

Metatheatre in Brian Friel's *The Loves of Cass McGuire*: The Semiotics of Make-Believe

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present paper is to explore the metatheatrical techniques in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* by Brian Friel. Those include the play-within-a-play, expressionism, as well as the self-reflexive techniques of Brecht's and Pirandello's metatheatre. In terms of structure, character delineation, language and setting, *Cass McGuire* draws attention to Friel's self-conscious devices. The play dramatizes the frustrations of Cass who deliberately chooses to withdraw to the realm of illusions and dreams, after being disappointed at the unpleasant realities she found at home. The study will also show how Friel managed to create a theatricalized balanced frame that draws the audience's attention to the theatrical devices and structural features of his play on the one hand, and to the reality beyond the theatre, or the world as "a projection of human consciousness", as Abel asserts, on the other.

Keywords: Brian Friel, metatheatre, semiotics in literature, Irish theatre, modern drama

Metagledališkost v Frielovi drami *The Loves of Cass McGuire*: semiotika pretvarjanja

IZVLEČEK

V prispevku obravnavam metagledališke tehnike v drami *The Loves of Cass McGuire* Briana Friela, in sicer igro-v-igrji in ekspresionizem, ter samorefleksivne tehnike Brechtovega in Pirandellovega metagledališča. Samozavedne strategije v tej drami so razvidne v dramski strukturi, zarisu likov, jeziku in prizoriščih. Drama tematizira frustracije junakinje Cass, ki se, razočarana nad neprijetno resničnostjo, ki jo najde doma, umakne v svet sanj in iluzij. V študiji tudi pokažem, kako je Frielu znotraj gledališkega medija uspelo ustvariti uravnotežen okvir, ki po eni strani pozornost občinstva usmerja na gledališka sredstva in strukturne lastnosti drame, po drugi strani pa tudi na resničnost onkraj teatra oziroma na svet kot Abelovo "projekcijo človeške zavesti".

Ključne besede: Brian Friel, metagledališče, semiotika v književnosti, irsko gledališče, moderna drama

1 Introduction

As early as 1940, the renowned Czech semiotician, aesthetician and theatre theoretician Jiří Veltruský declared: “All that is on the stage is a sign” (1940, 84). If semiotics is the study of signs, symbols and signification, or simply how meaning is created, then theatrical performances are at the heart of that science, as any theatrical presentation is a complicated act of semiosis. The work of the Russian formalists in the early decades of the twentieth century paved the road for the rise of semiotics in the field of literary criticism. Prominent among them were Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson, who drew the attention to the study of art as a science and laid great emphasis on the process of how art is created. They called for the concept of defamiliarization in art creation. In “Art as Technique”, Shklovsky states:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make an object “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.* (1998 [1917], 18)

The manipulation of semiotics in the analysis of theatrical forms was later developed by the Prague School in the 1930s and early 1940s. As Elam puts it:

In the context of the Prague School’s investigations into every kind of artistic and semiotic activity – from ordinary language to poetry, art, cinema and folk culture – attention was paid to all forms of theatre, including the ancient, the avant-garde and the Oriental, in a collective attempt to establish the principles of theatrical signification. (1980, 4)

Many scholars, language philosophers, and theoreticians have emphasized the value of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations of theatrical signs. Roland Barthes suggested in 1964 that “the nature of the theatrical sign, whether analogical, symbolic or conventional, the denotation and connotation of the message – all these fundamental problems of semiology are present in the theatre” (1972 [1964], 262). Susan Wittig went further by emphasizing the functional employment of semiotics in drama analysis:

Semiotics is a sturdy and serviceable theory of art, useful particularly as a means of understanding a multi-media art form like the drama and valuable not only as a way of talking about play itself but as a way into the teaching of dramatic theory in the classroom. (1974, 441)

Metatheatre recently gained momentum in the writings of many scholars who are interested in applying semiotics in the field of literary criticism, particularly in the appreciation of dramatic and theatrical forms (see, e.g., James 2020; Macrae 2019; Smith 2018). William Egginton observes that “there can be no theatre that is not already a metatheatre” (2003, 74). The term metatheatre or metadrama was first coined by Lionel Abel in his book *Metatheatre, A New View of Dramatic Form* (1963) and it was further delineated in a group of essays under the title *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form* compiled and edited by Martin Puchner (2003). The term refers to the artistic aspects or devices of a dramatic presentation

that draw the attention to its *artificiality*, or its being an art. That concept is thought by many to have been first inspired by the work of the Russian Formalists, especially Viktor Shklovsky (1917) and Boris Tomashevskij (see Rosenmeyer 2002; Elam 1980). Both called for the greater visibility of the devices used in a work of art, and that an author should attempt to “lay bare” his devices in order to draw the attention of the reader to them (Lemon and Reis 1965, 93). According to Abel, metatheatre or metadrama is used to describe a self-reflexive drama or performance that draws the attention of the reader/audience to the theatricalities and artistic devices or the *medium* that the author manipulates to convey his themes. For Abel, metatheatrical plays are

