
**THE METAFICTIONAL ASPECT
OF STRINDBERG'S *ETT DRÖMSPEL***

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ABSTRACT

August Strindberg's drama *A Dream Play* (1902) blends reality and a dream in such a way that it is impossible to distinguish between them. Many scholars have commented on these two dimensions of the play, but few have noticed a third, specifically fictional dimension. The article points out that the text of the drama indicates several times that the entire action might only be a fiction created by one of the play's characters: the Poet. The author of the article argues that this phenomenon adds a metafictional aspect to *A Dream Play*.

Keywords

August Strindberg – *A Dream Play* – Swedish literature – Swedish drama – metafiction

Ett drömspel (1902, *A Dream Play*) is one of August Strindberg's most experimental texts. What one is supposed to see on the stage, as the author himself claimed (see below), is meant to appear as if it were a dream. Dreams often blend things real and unreal, and, correspondingly, the boundary between the real and the imaginary is effaced in Strindberg's play. Consequently, also, all conventional realist ways of representing time and space are abandoned. These are some of the reasons *Ett drömspel* is nowadays recognized as one of the prime examples of modernist literature/drama.¹

It would be pointless to refer to all the literary and theater critics who have commented on the fact that it is impossible to distinguish between reality and a dream in *Ett drömspel*. After all, this interpretation is manifest in the text itself, so the reader/spectator does not even need to know that this was Strindberg's acknowledged intention. I will, however, argue that critics often do not pay attention to yet another interpretive dimension of what "reality" the play presents, a dimension one might call "the poetic," "the literary," or simply "the fictional." Besides the real and the dream-like, this is the third dimension that the text of the play emphasizes, but it sometimes goes unnoticed among critics who comment on the play. I will also show that this dimension adds a metafictional aspect to the text.

¹ See, e.g., Stounbjerg 211–212, and Jansson: "[B]y the turn of the century Strindberg had become a modernist writer [...]. As an early modernist, Strindberg made crucial contributions to the development of modernism in the twentieth century [...]" (837).

Strindberg has provided the play with a preface called “Erinran” (“Reminder”), and in this introductory text he explains some of his opinions as to how his text should be perceived:

Författaren har i detta drömspel med anslutning till sitt förra Drömspel „Till Damaskus” sökt härma drömmens osammanhängande men skenbart logiska form. Allt kan ske, allt är möjligt och sannolikt. Tid och rum existera icke; på en obetydlig verklighetsgrund spinner inbillningen ut och väver nya mönster: En blandning av minnen, upplevelser, fria påhitt, orimligheter och improvisationer.

Personerna klyvas, fördubblas, dubblas, dunsta av, förtätas, flyta ut, samlas. Men ett medvetande står över alla, det är drömmarens; [...]. (Ett drömspel 7)

[Following the example of my previous dream play *To Damascus*, I have in this present dream play sought to imitate the incoherent but ostensibly logical form of a dream. Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. Working with some insignificant real events as a background, the imagination spins out its threads of thoughts and weaves them into new patterns – a mixture of memories, experiences, spontaneous ideas, impossibilities, and improvisations.

The characters split, double, multiply, dissolve, condense, float apart, coalesce. But one mind stands over and above them all, the mind of the dreamer; [...]. (*A Dream Play* 646)]²

Such a formulation begs the question: Who is this dreamer? Whose mind/consciousness (*medvetande*) is it that stands above those of all the other characters? In other words, whose dream is it that the theater audience watches? Many readers/spectators, scholars and theater directors have attempted to answer this question in various ways. The most frequently suggested “dreamers” of the entire action of the play have been the following: Indra’s daughter, Strindberg, the spectator and God (Rossholm 140).³ However, one can argue that any attempt at arriving at an unequivocal solution in this regard is reductive, because the play is worded in such a way that it prevents an unambiguous answer. The text keeps the question of the dream’s origin open while, at the same time, suggesting three basic possibilities:

² I have modified the translation slightly. Sprinchorn has “form of our dreams” in the translation’s first sentence, but “form of a dream” corresponds more precisely to Strindberg’s original wording.

