

perfect!! (28)

**Question 2: Writers often use a character who is alienated from his or her culture or society in order to explore cultural and social values. Examine this idea with reference to the two works you have studied.**

In literature, the writers often speak through the voice of the characters. The construction of characters, or characterization, is a powerful tool by which the writer can effectively convey his or her ideas. In works such as The Great Gatsby (1925) and The Outsider (1942), the respective writers – F. Scott Fitzgerald and Albert Camus – created characters that are seen as pariahs of their societies, outcast by the perceived social norm of their different eras and background. The purpose of such characterization in both works is to bring out a more effective and astute critique on the then prevalent cultural and social values. Hence this essay will analyse the characterization of such alienated characters in both works and the extent to which they convey the authors intents and construct their critiques.

With respect to The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald mainly constructed characters that are perceivably ostracized in the social setting of America in the 1920s. Fitzgerald himself dubbed the era of 1920s "the Jazz age". It was a period of unprecedented economic success in America. The economic boom resulted in the prevalence of materialism and consumerism, which are among the main themes that Fitzgerald explored in this novel. The money-oriented culture and financial success gave birth to many new millionaires, or the nouveau riche. And among them is the titular character Jay Gatsby, who naively believes that his wealth through bootlegging and his love for Daisy Buchanan can buy him the passage into the true American upper class.

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Fitzgerald made Gatsby an alienated character using various symbols. Firstly, he constructs a geographical setting that is symbolic of Gatsby's status as an outcast from the American upper society. In chapter 1, he distinguishes West Egg, where Gatsby lives, from East Egg, where the "old money" such as the Buchanans, live. The "dissimilarity in every particular except shape and size" makes clear that these two fictional places are symbolic of their inhabitants. The class distinction becomes clear when the author declares that the West Egg is the "less fashionable of the two". In the West Egg, Fitzgerald describes Gatsby's house in great detail. It is said to be "a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy". It symbolizes that Gatsby, as a newcomer to the club of the wealthy, tends to be ostentatious. It is compared with the house of the Buchanans in East Egg, which is described as "elaborate", "glowing" and "gold". The most prominent difference is perhaps the swimming pool, which is present at Gatsby's but not at the Buchanan's. It is an unconventional addition to a household in the 1920s, suggesting yet again that the "new money" is a less traditional class than the "old money". The difference in setting is painted with different diction, which suggests a difference in tone and attitude.

Another symbol is Gatsby's appearance. Gatsby is depicted to be wearing a "pink suit" in Chapter 7. It symbolizes idealism and unconventionality. Gatsby, as the representative of the nouveau riche, is more readily open to the new fashions and trends. This can also be seen in the fact that he has "got a man in England who buys me clothes. He sends over a selection of things at the beginning of each season, spring and fall." Despite his clothing, his physical appearance is noted by Nick. He had a "rare smile with a quality of eternal reassurance", which also highlights his idealism, his "heightened sensitivity to the promise of life". However, such idealism is viewed with skepticism and disdain by the "old money". This idea is explicitly expressed when Tom Buchanan visits Gatsby's mansion and remarks, "A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know." Meanwhile Gatsby still holds on to his idealistic wish to "repeat the past" and "reinvent himself" to be accepted by the "old money" and to achieve his own version of the American Dream. However, as the plot unfolds, the readers find that Gatsby is never truly regarded as one of them, but instead excluded from that society because the entry to it is a birthright, not something that can be

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bought.

in which social spheres? Not a general point

Aside from symbolism, plot is another way that Fitzgerald used to show that Gatsby is an outcast in the novel. Fitzgerald arranged for Daisy to accidentally murder her husband's mistress Myrtle and for Gatsby to take the blame for her only to find himself betrayed and subsequently murdered. The revelation of Gatsby as a "bootlegger" and the betrayal of the Buchanans further illustrated how Gatsby is outcast by the upper class. His loyalty to Daisy is juxtaposed in the penultimate chapter with Daisy and Tom "conspiring together". The funeral scene is perhaps the most definitive proof of Gatsby's status as an alienated character, as "nobody showed up" at his funeral. All the wealthy and powerful that are depicted in his parties have turned their backs on Gatsby at the time of his death. In the end, he is joined by his own father, who symbolizes his own humble background, at his funeral.

The purpose of constructing Gatsby as a tragic outcast of the upper class is to reflect Fitzgerald's critical view about the social phenomenon in the 1920s. As the rich became richer and society became more affluent, Fitzgerald also noticed the corruption of the American Dream, the inspiring promise that everyone, irrespective of one's background, could achieve success through hard work and clear conscience. Gatsby is the symbol for this American Dream, which is marked by his own idealism and his "extraordinary gift of hope". However, he is treated as an outcast by the upper class establishment. Instead, he is doubted by it, taken advantage by it, and ultimately betrayed by it. It shows how in the prevalent culture of the 1920s, societal success could not be achieved because the "club of success" is so exclusive that it was a birthright, only available to those born into (or married into) wealthy families, like the Buchanans. This way, the American Dream became unattainable to the majority and hence its very essence was corrupted.

