

# An attempt to conform to society's norm on the example of three novels

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The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald, A Street Named Desire by Tennessee Williams and the poetry of T. S. Eliot were all written in the first half of the twentieth century, during a time which two World Wars had torn apart the world creating internal conflicts between the old and new. The characters of Blanche, Gatsby, Prufrock and other characters, attempt to conform to society's norm yet cannot truly integrate into the new era. All three literary writers comment on the destructive nature of the modern world. Jay Gatsby in The Great Gatsby fatally immersed himself into an imagined future. In A Streetcar named Desire we witness a cast of characters suffering from a sense of alienation from the world they live in. Within T. S. Eliot's poetry we see a narrative of loneliness and indecision, full of unknown voices, surrounded by different languages. It is these combinations of loneliness and a failure to immerse themselves into society which ultimately causes fracture.

Throughout the texts the 'surrounding world' only allows for the strong commanding figures to prosper, while the vulnerable are exploited. Both Streetcar and The Great Gatsby feature these imposing brutes in the form of Stanley and Tom, highlighting the injustice of the modern society. In Streetcar the fragile character of Blanche depicts the disintegrating Southern grandeur, stuck in the surrounding world of the unfamiliar world of New Orleans. The world in which Blanche finds herself in is in stark contrast to what Blanche is used to, there is no peace in the Kolowoski's apartment, or the lively streets of New Orleans. The ever present "music of the blue piano" in the opening stage directions shows the never ending noise in the background of daily life. Williams states this piano "expresses the spirit of

the life" which Blanche struggles to grasp whilst staying there. Throughout the play, the blue piano always appears when Blanche is talking about the loss of her family and Belle Reve, but it is also present during her meeting and kissing the young newspaper man. The blue piano thus stands for depression, loneliness and her longing for love.

The surrounding society of New Orleans represents the reality of the new world, in which there is a lack of class distinctions. Blanche views the people on the street as " crude" and they represent the lack of civilized culture. Elysian Fields is full of people from all races and care little about the run-down nature of the world they live in which Blanche seemingly struggles to comprehend. Blanche upbringing contributes to her unfamiliarity with the surrounding world, the gentility and wealth which she had grown accustomed to no longer exist in the modern world. Her previous home of ' Belle Reeve' which is a French phrase meaning ' beautiful dream' is just a memory of the South and she is thrown into the turmoil of the " Elysian Fields" which in Greek mythology, were the final resting place of the souls of the heroic and the virtuous. Which is ironic as the play sympathises with Blanche and her struggle to comply, with her new found home, yet mocks her as she lacks heroism in her world. Williams himself made a similar move in his life his father accepted a position in a shoe factory in St. Louis and moved the family from the expansive Episcopal home in the South to an ugly tenement building in St. Louis. Their cramped apartment and the ugliness of the city life seemed to make a lasting impression on Williams as a boy. Williams seemingly parallels his experiences to that of Blanche when she arrives in the new world of New Orleans. Williams told his literary agent <https://assignbuster.com/an-attempt-to-conform-to-societys-norm-on-the-example-of-three-novels/>

Audrey Wood in 1939 " I have only one major theme for my work, which is the destructive power of society on the non-conformist individual." This destruction is evident in the play as Blanche can't keep up with the ever changing society and she fails to adapt.

The division within the surrounding world is also evident in Fitzgerald novel *The Great Gatsby*. The divide between East and West Egg is parallels to the North and South Divide in *Streetcar*. The West symbolises the up and coming wealth, contrasted to the East which is occupied by the old money and wealth generational families. *Gatsby* begins in the time of the Roaring 20's in America after the First World War, at a time when the American dream and America itself became the so called land of opportunity. Yet the society at the time was full of cracks highlighted in Fitzgerald's novel. Malcom Crowley described 1920's America as " Everywhere was the atmosphere of a long debauch that had to end; the orchestras played too fast, the stakes were too high at the gambling tables," this image of a fast-paced extravagant lifestyle is mirrored in the *Great Gatsby*. The imagery in the description of the two eggs implies this. Between the two eggs lies the Valley of Ash the only thing which provides any colour in this bleak scene is the billboard with an advert on it " The eyes of Doctor T. J Eckleburg are blue and gigantic" The only thing with life and colour to it is from the wealthy inner city as urbanisation took place contrasted with the bleak dusty valley of ash. The blue instantly stands out from the sea of grey, immediately seeming out of place. The Valley is shown to be decaying place through the comparison with *Gatsby's* party which is full of life and excitement in the West Egg. The " glistening hors-d'oeuvre" as well as " Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons

