**Ain Shams University**
**Faculty of Al-Alsun**
**Department of English**

# Metadrama

# In

*Peter Shaffer's*       **Lettice and Lovage** (1990)

*Brian Friel's*       **Dancing at Lughnasa** (1991)

*Horton Foote's*       **The Young Man from Atlanta** (1995)

**Ph.D. Thesis**

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# Abstract

Enass Mohammad Ali Othman. Metadrama in Peter Shaffer's Lettice and Lovage (1990), Brian Friel's Dancing at Lughnasa (1991), and Horton Foote's The Young Man from Atlanta (1995). Ph.D. Thesis. Ain Shams University. Faculty of Al-Alsun. Department of English. 2010.

This thesis studies metadrama as incarnated in three plays written by the British dramatist Peter Shaffer, the Irish dramatist Brian Friel and the American dramatist Horton Foote. Direct address to the audience, role-playing, self-created illusions, literary reference within-a-play as well as the use of narration are all metadramatic devices analysed in Lettice and Lovage. The use of the narrative style within the dramatic structure, the presence of a storyteller, the ceremony-within-a-play and the direct address to the audience are discussed in Dancing at Lughnasa. The mystery subtext within a play, the use of narrative accounts, metacharacters as well as self-created fantasy are elaborated in The Young Man from Atlanta.

Throughout the study of metadrama, and hence, through the embodiment of Shaffer's, Friel's and Foote's technical and thematic concerns, the pillars of the metadramatic technique are demonstrated. The study focuses on the technical devices employed in the three plays Lettice and Lovage, Dancing at Lughnasa, and The Young Man from Atlanta with respect to the thoughts and concepts of each dramatist. The thesis' main interest lies in the investigation of metadrama as a panoramic technique dealing with its origin, development and manipulation in dramatic works.

# Contents

# Introduction

Theatre bears within a life cycle in which movements fade and others emerge, and each movement in turn mirrors the factors that influence the individual's mind. Theatre is a moral and aesthetic force that is characterized by revolt wherein one movement leads to another development. The theatre's story of development is "one of rebellion and reaction, with new forms challenging the old, and old forms in turn providing the basis for the new" (Styan, <u>Modern Drama</u> ix). Accordingly, metadrama, as a theatrical technique, is certainly a form of both revolt and development. Revolutionizing the dramatic form and rebelling against the restrictions that bind the dramatist's imagination are intrinsic characteristics of metadrama.

Exploring the dramatic consciousness of characters is a key principle of metadrama that in turn deals with drama itself stressing the moments of self-consciousness by which a play draws attention to its own fictional status. As a mode of rebellion, metadrama opposes the conventional and classical norms, the linear structure of the play as well as the insistence of realism on affording a typical life-like representation. Metadrama is a form of self-conscious art that is supremely aware of its artifice and it is self-reflective. In a metaplay the character – audience barrier is broken and the protagonist – spectator interaction is established.

The terms "metadrama" and "metatheatre" are used overlappingly. Metatheatre is a term coined by the critic Lionel Abel to describe:

> A dramatic form that focuses on "the dramatic consciousness" of its characters – the consciousness, that is, of being characters in a play. They usually demonstrate this awareness by stepping out of their characters to speak directly to the audience. Abel argues that metatheatre represents a modern alternative to TRAGEDY, as a from of serious drama that offers the audience the opportunity to reflect on the action from an aesthetic distance. In this respect, metatheatre bears a resemblance to Bertolt Brecht's ALIENATION EFFECT. (Quinn 194)

Brecht replaced the "fourth wall" with alienating effects that made his audience aware that it is watching actors "demonstrating" figures on a stage. The actors are free to make contact with the audience, and the audiences are not to be deceived into thinking that the events on stage are occurring before their eyes, but that they are sitting in a theatre watching a play, listening to a story whose action took place in the past. Breaking the "fourth wall" clarifies the twofold nature of the dramatic character as both an actor and a character. The actor character, while playing his role, should maintain a "distanced attitude" as an actor or actress.

The interchangeable usage of the two terms "Metadrama" and "Metatheatre" requires the definition of both theatre and drama. Keir Elam defines theatre and drama. Theatre refers to the production and

communication of meaning in the performance process. Drama is "that mode of fiction designed for stage representation and constructed according to particular ('dramatic') conventions" (Elam 2). Theatre and drama are overlappingly used; theatre concentrates on the performer–audience transaction, and drama is that fictitious form designed for stage representation.

Elam adds:

> The epithet 'theatrical', then, is limited to what takes place between and among performers and spectators, while the epithet 'dramatic' indicates the network of factors relating to the represented fiction. This is not, of course, an absolute differentiation between two mutually alien bodies, since the performance, at least traditionally, is devoted to the representation of the dramatic fiction. It demarcates, rather, different levels of a unified cultural phenomenon for purposes of analysis. (Elam2)

Performance is the key principle of the dramatic art. Performance is concerned with the representation of the dramatic fiction. Metatheatre reflects self-consciousness and theatricalism as well as the turn of the playwright to theatre as the source of reality to his own imagination. The subject of metatheatre is the theatrical experience itself; it is self-reflexive commenting on its own activity. In such a kind of theatre, the reality is theatre itself, the world does not exist; fantasy and life become inseparable. Metatheatre marks the breaking of barriers between the play on-stage and the audience off-stage.

