

A Study of the Metatheatrical Aspects of Peter Shaffer's *Equus*

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Abstract

The present article aims to analyze the notion of metatheatricality in Peter Shaffer's *Equus* and to investigate the functions of such metatheatrical notions as self-reflexivity and fictionality in the overall structure and theme of the play. The central questions of this survey include: In what ways are typical metatheatrical techniques employed in Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, and what are the structural and thematic functions of these elements? The present research shows that there are inner plays in the narrative structure of *Equus*, which are aligned with the characteristic features of metatheatricality as delineated by Richard Hornby in *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (1986). These plays within a play, which belong to the so-called "the inset type," construct two sharply distinguishable structural layers. As metatheatrical plays within a play, they self-reflexively call attention to the fictional nature of the play as well as to the possibilities of narrative diversity. *Equus* breaks the fourth wall of the realistic drama when its lead character directly addresses the spectators, thereby getting them physically and mentally involved in the action. The spectators, as a result, step into the fictional world of the play and start to interact with the characters as the characters start to interact with them. Judgment and interpretation become reciprocal as both the audience and the performers take part in the process of narration and meaning-creation.

Keywords

Metatheatre; Play within a Play; Breaking the Fourth Wall; Direct Address; Peter Shaffer.

1. Introduction

Postmodernism encompasses complex sets of practices which at times evade clear-cut definitions. Its affinity as well as animosity with modernism is a long and by now trite debate. On the one hand, there are critics like Jon Whitmore who argue that "Postmodernist principles that reject modernism include the highlighting of self-referentiality, deconstruction, and popular culture" (3), and on the other, there is a host of contemporary scholars who insist that characteristic postmodernist features such as ambiguity, abstractness,

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nonlinearity and stream of consciousness are also present in and borrowed from modernism. Lehmann provides a list of the typical features of postmodernism, which also are also applicable to the theatre:

Some of the words that have come up in the international postmodernism discussions are: ambiguity; celebrating art as fiction; celebrating theatre as process; discontinuity; heterogeneity; non-textuality; pluralism; multiple codes; subversion; all sites; perversion; performer as theme and protagonist; deformation; text as basic material only; deconstruction; considering text to be authoritarian; anti-mimetic; resisting interpretation. Postmodern theatre, we hear, is without discourse but instead dominated by mediation, gestuality, rhythm, tone. Moreover: nihilistic and grotesque forms, empty space, silence. (qtd. in D'cruz 23)

Peter Shaffer (1926-2016) was a renowned English playwright, a number of whose works exhibit typical aspects of the postmodern theatre such as broken and imagistic narratives, movement from linearity to multiplicity, fragmented characters, audience characters, self-reflexivity, unprecedented use of music and light, and narrative possibility and diversity. He was one of England's most popular and respected dramatists, "a writer for the stage who combines verbal articulateness with exceptional theatrical inventiveness" (Gianakaris 1). In Benedict Nightingale's words Shaffer's "plays traverse the centuries and the globe, raising questions that have perplexed minds from Job to Samuel Beckett" (5). In addition to his outstanding achievements in drama, Shaffer was also a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, a member of the Dramatists Guild, and was granted the title Commander of the British Empire in 1987. Many of Shaffer's plays have been adapted into teletheatres and movies, winning top theatrical and film awards. Shaffer published his first theatrical success, *Five Finger Exercise*, in 1958 and after that he wrote fourteen other plays including *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1964), *Equus* (1973), *Amadeus* (1979), *Lettice and Lovage* (1987), and *The Gift of Gorgan* (1992). Commenting on Shaffer's characteristic style, M. K. MacMurrough-Kavanagh has written that he

demonstrated a control over dramatic dialogue and a verbal dexterity that has remained a constant feature of his style; linked to this is his comedic flair (evident in the 'darker' plays as well as in his 'lighter' work) which incorporates Machievellian irony, Wildean wit and Ortonesque farce as well as word-play and one-liners. (1)

