

Annie Ernaux: A Dialectical Relationship between Self and Other in the Game of Shaming

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**Peut-être sa plus grande fierté, ou même, la justification de son existence:
que j'appartienne au monde qui l'avait dédaigné.**

— Ernaux, *La Place*

Le pire dans la honte, c'est qu'on croit être seul à la ressentir.

— Ernaux, *La Honte*

Shame is a traumatizing social emotion often resulting from an unequal relationship between Self and Other. A close look at their dialectic relationship in the game of shaming will provide us with a better understanding of Annie Ernaux' two seminal works: *La Place* and *La Honte*. After the publication of Ernaux's *La Honte* in 1997, shame became a topic Ernaux's readers could no longer avoid. "Mon père a voulu tuer ma mère un dimanche de juin, au début de l'après-midi" (*La Honte*, p.13), begins *La Honte*, acknowledging the most traumatizing event in her life: because of it "tout de notre existence est devenu signe de honte" (*La Honte*, p. 139).

I am definitely not the first one who has shown great interest in the question of shame in Ernaux's writing. Jennifer Willging in the article, "Annie Ernaux's Shameful Narration"¹, published in *French Forum* in 2001, applies both Cathy Caruth's and Pierre Janet's trauma theories to her own investigation, as she tries to uncover the "enigma" of why it took Ernaux twenty four years to recount the traumatic event ("ce dimanche-là") that she could have revealed in *La Place* back in 1983. Relying heavily on Caruth's and Janet's research on trauma, hoping to find, like the narrator herself, the "dernière vérité" "qui unit la fille de 52 à la femme en train d'écrire" (*La Honte*, p. 134), Willging concludes, through a careful textual and contextual analysis, that the narrator's implied fear of exhausting a creative source by speaking the unspeakable is unjustified since the imprint of that shameful experience carries more truth than any narrative ever could tell, and that the sustained trauma caused by the "scène" is the cause of the much delayed narrative.

Even though Willging's "close-reading" of Ernaux's works offers us some very interesting insights, I would suggest that conceptualizing shame from a dialectical relationship between *Self* and *Other* will lead us to a better and deeper understanding of Ernaux's *La Place* and *La Honte* in particular, and her entire writing in general. The father/daughter dynamic in both works presents a unique opportunity of a "case study" where I believe a dialectical relationship of Self and Other in the game of shaming structures Ernaux's characters' lives as well as her writing. As my examination of shame progresses in this work, I hope to bring to light the dialectical nature of the "game of shaming".

Coming from an underprivileged social class, Ernaux's personal success in social ascension through education does not change her status as marginalized *Other* in the stratified hierarchy of contemporary French society. Writing exclusively about the ordinary lives of common people as illustrated by her own family's struggling experience, she is an exception in French literary tradition where the bourgeoisie dictates language, style, and esthetics. Only the "classe dominante" is entitled to prescribe norms for a highly hierarchical French society. To recount lives where "rien ne se pense, tout s'accomplit" (*La Honte*, p. 63) ("nothing is thought, everything is done"), she recurses to a writing style called the "flat writing" (*l'écriture plate*) to retain existential immediacy.

¹ Jennifer Willging, "Annie Ernaux's Shameful Narration", *French Forum* Vol. 26, No.1 (Winter 2001), pp.83-102

Ernaux's self-fashioned "flat writing" can be easily labeled "anti-novel" and "anti-hero" because it deliberately departs from the bourgeois literary tradition by choosing to tell stories of those who generally have no place in French literature, such as her own parents and those who share the same social milieu. Unlike Sartre, who himself was a bourgeois insider and was well positioned to confront the establishment directly and vehemently, Ernaux chooses to carry out her pointed critique of social injustice through her obsessive recounts of her intimate family life experiences. She intertwines with the rapidly changing social condition in twentieth century France, experiences often silenced or marginalized by the bourgeois narrative (the official story). Ernaux explicitly tells her reader that she is facing a reality that has nothing in common with Proust and Mauriac's, and that the "flat writing" is of necessity.

Pour rendre compte d'une vie soumise à la nécessité, je n'ai pas le droit de prendre d'abord le parti de l'art, ni de chercher à faire quelque chose de "passionnant", ou d'"émouvant". Je rassemblerai les paroles, les gestes, les goûts de mon père, les faits marquant de sa vie, tous les signes objectifs d'une existence que j'ai aussi partagée (*La Place*, p. 24).

