Introduction

In an article entitled "Writing about Artists: Self-Referral in Drama and Society", Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe maintains that "[s]ince the considerable commercial and critical success of *Piaf* by Pam Gems in 1978 and Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* in 1979, the British stage has been swept by a wave of plays about famous artists".[1] Although this phenomenon started years before, the trend of using the figure of the artist has become more visible during the last forty years.

In the above article, Meyer-Dinkgräfe attributes the reasons which inspired dramatists to write about their fellow artists to commercial and personal factors in the lives of the dramatists. As far as commercial argument is concerned, he argues that "[i]n some cases, such an argument may be valid, especially when some plays about artists lack artistic merit and box office success".[2] Meyer-Dinkgräfe cites Robin Ray's *Cafe Puccini* (1986) and Julian Mitchell's *After Aida* (1986) as examples of commercially-led dramas which were not artistically or critically successful. In his comment on Mitchell's *After Aida*, the English writer and theatre critic Irving Wardle points out that

> There is no dramatic situation. The setting [the stalls of a theatre] is merely a playground where speakers can address us with memoirs, team up for brief scenes and rehearsals … members retreat to the stalls to read newspapers or sit looking bored; a sight that leaves you wondering why you should be interested in a spectacle they cannot be bothered to look at.[3]

Although they deal with artist figures, their lack of dramatic flavour and suspense makes these plays seem trivial and uninteresting to the audience. Furthermore, due to commercial reasons, there was a surge of one-person shows which "cost less" to produce, meaning that "unemployed actors can tour in shows they have compiled and perhaps also direct themselves".[4]

Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe goes on to argue that writing plays about artists is connected with developments in society which are not necessarily "restricted to theatre in particular or even

---

[1] Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, "Writing about Artists: Self-Referral in Drama and Society", *Critical Survey*, v. 10, n. 2 (1998): 52.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Quoted in Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, "Writing about Artists: Self-Referral in Drama and Society", p., 52.
[4] Ibid., p. 53.

the arts in general".[5] For Meyer-Dinkgräfe, this development or phenomenon of writing about artists as a form of self-referral represents a general tendency of art to reflect mainstream issues. Meyer-Dinkgräfe locates this tendency on three levels: "postmodernism and the related concept of intertextuality, science and the ambiguous phenomenon of the New Age movement".[6] In relation to science and the ambiguous phenomenon of the New Age movement, the phenomenon of writing about the artist has been associated with the complex processes of the autopoietic system which "needs to maintain its circular organisation [by information] inherent in the circular organisation itself".[7]

Another reason for writing plays about artists lies in the fact that dramatists want to test their own feelings by seeing them acted out on stage. In writing *Master Class* (1983),[8] for example, David Pownall wanted to convey to the audience the feelings of horror and mockery he experienced after he "had read the minutes of the composers' conference held by the communist party in 1948 in Moscow".[9] Similarly, the British theatre director Howard Davies connects the circumstances that led Pam Gems to writing for the theatre to her interest "in politics, especially feminism". He further states that "[s]he wanted to write a play with a woman as main character who should not be middle class and thus able to discuss feminist issues intellectually, because she feared that would have turned the play into open polemics".[10] This in turn leads us to another dimension of writing plays about artists – that is, self-reflexivity or self-referral for the dramatist. In other words, sometimes a play reflects different aspects of the

---

[5] Ibid., p. 52.

[6] Ibid, p. 55. The discussion of the ambiguity of writing plays about artists is connected with the introduction of the new terms in art, such as postmodernism and intertextuality. Arguably, "postmodernism, along with its relative poststructuralism, has been one of the most influential and controversial ideas of the last few decades. […] both proponents and detractors engaged in heated arguments about what it represented, especially in regard to the question of rationality". Nick Turnbull, "Introduction: Postmodernism and Rationality", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, v. 64, n. 251 (1), Postmodernism and Rationality (2010): 5. The other term which relates to postmodernism is intertextuality. This means a close interrelationship of meaning between two texts which can be established and fulfilled by allusion, quotation, imitation, translation, adaptation, travesty, pastiche and parody. Accordingly, writing about fellow artists becomes a kind of self-referral of other artists who have common characteristics and talents. For further analysis of intertextuality, see Gerrie Snyman, "Who is speaking? Intertextuality and textual influence", *Neotestamentica*, v. 30, n. 2 (1996): 427-449.

[7] Ibid., p. 57.

[8] *Master Class* is a play which explores the sensitive relationship between the political system, represented by Stalin, and the artists, Shostakovich and Prokofiev. For Stalin, the duty of the artist is to give people new energy for life and work. In doing so, they will be loyal to the political party.

