



Bloom's Literature

alienation

Countless literary characters feel painfully alienated from the social institutions that surround them. Some, like Jake Barnes in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, feel alienated from their own communities. Others, like Caddy Compson in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, feel alienated from their closer connections, including family members and loved ones. Still others, like Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, feel alienated by the religious institutions in which they have been raised; sometimes this type of alienation extends so far that the character or characters feel alienated from God himself. Perhaps the most extreme form of alienation lies in characters such as Meursault in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, who feels alienated from everything with which he comes into contact: his family, his society, and the whole of modern life. The proliferation of literary characters who struggle with alienation is a result of the real-life struggle many human beings have with feeling disconnected from, shunned by, and unrelated to other human beings and the societal institutions that shape and guide us. Alienation is a powerful force, one that moves humans toward the negative impulses of self-pity, vulnerability, and violence, but that can also result in the positive results of deep introspection and intellectual independence.

Many would associate alienation primarily with the 20th century and beyond, and indeed, the modernist movement, dated roughly from 1890 to 1950, has as one of its central [themes](#) the idea that in the modern era, with its increased reliance on science and technology, and the gradual removal of the individual from rural community into urban isolation, the individual and society are at odds with one another. Modernism explores how our relationships with each other and with social institutions such as the church, school, work, and family have grown weaker, leading us to be increasingly individualistic in our thinking and thus, alienated. In fact, the works listed above are all works in the modernist tradition. In addition to those novels and their alienated characters, [modernism](#) produced works such as T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," both poems that explore at length human beings' alienation from one another and from the world around them. For example, in "Prufrock," even though the speaker begins by saying, "Let us go then, you and I" (l. 1), the poem never feels like it is telling the story of a couple, as though the speaker is pretending to be working under the misconception that he is part of a community but is actually quite alone. The "you" has been variously interpreted to refer to the reader, the author, or some missing part of the speaker himself. It is precisely this problem—that the speaker is not alone but is clearly disconnected from his companion—that creates the feeling of alienation. Near the end of the poem, the speaker says, "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each / I do not think that they will sing to me" (ll. 124–125). Again, he is alive and moving through the world, but he is disconnected from it, hearing but not listening.

Other 20th-century works explore the general condition of alienation by depicting characters who are cut off from one another despite familial connections or close daily proximity. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, the title character, Jay Gatsby, born Jay Gatz, has cut himself off from his past, thus alienating himself from what might be called his natural place in the world. He has done this so that he may infiltrate Daisy Buchanan's world—a world of wealth, society, and superficiality. Yet despite making this transfer, he remains alienated, as Daisy's circle see him as foreign and out of place. He yearns to be a part of her world, but he does so because he thinks that is the way to win her love. Because he moves along this route, which is unnatural to him, his attempt is doomed to fail. The modern world Fitzgerald depicts in *The Great Gatsby*—with its artificial distinctions between West Egg and East Egg; its social caste system that leads Myrtle Wilson to have no more value than an animal; and its monumental Valley of Ashes, an artificial barrier separating the rich and the poor, brought about by capitalism and industrialization—suggests a world that will eventually alienate us all from one another by replacing honesty and emotion with facade and ambition.

Although the 20th century is the primary home of literature exploring alienation, the concept is much older. The biblical story of the golden calf, for instance, shows us a populace who are alienated from God and from themselves. In the story, Moses has left the Israelites for 40 days and 40 nights to climb Mount Sinai and receive the Ten Commandments. Because they are disconnected from Moses, they also disconnect from the idea of God and immediately fear that they are alone in the world and need an idol to worship to focus their beliefs. They therefore convince Moses' brother Aaron to forge a golden calf for them. As Erich Fromm points out, this story shows us how "man is in touch with himself only through the worship of the idols" (quoted in Khan 196). This story, of course, comes from the Old Testament, before the arrival of Christ. One way to read the New Testament is that the coming of the Messiah saves the world from its state of alienation from God. In fact, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul writes, "Remember that ye were without Christ, beings alien from the Commonwealth of Israel" (Eph 2:12, KJV). This connection, then, is vital for Paul; for him, the alienated being naturally yearns for connection.

The idea of alienation would remain chiefly theological for centuries. In [Middle English](#), the word signified a kind of "transfer," almost as though one owned oneself, and if "aliened" or "alienated," one was transferring that ownership to someone or something else. This could be active and hostile, as if one was being forced into the transfer, or it could be passive and indifferent, as though one was giving up oneself voluntarily. Beyond transferring one's will to God, the concept of alienation as we know it today did not exist. However, in the 18th century, the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau would postulate that alienation involves the giving of oneself freely, and that it benefits the individual by entering him or her into society, by freeing that person from the selfish state in which one serves only oneself. Although this might sound positive, for Rousseau it was the dependence on others whom society facilitates that created all vice. He believed that we must give up our rights and "transfer" them to the community. This creates in humans a state of alienation.

In the 19th century, the German philosopher Georg Hegel took up Rousseau's line of thinking, declaring that humans "live in a world shaped by his work and his knowledge, but it is a world in which man feels himself alien, a world whose laws prevent basic need satisfaction" (qtd. in Khan 26). Hegel is extending Rousseau's ideas here, arguing that modern man will always feel the struggle between his own individual needs and participation in society, and that the result is a feeling of detachment or estrangement. Hegel centered in on work as a primary agent of this detachment, a move that was echoed in the writing of Karl Marx, who articulated ideas of alienation better than anyone had before and who is still considered one of the most important thinkers on the concept. Marx explained alienation as the state that exists when things that should naturally go together are kept apart. Modern work, Marx argued, does this in many ways. The Industrial Revolution created workers who were alienated from their own essential humanity, because they were treated as "machines" as opposed to human beings. Further, they are alienated from one another because there is no social relationship involved in the production of a commodity. They are also alienated from the product they are producing, because it will be sold on the market with no relationship to the human that produced it, and from the act of work itself, because there is no satisfaction or meeting of desire involved. Preindustrial work did not have these attributes, as work was often performed in a family setting, with tangible results and, for many, a clear sense of pride and satisfaction. For Marx, and for many other philosophers of alienation, the farther society moves away from these more "natural" states, the more alienated we will become.

Further Information

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