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 postures as a camera might catch them, but because they themselves knew they were dramatic long before the playwright took note of them. (2003, 134–35)

Thus, metatheatre with its emphasis on the theatricality of the dramatic text and performance contrasts sharply with the tenet of illusionism that lies at the centre of realism. For Andréa Pérez-Simon, metatheatre stands for “multiple self-referential, anti-illusionist devices in twentieth-century dramaturgies” (2011, 1). The formal features that Abel stipulates in metatheatre include the play-within-a-play form, characters who tend to be self-conscious about their own theatricality, a sequence of action that has the quality of a dream, a self-centred language that is marked by mediative metalinguistic functions, and open-ended closures. As will be shown in the following pages, all those, among other characteristics, are to be found in Friel’s *The Loves of Cass McGuire*.

2 Metatheatre and Its Relation to Comedy

Critics vary in their view of the alienating effects of metatheatre. While Richard Hornby believes that the Brechtian devices may lead the audience to “the most exquisite of aesthetic insights, that is ‘estrangement’ or ‘alienation’”, he claims that such an experience may create a sense of “unease” in an audience (1986, 32). However, for Stephen Purcell (2018), the same trait of theatricality creates rather a sense of “delight” in the audience. He proves this through connecting theatricality with Koestler’s concept of *bisociation* in his book *The Act of Creation*, where he argues that the theatre audience’s mind keeps oscillating between two matrices: the “Now and Here” and the “Then and There”. As Koestler puts it: “It is this precarious suspension of awareness between the two planes which facilitates the continuous flux of emotion from the Now and Here to the remoter worlds of the Then and There, and the cathartic effects resulting from it” (Koestler 1976, 306). Purcell further explains that the stage figure “is tangling and confusing the two matrices to such an extent that he or she sometimes becomes hard to locate in one or the other” (2018, 17). This is what Koestler means in his definition of jokes as “universes of discourse colliding, frames getting entangled, or contexts getting confused” (1976, 40). The device of oscillating between the two planes, the “Now and Here” and the “Then and There” pervades the behaviour of the main character in *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, as will be explained below. On the part of the audience this theatrical

oscillation arouses a sense of baffled delight. The metatheatrical experience for the audience is explained by Świontek as “metaphorically stepping back from engagement with the fictional properties of the art work into a cooler, more detached stance that perceives the process of its construction as art” (2006, 121).

2.1 *The Loves of Cass McGuire* as a Metatheatrical Play

The Loves of Cass McGuire was first performed at the Helen Hayes Theatre, New York on October, 6th, 1966. Ulf Dantanus regards *Cass* as “a sister play” to Friel’s first play, *Philadelphia Here I Come* (1964) and maintains that: “[t]ogether they make up an extensive statement on the themes of emigration, love, and attachment to home and family” (1988, 101). Abel states that metatheatrical plays present the world as “a projection of human consciousness” (1963, 60), and *The Loves of Cass McGuire* is designed to have a central consciousness through which the audience are allowed to view the events.

The play revolves around Cass who returns home to Ireland after 52 years of exile in America. She ran away to America when she was 18 due to poverty and a bad relationship. There, in a new land, she had an affair with a disabled American, Jeff Oslan, the owner of the restaurant where she worked, who did not find it necessary for them to get married. They lived together in his two-room apartment until his death. The action starts with Cass coming home after 52 years of exile, driven by the hope of warm love and compassion in her family. However, her sense of isolation and estrangement increases when she – being a heavy drinker – begins to cause trouble for her brother Harry, a well-off business man who enjoys respectability in his bourgeois, middle-class community. The play opens with her family deciding to put Cass – against her will – in Eden House, a care home for elderly people, which Cass insists on calling a “workhouse”. In this way the home to which Cass comes back turns out to be as emotionally sterile as the one she escaped 52 years ago. Defeated in her pursuit of love and self-fulfilment, Cass learns from the inhabitants of Eden House to escape from the undermining realities around her and to slip into the world of imagination, fantasies and romantic false memories. Cass decides to compose her own fictionalized narrative of the events of her life; she speaks to her fellow residents of her “ten-roomed apartment” in New York, and how Harry’s children used to send her letters “as regular as the clock”. Like most characters in Eden House, she performs her own rhapsody and so envisages the happiness that the real world has denied her.

