

The Fall of the Modern Bard: Classical Tragedy and the Ethics of Artificial Authorship in Ayad Akhtar's *McNeal*

Asst. Lect. Jinan AbdZaid Ogab

Physical Education and Sport Science,

Al-Qasim Green University, Iraq.

jinanbadzaid@sport.uoqasim.edu.iq

Abstract

This article interprets Ayad Akhtar's 2024 Broadway play *McNeal* as a classical tragedy, using the formal elements of the genre to question what it means to be a writer in an age of generative Artificial Intelligence. The Nobel Prize-winning protagonist of the play, Jacob McNeal, is explored as a modern tragic hero whose hubris—his belief that it is not a fault, but rather a part of himself—carries him from literary success to professional and moral failure. The paper uses the published play text, Aristotle's Poetics, Roland Barthes' theory of authorship, and Walter Benjamin's account of mechanical reproduction to make the argument that *McNeal* is not just a play about AI, but what it reveals: how fragile the myths are that writers use to justify their practice to themselves and to others. Particular attention is paid to the play's meta-theatrical dimension, in which AI functions not only as the subject of dramatic inquiry but as a structural element of the play itself. The paper also engages with the only published academic study of the production to date (Kuchta, 2025) and situates *McNeal* within both Akhtar's body of work and the broader tradition of American tragic drama.

Keywords: Ayad Akhtar, McNeal, classical tragedy, Aristotle, AI and literature.

سُقُوطُ الشَّاعِرِ الْحَدِيثِ: التَّرَاجِيذُ الْكَلَّاسِيَّةُ وَأَخْلَاقِيَّاتُ التَّأْلِيفِ الْإِصْطِنَاعِيِّ فِي مَسْرَحِيَّةِ مَآكِنِيلَ لِأَيَادِ أَخْتَرِ

م.م جنان عبدزيد عكاب

كلية التربية البدنية و علوم الرياضة ، جامعة القاسم الخضراء

المستخلص

تُقدِّمُ هَذِهِ الْوَرَقَةُ الْبَحْثِيَّةُ قِرَاءَةً لِمَسْرَحِيَّةِ "مَآكِنِيلَ" (٢٠٢٤) لِأَيَادِ أَخْتَرِ، الَّتِي عُرِضَتْ عَلَى مَسْرَحِ بْرُودْوَايِ، بِوَصْفِهَا تَرَاجِيذًا كَلَّاسِيَّةً، مُوَظَّفَةً الْعَنَاصِرَ الشَّكْلِيَّةَ لِهَذَا الْجِنْسِ الْأَدَبِيِّ لِمُسَاءَلَةِ مَعْنَى أَنْ يَكُونَ الْمَرْءُ كَاتِبًا فِي عَصْرِ الذِّكَاةِ الْإِصْطِنَاعِيِّ التَّوَلِيدِيِّ. وَتَسْتَكْشِفُ الْوَرَقَةُ شَخْصِيَّةَ الْبَطْلِ الرَّئِيسِيِّ، جَاكُوبِ مَآكِنِيلِ، الْحَائِزِ عَلَى جَائِزَةِ نُوبِلِ، بِوَصْفِهِ بَطْلًا تَرَاجِيذِيًّا حَدِيثًا تَقُودُهُ غَطْرَسَتُهُ (الهُوبْرِيس) — أَيْ إِيْمَانُهُ بِأَنَّهَا لَيْسَتْ عَيْبًا، بَلْ جُزْءًا لَا يَتَجَرَّأُ مِنْ ذَاتِهِ — مِنْ النَّجَاحِ الْأَدَبِيِّ إِلَى السُّقُوطِ الْمِهْنِيِّ وَالْأَخْلَاقِيِّ. وَتَسْتَنْدُ الْوَرَقَةُ إِلَى النَّصِّ الْمَسْرُوحِيِّ الْمُنْشُورِ، وَكِتَابِ "فَنُّ الشَّعْرِ" لِأَرْسُطُو، وَنَظَرِيَّةِ رُولَانِ بَارْتِ فِي الْمَوْئَلَفِ، وَتَصَوُّرِ فَاُلْتَرِ بِنْيَامِينِ لِلِاسْتِنْسَاخِ الْآلِيِّ، لِتَطْرَحَ حُجَّةً مَفَادَهَا أَنَّ "مَآكِنِيلَ" لَيْسَتْ مُجَرَّدَ مَسْرَحِيَّةٍ عَنِ الذِّكَاةِ الْإِصْطِنَاعِيِّ، بَلْ تَكْمُنُ أَهْمِيَّتُهَا فِيمَا تَكْشِفُهُ: مَدَى هَسَاشَةِ الْأَسَاطِيرِ الَّتِي يَسْتَخْدِمُهَا الْكِتَابُ لِتَبْرِيرِ مُمَارَسَتِهِمُ الْكِتَابِيَّةِ لَأَنْفُسِهِمْ وَلِلْآخَرِينَ. وَتُولِي الْوَرَقَةُ اِهْتِمَامًا خَاصًّا لِلْبُعْدِ الْمِثَامَسْرُوحِيِّ فِي الْمَسْرَحِيَّةِ، حَيْثُ لَا يَعْمَلُ الذِّكَاةُ الْإِصْطِنَاعِيُّ بِوَصْفِهِ مَوْضُوعًا لِلْمُسَاءَلَةِ الدِّرَامِيَّةِ فَحَسْبُ، بَلْ عُنْصُرًا بِنْيَوِيًّا فِي الْمَسْرَحِيَّةِ ذَاتِهَا. كَمَا تَتَقَاعَلُ الْوَرَقَةُ مَعَ