Shaffer's *Equus* is one of the most commercially successful and influential plays in English theatre; it won Drama Desk Award for the outstanding new foreign play, Tony Award for the best play, and New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the best play in 1975. Known as a "psycho-drama" and generally considered as Shaffer's greatest theatrical achievement to date, *Equus* offers an in-depth observation and exploration of the human psyche and its inexplicable complexes. Lauding the play, Dennis Klein has remarked that "Shaffer has so

carefully constructed it that there are no loose ends left for the audience to tie together, and yet the play has inspired such diverse interpretations" (qtd. in Gale 38). The novelty and significance of the present research lie in the fact that it is the first survey on the nature and function of the metatheatrical qualities of the play, even though critical readings of Shaffer's play in general and *Equus* in particular are by no means sparse. For instance, in his master's thesis, *Peter Shaffer's Dramatic Vision of the Failure of Society: A Study of The Royal Hunt of the Sun, Equus, and Amadeus* (1989), Fushan Lai tackles the thematic load and social aspects of his selected plays as well their protagonists' futile struggle to develop their identity. He contends that

While critics have considered Shaffer's works as weak in content, regarding him primarily as a superb craftsman, Shaffer's plays present a significant examination of the failure of society to provide the individual with spiritual fulfillment. In each play the protagonist is a middle aged man who has lost his faith in the system which defines him. He discovers a young man who displays unique individuality and a scene of divine. (3)

As another example, in his article, "The Plays of Peter Shaffer and the Mimetic Theory of Rene Girard" (2004), Ed Block has applied Rene Girard's critical theory to Shaffer's dramatic works. Block has come up with the conclusion that "while critics have identified the theme of rivalry in such well-known works such as *The Royal Hunt of the Sun, Equus, and Amadeus*, Girard's theory of mimetic desire and envy provides an integrative explanation of these works" (58). "Modern Panopticism and Conflicts of Living in Peter Shaffer's *Equus*" is the title of an article by Margeaux Gamboa-Wong, in which he examines *Equus* by contextualizing Michel Foucault's critical jargon in the play. He has observed that

The conflict in *Equus* is reflective of a conflation of Michel Foucault's philosophies on discipline, knowledge, power and technologies of the self. In *Equus* Shaffer explores how man internalizes discipline perpetuated by the societal gaze conflict with man's desire to be an autonomous being living life as a work of art. (2)

In her psychoanalytic analysis of Shaffer's *Equus* in an article titled "Peter Shaffer's Revision of the Oedipal Complex in *Equus*," Larry Coulter has argued that Frank, Dora and Alan Strang form the traditional Oedipal triangle of the father, the mother and the son respectively. In Coulter's words, "in the text, Alan's efforts to realize his Oedipal desire for the mother take the form of his close religious bond with Dora, a bond that is later replaced by his obsession with horses" (1).

The present article investigates the presence and function of metatheatrical elements in Shaffer's *Equus*. The central questions of the article are: Can we

discern any characteristic metatheatrical feature in *Equus*, and how are they deployed by the dramatist and what structural and thematic roles do they play? Attention will be thus paid to key notions including metatheatre, play-within-a-play, breaking the fourth wall, and audience-character interaction. Analyzing the nature and function of the inner plays embedded within the main narrative structure is a main objective. The criteria of evaluation are Richard Hornby's definition of metatheatricality and his classification of inner plays.

Equally important is probing into the indications and functions of the break of the fourth wall, which gives the characters on the stage and the spectators off the stage the opportunity to interact with one another and directly address each other. Self-reflexivity and radical fictionality are sustained key terms throughout the introductory and analytical sections. In the pages to come, first a brief digest of metatheatre and its characteristic qualities is given and then the synopsis of the play is succinctly reviewed. This prefatory passage is followed by the discussion section, in which the metatheatrical aspects of the play are studied. It consists of two analytic subdivisions; the first part, "Play within a Play," deals with the inner plays inserted in *Equus* and the other, "Breaking the Fourth Wall," discusses the episodes in which the audience is brought into the narrative texture and audience-character interaction is made feasible.

