



The Estranged Artist in Joyce, Pinter and Fugard

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Abstract

The motif of the estranged artist pervades literature as a significant examination of human experience, probing into themes of alienation, disappointment, and rebellion. This essay examines selected works of James Joyce, Harold Pinter, and Athol Fugard to elucidate the complex dynamics of artistic estrangement. Utilising Maurice Blanchot's existential insights, Silvija Jestrovic's theatrical viewpoints, and Gary D. Mole's enhanced comprehension of existential estrangement, the paper reveals the internal conflict of characters traversing the chaotic realms of creative expression. In Joyce's *Exiles*, Pinter's *Betrayal*, and Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*, protagonists confront isolation, disappointment, and rebellion, embodying Blanchot's concept of the permanent outsider. Joyce's Richard Rowan represents the conflict between individual authenticity and societal demands, Pinter's Robert grapples with alienation and desolation in the face of treachery, while Fugard's Miss Helen epitomises resistance to societal conventions, illustrating the transformational potential of art. These playwrights collectively provide a painful tribute to the lasting significance of the estranged artist, prompting contemplation on the intricacies of the creative existence and the perpetual pursuit of meaning amid isolation.

Keywords: estrangement, estranged artist, Joyce, Pinter, Fugard

الأديب المغترب عند جويس وبنتر وفوغارد

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المستخلص

يمثل موضوع الفنان المغترب سمة بارزة في الأدب دراسة عميقة للتجربة الإنسانية، مستكشفاً موضوعات الاغتراب وخيبة الأمل والتمرد. يبحث هذا البحث في أعمال مختارة لجيمس جويس وهارولد بنتر وأثول فوغارد لتوضيح ديناميكيات الاغتراب الفني المعقدة. باستخدام رؤيات مورييس بلانشو الوجودية، وآراء سيلفيا جيستروفيك المسرحية، وفهم غاري دي مول المعمق للاغتراب الوجودي، تكشف الدراسة الصراع الداخلي لشخصيات تتخبط في عوالم التعبير الإبداعي الفوضوية. في مسرحية "المنفيون" لجويس، و"خيانة" لبنتر، و"الطريق إلى مكة" لفوغارد، يواجه الأبطال العزلة وخيبة الأمل والتمرد، مجسدين مفهوم بلانشو عن الغريب الدائم. يمثل ريتشارد روان لدى جويس الصراع بين الأصالة الفردية ومتطلبات المجتمع، بينما يعاني روبرت لدى بنتر من الاغتراب واليأس في مواجهة الخيانة، في حين تجسد الأنسة هيلين لدى فوغارد مقاومة الأعراف الاجتماعية، مما يبرز القوة التحويلية للفن. مجتمعة، تقدم هذه المسرحيات إشادة مؤلمة بأهمية الفنان المغترب الخالدة، مما يثير التأمل في تعقيدات الوجود الإبداعي والسعي الدؤوب نحو المعنى وسط العزلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اغتراب، فنان مغترب، جويس، بنتر، فوغارد

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معلومات البحث

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1. Introduction: Estrangement in Literature

In the vast landscape of literature, the theme of the estranged artist emerges as a poignant exploration of human existence, delving into the depths of alienation, disillusionment, and defiance (Blanchot, 1982: 35). Drawing from a rich tapestry

of critical discourse, this article discusses selected works of James Joyce, Harold Pinter, and Athol Fugard to illuminate the multifaceted dynamics of artistic estrangement.

Blanchot's insights into the fractured relationship between the artist and society delve deep into the existential complexities of estrangement. In *The Space of Literature* (1982), Blanchot explores the idea that literature exists in a realm beyond ordinary language, where the writer confronts the limitations of communication and grapples with the inherent solitude of the creative act (Blanchot, 1982: 35). *L'écriture du Désastre* (1980) delves into the concept of disaster as a fundamental aspect of human existence, reflecting on how literature emerges from the ruins of language and meaning (Blanchot, 1980: 35). Blanchot's work provides a profound philosophical framework for understanding the inner turmoil of characters navigating the tumultuous landscapes of creative expression.

Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon offer invaluable perspectives on the performative dimensions of estrangement, particularly in theatrical contexts. *Theatre of Estrangement* (2006) explores how estrangement becomes a theatrical strategy for negotiating identity and resistance in the face of societal pressures (Jestrovic, 2006: 82). Jestrovic analyzes how estrangement techniques disrupt conventional narrative structures and challenge audience perceptions, thereby creating space for critical reflection on social norms and power dynamics. Meerzon's work, *Performing Exile, Performing Self* (2012), delves into the performative aspects of exile, highlighting how performance becomes a site for negotiating personal and collective identities in contexts of displacement and alienation (Meerzon, 2012: 115). Both scholars shed light on the transformative potential of theatricality in articulating experiences of estrangement and resistance.

Gary D. Mole and Douglas Robinson deepen our understanding of existential estrangement experienced by characters in literary works. Mole's exploration focuses on key figures in French philosophy and literature, including Lévinas, Blanchot, and Jabès, to elucidate the existential dimensions of estrangement (Mole, 1997: 45). Mole highlights how these thinkers interrogate the nature of subjectivity, language, and otherness, revealing the profound alienation inherent in human existence. Robinson's analysis of somatics of literature examines how embodied experiences of estrangement shape literary texts and reader responses (Robinson, 2008: 72). Robinson argues that estrangement operates not only at the level of language and narrative but also in the physical sensations and affective responses evoked by literary works. By attending to the somatic dimensions of estrangement, Robinson offers new insights into its visceral impact on readers' perceptions and experiences.

Julius Sensat and Anna Smith contribute to our understanding of estrangement by exploring its rational and emotional dimensions. Sensat's work delves into the logical structures underpinning estrangement, arguing that it involves a fundamental rupture in the coherence of meaning and identity (Sensat, 2016: 107). By analyzing the logic of estrangement, Sensat elucidates how it disrupts conventional frameworks of understanding and opens up new possibilities for interpretation and critique. Smith's readings of exile and estrangement in Kristeva's work highlight the emotional and psychological dimensions of estrangement (Smith, 1996: 68). Smith examines how Kristeva's theory of abjection illuminates the experience of exile and otherness, revealing the profound affective

dimensions of estrangement. By attending to the emotional resonances of estrangement, Smith deepens our appreciation of its existential significance and its resonance with broader philosophical and psychological inquiries.

As the paper embarks on analysis of the works of Joyce, Pinter, and Fugard, it delves into the intricacies of artistic estrangement, uncovering the universal truths and timeless relevance of the estranged artist in literature.

2. 1. James Joyce's *Exiles*

James Joyce's *Exiles* (1918) delves into the complexities of the human psyche, particularly through the character of Richard Rowan, a writer grappling with feelings of estrangement and disillusionment. Richard Rowan, the protagonist of *Exiles*, embodies the archetype of the estranged artist. He struggles with a sense of disconnection from both himself and the world around him, resonating deeply with Blanchot's exploration of existential isolation. Blanchot suggests that the artist's creative endeavor inherently involves a separation from society, leading to a profound sense of alienation (Fagnoli and Gillespie, 2006: 85). This alienation is evident in Rowan's inability to fully integrate into his social environment, despite his creative talents.

Blanchot's concept of estrangement sheds light on Rowan's internal conflict, reflecting the tension between personal authenticity and societal expectations. Rowan's struggles mirror Blanchot's notion of the writer as a perpetual outsider, caught between the desire for connection and the inevitability of solitude (Spinks, 2009: 94).

In *Exiles*, Rowan's existential struggles are palpable in his interactions with other characters, particularly his wife Bertha and his friend Robert

Hand. Rowan's dialogue reveals his inner turmoil and the depth of his estrangement from those around him. As Joyce notes:

Love (understood as the desire of good for another) is in fact so unnatural a phenomenon that it can scarcely repeat itself," Rowan muses. "The soul being unable to become virgin again and not having enough energy to cast itself out again into the ocean of another's soul. (Joyce, 1951:113)

This passage encapsulates Rowan's profound sense of alienation and his struggle to find genuine connection in a world marked by emotional and spiritual paralysis.

Rowan's relationships with Bertha and Robert serve as microcosms of his broader existential dilemma. His marriage to Bertha becomes a battleground for competing desires – her longing for stability and his yearning for creative freedom (Fraser, 2016: 85). Similarly, his friendship with Robert is fraught with tension and ambiguity, reflecting Rowan's inability to fully connect with others on an emotional level.