الدَّرَاسَةُ الْاَكَاذِمِيَّةُ الْوَحِيدَةُ الْمُنْشُورَةُ حَتَّى الْاَنَ حَوْلَ هَذَا الْعَمَلِ (Kuchta, 2025) ، وَتَضَعُ "مَآكِنِيلَ" فِي سِيَاقِ اَعْمَالِ اَخْتَرٍ مِنْ جِهَةٍ، وَفِي سِيَاقِ التَّقْلِيدِ الْاَوْسَعِ لِلدَّرَامَا التَّرَاذِيَّةِ الْاَمْرِيكِيَّةِ مِنْ جِهَةٍ اُخْرَى. الْكَلِمَاتُ الْمِفْتَاحِيَّةُ: اَيَادُ اَخْتَرٍ، مَآكِنِيلَ، التَّرَاذِيَّةُ الْكَلَّاسِيكِيَّةُ، اَرِسْطُو، الذِّكَاؤُ الْاِصْطِنَاعِيُّ وَالْاَدَبُ.

1. Introduction

There is something almost comic about the way McNeal begins. In the dark, before any character appears, a giant iPhone fills the stage. We watch someone — we do not yet know who — typing prompts into ChatGPT, asking it to predict the Nobel Prize in Literature. The AI hedges, qualifies, apologizes. Then a voice cuts through: the chatbot is a “soulless, silicon ... suck-up” (Akhtar, 2024, p. 3). The line gets a laugh. But it also announces, with precision, the contradiction at the heart of Ayad Akhtar’s 2024 play: the man who says this will spend the rest of the evening depending on the very technology he despises.

That contradiction (between contempt and dependence, between artistic pride and technological complicity) is what makes *McNeal* worth studying carefully. Akhtar is not the first playwright to write about writers, nor the first to worry about technology. But he may be the first to stage the ethical crisis of AI authorship as classical tragedy, with all the formal rigor that implies. Jacob McNeal is a Nobel laureate who has secretly used an AI chatbot to co-author his latest novel. He is also, by the end of the play, a man who has stolen his dead wife's manuscript, destroyed his relationship with his son, and jumped — or perhaps only imagined jumping — out of a window. The trajectory is steep, and it follows a logic that Aristotle would have recognized immediately.

This paper offers a close reading of the published play text — *McNeal* appeared in *The Atlantic* in December 2024 — with two related aims. The first is to demonstrate that the play functions as a structurally rigorous Aristotelian tragedy, and that understanding it as such illuminates aspects of its meaning that are otherwise easy to miss. The second is to examine what the play argues, through that tragic structure, about artificial intelligence and the ethics of authorship. These two aims are not separable: Akhtar chose the tragic form because it is the form best suited to exploring what happens when a person of genuine greatness refuses to acknowledge the ethical limits of their power.

