

Research Article

Art and Literature Intertwined: Intertextuality and the Representation of Expressionist Art in Alex Michaelides' *The Silent Patient*

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History	Alex Michaelides' debut novel, <i>The Silent Patient</i> (2019), is a psychological thriller; the plot surrounds a psychotherapist whose obsession with a committed female murderer becomes the doom of him. While the novel has often been approached through psychoanalytic frameworks, this article examines how its narration incorporates expressionist art, Greek mythology, and ekphrasis through the lens of intertextuality. The article analyzes the novel according to the theory of intertextuality by the French philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva, focusing on how the novel combines its narration with Greek mythology and drama. The present study focuses on two paintings that are mentioned in the novel "Alcestis" and "Grove on fire" and how the main character's art becomes a tool of communication and her voice in a moment that she is psychologically disturbed that she cannot express her emotions verbally. Moreover, the article does not analyze the protagonist through psychoanalytical point of view rather it concentrates on her art though expressionism.
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1. Introduction

New York Times' best-selling novel *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides was first published in 2019. It is a plot twisting psychological novel that explores the hidden complexities of the human relations with the self and others. *The Silent Patient* is a highly engaging novel that keeps the reader guessing about the truth behind the crime in the plot. The novel is about a psychoanalyst named Theo after receiving a new position at a psychiatric unit becomes obsessed with one of his patients named Alicia. She murders her husband Gabriel, and never speaks a word about it, her refusal to speak creates a media frenzy, and leads the public's imagination wild to create stories about her seemingly perfect marriage and what led her to become a murderer. Thus, she becomes a 'silent patient' hence, the title of the novel. Through the stream of consciousness, and the non-linearity the storyline leads the reader to unexpected plot twists. The events

unfold through Theo Faber's investigation; therefore, the reader introduced Alicia through his perspective while he investigates her silence. Subsequently, the story shifts to Alicia's perspective through her diary, which is a representation of stream of consciousness narrative technique it shows the last few months before the murder. Her words depict her paranoia and mental struggles linking it with the trauma of losing her mother as a young girl and her father's bad treatment afterward.

At The Grove psychiatric facility, Theo becomes increasingly obsessed with Alicia's case and attempts to uncover the reasons behind her silence. Alicia's diary and art challenge perceptions of truth, guilt and identity. Therefore, the novel is a combination of suspense, psychology and Greek drama. *The Silent Patient* explores to the resurface of childhood trauma, repression in accordance with the power of silence. Alex Michaelides as a Cypriot-British novelist best known for his psychological themes (Ashraf et al., 2020). Michaelides, besides being a novelist, is a screenwriter, and this enhances his experience and his style of writing *The Silent Patient* which is rich with visuals, sound and atmosphere that are translated from the character's emotions (Michaelides, n.d.). Expressionism as an artistic movement originated in the early 20th century, it was first in Germany in painting, theatre, and cinema. The present study aims to showcase how art and literature are interlinked and how expressionism as an artistic and literary form indicates to focus on the human emotional depth. Therefore, this artistic movement tries to express inner thoughts, emotions and fears through distorted images and exaggerated forms. Instead of showing the world how it is, the expressionists indicate to experience it, thus Michaelides in his text shows the stream of consciousness of the heroine through her art. *The Silent Patient* falls deep into the psychological and emotional crisis rather than presenting them straightforwardly. Alicia's diary and her silence best describe the expressionism, because it describes her inner thoughts and emotions Expressionism externalizes inner thoughts in order to understand the subconscious and inner thoughts of the characters.

Art and literature are closely intertwined modes of expression that frequently intersect in narrative fiction. In *The Silent Patient*, Alex Michaelides draws on expressionism as an artistic movement to explore how visual art and storytelling converge in representing Alicia's psychological collapse and symbolic silence. Therefore, in the next few sections this article will analyze the representation of expressionist art in the novel, as well as examining how the novel blends narration with references to Greek mythology and drama. Analyzing *The Silent Patient* through Julia Kristeva's lens of intertextuality reveals that the novel is not just a mystery rather its interpretation depends on the reader's understanding of Alicia's final painting

named after the play *Alceste* by the ancient Greek dramatist Euripides. Intertextuality according to Kristeva in the intersection of a text within a text, it could be through direct quotations or passing references. Hence, Alicia's final painting becomes symbolism of sacrifice and betrayal which weaves a multifaceted web of childhood trauma and marital secrets. Finally, the article will showcase the use of ekphrasis, a narrative device that is a verbal representation of visual art. The paintings of in the novel are fictional, nonetheless by the use of ekphrasis the author creates an image inside of the reader's mind making them imagine every aspect of the character's appearance and emotion. (Fatah, 2024)