In this play, Friel innovated a metadramatic form that reaches beyond the frames of common theatrical presentations. Dwelling on the play-within-a-play form, expressionism, as well as the self-reflexive techniques in Brecht and Pirandello’s meta-theatre, Friel crystalized a de-familiarized form of comedy that baffled the audience’s expectations. In this play, Friel demonstrates his theatrical talents and exceeds the familiar forms of structure, character delineation, language and setting, in order to convey referential messages that are meant to comment on the social and economic conditions of the Irish milieu. *The Loves of Cass McGuire*’s theatricality strikes the audience from the first scene. Starting with a scene in the manner of Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search for an Author*, Cass’s direct address to the audience, her switching between the two planes (the Now and Here and the Then and There), the play within the play technique, the dream atmosphere that prevails throughout

the performance, and the metalinguistic discourse are among the prominent metatheatrical features of the work.

2.2 Theatricality Between the Expressionistic Structure and Pirandello's *Teatro Grottesco*

The Loves of Cass McGuire is composed of three acts, with a rhapsody ending each. The theatricality of the play is asserted from the first moment, with Cass rushing to the stage, objecting to the arrangement of scenes and taking over the performance. The play draws on Pirandello's absurd play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), where six strange people interrupt a rehearsal and declare to the Director that they are "unfinished" characters searching for an author to finish their stories. Friel's play takes the form of a play-within-a-play, and the structure clearly makes use of expressionism, with the dream atmosphere dominating the action. The performance is devoted to dramatizing the inner thoughts and psychological dilemma of the protagonist through a series of flashbacks with overlapping and disconnected scenes. The action is not limited to the time Friel gives at the beginning of each act. The memory sequences utterly distort the chronological order of events. However, the development of action reveals a growing tension towards a climax in a confrontation scene when Pat faces Cass with her sordid realities:

Pat: A skivvy – that's what you were – written all over you! And a drunken aul skivvy living in sin with a dirty aul Yank that kicked you out in the end... Didn't your father do the same in Scotland...I know youse all right – tramps turned respectable." (Friel 1967, 44)

The anticlimax shows the broken Cass after losing her strong will to keep in contact with the present (or the audience). By the end of Act III, she has totally slipped into the realm of dreams and world of make-believe. As Pat expected, Cass goes downstage and sits in a winged chair, absorbed in a rhapsody about her wedding party, her happy life with Jeff in the ten-room apartment, the warm welcome she received when she and Jeff came home. The play ends with Cass arriving at a state of "calm satisfaction" – "Home at last. Gee, but it's a good thing to be home" (Friel 1967, 63). As Maxwell puts it, "The fluidity of time and setting, equally functional, corresponds to Cass's own vacillation as past and present threaten to coalesce into dream" (1973, 74). Thus, in a fine balance between theatricality and mimeses, Friel deftly blends expressionistic devices with Pirandello's *Teatro Grottesco*, to keep his audience ever fluctuating between the two planes: Here and Now, and There and Then.

3 Characters

3.1 Cass as the Author and Stage Director

The main character in Friel's play is responsible for the main part of theatricality in the whole performance. From the start she, as Abel demands, shows her awareness of being "dramatic long before the playwright took note of [her]" (2003, 134–35). Early in the opening moments of the play, Friel shatters the illusion of reality and allows Cass to directly address the audience and assume the role of the author and stage manager of the play. The play opens with a cozy

domestic scene in Harry McGuire's living room, two weeks before Christmas. Harry and his wife Alice are talking about the trouble Cass caused in the pub the night before while drunk. Suddenly, the illusion of reality is shattered with the arrival of Cass "who charges on stage (either from the wings or from the auditorium)". As Friel directs the scene, in her "raucous Irish-American voice" she objects to the way Harry chooses to arrange the events in a story about her life, and wants them to begin from the point she was "stuck in the gawddam workhouse" (Friel 1967, 12). She chases the McGuires away from the stage shouting:

Cass: What is this gawddam play called? *The Loves of Cass McGuire*. Who is Cass McGuire? Me! Me! And they'll [the audience] see what happens in the order I want them to see it; and there will be no going back into the past! (Friel 1967, 14)

Moving away, Harry says to Cass: "[...] you may think you can seal off your mind like this, but you can't. The past will keep coming back to you" (Friel 1967, 14). Now she owns the stage and decides to begin the story later on, at the point of her being put in the care home. She speaks directly to the audience: "They are her friends, her intimates. The other people on stage are interlopers" (Friel 1967, 12).