McNeal has received relatively little academic attention since its Broadway premiere. The most substantial scholarly treatment to date is Kuchta's (2025) review in *the Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture*, which identifies the play's thematic richness and notes Akhtar's characteristic refusal to offer easy answers — but stops well short of the sustained textual analysis the play rewards. The present paper attempts to provide that analysis, drawing directly on the published text rather than on production reviews or journalistic accounts. The argument proceeds through a review of relevant scholarship, an account of the theoretical frameworks employed, a scene-by-scene analysis, and a concluding discussion of the play's broader implications for the study of AI and literary culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Classical Tragedy and Its Modern Adaptations

At the heart of Aristotle's account of tragedy, in the *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE), is an account of the fall of a great man that can result in something other than despair. The key mechanism is catharsis — the audience's feeling of pity and fear that is somehow clarifying rather than just painful (Aristotle, trans. 1987). The key is that this flaw in the character of the tragic hero has to lead to destruction, yet it has to be understandable — even knowable. It's not that we're sorry for Oedipus for being weak, it's that we're sorry that his very strengths lead to his destruction: his intelligence, his desire to know what's going on. That he has a hamartia does not separate him from his greatness.

This is the aspect of Aristotelian tragedy that twentieth-century American drama found most generative. Arthur Miller's famous 1949 essay “*Tragedy and the Common Man*” argued that the tragic condition is not the exclusive province of kings — that any person who refuses to accept diminishment, who insists on their full human dignity, can be the subject of genuine tragedy. Miller's Willy Loman and O'Neill's James Tyrone are destroyed by qualities — loyalty to a self-image, refusal to face reality — that are also, in their way, forms of integrity. The tradition that Akhtar inherits is one in which hamartia is always double-edged: the flaw and the strength are the same thing, seen from different angles.

What is less commonly noted in scholarship on contemporary American drama is the extent to which this tradition has always been preoccupied with artists and intellectuals — people whose self-understanding is constituted through their creative work. *McNeal* belongs to this lineage, and its protagonist's hamartia has a specifically creative form: his conviction that artistic greatness exempts him from ordinary ethical obligation. The play's own projected structural analysis — in which a ChatGPT interface maps the dramatic action onto classical tragic story points (Akhtar, 2024, pp. 42–43) — suggests that Akhtar is entirely conscious of this inheritance and is deliberately staging the encounter between classical form and contemporary technological crisis.

2.2 Artificial Intelligence and Literary Ethics

The use of generative AI in creative fields does raise ethical issues that are new, and academic writing on the subject is still playing catch-up. There are, indeed, five principles for ethical AI developed by Floridi and Cowls (2019) that are useful, but these are mostly for AI systems that impact on social welfare and not in the context of literary authorship. Boden's (2004) taxonomy of creativity – distinguishing between combinational, exploratory and transformational types – gives a more directly applicable analytical tool to one that explains why *McNeal* can, at once, disavow the AI as “not a good writer. Not yet” (Akhtar, 2024, p. 22) and rely on the AI as a compositional collaborator. What the AI can not do is the kind of transformational creativity, one of the ideas, that Boden calls exploratory creativity, and that he thinks the AI does well enough to be useful.

The contract scene in the play is a direct dramatisation of the legal aspect of AI as an author, where *McNeal* is called upon to sign a disclosure rider stating he has not used AI to write his novel. What's happening in this scene is deeply relevant in the real world: In 2023, a group of American authors sued Open AI for training its AI models on copyrighted material without permission (Alter, 2024). *McNeal* stages the individual artist's encounter with exactly this institutional reckoning — and his refusal to sign the rider is the moment at which his private transgression becomes a public one.

In the only published academic study of the production, Kuchta (2025) writes that Akhtar asks the question, “Does the involvement of AI in creative work result in ‘a loss of aesthetic agency’ and ‘the potential decline of traditional artistic practices?’” but, rightly, fails to answer it. This paper suggests that actually the whole answer lies in the question itself; Akhtar presents it as a tragedy, not a polemic, and as a human rather than a policy question.

2.3 Ayad Akhtar's Dramatic World and *McNeal* in Context

Of course, it is obvious to anyone who has followed Akhtar's career that *McNeal* is a deviation. His previous films – *Disgraced* (2012), *The Invisible Hand* (2014) and *Junk* (2017) – show a particular interest in the plight of Muslim Americans, in the moral turpitude of financial capitalism, or both. At least, not directly, is *McNeal* about none of these. The protagonist is a white male literary celebrity, of Irish-Texan-German descent, who, as his son tells him, is “a raging egomaniac” (Akhtar, 2024, p. 25). This is the first time that Akhtar is doing something new.

