

HL Language Literature Holiday homework ended 2015/2016

Your answer should address the ways in which language and context contribute to your reading of each work.

"I disavow any essential connection between my life and what I write." Is this a credible view for writers of literature you have studied?

The claim of disconnection between the written novels The Great Gatsby and Wide Sargasso Sea and their respective authors F. Scott Fitzgerald and Jean Rhys cannot be valid. The personal history and views of the writers did affect the development of the events, themes and characters in each novel. Voices of both authors are distinctly represented in both novels. In Gatsby, Fitzgerald may be said to be represented by the narrator, Nick Caraway. Through Nick, Fitzgerald satirizes the glamour and excess of the Roaring twenties. As for Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys' feminist views influence her works in criticizing the British empire and patriarchal society. Being a creole herself, Rhys understands the struggles faced by the alienated. As such, Wide Sargasso Sea is a novel that projects racial tension through the eyes of the seemingly inferior; a voice, Rhys' voice, that speaks out for the silenced. Semblances of Rhys may also be found in the female protagonist Antoinette. As such, personal views and history of the writers are unable to be completely divorced from the content of their writings. Hence, it cannot be credible that the lives of Fitzgerald and Jean Rhys had not influenced their novels.

In The Great Gatsby, the era of the Roaring Twenties that Fitzgerald lived in sets the Historical (?) context of Gatsby. Fitzgerald was surrounded by the excess of the era, he survived WWI and he functioned under the societal expectations and boundaries of the era. As such, Gatsby is a portrayal of the society that Fitzgerald lives in. Living in the post WWI period, Fitzgerald enjoyed the extravagance that society had offer. As such, in Gatsby, he celebrates the glitter and glamour of the Jazz Age through the lavish parties in the novel. However, as the plot develops, the excess and degradation of the lost generation is brought to light, revealing Fitzgerald's contempt and worry towards the purposelessness and fragmentation of society. With the new focus placed on materialism and industrialization, Fitzgerald notes the frivolousness of people in his society (women in particular). In Gatsby, he included the emergence of flappers. "In the 1920s, a new woman was born. She smoked, drank, danced and voted. She cut her hair, wore make up, and went to petting parties. She was giddy and took risks. She was a flapper". Fitzgerald mixes the traits of a frivolous woman with that of materialism to give rise to a Flapper. An ideal flapper, according to Fitzgerald, was described as "lovely, expensive, and about nineteen". Fitzgerald represented this by the many people who went to Gatsby's parties. They were loud, they drank, gossiped, danced, and donned dresses of vibrant colours. These qualities are also prescribed to one of the main characters, Myrtle. Myrtle was a woman with "perceptible vitality" who tried to entangle herself with the matters of the upper class. Her affair with Tom accentuated the frivolousness of society through the formation of random flings and superficial relationships. In her efforts, she indulges in her vanity, changing from one dress to another: "a spotted dress of dark blue crepe-de-chine", to a "brown figure muslin" and finally to "an elaborate afternoon dress of cream-coloured chiffon". The dresses symbolize the material wealth that she desires but cannot obtain. Nick's observations of Myrtle underscore the purposelessness of society as she allows herself to be defined and dictated by the wealth of materials around her. However, Fitzgerald cautions against the shallowness of society by developing the plot of Gatsby to show how frivolous actions will ultimately betray individuals as the characters ultimately suffer from devastating

References:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/jean-rhys-prostitution-alcoholism-and-the-mad-woman-in-the-attic-1676252.html>
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consequences. As such, the novel is a portrayal of society during the roaring twenties with all its extravagance and issues.