³ The last-mentioned possibility – God – might seem particularly strange, but it is, in fact, not surprising that some critics have made this suggestion. Both certain passages of *Ett drömspel* (see, e.g., 115) and several biographical facts reveal that Strindberg’s use of the concept of a dream in this play was strongly influenced by turn-of-the-century philosophical and theological speculation – he shared his view of life as a dream or illusion with, for example, theosophists: “Drawing on both Arthur Schopenhauer and Indian philosophy, late nineteenth-century theosophists conceived of the phenomenal world as an illusory shadow-play projected from a transcendental subject” (Szalczar 197). Strindberg himself wrote in a diary entry concerning his readings of “Indiska Religionens Läror” (“the teachings of Indian religions”): “Verlden är sålunda till endast genom en synd om den ens är till – ty den är endast en drömbild [not: Därför mitt Drömspel en bild av lifvet.], ett fantom [...]” (qtd. in Ollén 135) [“Thus the world exists only through sin, if it exists at all, for it is only a dream picture (hence my Dream Play is a picture of life), a phantom [...]”; trans. Meyer 432]. There is a considerable amount of secondary literature on Strindberg and the influence of Schopenhauer, Buddhism, occultism and related phenomena, but it is not necessary to go into detail in this regard for the purposes of this article. I should, however, make a short remark concerning Sigmund Freud. Many scholars feel tempted to make connections between Strindberg’s *Ett drömspel* and Freud, especially since Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* was first published almost at the same time (*Die Traumdeutung*, 1900) as Strindberg’s play, but good arguments can be made that Strindberg’s use of the concept of dream has almost nothing to do with Freud’s; see, e.g., Marschall 116.

DIKTAREN

Mig tyckes att jag upplevat detta förr...

DOTTERN

Mig även!

DIKTAREN

Kanske jag drömt det?

DOTTERN

Eller diktat det, kanske?

DIKTAREN

Eller diktat det!

DOTTERN

Då vet du vad dikt är!

DIKTAREN

Då vet jag vad dröm är!

DOTTERN

Mig tyckes att vi stått någon annanstans och sagt dessa ord förr!

DIKTAREN

Då kan du snart räkna ut vad verklighet är!

DOTTERN

Eller dröm!

DIKTAREN

Eller dikt! (*Ett drömspel* 101–102)

[POET: I have a strange feeling I've been through this before.

DAUGHTER: Me too.

POET: Maybe I dreamed it ...?

DAUGHTER: Or wrote it in a poem, maybe?

POET: Or wrote it in a poem.

DAUGHTER: Then you know what poetry is.

POET: Then I know what dreams are.

DAUGHTER: And I have the strange feeling that we once stood somewhere else and said these same words.

POET: Then it shouldn't take you long to figure out what reality is.

DAUGHTER: Or dreams!

POET: Or poetry! (*A Dream Play* 719–720)]

In the context of the play, this key passage indicates that what the spectator sees on the stage is either 1) reality (*verklighet*), or 2) a dream (*dröm*), or 3) a poem/poetry (*dikt*). Simultaneously, the passage suggests that it is impossible to distinguish between the three.

As I have indicated above, I want to emphasize the significance of the third possibility: what the spectator sees may be neither reality nor a dream, but *literary fiction* created by the character of the Poet. Thereby *Ett drömspel* acquires an important *metafictional* aspect: the play can be read (or staged) as a text which comments on its own fictional status, on the conditions of its own creation. In addition, some of the concepts of metafiction include the criterion of questioning the boundary between fiction and reality. For example, if one reads Waugh's definition of metafiction, one finds that it describes *Ett drömspel* very well, too: "*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). In any event, Strindberg's play is certainly self-reflexive in a manner one usually attributes to metafictional texts.

Before I continue following this line of thought further, I would like to point out several aspects of the role of the Poet which I think are relevant in the context of this article. One can argue that the Poet is the most privileged among all human beings that Indra's daughter meets during her stay on earth. He has a special status: Indra's daughter is more open to him than to others, and she eventually reveals (at least partially) the secret of how the world was created and how it works. Perhaps most importantly, she has an exceptional word of praise for the Poet, describing him as someone "who knows best how to live":

Farväl du mänskobarn, du drömmare,
Du Skald som bäst förstår att leva;
På vingar svävande utöver jorden,
Du dyker ner ibland i mulden
För att den snudda vid, ej fastna! (*Ett drömspel* 121)

[Farewell, you child of man, you dreamer,
you poet, who knows best how to live
soaring on wings above the earth,
swooping down when you feel like it,
to graze the dust, not to drown in it. (*A Dream Play* 732)]⁴

It seems that the main reason the Poet has a special position among the play's characters is that he, unlike other humans in *Ett drömspel*, is not content with an orientation toward the earthly and instead turns his attention toward the metaphysical heights. He is the only one who seems, in his dissatisfaction, potentially willing to "quarrel with God," something which, for example, the Officer's mother advises her son never to do (*Ett drömspel* 15). He appears to be the only one who does what Indra's daughter says – in her speech to the Officer – is necessary: "[D]et är en plikt söka friheten i ljuset!" (*Ett drömspel* 12) ["To search for freedom in the light is a duty!" my trans.]. All this is in contrast

⁴ I have again modified Sprinchorn's translation slightly, replacing his "human being" with "child of man."

with the majority of the human characters in the play who are (or sooner or later become) resigned to their suffering.⁵

This concrete emphasis on the role a poet can have within the human society reinforces the thematic importance of seeing the course of the action of the play *as* fiction. In this way, Strindberg seems to have revealed in the text his own conviction concerning the importance of an artist in society. The character of the Poet in *Ett drömspel* can obviously be seen as only a metonymy for any writer, playwright, or simply any artist, and what is called poetry in the above quote can be seen metonymically as literature or art in general.⁶ I have employed the term *metafictional* in this article, but one could just as well use the terms *metaliterary* or *metatheatrical* for the same phenomenon.

