

Dialectical Narrative and Ideological Critique in Terry Eagleton's *Disappearances*

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Abstract: Terry Eagleton's *Disappearances* represents a significant innovation in modern dramatic narration. By structuring its narrative around a dialectical (thesis-antithesis-synthesis) framework infused with ideology, the play creates a subversive movement between surface and deep narrative layers. Through this narrative practice, Eagleton not only enriches theatrical form by opening a nuanced space for ideological discourse but also offers a profound Western Marxist critique of the paths to individual emancipation.

Keywords: Dialectical narrative; Ideology; Terry Eagleton; *Disappearances*

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1. Introduction

Terry Eagleton, a world-renowned Marxist theorist, is unique for his foray into playwriting, a practice that allows him to enact his theoretical concepts creatively. His play *Disappearances* is precisely such an enactment: a deliberate and sophisticated effort not merely to write about ideology, but to stage it, rendering its abstract processes visceral within the dramatic form. To achieve this, Eagleton employs a dialectical narrative structure—rooted in the Hegelian-Marxist model of thesis-antithesis-synthesis—as his primary dramatic mechanism, using it to generate a subversive interplay between the surface-level plot and a deeper ideological inquiry.

This paper argues that the dialectical narrative in Eagleton's work functions as a subversive engine, generating a critical collision between the surface plot and a deeper ideological subtext. Through this mechanism, Eagleton not only revitalizes theatrical form but also mounts a profound critique of the fraught and contradictory pursuit of individual emancipation. The analysis will proceed in three parts: first, by establishing a theoretical framework that defines the dialectic as a dynamic process of conflict and resolution, outlining its function as Eagleton's essential tool for dramatizing ideological struggle. Second, it will perform a close reading of the narrative architecture of his play to trace how this dialectical engine operates as its structural core, propelling the continuous motion between plot event and ideological inquiry. Finally, it will interpret the effects of this method, contending that the

dialectical form itself functions as the critique—one that exposes the complexities of self-liberation and implicates the audience in its unresolved tensions. Thus, this paper positions *Disappearances* as a seminal work wherein Eagleton's theoretical and creative projects seamlessly converge, proposing a new model for political playwriting.

2. The dialectic as a dramatic principle

The dialectical method, which Marx famously characterized in the afterword to the second German edition of *Capital* as a process where he “openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker (Hegel)” and “coquetted with the modes of expression peculiar to him” while inverting Hegel's idealism into a materialist framework, constitutes a model of development through immanent contradiction ^[1]. Inherited from Hegel and radicalized by Marx, the dialectic posits progress as an emergent property of conflict. A given state of affairs or concept (the thesis) inevitably generates its own negation (the antithesis). Their collision yields not a null result but a synthesis—a new, more complex formation that sublates (*aufheben*) its antecedents, simultaneously negating, preserving, and elevating their elements. This synthesis, inherently unstable, becomes a new thesis, perpetuating the cycle. This process functions not as a clean, teleological progression but as a continuous engine of development driven by internal contradiction, forming for Marxism the deep structure of historical and ideological materiality. This aligns with Fredric Jameson's description of dialectical thinking as “an intensification of the normal thought processes such that a renewal of light washes over the object of their exasperation” ^[2]. It is precisely this capacity for “intensification” and conceptual “renewal” that Terry Eagleton seeks to harness and dramatize.

For Eagleton, a theoretical commitment to the dialectic necessitates a corresponding aesthetic form—one capable of capturing ideology not as a static set of doctrines but as a lived, material process that functions to “denote the interests of specific social groups rather than, say, someone's insatiable hankering for haddock” ^[3]. Traditional realist narrative invests in linear causality, psychological consistency, and narrative closure. This very investment risks ratifying the ideological structures it might critique, as it naturalizes complex social relations. Consequently, the dialectic emerges not merely as an analytic tool but as the requisite dramatic principle for a genuinely Marxist dramaturgy. Inherently process-oriented, this form stages the very movement of ideological conflict. It is internally disruptive, structurally resisting its own propositions and foreclosing simplistic resolutions. This strategy is directly akin to Brecht's *Gestus*: a technique for creating “significant stage groupings” that functioned not as mere aesthetic effects but as the foundation for “a hugely conceived theatre for the new social order”. For Brecht, such techniques were impossible without a “deep understanding and passionate support of the new structure of human relations” ^[4]. Like *Gestus*, Eagleton's dialectical form is designed to disrupt audience complacency and expose the constructed nature of the social world. Ultimately, it is generative; its operational logic actively produces new understandings and contradictions.