The fluidity of the play's setting adds to its metatheatrical atmosphere and grants Cass full control over the show. The curtain rises on a "spacious, high-ceiling room [...] which serves as the common-room in Eden House [...] and also as the living-room in the house of Harry McGuire" (Friel 1967, 7). When Cass charges onto the stage and interrupts the first scene at Harry's house, she immediately transforms the place into the home for the elderly: "Cass [looking around]: Yeah, this'll do for the workhouse. We have Swank windows, too, opening out on to a garden" (Friel 1967, 13). Quite as significant is her control of the lights and shadows that dramatize flashbacks. When Cass takes over the role of a stage manager, light is at hand to assist her: "[...] and we'll start off later in the story from here [light up bed-area]" (Friel 1967, 14). In this way, Cass carries the metatheatrical flair in Brian Friel's dramaturgy much further than any of his protagonists in the plays to come.

3.2 Characters as Dreamers

In expressionism, the characters are always presented as dreamers. Though the inhabitants of Eden House – unlike their expressionistic counterparts – are situated in a realistic locality, they create a world of make-believe for themselves. They indulge in reconstructing and transforming all the troublesome details in their lives into illusive images of happiness, success and fulfilment. With the help of those illusions, they are able to cope with their failures and acquire a sense of self-gratification.

Cass is presented as a tormented dreamer. She keeps shifting the audience's awareness between the two planes: the present reality and her memories. Like Gar O'Donnell who is divided into Public and Private in *Philadelphia*, she is divided between a past that she tries to escape from, and a present that she tries desperately to cling to. Cass does not want to acknowledge the fact that she has been rejected both by American society because of old age, and her Irish homeland because of her coarse manners. She yields instead to the teachings of her fellow residents in Eden House. Like them, she resorts to the make-believe trick through which she can cope with

the past. She manages, via self-deception, to reshuffle or reconstruct the unpleasant facts of the past into a romantic, pleasant memory that has nothing to do with reality.

With the exception of Pat, the rest of Eden House are also dreamers, and self-delusion dominates their lives to varying degrees. Ingram and Trilbe are the “rhapsodists” of Eden House who teach Cass the make-believe trick. They assist each other in living in and believing their illusions. Trilbe is a failed elocution teacher who lacks “the necessary qualifications” and was “consequently never recognized by the education department” (Friel 1967, 80). However, she refuses to acknowledge the fact. She puts on the mask of a distinguished elocutionist who is “adjudicating at a speech festival for junior schools next week” (Friel 1967, 19). However, one is conscious of “an insecurity behind the extravagant exterior” (Friel 1967, 18). Pat, another fellow resident, tells Cass that Trilbe has never married and that her father was a drunkard and that she, being a failed teacher, “kept running from one school to the next, hoping for a square meal” (Friel 1967, 28). In her rhapsody, Trilbe tells the others of her romantic love and marriage to a French prince, and how her father was “so proper and so stern”, and how they travelled around the world. She tells them of “the servant and the music and the wine and the travel and the poetry and his love for me and my love for him... all so real” (Friel 1967, 27).

Ingram is “a small, withered, testy nervous old man” (Friel 1967, 18). He was married to a dancer who abandoned him “two days after the wedding” (Friel 1967, 32) and eloped with a German Count in his yacht. This bitter experience affected his personality. As Friel directs him: “He is so frail and hesitant that he seldom finishes a sentence” (Friel 1967, 18). In his rhapsody, he tells us how his beloved “danced and danced and danced” for him, how they “kissed and loved and ran” and how she “one day, running before me, calling to me, she slipped” (Friel 1967, 41). Thus, in order to escape a painful past, each creates a myth of their own, believes it, and finally, lives it. Even Tessa, the young maid in Eden House – young as she is – catches the contagion of make-believe from the residents of the house. She tells them that her fiancé, a bricklayer, is a building contractor who will build “a bungalow” for her. Even the tangible facts about her wedding ring are transformed:

Tessa (by rote): It’s a solitaire diamond surrounded by a cluster of dazzling rubies and mounted on plat-ig-num and gold [Cass catches her hand and searches earnestly].

Cass: Where is the diamond?

Tessa: God, are you blind, too! There!

Cass: Oh yeah-yeah – so it is. Gee, that’s nice, sweetie. (Friel 1967, 63)

By the end of the play it is made clear that the residents of Eden House, including the maid, are role-players or masqueraders who are “locked into their own solipsistic world” (Andrews 1995, 96).