Fitzgerald's personal history also played a significant part in the creation of Gatsby. An influencing factor would be Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda Sayre. Zelda was from a well-to-do family, the youngest daughter of the judge of the supreme court. As much as the two fell in love, she was unwilling to fully commit to Fitzgerald who was then just a budding young writer whose success was a complete gamble. Fitzgerald forms a connection between his life and his writing through creating a parallel between his romantic interest and that of Daisy and Gatsby. Daisy, while she loved Gatsby, refused to wait for him and set off to find more promising men who could fulfill her financially. It was only after Gatsby became part of the Nouveau riche, that she reunited with him (temporarily) and professed her love for him. Likewise, Zelda broke off her flimsy engagement with Fitzgerald as she refused to live on his small salary until he became rich and famous upon publishing *This Side of Paradise*. Through the dependence of relationships on status and wealth in Gatsby, Fitzgerald highlighted the materialism of society which plagued his personal relationship with Zelda. The foundation of both relationships are set on money and sustained by money. As such, their relationship was to some extent, built on superficiality rather than love. This mirrored the materialism of society that Fitzgerald observed as increasing emphasis were placed on wealth and fame. Both Zelda and Daisy maintained their relationship with their lovers, not out of love alone, but also out of their love for money. As Gatsby said "her voice is full of money". However, the relationship between Gatsby and Daisy is even more tragic as Daisy leaves him a second time for the aristocrat, Tom. This accentuates the social stratification in society. Where it was near impossible to bridge across the different social classes. Fitzgerald implied that Gatsby himself was a miracle "even Gatsby could happen". This stemmed from the journey of Fitzgerald's career where he often struggled for money, falling in and out of the Nouveau Riche category.

Fitzgerald was also known to be a misogynist. This could have influenced his development of female characters in The Great Gatsby. The three main female characters in the novel: Jordan, Daisy and Myrtle are all bound by societal expectations. Myrtle and Daisy suffer at the hands of Tom Buchanan. Yet, the both of them still cling to him as they depend on him for a living. The two women disregard their sense of self to please Tom Buchanan. Even as Tom "broke her nose with his open hand", Myrtle could do nothing but weep. Daisy also keeps mum about his scandalous affair. The women in the novels are also given a shallow depth of character. Daisy is ultimately what her name suggests: a flower, superficial beauty that is fleeting. she is only valued at the surface of her being, not for her values or personality. This is because she allows herself to be shaped by money. She is unable to stand for love under the pressure of a confrontation. "She hesitated" and proclaimed that she did not love Tom with "perceptible reluctance". This diminishes the meaning of words especially when she tries to backtrack and proclaims she loves them both. Torn between love and societal status, she is unable to make decisions for herself. Rather, she lets herself be controlled by those in power. Like a flower, she wilts away in the heat of the confrontation. Hence, Daisy is a character who lacks independence and as such, is unable to develop depth of character such as principles and purpose. Similarly, Myrtle chases after superficiality. As if the wild goose chase isn't enough, she also dies violently in an accident after being locked up by her husband. Even Jordan who got away with almost anything (being an aristocrat), still had to get engaged as it was expected of a woman in that era to get married and settle down. As such, Jordan will also eventually be tied down to

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her husband. Fitzgerald can be said to be constantly putting down women in novel, accentuating his misogynist attitude despite the emancipation of women under the 19th amendment act.

As in Wide Sargasso Sea, the female protagonist Antoinette is similar Jean Rhys. Rhys parallels her childhood and subsequent parts of her life in the development of Antoinette. As a child, Rhys constantly searched for the love of her mother but was rejected and neglected. Just like Annette who “pushed me[Antoinette] away”, Rhys’ mother neglected her as well. As such, both Rhys and Antoinette spent their childhoods alone. This cultivated their need to find a person to accept and care for them. As such, Rhys developed a need for men in her life – one after the other even after her 3 failed marriages. Rhys depended heavily on the men around her, even resorting to prostitution after her first failed marriage to support herself. Rhys constantly felt abandoned (as she was) yet she was also constantly searching for a man to enter her life and finally make it alright. As did Antoinette, who craved Rochester to love her. Like Rhys, she believed that a man in her life could love her and put her back together again. Rhys’ quality of a hopeless romantic is mirrored in Antoinette despite her destructive relationship with Rochester. Even as Rochester shuns her, she begs Christophine to help her get him back. Rhys’ habit of being dependent on her male counterpart is accentuated as a tragic quality of neediness in Antoinette as she is ultimately destroyed by the man that she clung on to. In a way, Rhys’ success as an author also depended on a man. It was her lover Ford Madox Ford, a French writer, who taught her how to pen down her experiences into literary works for publishing. If not for Ford, Rhys may have never published at all. The inability of Rhys’ independence as a woman as well as her insecure nature from an invisible childhood leaks into the development of character Antoinette to be somewhat similar to Rhys’ toxic dependence.