Bernard Benstock (1984) observes that betrayal, in its various manifestations, pervades *Exiles*, with Rowan often at the center of this complex web. His role in relation to his native Ireland is a minor but significant aspect, intertwined with themes of personal and political betrayal. Richard's self-imposed exile from Ireland with Bertha is seen as both a betrayal of nation and a defiance of moral strictures, and his return is ambiguously perceived. Benstock highlights the intricate dynamics between Richard, Bertha, and Robert, emphasizing the theme of betrayal in their relationships.

Two additional quotations from the play further illustrate Rowan's dilemma as an artist. In one scene, Rowan grapples with the burden of artistic

creation: “I have wounded my soul for you—a deep wound of doubt which can never be healed,” (112) Rowan admits to Bertha. This confession underscores the profound sacrifices Rowan has made in pursuit of his artistic vision, revealing the inner turmoil and existential angst that accompany the creative process. This statement encapsulates Rowan’s idealistic view of artistic freedom and the sacrifices he believes are necessary for genuine creative expression.

These quotations provide further insight into Rowan’s character and the existential dilemmas he faces as an artist. Rowan’s struggles with doubt, sacrifice, and the nature of artistic freedom resonate with artists and audiences alike, inviting reflection on the complexities of the creative life and the eternal quest for meaning.

Vicki Mahaffey’s analysis in “Love, Race, and *Exiles*: The Bleak Side of Ulysses” provides valuable insights into the themes and characters of the play, shedding light on the intricate dynamics between the protagonists. Mahaffey’s examination of parental influences enriches the thematic depth of *Exiles*, shedding light on the interplay between upbringing and individual disposition. By analyzing Richard’s relationship with his parents and the parallels with Beatrice’s and Robert’s parental backgrounds, Mahaffey deepens our understanding of the characters’ motivations and conflicts. This familial context adds layers of complexity to the characters’ struggles, highlighting the enduring impact of childhood experiences on adult relationships.

Mahaffey’s insights into *Exiles* offer a compelling framework for understanding Joyce’s exploration of love, freedom, and identity in the play. By examining the interplay between the characters’ desires and societal expectations, Mahaffey

illuminates the thematic depth of Joyce’s work, underscoring its relevance to broader discussions of human experience and existentialism. Through *Exiles*, Joyce invites us to confront the complexities of love and freedom, inviting us to reflect on our own relationships and the quest for authenticity in an ever-changing world.

In conclusion, James Joyce’s *Exiles* stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of the theme of the estranged artist. Through the character of Richard Rowan, Joyce invites us to confront the existential realities of the creative life – the isolation, the longing, and the perpetual quest for meaning in a world marked by estrangement. Drawing on Blanchot’s theories of estrangement, Benstock’s insights into themes of betrayal, and Mahaffey’s analysis of familial influences, this examination has illuminated the complexities of Rowan’s inner world and the broader themes of alienation and artistic expression in Joyce’s work.

2. 2. Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal*:

In *Betrayal* (1978), Pinter crafts a narrative that intricately explores the complexities of human relationships and the dynamics of betrayal. The play’s unique structure, with its reverse chronology, not only serves as a narrative device but also reflects deeper thematic concerns about memory, time, and the elusive nature of truth. Through the character of Robert, Pinter delves into the psyche of an artist who grapples with feelings of estrangement and disillusionment amidst the intricacies of his personal relationships.

Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson observe that Pinter’s characters in *Betrayal* are articulate, intelligent, and cultivated, yet they are plagued by a sense of emptiness and desolation. Despite their apparent freedom and agency, they find

themselves trapped in a web of betrayals and moral ambiguities. Robert, in particular, embodies this sense of disillusionment, as evidenced by his remark to his wife, Emma:

I've always liked Jerry. To be honest, I've always liked him rather more than I've liked you. Maybe I should have had an affair with him myself. (Pinter, 1980: 87).

This quotation illustrates Robert's conflicted feelings and hints at the underlying tensions within his marriage. Robert's admission not only reveals his dissatisfaction with his relationship with Emma but also underscores his emotional detachment and sense of alienation.