4 The Three Rhapsodies as Ritual

In the “Author’s Note” to the play, Friel states: “I consider the play to be a concerto in which Cass McGuire is the soloist” (Friel 1967, 8). The author ends each act with a rhapsody that does not belong to the realm of reality. In these each of the three rhapsodists – Trilbe,

Ingram and Cass – sings their own song following the same accompanying ceremonies or rituals. Each should begin the rhapsody by sitting and relaxing in the “winged chair” down stage; the music is to “fade in gently”, “slowly and with growing volume”. In the first two rhapsodies, Trilbe and Ingram join in a duet complementing each other’s recitation of their romantic illusions. As a newcomer, Cass’s reaction towards their strange way of speech is “naked astonishment” (Friel 1967, 25). Later on, she gradually starts to tolerate the dreamers’ rhapsodies, as she moves into their world of fantasy. Now she no longer resists memories as she did in Act I.

The language of the rhapsodists is flooded with lyricism and poetic imagery. It is also characterized by phonic repetitions that add to the musical rhythm of the rhapsody. At the end of each rhapsody, they quote one of Yeats’s romantic poems:

Trilbe: But I, being poor have only my dreams...

Ingram: Our truth.

Trilbe: ...I have spread my dreams under your feet.

Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Ingram: Our truth. (Friel 1967, 27)

The word “dreams” is significantly followed by “our truth” to suggest that the world of dreams is so absorbing for them that it has gained such a power as to be their truth. After the rhapsodies, each of the three rhapsodists is transformed and enters into a state of “calm satisfaction” and happiness. In Cass’s case, she is driven to the rhapsodic world by the persistent encouragement of Trilbe and Ingram.

Trilbe: Tell us.

Ingram: Tell us.

Trilbe: Tell us. (Friel 1967, 58)

At the beginning, Friel directs the scene as follows,

Cass suddenly bursts into tears and drops into the winged chair. There she cries and groans, covering her face with her hands while the spasm lasts. Then, emerging from it, she sits up straight almost with nobility and very slowly lets her head come to rest on the back of the chair. (Friel 1967, 58)

The fit of tears and the sudden agitation that befall Cass as soon as she starts her rhapsody are the remnants of an awareness of the world of reality that is still flickering in her mind. She is then immediately calmed by Trilbe’s encouragement to go on.

Trilbe: No, no, go on, golden hair and patient eyes. And you had two dimples...

Cass (Relaxing): Yeah – yeah two dimples... (Friel 1967, 59).

Wagner’s music for *Tristan and Isolde*, a love story ended by the deaths of the lovers, accompanies her rhapsody. As Patrick Burke comments: “Because [...] of the pathos attendant on our insight that Cass is a casualty of disappointment, lost love and ultimately semi-senility, the parallel between her situation and that of Wagner’s lovers is also made very ironic” (1997, 21).

5 Self-Conscious Language

5.1 Discourse and Meta-Discourse

A highly significant feature of discourse in metatheatre is that it deals with language as an object, or a theme to be discussed in the theatrical presentation, a feature that dominates another play by Friel, *Translations* (1980), and is also characteristic, to a lesser degree, of *The Loves of Cass McGuire*. As Elam maintains: “In the drama, the metalinguistic function often has the effect of foregrounding language as object or event by bringing it explicitly to the audience’s attention in its pragmatic, structural, stylistic or philosophical aspects” (Elam 1980, 96). The language used in Friel’s play can be regarded as having such a metacommunicative function. Moreover, much of the characters’ speech is not meant for communication with each other, or even to tell the audience their stories. It is rather meant for commenting on the characters’ own usage of language, covering up their psychological dilemma, and directly passing certain messages to the audience. Trilbe is a failed elocutionist whose fake and pompous language is a way of not facing her failure. Moreover, addressing the audience with direct speech, as Cass does, is regarded by Elam as “an extreme of linguistic self-consciousness” which serves “to ‘frame’ the very process of character-to-character or actor-to-audience verbal communication, and so becomes part of a broader metadramatic or metatheatrical superstructure” (1980, 96). Like most of Friel’s plays, the theatrical discourse in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* is sometimes meant to comment on the Irish milieu, or the “metatheatrical superstructure” of his plays. In this way, the characters’ speech turns out to be a mediative medium between the author and audience, a trait that characterizes “highly ideational drama”, as Elam points out, “of which Hamlet is the classical instance and the plays of Pirandello perhaps the best modern representatives” (1980, 95).

Umberto Eco says that “[s]emiology always seems inclined to affirm not that we speak the language but that we are spoken by the language” (1985, 590). In the play examined here, the discourse features of many of the characters are mainly used to highlight their psychological states, like Cass, Trilbe and Ingram, who “seldom finishes a sentence” (Friel 1967, 18). The “psychological preconditions of a language”, as Wittig puts it, are referred to by many linguists starting from Saussure’s langue-parole dichotomy, Levi-Strauss and Charles Morris, and later developed by many including the French semioticians Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, Claude Bremond, and A.J. Greimas (Wittig 1974, 445).

