

Significance of the Outsider

Successful storylines are packaged in genres as varied as the plots they showcase. Magical realism to postmodern, every category of narrative must follow genre-specific rules in order to properly qualify. These guidelines create a structural backbone that permits programmed diversity while allowing room for creative and original works. Of all the styles, the unsung hero is certainly the often glossed-over science-fiction/speculative/fantasy (referred to hereafter as: SSF) grouping. Regardless of the lack of academic attention, this genre markets well to all ages and often records some of the most lucrative bestsellers. Although a memoir such as *Eat, Pray, Love* is praiseworthy, the indisputable success of the likes of *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* must garnish equal respect. The inherently removed position of this formula requires a character equally distanced for the reader to connect with whom additionally presents the world in a believable manner. In tales of futuristic, speculative and fantasy worlds such as *Herland*, *The Slaughter House Five*, *Watership Down*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Never Let me Go*, the outsider functions as a bridge between realities more convincingly than the heavy-handed relationship other genres' stories create. These informants are typically main characters who exist: outside of society's normal standards, outside of a presented reality, or outside of accepted magic. Television and film media also represent this category well, and alongside the key aforementioned novels, a proper understanding can be made of this neglected genre. The unassuming role of SSF protagonists is not only an instant outlet for the reader but the transformative journey is subtle and expresses a form of escapism that simultaneously reviews and assesses real world problems.

An aspect of SSF that by its very nature transports the reader into an alternate reality is the generally science-fiction/speculative trope that focuses on dreams, time

travel and memories. This form of storytelling often pairs with a cyclical plot, intentionally misdirecting the reader to create a narrative reminiscent of a puzzle. Operating as a connection between what is real and imagined, the characters within the veritable maze ground the plot at the same time as their journey questions the essence of reality.

Existing outside of reality requires a perfunctory disclosure of when and where the story takes place. As an enticing, suspense laden device, details such as these are often left for the resolution of the plot. Contrary to popular arrangements, in The Slaughter House Five, Kurt Vonnegut wastes no time introducing Billy Pilgrim's story as existential, "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time...he has seen his birth and death many times...and pays random visits to all events in between," (23). Unlike Joel from Eternal Sunshine or Inception's Cobb, the location of Vonnegut's protagonist is ever-changing whereas the other men are primarily locked with their own subconscious. This is further clarified by Vonnegut's statement, "Billy is spastic in time, he has no control over where he is going next and the trips aren't necessarily fun," (23). In this rendition of the outside of reality plot, Billy's time-jumps provide a link between his childhood, adolescence and adulthood that although interspersed, establish a pattern begging for further investigation. Similarly, in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Joel is a socially awkward man suffering from a troublesome breakup, secluding himself into a position of loneliness. Accordingly, he seeks the help of a speculative company that specializes in erasing memories. Both Joel and Billy have found the source of their problems in their past and resort to idealistic methods of imprisoning the negative stimulus.

Likewise, Cobb from Inception spends his journey either hiding in his own dreams or meddling within someone else's. Aside from living outside of the law, Cobb is literally separated from his own reality continuously struggling to differentiate his work environment and real life. Cobb's security totem, a top, reinforces when he is present in the real world, the type of reminder Billy lacked, always battling to assimilate himself to the current timeframe. Spreading further, these men's similarities stretch to the manner in which Cobb establishes a vault of memories where his wife can live on, a shadow of Joel's attempt to hide his beloved Clementine in distant memories and Billy's sporadic visits to pivotal life events. A noteworthy tie between these two films is during Inception's sleeping den scene in Mombasa where the attendant says, "They don't come here to sleep, they come here to wake up," and when a desk clerk in Eternal Sunshine says, "blessed are the forgetful," harkening back to the focal point for the each film, these quotes remark upon the painful quality of memories and dreams. It closely echoes The Slaughter House Five mentality of living in the moment, reminding people of the necessity of living through and growing from these incidents rather than dispelling their importance.

In these alternate realities, an obvious reconstruction of real world circumstances presents the element of evaluation the SSF genre demands. Joel's self-inflicted separation from the real world (where his pain is unmanageable) allows him the ability to reflect on the pros and cons of his failed relationship in a peaceful realm. Hidden in the recesses of his painful, humiliating and childhood memories arose the precise reasons Joel found Clementine so intriguing: she fulfilled the pieces of him that were otherwise left empty. Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind demonstrates the dangerousness of removing

essential memories and how this hinders personal development. Cobb's greatest dilemma, along with Joel's, is finding truth and comfort in memories and dreams that are only shadows of what has been. As a supplement to Cobb's struggles, he employs a curious university student named, Ariadne, who becomes his apprentice to extraction and inception and an unsuspecting witness to his metaphorical demons. Throughout their work, she reveals secrets to Cobb that enlighten the viewer to the origin of inception. Cobb's inability to let go of his past is indicated as his top spins out of frame, suggesting the dual possibilities of him having finally found a way home, or being locked eternally in a dream.