2. Synopsis of the Play

The protagonist of the play is Martin Dysart – a psychiatrist who specializes in the treatment of children and who is commissioned by a court magistrate to examine the case of a seventeen-year-old boy named Alan Strang, who brutally blinded six horses with a spike. Initially, the tormented and mentally traumatized Alan is uncooperative. Martin realizes that Alan's father, Frank, banned TV in the house and his mother, Dora, who is ardently religious, always read biblical passages to Alan. Martin also finds out that Alan has cherished a fetish-like fascination with horses. Dalton, the stable owner, tells Martin about a girl named Jill Mason, a co-worker in the stable, whom Alan had befriended. Martin hypnotises Alan to make him describe what he did to the horses. He confesses that horses for him represented the god Equus, a spirit who lives in all horses, and Nugget was his favorite horse/Equus. He took the horse out at night, got undressed, and rode it in a mixture of ecstasy and frenzy. Upon Alan's request, Martin gives him a placebo truth pill to help him tell the truth about the incident. Feeling that he had betrayed his gods because of his intimacy with Jill, Alan begs Equus for forgiveness. Outraged with the assumption that his apology is not accepted, he takes a spike and blinds six of the horses.

3. Discussion

3.1. Metatheatre

Self-reflexivity and radical fictionality are two of the most salient features of metatheatre. As Daniel K. Jernigan has put it, "The post-modern of the theatre, perhaps even more so than the post-modern of the fiction, has been intimately bound up with gestures of self-reflexivity, gestures which point to the bodies on the stage as inhabiting a meta position in their performance of a self in the world" (62). Metatheatre has long roots in history; it can be traced back in the classical Greek theatre, which heavily relied on the use of masks and constant role-shift they brought about, marking the sheer fictionality of the characters and by analogy, the whole play. The term metatheatre was first coined by Lionel Abel in his seminal book, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*, which he published in 1963. According to Abel, metaplays constitute

Theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized. By this I mean that the persons appearing on the stage in these plays are there not simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic posture as a camera might catch them, but because they themselves knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them. (60)

Abel's intention, in Robert Leach's words, was to define metatheatre as a dramatic category in the context of Renaissance drama and he "was intent on giving metatheatre a working definition, treating it as opposed to tragedy" (87). Niall W. Slater approaches metatheatre differently. He defines it as "theatrically self-conscious theatre, i.e. theatre that demonstrates an awareness of its own theatricality" (10), and claims that "comic theatre ... was capable of such an awareness long before the Renaissance" (10). Richard Hornby defines metatheatre as "drama about drama," contending that "metadrama is thus not a narrow phenomenon, limited to a few great playwrights or to a few periods in theatre history but is always occurring" (31). For Hornby, every play is somehow metatheatrical and the difference is all a matter of "degree." In his view,

The manner in which a play is metadramatic, and the degree to which the metadramatic is consciously employed, can vary widely. Great playwrights tend to be more consciously metadramatic than ordinary ones, and their plays tend to employ metadramatic devices more obviously, because the great playwright conceives his mission to be one of altering the norms and standards by which his audience views the world, as is thus more likely to attack those norms. (32)

If metatheatre is defined as any play that reflects its self-reflexivity and fictionality, then any theatrical device, if used in such a way as to refer to its fictionality and celebrate its self-reflexivity can work metatheatrically. According to Hornby, the five varieties of "conscious or overt metadrama include: "1. The

play within a play, 2. The ceremony within the play, 3. Role playing within the role, 4. Literary and real life reference, and 5. Self-reference" (32).

Gian-Paolo Biasin and Manuela Gieri believe that "Metatheatre closes the theatre on its generous confession of impotence in saying more than it says: Truth is only representable not knowable" (62). On the one hand, it awakens our awareness of the unlikeliness of life to the dramatic art and, on the other, makes us aware of life's likeliness to illusion. By calling attention to the artificiality and strangeness of drama, it establishes and observes the boundaries that realism endeavours to wipe off. As they contend, the fictionality of drama

Speaks of the script of life mounted inside the double-theatre of performance and metatheatre, which in turn frames that performance on another performance, all the way to the end of illusion on the threshold of the entrance into reality. But reality, too, is still theatre, and the theatre which wants to represent it can only be metatheatre of that play of masks which is life. (62)

Ironically, metatheatre seeks to transcend the illusion of reality by drawing attention to another kind of illusion; in other words, metatheatre creates a sense of reality only to shatter it via fictionality and self-reflexivity. That is why Biasin and Gieri have dubbed metatheatricality as "the mirroring of an impossible symmetry between reality and reflection, between the double and the original, between art and the world" (63). Play within a play and breaking the fourth wall are two of the typical tropes which give a play a metatheatrical and self-reflexive edge. Before getting to know how they are manifested in the play, let us review the plotline.