1.1. Expressionism

Expressionism is a cultural movement that originated in Germany and Austria in the beginning of 20th century: "Expressionism is complex and contradictory that encompassed the liberation of the body as much as the excavation of the psyche" (Bassie, 2019). From its inception, the term 'Expressionism' carried a different meaning and was initially used to describe progressive European art; until 1912, it was applied to the works of Paul Gauguin, Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and Vincent van Gogh. Expressionism was widely embraced in Germany and initially referred to painting and sculptor; it later extended to literature, theater, and dance. Artists and scholars do not agree on what exactly makes an expressionist art, some artists refused to be called an expressionist. However, what is clear is that expressionism as an art movement focuses on the subjective individual experience. This indicates that expressionists work pays less attention to objective reality or formal accurateness and it tries to provide an understanding on expressing personal emotions, inner feelings, and psychological conditions. Therefore, as an example, Van Gogh's swirling brushstrokes and vibrant colors convey the artist's emotional strength in "The Starry Night", although Munch's indistinct forms in "The Scream" reproduces anxiety and existential crisis. Their art highlights emotional expression over exact literal illustration, such art introduces the artist's inner world: "Expressionism also bore an immense potential for despair, disillusionment and atrophy. Along with works of profound poignancy, it also produced a flood of pseudo-ecstatic outpourings and a good deal of sentimental navel-gazing" (Bassie, 2019). In the following decades, Edvard Munch's art became a base for inspiring other artists, as he was one of the painters that concentrated on inner feelings and personal experiences rather than portraying reality (Bassie, 2019). Sokel in *The Writer in Extremis* (1959), defines expressionism as an artistic and literary connection that develops from psychological, moral, and historical crisis, in favor of radical subjectivity rejects realism. He debates that expressionist art cautiously employs

misrepresentation, destruction, and exaggeration to externalize inner thoughts and reveal deeper emotional and spiritual truths. Therefore, the expressionist movement is located within the context of modernity, that labels the individual as alienated, often reduced to figurative symbols. According to Sokel, expressionist art is created at the point of extreme, where traditional aesthetic balance paves the way to concentration, amazement, and unrealistic necessity, making art a means of disapproval and existential realization rather than imitation or aesthetic pleasure.

2. Literature Review

The publication of *The Silent Patient* has prompted a number of scholarly articles across many journals. These academic discourses have concentrated on Alicia's silence, and Theo's malevolent intentions. Thus, they have mainly examined the relationship between narration and psychoanalysis. This section showcases different studies with the aim of providing a more enhanced understanding of the novel.

Lothstein (2020) focuses on the novel under the lens of psychotherapy. The study examines the role of silence in psychotherapy of violent individuals within a forensic hospital setting. Therefore, it focuses on the challenges that psychotherapists face in diagnosing and dealing with such patients, studying the family and childhood trauma on such violent behaviors. She also studies the meaning of silence in psychotherapy.

Ashraf et. al., (2020) analyze the novel through the lens of postmodernist theory. Postmodernism, as a contemporary intellectual movement, challenges traditional notions of knowledge, rationality, truth, and objectivity. It encompasses a range of ideas and theoretical discourses that resist fixed definitions and definitive conclusions. Drawing on Jean Francois Lyotard's concept of metanarratives versus mini-narratives. The research employs textual analysis to identify postmodern elements within the narration's language, dialogue, and character interaction.

Rana and Khan (2023) investigate health care providers, and it focuses on the concept of narrative medicine. Which underlines the importance of attentiveness, connection, and illustration in the relationship between clinicians and patients through storytelling. By applying Rita Charon's theory of narrative medicine to Alex Michaelides' *The Silent Patient*, the research examines how narrative understanding can illuminate psychological trauma and emotional repression. Through an analysis of the protagonist, Alicia's silence and past experiences, the study reveals how suppressed emotions can explode into acts of violence and how storytelling serves as a means of healing and comprehension.

