

Interpretation of self discovery in the stranger, streetcar named desire, and the...

[Literature](#)



Self Discovery

In today's world, especially in modern Western society, the collective days of the human race are dictated by the facetious and the more-often-than-not tangible ideas of happiness. Everyday an individual wakes up and embarks on an artificial journey. This journey isn't one of philosophical or enlightening proportions, rather it is a heinous excursion for power and wealth. The world has become more focused on the aesthetics of life rather than what really matters, accomplishing inner fulfillment. This soulful satisfaction is synonymous to true self-discovery. This is seen in Albert Camus's, *The Stranger*, Tennessee Williams's, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Raymond Carver's, "The Cathedral." This theme is also expressed in various poems, including Langston Hughes' "Democracy" and in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In these poems, the theme of self and self-discovery is centralized. The universal truth of self-discovery and its limitations are also expressed in the critically acclaimed film, *The Graduate* directed by Mike Nichols based on the book by Charles Webbs. The characters in each of these pieces are restricted from finding themselves because of the bounds of society, and twisted reality. These works show that man must embark on the journey of finding true happiness through true self recognition despite varying limitations.

Often times, one's self is exposed to the volatile and corrupt ideas that become central in their society. In Camus's *The Stranger*, Meursault, the main character, says, "Yes, it was the hour when, a long time ago, I was perfectly content. What awaited me back then was always a night of easy,

dreamless sleep. And yet something has changed, since it was back to my cell that I went to wait for the next day...as if familiar paths traced in summer skies could lead as easily to prison as to the sleep of the innocent” (Camus 89). Meursault justifies his passivity by saying there is nothing anyone can do anyway. If you are at the mercy of chance and bad luck, you might as well drift along. However, the society that Meursault has been bound to thinks differently of his apathetic ways. Detachment from society is one thing, but nonconformity to, or refusal to play by its rules, is another. The blatant nonconformist is deemed amoral. This is why the passive Meursault is considered an outsider, a stranger. As mentioned in Critical Insights: Albert Camus, “ When society condemns him, Meursault realizes that he is not being condemned for taking human life but for refusing to accept the illusion society promotes to protect itself from having to acknowledge the human condition” (“ Works by Albert Camus”). Society has judged that the crime of a passive, detached atheist is punishable by death. Meursault, having nothing to add, accepts the sentence. Albert Camus exemplifies the idea of the inner human journey. This journey emerges from the idea of inescapable mortality. He builds on this theme through his Meursault who essentially embodies the entire journey. Although detached and perhaps slightly apathetic, once he realizes that his death not only is imminent, but also processing at an untimely pace, he begins a subtle contemplation of his life. His true identity has been shaped and marred by society, and when he comes to accept that fact, death no longer seems shallow, but fulfilling. The film, *The Graduate*, is also a great adaptation of the refusal of one to conform to the wants of those around them. As stated

by film critique John Adamczyk, the film “ demonstrates a strong sense of rebellion – rebellion against the upper class, rebellion against the older generation, and rebellion against the standard conventions of the American culture during the Sixties (Adamczyk).” The main instance in the plot of “ The Graduate” in which rebellion is portrayed is Benjamin’s long-term affair with Mrs. Robinson. This act is Benjamin’s first real revolt against his parents and the expectations placed upon him; he demolishes the moral principles of the Sixties by marrying himself with adultery. Although Benjamin eventually realizes the relationship is “ disgusting,” his indulgence marks the most scandalous and controversial act in the film. The film also embarks to show the entire concept of self-discovery through the theme of coming-of-age. Ben Braddock, the main character, is a seemingly intelligent young man whom everyone believes is headed onto to bigger and better things. However, it is made abundantly clear to the audience that he is not willing to acquiesce to the whims of society when he responds to his father’s question of how he wishes his future to be as “ different” (The Graduate). Ben, like Meursault, may be a wanderer, but he also is similar to the existential character because he too does not understand why society is so opposed to him. This theme of societal restraints is also expressed in Tennessee Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire. In this play, the characters of Blanche and Stanley represent the complexities and clash between the infrastructure of Blanche’s traditional societal viewpoint and Stanley’s new world viewpoint. At one point in the play, Stanley explains his frustration with Blanche to his wife and says, “ That’s how I’ll clear the table! ... Don’t ever talk that way to me! ‘ Pig, Polack, disgusting, vulgar, greasy!’ – them kind of words have been on your

tongue and your sister's too much around here! What do you think you two are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long said - ' Every Man is a King!' And I am the King around here, so don't forget it" (Williams 8. 14). Stanley represents the new America, land of opportunity and equality, as opposed to Blanche's more archaic ideals. Blanche seems to think her ethnic origins make her better than others. It is a point of pride for her. She cannot seem to accept the fact that the world is moving forward and the traditional ideals are diminishing. As critic Brenda Murphy says, " Blanche is trapped in a way of life that does not allow her to move forward. She's trapped in the past, never having got over the death of her first husband. She's trapped in the present in that tiny apartment with Stanley. She is trapped living with Stella and Stanley because she doesn't have any money. She is trapped playing the southern belle in order to trap a man to marry her" (Murphy). This play is very much about the symbolic clash between old versus new and past versus present: whether it is Old America versus New America, old south versus new south, the dying aristocratic class versus the rising industrial working class, or imagistic pastoral sensitive past versus harsh straightforward brutal present. Ultimately, Blanche's Southern Belle persona is what blocks her inner journey to self-discovery.