3.2. Play within a Play

The first analytic section of the article deals with the indications and implications of the dramatic technique of play within a play in *Equus*. Generally speaking, play within a play typically and characteristically underscores the fictionality of the episode and at times of the whole play, hence its metatheatricality. First introduced in 1589 by Thomas Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy*, play within a play refers to the moment in a play when the characters turn into spectators and watch a play performed for them. As M. K. MacMurrough-Kavanagh has explicated, "Dramaturgically speaking it describes a strategy for constructing play texts that contain, within the premier of their fictional reality, a second or internal theatrical performance ... The duplication of the theatrical reality is often reinforced by the presence on stage of an 'internal audience' which acts as double to the actual audience" (xi). In the construction of play within plays, more than a secondary level of fiction can be added to the primary level, but it may be very hard for the general audience to digest and comprehend such a complexity. Elaborating on

the play within a play episode in Ludwig Tieck's comedy *When the World is Upside Down*, Manfred Pfister declares that

When the World is Upside Down deliberately sets out to explore these limits, to the extent that it even contains fictional spectator figures who discuss this very problem: Look – here we sit watching a play; in this play more people sit watching another play, and in this third play, the third actors are yet watching another play! (224)

Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner believe that play within a play is manifest in multitude of forms; they have categorized it in four groups:

(1) as an artistic agency of self-reference and self-reflection. It thus appears as a meta-theatrical mode of aesthetic expression, (2) as a special mode of perception that allows for different ways of presenting perspectives of appropriating and placing itself in relation to the world at large, (3) a particularly suitable aesthetic agency for the exploration of fields of social and historical interaction or exchange, and (4) as an artistic agency of mediation between conventional genres, or of generic transformation, permitting shifts from one genre to another. (xii)

Correspondingly, plays within a play are not all necessarily metatheatrical. A playwright may create an inner play with a different genre from the main play in order to emphasize the generic differences between them. Sometimes a play within a play is deployed to shed light on different ways of looking at the same subject matter. It can also be used as a vehicle for exploring different social and historical exchanges. Finally, it may be utilized metatheatrically, to call for its self-referentiality. In Hornby's viewpoint, metatheatricity "requires that the outer play have characters and a plot; that these in turn must acknowledge the existence of the inner play; and that they acknowledge it as a performance" (35). He also believes that there are two general kinds of play within a play: "the inset type" and "the framed type." In "the inset type," it is the outer play that is primary, while in the framed type, it is the inner play; also, in both types the degree of connection between the inner and outer play is variable.

In Shaffer's *Equus*, the first play within the play episode appears in scene five, act one. Dysart is not happy with his position as a psychiatrist who specializes in the treatment of children and this episode reflects his suppressed feelings. Here, Dysart, who plays the role of a psychiatrist in the main play, shifts into a chief priest in Homeric Greece, wearing a mask, holding a knife, and officiating at the sacrifice of five hundred children: "then, with a surgical skill which amazes even me, I fit in the knife and slice elegantly down to the navel, just like a seamstress following a pattern. I part the flaps, sever the inner tubes, yank them out and throw them hot and streaming on to the floor" (Shaffer 407). As Hornby has contended, if there are "two sharply distinguishable layers of performance," the play within a play is metatheatrical; here the borderline between the two performances is clearly visible; therefore, it is metatheatrical. Also, this inner play

seems to be of “the inset type” because although it highlights one of the important themes in Shaffer’s works, namely, “the relationship between man and God, man and himself and man and eternity” (MacMurrough-Kavanagh 11), what the main play as a whole tries to convey is much more than the message of this particular episode.

The second play within a play occurs in the fifteenth scene of the first act, in which the nurse, Dalton, and the actors pretending to be horses role-play as customers:

DYSART [amused]. I see ... what did your mother think?

ALAN. Shops are common.

DYSART. And you?

ALAN. I loved it.

DYSART. Really?

CUSTOMER. philco.

ALAN [to DYSART]. Of course it might just drive you off your chump.

CUSTOMER. I want to buy a hotplate. I’m told the philco is a good make! (439)

In the main play, the setting is Dysart’s office, whereas in the inner play it changes into an electrical shop. There is an outer play which has a plot and characters in which Alan confides his private life to his psychiatrist. The outer play characters are aware of the existence of the inner play; Dysart, for instance, watches the performance of the additional role of a number of the characters of the main play in the inner play. Here again, the two layers of performance are sharply distinguishable from one another and the play within a play is metatheatrical and of “the inset type.”