[9] Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, "Writing about Artists: Self-Referral in Drama and Society", p., 53. The composers' conference was a historical event which took place during the time of the Soviet Union. Marshal Andrei Zhdanov (1896-1948) was the chief administrator of the central committee of the communist party who led "a major ideological campaign across all branches of the arts and sciences in order to counteract declining party discipline". So, in January 1948 he "summoned all USSR composers to an informal exchange of opinions into the Kremlin". See Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, *Biographical Plays about Famous Artists* (Cambridge Scholar Press, 2005), p. 15.

[10] Ibid.

writer himself. In this sense, writers who write plays about artists can use the process as a way of finding out more about their own existence and their artistic creativity. In his speech about Howard Brenton's *Bloody Poetry*, the British theatre director Ronald Rees argues that the two artist characters, Shelley and Byron, "represent two clear features of Brenton's own personality: 'He loves to talk to enthusiastic listeners, with a bottle of good wine, for hours. On the other hand, he has those qualities of Shelley, being passionate, romantic, and all that'".[11] Contrastingly, using artists in this way presupposes certain conditions for the playwright to present. In *Three Uses of the Knife*, David Mamet asserts that "[t]he artist has to undergo the same hero struggles as the protagonist".[12]

In his seminal study, *Biographical Plays about Famous Artists*, Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe chooses a number of playwrights to comment on the motives behind using artist characters in their plays. Once again he concentrates on the self-referral of the dramatist as the main impetus behind using artist figures. He also assigns two motivations for using those figures: outer and inner. The outer motivation is embodied by the playwright's interest in showing the adverse forces against artists – such as the political system and society – which overpower them. The inner motivation, however, is represented by the use of the artist figure to address the current problems in society. Amanda Saunders, an executive producer, argues that a lack of this motive meant that "the rising number of biographical plays about a famous artist [refer] to dramatists' lacking originality".[13] She views this tendency as a kind of escapism. Instead of using drama to confront and shock the spectators with the immediate problems surrounding them, "dramatists escaped into some safe past with artists who are anything other than down to earth".[14] Though I have reservations about Saunders's opinion, artists in general, and playwrights in particular, work by inspiration. It does not mean that writing about artists is lacking in originality, but it is a kind of strategy for the dramatist to comment fully on political and social issues without being censored.

While Meyer-Dinkgräfe's two sources do not mention the playwrights or plays that I have studied here, this thesis presents an original analysis for this period (1970-2010). Moreover, Meyer-Dinkgräfe concentrates on the use of the artist figure to talk about biographical issues.

---

[11] Quoted in Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, "Writing about Artists: Self-Referral in Drama and Society", p. 55.
[12] David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 50.
[13] Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, *Biographical Plays about Famous Artists*, p. 75.
[14] Ibid.

In this thesis, fictional artists as characters are used to comment on different aspects of the creative process of writing.

By analysing British drama over four decades (from 1970 to 2010), I found that using the artist as a character goes beyond Meyer-Dinkgräfe's commercial and personal reasons. Though using the artist as a character is not something new, as we shall see, for example, in Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1895), it recurs again and again in the dramatic works of writers. But what makes it special to British theatre at the end of the 20th century is the urgent need for the artist to leave his ivory tower and engage with real life. The romantic view of the artist as a creative individual who is only concerned with the aesthetic aspect of his work has changed to that of one who is preoccupied with the dilemmas affecting his existence. One of the reasons for using the figure of the artist in British theatre during this period goes back to the desire of playwrights to reflect their own opinions and philosophies about different issues. Many factors have helped them to shape their playwriting. Looking back at British theatre during the late 1960s, we can see that there are two events which had an immediate impact on the playwright and the type of play he chose to undertake. Those events were the abolition of state censorship of the theatre (1968) and the expansion of public subsidy for the theatre. These acts opened the door for more freedom in discussing issues with topical and satirical content which had previously been restricted. Thus, by using the fictional character of an artist, a playwright could criticize sensitive issues such as politics without being censored.

Furthermore, the European influence in encouraging such types of plays cannot be ignored. Brecht's influence during the 1960s and 1970s is most discernible in that of an intellectual champion of politically committed drama. Moreover, during the 1970s, there was an extraordinary amount of agitprop plays. In so doing, playwrights began to test the validity of the artist's commitment to the ruling political system. Here, Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase* and *Travesties* are a case in point. Though Stoppard commenced his success as a playwright in 1967, at a time when the success of playwrights was increasingly determined by their political commitment, the 1970s witnessed a heated discussion on the real function of the artist and whether that lay with society or the literary world.