Rhys was a feminist and her thoughts largely shaped the writing of Wide Sargasso Sea. Rhys’ writing was a voiced for the silenced, be it for the women of society or the creoles or both. The English, represented by Rochester, are portrayed in a negative light. Rochester subjugates Antoinette such that she has to become fully dependent on him. In addition, Antoinette’s dreams depict the power that Rochester holds over her. His face was “black with hatred” yet Antoinette “follows him” despite being “sick with fear”, making “no effort to save herself”. She has no idea where she is going yet she follows him without complaint. The use of the colour black suggests the racial tension that plagues Antoinette. Her “white and beautiful” dress “trails in the dirt”. Antoinette’s white dress represents her innocence and sexual purity but as she follows Rochester, her dress becomes dirty. This represents how Rochester taints her sexual purity. As her husband, Rochester treats Antoinette as his property, his own little “marionette”. As such, Rhys’ uses the cruelty of Antoinette to highlight the unfairness of a male-dominated society. In addition to the subjugation of women, Rhys being creole is able write Wide Sargasso Sea through the perspective of the alienated. Rhys had always wanted to be an actor but had to quit drama school because she had a “funny west indies accent”. Her racial and cultural differences set her apart from the other English girls. This racial discrimination is carried over to the distinction between Bertha and character foil Jane Eyre. Bertha is portrayed as a mad ballistic, violent creole while Jane exudes sweetness, innocence and purity. This serves to highlight the racial discrimination Rhys wished to address. Moreover, the racial tension is also evident in Wide Sargasso Sea as Antoinette struggles against the blacks and her own husband who is white. Antoinette is isolated and targeted for the ‘impure’ nature of her blood and identity. Rhys, having the perspective of the oppressed Creole, breaks the common stereotype of the English as portrayed in Bronte’s Jane Eyre. Bronte describes Rochester as a true English gentleman who is chivalrous and aggressive. He is responsible and is distressed because of his kind heart

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that does not allow him to abandon his mad creole wife in the attic. However, in Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys breaks tradition and writes about a different side to the British. She portrays them as ruthless and scheming colonizers who conquer and destroy, as he did to Antoinette and her home. Instead of a chivalrous gentleman, Rochester is made to be somewhat a control freak, who wishes to dominate and destroy Antoinette. As such, Rhys attributes Antoinette's loss of sanity to Rochester, and a cruel man who exacerbates it by locking her in an attic. This differs from Charlotte Bronte's turn of events who slights the creoles as an undeveloped and ignored character. Rhys provided a voice to the silenced, one too often drowned out as of that in Bronte's novel with only the voices of the whites being heard. As such, in Wide Sargasso Sea, the whites are placed on a pedestal that looks down on all the other races. The whites seem almost tyrannical as Rochester brutally pushes Antoinette into Madness. He "watched her die many times" as he ruined her financially, physically, emotionally and mentally. Rhys disdain towards white oppressors largely influenced the novel to veer towards being a voiced for the alienated Other. In addition, her novel criticizes the racial tension caused by the fiction of the empire, thereby biting back against the whites.

Therefore, both the lives of both authors shape the writings of their respective novels.

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