

## SCENIC AND DRAMATIC MANIFESTATIONS OF THEATRICALITY IN POSTMODERN LITERARY DISCOURSE

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### Summary

The paper aims at examining the specificity of scenic and dramatic manifestations of theatricality in postmodernist literature. Intermediality studies and linguopoetics function as the theoretical and methodological basis of eliciting textual representations of theatricality. Following this approach, theatricality is viewed as an intracompositional form of intermediality manifested at micro- and macrotextual levels, lexical-semantic, imagistic, compositional, and narrative among them. The notions of 'scenic' and 'dramatic' are construed as crucial parameters of theatricality based on the conventions of theatrical art. Special attention is given to explicating instances of 'scenic' and 'dramatic' characteristics of theatricality in such postmodernist novels as M. Atwood's *Hag-Seed* and I. Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea*.

**Keywords:** intermediality, linguopoetics, intermedial reference, postmodernism, scenography, dramaticism.

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### 1. Introduction

Much of today's interdisciplinary research tackles the problem of crossing the borders between various arts and media (*Elleström, 2010; 2020; Rajewsky, 2005; Rippl, 2015; Schröter, 2011; Wolf, 1999; 2011*). The ever-expanding influence of an interdisciplinary paradigm is especially prominent within the realm of literary studies (*Pennacchia Punzi, 2007*) and linguopoetics (*Vorobyova, 2017; 2020*), which essentially focus on verbal and textual manifestations of distinct arts and media in literary text. Over the last decades, a theoretical and methodological framework for explicating the interplay of arts and media, specifically in the domain of literary discourse, is provided by intermediality studies, a wide-ranging field of research which accounts for various forms of inter-art relations. One example of such an interface between literature and theatre is the effect of theatricality, which receives an increased attention of literary scholars and linguists. The domain of theatre is generally admitted to exert influence on behavioural, social, and cultural practices of humans, with theatricality functioning as one of its integral characteristics. At this backdrop, the crucial parameters of theatricality are those connected with the conventions of dramatic and scenic representations. Although the conceptions of theatricality are manifold within the field of humanities, its literary manifestations lack comprehensive study, particularly what concerns its verbal and textual means in postmodernist fiction.

Following the intermediality-based approach, this paper **aims** to delineate the notion of theatricality as an intermediality form, with a special focus on the scenic and dramatic properties of theatre as its textual facets in postmodernist literary text. Thus, to achieve this aim, the present paper sets out to elaborate on the following points: 1) to provide a systemic overview of

intermediality forms in literary text; 2) to characterize the notions of “scenic” and “dramatic” based on the intermediality perspective; 3) to elucidate the methodological basis for explicating literary forms of theatricality; 4) to elicit the way “scenic” and “dramatic” parameters of theatricality are verbally and textually represented in postmodernist literary text, being part of the theoretical and methodological framework of linguopoetics.

## 2. Theatricality through the perspective of intermediality forms

The conception of intermedial phenomena stems from the specificity of media interrelations, that is „relations between media conventionally perceived as different” (*Johansson, Petersson, Holdar & Callahan, 2018: 1*). In terms of such relations, Jens Schröter suggests four models of intermediality that could serve as frameworks or “discursive fields” (2011) for discussing various intersections between arts and media, among them *synthetic intermediality*, *formal* or *transmedial intermediality*, *transformational intermediality*, and *ontological intermediality*. In particular, synthetic intermediality accounts for the process of blending different media, which eventually results in creating a new sort of medium attributable to Wagner’s “artistic synthesis of *Gesamtkunstwerk*”, i.e. ‘total work of art’ (*ibid.*). In turn, formal intermediality suggests looking at those “*transmedial*” structures which are not restricted to specific media but pertain to various forms of artworks and artifacts. Within the framework of the formal (transmedial) paradigm, these intermedial features can be “transferred” from one medium to another (*ibid.*), as, for instance, in the case of *theatricalization* of literary texts. Further, transformational intermediality presupposes representation of one medium by means of another, that is a medium does not incorporate another medium directly but represents or comments upon it, such as a painting in a film or a photograph of a building. Finally, ontological view of intermediality implies that media could be defined in relation to other media. Seen in this view, intermediality becomes a prerequisite for media discussions and analysis: “whatever seems to be specific in a given medium depends on [...] the (implicit) definitions of other media that have to be used as contrasts” (*Schröter, 2011*). It should be noted, however, that the four models of intermediality suggested by Jens Schröter do not account for various types of intermedial relations but rather offer a range of discursive frameworks through which the intermedial phenomena are crystalized. The underlying idea here is that media could hardly be seen as clearly separated or restricted to some media-specific boundaries.