Metadrama, as a non-conventional form, marks the development of self-conscious art forms. It reflects a postmodernist emphasis on self-reference. A postmodern writer is mainly concerned with the craft and artifice of writing. Moreover, the task of postmodern writing is to subvert the foundations of our expected modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the "meaninglessness" of existence and the underlying "abyss" or "void" or "nothingness" on which our supposed security suspended. Postmodern writing subverts the foundations of language itself. Postmodern art extends or even breaks with modernist techniques and conventions without reverting to realist or pre-modernist positions.

As a postmodern technique metatheatre came as the inevitable reaction to the decline of realism, the preceding dominant school. Metatheatre stresses the development of Western drama wherein the present merges into the past, and wherein theatrical conventions waver between self-conscious and non self-conscious art forms. As a form of development in the dramatic structure, metadrama abandons the conventions of the well-made play and rebels against the principles of realism by making use of the episodic plot structures, the supremacy of narration, the emphasis on fantasy and illusion as well as the use of offstage scenes.

It could be argued that the development of the dramatic technique is culminated in metadrama. Structure and plot development are incarnated in various plays exploiting the metadramatic technique. Surveying the different stages of structure development could be traced

as early as the Aristotelian concepts of drama, the use of the well-made play as well as the successive literary schools; namely, realism, symbolism, expressionism, modernism and finally postmodernism.

In fact, metadrama initiates its rebellious tendency by revolting against the Aristotelian division of the story having a beginning, a middle and an end. The metadramatic development of a play is not linear; rather it is episodic abandoning the classical unities of the plot especially through making use of the narrative element of time switch according to which characters and narrators move freely through time and space. Furthermore, the use of open ends enhances the revolt against conventional norms. Again metadrama objects to the Aristotelian concept of "empathy". Distancing the audience in metadrama has its Brechtian origin that contradicts the Aristotelian concept of "empathy". Empathy means identifying with, and projecting oneself into a character's feelings. Brecht's non-Aristotelian theatre would allow the spectator to remain at a distance from the play by using the alienation effect.

Gradually, change took place regarding the plot structure. Yet, in spite of the tendency to rebel against old forms, still the Aristotelian observations on Greek tragedy and the unities persisted during the neoclassical period that dominated the literary arena in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it emphasized the principles of rationality, order and logic.

As an anti-well-made play technique, metadrama sets the dramatist's imagination free without abiding by the mechanical rules of

the unities and the restrictions of the beginning, middle and end. The term well-made play flourished in the mid-nineteenth century; it is associated with the two French dramatists: Eugène Scribe (1791 – 1861) and Victorien Sardou (1831 – 1908). The term refers to plays that followed a set pattern or formula in their construction. A well-made play was constructed by mechanical rules designed to catch an audience's attention. Well-made plays include coincidences in the form of misplaced documents, mistaken identities and lost letters. The focus is always on a leading male or female character. Moreover, a well-made play comprises elements such as overstressed sensationalism and impending human disaster. Unlike events in a well-made play, events in a metaplay do not follow a set pattern; rather, they move freely through time and space in a non-linear structure.

It is contended that metadrama is an anti-realistic approach that nearly emanated from the practices of expressionism; a school that discarded all the traditions of the realistic theatre in favour of the dramatization of the subconscious, the representation of the effect of the inside world of the dramatist on the outside reality, the use of episodic structure and the dream technique. Yet, in order to fully grasp the impact of expressionism on metadrama, it is necessary to shed light on realism as a significant literary school.

Realism came as a reaction against romanticism that dominated most of the first half of the nineteenth century. Realism nearly dominated the last three decades of the nineteenth century. It objected to self-consciousness and the full freedom of the dramatist's imagination

aiming, relatively, at narrowing the dramatist's role to mirroring human life and revealing hidden relationships. Both tragic and comic forms appear in the realistic school of drama. Naturalism, psychological realism, and social realism are all linked to the main umbrella of the realistic school. Naturalism stresses the significance of environment, heredity and circumstances and their impact on the fate of the individual; thus, propagating scientific facts. Naturalism sought to take the determinist element in realism a step further; the writer's role was to study his or her subjects "as if they were experimental animals, recording one's findings with the objectivity of a scientist" (Quinn 274).

In psychological realism, the dramatist endeavours to interpret human relations with reference to Freud's theories of psycho-analysis. Social realism plays depict the victimization of the lower-classes as a result of the economic burdens. Ibsenism is the reforming movement at the end of the nineteenth century for a more realistic drama, it is associated with Henrik Ibsen (1828 – 1906). The Ibsenian form is a two-level structure: the surface structure, and the deep structure that presents a subliminal play resulting in the revelation of unseen truths of ordinary life. It is argued that Ibsen's realistic plays are not highly successful tragedies due to their inability to convince the reader of the necessity for the fate of their protagonists. Such inability led to a tendency among Ibsen's followers to break from the Ibsenian dramatic form.