5.2 A Play of Voices

Being “a play of voices” (Andrews 1995, 96), *The Loves of Cass McGuire* displays a variety of forms which detach it from the everyday language of naturalistic drama and highlight its metatheatrical effect. Remarkable among these is the lyrical poetic language of the three rhapsodists. Language, Andrews indicates, “becomes preferable to direct action, to reality, to genuine engagement; it becomes a mask” (1995, 99). Even when the characters speak outside the rhapsodies, their conversations are characterized by shifts in topic and incoherence, a fact which illustrates estrangement and communication failure. The following dialogue is a pertinent example:

Trilbe: I think perhaps my favorite piece for children is a little poem ... It is called "Clickety-clack" ...

Ingram: When he was a young barrister my father published a pamphlet attacking capital punishment.

Trilbe: We puff over meadows and rivers and streams /Till we come puffing gaily to the land of our dreams.

Ingram: ... He was a stern man, but I think he was a just man.

Trilbe: We are having ham for tea.

Ingram: Snow is forecast. (Friel 1967, 55)

The lack of communication is primarily manifested by the long turns of speech that Friel allows Cass, "the soloist" of his concerto. Since she finds no emotional bridges with others, Cass speaks to the audience or to herself, a remarkable device that was used earlier in *Philadelphia* to suggest solitude and estrangement; the same device is to be used later on in *Molly Sweeney* (1994) and *Faith Healer* (1997). The play is also characterized by a variety of accents and idioms. Cass's vulgar language is contrasted with the ordinary middle-class language of Harry and Alice, the falsely pedantic speech of Trilbe and the hesitant, seldom finished sentences of Ingram. The dissonant modes of speech among the characters demonstrate the theme of non-communication and contribute to the comic quality of the play.

Silence is another element that Friel uses effectively to dramatize frustration and depression, particularly in the scene of Pat's departure. Cass, Trilbe and Ingram feel emotionally depressed and frustrated at their inability to find a way out of Eden House. This sense is exacerbated by Pat's success at leaving the place and getting another chance to live among the people outside. However, this is never expressed by words. After his departure, there are moments of uneasy silences intercut with some highly unnatural talk that cannot defeat the silence. "The silence now is total, the depression complete" and "They cannot sustain talk any longer. Silence flows in and fills the room" (Friel 1967, 55).

5.3 The Wagnerian Total Artwork and the Macro/Micro-Signs

Eco states: "Semiology shows us the universe of ideologies, arranged in codes and sub-codes, within the universe of signs, and these ideologies are reflected in our preconstituted way of using the language" (1985, 591). Throughout his dramatic career, Friel developed his own concept of the theatre craft to include all the aesthetic facilities of music, dance and ritual, together with the spoken word, to create a "universe of signs" in each play. In most of his plays, Friel adopts the Wagnerian concept of language that is fit for the theatrical experience. Wagner advocated a theory of the "total artwork" in music drama where "[n]ot one rich faculty of the separate arts will remain unused" (Wagner 1895, 190). In Wagner's notion of the ideal art, music, poetry and dance are combined to produce an artistic expression of some pre-rational time when those three elements served to "emotionalize the intellect" (Wagner 1895, 190). On the level of language, the most outstanding supra-realistic element in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* are the three rhapsodies of Trilbe, Ingram and Cass. Some critics (White 1999; Burke 1997; Andrews 1995; Rollins and Rollins 1990) referred to Richard Wagner's "total

artwork” as the background against which Friel formed the three rhapsodies in the play. The three rhapsodies are performed as a ritual in which music, words and setting are combined to present an allegorical frame of an absorbing illusion. These rhapsodies have nothing to do with the real world, and are the best linguistic form to dramatize the state of self-delusion and withdrawal into the world of fantasy. Rollins and Rollins compare the three rhapsodies in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* to selected passages from Wagner’s operas *Tannhauser*, *The Valkyrie*, and *Tristan and Isolde*. “Friel, like Wagner before him, is experimenting in this play with the reciprocal relationship between dramatic action and tonal harmonies” (1990, 24).