Under Thatcher's three terms as Prime Minister, however, the discussion of art and its relationship to politics or society continued with intense bitterness. British theatre during the 1980s may be seen as "a cultural backwater",[15] especially for artists. It was subject to a variety

---

[15] Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 8.

of political and economic pressures that produced a sense of dissatisfaction among artists. Not only was British theatre subject to funding cuts, but also to censorship, as we shall see. Government interference in performance and writing led to a lack of freedom. So, works which were economically unviable were threatened with being banned or cancelled. In doing so, the commissioning of artists began to depend entirely on the criteria of the ruling political party – the Conservatives – who ignored the artists' true feelings. For Thatcher, they were no more than "intellectuals" who talked more than acted. So, playwrights employed artists as characters as a form of self-defence against such accusations whilst at the same time demonstrating that artists, like other humans, are affected by the economic and political circumstances surrounding them. It may be true that the Thatcherite period was helpful for British theatre in terms of increasing commercialization. It was a time of success for big musicals such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Evita* (1978) and *Cats* (1981). Moreover, Thatcher's reign was a fruitful time for women's writing, as we shall see in the discussion of chapters three and four.

In such a cultural atmosphere, artists were forced to fit into a service-oriented economy, which met the needs of the market outside the realm of everyday life. Also, the duty of the artist was to be devoted to espousing political ideals. Otherwise, he was at risk of being marginalized. Barker, however, is one of those playwrights who has paid the price for writing uncommercial plays that eschew mere realism. He is a radical individualist who does not believe in the usefulness of theatre to espouse any political or social message.

By the end of the 1980s, commercial British theatre had been reshaped and influenced by a monetarist ideology. The new decade of the 1990s was a reaction against the legacy of the previous decade in that there was a healthy resistance. However, the issue of marginalization and lack of free will was represented by artist characters not only in the works of male playwrights but also in those by female playwrights such as Timberlake Wertenbaker.

Through writing about artists, or using the figure of the artist in theatre, playwrights can raise questions about the creative writing process. These include: the role of the artist in society, the dilemma he confronts in his artistic development, the nature of art and the state of being an artist. To quote Meyer-Dinkgräfe again, he asserts that "[m]any dramatists confirm that they had reached a stage in their artistic development at which they wanted to reflect on the nature of art and the implications of being an artist".[16]

---

[16] Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, "Writing about Artists: Self-Referral in Drama and Society", p. 54.

Therefore, dealing with an artist character in a play, whether an intentional or unintentional act of self-referral, makes each dramatist cast a light on the immediate dilemmas he faces through playwriting. These dilemmas can vary according to numerous factors which range from economic, political and gender issues to the dialectical relationship between art and life.

As its subject, this dissertation is concerned with the phenomenon of using artists as characters – a phenomenon that I investigate alongside numerous theorists and writers. The question about the responsibility of the artist and the function of art has been at the forefront of controversial debates among intellectuals who have been preoccupied with the aesthetic function of art and its morality. An ever-growing body of plays have tackled this issue during the last forty years, including such diverse works as Edward Bond's *Bingo* (1974), Howard Brenton's *Bloody Poetry* (1984) and his most recent play, *The Arrest of Ai Weiwei* (2013), Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), David Grieg's *San Diego* (2003), and Lee Hall's *The Pitman Painters* (2007). This thesis intends to explore how artists are reflected on stage in order to demonstrate the dilemmas that the artist has to confront. Moreover, by considering several contemporary plays by both male and female contemporary playwrights, this thesis attempts to show how the figure of the artist is the focal point for observations and perspectives.

However, two words in the title need an explanation before the discussion can begin. First, the use of the word 'artist' does not exclusively mean a particular artist. Instead, the word 'artist' refers to any intellectual and creative human beings who may be painters, musicians, composers, actors, directors, writers, cartoonists, etc. Unlike Marxists, who look at every individual as a potential artist, I mean those who are professionally creative. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels ascribe the differentiation of artistic talent among individuals to division of labour. They claim that

> If, even in certain social conditions, everyone was an excellent painter, that would not at all exclude the possibility of each of them being also an original painter, so that here too the difference between 'human' and 'unique' labour amounts to sheer nonsense. In any case, with a communist organisation of society, there disappears the subordination of the artist to local and national narrowness, which arises entirely from division of labour, and also the subordination of the artist to some definite art, [….] In a communist society there are no painters but at most people who engage in painting among other activities.[17]

---

[17] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, Part one, Students edition, ed. C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974), p. 109.