And yet the continuities are real. Key to Akhtar's work, as Bigsby (2019) points out, is his initial exposure to Jerzy Grotowski's theater, which was dedicated to posing questions instead of finding answers and to reducing drama to the “meeting between the actor and the spectator.” In this respect, *McNeal* is certainly Akhtar's: a protagonist who is at once both interesting and repulsive, and a refusal to pass judgment between these two attributes. It is Raskolnikov's interest that is

interesting, like McNeal's — not because we like him, but because we know, and are made uncomfortable by, the logic of his position.

The play's extraordinary intertextual density — Shakespeare, Kafka, Ibsen, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Bellow, Ernaux — is also characteristic. Akhtar has always written plays that take their characters' intellectual lives seriously, that treat the books people read and argue about as dramatically significant. In *McNeal*, this intertextuality becomes structural: the AI's literary sources, fed into it by *McNeal* to generate his novel, are also the play's own sources. The distinction between McNeal's borrowings and the play's borrowings is deliberately blurred, and that blurring is part of the argument.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Aristotle's Poetics and the Architecture of Tragedy

The Aristotelian framework employed in this analysis is not applied mechanically. It would be easy enough to map the play's seven scenes onto the classical tragic arc and call it done. What is more interesting is the way the play itself performs that mapping — literally, through the ChatGPT interface that projects the “classic tragic story points” onto the stage at the play's structural midpoint (Akhtar, 2024, pp. 42–43). The AI's analysis of the plot it is helping to generate is one of the play's most unsettling jokes: the machine that is complicit in McNeal's transgression is also the one that identifies his story as a tragedy. It knows, in some sense, what it is doing. McNeal does not.

The most important Aristotelian concept for this reading is not hamartia alone but the specific relationship Aristotle posits between hamartia and the hero's greatness. The flaw is not something external to the hero's excellence; it is the shadow cast by that excellence. McNeal's hubris and his greatness as a writer are connected: he will not have rules imposed on him, he believes his vision is worth whatever he has to do to bring it to fruition, and he will go places where others would not. Aristotle calls this tragic precisely because the hero is not simply bad — if they were, the fall would produce only satisfaction. The fall must produce pity as well as fear, which requires that we see the greatness and the flaw as one.

3.2 Barthes and the Death of the Author

Barthes's 1967 essay is almost too apt a framework for McNeal — which is perhaps why the play engages with it so obliquely. The essay's central claim, that the author must be killed off in order for the text to live, is staged in the play not as a theoretical proposition but as a literal dramatic event: McNeal may or may not die at the end of Scene 7, and the speech that follows is delivered by a figure who exists somewhere between the author, the character, and the AI-generated simulacrum of both.

What Barthes could not have anticipated is the specific form that the death of the author takes in the age of generative AI. When McNeal instructs the chatbot to

“rework these texts in the style of Jacob McNeal”(Akhtar, 2024, p. 11), he is performing — quite literally — what Barthes described as the dissolution of authorial identity into a network of cultural citations. The irony is that McNeal intends this as an exercise of his authorial power, not a surrender of it. He believes he is using the machine; the play suggests the machine is using him.

3.3 Benjamin and the Question of Authenticity

The theoretical framework most directly relevant to the play's staging is Benjamin's essay on mechanical reproduction from 1935. The deepfake shifts - where McNeal's face morphs into that of his characters, his wife, Ronald Reagan and Barry Goldwater - bring a visceral theatrical quality to Benjamin's tell of the aura in crisis. The stage directions ask for these changes to be “a constant state of change as if more than one face were living”(Akhtar, 2024, p. 31) . This is not mere theatrical spectacle; it is the play's argument made visible. Benjamin was concerned about the fate of painting and sculpture in the era of their perfect reproducibility. Akhtar's question of literary identity is similar: When a machine can reproduce a man or woman's prose on demand, what happens to the unique human voice that makes one prose readable and comprehended by the other? At his most defensive McNeal's response is that nothing happens because the machine won't come close to the man. The play's answer is darker: that the question itself has already changed the nature of the thing it describes.

