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(Timelessness)

Literary works that have influenced audiences beyond their immediate cultural and temporal context seem to do so because of important messages that they convey which abide beyond their era. The Great Gatsby (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald and The Outsider (1942) by Albert Camus were written in the twentieth century but continue to be influential and instructive to the present day. This essay will attempt to elucidate the idea that it is their exploration of universal, timeless ideas of society and the human condition that have made them transcend their individual historical context and achieve significance as seminal works. In The Outsider, Camus points out the absurdity of life, mankind's tendency to impose rationality on an irrational world and society's rejection of the eponymous outsider in the midst. In Gatsby, Fitzgerald uncovers man's inclination for hope and its corruption, and mankind's propensity for moral decay.

In The Outsider, Camus explores and espouses the idea of absurdism, which is the belief that life is ultimately meaningless and that men's search for meaning is in the end futile. His insights were influenced by his own experiences: his father died during World War I when he was a year old and he too nearly died of tuberculosis; His personal experience with the brevity of life and the inevitability of death is reflected in his construction of Meursault, the protagonist, who effectively acts as Camus mouthpiece. In Chapter 5 of Part 2, Meursault affirms to the chaplain that he believed he is to "die outright". In the climatic outpouring of "joy and anger" at the chaplain, he also asserts that death is the only certainty that he had and in the end, "nothing mattered". This is a reiteration of his sentiments about marriage and his mother's death-"nothing mattered". When his boss offered him a posting to Paris citing the ambitions of a typical young man, Meursault declines with the belief that "one life was as good as another". Through Meursault, Camus points out the existential notion, that existence does not necessarily have meaning, and men often try to ascribe meaning to what is in fact meaningless. In fact, Camus suggests that it was coming to terms with the "benign indifference of the world"- its innocuous meaninglessness- that would allow one to be truly happy as Meursault was before his execution. Existential philosophy of which absurdism is a subset, has occupied the minds of men since the Frederic Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre and remain relevant to us today as each individual continuously seeks to understand life. Hence, Camus exploration of this idea makes his work outlast his era and influence the development of subsequent philosophical thoughts.

Camus also points out that mankind's propensity to impose rationality on an irrational world, in its quest for truth and meaning. In Chapter 1 of Part 2, the examining magistrate repeatedly asked why Meursault shot the Arab four times, seeking a rational justification for what seemed to be an outburst of hatred and passion; Meursault conversely, wanted to point out that he was wrong to insist on that last point about number of shots. Here, the rational flounders and struggles when it is juxtaposed with the completely irrational. In Chapter 4 of the same part, the prosecutor strives to portray Meursault as a "heartless criminal" by insisting on the "tragic and vital relationship" between his lack of grief at his mother's funeral and the murder of the Arab. He points out Meursault's indifference and ignorance of his mother's age, and how he smoked and drank white coffee besides his mother's body. He seeks to

condemn Meursault based on his disconnected and unconventional life, using it as the grounds to rationalise that his murder was premeditated and he was an “immoral monster”. The irony is that the courtroom fails to realise the fact that the murder was in fact irrational. In fact, when Meursault stood up to explain that it was the sun that compelled his murder of the Arab, the “public laughed”. Through these episodes, Meursault outlines the way people have elevated reason to a higher place than it ought to have, or trust their own reasoning more than they should. Such assertion has implications for society and the way we think even now, and is indeed a salient truth that abides beyond the details of the novella.

Finally, Camus points out society’s rejection of the outsider. While Meursault represents the belief in absurdity and reconciliation, with the reality of irrationality, other characters represent what is antithetical. The examining magistrate brandishing the “silver crucifix” in an impassioned attempt to proselytise Meursault was threatened by the latter’s indifference and unbelief. It became a matter of personal sense of security as the magistrate asked “do you want my life to be meaningless?” That Meursault does not [weep] at this symbol of suffering strikes fear in the magistrate as his beliefs are shaken by an anomalous encounter. The prosecutor likewise condemns Meursault for his non-conformity to the “fundamental rule of society” and his divergence from “basic human reactions” such as in his sexual encounter with Marie and his watching of a Fernandel film the day after his mother’s funeral. He sees Meursault as having a “heart so empty it forms a chasm that threatens to engulf society”. Evidently, it is the fear of a person who thinks and behaves differently –an outcast- that drives Meursault’s trial, rather than a factual judgment of his crime. Indeed, in Chapter 3 of part 2, when Meursault first enters the courtroom, he compares the jury to anonymous passengers on a tram who were finding peculiarities in the new arrival. Camus thus perspicuously suggests that what society condemns is ‘peculiarity’ rather than ‘criminality’. The courtroom, as a microscopic symbol of the macrocosm of society thus shows the intolerance of society, which remains pertinent till today in understanding and shaping the development of human society. The Outsider thus succeeds in achieving a timeless importance.