Bassie (2019) analyze the role of art therapy in supporting emotional healing and self-expression through the character of Alicia Berenson. By Applying Sigmund Freud's theory of defense mechanisms, it investigates how creative expression can expose suppressed emotions, assist self-discovery, and encourage healing from psychological trauma. By studying Alicia's use of art as a therapeutic tool, the study highlights the transformative hypothesis of creativity in understanding and healing the human psyche, offering valuable insights for clinical applications of art therapy, to deal with psychological distress and emotional challenges.

Al Areqih (2025) focuses on Alicia by applying a feminist lens, it interprets her silence as a metaphor for the broader silencing of women under patriarchy. The research examines how misogyny, childhood trauma, and societal expectations influence Alicia's life and actions. It argues that her violent act restricts from accumulated trauma and the failures of the patriarchal structures to protect her, ultimately linking personal suffering with systematic oppression.

The previous mentioned studies focused more on the psychological aspects and postmodern theories to analyze *The Silent Patient*. This article differs from these studies by focusing on the relation between art and literature and how art and painting would become a source of expression.

3. Results and Discussions

The Silent Patient is profoundly influenced by Greek drama and references to Greek mythology. Alicia before her trail paints a self-portrait with the title "Alcestis". Alcestis is a figure from Greek mythology and a character from Euripides's play with the same name (438 B.C.). Alcestis' husband is a king named Admetos after the gods telling him his time has arrived to die, he tells them he is not prepared to die, Apollo convinces Fates to not let him die, however, he is told that someone else has to be sacrificed instead of him no one is prepared to die for him expect for his wife. As seen in (Figure 1) a painting by the title of *The Sacrificial Death of Alcestis*, an oil on canvas by German artist Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Elder, (1780). The canvas shows Alcestis' self-sacrifice surrounded by her mourning family (Miao, 2025). After the death of his wife, he becomes miserable, Herakles fights death and brings her back to life, but Alcestis becomes silent after her reincarnation and cannot speak for three days (Euripides, 1900). Her silence can have different interpretations for instance she could be temporarily silent by death. However, in *The Silent Patient* her silence and Alicia's silence are connected with the betrayal of their husbands and how they gave their wives a death sentence.



Figure 1. *The Sacrificial Death of Alcestis* by Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Elder (1780).

The novel's interconnectedness with a Greek drama can be analyzed through intertextuality which denotes to incorporating a text within a text, it could be directly or indirectly (Ahmed & Mohamad, 2024). Julia Kristeva "coined the term intertextuality. Intertextuality, though surfaced as a poststructuralist concept, existed as a universal phenomenon that elucidates the communicative interconnections between a text and the other and text and context" (Raj, 2015). Kristeva's theory is not only significant because she has coined the term, rather it shows the diversity of merging texts. She builds her theory based on Mikhail Bakhtin in which they both explain that a text cannot be separated from socio-cultural place that it was originated from, the text: "cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system" (Raj, 2015). Furthermore, she puts it this way that an author's writing and thinking is not original rather than it is produced from a number of existing texts. Kristeva also explains while analyzing texts history and culture should be considered. Her theory clarifies that a text is not a single entity nonetheless it can be analyzed though many different views and perspectives. And that the author is not a creator, the sole origin of meaning, or the composer rather he is engaging in creative process: "Therefore what we term as meaning of the text finds a wider and complex characterization beyond what is inscribed in a text. The 'text that is' is 'texts within' and the 'meaning that is' is 'meanings beyond.'" (p. 80). In *The Silent Patient* the author blends the storytelling of Greek drama, this indicates how *Alcestis* is textualized in the novel. Therefore, the novel is a form of intertextuality by focusing on Greek mythology, art and literature as a medium to understand the human psyche. Intertextuality can occur where direct or indirect quotations, allusions, to other literary works, the narrator of *The Silent Patient* explicitly refers to

Euripides's *Alcestis*. Direct quotation from the play can be noticed before the prologue of the novel "But why does she not speak? —Euripides, *Alcestis*" (Michaelides, 2019). Moreover, Theo explains the play to the reader in the following quote from the novel:

Alcestis is the Heroine of a Greek myth. A love story of the saddest kind. Alcestis willingly sacrifices her life for that of her husband, Admetus, dying in his place when no one else will. An unsettling myth of self-sacrifice, it was unclear how it related to Alicia's situation. The true meaning of the allusion remained unknown to me for some time. Until one day, the truth came to light (Michaelides, 2019)