4. Analysis

4.1 Jacob McNeal as Tragic Hero: Arete and Hamartia

The first scene is economy and some wit setting up McNeal's greatness. While waiting for the results of his tests, he types something on his phone in his doctor's office. He's going to be getting the Nobel Prize. He's also drinking himself to his death. The choice of juxtaposition is purposeful – Akhtar is not so much interested in a hero that is simply good as in a character whose strengths and self-destructions are thoroughly intermingled. McNeal, of course, does not pick up the phone when the Swedish Academy calls, but he does ask his doctor to do so because he doesn't want to jinx it. The gesture is a perfect fit: a superstitious, theatrical character relying on others to do the things that he cannot.

In fact, his hamartia (tragic flaw) is obvious in Scene 3, during his book revision meeting with his agent, Banic. When put under pressure from a copy editor to work differently, McNeal responds “Seduction's about what you hide, not what you show. —They don't make copy editors like they used to”(Akhtar, 2024, p. 14)

The line appears to be a piece concerning prose rhythm. However, it is a self-portrait, when you read it in the context — it's a person, not just the writer, who is in the business of concealment. What he attempts to conceal from his copy editor he conceals from his agent, his son, his lover and finally himself. The mechanism of his moral failure is the quality he is exhibiting as his “artistic sophistication.” In

the Aristotelian sense, it's not something that has been imposed upon the character from outside, but something that comes from the same root as his talent, a hamartia. Banic asks McNeal about his need to write, and the least wordy rendition of his philosophy as a driver is when he answers the question. His response is in two words “Pain is the motor” (Akhtar, 2024, p. 20).

It sounds like any sort of literary life writing, except for the confessional—McNeal says it as a person who has voiced such things before. What eventually becomes clear in the play, however, is that it's not just his own pain that McNeal brings to his work...it's his wife's, his son's, his lover's. He has been taking away from them the raw material which was in their immediate possession, and on their own terms. The motor is fuelled by others' miseries, and he has deluded himself that it's art.

4.2 The AI Collaboration: Transgression and Disclosure

The fact that McNeal used AI in her writing is revealed almost in passing in Scene 3 while she is reviewing a contract. As soon as Banic produces the disclosure rider, McNeal moves to sign it without reading — but pulls the motion. The following is a quite carefully constructed speech in self-presentation – it is worth reproducing in full “I kept running sentences through it. Like the Nobel speech. The more I used it, the better it got. It's not a good writer. Not yet” (Akhtar, 2024, p. 22).

Identify scriptural devices. First minimization: “running sentences through it” appears to be a spell-check rather than a co-authorship. Secondly reassurance: He used it in the Nobel speech too, and that speech was well received, and nobody noticed. Third: The tool in a condescending manner: “not a good writer. Not yet.” The most tell-tale words in the speech are “Not yet” in parentheses. It implies competitive anxiety, not moral superiority. But “AI is not something that I want to fight against, it's when it gets better that I'm concerned,” McNeal said.

The play does not let Banic's “episode of institutional complicity” pass lightly, when he “took back” the contract and told McNeal that he was supposed to say nothing about it (Akhtar, 2024, p. 23). The agent's pragmatic act of suppression of disclosure of a question mirrors the attitude of the culture to the ethics of AI authorship for commercial convenience in miniature. Her offering of advice is not malicious, merely practical. It's the kind of thing that is concerning.

It's only in Scene 7 that Banic's find of McNeal's manuscript of Swiss Clinic—a novel written in two days—that reveals the full extent of the AI that McNeal utilizes “Watching those pages come out of the printer was like seeing the last chunk of Antarctic ice fall into the ocean. There's no turning back” (Akhtar, 2024, p. 54).

It is the most striking metaphor in the play—and well worth all the hard work. The ice in Antarctica is testament to irreversible environmental catastrophe – a point of no return, a system that is thrown out of balance. This is not just a story of his joy over a new book, it's a historical event. Metaphor use is grandiosity too—or as it is

used here, it would be inexplicable for McNeal not to frame even his own creative process as world-historical. However, the pomp has a kernel of truth. There is a change and there will be no return.

4.3 The Aristotelian Arc: Peripeteia and Anagnorisis

The reversal (peripeteia) does not come at the hands of the AI disclosure, but rather at the hands of another, deeper transgression: McNeal's stealing of his late wife's unpublished manuscript for his Nobel-winning novel Evie. At the start of the play, when his son Harlan arrives bearing a copy of the advance script he straightforwardly challenges, "In Scene 4, when you show up with the copy of the advance manuscript, what you're basically saying is what? You took the whole thing." (Akhtar, 2024, p. 26).