In Gatsby, Fitzgerald likewise delves into timeless ideas of the human condition and society. First of all, he points out humanity’s inclination for hope. Gatsby is described as having a “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” and a pursuit of the “orgastic future”. It is this capacity to dream- the belief in the “unreality of reality” and that reality is founded on a “fairy’s wing” that propels him to seek wealth and the hand of Daisy Fae. The ability to hope is seen even in George Wilson, who constantly asks about Tom Buchanan’s interest in selling his car, in the hope of making some money. Upon discovering that Myrtle had a “life apart from him” in Chapter VII, he wanted all the more to secure the transaction and move elsewhere to lead a happier life. This hope in the future and “romantic readiness” about the possibilities of life thus permeate the novel. Through his description of the universal capacity to dream, Fitzgerald thereby elucidates an integral trait of humanity which transcends America in the 1920s.

Secondly, Gatsby also demonstrates the corruption of these same dreams. The American Dream is the belief that anyone in society can achieve wealth and social advancement through hard work and determination. Taking away the label, this is in fact quite a common aspiration and ideal in every

society. However, Fitzgerald shows the corruption of the American Dream, from its original ideals of progress for humanity and betterment of society to a selfish pursuit of material wealth and social status. The “foul dust that floated in the wake of [Gatsby’s] dreams” was perhaps the tragedy of focusing his “incorruptible dream” on the wrong person- Daisy Fay. The “colossal vitality of his illusion” which “went beyond her” blinded him to the carelessness and imperfection of the woman he pursued, ultimately leading to the inevitable tragedy. In addition, Gatsby settled for unmoral means of encompassing wealth. The phone calls that interrupt his parties, be it from Philadelphia or Chicago, remind us of his corruption. He was willing to deal with the underworld and “sold grain alcohol over the counter” to achieve this perverse and almost unrecognizable American Dream. Similarly, Myrtle Wilson, in her bid to climb the social ladder, has no qualms about being a mistress to Tom Buchanan, if only to elevate herself away from a man who was “beneath her”. (Should better explain) Here, we see the loss of the pure spirit of the American Dream and the unscrupulous means that society is willing to stoop in order to achieve personal advancement. As a diagnosis of human fallibility and depravity, Gatsby achieves timeless significance.

Gatsby also points out society’s continual tendency to exploit the defenceless and stifle those of lower social class. Dan Cody, Gatsby’s millionaire mentor who brought the “violence of the Eastern brothel to his yacht” is a conceptual amalgamation of Daniel Boone and Bill Cody, pioneers who exploited the native Americans. That this connection should be made as an inspiration of Gatsby’s rise to wealth is telling of the man’s cruelty and exploitation. Tom Buchanan likewise consistently condescends to and bullies George Wilson, not only having an affair with his wife, but also threatening to withhold the car from him. Besides outright oppression of the lower class, we also see the more insidious reinforcements of barriers to social advancement. This is seen in the contrast between the nouveau riche and the “old rich”. The aristocratic Mr Sloane, the woman in the brown riding-habit and Tom Buchannan can be seen to subtly condescend to Gatsby in Chapter VI, for they do not see him as their equal. While similar in superficial ways- in wealth and possessions- Gatsby lacks the sophistication and shrewdness to realize as Tom points out that the woman “doesn’t want him to come” to her dinner party. Gatsby’s nativity and eagerness to come is all the more poignant, as they leave him behind before he gets ready. This is symbolic of the inability of the lower class to ever attain equality with the aristocratic upper class. Again, when Tom and Daisy visit Gatsby’s party in the same chapter, Daisy is “offended” and “appalled” by the West Egg- its “raw vigor” and “awful simplicity she failed to understand”. The disparity between them and the West Egg shows the extent of social stratification. As social classes occur to a certain extent in every society, Gatsby succeeds as perhaps the supreme American novel in transcending time.

In conclusion, both The Outsider and Gatsby are important timeless works due to their salient exploration of universal themes that govern society and the human condition. (May want to touch up conclusion!)