It is not difficult to sense Ernaux' irony when she states "flat writing" suits best for telling shameful lives such as her father's and her own. By addressing their lives as shameful, Ernaux intends to shame the dominant class and establishment while hoping to get out of shame. Whether she wants it or not, she is in the game of shaming because of her shameful narration. As antidote to "Belles Lettres", Ernaux's writing advocates border crossing², both literally and figuratively. Her shame-plagued life experience carries agony and hope at the same time. The notion of border crossing brings forth a dialectical relationship between *Self* and *Other* in the game of shaming. Reading *La Place* and *La Honte* in light of border crossing welcomes many possible interpretations of Ernaux's two works.

Before entering in-depth discussion of how the game of shaming operates in Ernaux's characters' lives and in her writing, one could entertain a few possible interpretations here. First Ernaux's description of how the social condition molds her father's life and her own reminds the reader of Zola's statement "milieu fait l'homme". Her recount of her father dying in his bed, the very day of his death, and his funeral shortly after, throws us into the world of Camus' *Stranger* where one is "nez à nez" with absurdity and tragedy at the same time. This "Qu'est-ce qu'on va penser de nous?" (*La Place*, p. 61) depicted in her parents' (especially her father's) agonizing anxiety throughout their lives also illustrates indeed the alienating gaze of *Other*: the cornerstone of Sartre's ontology of phenomenology. In addition, *La Place* and *La Honte* inevitably invite interpretations à la Marx (class struggle and alienation), à la Foucault (surveillance and punishment), and à la Bourdieu (symbolic violence). Finally an ethnographical interpretation seems equally pertinent since "Etre en somme ethnologue de moi-même" (*La Honte*, p. 40) is the author/narrator's chosen method in *La Honte*. However, despite this spectrum of interpretative possibilities, Ernaux herself flatly rejects a psychoanalytical approach to her shameful experience, discouraging any attempt to psychoanalyze the content of her writing as well as the writing itself.

While any of the aforementioned interpretations might shed some light on decoding the game of shaming, none of them alone explains the complexity masked by the "simplicity" of lives and writing in question. I suggest, in this article, a socio-philosophical approach that welcomes contributions of different interpretations and encourages constant border crossing. American sociologist Thomas J. Scheff,³ panoramic review of sociological theories on shame and the social bond, put forward several theses on shame by some of the world's renowned sociologists. These theses greatly helped me frame my interpretation of *La Place* and *La Honte*. According to Scheff, most influential sociologists from Emile Durkheim to Marx Weber, to Erving Goffman, all tend to agree that shame is a social emotion. Scheff's review suggests that classic sociologists don't refer directly to shame in their discussion of emotions as a powerful force in the structure and change of societies (even their discussion of emotions were often vague and general).

² If you are interested in the topic of "border crossing", you are welcome to read my article "Rethink Tournier's *Friday*: I is Other – Constant Becoming as Postcolonial Condition", *Australian Journal of French Studies*, Volume XLVI, pp. 72-82. The work was published in 2009 under my former name "Zhaoding Yang".

³ Thomas J. Scheff is a Professor Emeritus of Sociology from University of California-Santa Barbara. He is an important sociologist in the field of micro-sociology and an author of a number of intellectually compelling books on social emotions. His book *Bloody Revenge: Nationalism, War, and Emotion* (1994) that offered to explain the Franco-Prussian War from a shame theory was very original. He has published extensively on shame and continues to research the topic.

Goffman was the first sociologist who unequivocally asserted the centrality of shame in social relations in his book *Interaction Ritual*⁴, but this empirical study of facial expressions tends to focus on shame *per se*. It is the following three important works (reviewed by Scheff) that provided me with critical tools for this discussion of shame in Ernaux's two quasi autobiographies. First in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*,⁵ Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb focus on working-class males' low self-esteem in the United States in the twentieth century. Through extensive interviews, the authors suggest that social status plays a major role in underprivileged working men's chronic suffering that they called "hidden injuries of class". Those working-class men's desperate worry about their image in the eyes of others leads them to cancerous self-doubt. Male dominated society of that time made it more traumatizing.