While Wagner’s concept of art emphasizes the total effect of the work of art as a “macro-sign”, theatre practitioners or even the audience deal with every device and sign on the stage as a deliberately directed “micro-sign” in which meaning is encapsulated. Petr Bogatyrev, formerly a member of the Russian formalist circle states in this context: “on the stage things that play the part of theatrical signs [...] acquire special features, qualities and attributes that they do not have in real life” (1976 [1938], 35–36). Elam also states that many theorists of the Prague Linguistic Circle, tended to “view the performance not as a single sign but as a network of semiotic units belonging to different cooperative systems” (1980, 5).

The Loves of Cass McGuire teems with indicative signs. Many stage props are used by Cass as a mask behind which she can hide her sordid reality, or to otherwise provide an escape from it. These include very small things like cigarettes, drinks and items of make-up, such as at the end of Act Two, when Cass is completely “deflated” by Pat’s cruel words to her; “Cass, angry, sobbing rushes into her room, takes the bottle from under the mattress and drinks [...] then she lights a cigarette and then makes up” (Friel 1967, 44). In the garden of Eden House, “a Cupid statue (illuminated) is frozen in an absurd and impossible contortion” (Friel 1967, 7). This is symbolic of the strange and “absurd” emotional state of isolation and lack of love in which the residents of the house live. Equally significant is the winged armchair that is situated down stage right “conspicuous in its isolation” (Friel 1967, 7). It is put down stage and “never used throughout the play except during the three rhapsodies” (Friel 1967, 7), as Friel writes in his directions. Giovanna Tallone sees it as “a parameter of escape in space and time” (2010, 60). It symbolizes a refuge into the world of dreams, where the inhabitants of Eden House “fly” high to find consolation for their grief. Before her rhapsody, Trilbe expresses her wish to sit in the winged chair. “Trilbe: I haven’t sat in it for three whole weeks, and now I wish to remember [...] The past and all the riches I have, and all that nourishes me” (Friel 1967, 26). As Kowzan puts it, all theatrical signs are “voluntary [...] Even if they have no communicative function in life, they necessarily acquire it on stage” (1968, 60).

6 The Actor/Audience Communication: “Declaring the Game”

Abel (1963) refers to many premediated and composed forms in many of Shakespeare’s and Ben Jonson’s plays as metatheatrical. Those include prologue, epilogue, induction, play within a play and asides. Such devices in which an actor is required to “step out of his role and acknowledge the presence of the public” (Elam 1980, 56), are meant to comment on the action, character or on the very theatrical experience. Though they appear to be “breaking the frame” as Elam puts it, they are “licensed means of *confirming* the frame by pointing out the pure facticity of the representation” (1980, 56).

In his book *Why Is That So Funny? A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy*, John Wright describes metatheatre as a context within which the actor is “declaring the game” to the audience (2006, 45). He compares theatre practices to the rules of a game which both actor and spectator share, while knowing that there is “no illusion, and all your actions will be valued for what they are rather than for what they imply. When you declare the game, you play it so as to have an effect on the audience” (2006, 46). However, in none of his plays does Friel reach such a degree of transparency with his audience, and in the play under study he creates a balance between the mimetic and non-mimetic.

In the metatheatrical context of *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, the audience are endowed with a performative role and become part of the “game”. They symbolize reality as opposed to the world of dreams into which Cass gradually lapses. Cass addresses the audience as if they are among the characters of the play. Although she says to Harry “I live in the present, Harry boy: Right here and now!” (Friel 1967, 14), Cass frequently resorts to her memories, or the “there and then” plane. Throughout the play, Cass is torn by a bitter struggle between the past (or the painful memories that keep haunting her) and the present (or the reality that she tries to stick to and is represented by the audience).

The battle between the past and present is undecided for a time, as memory sequences invade her mind and converge with her direct speech with the audience. Near the end of Act II Cass realizes that her family no longer wants her among them. Now broken and “on the verge of tears” (Friel 1967, 39), she goes on talking to the audience of whose existence she wants to assure herself: “Are you still out there?” (Friel 1967, 40). Cass’s self-deception is marked by her awareness of the audience gradually beginning to fade and her getting more and more involved with Trilbe and Ingram in their rhapsodies. The tension of Cass’s struggle with the past comes to a height when Trilbe appears through the window beckoning her to join them. However, Cass desperately tries to stick to the audience, or the present, “They think they’re going to run me back into the past but by Gawd they’re not! [...] Where are you? Stick with me” (Friel 1967, 44).