The above lines reveal that creativity is not only confined to artists. Though they are bestowed with certain skills, artists are people. So, creativity is rationally available to almost everybody if there are no restrictions imposed on them by society. Sometimes this creativity is repressed by the ruling political system if there is an imminent threat to its existence.

Secondly, the word 'character' needs to be distinguished from what Raymond Williams calls three "keywords",[18] that constitute a backbone for the anatomy of character. Those keywords are character, personality and identity. By 'character', however, I mean 'dramatis persona' as we meet them in drama more than in real life. In theatre, the question is still raised: whether the represented or fictional character "delivers a 'real' person to the eye or imagination or if such imitation is no more than a sleight of hand, a clever trick that dupes us into believing that we are apprehending people such as ourselves, when in fact the images that we see or imagine are prompted from nothing more than words on the page of a novel or in a script".[19] Therefore, characters in the theatre need a more scientific approach in order to be understood by the audience. Unlike narrative character depiction in novels, theatrical or dramatic characters are "designed for a faithful embodiment on the stage".[20]

In "The Anatomy of Dramatic Character", Bert O. States, a professor of Dramatic Art at the University of California, argues that "[v]ery little in the study of the drama is as neglected as the phenomenon of character. We feel the force of its presence yet seem able to talk about it only in the vaguest of terms. Primarily, character is so elusive because it is at once cause and effect, both the fuel that drives the plot and a kind of exhaust or emanation given off by the plot".[21] By character, States means the dramatic character who undergoes an important internal change as represented in a dramatic work. Conspicuously, however, character and plot are inseparable. So, he finds it apt to "worry the distinction between our perceptions of character in life and character in a play":

> The fundamental difference is that dramatic character unfolds in the closed field of an art object and a single action…. This much is self-evident, but it is the tension between a character's lifelikeness, or like-us-ness (greatly enhanced on stage by the person of the actor) and his perfection as a self-consistent entity that is doing *one thing* beneath all the things that he does –

[18] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Revised edition (USA: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 232-234.
[19] William Storm, "On the Science of Dramatic Character", *Narrative*, v. 19, n. 2 (May 2011): 241.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Bert O. States, "The Anatomy of Dramatic Character", *Theatre Journal*, v. 37, n. 1 (March 1985): 87.

and moreover doing it in the invisible channel of a precise future – this tension is the key to our fascination with dramatic character. [22] (Emphasis in original.)

So, the problematic relation between the character as a human subject in real life and its artful depiction in literary works becomes a challenging arena for playwrights to dig deep into their disparities. In his comment on the aesthetic representation of characters on stage, William Storm argues that the disparities between real and fictional characters

> always exist, and are innate, if only because fictional characters are necessarily incomplete by comparison with their models in life. This is perhaps especially the case in theatre, where the circumstances of a character's life must be communicated in all of their pertinence in the span of two or three hours only.[23]

After all, fictional characters are representative of human beings on a largely aesthetic level. As Storm puts it, "[f]ictional characters, on the stage or in books, accomplish an extremely varied range of surrogate missions on our behalf – adventurous, romantic, intellectual, philosophic, and so forth".[24] But still the corporeal dimension of the character, which is created for the theatrical performance, gains the audience's admiration more than in the narrative. In any cases, the dramatic characters performed are a reflection of actual situations in real life. In other words, "most of our interest in character falls under the heading of anticipation and confirmation [of our actual actions in life] rather than surprise or revision".[25]

Etymologically, the word 'character' comes from the old French *caractere* and from the Latin *kharaktēr*, a 'stamping tool' or an 'engraving impressing instrument'. Its origin goes back to the graphic arts to denote "a distinctive mark, […] feature, or trait" (OED). In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Viola uses character in the same meaning when she says, "I will believe thou hast a mind that suits/With this thy fair and outward character".[26] In the *Oxford Dictionary of English,* character is also defined as "the moral and mental qualities distinctive to an individual". This moral notion has its resonance in Aristotle's *Poetics*. For Aristotle, character

---

[22] Ibid.
[23] William Storm, "On the Science of Dramatic Character", p. 241.
[24] Ibid., p. 246.
[25] Bert O. States, "The Anatomy of Dramatic Character", p., 98-99.
[26] William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night Or What You Will*, ed. Keir Elam (China: DC Graphic Design Ltd., 2008), p. 169.