Intertextuality explains that interpretations and meanings behind texts can be different we can see this when Alcestis' silence is interpreted as a way of her feeling of anger and betrayal, as young girl Alicia loses her mother, and she overhears her father say it should have been her who should have died, and she whispers to her cousin that her father had killed her, not physically but metaphorically. Her diary reveals that on the night she murders her husband, an intruder comes to her house to reveal to her that her husband has had an affair, and tells Gabriel should he pull the trigger on him or his wife, and he whispers that he does not want to die. It is revealed that the intruder is Theo himself, and leaves Alicia's house, and she feels the betrayal for the second time in her life, and decides to shoot Gabriel five times in the head, "Gabriel was the second man to condemn Alicia to death; bringing up this original trauma was more than she could bear" (Michaelides, 2019). Thus, this can be connected to Kristeva's theory of intertextuality and how texts can have different possible readings and clarifications. Kristeva's intertextuality does not only refer to allusions rather it is explained through redistributive (destructive constructive) clarifying that the new text renovates the meaning behind old texts: "it is permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a text, many utterances taken from other texts intersect with one another and neutralize one another" (Raj, 2015). Thus, the novel uses the mythology figure to transform the protagonist murdering her husband not as a crime but to justify her actions to show her feelings of betrayal, Theo subsequently realizes that Alicia sees the *Alcestis* play a short while before murdering Gabriel. Alicia has an emotional reaction about the reincarnation of the main character, which seems to foreshadow her later actions.

In *The Silent Patient* ekphrasis is used to illustrate the work of art by Alicia. Which is a figure of speech that is used to describe any painting, work of art, or sculptures. Ekphrasis is described as: "verbal re-creations of visual artwork" (KhosraviShakib, 2012). In the novel, ekphrasis helps the reader bring the

paintings to life, and makes them imagine every color, every pose, every expression. The paintings might not be based on real-life paintings, but it creates a visualization of Alicia's anger, betrayal, and raw emotions. The use of ekphrasis also serves as a mirror of her horror, her red hair and visible blue veins, gives a visualization of her appearance, as well as her trauma, and emotional turmoil.

"Alcestris" is not the only painting by Alicia that is mentioned, a number of different paintings is described that show us a getaway to her mental status for instance; "The Grove on fire", "portrait of Lydia Rose", "Crucifixion of Gabriel", "car accident". While in the novel it is not mentioned directly but her paintings after the murder of Gabriel could be a representation of expressionist art. This article does not analyze the novel through the psychoanalysis theory but rather it focuses on the psyche of the protagonist through her art. Expressionists focus more on subjective emotional turmoil rather than objectivity; the paintings sometimes were disoriented. Alicia's painting is described as the following:

The painting is a self-portrait, depicting Alicia in her studio at home in the days after the murder, standing before an easel and a canvas, holding a paintbrush. She is naked. Her body is rendered in unsparing detail: strands of long red hair falling across bony shoulders, blue veins visible beneath translucent skin, fresh scars on both her wrists. She's holding the paintbrush between her fingers. It's drip- ping red paint—or is it blood? She is captured in the act of painting— yet the canvas is blank, as is her expression. Her head is turned over her shoulder, and she stares straight out at us. Mouth open, lips parted. Mute (Michaelides, 2019).

We can analyze her painting and connect it with expressionist movement in several points; beginning with how the painting can serve as Alicia's confession to the murder of her husband, which is a portrayal of her psychological state of mind. As well as how her scars can be a representation of new and old traumatic experiences. While the painting does not portray the crime scene it is considered to be a confession and the aftermath of her crime. It shows her motives to her murdering her husband, which were betrayal and her husband's selfish motivation in wanting to sacrifice her for his sins. Alicia, a month before the murder of her husband, she makes him pose for her and portrays him as Jesus being crucified, thus, the religious symbolism foreshadows the reason of Garbiel's murder which is he wanted to sacrifice Alicia for the sin of his affair on his wife. Another significant part of the self-portrait that the reader notices is the use of the color "red", expressionist artists are mostly recognizable for using vibrant and unconventional colors such as red, as can be seen in Munch's well-known painting "The Scream". The application of bold colors such

as red is supposed to create an emotional response from the viewer, it is for the purpose of making a connection between the painting and the audience (Fatah & Ahmed, 2023). Thus, while Alicia was going through a difficult time after the death of her husband, she was not able to express it verbally, but she wanted people and the viewer to understand her psyche. The color red can also symbolize her anger and frustration, as well as her disappointment with what Gabriel has made her put through. The color “red” also symbolizes the blood thus, her admission of guilt as well as symbolism for danger.

