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(Contrast)

Contrast is a key stylistic feature in literary works where the differences between two elements are highlighted. It is thus not uncommon to find pairs of characters or settings that are juxtaposed for the sake of emphasising their contradictory or antithetical characteristics. The Great Gatsby (1925) and The Outsider (1942), F. Scott Fitzgerald and Albert Camus respectively make salient use of contrast to communicate and elucidate their central messages. Camus develops a stark contrast between the protagonist Meursault and other characters, as well as between different settings to convey the notions of the absurdity of life, man's tendency to impose the rational on the irrational and society's rejection of the outsider. Fitzgerald similarly strives to highlight differences in setting and characterisation to communicate ideas about the corruption of the American Dream and the tragedy of social stratification in 1920s America.

In The Outsider, Meursault makes a very interesting contrast in setting to illustrate his point about the absurdity of life. With the events of the novella set in French Algeria, where Meursault himself was a pied noir, or someone of French decent born in Algeria, Meursault is confronted with the disharmony and hostility of the universe represented by heat and light. In Chapter 1 of Part 1, the physical discomfort of Meursault is consistently emphasised during the events surrounding his mother's funeral and the night vigil. Meursault laments the "glaring heat reflected off the road" on the way to the nursing home; in the vigil, he speaks of the "blinding light" in the room; and during the funeral processions, he reiterates the punishing heat and his throbbing temples. Building up to the climax of the novella, in Chapter 6 of Part 1, Meursault experiences "the same sun as the day of Mother's funeral", with "sheets of blinding rain" and the overwhelming sensory assault of the sunlight leaping off the Arab's knife "like a spear". This description of heat, with hyperbole and the violent imagery of a "spear", perspicuously communicates the hostility of nature and the universe towards Meursault, who as yet has not come to terms with the fact that rationality and meaning cannot be imposed on an existence that is fundamentally irrational and meaningless. Camus' attempt to communicate ideas of absurdism is only consummated when he shows the contrast in setting when Meursault finally embraces the meaninglessness of life. The night before his execution in Chapter 5 of Part 2, Meursault describes how the night air "cooled [his] temples with the smell of salt and earth" and a "wondrous peace" was experienced, in sharp contradiction to the tension and distress portrayed at his mother's funeral and at the scene of the murder. Indeed Camus effectively shows that we can only find peace when we do not deny the absurdity of life but embrace it, when he likens it to a "melancholy trance" with "the benign indifference of the world" This contrast in setting – between the discomforting and the soothing – therefore aids Camus in convincing readers of his notion of absurdism.

Camus does not only limit this contrast to setting but also juxtaposes Meursault with other characters of conflicting beliefs to demonstrate men's tendency to impose the rationality on the irrational. In his interaction with the examining magistrate in Chapter 1 of Part 2, we see Meursault being questioned persistently on why he shot the dead Arab four more times. Meursault expresses his desire to "tell him he was wrong to insist on this last point". Here, the rationality of men represented by

the legal system, flounders and is disoriented in the face of what is irrational. This contrast between Meursault's piece with the irrational and the insistent rationality of society at large is amplified in the person of the prosecutor in Chapter 3 of Part 2. The prosecutor strives to rationalize Meursault's crime as a premeditated act of cold-blooded murder by pointing out Meursault's disconnected and unconventional way of life. We see Meursault indicted for smoking and drinking white coffee besides his mother's body along with being ignorant of his mother's age. The prosecutor uses the fact that he watched a Fernandel film and had sexual liaison with Marie the day after the funeral to prove that Meursault was an unfeeling and "immoral monster". We feel sympathy for Meursault that he is ultimately condemned not for his crime but for his unconventional life. Indeed, "some people laughed" when Meursault explained that he did not intend to murder the Arab but was compelled to do so by the sun. The contrast between the rationality of man and the irrationality of reality serves Camus' point that man tends to elevate reason to a higher status than it ought to have. Contrast therefore brings across his point that we must come to terms with the irrationality of existence.

Further contrast between Meursault and other characters demonstrates society's fear and rejection of the outsider. In Chapter 1 of Part 2, the examining magistrate brandishes a "silver crucifix" and becomes increasingly agitated that he did not "[weep] at this symbol of suffering". What should have been a professional and impersonal examination instead becomes an issue of personal insecurity, as the examining magistrate is threatened by Meursault's unbelief. He insists that "all men believe in God" and Meursault's indifference was an affront to his own sense of meaning. This is encapsulated in the rhetorical question "Do you want my life to be meaningless?". In Chapter 4 of Part 2, the contrast between Meursault and the prosecutor reinforces the idea of society's fear of one who thinks differently. The prosecutor condemns Meursault as being ignorant of the "basic human reactions" and "fundamental laws of society". His "empty" soul is likened a "chasm that threatens to engulf society". It soon becomes apparent that Meursault is condemned not for his 'criminality' but for his 'peculiarities'. The contrast between Meursault's atheism and the defiance of social norms and the beliefs of other characters therefore clearly convey Camus' message that society is fundamentally afraid of the anomaly-one who thinks and believes differently.

