

Alienation in Colour and Narrative: An Existentialist Reading of Nick Carraway in The Great Gatsby

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Abstract: In this paper, the author attempts to explain the concept of alienation by point out the colour grey and how it has been used in the novel and how the narrative of the novel portrays the alienated, pessimistic and gloomy picture of the world. The narrator of the novel is Nick Carraway and this paper focuses on his narrative and describes his character in how he has used the grey colour and his voice as if he a prophet of pessimism and alienation.

Key Words: Alienation, Crisis, Pessimism, and Culture.

Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is an epitome for analysing and describing alienation isolation that one faces in the real world tacitly, inside, and silently. The word isolation is typically linked with total separation from society, but the characters in this book are not separated from society but from reality. The characters in the novel possess huge wealth that makes feel that they possess invincibility and nothing seems to intimidate or disturb their false perception of the world that they live in. They are full with greed, insatiability and self indulgence because they are never faced with reality and for them anything goes, and they never stop wanting more.

View of Critics

Laura Rattray writes in *Edith Wharton in Context*, “In Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), for example, characters oscillate pointlessly from New York to Long Island via the glorious convenience of automobiles” (267) Similarly, Ruth Prigozy writes in the introduction of this novel, he explains the historical context of the novel:

Rapid change and growth created in many Americans a sense alienation as the old values died; even personal identity might be lost or found through the eyes of those who perceived even the slightest shift in one’s wealth or social status. (xvi)

Similarly, Virgin Lee writes in her commentary on *The Great Gatsby*, “The valley of ashes (p.26) offers the most potent symbol of despair and alienation in the novel. The landscape is dead; the people who dwell there are ghosts” (54).

Grey Colour in the Novel

The idea of isolation and alienation is present from the beginning of the novel if read with concentration, we find alienation in *The Great Gatsby* from the very start. There are many illustrations where the book hints at loneliness or despair. This is mostly by the employment of such words which create alienation effect on the readers as well as the characters also portray an alienated attitude towards the world. The word choices are very appealing and even non-living substances appear to have sadness about them. The characters each have a touch about them which hints at seclusion from the words that they use, their reactions to life, and even the way they carry themselves.

The first analysis can be done by looking at the words used in the novel especially colours in the whole book. The ‘grey’ colour for example is used many times which includes:

1. “ash” (26) and
2. “cement” (29)

Both ‘ash’ and ‘cement’ are shades of gray or representative of a shade of grey which also refers to loneliness. Gray indicates a melancholy tone within the text. Some of the things that are mentioned as being gray are:

3. “Grey upholstery” (30),
4. a “Grey old man” (27),
5. “Grey little villages in France” (52),
6. “Grey cars” (26),

7. "Grey land" (26),
8. "Grey sun-strained eyes" (14),
9. "Grey land and the spasms of bleak dust" (26).
10. "Grey names" (66)
11. "Grey windows" (101).
12. "Grey haze" (116).
13. "Grey tea hour" (161).
14. "Grey clouds" (170).
15. "Grey beard" (178).

It is as if the narrator, Nick, is seeing the world in shades of gray. By him describing so many things in the world with the colour grey we see his loneliness. We see the world through his eyes, his lonely eyes.

Nick declares his outlook on life to the reader and he says:

I was rather literary in college—one year I wrote a series of very solemn and obvious editorials for the 'Yale News'—and now I was going to bring back all such things into my life and become again that most limited of all specialists, the 'well-rounded man.' This isn't just an epigram—life is much more successfully looked at from a single window, after all. (6)

Pessimistic Narrative of the Novel

The reader, when introduced to Nick, perceives that he has a distorted and twisted view of the world. Luann Suhr writes in "The Theme of Loneliness in The Great Gatsby"

Nick doesn't want to see the whole picture, only a part of it. He doesn't seem to think details and outside factors are important. By saying, "from a... window" this implies that he considers himself an outsider, just a spectator, and not part of anything. This shows that Nick is a very lonely person since he doesn't feel like he's connecting with anybody. He is always on the wrong side of the glass. (para 3)

This isolation is explained by the narrator of the novel, i.e. Nick, when he says:

At the enchanted metropolitan twilight I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others—poor young clerks who loitered in front of windows waiting until it

was time for a solitary restaurant dinner—young clerks in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moments of night and life. (62)

Nick is actually lonely himself and is so alienated from the world that he even feels the loneliness in other people too. It may be the case that Nick is projecting his isolation onto others so he can experience that he is not the only who has experienced this loneliness in the world but there are others who experience the same phenomena. When he is at Gatsby's party, he feels tremendously awkward and restless with being alone. As it is written in *The Great Gatsby*:

As soon as I arrived I made an attempt to find my host but the two or three people of whom I asked his whereabouts stared at me in such an amazed way and denied so vehemently any knowledge of his movements that I slunk off in the direction of the cocktail table—the only place in the garden where a single man could linger without looking purposeless and alone. (46)

Nick wants to hide although he is out in the open. He is such a human being who experiences utter loneliness that he while being with many persons doesn't actually want to be with them. This is seen in the text when he is referring to Jordan Baker. While at the party he informs the reader that:

I was on my way to get roaring drunk from sheer embarrassment when Jordan Baker came out of the house and stood at the head of the marble steps, leaning a little backward and looking with contemptuous interest down into the garden. Welcome or not, I found it necessary to attach myself to someone before I should begin to address cordial remarks to the passers-by. (46)

This informs the readers that Nick will settle and it looks obvious that he has capitulated and he has been crushed by existential questioning of meaning of life and vanity of the aims of those who are around him. This fact can be observed later on in the Novel when Nick evaluates himself to both Gatsby and Tom. He is envious because of the fact that both Gatsby and Tom have someone in their life who is or who gives some meaning to their life, so Nick is trying to deceive himself into thinking he does have someone also who gives meaning to his life, by getting closer to Jordan. Nick says:

We passed a barrier of dark trees, and then the facade of Fifty-Ninth Street, a block of delicate pale light, beamed down into the park. Unlike Gatsby and Tom Buchanan I had no girl whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs and so I drew up the girl besides me, tightening my arms. Her wan, scornful mouth smiled and so I drew her up again, closer, this time to my face. (86)

Nick doesn't have that connection to anyone who can create a meaning in his life, so he tries to act as if by putting up a façade of a connection with Jordan in his mind provisionally by bringing her closer to him physically. He is in need of this familiarity, this relationship, or at least he needs the illusion or false impression of it. He even starts to imagine meeting girls and making them fond of him. He is alone and not sure enough to come near to even one of the women. He is fond of this farce since it keeps him safe from being upset or hurt and he doesn't have to put his superiority or his pride endangered. These invented women in his imagination can never be broken or ruined since they exist only in his mind. They fade away and that is how he feels people are in life, approaching in his life and then disappearing so he is destined to be alone once more. He bears in mind the feeling when he was away from home in West:

They knew that presently dinner would be over and a little later the evening too would be over and casually put away. It was sharply different from the West where an evening was hurried from phase to phase toward its close in a continually disappointed anticipation or else in sheer nervous dread of the moment itself. (15)

Nick never took pleasure from life, he just feared life itself and he is not just a character in the novel but also the narrator, so we perceive his seclusion and alienation from the world in the narrative of his environment. Nick's narrative about a place is an epitome where we can assess the type of his personality and how he looks at the world before him, he says:

This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud which screens their obscure operations from your sight. (26)

These lines are enough to prove that Nick is a pessimist inside his heart and he perceives objects and human beings decaying before anything takes place to indicate a depressing conclusion. The way Nick portray the advertisement of a pair of eyes is as if those eyes are scrutinizing his every move and judging him. He says:

I followed him over a low white-washed railroad fence and we walked back a hundred yards along the road under Doctor Eckleburg's persistent stare. The only building in sight was a small block of yellow brick sitting on the edge of the waste land, a sort of compact Main Street ministering to it and contiguous to absolutely nothing. (27)

This experience makes him nervous and more self-conscious and here we can see that he is in existential crisis, He says about the Doctor what feels inside:

They look out of no face but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground. (27)

Again at the end of party, which was hosted by Gatsby, when everyone is leaving, Nick observes that:

The caterwauling horns had reached a crescendo and I turned away and cut across the lawn toward home. I glanced back once. A wafer of a moon was shining over Gatsby's house, making the night fine as before and surviving the laughter and the sound of his still glowing garden. A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host who stood on the porch, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell. (61).

The guests are leaving and the delusion of enjoyment is no longer visible. Sadness is coming again to both Gatsby and Nick as he senses it as if it had actually made itself apparent.

When we look at Jay Gatsby, the main protagonist of the novel, we see he is eager to do anything to get Daisy's love and marry her, which involuntarily causes harm to other characters of the novel. Tom and Daisy Buchanan all the time desire to increase their wealth

and do not show any regard for others, whoever they are. Daisy appears to be a sweet and foolish lady, but she is constantly manipulating others for her own self. The novel is full Symbols that represent greed, self indulgence and other symbols are also present which are quite opposite to greed and represent an isolated and alien nature of a human being in real world. While Daisy and Gatsby are admiring her home from across the lake, Gatsby observes a green light, as the text of *The Great Gatsby* is quoted:

“If it wasn’t for the mist we could see your home across the bay,” said Gatsby. “You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of dock.” Daisy put her arm through his abruptly, but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. (74)

Here we may feel passionate about and may feel she is honest but her greed and selfishness is not exposed until much later in the novel which will ultimately cause the death of Myrtle. Nick’s innocence fades after being in contact with these people because Nick is evolving inside as he is also narrating and watching the world before him.

Gatsby’s isolation is quite different from the rest of the characters in the novel. He is isolated in a social context, even though hundreds of famous people surround him. This declaration may look contradicting itself, but it is to be remembered that there is not a single person from those people which may be called as his true friends. His sophisticated parties are full of strangers and even though he is polite and a good host, but he is only in search of one person that he loves, i.e., Daisy. Daisy resides on the opposite side of town and Gatsby imagines of the day when she would make an appearance at one of his parties. Gatsby frequently stands on one of his grand balconies, scrutinizing the crowd. It is at first dismissed by Nick, however he later become conscious that Gatsby has an objective in mind. Nick becomes aware of Gatsby’s separation from society after one of his parties while he is watching his mansion. Nick elucidates:

A wafer of a moon was shining over Gatsby’s house, making the night fine as before and surviving the laughter and the sound of his still glowing garden. A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host who stood on the porch, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell. (61)

Conclusion

Although isolation is one of the themes of *The Great Gatsby*, still there are many more well-known themes like greed and selfishness. These two themes are in themselves an effect of isolation. When a human being becomes isolated from society, he loses social skills of an ordinary person and becomes secluded. This causes such persons to focus only on themselves and be unacquainted of the probable consequences.

In this novel the characters are all impermanent and temporary to each other. No one is permanent in their relations and dealings. The famous quote from the novel can make it clear how alienated the narrator of the novel feels:

The little dog was sitting on the table looking with blind eyes through the smoke and from time to time groaning faintly. People disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other, found each other a few feet away. (41)

It also shows that everyone is lonely in the novel, although each in a different way. But the way the narrator is alienated and watching the world before him and the way he describes the world in bleak words make it clear that the message of the narrator is that each human being is alone in this world. People find and lose each other simply to comprehend and become conscious of the fact that each human being is alone.

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