Therefore, Sokel’s concept of *The Writer in Extremis* (1959), powerfully linked to art in *The Silent Patient* throughout the idea that art performs from psychological extremity and functions as an exteriorization of inner trauma. In Sokel’s expressionist framework, distortion and silence replace realistic representation in order to convey emotional truth. Likewise, Alicia’s paintings in *The Silent Patient* do not mean to illustrate reality precisely; instead, they undertake her broken psyche, remorse, and repressed trauma. Alicia’s final painting, “Alcestis”, utilities as an expressionist artwork: symbolic, emotionally charged, and created at a moment of psychological collapse. Like the expressionist artist in Sokel’s analysis, Alicia interconnects what cannot be spoken through vigorous imagery, symbolism, and artistic concentration, making art an alternate for language and an exposure of inner crisis. Thus, the novel aligns with Sokel’s view of expressionism by presenting art as a moderate innate from extremity, where subjective truth compensates realism and aesthetic harmony.

Another significant component of the painting is that the painter is without her clothes on; however, her nudity is not portrayed in sexual manner. Though, her naked body symbolizes her truth and emotional vulnerability. She is exposed, not just physically but emotionally as well, which is a symbolism of her confession and her only statement after the murder. Expressionist artists like Die Brücke Group, nudity played an essential role for representing sexuality and liberation. However, other painters like Egon Schiele used nudity as a form of portraying the inner psychological states of their subjects. Theo attempts for Alicia to speak and tell him the events of her husband’s murder; however, she continues to remain silent. And he decides to give her paint and canvas so she could express her emotions through painting:

Alicia had painted a redbrick building, a hospital—unmistakably the Grove. It was on fire, burning to the ground. Two figures were discernible on the fire escape. A man and a woman escaping the fire. The woman was unmistakably Alicia, her red hair the same color as the

flames. I recognized the man as myself. I was carrying Alicia in my arms, holding her aloft while the fire licked my ankles. I couldn't tell if I was depicted as rescuing Alicia—or about to throw her in the flames (Michaelides, 2019).

Theo recognizes himself as the man in the painting, the psychiatric hospital the Grove is on fire. Fire is a symbol of destruction and ruin, as well as representing her personal feelings of rage and fury. Moreover, it can also portray her crying for help and wanting to be rescued. The painting's interpretation can be ambiguous to the reader, when the narrator mentions he does not know whether he is saving her or throwing her into the fire. However, by the end of the novel we realize that Alicia has recognized Theo as the intruder of the night of the murder, which we can fathom from this, that her painting supposed to represent her anger with Theo and how he might have been the reason she killed her husband, thus, ruining her life. As well as her rage and horror with being institutionalized, not feeling secure and safe in her environment. If we interpret the painting as an expressionist representation, it can be understood that all the flames symbolize her trauma and all the emotions that have been repressed in her psyche and her inability to express them with speech. In other words, "Grove on fire" symbolizes a voice of a silent woman, and her art becomes the only tool of communication, and the intense colors represent a scream for the need to be rescued. To sum up, although *The Silent Patient* is classified as contemporary psychological thriller, the novel has characteristics of expressionist literature, such as narration techniques of stream of consciousness writing, and disjointed storytelling. Expressionist literature rejected the idea of applying chronological events in their plots, in order to convey the psychological states of their characters. Alicia's diary and Theo's investigation happen in non-linear structure, it is supposed to show how trauma can be experienced as well as remembered, and how the characters can be affected by the trauma can come to the surface randomly.

4. Conclusion

This article explored the subjectivity of Alicia's silence and how it became a source of confession through her diary and her painting. Hence, it emphasized the effective relation between art and literature and how these two would become a source to of her expression. The article investigated two main paintings in the novel and how they help the narration to take shape and describe the incidents of the novel. Thus, it discussed how Alicia's art can be a representation of expressionist art. Her paintings serve as a source to understand her psyche, her marital problems, and past traumas. Moreover, it analyzed the relational and

emotional depth of Theo and Alicia's murder of her husband and how the narration blended these events with Greek drama. By incorporating Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, it was explained that *Alcestis* does not serve as merely an allusion rather it provides hidden meanings behind the main character's trauma; it reconstructs the ancient text and depicts new meaning to the reader. Both Alecetis' and Alicia's silence symbolize betrayal, and anger.

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