Another alienated character in the novel is the narrator Nick Carraway. His presence in the novel is to provide a voice for Fitzgerald to tell the story and channel his criticism. His background is established as a Yale graduate from a "prominent, well-to-do" family in the Midwest. The fact that he and Tom Buchanan went Yale together and his family prominence seem to suggest that he is from the exclusive circle of the American upper class. However, he does not in fact belong to that circle. His Midwest origin gave him a distinct moral righteousness when compared to the wealthy in East and West Egg and in New York. These locations are almost used as metonyms to reflect the geo-economical status of the two regions. New York is the financial hub of America and somewhat inevitably became the hotbed for moral decadence when the unprecedented financial boom unleashed people's primeval, materialistic desires. The Midwest, on the contrary, was still seen as more conservative and upright. And this characteristic of Nick can be seen in chapter 2, when Tom dragged Nick to one of his parties with his mistress, Nick is "within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life." This paradox is not only a reflection of Nick's feeling at that party, but also an accurate account of his social stance among the East Egg elites. He is one of them because of his relations with the Buchanans but at the same time he is not because he feels a moral imperative to "reserve [his] judgments" and not reduce to their level. This is also seen through his friendship with Gatsby, how he thinks that the others are "a rotten crowd" and that Gatsby is "worth a whole damn bunch put together". Nick is the only friend that showed up at Gatsby's funeral. He is an alienated character, and necessarily so as Fitzgerald wanted to distance Nick from the rest of the characters and through his first-person narrative voice to pass on criticism to the societal ills. He feels the truth! It's a moral difference!

In Albert Camus' The Outsider, the construction of an alienated character is relatively clearer. This character is the protagonist Meursault. As the title suggests, he is an outsider in society. Set in French Algeria, this novel depicts Meursault as a *pieu noir* – someone who is born and bred in the French colony in Africa but is of French descent. This characterization

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of Meursault is autobiographical and from here, a sense of alienation of the character is established, as he cannot reconcile with this identity of his. Meursault does not identify himself with the native Arabs, as shown by his conflict with an Arab and the subsequent murder of him. However, he cannot find connection with the French mainlanders either. He is very sensitive to the "Parisian accent" of Masson's wife. In the social context of colonialism, Meursault could not reconcile with his identity and in that aspect he is alienate in the cultural and social setting.

The sense of alienation of Meursault is most effectively demonstrated by his detached, often clinical tone through his first person narrative voice. Throughout the novel, Meursault remained a passive observer of the goings-on around him. He himself rarely registers or expresses any emotions, but is always analyzing everyone's every move. For example, during his mother's vigil, Meursault does not show any emotion towards his mother's death but instead notices that "some of the old people were sucking at the insides of their mouths." His internal monologue to himself is also written out by Camus, such as "I knew how much I'd have enjoyed going for a walk if it hadn't been for mother." The tone shown in the novel is cold, analytical and clinical, devoid of all emotions and filled with logical reasoning. It helps to establish Meursault as a detached figure from society, as he refuses to conform to social norms. He does not cry at his mother's funeral and he does not understand people's (such as Celeste and the warden) attempt to offer condolences. In Camus' own afterword, Meursault "refuses to play the game...and refuses to hide his feelings and society immediately feels threatened". For such reason he is alienated by society and subsequently tried for the murder of the Arab based on his refusal to "hide his feelings".

His alienation stems from another source, which is his atheism. When he is sentenced to death at court, his response to the chaplain's faith is that "I didn't want to waste it [his time] on God." His blunt rejection of religion is deep-rooted in his belief in the realist world. "I was sure of myself, sure of everything, surer than he was, sure of my life and sure of the death that was coming to me." The repetition of the word "sure" and the almost asyndetic listing shows that his belief is grounded in realism and he rejects all that is spiritual; or "irrational" as he calls it. Given the social context, it surly made Meursault a pariah because Christianity was the social norm among the Europeans at the time. Along with other social norms, such as showing sorrow at one's mother's funeral, Meursault rejects them all.

The reason for the characterization of Meursault is to bring out the philosophical belief of Albert Camus, which is absurdism. The idea of the absurd is the irreconcilable conflict between man's desire for significance of life and the cold indifference of the universe around him. Through the depiction of Meursault as the "outsider", alienated and shunned by society, Camus built up Meursault as a symbol of "revolt" against the man's futile attempt to make meaning of life. This idea of "revolt" is one of Camus' proposed solutions to the absurd stipulated in his Myth of Sisyphus (1943). The rejection of religion is also included in the idea of "revolt" as Camus saw it as a philosophical suicide. In the end, the only solution to Camus is recognition: to admit and acknowledge the conflict with the universe and be content. Meursault, near the end of his life, being forced to the cliff of death, expresses such an embrace of the "benign indifference of the universe" and identifies himself with it. Hence, such an alienated character effectively conveyed Camus' philosophical belief.

To conclude, both The Great Gatsby and The Outsider successfully established alienated characters to convey the author's message to the world. Their messages ranged from the critique of societal and cultural ills to their personal philosophical arguments. It is through these alienated characters that the messages are conveyed in an honest and effective manner.