In similar vein, Lars Elleström suggests looking at human communication in terms of producing media products and points out its intermedial capacity based on the assumption that “the intermediate entity connecting two minds with each other is always in some way material, understood broadly as consisting of physical entities or phenomena, although it clearly cannot be conceptualised only in terms of materiality” (2020: 13). Such a medium-centred model of communication further contributes to the idea that all media are fundamentally interrelated – they are both “different and similar, and intermediality must be understood as a bridge between media differences that is founded on media similarities” (*ibid.*: 5).

Seen in this way, all arts and media are prone to crossing their “medial” borders and attaining an intermedial status, particularly the way literary texts prolifically display affinities with music, painting, video games, cinematography, or theatre. Hence, the multitude of intermedial relations is widely explored by scholars within the domain of literary studies and linguistics (*Ryan, 2014; Rippl, 2015; Vorobyova, 2017; 2020*). Elaborating on the interface of literature and theatre, the core concepts of intermediality theory could be fruitfully employed as the basis for analysing verbal and textual means of theatricality. Given Werner Wolf’s differentiation of

intermedial relations (1999; 2011), we proceed from an understanding of theatricality as a form of *intermedial reference* – a type of *intracompositional intermediality* that entails an explicit or implicit mentioning of another medium or work (artefact) produced in another medium (Rarenko, 2021). In line with Wolf's approach (1999; 2011), manifestations of theatricality in literary text could be inferred within the following forms: 1) *explicit (overt) references* or reflections upon theatrical works and the art of theatre; 2) *implicit (covert) imitation* of the theatrical medium by verbal and textual means. The act of imitating theatrical art or directly discussing it in works of fiction, on the one hand, incisively amplifies the contiguity of these media. On the other hand, it foregrounds the “theatricalized” effect grounded in the presence of theatre as a distinctive medium in literary text.

### 3. Scenic and dramatic parameters of theatricality in literary text.

It is important to take into consideration different approaches towards comprehending theatricality in humanities, as well as systematising its intermedial traits in terms of scenic and dramatic parameters. In *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, Bertolt Brecht defines the essence of theatre as “making live representations of reported or invented happenings between human beings and doing so with a view to entertainment. At any rate that is what we shall speak of theatre, whether old or new” (1974: 180). Probing the issue of the relations between art and reality, Brecht claims that “if art reflects life it does so with special mirrors. Art does not become unrealistic by changing the proportions but by changing them in such a way that if the audience took its representations as a practical guide to insights and impulses it would go astray in real life. It is of course essential that stylization should not remove the natural element but should heighten it” (ibid.: 204). It is thus possible to infer that the general nature of theatrical art inevitably revolves around the problem of representing reality, although its artistic expressions might vary across different theatrical schools and methods. These features of theatrical representation are pivotal for comprehending the complex phenomenon of theatricality in the context of postmodernist literature, with the dichotomy of “real” and “theatrical” as one of its prevailing principles.

Considering the “scenic” aspect of literary text envisages the way this notion is defined within the realm of theatre studies, that is what contributes to creating the effect of scenic presence. Traditionally, the term “*scenery*” is used to designate a stage arrangement – “the frame of action on stage, using pictorial, plastic, architectural and other means” (Pavi, 2016: 322). Its functions are considered to be threefold: 1) *illustration* and *representation* of the elements pertaining to the dramatic text with the aim of giving “the illusion of mimetically representing the framework of the dramatic world” (ibid.); 2) *construction* and *modification*, which shifts the focus from the mimetic representation to rendering the stage as “performance machinery”, a space specially constructed for action and movements (ibid.: 323); 3) *subjectivization* – a form of stage arrangement imbued with “dream-like or fantastic atmosphere on stage and in the relationship with the audience” chiefly by means of colour, lighting etc. (ibid.).

The above inventory of functions shows that the scenery in a theatrical performance entails the use of stage elements and materials, ranging from realistic representations to subjectivized forms. Speaking of representation, Roland Barthes views theatre as “precisely that practice which calculates the place of things *as they are observed*: if I set the spectacle here, the spectator will see this; if I put it elsewhere, he will not, and I can avail myself of this masking effect and play on the illusion it provides” (1977: 69). In this respect, Barthes identifies a correlation between the stage and geometry, the former being “the line which stands across the path of the optic pencil, tracing at once the point at which it is brought to a stop and, as it

were, the threshold of its ramification. Thus is founded – against music (against the text) – *representation*” (ibid.). At the semiotic level, the problem of theatrical representation stems from creating *the effect of reality*; in other words, a theatrical production “*stages a referent*”, thus the scenery “is not considered real (despite its material qualities), but is considered, rather, as a sign that refers to reality” (Fernando de Toro, 1995: 87–88). Extrapolating these properties of stage space onto the domain of literature, it is important to consider the way the theatrical scenery is actualized at the level of literary texture both verbally and textually.