If one stresses the idea that what the spectator sees may be neither reality, nor a dream, but fiction created by the Poet, a question still remains whether one can say anything more about the nature of this fiction. Here I must point out once more that the play treats *fiction* and *dream* as two very similar, perhaps mutually indistinguishable, phenomena. The proximity of fiction and a dream is, for example, suggested in another key passage:

DOTTERN

Den Blinde? Fagervik? Det måtte jag ha drömt! Och Alices fästman, fula Edith, Skamsund och Karantänen, svavel och karbol, promotionen i kyrkan, advokatkontoret, korridoren och Victoria, Det växande Slottet och officern ... det har jag drömt ...

DIKTAREN

Det har jag diktat en gång!

DOTTERN

Då vet du vad dikt är ...

DIKTAREN

Då vet jag vad dröm är ... -- -- Vad är dikt?

DOTTERN

Ej verklighet men mer än verklighet ... ej dröm men vakna drömmar ... (*Ett drömspel* 91)

[DAUGHTER: Blind Man? Fair Haven? I must have dreamed all that. And Alice's lieutenant, ugly Edith, Foul Strand and the quarantine, sulphur and phenol. Graduation exercises in the cathedral, the lawyer's office, the corridor and Victoria, the growing castle and the officer – it's all a dream I've dreamed.

⁵ Cf. also Ward: "The Poet is humanity's spokesman; an outcast and a wanderer who is cynical about the disappointments of life. This causes him to blaspheme when he accompanies the Daughter to Fingal's Cave, but in other respects he has deep insight into the moral complexities of human behaviour and acts as her guide" (220–221).

⁶ Several critics and directors have approached the Poet as Strindberg's *alter ego*, and Ingmar Bergman, for example, made Strindberg the explicit author of what the audience saw – in Bergman's version "the *whole* play is a dream dreamt by the author: Strindberg" (Törnqvist 236). But this is obviously reductive, no matter how close one might assume that Strindberg identified himself with the Poet (cf. Skaftun 152). Such an approach simplifies the complexity and ambiguity of the fictional world of *Ett drömspel*; it is important to keep in mind that the Poet signifies Strindberg only indirectly, in the sense that the Poet can represent a potentially unlimited number of writers/artists (including, by implication, Strindberg, too).

POET: It's all in a poem I once wrote.

DAUGHTER: Then you know what poetry is.

POET: I know what dreams are. What is poetry?

DAUGHTER: Not reality. Something more than reality. Not dreams, but wide-awake dreams. (*A Dream Play* 712)]

The expression “a wide-awake dream” is obviously an oxymoron. At the same time, it can easily be regarded as a definition of a certain type of art: an art based on imagination, free of the constraints of rationality, an art which blends the rational and the irrational, the real and the imaginary. As such *Ett drömspel* fits the time period in which it was written: much of the late-nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-century Scandinavian literature turned against the literature of the 1870s and 1880s as too rational(istic) and without imagination. As is well-known, an entire generation of Scandinavian writers emerged in the 1890s who preferred to focus on the subjective and even irrational elements of the human psyche, rather than concentrating on the individual within a broad social context, as the realists and naturalists of the 1870s and 1880s tended to do. Free imagination and the inquiries into the depths of the human mind were set against what has been termed disdainfully as “skomakarrealismen”⁷ (“shoemaker realism”) in Sweden: a literature in which mere craft was deemed more important than an individual genius. Strictly in terms of his age, Strindberg did not belong to this generation of writers, but in the second part of the 1890s he began to write in a similar way. In this context *Ett drömspel*, with its metafictional dimension, can be considered as one of Strindberg's statements on what art and artists are (or should be): according to the text of the play, a real artist is not a skilled craftsman, but a mind-probing, sensitive soul endowed with a free-flowing, dream-like imagination.

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⁷ The term comes from Verner von Heidenstam's essay *Renässans* (1889); see, e.g., Lönnroth and Delblanc 17.

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METAFIKČNÍ ASPEKT STRINDBERGOVA DRAMATU ETT DRÖMSPEL

Résumé

Hra snů (1902) Augusta Strindberga mísí realitu a sen takovým způsobem, že je nemožné je od sebe navzájem odlišit. Těmito dvěma dimenzemi hry se již zabývalo mnoho badatelů, ale málo z nich si všimlo ještě třetího, specificky fiktivního rozměru. Článek poukazuje na to, že text dramatu několikrát naznačuje, že celý děj je možná jen fikce vytvořená jednou z postav hry, Básníkem. Autor článku argumentuje, že tento jev dodává *Hře snů* metafikční aspekt.