Therefore, in *Disappearances*, Eagleton transcends the mere thematic application of dialectics to enact a full methodological synthesis. Here, the dialectic is not just a subject but the genetic code of the narrative itself. The play is engineered as a dramatic vessel that is both a product of and a performance in Marxist analysis. Its entire architecture—the collision of scenes, character development, and the sequencing of events—is meticulously calibrated to mimic the internal dynamics of ideological struggle. This strategic fusion of form and content ensures the audience experiences the contradictions of liberation not as abstract propositions, but as the visceral, unfolding logic of its plot. The following analysis will trace the mechanics of this dialectical engine, examining how its triadic rhythm of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis structures the narrative to generate ideological force.

3. The triadic structure of self-subversion

In *Disappearances*, Terry Eagleton operationalizes the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic, transforming it from an abstract philosophical concept into the very architecture of his narrative. He deploys the triadic model of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis not as a mere thematic backdrop but as the generative structural principle that orchestrates the protagonist's transformation. This narrative strategy ensures that the evolution of Kaman's consciousness—through recognition, reversal, and ultimate self-subversion—enacts the dialectical process itself, thereby performing the ideological critique central to Eagleton's project.

3.1. Thesis: the intellectual in exile

Kaman's initial position constitutes the dramatic thesis: that of the intellectual who has retreated from overt political action into the ostensibly apolitical sanctum of art. Eagleton immediately foregrounds the constitutive contradiction of this subjective stance in Kaman's inaugural conversation with Mann. This dialogue operates as a microcosm of his self-subversive logic, wherein his asserted principles inherently contain the seeds of their own negation.

Mann: So you still see your work as committed?

Kaman: ...Poetry is the taste of words on the tongue. That's a kind of politics.

Mann: So you see your art as trying to change things?

Kaman: Of course not. There is nothing more useless than poetry, except perhaps for the Pentagon. That's why it's so subversive.

Mann: I'm sorry, I don't get it

Kaman: Art exists for its own sake, and so should we—if only United Fruit would let us. It reminds us of a world where things might manage to rhyme—like us, for instance. (ActI:126) ^[5]

Kaman's exilic thesis is founded on a deliberate paradox. He asserts the absolute autonomy of poetry ("exists for its own sake") while simultaneously claiming that its very uselessness is the source of its "subversive" political power. This is not a logical failure but a defense mechanism, a coherent philosophical position within his exilic framework. For Kaman, poetry functions as a sanctified space of linguistic order and imaginative freedom, consciously juxtaposed against the material chaos and injustice represented by "the Pentagon" and "United Fruit." It is a refuge where the intellectual can preserve his identity against a hostile political reality. However, as Eagleton the theorist knows, this position is untenable. The moment Kaman claims his art is "a kind of politics" and "subversive", he re-politicizes the very autonomy he seeks to defend. His thesis is thus inherently unstable, already gesturing toward its antithesis.

This instability is further pressurized in his exchange with his former comrade Raan, who embodies the external antithesis against which Kaman defines himself.

Raan: We need you to speak out against Janda. When the right moment comes...

Kaman: Look Raan; there's one place left where we can still play a little, and it's called art. It's thin margin, but it's all we've got...My job is to redeem words from history, so we can still have a currency of sorts.

Raan: You know what real politics is about. Your were tortured back there.

Kaman: Torture's like art--it's a world apart. Its rules don't relate to this one. (ActI:139) ^[5]

This exchange is a critical defense of his thesis, built on three key pillars that reveal its profound fragility:

Firstly, Kaman frames art as a sanctified space, a realm of “play” explicitly opposed to the instrumental “work” of politics. His description of this space as a “thin margin” is crucial, for it implicitly acknowledges the overwhelming pressure of the very world it seeks to exclude, revealing the fragility of his refuge from the outset.

Secondly, he elevates this retreat into a project of aesthetic redemption, casting himself as a “linguistic savior”. His mission to redeem words “from the wreckage” of history is not merely aesthetic but ethical, an attempt to preserve a pure “currency” of meaning. Yet, this very objective undermines his thesis, as the need for redemption admits that language is already politically contaminated and thus can never be truly autonomous.