Sennett and Cobb's ideas support my analysis of Ernaux's father's living shame (class consciousness) functioning as a fundamental organizing principle of her narrative. Then in *The Civilizing Process*⁶, Norbert Elias argues that what characterizes "modernity" is how, increasingly, the dominant class systematically plays the game of shaming for social control. Elias' argument allows me to contextualize shame in *La Place* and *La Honte* and to better demonstrate how symbolic violence operates through institutions such as family, school, church, prison, and political parties in contemporary French society.

Finally in *On Shame and the Search for Identity*⁷, Helen M. Lynd points out that acknowledgement of shame strengthens social bonds while lack of acknowledgement creates alienation. Lynd's perspective invites me to take a closer look at Ernaux's writing shame: from the father's "interiorizing" shame all his life to his daughter's "outing" shame in her two works, the game of shaming continues from the real world well into the symbolic sphere.

Despite their different focuses on shame, all the aforementioned sociologists do have one thing in common: they all unequivocally assert, from different perspectives indeed, that *Other* plays a crucial role in the game of shaming. I would even go farther by saying that shame is utterly inconceivable without interaction with *Other*.

The notion of *Other* can be conceived of philosophically, sociologically, anthropologically, religiously, psychologically, linguistically, and politically. Understanding the notion of *Other* from different perspectives thus inevitably leads to diverse focuses on issues such as subjectivity, moral conscience, religious faith, identity, race, gender, sexuality, language, social injustice, ideology, power struggle, and shame. In my reading of Ernaux' *La Place* and *La Honte*, I choose to approach the concept of *Other* from a socio-philosophical angle. I propose to define *Other*, not as an either/or subject/object, but in Ernaux' case as a constantly shifting perception of a symbolic relationship between *Self* and *Other*, materializing the dynamic interplay of the "classe dominante" and the "classe dominée". If viewed from the perspective of the "classe dominée", *Other* represents the "classe dominante" who dictates *the* norm in every domain where the "classe dominée" is at least systematically marginalized if not always denied access, and consequently feels ashamed of being *Other* in the eyes of the "classe dominante". However if perceived from the perspective of the "classe dominante", *Other* is unmistakably the "classe dominée" always appearing to be displaced/misplaced and being everything that is not supposed to be according to the dominant ideology. According to Bourdieu's theory on symbolic violence,⁸ this class "alienation" is not *inter-subjective* (meaning one individual's direct domination over the other), but rather *structural* (meaning under immaterial forms of competition and accumulation for prestige and recognition).

⁴ Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*. New York: Anchor, 1967

⁵ Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, New York: Vintage Books, 1972

⁶ Norbert Elias, *The Civilized Process*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994

⁷ Helen M. Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity*. New York: Science Editions, 1961

⁸ Regarding Bourdieu's theory on symbolic violence, I suggest his following works:

Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984)

Masculine Domination, translated by Richard Nice (California: Stanford University Press, 2001)

Language and Symbolic Power, translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999)

Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London, Sage Publications, Second Edition, 1990)

The “classe dominée” ends up accepting, often unconsciously, cultural and social domination due to misrecognition of power relations situated in the very civilizing process that drives the project of “modernity”. While the bourgeoisie gains the legitimacy of domination, the “classe dominée” falls deeper and deeper into alienation – the inferiority complex.

To speak of domination or symbolic violence is to say that, except in the case of a subversive revolt leading to inversion of the categories of perception and appreciation, the dominated tend to adopt the dominant point of view on themselves.⁹

It is from this perspective that I argue the game of shaming produces and reproduces two stubborn symptoms in modern society: domination and subordination. It is not unreasonable to assert that this antagonism is responsible for social injustice we witness every day. Bourdieu’s theory further strengthens my belief that simply interacting with *Other* does not necessarily lead to shame, and that shame comes into play only when *Self* and *Other* are perceived from a hierarchical order, and supported by a powerful and faceless symbolic system in place for social control. I believe a thorough understanding of the dialectical relationship between *Self* and *Other* is indispensable if one hopes to ever penetrate the essence of shame.