Furthermore, Robert's status as an art dealer adds another layer of complexity to his character. As an arbiter of aesthetics and taste, Robert occupies a privileged position within society, yet his personal life is marked by moral ambiguity and emotional turmoil. His inability to maintain authentic connections with those closest to him reflects a broader existential crisis, wherein the pursuit of status and success fails to provide genuine fulfillment.

William Baker (2008) highlights the personal aspect of *Betrayal*, noting that Pinter drew inspiration from his own experiences, including his seven-year-long affair with the wife of a close friend. This personal dimension adds layers of complexity to the play's exploration of betrayal and deception, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Through the character of Robert, who is entangled in a love triangle involving his wife and best friend, Pinter confronts the audience with uncomfortable truths about human nature and the fragility of relationships.

Michael Billington further emphasizes the theme of betrayal in the play, noting that it extends beyond personal relationships to encompass broader power dynamics and unseen presences. In *Betrayal*, the characters navigate a world where trust is constantly undermined, and loyalty is called into question. Robert's sense of being a "stranger" reflects a deeper existential alienation, as he grapples with the realization that the people closest to him may not be who they seem (Billington, 1996: 355).

Ronald Knowles (1995: 85) draws parallels between *Betrayal* and Pinter's earlier work on *Exiles*, noting similarities in themes of estrangement and homoeroticism. The buried homoerotic psychology evident in *Betrayal* finds explicit expression in *Exiles*, where characters grapple with desires that defy societal norms and expectations. Through these parallels, Pinter invites audiences to confront the complexities of human desire and the fluidity of identity.

In conclusion, Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* offers a compelling exploration of the estranged artist through the character of Robert. Drawing on Maurice Blanchot's theories of estrangement and the insights provided by critics such as Almansi, Henderson, Baker, Billington, and Knowles, we gain a deeper understanding of the play's thematic concerns and its relevance to broader questions of human existence and relationships.

Pinter's masterful manipulation of language and structure in *Betrayal* serves to heighten the sense of disorientation and emotional intensity experienced by the characters and the audience alike. The play's fragmented narrative mirrors the fractured nature of memory and perception, inviting us to question the reliability of our own recollections and interpretations. As Robert's story

unfolds in reverse, we are forced to confront the consequences of his actions and the profound impact they have on those around him.

Furthermore, *Betrayal* can be seen as a reflection of the cultural and social upheaval of the time in which it was written. Set against the backdrop of the tumultuous 1970s, the play explores themes of disillusionment and moral ambiguity that were prevalent in society at the time. The characters' search for meaning and connection in a world marked by uncertainty and instability resonates with audiences across generations, making *Betrayal* a timeless exploration of the human condition.

In sum, Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* stands as a poignant testament to the complexities of human relationships and the elusive nature of truth. Through the character of Robert and his journey of self-discovery and estrangement, Pinter invites us to confront our own fears and insecurities, ultimately challenging us to reexamine our understanding of love, loyalty, and betrayal in all its forms.

2. 3. Athol Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*:

Athol Fugard's *The Road to Mecca* (1984) takes the audience on a profound journey into the heart of artistic identity and existential defiance, using the character of Miss Helen as a vessel for exploring these complex themes and the multifaceted dynamics of Helen's character and the transformative power of artistic expression.

At the core of *The Road to Mecca* lies Miss Helen, a reclusive artist whose unconventional lifestyle and exotic artwork challenge the rigid societal norms of her conservative community. As Jerry Dickey astutely observes, Helen's home becomes "a temple of light and sparkle, a woman's

elaborate dream of artistic expression" (Dickey, 1984: 527). The visual spectacle of her sanctuary serves as a testament to her unwavering commitment to artistic freedom and self-expression. Indeed, the sculptures adorning her yard, with their uplifted arms and expressive gestures, reflect Helen's yearning for freedom and transcendence (Dickey, 1984: 527). In this way, Helen emerges as a symbol of defiance against the darkness of conformity and repression.