Alongside the properties relating to the theatrical scenery, the manifestations of theatricality in literary text require careful explication in terms of the “dramatic” features as well. Initially, the term “dramatic” refers to “a principle of construction of text and performance which accounts for the tension in the scenes and episodes of the fabula toward a denouement (catastrophe or comic resolution) and suggests that the spectator is captivated by the action” (Pavi, 2016: 112). By contrast to the materialized scenic space, the dramatic effect is conspicuous by its emotive tension and histrionics. It is perceived by the audience as “a framework for the development of the action and the characters” (ibid.: 117). Similar to the art of oratory, theatrical acting is concerned with the problem of emotional impact on the audience – “arousing emotions in spectators and listeners by means of the body and voice” (Balme, 2008: 18). Beyond the theories of classical antiquity, the problem of managing “genuine and ‘affected’, i.e. played, emotions” remains a definitive asset of the staged performance (ibid.: 19). With regard to the phenomenon of theatricality, our attention is focused precisely on the way the dramatized nature of theatrical performance could be traced in literary texture, particularly in the prose texts of postmodernist fiction; it includes the analysis and interpretation of the way the idea of “*dramatic acting*” and “*putting on a performance*” is discussed or imitated at different textual levels.

#### 4. Methodological basis for explicating literary forms of theatricality

An inquiry into the interrelation of different art forms requires a “media-conscious” (Ryan, 2014) approach to all further elaborations in this paper. In our attempt to elucidate the manifestations of theatricality in postmodernist fiction, the *theory of intermediality* serves as a starting point of analysis, which allows us to discern and systematize various intersections between theatre and literature.

Viewed as a form of *intracompositional* intermediality (Wolf, 1999; 2011), theatricality presupposes the use of *intermedial references* to theatre in literary text (Rarenko 2021). The incorporation of the theatrical medium into the literary texture is analyzed within the following forms: 1) explicit discussions or thematic references to theatre as a distinct medium or a work produced in this medium; 2) implicit imitation or stylization of the features pertaining to theatrical practices by the verbal and textual means available at various textual levels (ibid.). Within the broad field of theatrical conventions, we will deduce literary instances of theatricality in terms of the “scenic” and the “dramatic” parameters based on their conception in theatre studies.

Traces of scenic and dramatic artifice in postmodernist writing – including both *explicit (overt)* and *implicit (covert) intermedial references* – are elicited and classified with the help of *linguopoetic* and *linguostylistic* analysis. Given the multilevel (micro- and macro-) structure of literary text, this approach comprises the following stages: 1) explicating the way the “*scenic*” and “*dramatic*” facets of theatricality are marked *lexically*, as well as tracing their recurrence in *isotopic chains* throughout literary text based on Greimas’s understanding of *isotopy* as a set

of recurrent linguistic categories (*cit. after Herman, Jahn & Ryan, 2008: 263*); 2) analysing the *verbal imagery* related to the scenic and dramatic parameters of theatricality in literary text; 3) eliciting *narrative* and *compositional* devices that actualize the effect of theatricality, particularly in the scenic and dramatic sense.

### 5. Theatricality in postmodernist literature in the context of „scenic” and „dramatic” parameters: Stages of analysis

There is a tendency within postmodernist criticism to argue that postmodernism experiments with the ideas of artifice, theatricalism and simulation of reality (*Baudrillard, 1982; Bertens & Fokkema, 1997; McHale, 1992*). To reveal the specificity of theatricality in postmodernist fiction, the research is carried out with a special attention to such novels as *Hag-Seed* by M. Atwood and *The Sea, The Sea* by I. Murdoch.