Examining shame from the angle of a dialectical relationship between *Self* and *Other*, the following definitions/delimitations of shame may be distilled: 1). Shame is relational; 2). Shame is to be seen (judged) by *Other*, both literally and figuratively; 3). Shame is the result of a hierarchical relationship; 4). Shame is a painful, therefore suffering emotion; 5). Shame aims at the person instead of the sheer act; 6). Shame belongs to symbolic violence. These propositions structure my reading of *La Place* and *La Honte* and therefore my socio-philosophical approach to shame. Keeping the above conceptual framing in mind, I will focus on showing, in my reading of the two stories, how a dialectical relationship is woven with three main threads: *Self*, *Other* and *Shame*. The two texts become most understandable if read as this dynamic interplay between *Self*, *Other*, and *Shame*.

Through the game of shaming, the gaze of *Other* engenders shame; being this continually chastised *Other* by the “classe dominante” generates the inferiority complex; internalizing the feelings of shame and inferiority leads to frustration and anger (illustrated by the “scène” that Sunday in June 1952 when Ernaux’s father tried to kill her mother); finally “outing” shame in writing puts Ernaux in a suffocating dilemma: while having the intention to shame the French hierarchical society as being responsible for social injustice by digging deep into her own, especially her father’s shameful existence, in the hope of connecting the girl before the “scène” with the woman who is writing now, the daughter with the father, and the working class origin with the acquired bourgeois status, Ernaux ends up exposing her father completely naked, both literally and figuratively, and so further alienates herself. Ironically at the very end the “classe dominante” is not the active agent of shaming, instead Ernaux is. She is shaming her father beyond his grave, with a most bourgeois weapon: writing! Being displaced, fragmented, separated, alienated, Ernaux acquires a new situation as *neither/ nor*: no longer truly belonging to the “classe dominée”, but not yet (probably never) really initiated to the “classe dominante”, she is destined to constant border crossing in search for her identity. Ernaux’s search for identity tragically mirrors her father’s precarious identity throughout both their lives.

The narrator starts *La Place* recounting a decisive success in her life: she passed the “épreuves pratiques du Capes” in a high school in Lyon and became a “professeur titulaire” in secondary education. Her brief description of the almost comic circumstances where she made it through the tough exam already winks at the flaws of French educational system: male domination, power structure, and social hierarchy. Also there is a very interesting detail to be noticed: for her exam the narrator did an “explication du texte” on Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot*. Strangely this makes me imagine *the father Goriot* and *father Ernaux* as amputated twins who belong to different times, possess their own stories, but share the same “comédie humaine” where their daughters play important roles. The statement “Je n’ai pas cessé de penser à cette cérémonie jusqu’à l’arrêt de bus, avec colère et une espèce de honte” (*La Place*, p.12) reflects the narrator’s mental state after the exam. Why anger and shame after a supposedly very positive event? And in the next page she introduces the contrasting event: the death of her father two months after she becomes a “professeur titulaire”. Putting her own success and her father’s death next to each other, Ernaux, “professeur titulaire”, assigns her reader the very first homework dealing with a perplexing question: what is “A Man’s Place (the English title of *La Place*)”?

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, translated by Richard Nice (California, Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 119.

Before one knows anything at all about the father's life, one is to painfully witness his last humiliation. Instead of recounting her father's life chronologically, the narrator, with her mother announcing her father's death from the upper part of the stairs with a seemingly emotionless "c'est fini", puts her reader in front of a humble death and quickly moves on with description of her father's almost repugnant cadaver in a apparently calm tone disguising agonizing emotions in a semi-private space (the living space above the family's "café-épicerie"). She saw her father's sex for the first time! The description of the episode of transporting her father's body from upstairs to his coffin is even more compelling:

Le corps a dû être enveloppé dans un sac de plastique et traîné, plus que transporté, sur les marches, jusqu'au cercueil posé au milieu du café fermé pour une heure. Une descente très longue, avec les commentaires des employés sur la meilleure façon de s'y prendre, pivoter dans le tournant, etc. (*La Place*, pp. 18-19.)

At the funeral, the father's existence was categorized by the priest as a "vie d'honnêteté, de travail" and as a "homme qui n'a jamais fait de tort à personne" (*La Place*, p. 20). The materiality of Ernaux's descriptions of the final episode of her father's life hopelessly arouses corporeal reactions of disgust and shame. Ernaux's recount of her father's shameful death naturally prepares her reader for an encounter with her father's shameful life where he is never master of his own place.

