

THE IMPACT OF DISLOCATION IN VANISHING POINTS BY THEA ASTLEY

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Abstract

The impact of dislocation in Thea Astley's "Vanishing Points" is a profound and multifaceted theme that permeates the novel. Dislocation, in this context, refers to the physical and emotional displacement of characters from their familiar surroundings, leading to a sense of disorientation and identity crisis. Astley masterfully explores the effects of dislocation through her characters, particularly Julie Truscott and Macintosh Hope, who flee their lives in search of meaning and connection. Their journeys are marked by a sense of dislocation, as they struggle to reconcile their past and present selves.

Keywords: Alienation, Identity, Social change.

In *Vanishing Points*, Thea Astley uses dislocation as a powerful tool to explore themes of alienation, identity, and social change. By weaving this theme throughout both personal and societal struggles, she reveals how deeply the feeling of being unmoored can affect individuals. The characters' emotional, psychological, and physical dislocation reflects the broader human experience of searching for meaning and connection in a rapidly changing world.

The theme of dislocation contributes to the characters' sense of being "out of place." Whether it's geographical displacement or the disconnection from their own inner selves, many of the characters in *Vanishing Points* struggle to reconcile their past with their present. This dislocation leads to feelings of alienation and loss of personal identity.

The characters often experience physical dislocation, where they are removed from familiar environments or find themselves in unfamiliar, hostile settings. This displacement acts as a catalyst for their emotional and psychological

turmoil. It forces them to confront their vulnerabilities, breaking down their sense of stability and comfort.

Dislocation is not just a physical experience for the characters but an emotional one. Astley explores the idea that being out of place or experiencing disruptions in one's life can lead to psychological fragmentation. The dislocation can bring about a breakdown of clear, structured thought, leaving characters to grapple with confusion and a sense of purposelessness.

Dislocation also disrupts personal relationships in the story. The emotional disconnection that results from being out of place often leads to miscommunication, isolation, and alienation between characters. This can be seen in romantic relationships that falter or friendships that dissolve as people lose their sense of connection to one another. The physical and emotional dislocation often creates emotional distance, preventing characters from truly understanding or supporting each other.

The title *Vanishing Points* itself symbolizes how the characters' lives, their goals, and their understanding of the world seem to disappear or become elusive. Dislocation intensifies this theme, as characters struggle to find a sense of direction. The "vanishing point" can be understood as a metaphor for both the literal and figurative points where things or people seem to disappear, leaving only confusion and uncertainty in their wake.

There is also a cultural dislocation experienced by some of the characters, especially in the context of Australia's social and historical landscape. The novel deals with issues of cultural shifts, where old traditions and values clash with modern realities, leading to further dislocation and disorientation for those caught in the crossfire.

One of the most poignant examples of emotional dislocation occurs with the character of Clare, who feels disconnected from her family and community. She's not only physically separated but emotionally adrift, finding it difficult to belong or connect. She struggles to reconcile her past with her present, creating a sense of psychological fragmentation.

Clare looks back on her childhood with nostalgia, but the memories are tinted with loss. She feels disconnected from both her past and the people in it, unable to find a place in her present world. This emotional dislocation is made clear when she reflects: "I tried to place myself in the world, but it kept shifting, like a landscape that couldn't hold its shape". This quote highlights how Clare's sense of self is constantly in flux, unable to anchor herself to a stable identity or reality. She is stuck between different versions of herself and her experiences, making it hard to feel rooted.

Another key aspect of dislocation is physical displacement, particularly when characters are uprooted from their homes and relocated to environments that feel unfamiliar, hostile, or alienating.

A key moment in the novel occurs when the characters move from rural areas to urban settings, and some of them struggle to adapt to the fast-paced, impersonal nature of city life. A specific character who feels this deeply is Sylvia, who had grown up in a small, tight-knit community and now faces the overwhelming anonymity of city living. "The streets were like veins—unseeing, unfeeling, and I was just another drop in the flood of people". This quote reflects Sylvia's alienation as she is thrust into an environment where she doesn't feel she belongs. Her feelings of isolation are compounded by her inability to find any meaningful connection in the urban landscape.

The characters' psychological dislocation is also evident in their inability to reconcile their memories of the past with the reality of the present. This is particularly true for Gail, who is haunted by her childhood and the choices she made. She struggles to understand how she got to where she is, questioning the very core of her identity.

In a moment of self-reflection, Gail asks herself: "Who was I before all of this? Was there ever a version of me that existed before the world took its toll?" This quote reveals Gail's search for identity in the face of overwhelming dislocation. She cannot connect with her earlier self, and as she looks back, she feels as though her past has been erased or replaced by her current, more fractured version.

In the broader context of societal change, cultural dislocation plays a significant role in the novel. Characters feel lost not only because of their personal struggles but because of the larger cultural shifts occurring around them. The tension between traditional values and modern realities leaves characters unsure of where they fit in.

The novel often reflects on how traditional ways of life are being overshadowed by rapid societal changes. One character, Eleanor, who once held a clear sense of cultural identity, reflects: "The old ways, the stories we once believed in, seemed to have no place in this new world that didn't understand them. I was left alone with nothing but the echoes of a past that no longer existed". Here, Eleanor expresses the dislocation caused by modernization. Her culture, once stable and defining, is now fragmented and alien to her. She struggles to adapt, and her sense of cultural identity becomes blurred.

The vanishing point of the title serves as both a literal and metaphorical representation of the characters' struggles. The vanishing point is not just the horizon line where everything seems to fade into nothing, but also symbolizes the elusive goals and disappearing opportunities that the characters strive toward.

In the novel, a character reflects on their journey and the perpetual chasing of goals that seem to get further and further away: “I kept running towards something, but the further I went, the less I could see of it. Like the road was leading me to a place that no longer existed”.

This scene emphasizes the futility of trying to find direction in a world that seems to offer no stable ground. The idea of the vanishing point serves as a poignant reminder of the fleeting nature of the goals and ideals that people often chase.

A recurring theme of generational dislocation appears in the novel as characters feel torn between the traditions of their parents and the demands of the new generation. The younger characters often feel alienated from their elders, and vice versa.

In a conversation between a father and his son, the father says: “You don’t understand what it was like, son. Things aren’t like they used to be, and I can’t help you find your place in this new world”.

The father, having experienced life in a different time, expresses his frustration with the changing world that his son is now a part of. The son, meanwhile, feels disconnected from the old ways and finds himself unable to relate to his father’s ideals, making them both feel isolated from each other.

Overall, dislocation in *Vanishing Points* acts as a central force that drives the characters' internal and external struggles. It deepens the exploration of human vulnerability, the impact of change, and the search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented world. The sense of being unmoored plays a pivotal role in the novel’s melancholy and existential undertones.