Encompassing the scenic and dramatic features of the theatrical medium, theatricality in its complex form is studied within various textual dimensions. Based on the selection from lexicographic sources (*Urdang, 1994*), the key verbal markers of “theatricality” include the following lexical means in its synonymic group: ‘*theatric*’, ‘*dramatic*’, ‘*stage*’, ‘*histrionic*’, ‘*Thespian*’, ‘*repertory*’, ‘*stagy*’, ‘*overdone*’, ‘*camp*’, ‘*campy*’, ‘*melodramatic*’, ‘*overwrought*’, ‘*exaggerated*’, ‘*forced*’, ‘*overacted*’, ‘*overacting*’, ‘*sensational*’, ‘*sensationalistic*’, ‘*fake*’, ‘*false*’, ‘*mannered*’, ‘*affected*’, ‘*unnatural*’, ‘*artificial*’, ‘*showy*’, ‘*ostentatious*’, ‘*spectacular*’, ‘*extravagant*’, ‘*phoney*’, ‘*ham*’, ‘*hammy*’, ‘*grandstand*’. The “scenic” parameter of theatricality is marked by such epithets as ‘*picturesque*’, ‘*panoramic*’, ‘*pretty*’, ‘*beautiful*’, ‘*grand*’, ‘*awesome*’, ‘*awe-inspiring*’, ‘*impressive*’, ‘*striking*’, ‘*spectacular*’, ‘*breathtaking*’ (*ibid.*). On the other hand, the synonymic group of “dramatic” is represented by means of the following constituents: ‘*theatric(al)*’, ‘*dramaturgic(al)*’, ‘*Thespian*’, ‘*histrionic*’, ‘*stage*’, ‘*vivid*’, ‘*sensational*’, ‘*startling*’, ‘*breathtaking*’, ‘*sudden*’, ‘*striking*’, ‘*noticeable*’, ‘*extraordinary*’, ‘*impressive*’, ‘*marked*’, ‘*shocking*’, ‘*expressive*’, ‘*graphic*’, ‘*effective*’, ‘*complete*’, ‘*considerable*’, ‘*radical*’, ‘*major*’, ‘*flamboyant*’, ‘*melodramatic*’, ‘*colourful*’, ‘*showy*’, ‘*stirring*’, ‘*spectacular*’, ‘*theatrical*’, ‘*histrionic*’, ‘*exaggerated*’, ‘*overdone*’ (*ibid.*).

Considering the way the above lexical items constitute *isotopic chains*, i.e. strings of theatre-related key words throughout postmodernist literary texts, let us first address M. Atwood’s novel *Hag-Seed*. Its plot revolves around the idea of interactive theatre unfolding at the premise of the Fletcher County Correctional Institute, wherein the former theatre director Felix Phillips is in charge of staging Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*. The description of the theatrical scenery imbues a typical prison setting with the characteristics pertinent to theatre, e.g.: “Welcome to the good ship ‘**Tempest**’, which you are now aboard. I’m the Boatswain and these are my sailors. We’re sailing you across the sea to a desert isle. Don’t be worried if there’s some strange noises, it’s part of **the play**. And this is **an interactive piece of theatre, experimental** in nature; we’re alerting you of that fact in advance.” (*Atwood, 2016: 206*). In this textual fragment, the iteration of theatrical lexis (‘*Tempest*’, ‘*the play*’, ‘*an interactive piece of theatre*’, ‘*experimental*’) thematizes the contemporary stage performance of Shakespeare’s play. The presence of stage effects is further foregrounded by references to lighting, sound, and artificial decoration ‘*decorated*’, ‘*amateurish*’, ‘*cardboard*’, ‘*plastic*’, ‘*painting*’, ‘*light*’, ‘*silhouettes*’, ‘*wrapping paper*’, thus attributing the space of a prison cell with the stagey and artificial qualities: “The walls are **decorated** with **amateurish cardboard** palm trees, seashells, a squid. There’s a box of **plastic** Lego blocks in the corner. An awful **painting** of the seashore, with some kind of horrible mermaid on it.” (*ibid.: 214*); “Then the overhead **light** goes on: they’re in a four-bunk jail

cell, two up, two down. The walls are **decorated** with **silhouettes of cactuses**, cut from brown **wrapping paper.**" (ibid.).

In turn, the dramatized nature of literary text appeals to the emotional rather than spatial conventions of the staged performance. In I. Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* the idea of acting out the dramatic performance is widely discussed by the narrator Charles Arrowby, a retired theatrical director, who reminisces about the essence of theatre, e.g.: "Wilfred was a **great actor**. They do not make them like Wilfred any more. [...] He could stand **motionless, not moving an eyelid**, and make a theatre rock with prolonged laughter. Then he would **blink** and set them off again. Such **power** can be almost **uncanny**: the mystery of the **human body**, the **human face**. Wilfred had a face which **glowed with spirit.**" (Murdoch, 1980: 35). Here, the power of dramatic performance is marked by the lexical units denoting the actor's body, face, and onstage motion ('great', 'actor', 'motionless', 'not moving an eyelid', 'blink', 'power', 'uncanny', 'human body', 'human face'). The dramatic effect of acting and theatrical role-play is thus conveyed as having mastery of emotions and the power to have an effect on the audience.