Going through her father's belongings after the funeral, the narrator discovers an old photo that slipped from between a folded clipping of an old newspaper article. In the photo she recognizes her father among other "ouvriers", looking serious and "presque inquiet" (*La Place*, P. 22), whereas

La coupure de journal donnait les résultats, par ordre de mérite, du concours d'entrées des bacheliers à l'école normale d'institutrices. Le deuxième nom, c'était moi. (*La Place*, p. 22.)

These two ordinary objects succinctly frame the daughter/father relationship, intimately connected while at the same time desperately separated.

Taking a first-class train with her son on the way back to her own home, she painfully realizes that "maintenant, je suis vraiment une bourgeoise" (*La Place*, p. 23) and "il est trop tard" for her to reconnect with her defunct father.... In that same summer the narrator decides to write a novel in which her father is the main character and becomes disgusted in the middle of her writing. That's when she chooses the "flat writing".

Je rassemblerai les paroles, les gestes, les goûts de mon père, les faits marquants de sa vie, tous les signes objectifs d'une existence que j'ai aussi partagée. (*La Place*, p. 24.)

After assessing her father's place in writing, the narrator can only hope to collect "objective traces" of his existence under forms of speech patterns, prejudices (especially against priests), gestures, tastes, eating and other habits, and hygiene in order to piece together the father's place in the society.

After witnessing her father's utterly humiliating passage from his death bed to his graveyard, through her "flat writing", one learns that her father begins his life "quelques mois avant le vingtième siècle, dans un village de Caux, à vingt-cinq kilomètre de la mer" (*La Place*, p. 24), and that his childhood coincides with the time evoked in Proust and Mauriac's writing, but has no place in it. As no one can choose one's birth (pure contingency in Sartre's eyes), the father is "mal né" – in an illiterate peasant family without land surrounded within a social milieu where people barely manage to be presentable on Sundays, children always have parasites, and adults and children alike think of communion two months ahead and starve themselves three days before so they can eat and drink as much as they can, so much that they get sick.

Un enfant du vilage, en convalescence d'une scarlatine, est mort étouffé sous les vomissements des morceaux de volaille dont on l'avait gavé. (*La Place*, p. 28.)

Such poignant descriptions are found throughout *La Place*. Ernaux's quasi cinematic writing keeps shocking our sensibility with vivid images of struggling people surviving in an often polarized society. The narrator's presentation of her father's life constantly contrasts his happy nature with the hostility of his social condition, his desire to move forward socially with reoccurrences of his hidden class injuries (his humble class origin, for instance), and his continual efforts to undo what he is ("classe dominée") with his slim hope to become which he is not ("classe dominante") through his daughter's social ascension. These contrasts make the story of the father's shameful existence even more compelling.

While *La Honte* focuses on the “scène” that turned her whole existence into shame when she was twelve years old, I want to point out that parallel to the “scène” an event I would call the “verdict” constitutes the origin of her father’s shame, and it coincidentally happened when he was himself twelve years old! One day when he and his older brother were absent at school because they had to help their parents with farm work, the school master scolded them saying “Vos parents veulent donc que vous soyez misérables comme eux!” (*La Place*, p. 29) At age of twelve, although talented and eager to learn, the father had to abandon his school because “on ne pouvait plus le nourrir à rien faire” (*La Place*, p.30). Instead of continuing his school, he became a cowherd and slept above the stable where “les bêtes rêvent, toute la nuit tapent le sol” (*La Place*, p. 31.). Both the father and the daughter stepped into their teenage-hood with a violent awakening of their social class. In my opinion, the “verdict” was as significant in the father’s life as the “scène” was in the daughter’s. The big difference is that the father entered the game of shaming and carried shame all the way to his tomb without ever being able to acknowledge it.

In *La Place*, the father’s life span covers profound social changes that inevitably shaped his life. From a cowherd to a factory worker and to a “petit commerçant”, each step forward sensitized his keen and painful awareness of low social status based on humble origins and inadequate education. Although his hyper-critical wife would proudly make statements such as “mon mari n’a jamais fait ouvrier” (*La Place*, p. 36.), she would also make comments such as “c’est un homme de la campagne, que voulez-vous” (*La Place*, p. 67). This indeed was not going to help his self-esteem. “Faire paysan signifie qu’on n’est pas évolué, toujours en retard sur ce qui se fait, en vêtements, langage, allure” (*La Place*, p. 70), the father is perfectly aware of being scrutinized by invisible, but powerful judging eyes in every corner, and lives therefore nervously under constant self-monitoring. His incurable anxiety is condensed in this obsessive question “qu’est-ce qu’on va penser de nous?” One would say that his teacher’s “verdict” when he was twelve years old is tattooed into his whole being. He is determined not to repeat his own parents’ misery, mercilessly pointed out by his school teacher. With rapid and profound social changes in twentieth century France, both physical and social mobility were ideologically welcomed as social progress. But unfortunately for the father as well as for many other underprivileged French, despite some baby-steps made towards social ascension, they, instead of enjoying new opportunities, often became victims of “la peur d’être déplacé, d’avoir honte” (*La Place*, p. 59) and were left further behind with the country’s modernization. Fear and shame followed the father like his own shadow all his life.

