to Arden's portrayal of remorse. Comparative studies could link these themes to real-life accounts of veterans and those affected by systemic violence. Ultimately, *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* offers a profound look at guilt and moral reckoning. By portraying atonement as a journey toward awareness and responsibility, Arden opens a dialogue on war's human cost and the complex path to redemption.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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