(ethos) means thought which is one part of "three objects of imitation"[27]: plot (*mythos*) and thought (*dianoia*). As such, character is connected with the process of thinking, which requires making moral decisions. This particular trait, therefore, encompasses an internal or dramatic struggle which can be acted out on stage. Without moral choices, the character will be less important in the play. Returning to Aristotle, he asserts that "character will be displayed if the dialogue or actions of the play show choice".[28] Concerning dramatic structure, Aristotle concentrates on plot as a more important entity than character. Likewise, David Mamet, an American playwright who is highly influenced by Aristotle, pays little attention to character in his dramatic works. In other words, character is in the service of plot. Like Aristotle, Mamet writes "[d]ramatic structure is not an arbitrary – or even a conscious – invention. It is an organic codification of the human mechanism for ordering information. Event, elaboration, denouement; thesis, antithesis, synthesis; boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl; act one, two, three".[29] In the case of the dramatic artist, the nostalgic spirit for perfection is the main source of his aspiration. In other words, aspiring for a transcendental or perfect state puts the artist in a continual state of suffering which can be dramatized in dramatic fiction by fictional characters – the surrogate. So theatre becomes a tool by which the imperfect character goes through a process of individuation. In Mamet's words, by dramatic form, "the theatre artist's task is to ease the disparity between the conscious and unconscious minds – 'to cure a raging imbalance' – and so achieve peace".[30] In doing so, both the subconscious and conscious come into alignment, at which point the audience is eager to see what happens next. Mamet, like Aristotle, places too much faith in pure narrative rather than character. He claims that "[i]t may be impossible […] to bring the audience's conscious and unconscious minds into alignment if audience members have grown impatient with the character".[31] In his comment on the role of the actor on stage, Mamet decreases the importance of character, claiming that "There is no character. There are only lines upon a page. They are lines of dialogue meant to be said by the actor".[32]

However, several modern theorists weave their principles of character in some way or another around the Aristotelian tether. In *The Pleasure of the Play* which centres around Aristotle's

---

[27] Aristotle's *Poetics: A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature*, trans. Leon Golden, commentary by O. B. Hardison (London: Prentice – Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 122.
[28] Aristotle's *Poetics*, trans. And introduced by Kenneth McLeish (London: Nick Hern Books, 1998), p. 20.
[29] David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama*, p. 73.
[30] Myles Weber, "David Mamet in Theory and Practice", *New England Review (1990-)*, v. 21, n. 2 (Spring, 2000):136-37.
[31] Ibid., p. 137.
[32] David Mamet, *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), p. 9.

Poetics, Bert O. States claims that "we perceive character on at least five levels … the individual, the dialogic, the thematic, the stylistic, and the mimetic".[33] Again, for this thesis, these elements in the study of dramatic character cannot be separated.

The second keyword which is closely associated with character is personality. The word is originally derived from the Latin *personalis*, 'of a person', or *persona*, meaning mask. In this sense, it is synonymous with the 'role' or 'part' played by the character on stage. In other words, it is the mirror which reflects an individual's qualities of uniqueness or weakness. In its earliest English sense, it means "the quality of being a person and not a thing".[34] In this sense, personality is the *dramatic persona*, the natural traits of the person, which are revealed either by the corporeal body of the actor on stage or the mental image of a human being in the text.

Today, our understanding of personality goes beyond the distinction between persons and things to the distinction between persons themselves. Now, personality has become the quality or the charisma of the individual which distinguishes him from other human beings or peers.

To sum up, both character and personality are sometimes used interchangeably. But while character means the macrocosm of the human being which is formed over time through experience, personality is the microcosm of the person which is naturally born and "powerfully influenced by social life".[35] For States, personality is the exterior of the person. It is "the skin of the Character, the 'place' of exchange between inside and outside".[36]

The last word which is connected with the anatomy of character is identity. Identity may be defined as the natural outcome of character and personality. It is "one's end" whose signs appear in "the form of an obsession, an *idée fixe*, a sustained exercise of will, a passion, a humor, a status, or a passive satisfaction or dissatisfaction in being what one is".[37] It is the permanent stamp of the person which distinguishes one person from another.

Let us shift ground from the discussion of the three keywords of the anatomy of character to the definition of dramatic character in artistic terms. States concludes his discussion of character by saying that

---

[33] Bert O. States, *The Pleasure of the Play* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 132.
[34] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, p. 232.
[35] Bert O. States, "The Anatomy of Dramatic Character", p., 89.
[36] Ibid., p. 92.
[37] Ibid., p. 97.

> A dramatic character is, first and foremost, an intensified simplification of human nature: he is a Personality with a Character – someone who appears and behaves in a certain way and who carries within him a certain *ethos*, or disposition with respect to moral conduct and choice. This disposition […] may be seen in any character the dramatist has bothered to make an important agent in his action.[38] (Emphasis in original.)