The hard-to-miss fragmented quality of the narrative throughout *La Place* is intentionally created to reflect her father’s fragmented life in reality. She rejects the illusion of a cohesive story when it comes to represent his real life experience, especially the kind of life experience where language itself is a source of shame. This question of fragmentation becomes more significant if examined from the perspective of class division. All the “facts” the narrator is trying to recollect in order to constitute her father’s identity/place are carefully presented according to an organizing principle: “centre” versus “périphérie” (this binary opposition is often employed in debates concerning different aspects of French culture) or the “classe dominante” versus the “classe dominée”. Following this organizing principle, the narrator of *La Place* gives us a “walking tour” learning about her father’s “banal” life “scène” after “scène”. We find ourselves constantly facing contrasting images: the supremacy of standard French over regional languages permeates the very psyche of the French, especially those from lower social class for whom, even bad French is better than the “patois” (the father thinks “patois” is ugly even though he is not even close to mastering French); the “refined taste” such as classic music, poetry, serious novels, painting, and museums, mocks, in every occasion, the “vulgar taste” of circus, popular novel, silly movies, popular radio broadcasting, fire works, and folk fairs (the father never sets his food in a museum).

The “elegance” of bourgeois table manners makes the father’s peculiar eating habits appear disgusting. The countless privileges of people living in the center of Y (Yvetot) contrast the endless misery of those from the outskirts of Y. The impeccable bourgeois behavior in their family “condemns” the narrator’s parents’ daily interactions full of “grossièreté” (the father’s conversations with costumers are often mixed with scatology); the division of “par ici” and “par là-bas” manifests in fact social barriers under the disguise of geographical separation. What we learn through this “walking tour” is that the father’s life incarnates hidden class injuries suggested in Sennett and Cobb’s work mentioned earlier, and that class division is the fundamental cause of hidden class injuries. The father’s feeling of inferiority and shame deepened when the narrator reached her teenage-hood and became angered by acute class-consciousness. Tormented by her puberty the narrator gangs up with her mother against the poor father; the father/daughter relationship worsens day after day as anger, frustration, and sadness tear them apart.

In the second half of *La Place*, the narrator describes in detail the growing distance between herself and her father. That distance does not stop growing until she painfully realizes at her father's death her belated desire to be close to him. Describing her dead father's unrecognizable look, the narrator lamented: "même celui-là, je ne le reverrais jamais" (*La Place*, p. 16).

The father tried very hard to cope with, if not overcome, his feeling of inferiority and shame. His pleasure for building and demolishing things and his passion for his perfectly maintained vegetable garden reveal his fantasy (unconscious) of remaking himself. In these real and imaginary spaces he was at least given a chance to secretly savor the pride he was denied by the society. While shame made him hesitant and evasive in a public space, he was at ease (away from the gaze of Other) in his own space. The father's happy nature and good physical health were weapons that helped him survive in a patriarchal society in some ways, but his nurturing nature (maternal characteristics according to convention) did not serve him as well. He took great pleasure in taking care of his daughter's physical well being (happy to see her eating well and sleeping enough), but never met his daughter's teachers from the "pensionnat". Although the father's greatest pride was that one day his daughter would belong to the bourgeoisie through successful schooling, it was his wife, not himself, who acted as decision maker regarding their daughter's education. Shame prevented him from participating in certain aspects of social intercourse, especially in those learned circles such as his daughter's private school ("pensionnat") where manipulation of language is requisite.