McNeal's answer is a defense and a confession. Immediately he cites to the canonical literary authority: "That would be like saying — Shakespeare took Pandosto for Winter's Tale" (Akhtar, 2024, p. 26). The criticism isn't all empty — the play's actually concerned with the point at which "real" literary influence gives way to thievery. In this particular instance, however, it's definitely evasion. He did not influence her according to the definition, but erased the originality of her work, the history of her authorship, and the manuscript she created for her creative identity. That's not what Shakespeare did with Pandosto.

The moral reckoning of the play is most strongly presented in the confrontation of scene 6 between the two characters Francine Blake and the audience. Blake's description of McNeal is on the money "Pillage, Jacob. You pillaged me. (Akhtar, 2024, p. 46)

She then shows (and shows methodically!) how McNeal has been reworking into fictional elements various details of her personal life, all without her permission and all to his benefit — she lost out. There is no hyperbole in the word "pillage": that is what has occurred. McNeal has taken a resource from someone else and made it useful to him — just as a conqueror would do with a conquered territory. McNeal's response is the play's most explicit statement of his hubris — and its most dramatic moment "Carnage be damned. I'm doing God's work. Helping generations yet unborn" (Akhtar, 2024, p. 46)

He says this to the audience directly, over Blake's head. It is a kind of manifesto: the artist's claim to exemption from ordinary ethical judgment on the grounds of a higher creative mission. Blake responds immediately, also to the audience: "His hubris is repulsive" (Akhtar, 2024, p. 46). The Greek word hubris appears in an English sentence, spoken by a character addressing the theater audience directly — the anagnorisis moment made explicit, the recognition not by McNeal but by the witnesses to his fall.

4.4 The Nobel Speech: Literature Against the Machine



Scene 2, the Nobel lecture, is the play's intellectual center of gravity. It is also McNeal's most dazzling performance — and, in retrospect, his most compromised one. He begins with a confession so casual it almost passes unnoticed “I ran this speech through the chatbot just to see. —You'll be pleased to know, a few good cuts aside, I didn't prefer its suggestions” (Akhtar, 2024, p. 9).

The aside gets a laugh from the Nobel audience in the play, and presumably from the theater audience as well. But it is not a joke. McNeal is telling the most distinguished literary gathering in the world, without apparent anxiety, that he tested his acceptance speech on an AI. The casualness of the admission is more revealing than any elaborate confession would be: he genuinely does not see it as a problem. This is hamartia as cognitive blindspot, not moral failure — at least not yet.

The speech's central argument concerns what literature can do that AI cannot. McNeal's case rests on the example of King Lear — Shakespeare's transformation of a mediocre source play into the greatest work in the English language. No AI, he argues, however many times it processed the original, could have made that leap. What produced King Lear was not pattern-matching but something else, something that cannot be mathematized. The argument is a defense of his own practice: just as Shakespeare's genius consisted in what he did with borrowed material, McNeal implies that his genius consists in what he does with what the AI gives him.

The speech reaches its moral peak in a declaration that the play will spend its remaining scenes ironizing “Literature, distinguished guests, doesn't play along. Not with our hubris or our lies, or our endless terror of the mortal truth” (Akhtar, 2024, p. 10).

McNeal is right about this. He is also, at this precise moment, engaged in the hubris and the lying he is denouncing. He has used AI to compose the novel that earned him this prize. He has appropriated his wife's manuscript. He is hiding both facts from the people most entitled to know them. His Nobel speech is a performance of the literary integrity he is in the process of betraying — and the play's dramatic irony depends on the audience eventually understanding this, even if McNeal does not. The speech also contains the line that best captures the play's deepest concern “Digital machines are not just remaking stories, they're remaking us” (Akhtar, 2024, p. 10).

The shift from “stories” to “us” is the key move. Akhtar is not interested in AI as a technical problem for the publishing industry. He is interested in what kind of people we become when we increasingly outsource our narrative imagination to machines that know our preferences better than we do. McNeal's own trajectory — from dismissing the AI as a “suck-up” to depending on it as his primary creative partner — is the answer the play proposes.