As mentioned before, making moral choices increases the dramatical situation of the character. A good example of this disposition is Hamlet's hesitation. It also reveals the genuineness of the artist and whether he succumbs to the desires of the ruling political party or he remains loyal to his function as an instigator of the truth.

To take this issue further in discussion, I will concentrate on Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, to see how the dramatic character is represented and to discuss the issue of being an artist. The function of art, whether for life or aesthetic work, is also demonstrated by the views of two main artist characters.

Chekhov's use of two main characters as artists reflects the dramatic conflict of the artist for art's sake and those in which the artist characters serve a more general function. The two characters who represent artists are: Konstantin and Trigorin. While the first is still immature, the latter is professional. In the play, however, they are connected by an awkward relationship which plays a decisive role in their later lives.

Trigorin is the lover of Konstantin's mother, Arkadina, a famous actress. As an artist, he is admired by Nina, Konstantin's beloved, who looks for fame and glory. Nina's fluctuating feelings from Konstantin to Trigorin have a psychological impact on Konstantin's trajectory of writing. His disappointment about being rejected in love is felt in the symbolic action of killing the seagull. He foretells the disastrous end of his life. Nina's reaction to Konstantin's symbolic deed is devoid of any emotion. Her coldness makes him yell:

> [….] You don't like my work anyway. You think there's nothing to me. I'm just one of the crowd. I'm not special. (*Stamping his foot*.) How well I understand you. How well. I feel as if someone had hammered a nail into my brain. Damnation take it – my pride is sucking my blood like a snake. (Act Two, p. 40)[39]

---

[38] Ibid, p. 91.
[39] Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2000).

The image of Konstantin's pride, "sucking [his] blood like a snake" brings to mind the image of the artist as one who lives in an ivory tower overlooking people. His vanity blinds him from seeing the truth of Nina's transformation. He is removed from reality.

Konstantin and Trigorin have contrasting views about art. Trigorin sees art as the embodiment of writing about people's life:

> I feel an affinity with nature that awakes in me a passion and an inescapable need to write. But I'm not a landscape artist. I'm a citizen. I love my country, the people. I feel as a writer that I'm duty bound to write about the people, about their suffering, about their future. (Act Two, p. 44)

In contrast, Konstantin insists that the artist "must show life not as it is, nor as it should be, but as it appears to us in our dreams", (Act One, p.17). He adds that "[….] To take a subject from the realm of abstract ideas as you have done is very important because art should always demonstrate some great idea", (Act One, p. 28). This view is clearly criticized by Dorn, a doctor, who argues that "A work of art should always express one specific clear idea. You must have a purpose in writing or your work will become merely effective and picturesque without any meaning and you will soon get lost and your talent ruined", (Act one, p. 28).

Konstantin's views of art justify his aspirations for the new forms. At the same time, they reflect his disagreement with his mother over art, especially theatre. He tells his uncle Sorin that

> She knows I don't believe in the theatre as she does. She loves the theatre. She thinks she is serving mankind and that it is a sacred art, while I think the modern theatre is prescriptive, routine, conventional. When the curtain goes up on the inevitable three-walled room bright with artificial light, all these great artists, these keepers of the sacred flame, all they do is simply demonstrate how people eat, drink, make love, move about, wear their jackets. And when from these complacent *tableaux* with their meagre language they try to squeeze a moral, a mean, accessible little moral designed for domestic consumption, when in a thousand variations the same play is dished up over and over and over, I want to run away. (Act One, p. 13)

The above lines reveal that Konstantin is not content with traditional artistic values. Instead, he calls for new forms to be adopted. As already mentioned, artists find themselves in a

continual and internal struggle as their ambitions have no limitation. There are always new horizons to be discovered. People always expect artists to give answers to the complexities of life. The burden put on their shoulders makes them suffer. This internal struggle or suffering is clearly manifested by Trigorin, who states:

> I want to write about science and human rights, etc, etc, etc. You know. Oh dear. And so I write about everything that interests me. Harried, hurrying, chased in every direction, irritating people. I scramble for cover. Dodge and weave, like a fox pursued by hounds. But I see life always ahead of me. I'm always behind. Science is always beyond my reach, exceeding my grasp. I can't keep up. I'm like a poor peasant. I'm always missing the train. (Act One, p. 44)

This state of bewilderment reveals Konstantin's lack of decision which pushes him to put an end to his life. He sadly addresses Nina:

> You have found your way, then. You know where you're going, whilst I drift about in a chaos of dreams and images, not knowing why I'm doing it or for whom. I have no faith and I don't know what my vocation is. (Act Four, p. 83)

At the end of the play, both Konstantin and Nina come to realize that "a man should write from his soul without restriction in whatever form or structure that takes him", (Act Four, p. 79). The most important thing is not fame, glory or dreams, "but the capacity to endure. To be able to carry one's cross and keep faith. I have faith so that the rest of it doesn't hurt so much. I have my vocation and so I'm not afraid of life", (Act Four, p. 83). The important lesson Konstantin and Nina want to communicate is that the artist should be true to himself. The power of creativity the artist enjoys will ensure his commitment to people without fear of any political system which tries to restrict him or them.

Dealing with an artist character in a play is not only exclusive to those playwrights discussed in this thesis. There are further examples in contemporary British theatre in which the artist as a character is employed. Among others are Howard Brenton's *Bloody Poetry* and Edward Bond's *Bingo*, previously mentioned. Bond's *Bingo*, for example, is about the last days of Shakespeare. Impressively, the play becomes more than that, to be "a sort of attack on that kind

of culture which is seen as something outside life, a sort of gilding on life, or something removed from life … [Art] should be about our lives and it should help us to be able to solve our problems".[40] In *Bingo*, Shakespeare is described as an aged person who is concerned more with his financial security than with art or the people around him. Accordingly, the ageing Shakespeare begins to suffer from pangs of conscience in part because he feels that he betrayed his people by signing a contract which secured his landholdings at the expense of other local peasant farmers.

For my analysis I have chosen plays written by British playwrights. In doing so, I intend to present a selection of works from the past four decades in the UK. To contextualize the origin of all the plays, I have situated my analysis in the historical and political circumstance of each decade. Although I have mostly concentrated on the study of British theatre, I have sometimes included references to writers from outside Britain whenever their ideas or themes correspond with my theme, as in the case of American playwrights, Arthur Miller and David Mamet.

As far as methodology is concerned, I have engaged with close reading of the texts rather than theatre production and performance. My approach is thematic as I rely extensively on dramatic criticism, drawn from scholarly critical books and articles. I have also found it important to consult the playwrights themselves, some of whom I interviewed in person, while others via email. All the studied playwrights are still alive. Their views or theories about theatre and the function of art are still an on-going process of discussion.

Apart from thematic unity, the chapters are organized in such a way to trace the theme being studied in plays produced throughout the successive decades from the 1970s to the 2000s. One exception to this rule is Wertenbaker's plays. Although I discuss a number of her plays, I focus on two in particular: *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1991) and *The Line* (2009), which were written in different decades. Thus, the thesis follows the development of the theme of using the artist as a character which finds expression in Howard Brenton's most recent play, *The Arrest of Ai Weiwei* (2013).

The first chapter examines the significance of using the artist as a fictional character in a literary work. An outline of the close interaction between art and life leads to a discussion of the responsibility of the artist and the function of art in society. This responsibility is anticipated according to the cults of 'Art for Art's Sake' and 'Art for Society's Sake'. It also shapes the

---

[40] Cited by Malcolm Hay and Philip Roberts, *Bond: A Study of his Plays* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p. 197.

potential dilemmas the artist faces in his trajectory of writing. To highlight the idea under analysis, I have devoted this chapter to mapping out some of the major debates by a number of theorists and writers. This is done to draw a full picture of how those artists and thinkers responded to the issues. Since this thesis is about British theatre, the first chapter traces the development of British theatre following John Osborne's landmark *Look Back in Anger* (1956) to the present day.

The second chapter examines the artist as a character in Tom Stoppard's plays: *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1972) and *Travesties* (1974). As a unique voice in the context of British theatre in the 1960s and 1970s, Stoppard's philosophical and scientific inquiries about the dilemma of the artist and the relationship between art and politics are blended with the particular style and art forms which are embodied in pastiche and parody. In an environment where socially and politically committed drama had long been valued, Stoppard tried hard to avoid journeying into the realms of political debate, especially in his earliest works. As a result, Stoppard has frequently been criticized for a lack of political engagement and also for not leaning too much to the left when he does engage.[41] He is well known for his ambiguous views on aesthetics as well as ethical and political issues. His plays do not give particular answers and frustrate the audience with paradoxes and contradictions. However, Stoppard's inquiry into the nature and function of art is never complete without looking at his portrayal of the artist in light of rights and responsibilities which will reveal, in turn, the possible dilemmas the artist may confront. This is the main aim of this chapter which will also shed light on Stoppard's oeuvre in the 1970s.