The third play within a play happens in the tenth scene of the first act, in which Dysart asks Alan about the first time he ever saw a horse. Then, we see an inner play in which the six-year-old Alan talks to a horseman:

HORSEMAN [reining back]. Whoa! ... Whoa there! Whoa ... Sorry! I didn’t see you! ... Did I scare you?

ALAN. No! [...]

HORSMAN. Torjan. You can stroke him, if you like. He won’t mind. (Shyly ALAN stretches up on tiptoe, and pats an invisible shoulder.) (Amused.) You can hardly reach down there. Would you like to come up? (419)

In this inner play, Alan plays the role of himself as a child; beside him and the horseman, his parents play their roles in the episode. The performance of the characters, watched by Dysart, takes place on an imaginary beach. Therefore, the contrast between the two performances can be claimed to be sharp and the play

within a play metatheatrical. The inner play is of “the inset type” since although it divulges significant details concerning Alan’s childhood, like the previous two episodes, what it reveals, compared to the outer play or the main plotline, is of secondary importance.

An interesting point about this scene is that there is reciprocity between the inner and main plays in that the characters (Alan and the horseman) already know that they are only role-playing and they are aware of the fictionality of the performance. Here is an example:

HORSEMAN. Do you want to go faster?

ALAN. Yes!

HORSEMAN. O.K. All you have to do is say, “Come on, Trojan – bear me away!” ... Say it, then! [...]

DYSART. Weren’t you frightened?

ALAN. No!

HORSEMAN. Come on now, Trojan! Bear us away! Hold on! Come on now! ... (419-420)

The excerpt reveals Shaffer’s true intention in using play within a play. He does not want to create any generic difference as the plays incorporate the same characters and theatrical and narrative elements; not does he intend to shift into any subject matter other than the one at hand. What he really wants to do is to accentuate the theatricality of the (inner and outer) plays. He wants to show that all that is happening before our eyes is just a performance. Shattering the illusion of reality, he demonstrates what a metatheatre actually purports to do: to be a drama about drama.

In *Equus*, all of the plays within play are of “the inset type” rather than “the framed type.” Unlike plays of “the inset type,” those of “the framed type,” like Francis Imbuga’s *Man of Kafira*, begin with a play within a play that introduces and provides commentary on the major play. Considering this particular play as a “framed type,” Chesains Clarunji explains that the inner play “prepares us for *Man of Kafira* proper by raising issues which are important in understanding some of the major themes of the play” (33). However, this is not the case with *Equus*, in which the main play has much more to say than the plays nested within it.

3.3. Breaking the Fourth Wall

The second key notion, associated with metatheatricality and self-reflexivity, is the disappearance or breaking of the fourth wall. Here again, before the analysis proper, a short digest of the phrase is provided. As Erin K. Moodie has

proclaimed, "one of the potential effects of metatheatre is 'pretense disruption,' when the actors break the fourth wall between themselves and the audience" (42). The fourth wall is the imaginary screen across the stage which separates the audience from the actors and confines the actors on the stage. Through the invisible fourth wall, the audience can see and hear the performance and the actors can occasionally, and often for ironic purposes and effects, communicate with the audience. Addressing the audience is a well-known device in cutting through the fourth wall. Defining the technique, Tom Brown has stated that "direct address will be the province of a single character and that character is often the protagonist or the principal agent of the narrative" (13).

In his realistic theatrical style, Andre Antoine insisted that his actors should turn their back to the audience when they were playing their roles. Commenting on Antoine's penchant for realistic performance, which deeply influenced theatrical performance at the close of the 19th century, Paul Binnerts has observed that "If, Antoine reasoned, actors were to really feel at home inside their realistic interiors, why should they keep facing out at the audience as in the old declamatory style?" (236). Through this innovation, the separation between the audience and the actors was complete and the fourth wall was born. Antoine's fourth wall reinforced the old Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action. Also, the characters now seemed to live in their own closed world, the actors, in the eyes of the spectators, became identical with the roles they played, and playwrights tried to detailed and lengthy descriptions of the sets in which the dramatic actions were to take place. As Binnerts has put it, "Just like Wanger's 'total theatre,' this new theatre form acquired a quality of absoluteness and inaccessibility" (243). Obviously, behind the fourth wall, the audience may still sympathize with characters on the stage, but there is no direct communication between them. Binnerts remarked that "the audience can be deeply moved by what happens to the characters they see on the stage, be affected by them, and still turn away thinking: "how sad for them!" (245).