4.5 The Meta-Theatrical Dimension and the Final Speech

The most intellectually interesting aspect of the play is the manner in which the AI is not merely a topic to consider in drama, but rather becomes a part of the structure of the play itself. The transition sequences—displayed as ChatGPT prompts and responses on a screen—are not picturesque window dressing. They are the play’s nervous system, propelling the plot forward and involving the audience in the process of AI-assisted composition. When the audience observes the screen as Urdu texts are prompted by “Please rework these texts in the style of Jacob McNeal”(Akhtar, 2024, p. 11), and the AI outputs are live, then the audience is witnessing a creative process which is also a transgression. No safe observing site is available.

The meta-theatrical argument is upped a notch in Scene 7, where McNeal asks the AI to write a suicide note for a fictional character. The first reaction — no, because of harmful content — is, in the context of the play, a darkly comic occurrence, as the machine that has moralized every one of McNeal's transgressions at the same time discovers a scruple. It is reprompted by McNeal, who frames it as fiction, and it complies (Akhtar, 2024, p. 50). The exchange is one of the most precise moments of the play, in which McNeal is able to use the ethical system itself as a way to get around it, after which he reframes all the time.

The final scene resolves — or refuses to resolve — the play's central ambiguities. McNeal instructs the AI “Please write a final speech for an audience confused by what is real and what isn't, inspired by Prospero's final speech”(Akhtar, 2024, p. 56). What follows is a speech that McNeal delivers to the theater audience — a meditation on whether the speaker still exists, whether the author persists in the words that survive him. It begins “Am I now but the lifeless tangle / Of blood and bone that barely led the morning news?” (Akhtar, 2024, p. 56).

The audience at this point does not know whether McNeal has died. The speech was generated, at least in part, by an AI. The actor delivering it is playing a character who may or may not be fictional. The layers of mediation are deliberate and vertiginous. The play ends not with catharsis in the simple sense of emotional release, but with catharsis in Aristotle’s more precise sense: a clarification of the emotions, a recognition of what has been seen. The final promise —to craft a truthful lie that might still matter (Akhtar, 2024, p. 56)— is both McNeal's epitaph and Akhtar's statement of purpose. Fiction is, by definition, a lie. The question the play has been asking all along is what makes it true.

5. Discussion

When read within its context, looking back at the play text and the classical tradition on which it evolves as well as the new literature on AI and creativity, a more complex picture emerges than McNeal's fans and foes have allowed themselves to see. But the play’s intellectually exhilarating nature, paired with its



somewhat underdeveloped dramatics, is the realistic response of critics who were looking for the type of cathartic response that *Disgraced* offered - and who may have found *McNeal* frustratingly oblique. However, it is a formal thing, and not a failure. The fact that there is no easy emotional solution to the play is a structural aspect of what is going on, a crisis with no solution.

It is not a legitimizing move here, it is not a way of saying that *McNeal* is important because it looks like Greek drama, but it is an analytical move. The lesson to be learned from *McNeal*'s fall is not that "He's a bad guy who does bad things. It's a tale of a very special form of greatness with its own built-in seeds of destruction". The writer who rejects all restraint, who argues that his art is more important than any normal ethical lesson, who treats the pain of others as material kindling without putting in the work or taking care to notice it — this writer produces really important artwork and really serious damage, and the play doesn't seem to differentiate between the two.

In the spirit of Grotowski, Kuchta (2025) notes that Akhtar poses questions instead of answering. That's true of *McNeal*'s treatment of AI, but the questions he poses are quite sharp for all that. The play doesn't pose a question on whether AI is good or bad for literature. It poses a question to us: What does it reveal about us that we are attracted by it? What need does it satisfy? What self-deception does it support in us? What short cuts does it provide for those who should know better? *McNeal*'s response to these questions is dramatized as much as it is argued, and for that, it's even more convincing.

Finally, the play's metatheatrical dimension, that of the AI not just thematic content but structural element as well, is its most original contribution to contemporary dramatic form. Akhtar's creation of an interface that is visible on stage, and that prompts and outputs that drive the drama's plot, implicates the audience in a way that a purely realist drama cannot. We're witnessing a narrative and we're seeing this narrative being produced. Before the advent of generative AI, the difference between these two activities was clearly defined, but not so anymore, according to *McNeal*.

6. Conclusion

McNeal is, among other things, a play about the story we tell ourselves about what literature is for. Jacob *McNeal*'s Nobel speech articulates that story with eloquence and conviction: literature confronts our hubris and our lies, refuses to play along with our self-deceptions, forces us to face what we would rather avoid. It is a noble account of the literary vocation, and *McNeal* clearly believes it. The tragedy is that he cannot apply it to himself. The same refusal to play along that makes him a great writer makes him incapable of the self-examination that might have saved him. His hamartia is not opposed to his greatness; it is his greatness, seen at the wrong angle.