Personal development is a grappling issue Billy also encounters and while he remains more or less stagnant, Billy serves as a living example of treasuring the meaningful and meaningless moments in life. There are endless questions people want answered, to which Joel and Cobb search for in their dream reality. In Billy's case, he questions the problem at hand, addressing the aliens who abduct him, "'Why me?' 'That is a very *Earthling* question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? Because this moment simply is,'" (Vonnegut 76-7). The compatible films in this category are narrowed to these questionable yet unanswerable moments in time that Billy highlights in The Slaughter House Five, discovering hidden happiness in otherwise discarded thoughts.

Another common key to SSF is the distinction between the main characters identities and what society outlines as appropriate. No matter the community, there will always be people who live outside what is considered "normal". Coincidentally, this juxtaposition favors the contentious plots of SSF stories, providing an easily accessible

outlet to comprehending what it means to be “different”. This purposeful comparison between normalcy and abnormality interlaces the outsider concept with a critical view of civilization.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s tale, Herland, is the quintessential comparison novel. The usage of male main characters in an entirely female community is Gilman’s cleverly authentic review of a patriarchal society and gender’s influential role in the outsider. Throughout the tale, Van, Gilman’s main man, questions how the matriarchy functions, illuminating the stark differences he draws from his own male-dominated world. The reader is first introduced to Herland with a distinctive description, “It looked safe and civilized enough, and among those upturned, crowding faces, though some were terrified enough, there was great beauty -- on that we all agreed... ‘Here goes for Herland!’” (Gilman 12). The men’s initial evaluation of Herland is appearance driven, which is characteristic of a masculine outlook. The utopia of Herland is easily contrasted with the dystopian landscape of Margaret Atwood’s, The Handmaid’s Tale and yet both worlds heavily rely upon external appearances and the outsider’s performance of gender.

Atwood’s complacent main character, Offred is a testament to society’s willingness to obey leadership and customs, no matter how skewed the doctrine, identifying her societal status through a red cloak. Both narratives derive from worlds where women are revered albeit in vastly opposed ideologies: Herland’s citizens are located outside of the common patriarchy whereas Gilead impounds its female in gender specific roles that are conducive to patriarchal standards. Due to the intimate point-of-view and flashbacks Atwood includes, the reader is provided a window to Offred’s grueling lifestyle, “I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. I

must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance,” (Atwood 39) reminding herself and the reader that complacency or ignorance is the only palatable way to manage an atrocious society such as Gilead. Witnessing a female-centric world is as refreshing and self-critical for Van and Offred as it is for the reader, highlighting a spectrum that detracts credibility from either extreme. Critical to the final understanding of Herland, Van accepts that the identifier of masculinity and femininity are social constructs that only function and evolve in conjunction:

These women, whose essential distinction of motherhood was the dominant note of their whole culture, were strikingly deficient in what we call "femininity." This led me very promptly to the conviction that those "feminine charms" we are so fond of are not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity -- developed to please us because they had to please us, and in no way essential to the real fulfillment of their great process. (Gilman 59)

In order to comprehend the purpose of gender in society, the reader must be exposed to these reinvented opinions that both mirror the afterthought of females in society in tandem of prominently showing how they are irreplaceable. This is a concept that reemerges during the ceremony in Atwood’s novel, “One detaches oneself...There is something hilarious about this, but I don’t dare laugh,” (95). By mentally placing herself outside of her own circumstances, Offred can cope with the devastating truth behind her meager gendered existence. In the final act of The Handmaid’s Tale, Atwood writes, “I want to keep on living in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am an object. I feel, for the first time, their true power,” (286). This moment is the complete disintegration of Offred’s complacent, outsider mentality and how gender can be a dangerous form of power. Contentious external identifiers like gender can be detrimental to a harmonious community, but sometimes society removes these obvious traits through physical displacement.

It is no surprise a prime detail of living outside of normal society in this subsection of SSF is the physical removal of undesirables. Synonymous with the fantasy sector of SSF, Watership Down by Richard Adams is one of the few stories in the genre that does not exemplify the typical supernatural element to its plot, but in spite of this lack of magic, Adams keeps the mysticism alive through the point-of-view of humble rabbits. As an evaluation of human society, the rabbits promote the underappreciated aspects of life. Adams' arrangement is not only outside of social norms, but the rabbits are entirely removed from human society. Within their own community however, Hazel and his trusted accomplices are considered expendable low-lives who additionally position themselves physically outside of the warren by declaring, "Fiver and I will be leaving the warren tonight...I don't know exactly where we'll go," (Adams 29). Hazel's outsider faction gives insight into each warren they encounter throughout the duration of their travels, adopting high-quality ideas to mesh together for their final home.