Finally, and most radically, Kaman makes his ultimate defense: a metaphysical rejection of the political itself. In a desperate act of intellectual compartmentalization, he equates torture and art as equivalent transcendent realms (“a world apart”). This equation attempts to neutralize his trauma and invalidate Raan’s argument by placing both experiences beyond mundane political logic. However, this strategy proves to be the profound undoing of his thesis. Rather than successfully segregating the spheres, this explosive analogy forges a volatile, untenable bond between them, creating the very conceptual linkage that the narrative will exploit to force his eventual confrontation with the political reality he denies.

Kaman’s conflict exemplifies the central paradox of the post-Kantian aesthetic: his retreat into disinterest is a Kantian strategy to create a purified cultural sphere, “partially separating culture from the terrain of political institutions”^[6]. Yet, Eagleton employs a fundamentally Hegelian dramatic structure to dismantle this separation. The narrative forcibly collides Kaman’s abstract aesthetic principles with the material politics he escapes, transforming his internal contradiction—that disinterested art is subversive—from a personal flaw into the philosophical crisis that propels him toward the necessary antithesis.

3.2. Antithesis: The immanent critique

The antithesis to Kaman’s exilic thesis emerges not as an external assault, but as an immanent critique—a negation generated from the internal contradictions of his own beliefs, manifesting through his unintended political consequences. This critique is embodied not by the intellectual Raan, but by his servant, Salah, whose simple act of recitation delivers a more powerful refutation than any debate could.

Salah: (Moving forward) You have words, sir. You great man, Mr Kaman. You put music in our mouths. You take words and make them dance. You give us words to be free, We know your words, we sing them. (Begins to recite.).....

Kaman: You learn that?

Salah: I learn back home, sir. You write poems of freedom. My family, we sing them together.

Kaman:(After a pause)Well, maybe one day I’ll write like that again. Maybe I will, one day. (ActII:167)^[5].

Salah’s intervention operates as a profound immanent critique in three crucial ways, forcing Kaman to confront the failure of his own philosophy:

First, Salah materializes Kaman’s “useless” art. Kaman’s theory that poetry is subversive precisely because it is “useless” is shattered by the tangible reality of Salah’s experience. The poems were not preserved in an autonomous realm; they were memorized, sung, and integrated into the collective resistance of an oppressed community (“My family, we sing them together”). Kaman’s art has not been redeemed from history; it is actively

being used within history, transforming his aesthetic refuge into a tool of political solidarity.

Second, Salah reflects Kaman's repressed political self. He hails Kaman not as a detached aesthete but as "the great man" who writes "poems of freedom." This forces Kaman to confront the gap between his past identity as a committed poet and his present persona as an exile. The praise—"You put music in our mouths"—highlights the potent agency Kaman has abandoned, framing his retreat not as a philosophical stance but as a dereliction of a sacred, communal duty.

Third, and most significantly, Kaman's own response signals the success of the critique. His paused, hesitant concession—"Well, maybe one day I'll write like that again"—marks the first crack in his ideological armor. The repetition of "maybe" and "one day" reveals a consciousness grappling with its own fragmentation. This moment exemplifies what Bakhtin describes as the awakening of consciousness within "a world of alien discourses surrounding it" ^[7]. Kaman is no longer the sole author of his identity; Salah's discourse has invaded and destabilized it.

Therefore, Salah functions not as a debater but as the embodied antithesis. He does not argue; he performs the living contradiction of Kaman's thesis. This scene is the quiet, devastating moment where the walls of Kaman's exile crumble from within, proving that no art can truly be "a world apart." His project to "redeem words from history" is exposed as an attempt to purify language for a different kind of struggle—an ideological one. The fundamental dissonance between his theory of political language and his doctrine of aesthetic autonomy constitutes the site of his inner conflict, a dialectical tension that propels him toward a necessary synthesis.

Despite his professed doctrine of aesthetic disengagement, Kaman remains deeply entangled in the political sphere through his poetic practice. This contradiction is not merely observed but is performed through his work. His servant Salah's acknowledgment that he writes "poems of freedom" provides external testimony, but Kaman's own theoretical insight—that "language is how the oppressed conceal their thoughts from their masters"—reveals his acute awareness of language's inherent political utility. Consequently, his project to "redeem words from history" is exposed not as a flight from politics, but as an attempt to purify and weaponize language for a different kind of struggle—an ideological one. Thus, poetry becomes for him the ultimate subversive act: a means to confront chaos and injustice by mastering the very medium through which power and resistance are articulated. This fundamental dissonance—between the theorist of political language and the proponent of art-for-art's-sake—constitutes the primary site of his inner conflict, a dialectical tension that his consciousness cannot resolve.