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arrived from a fruiterer in New York". The diction choice of the " glistening" illuminates to a sense of them being irresistible. The use of colour again shows the wealth contrast, the vibrant and bright orange yellow contrasts with the grey of the valley of ash as they connote to images of youth and life. In the 1920s, produce was difficult to keep fresh, and so the mountain of oranges and lemons also illustrates Gatsby's wealth. The valley of ash lacks any noise compared to the party and the quietness highlights the bleakness and connotes to imagery of a graveyard. The colour of the party also brings it to life compared to the grey, gloominess of the valley of ashes. The imagery of decay and dust is vividly seen in Eliot's poetry as well. Within The Wasteland a poem talking about the discord of a 1920's world struggling to keep up with the technological advancements, the " will show you fear in a handful of dust" the multiple meanings of the line could be interpreted as the " dust" meaning death and the emptiness on what used to be there, as dust is dead skin. The allusions of dust is near identical to that of The Great Gatsby " but above the grey land and spasms of bleak dust" in both texts the imagery of the dust is compared to death and the aftermath of destruction in society. 1920's America is depicted as a desperate place as people attempted to succeed, like George and Myrtle Wilson, whilst the rich took advantage of them and preyed on their desire to climb the social ladder within society. This disparity in wealth was shown in the American Passages " 1/10th of 1% of the wealthiest families made as much money each year as 42% of the poorest families." The world of preying on the weak is further evident in both Eliot's poetry of the Wasteland, a poem about the different voices of the world, as Albert takes advantage of his wife in ' A game of

Chess' and Stanley preys on Blanche mental disabilities and delusions in Streetcar. Even Eliot's own wife Vivien agrees with the husband wife relationship of Albert portrayed in the 'The Wasteland' wrote 'wonderful' against this section where his wife asks "staccato question" clearly "Vivien recognised the accuracy of the non-dialogue". Eliot presents a highly judgemental and prejudice society in the poem Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, Prufrock is conscious of how others will perceive him. "With a bald spot in the middle of my hair" the imagery of Prufrock standing in front of the mirror worrying about what people will think of him shows society's judgemental attitude and Prufrock worries about the fashion trends of the time. The stage directions in Streetcar also give Stanley the trait of prejudice contrasting to Prufrock who is fearful of prejudice "He sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind" the sexual thoughts highlight Stanley's derogatory view of woman and his judgemental mind set as one of the more fierce characters. Elila Kazan emphasises this by labelling Stanley as "marvellously selfish, a miracle of serious self-centredness." Which is true as he takes no interest in Blanche's past labelling it all as lies and is determined to find her out. The surrounding world portrayed in the three texts presents a highly divided society in which boisterous, judgemental characters prey on the weak and insecure, contributing to their fracture.

Alongside the cruelty of society; one of the clearest is the inability to escape the past. This cause of fracture is most clearly seen in the form of Blanche Dubois in Streetcar, she is presented as a fantasist who is unable to overcome reality which causes her to become fragmented. Blanche never

allows herself to be under light in order to prevent anyone from seeing the reality of her fading beauty. Mitch exclaims " I don't think I've ever seen you in the light. That's a fact!" The darkness helps her create the fantasy world she prefers to live in by covering the naked lightbulb with a Chinese paper lantern, thus masking the harsh reality the naked lightbulb emphasizes. This reflects her struggle with reality and fantasy which causes her fracture. Blanche attempts to build up an illusion around her whole life every action and every word spoken is determined to recreate this time, this youth. Blanche's delicacy is presented in the stage directions " as well as her white clothes, which suggests a moth" the imagery of Blanche being a ' moth' shows her fragility. The colour white stands for purity, innocence and virtue. Blanche attempts to be a pure person, but throughout the play it becomes obvious that Blanche cannot call any of these traits her own. Only the illusory image which she tries to create for herself suggests these traits. Blanche consistently bathes throughout the represent her efforts to cleanse herself of her odious history " all freshly bathed and scented, feeling like a brand new human being!" Blanche believes that bathing is a cleansing of the soul helping her forget her past. However as Blanche can never outrun her past the bathing in water never stops. The motif of water as a means of rebirth is similarly seen in the poem the Wasteland. The land is dying of its lack of water and the " spring rain" will come to bring new life out of the landscape. However much like with Blanche the water fails to bring the land back to life " sti dull roots,". However the symbolism of the water in the Wasteland is ambiguous as the poem also features a " the drowned Phoenician Sailor" disagreeing with the previous interpretation. The legend of the Fisher King,

whose wound causes the land to stop producing new life. The drowned sailor in this case might represent the terrible curse that has fallen over Europe as a whole in the 20th century, but also the fact that water cannot overturn the curse and move the land away from the past.