Living the life of one's dreams is distinctly different from living a normal life as a dream. This is how Tennessee Williams's character Blanche is living her life, " Every action and every word out of Blanche's mouth is based on illusion. Her story of why she's ended up at Stella's door is an illusion. The way she covers the harsh light of the bare bulb with a paper shade is an illusion. The lies she tells Mitch are an illusion" (Banach). Blanche is slightly

<https://assignbuster.com/interpretation-of-self-discovery-in-the-stranger-streetcar-named-desire-and-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock/>

melodramatic and has built this illusion, in which she is still a wealthy, lovely socialite. It is difficult to distinguish between when she has lost her grip on reality, when she is simply imagining a better future for herself, and when she is immersed in fiction and indulging in romantic fantasies. This disregarding of reality is also portrayed in Raymond Carver's, "The Cathedral," in which the narrator and his wife are both dissatisfied with their lives. This is seen in their interactions before the arrival of Robert, "'Are you crazy?' my wife said. 'Have you flipped or something?' She picked up a potato. I saw it hit the floor then roll under the stove" (Carver). Jealousy, insecurity, and communication problems distort the narrator's reality. His distorted reality makes his wife angry, and makes her husband seem like a more closed-minded person than he is. As critic Lawrence Garver writes, "The husband unwittingly betrays a great deal about his own sour and stunted in nature; his jealousy, insecurity, suspicion, and self-imposed isolation..." (Garver). The husband is metaphorically isolated from his true self. Instead of surrounding himself with ideals of progression and positivity, he is degrading himself with corrupted notions, such as unorthodox jealousy and insecurity. Due to issues of self-esteem, or a lack thereof, the narrator is unable to truly realize the essential dimensions of his self-identity. Self-perception changes not only person to person, but also changes with time. The narrator may not have harbored these feelings of jealousy previously, as he does when he learns and meets the blind man. At the end of the story, he reaches his inner epiphany, but only because he was able to detach himself from these negative emotions while connecting himself to the rest of the world. This concept of self-obstruction by lack of reality is further explored in

T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The narrator, a shy and timid man, imagines himself growing old, unchanged, worrying about his health and the "risks" of eating a peach. Still, he faintly hears the mermaids of romance singing in his imagination, even though they are not singing to him (Eliot L-122). In a final imagined vision, he sees these nymphs of the sea, free and beautiful, calling him. Reality, however, intrudes in the form of "human voices," perhaps those of the art-chattering women, and he is "drowned" in his empty life (Eliot, L-132). As critic John J. Conlon mentioned in his analysis of the poem, although an imagination is extremely important in living a colorful life and can even help an individual discover more about themselves, such as Alfred J. Prufrock imagination "leads us to believe he is a romantic and even an optimist at heart, the total lack of reality is what becomes one source of his despair and lack of fulfillment" (Conlon). Furthermore, the audience can see almost the satirical undertones implemented by the poet through his subtly mocking poetic form. For example, the first two lines, "Let's go you and I, /When the evening is spread out against the sky," is a heroic couplet (Eliot, LI 1-2). Critic John Conlon also writes about the irony of the use of Eliot's heroic couplet when the narrator is as far from heroic as can be (Conlon). This mocking attitude in the form of poetic meter may essentially be T. S. Eliot's way of poking fun at the cowardice daydreamer who is Mr. Prufrock and his inability to fully accept reality and therefore fully accept himself.

Langston Hughes' "Democracy" is a concise and passionate piece of literature that emulates the struggles of African Americans during the era of segregation and flaming racism. The form of the poem, including the basic

<https://assignbuster.com/interpretation-of-self-discovery-in-the-stranger-streetcar-named-desire-and-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock/>

language, doesn't take away from the message of national self-discovery and is noticed by many scholars and analysts, " Langston Hughes felt compelled to speak his mind for equality and his birthright freedom via poetry. His language, again, is as strikingly strong and direct ... is so simply put, and with such spare beauty" (Miller). Hughes is primarily a writer of the vulgar, in subject matter as well as form. For meter he favors the uneven vocal patterns of everyday speech and for his verses blank rhyme interspersed with simple rhymes that lend strength to the key lines. The fact that he used such techniques became a main factor in the overwhelming success of the poem since it was " a particularly unusual style to have when Hughes first began to be published - in the 1920's when many modernist poets and authors were writing from the extreme opposite pole of esoteric obtuseness and high pretension" (Sanders). The controlled writing of the poem essentially made the message more accessible and deep. The societal norms of the " White Man's Burden" and the Governments inefficiency to implement a true democracy are the hurdles that Hughes and his fellow black Americans had to overcome to find themselves. He clearly addresses his point of views about democracy in the first stanza when he declares the following: " Democracy will not come / Today, this year / Nor ever / Through compromise and fear" (Hughes, Ll 1-4). Democracy back then was laughable and a joke - and outright biased. Government rule by the people pertained to whites exclusively, excluding all African Americans. Democracy implies free and equal representation of people; in more concrete language, it implies free and equal right of every soul to participate in a system of government, which was nonexistent to blacks at the juncture. This poem ultimately