Towards the end of *La Place* when the father's health deteriorated after the operation and the narrator's success got closer (she was a student at the University of Rouen studying "lettres modernes"), we sense that the father's death became inevitable. "Je ne suis plus bon à rien" (*La Place*, p. 87), he said to his wife; "ton père, regarde-le, c'est un coq en pâte!" (*La Place*, p. 91), his wife said to their daughter, in front of him. The father lost his pride in being a man. When one day, near the end of his life, the father said to his daughter, with his eyes full of pride: "Je ne t'ai jamais fait honte" (*La Place*, p. 93), the daughter did not react, but wrote *La Honte* twenty four years later. Ashamed of his own parents, the father could not bear the thought he would be the source of shame for his own daughter. He left his world without ever escaping the trap of the game of shaming that operates beyond time and space.

While the narrator of *La Place* recounts her father's living shame with regret, controlled anger against social injustice, sadness, and a fair amount of tenderness, the narrator of *La Honte* neurotically outs her shame, the shame triggered by the "scène" back in 1952 in that mid-June Sunday afternoon when her father tried to, with unleashed anger and harshness, kill her mother. Revisiting the "scène" that tattooed her with shame, she concentrated on her perception of her life by trying to be her own "ethnologue", analyzing two pictures of her taken before and after the "scène". The first is taken in June 5th 1952, a serious looking young girl wearing huge glasses and dressed for communion, a physically not yet fully developed little girl who still believes in the perfect world taught at the "pensionnat". The other is taken at the end of August 1952 during an organized summer trip in Biarritz with her father; she is dressed and posed to show the "coquetterie" of being a little woman with a big smile on her face, but really a perturbed teenage girl consumed with shame.

The narrator of *La Honte* does not offer much additional information that we haven't already learned in *La Place*: the family's daily worries, her parents' peculiar habits and behaviors, the domestic violence (both physical and verbal), jealousy and envy, fear/lack of originality, social inadequacy, political ambiguity, low self esteem, and backwardness in all aspects found in their particular community. But after the "scène", these same "facts" gain terrifying new effect: from the narrator's perspective a feeling of total marginalization.

Looking at her two pictures taken before and after the "scène" "jusqu'à perdre toute pensée" (*La Honte*, p. 26), the narrator hopes to penetrate the secret of what separates the little girl "en communiant" (*La Honte*, p. 22) and the little woman "avec l'air anxieux" (*La Honte*, p.25) trying to be who she is not: "des gens chics, des villégiaturistes" (*La Honte*, p. 25), and admits she would not believe it was actually her in those two pictures if she had never seen them before. The narrator speaks:

Trois mois à peine les séparent. La première date de début juin, la seconde de fin août. Elles sont trop différentes par le format, la qualité, pour indiquer un changement certain dans ma silhouette et ma figure, mais il me semble que ce sont deux bornes temporelles, l'une, la communiant, à la fin de l'enfance qu'elle ferme, l'autre, inaugurant le temps où je ne cesserai plus d'avoir honte. (*La Honte*, P. 26.)

Right after the above reflection, in the next page the narrator talks about her disgust while looking at a “tache” on a black and white postcard. The very symbolism of the “tache” provides us with a key to decode *La Honte*. After the “scène”, she continually suffers from a “stained” life! She tries to be her own “ethnologue” hoping to grasp the cause of her shameful existence. Searching in the local archives where parade the “big events” of that time period, she finds no place for the “scène”. Establishing a “topographie” of her city, profiling people from her family’s surroundings, analyzing local “moeurs” and diametrically opposed “tastes” based on social class, the narrator finally “recognizes” the “lien” between two persons in the pictures when she tries to reconstruct her life at the “pensionnat”...

The “pensionnat” constitutes a perfect place where both Bourdieu’s argument on symbolic violence and Foucault’s ideas on surveillance and punishment seem relevant. The narrator’s life in *La Honte* is structured as a “va et vient” between the “pensionnat” and her family. While the first represents the “true”, the “good”, and the “beautiful”, the latter incarnates the opposite. In the “pensionnat”, the narrator, like other pupils, unconsciously succumbs herself to symbolic violence while buying into competition for recognition and prestige (Bourdieu). Being an excellent student temporarily gives her the illusion of being identified with the “pensionnat” (in contrast with “école laïque”). In Foucault’s words, the “pensionnat” actually “normalizes” the narrator’s life, and in return enhances its legitimacy in her eyes. In some ways, the “pensionnat” shelters the narrator from shame. But the “scène” changed everything and excluded the narrator’s family from the world of “normality”, at least in the narrator’s eyes.