3.3. Synthesis: Moral transformation

The culminating synthesis is achieved not through intellectual revelation but through a violent, personal collision that forces an ethical crisis. The threat to his daughter's safety acts as the material force that shatters the abstract conflict between Kaman's ideals, demanding a profound self-subversion. The thesis of the intellectual's fortress—his commitment to spiritual autonomy—collapses under the irreducible weight of paternal love. This internal cataclysm is encapsulated in his agonized monologue:

Well, what can you do?what's the point of trying to look after everyone else if you can't take care of your own? Come on, what are you asking me to do, ruin my own daughter?..... I may not be courageous but at least I'm consistent. Somewhat I'm trying to say-the point I'm trying to make -what it all comes down to is: immorality begins at home. (ActII: 166-167) ^[5].

This speech is the linguistic performance of Kaman's ideological self-subversion. Through a series of rhetorical reversals, he systematically dismantles his exiled identity.

First, he negates the universal for the particular. The Marxist principle of collective solidarity ("looking after everyone else") is subverted by the devastatingly personal question: "What's the point... if you can't take care of your own?" The abstract revolution is rendered meaningless against the concrete reality of familial duty.

Second, he redefines his core virtue as a vice. His prized "consistency" is recast as a cowardly refusal to engage with moral complexity. The declaration, "I may not be courageous but at least I'm consistent", is saturated with tragic irony, exposing his adherence to principle as a rigid, selfish attachment to an abstract ideal.

The climax of this subversion is the paradoxical inversion of a moral maxim: "immorality begins at home." Kaman argues that to betray his daughter for a political cause is the root of ethical failure. This is not selfishness but a radical redefinition of morality itself, prioritizing immediate, responsible care over distant ideological purity.

This monologue is the moment of *Aufhebung* (sublation), where Kaman's thesis (the intellectual in exile) and its antithesis (the call to political action) are simultaneously negated and preserved in a higher synthesis. His pure artistic autonomy is destroyed, just as his identity as a purely public political actor is relinquished. What is preserved—and elevated to a new, tragic plane—is his desire for a moral life. The resulting synthesis is paternal love reconfigured as the ultimate subversive political act—a conscious choice to embrace the "immorality" of collaboration to achieve the higher morality of protection.

This process of sublation is powerfully illuminated by M. Bakhtin's insight that "consciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it"^[7]. Kaman's new consciousness is not born from solitary reflection but is decisively shaped by a collision with external "alien discourses": the primal call of parental love and the brutal reality of political threat. It is precisely his surrender to these forces—the negation of his ideological purity—that constitutes his awakening. Thus, the *Aufhebung* is achieved dialogically; Kaman's independent moral self is forged only through a transformative engagement with the very world he sought to exclude. This transformation exemplifies what Eagleton identifies as the foundation of true morality: "To meditate on one's mortality is to have an opportunity to become truly moral"^[8]. Faced with the potential mortality of his child, Kaman sacrifices his ideological purity, an act that is both a devastating loss and a moral ascent.

In conclusion, Eagleton's dialectical narrative uses Kaman's personal tragedy as a synecdoche for the collective struggle of a colonized people. The play demonstrates that grand historical narratives are inevitably experienced and negotiated within the intimate sphere of individual ethical consciousness, revealing the profound, often tragic, collisions between the personal and the political.

4. Ideological critique

In *Disappearances*, Eagleton's dialectical narrative structure functions not merely as a formal strategy but as a powerful mode of ideological critique, directly interrogating the material and discursive conditions of neocolonialism. The play itself constitutes what Lucien Goldmann terms a "significant structure"—a narrative form that encodes fundamental historical and social contradictions^[9]. By synthesizing the personal with the political, this structure renders visible the intertwined economic, juridical, and subjective dimensions of contemporary coloniality. In doing so, Eagleton's play performs the core task of ideological analysis that Fredric Jameson advocates: "the reinterpretation of a particular narrative trait... within its social, historical, or political context"^[10]. The play *Disappearances* undertakes precisely this reinterpretation, using its dramatic form to expose

how neocolonial power perpetuates itself through economic dependency, legal corruption, and the fragmentation of political subjectivity.