The repetition of music in *Streetcar* also comes from Blanche's past to haunt her present causing her to become fragmented. The repetition of the *Varsouviana*, to which Blanche and her young husband, Allen Grey, were dancing when she last saw him alive, haunts Blanche. It is a constant theme throughout and returns predominately in Scene 9 "The rapid, feverish polka tune, the 'Varsouviana', is heard". The stage directions highlight that Blanche head is in discord as the song is said to only "The music is in her mind...and the sense of disaster closing in on her". The song reminds her of the past in general and the guilt she feels in the death of her husband. These stage directions create a sense of anxiety and instability. The further stage directions in Scene 9 say "Blanche is seated in a tense hunched position in a bedroom chair" alludes to Blanche sitting in a foetal position, being entirely vulnerable to the rest of the world. It also highlights Blanche's loneliness within the Kowalski apartment. Williams stage directions are highly expressionistic and emphasis how broken Blanche really is. "Lurid reflections appear on the wall appear on the walls around Blanche. The shadows are of a grotesque and menacing form" The darkness hides Blanche fading beauty but the shadows also represent danger for Blanche. Francis Gilbert says "The grotesque shadows are expressions of how Blanche is feeling; her internal turmoil is reflected in the external world". All of Blanche's past is filled with heartbreak and turmoil, her marriage was



destroyed by her husband and she has had to deal with the deaths of her family. " All those deaths the long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother!" This seems to justify her need to create an imaginary world creating sympathy from the audience.

An inability to escape the past as a cause of fracture is (also) a theme seen in the novel *The Great Gatsby*. Jay Gatsby's one desire is to be reunited with the love of his life, Daisy Buchanan, which leads to his death. Everything he does, every purchase he makes, every party he throws, is all part of his grand scheme to bring Daisy back into his life for good. This seems to be a romantic gesture, yet it is also an illusion Gatsby is unable to recreate in reality, attempting to create (just) a parody of his younger self. Gatsby argues with Nick, (that) " Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. " Why of course you can!". Gatsby attempts to stop time in order win Daisy over as " his head leaned back so far that it rested against the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock" The clock may also symbolize Gatsby's inability to let Daisy go. The fact that the clock is broken symbolizes his efforts to win her were broken. That time of her loving Gatsby is in the past and any further attempt will prove fruitless. Even knowing the clock is broken, Gatsby still delicately places it back on the mantelpiece, symbolic of how he still wishes to cling to his broken past. Tony Tanner supports this idea " Gatsby's concern with time, it's arrest ability, recoverability and repeat ability is equally obsessive." Gatsby is constantly trying to relive the past and re-visit his past memories with Daisy instead of living in the present, causing him to become broken. The structure of the novel allows Nick to look back at the events and create a sense of nostalgia. In *The Great Gatsby* written in <https://assignbuster.com/an-attempt-to-conform-to-societys-norm-on-the-example-of-three-novels/>

1925, only three (3) years after it's setting, Fitzgerald tries to warn against the idea of the American dream and creating false illusions. At the ending of the novel Nick reflects on the American society as a whole and their fight to achieve the dream, even though it is in the past. " So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past", the metaphor of the sailors implies a blind struggle to achieve a dream that is ultimately behind them. At the time Fitzgerald had been living in France and become disgusted with how materialistic America had become. By having Gatsby create this materialistic world in order to find Daisy, Fitzgerald condemns the dream. Gatsby and Blanche's past both fracture them. Both create illusions of what they wish reality to be like but ultimately both fail as they are unable to cope with modernity.