Adams' tale blends well with Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go, who uses the tactic of exclusion to instigate the mystery surrounding the students at Hailsham. Despite noting her childhood as her fondest memories, the protagonist, Kathy, much like her fellow classmates, outgrows the facility and loses it to time and the recesses of society's awareness. On an endless search, like Hazel, throughout her limited adulthood, Kathy seeks the source of her once pleasant life, "'Maybe that's it! I've found it! This actually *is* Hailsham!' Then I see it's impossible and I go on driving, my thoughts drifting elsewhere," (Ishiguro 6). Having spent her life on the compound, as Hazel has spent in the home warren, they each face an impenetrable English countryside where nothing is familiar but everything is reminiscent of a simpler time. As Ishiguro writes, "You have to

remember that until [the cottages] we'd never been beyond the grounds of Hailsham, and we were just bewildered," (118). Life removed from a traditional childhood and restricted from exploration created a dependent and insecure generation that Kathy struggles to separate from. Departing from the home warren, Hazel and his accomplices are also naively seeking a stable replacement, somewhere they belong without be titled different. Even though Adams straightforwardly compares rabbits and humans, there are times when he draws the parallel more subtly, "To rabbits, everything unknown is dangerous," (37) but in reality he is declaring that every self-aware creature, like Kathy and her friends and the community at large, is afraid of what they cannot define.

The indisputably production of Gilman's Herland is to comment on the inherent patriarchy of her male character's world and how ineffective it can often be. Nevertheless, the male perspective provides the perfect opposition to permit readers a deeper comprehension of our real society and its many flaws and inconsistencies. Likewise, Atwood creates a world that addresses the potential faults in our system when she discusses how the government dismantled from within, "Things continued in that state of suspended animation for weeks...newspapers were censored...the roadblocks began to appear, and Identipasses...The thing to do, they said, was to continue on as usual," (174). While in Herland, the characters had to question why "western" society performed the way it did, Atwood's characters lack the luxury of questioning their new world order.

Most SSF novels use the outsider to assess our world and more often than not the comparison is an undertone, but these selections prominently concentrate on their dissatisfactions under the disguise of entertaining fiction. And in typical Adams fashion,

he makes a direct statement, “Men will never rest until they’ve spoiled the earth and destroyed the animals,” (163) and “when several creatures—men or animal—have worked together to overcome something offering resistance...they felt the right propriety of paying respect to the adversary who has put so good a fight,” (226). These connections enlighten the reader to human’s role in the animal world and how two very unlike species are actually interconnected. Drawing a closer parallel, Ishiguro demonstrates this in his coming-of-age tale, written like a poetic textbook how to deceive and sequester people that are otherwise unwanted by society. Kathy’s friend Ruth recognizes this first, saying, ““We all know it. We’re modeled from *trash*,” (Ishiguro 166) in reference to who they are cloned from. This realization leads to the ultimate collapse of their friendship and gradual acceptance of the misrepresented world they live in.

Furthermore, in search for answers, Kathy and her childhood sweetheart, Tommy stumble upon the most deafening facts of all: they were created as, “Children demonstrably *superior* to the rest of us? Oh no. That frightened people. They recoiled from that,” (Ishiguro 264), markedly a disturbing insight into their entire existence while simultaneously operating as a commentary on “the other” and how troublesome being different truly is. At the climax of the gallery subplot, it is exposed that, “We took your art away because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to *prove you had souls at all*,” (260). Much like other oppressed groups, those in the majority hold the delusion of superiority over the oppressed that are subsequently imposed with an inhuman stigma that allows for such atrocities to occur and yet this close relationship assists in the reader’s empathy of Tommy’s final anguished scream. Also, from the extensive time readers spend with Hazel and his cohorts, the ending sentence of

Watership Down, “underground, the story continued,” (478) encourages people to remember that even though the written story has finished, that the world’s adversity, prejudices and problems still carry on. Ultimately, the outsider to normalcy is easily the most adaptable form of real world evaluation within the genre exhibiting political overtones that overlap with confining sentiment and a reader connection that extends beyond the page.

Reaching its crescendo, the outsider moniker of the SSF genre becomes highly pronounced in the fantasy category as its defining characteristics are more overt than the internalized and metaphysical aspects of the former variations. While it is possible for fantasy to incorporate the previously detailed traits of an outsider (like Watership Down), it is more likely that the protagonist, and by extension the reader, will be removed from the supernatural or magical aspect of the narrative. Left to absorb unexpected characters and places, readers of this division of SSF are presented with eerie reminders of their own world and its desperate need for long-overdue improvements.