The play situates itself within what Fredric Jameson describes as the “global colonial network” of modernity, here manifested in the neocolonial entanglement of a West African nation with foreign capital ^[11]. Eagleton stages this reality through a dramatic narrative that explores the dialectic of resistance and complicity, particularly through the figure of Kaman. His trajectory embodies the materialist axiom that “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life” ^[12]. This materialist critique is rendered with acute clarity in his dialogue with Raan:

Kaman: So you oust Janda. Then what? Expropriate foreign capital?

Raan: ...We can't survive outside the world market.

Kaman: You can't survive inside it either. So what changes? The new President wears a collar and tie rather than looking like something out of Star Wars?

Raan: We see off a gang of thugs who bleed the people dry.

Kaman: And substitute a bunch of Cambridge graduates who'll bleed them white...

Raan: We've got to start from where we are. We're talking about 78 per cent illiteracy, Kaman. We're talking about three-quarters of a million people living in quarries...

Kaman: You can't skin a tiger claw by claw... what about the debt, for God's sake?... They'll stuff you with military bases..... (Act I: 137-138) ^[5].

This exchange distills the core paradox of neocolonial sovereignty: political independence remains circumscribed by economic subjugation. Raan's revolutionary agenda is pre-emptively contained by what Kaman identifies as the inescapable logic of capital—the material realities of “illiteracy”, “the debt”, and “the IMF.” Eagleton demonstrates that the “world market” is not a neutral arena but the fundamental determinant of the political superstructure, ensuring that even revolutionary regime change merely reproduces dependency. Kaman's cynical conclusion—that the difference is cosmetic, “a collar and tie” instead of a “Star Wars” costume—reveals a tragic insight: under neocolonialism, political transformations are often superficial, masking the continuous economic extraction orchestrated by global capital.

Eagleton further reveals how economic control corrupts the legal and social order. The involvement of the CIA and “major American finance corporations” in drug trafficking illustrates the collapse of juridical integrity under external manipulation:

Raan: [Janda is] a dab hand in drug trafficking, with a spot of support from the Company.

Richard: What company?

Raan: The CIA. ...

Kaman: My dear Richard, where have you been hiding? So are some of the big American finance corporations. (Act II: 147) ^[5].

Here, Eagleton demonstrates that law is not suspended but instrumentalized by power. The “Company” signifies the convergence of state and corporate interests in perpetuating illegality as a mode of control. The Janda government's symbiosis with foreign entities exemplifies what happens when political agency is hollowed out: the

state becomes a puppet, enforcing disorder rather than order.

Within this suffocating matrix, characters struggle to retain discursive and ethical agency. As Bakhtin argues, “an independent, responsible and active discourse is the fundamental indicator of an ethical, legal and political human being” ^[7]. Yet in *Disappearances*, even dialogue is contaminated. Kaman’s withdrawal into poetry represents an attempt to preserve a space of linguistic and moral autonomy, but his ultimate compromise—collaborating with British authorities to save his daughter—signals the impossibility of purity under neocolonial conditions. He becomes what Eagleton, elsewhere analyzing the scapegoat, describes as a figure who “incarnates dirt, deformity, madness and criminality”, simultaneously “shunned and regarded with respectful awe” ^[13]. Kaman is both a critic and a product of the system he condemns.

Through these layered engagements, *Disappearances* offers a broader critique of neocolonial subjectivity. The play illustrates how economic predation manufactures political powerlessness, which in turn distorts social relations and fractures individual conscience. Crucially, Eagleton does not resolve these contradictions but holds them in a sustained dialectical tension, using the very structure of the play as his primary medium of ideological revelation. In doing so, he affirms Goldmann’s belief that significant aesthetic forms can render visible the deepest structures of social life—and implicates the audience by challenging them to recognize their own role within the global networks of power the play critiques.

In conclusion, Terry Eagleton’s *Disappearances* stands as a seminal work of political theatre by making its innovative form its most profound ideological statement. The masterstroke of this play is its synthesis of dramatic narrative with a rigorous Hegelian-Marxist dialectic; Eagleton does not merely narrate a story of neocolonialism but stages its very logic. The triadic structure of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis functions as the narrative engine, driving a relentless critique that generates complex perspectives and refuses simplistic resolutions. This formal strategy seamlessly bridges the surface-level drama of individual choice with the deep structure of ideological inquiry, organically fusing Kaman’s personal tragedy with the collective predicament of his nation. Ultimately, *Disappearances* offers a searing examination of universal modern dilemmas—from economic exploitation and compromised political agency to the spiritual costs of survival—radically redefining the capacity of dramatic form to interrogate the most pressing material and ethical contradictions of the contemporary era.

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