What the classical tragic framework adds to our understanding of the play is not simply a vocabulary for describing McNeal's fall. It insists on a specific relationship between the protagonist's greatness and his flaw — a relationship that prevents us from dismissing McNeal as simply a bad person who got what he deserved. His fall matters because he was genuinely great, and his greatness matters because it was genuinely flawed. This is the tragic double bind that Aristotle identified more than two thousand years ago, and that Akhtar has found a way to apply to the specific crisis of creative identity in the age of generative AI. The play's ending refuses comfort. McNeal may be dead; the speech that concludes the play may have been written by a machine; the author and the character have become indistinguishable. What remains is a promise — to craft “a truthful lie that might still matter”(Akhtar, 2024, p. 56) — that is simultaneously a defense of fiction and an acknowledgment of its complicity in the falsehoods it claims to expose. Whether that promise can be kept, in an age when the machines have learned to make truthful lies of their own, is the question that McNeal leaves open. Future scholarship on this play will benefit from comparison with other recent dramatic works engaging with digital culture, and from more sustained attention to the play's dramaturgical innovations — particularly the use of projected AI interfaces as structural rather than decorative elements. The relationship between McNeal and Akhtar's earlier work, especially the ethical transgressions of *Disgraced* and the financial hubris of *Junk*, also remains to be fully explored. What this paper has tried to establish is that McNeal deserves the kind of careful, text-based scholarly attention that its still-recent publication date has so far prevented — and that the classical tragic tradition, far from being an antiquarian imposition, is exactly the right tool for understanding what Akhtar has built.

References

- Akhtar, A. (2024). *McNeal*. The Atlantic.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2024/12/ayad-akhtar-mcneal-artificial-intelligence-writing/680720>
- Alter, A. (2024). AI meets art in *McNeal*: Akhtar's play challenges limits of creativity. *The New York Times*.
- Aristotle. (1987). *Poetics* (R. Janko, Trans.). Hackett Publishing. (Original work composed c. 335 BCE)
- Barthes, R. (1977). The death of the author (S. Heath, Trans.). In *Image-music-text* (pp. 142–148). Fontana Press. (Original work published 1967)
- Benjamin, W. (1969). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction (H. Zohn, Trans.). In *Illuminations* (pp. 217–251). Schocken Books. (Original work published 1935)

- Bigsby, C. (2019). Ayad Akhtar. In *Staging America: Twenty-first-century dramatists* (pp. 7–30). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Boden, M. A. (2004). *The creative mind: Myths and mechanisms* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Floridi, L., & Cowls, J. (2019). A unified framework of five principles for AI in society. *Harvard Data Science Review*, 1(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1162/99608f92.8cd550d1>
- Fried, R. K. (2024, November 14). Ayad Akhtar wants writers to reckon with AI. *The Millions*.
- Kuchta, A. (2025). The demise of the artist: A review of *McNeal*, a theatrical play written by Ayad Akhtar and directed by Bartlett Sher. *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture, New Series*, 22(2), 171–177.
<https://doi.org/10.4467/24506249PJ.25.010.22410>
- Lincoln Center Theater. (2024, August 19). Ayad Akhtar on *McNeal*, Shakespeare, and AI. *Lincoln Center Theater Blog*.
<https://www.lct.org/explore/blog/ayad-akhtar-mcneal-shakespeare-and-ai/>
- Lincoln Center Theater. (2024, September 13). Bartlett Sher on the subtext of *McNeal*. *Lincoln Center Theater Blog*. <https://www.lct.org/explore/blog/bartlett-sher-subtext-mcneal/>
- Miller, A. (1949, February 27). Tragedy and the common man. *The New York Times*.
- Salter, C. (2010). *Entangled: Technology and the transformation of performance*. MIT Press.
- Sievers, W. D. (2019). Classical form and contemporary drama: Aristotelian structures in post-millennial theatre. *Theatre Journal*, 71(2), 143–167.
- Strong, J. (2024, December 4). Foreword. *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2024/12/ayad-akhtar-mcneal-artificial-intelligence-writing/680720>
- Williams, R. (2003). *Modern tragedy*. Broadview Press.