At the *imagistic level*, the aforementioned theatre-bound lexical items are further engaged in the use of verbal imagery, wherein the scenic and dramatic characteristics are given special prominence. In the vein of Shakespeare's catch-phrase "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players" (2006: 227), postmodernist literary texts often ironically reinterpret contemporary realia through the metaphor of theatre, e.g.: "**Emotions** really exist at the bottom of the **personality** or at the top. In the middle they are **acted**. This is why **all the world is a stage**, and why the **theatre** is always popular and indeed why it exists: **why it is like life**, and it is like life even though it is also the most vulgar and outrageously **factitious** of all the arts. [...] Whereas the theatre, even at its most '**realistic**', is connected with the level at which, and the methods by which, **we tell our everyday lies**. This is the sense in which '**ordinary**' theatre resembles life, and **dramatists are disgraceful liars unless** they are very good." (Murdoch, 1980: 33). Apart from containing the metatextual reflections about theatre, this passage also metaphorically compares ordinary life to a stage, drawing a parallel between dramaturgical art and everyday pretence ('all the world is a stage', 'we tell our everyday lies', 'ordinary theatre resembles life', 'dramatists are disgraceful liars'). The idea of theatrical disguise is also foregrounded by semantically and contextually contrasting lexical units, e.g. 'outrageously factitious', 'realistic', 'ordinary theatre', 'everyday lies'.

At the *macrotextual level*, theatricality is chiefly centered around thematization and imitation of the theatrical medium, with the scenic and dramatic effects encompassing the *narrative* and *compositional* structure of literary text. Such an example of theatricality could be inferred from *The Sea, The Sea*, where the narration is delivered from the perspective of an affectedly "dramatized" character. Charles Arrowby, the novel's narrator and protagonist, cannot remain oblivious of his theatrical past, as he retires in a house by the seaside. Being a former theatre director and playwright, he repeatedly discusses the essence of theatrical art in his memoirs. These passages are interlinked with the description of his present-day life which gradually turns into a theatrical artifice of its own. In the light of this fact, the Charles Arrowby's narrative turns out to be overly dramatic, delusional and unreliable, echoing the presentational mode of drama, e. g.: "It was only now **clear** to me how very much I had **made** that **image**, and yet I could not feel that it was anything like a **fiction**. It was more like a **special sort of truth**, almost a touchstone; as if a thought of mine could become a **thing**, and at the same time be **truth** [...] and the **ambiguous** tormenting **image** had become gentle and a source of light." (Murdoch, 1980: 428).

A stagey – almost pictorial or photographic – image is further portrayed through the narrator's eyes, e.g.: "I **conjured up** that weird **scene** in the sitting room at Niblett's with the

scones and the cucumber sandwiches and the iced cake and Ben and Hartley looking so clean and well [...] There had been a kind of **creepy peacefulness**. It was indeed like a **primitive picture**, the virtuous and happy couple in their pretty little house complete with collie dog. They were **‘plumped out’** in my memory, as **art plumps out its subjects**, making them fatter and **smoother than life** and **more absolutely there**. They looked better, healthier, handsomer than I had seen them before.” (ibid.: 428–429) In the vein of a stage director, Charles Arrowby arranges a theatre-like scene, where the motionless image of characters is reinforced through the textual references to art (‘scene’, ‘primitive picture’, ‘smoother than life’ etc.). Narratorial instances like this yield information about the way the inherently multimodal form of theatre can be verbally and textually represented in literature.

## 6. Conclusions

Postmodern literary texts demonstrate a variety of verbal and textual means through which the effect of theatricality is manifested at the micro- and macrotextual levels, lexical-semantic, imagistic, compositional, and narrative, respectively. It can thus be suggested that a comprehensive understanding of theatricality involves elaborating on the notions of “scenic” and “dramatic” as the medium-specific features of theatre. It implies the possibility to define theatricality as a form of intermediality within the realm of literature grounded in: 1) overt (explicit) references to the scenic and dramatic facets of theatre, or 2) their covert (implicit) imitation by means of literary text. This view of theatricality enriches the intermedial constituent of linguopoetological analysis and the way it can be applied to get a deeper insight of interart relations in the context of postmodernism and beyond.

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