

# **Betrayed by Rita Hayworth Short Guide**

## **Betrayed by Rita Hayworth by Manuel Puig**

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## Social Concerns

Manuel Puig's first novel *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* is set in a small Argentine town called Coronel Vallejos, which was modeled on the village of General Villegas in which the author grew up. As might be expected, it abounds with local color and, like most of Puig's work, has a strong strain of social realism. In portraying a wide range of the town's varied inhabitants, Puig focuses on the cultural, political and social myths by which they live.

These characters present themselves through a series of interior monologues in which they reveal their values and concerns: the cultural attitudes, religious beliefs, and assorted dreams that have shaped their lives. Primary among these is the influence of the Hollywood vision that has filtered into their unfulfilled lives and shaped their perceptions of reality. The romantic ideal presented by the cinema and other influences from popular culture, such as escapist fiction and popular songs, is contrasted to the everyday lives of the characters and the harsher reality of their dirt floors, class consciousness, crude sexuality, and limited prospects for bettering themselves.

Puig's chief social concern is also the theme of the novel: the betrayal of the individual by the particular illusion he or she embraces. Puig examines the origin of such illusions as well as the manner in which environment determines personality. A case in point is the fascination with gangster movies that one character reveals in a monologue: "a bullet in their legs and they're goners, a kick in the belly and their mouths bleeding they kiss the dirt on the Chicago alley." This imagined scene blends into the character's memory of his attempted rape of a young boy. The reader might be inclined to see a causal relation between the two.

In fact, quite often the narrative seems to suggest possible cultural origins for the "macho" attitudes of most of the male characters in the novel.



# Techniques

Puig's highly innovative techniques are what are most often commented on by critics of his novels. The most obvious of these is his use of popular culture in the form of movies, tangos, advertisements, and soap operas. For this reason his novels have been described as an amalgamation of "high" and "low" culture.

Puig has said that he prefers copying to creating, and this is perhaps a key to his unique style. *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* consists of a series of manuscripts, interior monologues, and conversations recorded over a period of fifteen years. Rather than developing full-blown characters and weaving complex plots, he practices what Roland Barthes has called "zero degree" writing. This is style at its most transparent: writing as a window on reality.

The author seldom intrudes into the text and, in fact, avoids all third person narration. Puig's intent in *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* was to let the people he had known present their own characters and speak in their own voices with their unique style and vocabulary. The result is a "gallery of voices" technique, which shows Puig to be a master stylist. And while Puig is ever the invisible and nonjudgmental author, the result of the technique often borders on playfulness and parody.

The montage technique that Puig borrows from film allows him to juxtapose images and build on his theme through repetition and contrast rather than logical development. As with many contemporary novels, what is most striking in Puig is not the content but the technique itself.



## Themes/Characters

As Puig explained in an interview, *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* was partly an explanation of why he was in Rome, at age thirty, without a career, without money, and discovering that his life's vocation — the cinema — had been a mistake, a neurosis and nothing more. Writing the novel, Puig claims, was an attempt to understand this failure. However, Puig goes beyond the personal aspect of the novel to expand what he discovered from his own experience to a universal theme: the betrayal of reality by illusion. Each of the characters in the novel reveals a different perspective on this betrayal.

First, there is the protagonist Toto.

He is an imaginative and, as his father bemoans, effeminate boy who enjoys nothing more than going to the movies with his mother, Mita. Afterwards, he and his mother spend hours discussing the film and drawing pictures of it. The two of them are lost in the world of imagination while the father, the conspicuously absent male, is alluded to as being in the next room sleeping or brooding over the family's finances.

While Toto and his mother are sensitive and sympathetic characters, they seem to have very little connection to the world where the father, who happens to look like a movie star, worries about bills. Moreover, Toto's Hollywood ideals spill over into his life, and his monologues reveal him to be quite out of touch with even the most basic facts of existence. Toto's thoughts move freely between reality and imagination as lived experience translates in his mind into images of movie scenes he has viewed.

While Toto only dreams of romance with a girl with pretty hair, there are the more down-to-earth, "macho" males like his cousin Hector, who satisfy their basic, unromanticized needs quickly and efficiently in back alleys.

Such characters also know how to appeal to the hunger for romance in others to get what they want ("All I did was sing to her a little and presto!

a little bullshit and she fell for it like a ton of bricks"). Although it may initially appear that Puig is setting up a contrast between reality and illusion, or the naive Toto and these practical connivers, he eventually shows how even these characters have adopted an image of themselves suggested by some element of popular culture. They may see themselves as characters in a gangster movie or as heroes in a soccer game. Regardless of the particular vision each pursues, their toughness, their "machismo," and their pursuit of carnal pleasures are, in fact, based on models from popular culture.