Antoine's sense of realism was radically refuted by Brecht who criticized "dramatic" or "Aristotelian" theatre and recommended an acting method based on his concept of "alienation," which necessitated the collapse of the fourth wall. Expounding Brecht's theatrical taste in his 'epic theatre' campaign, Elizabeth Bell has written that "Performers break the fourth wall between themselves and the audience when they address the audience directly, making observers aware they are being watched and that performers, in turn, are watching their own behavior" (203). In the same vein, Antony Tatlow and Tak Wai Wong have noted that

To break down the fourth wall is to strip away the 'mysteriousness' of stage art and to establish a natural relationship with the audience. Only after the fourth wall is broken down can the principles of acting before an audience be clearly established and the techniques employed by Brecht, such as singing, reading, sub-title screening, self-introduction of characters and commentary to achieve the 'alienation' effect be justified in terms of stage production. (35)

A key notion here is that not every direct address is necessarily metatheatrical in nature. For example, prior to the introduction to metatheatrical certain dramatic and stage features such as soliloquy, prologue, epilogue, chorus, or monologue have always and characteristically incorporated interaction with the audience, but these techniques per se and in the absence of other postmodern dramatic devices are not to be taken as metatheatrical. To begin with soliloquy, for instance, it is counter-argued that it is not a direct address anyway. Sarah K. Scott and M. L. Stapleton are of the opinion that soliloquy "flouts commonsense views of stage action or reality in which "thinking aloud" matters only to the character and the story proceeds without reference to the audience" (110). As for the other tropes, they go on saying that "In case the audience missed the message or understood the story, the 'authorized version' of the action was provided by Prologue, Epilogue, Presenter or Chorus" (112). We can also add monologue, which was predominantly used didactically, to their list. On the radical difference between the function of direct speech in metatheatrical and theatres before it, Nicholas Ridout has commented that

In most accounts of acting techniques it is therefore suggested that direct address tends to point up to an audience the fact of co-presence and emphasizes thereby the presence and agency of the performer, disrupting any illusion that what we are seeing is simply the 'character' in the fictional world of the drama played. (70-71)

In postmodern practice, direct address as well as the ensuing breaking the fourth wall is metatheatrical in the sense that it draws attention to the dramatic and narrative structure of the play itself and its performance techniques. Unlike Brecht's alienation effect, however, its prime objective is highlighting the fictionality of the play, rather than assigning a social or political function to it. There are moments in Shaffer's *Equus* in which the fourth wall is brought down and the audience is directly addressed. In the play, the only character who addresses the audience is Martin Dysart. According to Michael J. Meyer, "Shaffer frames Alan's story with Dysart's own. Indeed, Dysart is the protagonist of the play – not Alan Strang – and *Equus* is much more than a good detective story" (21). On Dysart's dissatisfaction with his life and occupation, Bennet M. Berger has written that

Much of the dramatic impact of the play is projected by Shaffer's psychiatrist-protagonist who is tormented by the feeling that, by relieving the suicidal obsession of this seriously disrupted adolescent patient, he is destroying the boy's deepest passions, his capacity "to worship," as the psychiatrist puts it. (223)

The play begins with Dysart's direct address to the audience: "You see. I'm lost. What use, I should be asking, are questions like these to an overworked psychiatrist in a provincial hospital? . . . I'm sorry. I'm not making much sense. Let me start properly; in order" (402). Here, as elsewhere, the purpose is to get the audience involved in the action and create an ambience of intimacy. In Brown's words, "It is clear that having a character address the audience directly is a very particular gesture towards intimacy with that audience" (13). The spectator, as a result, gradually becomes one of the characters of the play; s/he participates in the progression of the play and starts to interact with the characters on the stage and make judgments about them.