encapsulates the idea that many societal beliefs and many laws become limitations to those individuals who wish to find themselves spiritually and mentally. This theme is also embodied in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*. Throughout the varying times of humanity, law has been implemented to prevent monstrous and wide-scaled chaos. However, often times the law becomes directly influenced by the bias of a specific society and in turn ends up as the driving force behind the injustice and incomparable treatment of individuals such as Camus's Meursault. This lack of justice is pointed out by critic Steven G. Kellman when he mentions, " Both attorneys attempt to find some pattern... All details paint the portrait of an innocent man acting in self-defense. Yet the prosecutor finds that Meursault's callousness about his mother's death is symptomatic of a cold blooded murder" (Kellman). Although all evidence shows that the murder by the hands of Meursault was an accident, the prosecutor, a symbol of the society Meursault deals with, shows readers that he is being victimized on the basis of his less than stellar personality. Once again, societal shams have proven to be a hindrance in man's inner journey to self-discovery.

Although there are many outside limitations to one's ability of self-discovery, some obstructions arise from one's own personality and character, as seen in T. S. Eliot's " *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.*" Prufrock's inability to achieve self-enlightenment stems from his fears and insecurities. In the poem's opening lines, Prufrock invites the reader to accompany him as he walks through a modern city making his social rounds. Perhaps " he assumes that they share his comfortable wealth and socially active lifestyle. As his proper, even prissy, name implies, Prufrock is neurotic and fearful" (Childs).

<https://assignbuster.com/interpretation-of-self-discovery-in-the-stranger-streetcar-named-desire-and-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock/>

Alfred Prufrock is essentially an insecure and deprived individual. Although his name, and often even his actions portray that of a high class socialite, the fact that he is unable to communicate with individuals in the social world portrays his actual character as an insecure individual. Ultimately this becomes a hindrance to his inner journey of self-discovery because he is unable to accept himself for who he is. Insecurity is not the only limiting factor that threatens Prufrock's inherent self, " Like the limitless streets outside his window, infinite time also threatens Prufrock. The more life he has left to live, the more he is left to wonder and to question. Wondering and questioning frighten him because the answers that they provoke might challenge the perfect, unchanging regularity of his tidy existence" (Conlon). Achieving self-enlightenment is not a path clear of obstructions. One of these road blocks that J Alfred Prufrock encounters is fear. However, his fear is hard to describe. In fact, it is quite paradoxical in that not only does he fear death and the loss of time; he also fears immortality and increased time. He doesn't not wish for his life to be over but he also doesn't wish to ponder about it due to his inquisitive nature. The concepts of life and death are intangible ideas, and he fears the answers. Unlike Langston Hughes' " Democracy," Eliot's poem's form is wordier and a dramatic monologue that allows the readers to gain more insight regarding the fictional character as the poem continues on. What is odd about Prufrock is that, while he is impotent to act because he cannot begin to speak, " he states what he feels about himself in an eloquent and poetic manner, worthy of any social setting" (Menland):

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully! Smoothed by long fingers, Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers, Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me. (Eliot, LI 75-78)

The flow and beauty of these lines demonstrates that Prufrock is capable of speaking about love in poetic style, so he should not be insecure. The reference to Dante is not only appropriate, but it explains how a character as insecure and inarticulate as Prufrock can say exactly what he means in the poem, but not in the scene in the poem. This is similarly seen in Raymond Carver's "The Cathedral." The narrator's blurred view of everything that happened in his wife's past life shows the insecurity that plagues him. When referring to his wife's ex-husband he says, "Her officer- why should he have a name? He was the childhood sweetheart, and what more does he want?" (Carver). The upcoming visit of Robert is, as critic Charles E. May says, is where "the husband unwittingly betrays a great deal about his own sour and stunted nature: his jealousy, insecurity, suspicion, and self-imposed isolation." He is metaphorically isolated from history self. Instead of surrounding himself with ideals of progression and positivity, he's degrading himself with corrupted notions, such as an unorthodox jealousy and insecurity. Because of these issues of self-esteem, he is unable to truly realize the essential human truth of understanding individual identity. Self-perception changes not only person to person, but also changes with time.

One of the essential human truths expressed in these pieces of literature, is that an individual's identity not only varies from person to person, but also changes from time to time. Self-identity is not only dependent on an

individual's persona, but also the varying limitations that are set forth in their realms of living. Albert Camus, Tennessee Williams, Raymond Carver, Langston Hughes, T. S. Eliot, and Mike Nichols all feature this truth in their pieces using the different restrictions set forth in their characters' worlds. They also convey the essential truth that to be truly satisfied and content with life, one must acknowledge and detach themselves from the plethora of limitations.