The third chapter offers a critical reading of Howard Barker's drama as it is reflected in *No End of Blame: Scenes of Overcoming* (1981) and *Scenes from an Execution* (1984). An outline of the historical legacy of the 1980s is also provided to show the effect the Thatcherite system had on artists. Moreover, the impact of changing economics on British subsidized theatres, during Margaret Thatcher's time raises crucial questions about the role of theatre in society and the relationships between the artist and the state. I will address these questions through an investigation of the challenges that confronted British playwrights in the 1980s. Barker is one of those writers who had begun to grapple with these questions when he became suspicious of the effectiveness of politically committed theatre at about the same time Thatcher was elected

---

[41] This tendency of amorality in Stoppard's early dramatic career is scrutinised by the critics who severely criticize him for his indifference to contemporary social issues. Philip Roberts wrote in 1978, because of this tendency, Stoppard's early plays turned into apolitical opportunities for "wit, parody and metaphysical dalliance", Phillip Roberts, "Tom Stoppard: Serious Artist or Siren?" *Theatre Quarterly*, v. 20, n. 3 (August 1978): 87.

as Prime Minister. In his influential collection of essays, expressed in his books *Arguments for a Theatre* and *Death, The One and The Art of Theatre*, Barker reveals his own powerful theatre theory. This theory evolved from his rejection of collectivism and Brechtian alienation which are typical of the early work of Caryl Churchill and David Hare. Instead, he looks at theatre as a place for individual speculation. As far as the artist character is concerned, he reveals the immediate dilemmas artists faced which are clearly reflected in censorship and lack of free will.

The fourth chapter starts by investigating the dilemma of women playwrights in the 1990s and 2000s as reflected in Timberlake Wertenbaker's plays. Though I have dealt with plays written in the 1980s, I have concentrated on Wertenbaker's *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1991) and *The Line* (2009), which signal the start of a difficult new era for women playwrights following the heyday of the 1980s. Using the artist as a character is analysed through the juxtaposition of different critical views for the dilemmas of the artist in women's writing. These dilemmas are represented by a plethora of female British playwrights such as Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems and Timberlake Wertenbaker. In the case of Wertenbaker, however, the dilemmas of marginalization and silencing take on a new cultural dimension since she is not originally British. Having fought her way into the male-dominated theatre scene, Wertenbaker embraces theatre as an effective means of reflecting women's marginalization. So, this chapter offers a detailed survey of the most important dilemmas facing women playwrights in contemporary British theatre.

As each theme is studied, I will discuss key works in which the theme is particularly prominent. Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase* and *Travesties*; Barker's *No End of Blame: Scenes of Overcoming* and *Scenes from an Execution*; Wertenbaker's *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1991) and *The Line* (2009) struck a chord with audiences who found themselves confronted with numerous questions and dilemmas concerning the status of the artist in society. The artist's preoccupation with censorship and lack of free will, which are addressed in those plays, appear to be acutely relevant in the years of political and economic flux.

Rather than privileging one dominant theoretical position and adopting its perspective for the purposes of my analysis, I connect the work of playwrights informed by different artistic positions and political convictions, in order to pinpoint the principle of co-existence and multiplicity of using artist as a dramatic character.

As mentioned before, this aesthetic and ideological diversity of using artist as a dramatic character in contemporary British theatre has been confirmed not only by the primary and secondary sources that I drew upon but also by the playwrights themselves, whom I interviewed. Moreover, I shall link together dramatists writing from a variety of ideological positions, emphasising the importance of co-existence and multiplicity within using artist as a character to illustrate the role of the artist and function of art in society. Although references to such positions will constitute a standard presence throughout the thesis, I have devoted an introductory chapter to mapping out some of the major directions in the role of the artist and function of art in society.

However, after the collapse of communism and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1990 and the appearance of the US as the major super-power in the world, the role of the artist and his function in society also underwent a discernible change. Artists and critics alike were no longer obliged to conceal their opinions or to suggest multiple interpretations for fear of being censored or imprisoned. This demonstrates why British playwrights have turned to European and Eastern countries to tackle the issue of artistic freedom. Brenton's The Arrest of Ai Weiwei (2013), a play about the arrest of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei is an example of the global nature of the artist.

Undoubtedly, the employment of the artist as a character has constituted a major issue for debate throughout the late 20th century. No doubt, this debate will be at the forefront of the 21st century as the world continues to change drastically. The global population welcomes any action against the threats of mass terror and nuclear weapons even though sometimes these threats are fabricated to achieve political agendas.