But popular culture is not the sole source of such personality molding.



The spinster music teacher, Herminia, is no more enviable than the local scamps. She, in fact, serves to illustrate how an exposure to elements of high culture can be as devastating as one to mass culture. She has an image of herself as one of the "wyllis" — women who die virgins without having experienced life and continue to suffer in the afterlife. A similar character is the girl, Pug-nose, who is in love with the dullwitted, soccer-playing Hector. Her selfimage is of an intellectual, and she expects the ignorant but lusty Hector to read and understand Dostoevsky.

Even politics becomes one of the myths people live by — no less a fiction than the theater. Marxism and Peronism have tremendous popular appeal and are often greatly romanticized by the masses. An example is the character Esther, a poor but intelligent and hard-working student. Because of her academic achievements, she receives an unprecedented opportunity to attend school in the wealthy district.

She is grateful to Peron for his social reforms and writes the following in her journal in praise of him: "Peron! During the one year you've been our president there's no room for all the things you've done for us in the pages of every day of every month of this year of newspapers . . . and nevertheless in your heart there's room: toys for your children! all the needy children of the Argentine republic, and laws for the workers, not to be humiliated any longer, and welfare for those burdened with years and with want."

Each of the characters in the novel, thus, demonstrates how personality is formed, or deformed, by cultural phenomena. As Hector observes about Pug-nose, "If her old man went so cuckoo from reading Schopenauer and all that shit about the Superman, she'll have it even worse because she's polishing off the whole Public Library." In each character's monologue, the particular influence and its effects on that character are revealed. What also becomes apparent is the manner in which each character's monologue is sealed off from the others, for each character lives in a private world and with a vision of himself that is not shared by the others. There is virtually no agreed upon reality in this play of illusions.

# Literary Precedents

Whenever Puig is asked about literary influences, he denies that he comes from any literary tradition, insists that he does not read much fiction, admits to having casually leafed through *Ulysses* (1922), and claims that the greatest influence on his work was an extraliterary one: the cinema. However, his use of cinematic techniques together with other aspects of his style make his work most closely resemble the French new novel. The new novelists, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes, imitate the cinema by presenting sharp visual images and by recreating "things" in all their concrete reality. Often, this amounts to a cataloguing of external objects as can be seen repeatedly in *Heartbreak Tango*, 1969 ("On the wall opposite the bed a window, on one side of it a mantelpiece laden with dolls, all with natural hair and movable eyes, and on the other side a bureau with a mirror"). The pared-down style that is evident here is another characteristic of the new novel, for in order to present "things" in a cinematic fashion, the author must not intrude in the text.

There is also a degree of mystery in this style of writing. For the sake of realism, the author does not pretend omniscience or draw conclusions for the reader. Thus, the reader is often required to piece together the available evidence in order to fully understand a situation. For instance, when Puig reproduces a character's letter in *Heartbreak Tango* with a generic salutation, the reader must decipher clues within the text to learn the addressee's identity. Similarly, a description of photos in an album merely hints at the identity of the subjects. The reader must draw his own conclusions. In *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, the author relates only one side of a telephone conversation, which, realistically speaking, is all an observer would hear. In order to make sense of the conversation, the reader must invent or reconstruct the other half. Like the new novelists, then, Puig attempts to record reality in a detailed and objective fashion while at the same time suggesting that it is ultimately unknowable.

Although Puig's novels are experimental and more in the tradition of postmodernism than nineteenth-century realism and naturalism, they have some elements in common with the latter. Puig's realism is a more radical variety, yet it retains the basic underlying assumption that the individual is formed by heredity and environment.

For Puig, the focus is culture and environment, and he examines their effects as meticulously as any determinist.

An influence on his work that Puig himself acknowledges is the Italian author Ariosto who practiced a mixed media art — writing as if he were painting or playing music. Similarly, Puig often tries to recapture screen images in his novels — to translate a visual image to a verbal one, as he does very successfully in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1976). While Puig denies having been influenced by or even exposed to Latin-American or specifically Argentine literature, his work has a great deal in common with that of other writers of the "Boom." Like his compatriot, Julio Cortazar, he enjoys game playing in his novels and requires an active reader who will serve as an accomplice, rather than reading the novel passively and superficially.

Thus, when Puig plays with the style of the serial romance, as in *Heartbreak Tango*, or with the detective novel, as in *The Buenos Aires Affair*, he does not actually expect the reader to approach the work as such, but to come to it with some humor, a sense of irony, and curiosity as to what lies concealed within Puig's use of that popular genre. The meaning of Puig's narratives never lies on the surface.





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