Eliot's poetry as well as blaming the inability to escape the past, present's isolation as a cause of fracture. Prufrock's - the protagonist of the poem The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock - description of his everyday life moves from the buildings of an inner city, to underwater imagery conveying (Prufrock's) his emotional distance from the world. The epigraph to the poem describes Prufrock ideal reader. Taken from Dante's Divine Comedy in hell, the lines are spoken to Dante by Guida Da Montefeltro. The epigraph translates as " If I thought my answer were given to anyone who would ever return to the world". The description illuminates to someone who is as lost as the speaker and will never betray to the world the content of Prufrock's present confessions. However Prufrock struggles to find anyone with these sympathetic values which is why he is detached from his reality and becomes fragmented. The first rhyming couplet is meant to be romantic, "

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Let us go then, you and I, When the evening is spread out against the sky” yet it is Prufrock’s sexuality which contributes to his loneliness. Prufrock senses women don’t like him; he fails to express what he thinks and feels to them “ I have heard the mermaids singing, to each to each.” The allusion to Echoes Donne’s poem ‘ Go catch a falling star (.)’ in which Donne begins by suggesting a series of impossible tasks implying Prufrock believes finding a women to be one of these. Nick in Gatsby also struggles with his sexuality causing him to become broken. “ pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove.” He likes this dream because it keeps him safe from being hurt and he doesn’t have to put his pride at risk. These imaginary women of his can never be ruined because they are only in his mind. Prufrock shies away from women, he senses women don’t like him and this preys on his mind. “ Is it the perfume which makes me so digress?” The continual questioning shows him searching for excuses to not talk to them. The mood in the poem however quickly changes from the first two lines and love is presented as hard and unfeeling. The simile of “ Like a patient etherized upon a table” elucidates to society being drugged and dazed. The lack of feeling within society seems to stop Prufrock from fully engaging as he is unable to express how he truly thinks or feels causing him to become a character of inaction. Within Eliot’s own life, he moved about America. (Because of) Family ties to St. Louis meant the Eliot family chose to remain in their rundown home. (It was) In the summer months of his childhood Eliot would be taken to the North Shore. Eliot grew up saying that he gave up a

sense of belonging to (ever) any region. These feelings of loneliness and detachment from reality mirror Prufrock's.

The further illusions (of) to John the Baptist present(s) Prufrock as unable to cope with the demands of society. The imagery presented in (of) " Though I have seen my head brought in upon a platter, I am no prophet" (It) is ironic as Prufrock is full of self-reflection yet disagrees with the idea of being a prophet. The demands of society and women in particular are presented as too hard to achieve causing Prufrock to break. David Spurr agrees " The image of decapitation parodies the theme of disconnected being and provides for at least a negative definition of the self: " I am no prophet." This contributes to the overall levels of displacement from the surrounding world as he is seemingly unable to interact with others contributing to the fracture.

Prufrock's continual inaction contributes to his remoteness from the surrounding world. Prufrock takes some of the concepts of the anti-hero, someone who is not courageous but not a villain either but someone who constantly wonders " What is it?" and " Do I dare?", both are spoken with a tone of reluctance as if Prufrock does not want to answer the question, taking on a stance of inaction. Eliot further implies Prufrock's segregation as he uses the imagery of him being a crab submerged beneath the ocean. " I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas." Prufrock allegorizes himself with the crabs' lack of purpose and forward movement feeding of society's scraps as opposed to wanting to contribute.

The inaction and indecision of Prufrock is paralleled in the form of Daisy in Gatsby " She turned to me helplessly. ' What do people plan?' This emphasises Daisy's over dependence on the actions of other people and external forces. She neither thinks for herself nor has any drive to do anything new. She is a passive character that Fitzgerald uses to suggest that those without ambition or ruthlessness within society will not achieve (,) and simply be passengers within society. Yet the novel is set in the roaring 20s, a time of ambition when anything is achievable. (Yet) We see material wealth as (i)s easy to acquire, yet (but) more important comforts such as love cannot (easily) be acquired so easily.

Gatsby also features characters fractured by loneliness in the sense of Nick. We are told the story through his lonely eyes " Life is much more successfully looked at from a single window after all". He doesn't want to see the whole picture, only a part of it. (By) Saying, " from a... window" (this) implies that he considers himself an outsider, just a spectator, and not part of anything, much like Eliot's poem Rhapsody on a windy night, told by someone walking alone down a deserted street. This loneliness is even told directly to the reader by Nick himself when he says, " I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others". Nick is so lonely that he even feels the loneliness in others.

All three texts do present a fractured sense of self in relation to the surrounding world. The surrounding world (can) could be labelled as a cause of fracture, the displacing of the protagonist and pushing them into an unfamiliar world causing isolation and discourse. Thu(i)s (further)

highlighting(s) how an inability to adapt to change is a fundamental flaw of the characters. Williams and Fitzgerald point to inability to escape the past as a key instrument in the downfall of both Blanche and Gatsby, both clinging to past glories.