In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald likewise succeeds in communicating his central ideas by contrasting characters. Set in the Roaring Twenties, the events of Gatsby occur in a milieu where the American Dream was still a popular belief: That anyone could achieve social-economic advancement and high station in life through hard work, regardless of their background. Fitzgerald points out that the original idea of the American Dream had been corrupted in 1920s America and that upward social mobility was in fact a lie. This is made evident by contrasting Jay Gatsby, the titular character, against Tom Buchanan. Jay Gatsby, described as a "self-made man" represents the nouveau riche who had acquired their wealth during their lifetime through their own efforts. Conversely, Tom Buchanan represents the 'old rich' who were "enormously wealthy" by virtue of their lineage. Their different fates at the end of the main conflict of the novel illustrate Fitzgerald's opinion of social immobility. Gatsby "broke up like glass against Tom's hard malice" after the climatic confrontation in Chapter VII. He took the blame for Daisy's inadvertent killing of Myrtle Wilson and is subsequently murdered by George Wilson. In stark contrast, Tom Buchanan emerges unscathed – in fact, he appears to be "conspiring

together” with Daisy immediately after the Plaza Hotel confrontation in chapter VII and they ultimately “retreat back into their vast carelessness or vast money” after “smashing up things and creatures”. Fitzgerald expresses his pity for those who believe in a version of the American Dream with naivety, and conveys a thinly veiled disdain for the impunity of the upper class through this contrast.

Fitzgerald also utilizes contrast in setting to bring out the tragedy of social stratification. The geographical setting of the East Egg and West Egg shows the reproachful disparity between the aristocratic upper class and the nouveau riche. The East Egg and West Egg are “dissimilar in every particular except shape and size”. East Egg is described as “fashionable” with “white palaces” that “glittered along the water”. The use of colour imagery in “white palaces” complements the idea of royalty with an impression of purity and sophistication. The word “glittered” imparts a magical, attractive quality to the East Egg which is therefore seen as an exclusive enclave of the culture and wealthy. Conversely, the West Egg is “less fashionable” and Gatsby’s home is dismissed as a “factual imitation of the some Hotel de Ville”. This being described from the point of view of Nick Carraway, himself from a ‘well-to-do’ Mid-Western family, we see that while the nouveau riche are superficially equal to the upper class in wealth, their sophistication was not genuine. Fitzgerald, hints at the fundamental disparity that could not be changed even with the acquisition of wealth. In the East Egg, the atmosphere is idyllic, with the evening being “casually put away” when Nick visits the Buchanans. By contrast, the evening is “hurried from phase to phase in a continually disappointed anticipation” or “sheer nervous dread” in the West Egg. West Egg’s “spectroscopic gaiety” cannot conceal the underlying lack of class and heritage of the nouveau rich which is juxtaposed with the “staid nobility” and “distinguished homogeneity” of East Egg in Chapter III. This striking difference illustrates Fitzgerald’s that the glass ceiling of social class can never be broken- part of the tragedy of social stratification.

Additionally, the colourlessness of the Valley of Ashes is contrasted with the vibrancy of the West Egg to highlight the expediency of society in overlooking the poor while pursuing their own gratuitous lifestyles of decadence. The Valley of Ashes is described as a “fantastic farm where ash grows like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens” with “ash-grey men” whose lives are “obscured” from the sight of the common men by “spasms of dust”. Repeated emphasis of the colour “grey” builds a strong contrast with the “blue gardens” and “spectroscopic gaiety” of West Egg, showing not only the tremendous inequality of society but also the tragic lack of vibrancy and joy in the lives of the poor when society at large pursues its own decadent, self-serving version of the American Dream. This contrast thus emphasizes Fitzgerald’s criticism of social stratification.

In conclusion, both Camus and Fitzgerald make salient use of contrast as a literary device to effectively elucidate and communicate the central themes in their works. In both Gatsby and The Outsider, striking contrasts between characters and settings make these authors’ central messages memorable and compelling by means of antithesis.