Dysart goes on to describe to the audience the moment he wanted to see Alan: "What did I expect of him? Very little, I promise you. One more dented little face. Once more adolescent freak. The usual unusual. One great thing about being in adjustment business: you're never out of customers" (404). The apostrophe maximizes the emotional and intellectual interaction between the audience and the spectators. Dysart is implying that he treats people simply because it is his job and patients whom he visits are just like customers. This is a sad observation and the audience who is directly addressed by him cannot help but share his dejection. It does not mean that identification with a character on the stage is possible only if there is no fourth wall, but that its removal facilitates the process. As Brian Gibbons has contended, in the absence of the fourth wall, the audience and the actor get engaged not only in the 'willing suspension of disbelief' (reminiscent of Coleridge's famous phrase), but also in the collective enactment of recognizable fiction (33).

The play ends, as it begins, with Dysart's apostrophe; here, he asks the audience about the method of his treatment and its effectiveness and wonders if the procedure will make Alan normal again and if it will make him a better person? He concludes that "I'll heal the rash on his body. I'll erase the welts cut into his mind by flying manes. Hopefully, he'll feel nothing at his fork but Approved Flesh. *I doubt, however, with much passion!* ... Passion, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created" (476). By the end of the play, we realize that treating and knowing Alan have taken their toll on Dysart as he has already begun to ask confusing questions about his own life and existence. In the final lines of the play he says: "I need – more desperately than my children need me – a way of seeing in dark. What way is this? ... *What dark is this?* ... I cannot

call it ordained of God: I can't get that far. I will, however, pay it so much homage. There is now, in my mouth, this sharp chain. And it never comes out" (Ibid.). This existential doubt, it seems, reflects Shaffer's own philosophical concerns. C. J. Gianakaris believes that

Shaffer's favored theme implies a conjunction of metaphysical puzzle: does a universal deity exist in our unjust world, and, if so, what is man's relationship to him? If no god exists, how does man infer an order through which to lead a satisfying life? Shaffer expects no easy answer to the question that he poses, but prefers to raise them rather than pretend they are not there. (3)

Gianakaris goes on saying that Shaffer's protagonists always "remain stymied when no evidence appears with which to confirm god's existence" (3). Shaffer's frustration and distress, also identified by Gianakaris, is clearly visible in Dysart's final remarks. To drive home his views about life and to elicit maximum self-identification with dramatic personae from the spectators, Shaffer resorts to direct address and metatheatrical techniques. Through direct address and through creating the illusion that the spectators are part of the narrative structure, he ever increasingly expands the semantic possibilities of his play as new spectators participate in it in each new performance and new interpretations become a matter of inevitability.

4. Conclusion

The present research was an attempt to explore salient elements of metatheatricality in Peter Shaffer's *Equus*. Major discussions contained debates on the notions of play within a play (and Richard Hornby's definition of metadrama and the types of nested plays) and breaking the fourth wall (manifested most visibly through direct address) with the objective of assessing the presence of absence of these postmodern and metatheatrical elements in Shaffer's play. In the course of the mainstream discussion, it was revealed that the playwright develops his inner plays in such a way as to do away with set features of Realistic drama and make the spectators feel that what they are watching is just a play. All of these inner plays are metatheatrical and of the "inset type" (as opposed to the "framed type"); also, it was shown that by transporting the audience out of the world of the main play into the world of his inner plays, Shaffer lays emphasis on and foregrounds the fictionality and theatricality of the plays as well as the self-reflexivity of the whole work.

It was argued that like Brecht (though for purposes other than those in Brechtian alienation effect and epic theatre), Shaffer tries to unsettle and transform certain traditional forms through his theatricality and thereby assign theatrical role to his audience. Ignoring the fourth wall, Dysart gesticulates, looks at the spectators, and talks them to elicit their emotional and intellectual

interaction and active and creative participation both in the process of meaning creating and story narration. The spectators, no longer confined by the boundaries of stage walls, begin to realize that they are actually members of the dramatic personae and are drawn into the performance. Both for the actors/actresses and the audience, each new performance is a new experience and a new context for creating and interpreting meaning. As for the actors/actresses, the vibe they get from the audience and the atmosphere of the theatre can affect their performance; and as for the audience, it keeps changing (literally, emotionally, and intellectually) and reevaluating what is performed on the stage. Consequently, interpretation is always deferred and differed, fresh thought, feelings, and meanings are pumped into the play in each performance, and final product is replaced by continual process. That is how Shaffer crafts his metatheatrical play and turns *Equus* into a metadrama – a drama about, in, and on drama.



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