Evident from its title, LOST plays host to a collection of people who have become so immersed in the minutia of their lives that they consequently lose sense of their identities. Forced together through fate, the castaways find themselves on a mystical island filled with secrets. Introducing ordinary people to the magic-based environment is an easy access route for writers to dictate rules and plotlines that that viewer will unquestioningly follow, a tactic employed in the accompanying subjects of this supernatural subset. Each character that LOST focuses on are faced with their own placement outside of society: physically, by time-travel or mentally/emotionally, from touch-and-go family relations or criminal charges. In a comparable manner, the war

plagued world of Howl's Moving Castel, paints a tumultuous background where Sophie meagerly exists as a hatter in a bustling city and is seen as little more than plain. Her appearance and lack of social prowess places Sophie on the outskirts of society and through a cruel spell, she is physically alerted and displaced. Severely aged and temperamental, Sophie dejectedly removes herself from the city, seeking her own escape alongside the rogue wizard, Howl. He is not much better off, personally or professionally. Unable to commit to friends or family, Howl finds it even more impossible to align himself with any of the feuding armies.

Yearning for freedom from her own war-torn surroundings, young Ofelia's fascination with fairytales firmly positions her outside of the truth in Pan's Labyrinth using the fantastical journey as her form of escapism. Sophie and the losties have no choice but to remain immersed in their magical backdrop whereas Ofelia consciously chooses this supernatural path. The introduction of the lost princess and the startling similarities between her and Ofelia create a dialogue of what is normal in one world and unrealistic in another. This duality helps clarify for Ofelia and the viewer what is appropriate beliefs and behavior. Instructed to fulfill three tasks, Ofelia's charge expresses how uninformed and distanced she is from the supposed fantasy world she once came from. Unlike the greater population and yet close to the previously mentioned mentalities, she is not frightened but rather intrigued by the curiosities and wholly believes that a better life awaits her. Each of these characters are provided with an escape from life's troubles, while ironically, their stories offer viewers the same escape.

LOST's focal episode is "The Constant" during which Desmond is sent skipping through time, requiring a stable connection to another person if he wants the science-

fiction transportation to end. Like his fellow castaways and genre peers, Desmond has a history of unresolved tribulations. However, he was not aboard the pilot episode plane which positions him outside of the series' regulars fondly titled, "losities". In addition to the supernatural placement of the famed island, these people battle through corresponding obstacles in their collective pursuit for happiness as an outsider. The classic quote spoken by Jack says, "If we can't live together, then are going to die alone." Specifically, Desmond achieves this by reconnecting with the love of his life, proudly embracing his outcast identity to win her back.

Desmond's storyline, in stride with Sophie's is an optimistic look at relationships overcoming barriers, even though they are of the magical variety. Although Sophie was aware of the witches and wizards living in her surroundings, much like her fantasy fellows—the losties and Ofelia—her growing knowledge throughout the story at Howl's side is reflective of the viewers as well. Together this pair challenges the stereotypes of what makes a good person as well as a good couple. It is only with the crutch of the other do they finally mature: Howl says, "I feel terrible, like there's a weight on my chest," to which Sophie replies, "A heart is a heavy burden". Learning to love, Sophie's age decreases when she reveals her acceptance of herself. Conversely, Howl ultimately chooses the selfless wizard he desires to become in favor of saving Sophie's life. Meanwhile, Ofelia's commentary on literal escapism is both disappointing and enlightening because in traumatic times, people can create their own sanctuaries. In LOST as in Howl's Moving Castle, the characters transition between reality and their supernatural surroundings, requiring its mystical touch to mend their issues. Unfortunately, as Ofelia's mother states, "There are not fairytales, not for anyone."

Lucky for Ofelia, the losties and Sophie, fantasy is attainable, but for the viewers, the aforementioned films provide that much-needed getaway.

Densely packed with rich characters and illuminating content, the SSF genre employs the outsider as a foolproof manner of connecting readers with translatable material. In its variations, the outsider stresses the improvable and applaudable worldly traits with its whimsical content. Not only is the outsider to reality a psychological window to a collective subconscious, but it additionally demonstrates the significant microcosm of personal development beneficial to everyone. Retaining the most weight of all the divisions of SSF is the outsider to normalcy. This approach plays host to endless possibilities as there are innumerable types of people who feel invisible and yet provide refreshing outlooks, or rather inlooks, on society. Although it is most commonly thought of when discussing this genre, the fantasy dominated outsider to magic allows writers to take people places they could never visit, but actually see every day. As a testament to its versatility, these outsider distinctions are best performed in the aforementioned novels, films and television shows to reflect upon subjects such as friendly antics to the global community. Alas, the presumptuous notion about the genre's name sometimes frightens readers away if they are not privy to the delicate societal appraisal. As seen in the reviewed texts, there is a world of information waiting just a page away. In fact, science-fiction/speculative/fantasy is not fantastical at all. It is a close friend. A stable looking-glass. It is the story contained within all of us that unites humanity.

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