Janet Ruth Heller's analysis sheds light on the profound bond between Helen and Elsa, transcending gender boundaries to articulate universal human experiences (Heller, 1993: 473). Through their unconventional friendship, Fugard explores themes of artistic isolation and the nurturing role of the artist, echoing Blanchot's notion of art as a transcendent force that speaks to the deepest needs of humanity (Blanchot, 1982: 82). Despite societal pressures and personal hardships, Helen and Elsa find solace and empowerment in each other's company, defying the expectations imposed upon them by their conservative community.

The arrival of Marius Byleveld introduces a tension that tests the bond between Helen and Elsa, highlighting the societal resistance faced by non-conformist individuals (Heller, 1993: 476). Marius's attempts to manipulate and undermine Elsa's presence underscore the threat posed by their unconventional friendship to traditional power structures (Heller, 1993: 476). His interrogation of Elsa's relationship with Helen reflects the broader societal disdain for those who dare to defy the status quo, echoing Blanchot's assertion of the artist's confrontation with societal norms (Blanchot, 1982: 93).

Throughout the narrative, Helen's journey towards self-affirmation unfolds against the backdrop of existential darkness and artistic impotence (Heller, 1993: 477). The symbolism of light and darkness serves as a metaphor for Helen's inner turmoil and eventual triumph over her fears. As Frank Rich puts it, "In Fugard's play, the candlelight becomes a beacon of hope in the midst of existential despair, illuminating Miss Helen's path towards self-discovery and creative fulfillment" (Rich, 1988: 14). This journey of self-discovery is not without its challenges, as Helen confronts the limitations imposed upon her by society and grapples with the pain of personal loss.

Albert Wertheim argues that Miss Helen's defiance of societal expectations embodies the transformative power of art in fostering meaningful change (Wertheim, 2000: 167). This aligns with Blanchot's discussion of artistic inspiration and the artist's role in challenging societal norms (Wertheim, 2000: 167). Through her art, Helen not only asserts her individuality but also inspires others to question the conventions that constrain them, embodying the spirit of rebellion and resilience.

In conclusion, *The Road to Mecca* emerges as a profound exploration of artistic defiance and existential resilience through the character of Miss Helen. Drawing upon various analyses, this integrated study illuminates the transformative power of art in challenging societal norms and nurturing human connection amidst existential darkness.

3. Conclusions

The playwrights explored in this study, despite their disparate backgrounds and eras, (Irish Modernist, British Absurdist, South African

Postcolonialist), James Joyce, Harold Pinter, and Athol Fugard, all converge on the notion that the artist is inherently estranged from society. Through their respective works, they delve into the complexities of this estrangement, unraveling its existential dimensions and shedding light on its profound implications for human existence.

In James Joyce's *Exiles*, we encounter Richard Rowan, a writer grappling with feelings of isolation and disillusionment, echoing Maurice Blanchot's exploration of existential estrangement. Through Rowan's struggles, Joyce invites us to confront the inherent tension between personal authenticity and societal expectations, highlighting the profound sacrifices and internal conflicts inherent in the artistic endeavor.

Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* delves into the intricacies of human relationships and the dynamics of betrayal, with the character of Robert embodying feelings of emptiness and detachment amidst the complexities of his personal life. Pinter's masterful manipulation of language and structure heightens the sense of disorientation and emotional intensity, inviting audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about love, loyalty, and the elusive nature of truth.

In Athol Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*, the character of Miss Helen emerges as a symbol of defiance against societal norms, embodying the transformative power of art in fostering meaningful change. Through Helen's journey towards self-affirmation, Fugard explores themes of artistic isolation and existential resilience, inviting us to reflect on the enduring impact of artistic expression in the face of adversity.

Collectively, these playwrights offer a poignant testament to the enduring relevance of the theme

of the estranged artist. Their works invite us to confront the existential realities of the creative life—the isolation, the longing, and the perpetual quest for meaning in a world marked by estrangement. Drawing on Blanchot's theories of estrangement, this examination has illuminated the complexities of artistic expression and the broader themes of alienation and human existence in literature.

In sum, the estranged artist remains a compelling figure in literature, resonating with audiences across generations and inviting us to confront the universal truths and timeless relevance of the human condition. As we continue to navigate the complexities of the creative life and the ever-changing landscapes of human experience, the works of Joyce, Pinter, and Fugard serve as beacons of inspiration, guiding us through the depths of artistic estrangement and towards the transformative power of artistic expression.

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