Gradually, she begins to lose ground and finally lays down her arms. This is asserted when “she hesitates, takes a few steps towards the footlights, shades her eyes, searches the auditorium. She sees nobody”, “And I could’ov swore there were folks out there. [Shrugs] What the hell” (Friel 1967, 53). This is a signal that Cass has already lost contact with the world of reality. The play ends with the arrival of Mrs Butcher, a newcomer to Eden House who, ironically enough, speaks to nobody but the audience, whom she addresses “confidentially”. In this way, while distancing the audience from the characters through metatheatrical devices, Friel involves them in the performance and dwells on their self-consciousness to transmit his message. Patricia Waugh (1984, 63) states: “to be successfully decoded [...] experimental fiction of any variety requires an audience which is itself self-conscious about its linguistic practices.”

7 *The Loves of Cass Mc Guire* as an Irish Metatheatrical Piece

Friel’s identity and background and the play’s Irish setting are thus well served through the usage of European metatheatrical techniques. The deteriorating social conditions and political tension of Northern Ireland, his birthplace, are constant themes in almost all his entire oeuvre.

Derry, the city where Friel lived, was a minority Catholic community that suffered severely from political repression and economic depression since 1922, when the south of the island became the independent state of Éire/Ireland, while the north remained part of the United Kingdom. The separation of the north and south remained among Friel's recurrent themes, as expressed through the concepts of split identity, exile, emigration, dislocation and failure in communication and family disintegration.

Like *Philadelphia*, *The Loves of Cass Mc Guire* takes the crisis of a divided Ireland with its social and economic failure as a background to its central concern. Desolation, economic decay and sexual repression are the driving forces behind young Cass's decision to leave home and seek self-fulfilment in a new land, a situation that is identical to that of Gar O'Donnell. This is why critics see *The Loves of Cass McGuire* and *Philadelphia* as twin plays. As Ulf Dantanus explains: "Together they make up an extensive statement on the themes of emigration, love, and attachment to home and family" (1988, 101).

As Anthony Roche puts it, Friel's work "continues to speak to and interpret an Ireland undergoing dizzying social change and political upheaval" (1999, vii). The economic progress in Northern Ireland in the mid-1960s is also reflected in the successful career of Harry McGuire. John H. Whyte tells us in "Ireland, 1966–82" that the economy of Northern Ireland in 1966 had been improving, and the Ministry of Commerce "was energetically attracting new industries [...] Northern Ireland became one of the main centers in Europe for this booming industry" (1984, 342). When in exile, Cass believed that the ten dollars she used to send her family were of good use. When she returns home, however, she finds out that her money was left untouched and that her family did not really need it. She comes to realize sadly that her money has not bought her the love and compassion she expected to find on coming home. Thus Cass's social and economic dilemma, both before leaving Ireland and after coming home operates as a form of metatheatre, offering meaningful messages to the Irish audience. As Seamus Deane remarks significantly:

No Irish writer since the early days of this century has so sternly and courageously asserted the role of art in the public world without either yielding to that world's pressures or retreating into art's narcissistic alternatives. In the balance [Friel] has achieved between these forces, he has become an exemplary figure. (1996, 22)

8 Conclusion

Despite it being only Friel's second attempt at a play, *The Loves of Cass McGuire* introduced much of its author's "surefooted" (O'Toole 1988, 230) theatrical prowess, and already made use of a variety of methods and techniques that would also appear in his later works. These include expressionism, the *Teatro Grottesco* of Pirandello as well as the art of Wagner and Brecht's epic theatre. It validated Friel's experimental efforts and confirmed his grasp of many innovative devices, a fact that rendered it a "gem" (McGrath 1999, 71) among the author's early works.

The different techniques and dramatic devices that Friel manipulates in *Cass* are perfectly compatible with the make-believe theme of the play. The use of flashbacks and expressionistic memory sequences suits the dreamlike effect that he aimed to produce; the comic mood, and

three rhapsodies which reflect the influence of by Wagner's idea of the "total artwork", lend the play a lyrical ritualistic flair and help engage the audience and involve it in the dramatic performance. In those scenes Friel manipulates words, gestures, music, lights and shadows to signify the phantasy world to which Cass has moved. In a fine balance with that effect, Friel's debt to Brecht's epic theatre shows itself in making Cass play the role of the narrator, though she differs from Brecht's narrators in that she herself is involved in the action. Pirandello's impact is manifested in Cass's direct speech to the audience, her exclamation against the author's choice of the play's title, and her insistence on rearranging the events of the play. Such self-conscious devices contribute to the comic effect and confuse the audience by distorting the conventional concept of the invisibility of the spectator who is pushed by Friel, into not only "ponder(ing)" (Frey 2015, 106) the action, but also being part of the performance. We may conclude by agreeing with Rosenmeyer (2002, 99) that "a piece of metatheatre is by definition or concomitantly a variety of commentary, [...] both the play and the characters, and the playwright, and ultimately the audience, share in that critical pursuit".

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