Nous avons cessé d’appartenir à la catégorie des gens corrects, qui ne boivent pas, ne se battent pas, s’habillent proprement pour aller en ville. (*La Honte*, P. 115.)

It is only two pages later after the above passage that the narrator recounts the shameful moment when dropping her off at her parents’ house late in the night after attending a Summer Youth Festivals for Christian schools in Rouen, her private school teacher saw her sleepy shaggy mother in a tattered and wrinkled sleeping shirt that “on s’essuyait avec, après avoir uriné” (*La Honte*, p. 117). She became petrified by indescribable shame.

Je me suis engouffrée dans l’épicerie pour faire cesser la scène. Je venais de voir pour la première fois ma mère avec le regard de l’école privée. (*La Honte*, P. 117.)

Believing in the “universalité”/“standard” of the “pensionnat”, the narrator of *La Honte* agonizes and imagines her family’s “stained” life harshly judged everywhere and all the time. She is hopelessly ashamed of becoming *Other*, being outside the world of “normalité”/decency. Her incurable shame demonstrates the devastating harm done by the game of shaming for social control, under the form of symbolic violence, “successfully” carried out by the “pensionnat”.

Foucault points out the very essence of the game of shaming for social control:

Les juges de normalité y sont présents partout. Nous sommes dans la société du professeur-juge, du médecin-juge, de l’éducateur-juge, du travailleur social-juge; tous font régner l’universalité du normatif; et chacun au point où il se trouve y soumet le corps, les gestes, les comportements, les conduites, les aptitudes, les performances.¹⁰

Judging herself, her family, and their social milieu “avec le regard de l’école privée”, the narrator views any “anormalité” (contrary to the “norm” represented by the “pensionnat”) as a shame marker. The father’s outburst of violence and anger in the “scène” represents the outcome of a domestic power struggle in which he succumbs and his wife dominates (an “anormalité” in a patriarchal society) and especially of the class struggle that often seriously damages intimate relationships. His violent act hopelessly awoke his daughter’s sense of shame and drastically sensitized her alienation of being *Other*. “Le pire dans la honte, c’est qu’on croit être seul à la ressentir” (*La Honte*, p. 116). By writing shame the narrator of *La Honte* is searching for a bond with her reader in the hope of minimizing the horrifying “otherness” of the “scène” she can no longer carry all by herself. Unfortunately the very act of her “writing” excludes the very possibility of ever forming a bond between herself and her defunct father. Reading Ernaux’s *La Place* and *La Honte* makes me realize how much Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs*¹¹ is still a relevant book today.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir, Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 356.

¹¹ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952).

When you read “peut-être sa plus grande fierté, ou même, la justification de son existence: que j’appartienne au monde qui l’avait dédaigné” (*La Honte*, p. 112), you just can’t ignore the surprising similarity between the father’s fate and that of Fanon’s black men and women who try to whiten their black skin in vain. When the European colonizer categorized black people as an aberration of the human race and therefore cast them out of “normality”, a shame of race was born; when the “classe dominante” set their standard and value system and therefore created a social *Other*, a shame of social class was established.

Going back to the six definitions/delimitations of shame I offered earlier and applying them to the reading of *La Place* and *La Honte*, I would make the following reflections on shame: as long as there is an hierarchical social interaction between *Self* and *Other*, shame is inevitable; while there continues to exist a powerful symbolic operation dictated by the “classe dominante” for social control, the “classe dominée” unconsciously succumbs to shame and legitimizes domination by their very submission; just acknowledging shame (such as writing) is far from enough to establish the social bond with *Other*; however, believing in border crossing between *Self* and *Other* as a beginning of authentic (meaning beyond hierarchical order) social interaction brings hope that the game of shaming will one day be replaced by authentic communication where interaction between *Self* and *Other* is no longer antagonistic.

Ernaux will likely continue to be torn by unbearable shame awakened by that “scène” that took place that early afternoon in June 1952, and the ghost of her father will probably never stop being ashamed of himself and proud of his daughter. Nonetheless, her two important works can always remind the “wretched”, the “marginalized”, the “excluded”, the “conquered”, and the “dominated *Other*” that hope can and should keep us continuing to go on.