

5 July 2013

Y6 Language and Literature

5. Compare the ways that the treatment of time has been used to shape meaning in two works you have studied.

One of the functions of great literature is the exploration of themes that are universal to Humankind. One such theme that is explored in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F Scott Fitzgerald and *the Outsider* (1942) by Albert Camus is the trapping of Man within the boundaries of Time. There exist primarily two ways to deal with this dilemma: we can either resist the passage of time, or accept it.

Through the first person narration of Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby, the protagonist of *The Great Gatsby*, is shown in his attempt to establish some sort of control over the influence of time in his life, which ultimately results in his untimely death. Gatsby's treatment of time is a tragedy in that he wishes to escape his history as James Gatz, yet simultaneously desires to relive the past in his blind pursuit of Daisy Buchanan and what she stands for – the actualization of the American dream.

In contrast, Mersault is a nihilistic individual, and by the end of *The Outsider*, Mersault makes peace with time by accepting the inevitability and certainty of death.

However, although Gatsby and Mersault seem like polar opposites, the fundamental message communicated through both novels is largely similar. By Gatsby's demise, caused by his unwillingness to accept time's indelible influence, as well as Mersault's execution by the society that cannot understand his coming to terms with the end of life in time, Fitzgerald and Camus demonstrate the danger and meaninglessness of resisting the passage of time.

Firstly, before the beginning of the novel itself, Gatsby reinvented himself from James Gatz at the age of 17, which is revealed in chapter 6. In the words of Nick Carraway, "the truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself." James Gatz was born to "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people" in North Dakota, and for over a year he was "a clam digger and a salmon fisher". However, under the influence of Dan Cody, a fifty-year old millionaire he met at Lake Superior, James Gatz changed his name to Jay Gatsby and moved to New York. He rewrites his past, telling Carraway in chapter 4 that he was educated at Oxford and that he fought in the war and received a medal from it, although in truth he attended the institution called "St Olaf's" in Southern Minnesota, paying his way through as a janitor and despising it thoroughly. This shows how Gatsby has tried to escape his past.

At the same time, Gatsby also tries to return to the past. Fitzgerald has employed a myriad of symbols in his novel to reflect Gatsby's conscious opposition of present conditions. For instance, in chapter 5 of the *Great Gatsby*, before Daisy and Gatsby were to meet again for the first time in the novel, Gatsby wants Nick Carraway to get

Y is relation
to time?
Life = limited
time?
Sundays =
too much
- time?
meaningful
to life?

the grass cut, a reversal of the growth process that is a metaphor for time itself. Gatsby wishes to erase the time that he has spent apart from Daisy. When they do meet, however, Gatsby, in his nervousness, knocks down a clock, but does not shatter it: the clock "tilt(ed) dangerously at the pressure of (Gatsby's) head" but he catches it and puts it back. This lends itself to the theme of appearance versus reality. Although Gatsby may have seemed to successfully turn back time, he is unable to, because it is impossible, and the awkwardness of Gatsby's first meeting with Daisy reflects the brokenness of their relationship. By knocking down the clock, Gatsby has symbolized the clumsiness of his attempt to stop time and retrieve the past. However, he continues to try, no matter how foolish this act may have been. In chapter 6, Carraway narrates, "'Can't repeat the past?'" (Gatsby) cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!" Another symbol of Gatsby's resistance to time is his swimming pool, which he only uses in chapter 8 of the novel, at the end of summer, and in which he is killed by George Wilson. Gatsby's death takes place on the first day of autumn, when a chill has begun to creep into the air. His decision to use his pool is a defiance of the change of seasons. The summer is, for him, equivalent to his reunion with Daisy; the end of the summer heralds the end of their romance. Up to the moment of his death, Gatsby cannot accept that his dream is over: he continues to insist that Daisy may still come to him, though it is clear to everyone including the reader - that she is bound indissolubly to Tom. Gatsby's death thus seems almost inevitable, brought about by his own blind desire to recreate himself as Jay Gatsby and forever win back his past love, Daisy.

Furthermore, in chapter 7, where Gatsby comes into direct conflict with Tom Buchanan, Daisy's husband, Gatsby insists that Daisy erases her history with Tom in a manifestation of his extreme jealousy and inner rejection of Tom Buchanan's possession of Daisy Buchanan. It is not enough for Gatsby simply to know that Daisy loves him, because he also wants to hear her say that she never loved Tom. He is unable to accept it when she says to him "I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help what's past... I did love him once—but I loved you too." Therefore, in *The Great Gatsby*, symbols are used to characterize Jay Gatsby as someone who is unable to accept time's passing and is destroyed by it.

Next, to understand the treatment of time in *The Outsider*, an understanding of the Absurd in Camus' life view must be established. Camus's absurdism at its core expresses the disharmony and incompatibility between the irrational universe and the human desire for rational order. In other words, Camus believed that Man had a natural inclination to force meaning on things where there was none to be found. This is demonstrated in *The Outsider* through the motif of death, and extension of the irrational universe, which is described at the end of the novel as having a "benign indifference". When faced with the death of his *maman* and of the Arab whom he murders, Mersault is portrayed as an entirely indifferent individual. This is captured from the very beginning of the novel: "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday. I can't be sure." This is because in the grander scheme of the universe, death is wholly insignificant. There is no individual who is so important that his or her death would dictate a cessation of all other life, or that could stop the Earth from spinning on its

waiting for her
class

yes

yes

hence,
the
understanding
to have,

interest
perspective
for
Mersault's
beliefs

axis. Even death on a large scale, such as the Holocaust, may be said to have a minute effect on the incredible vastness of the universe. Although now we mourn the death of those who died under Nazi rule, it does not stop those of us living in the present day from living our own lives. Since death is always timely and inevitable, resisting death is the same as resisting time – both are equally pointless. Mersault himself states that he “could see that it makes little difference whether one dies at the age of thirty or threescore and ten – since, in either case, other men and women will continue living, and the world will go on as before.”

However, in part 2 of the novel, after Mersault's trial results in his execution and Mersault is faced with his own death, he wishes to find a “loophole” to escape death, saying that the thought of it “obsesses” him. In this sense, Mersault embodies the human condition, however briefly. He also says that “another equally ridiculous fancy of mine was to frame new laws, altering the penalties.” The concept of death becomes harder to grasp when it is one's own. Death is where one's very consciousness, as far as we know (in a Godless world) simply ends, just as a television show ends when it is switched off. It is a foregone conclusion, yet it remains an unrealized possibility until some undetermined time in the future. In the end, though, Mersault rejects his own desire for meaning and sees the fault in the nature of the society that has executed him – that they cannot accept death and the passage of time. He says that “all that remained to hope was that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration,” because he wants to be the antithesis of what he stands for, which reflects Camus' solution to the Absurd: to accept it, and embrace it. Therefore, in the Outsider, time has been treated as a friend, and not an enemy.

same of time?

interesting perspective

In conclusion, the Great Gatsby and the Outsider are two great literary works which employ different means to create similar meanings: whether we like it or not, Time is a facet of life that cannot be ignored or removed. To live a full life, one must accept this fact and move with it.

→ subjective + contextual interpretation of time?

- A: 5 detailed & apt references to both works → although
- B: 5 close adherence to Qs & expectations
- C: 4 expls & symbols → good!
- D: 4
- E: 4

Context is hardly mentioned!

21