Anti-realist approaches encompass two main schools: Symbolism and Expressionism. As a reaction to realism, symbolism sought to alter form and style of literature and art. In drama, the simplicity in form and

style of a play could evoke the rich imagined life behind it. Symbolism relatively destroyed the intimacy of the theatre by making use of contrast in light and darkness, and creating a distance between the actor and the audience. As a technical and critical term, "Symbolism" came into specialized use with reference to poetry and it was first employed by Stéphane Mallarmé. In poetic practice a verbal symbol is intended to evoke feelings and ideas greater than those the words usually stand for.

Symbolism comprised two sub schools: Dada and Surrealism.

Both the Romanian, French avant-garde poet, essayist and performance artist Tristan Tzara (1896 – 1963) and the French writer, poet and surrealist theorist André Breton (1896 – 1966) are credited with the invention and promotion of Dada, "a movement designed to show its disciples' disgust with the senseless values of modern society, as chiefly represented by the appalling trench warfare of the First World War" (Styan, Modern Drama 51). Its chief purpose was to bring about the utmost degree of misunderstanding between the performer and his audience.

Evolving from Dada, Surrealism refined the application of Dadaist principles by exploring the mysteries of the irrational mind, "the rational control of our perceptions was to be disturbed and questioned by whatever means could be devised, and to do so the surrealist artist would use elements of surprise, the involuntary and the unconscious" (Styan, Modern Drama 52). Surrealist writing emphasized dreams, fantasies and hallucination in a bid to explore the subconscious mind. In fact the pattern of Surrealist writings is non-logical; Surrealist writers

sought to explore the inner life of man and the freedom of the subconscious.

It is contended that metadrama, as a rebellious technique, has emanated from the culmination of successive revolting movements especially anti-realistic movements that comprised different schools such as symbolism and expressionism. It could be argued that metadrama's emphasis on fantasy and the workings of the subconscious is relatively traced in the writings of surrealism. Surrealist plays were made up of many quick scenes and they introduced characters wearing masks and moving like mechanical robots. Surrealism in the theatre emerged chiefly in Paris and was particularly associated with Apollinaire and Cocteau.

Surrealism subverted the realism of the well-made play. Visual and theatrical effects took precedence over words and performers used to mime the action in masks. The surrealistic approach had its impact on the emergence of both the theatre of cruelty and the theatre of the absurd; both, in turn, had their distinctive impact on enhancing the metatheatrical technique. The theatre of cruelty had its mesmerizing effect on the audience by manipulating spectacle and sensation through actors wearing masks and carrying out certain rituals. The French dramatist Antoin Artaud (1896 – 1948) is credited for his innovations in visual imagery on the stage making use of concrete sounds, music, dance, colour light and costumes that cope with the actors' interrelations. The Artaudian playhouse consists of no more than four

plain walls with the audience in the middle so that the action can flow around it.

The innovative aspect of the Artaudian playhouse is explained by Styan who argues that: "With the addition of galleries and catwalks, the actors can perform on all levels as well as on all sides, and light and sound will fall as much on the audience as on the performers" (<u>Modern Drama</u> 109). Such theatricalism has its effective role in activating the audience's sense in a bid to comprehend the theatrical aesthetic experience.

Antoin Artaud wished to take theatre to other limits beyond social problems. His aim was:

> To produce cosmic dramas of mythic proportions, focusing on cataclysmic events, such as social upheavals or natural disasters. Individual characters would be replaced by characters "enlarged to the statures of gods or monsters." Such powerful spectacle would not be a series of random effects but a well orchestrated performance in which all the elements of the theater would coalesce to produce an awe-inspiring event. (Rosefeldt 56)

Artaud, who coined the term theatre of cruelty in the 1920s, called for a theatre that would liberate its audience from the repressive character of modern society. Such theatre would not be tied to a script, rather the spontaneous improvisation would be its dominant mode of presentation; thus, taking theatre back to its primitive ritualistic origins.

Rosefeldt adds:

> Artaud called his theater the theater of Cruelty, not so much because it featured violent and catastrophic events, but because it focused on the metaphysical cruelty of human beings trapped in a cycle of determinism. For Artaud, cruelty is inherent in the human condition: in his vision, humanity is caught in a new web of fate and evil is inescapable. (56)

Thus, Artaud's theatre of Cruelty features the intrinsic cruelty inherent in human beings and the primitive uncontrollable hidden traits of humans.

Commenting on Artaud's concept of theatre, Robert Cohen argues:

> The theatre envisaged by Artaud was a self-declared "theatre of cruelty" for, in his words, "without an element of cruelty at the root of every performance, the theatre is not possible." The "cruel" theatre would flourish, Artaud predicted, by "providing the spectator with the true sources of his dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his illusions, his utopian ideals, even his cannibalism, would surge forth." (287)

Although unable to put his theories into practice or gain acceptance for them in his own life time, yet Artaud's theories on the impotence of the spoken language and his call for a language of gesture are embodied in the works of some of the leading absurdist playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet.