

## ALIENATION IN THE MODERN AMERICAN NOVEL: THE NECESSITY OF DE-GENERALIZING THE TERM

The shattering of previously established values in our century, such as the concept of the world as an ordered reality, the belief in a transcendental Being, and the sense of a purpose in Life, originated the concept of "alienation". According to this term, the modern human being feels a sense of displacement, living in a chaotic and fragmented world. As a result, it seems progressively harder for the human person to be able to find order and meaning in life.

This ideology, rooted in existentialism, has had some repercussion in Modern Literature. A great number of contemporary works of fiction present the self as the major theme and the anti-hero, or alienated man, as the protagonist. However, this term has been used rather broadly by some literary critics, to the extent that it has become a rather common "cliche" when referring to twentieth century fiction. This has been to the detriment of the specificity of the term, which has lost most of its validity as a classifying concept. David Galloway points to this fact:

Since the words "absurd" and "absurdism" have become such popular catchalls for the analysis of contemporary literature, ... literary critics no doubt often commit an unfortunate if understandable "lèse-majesté" in regarding the theme of alienation as the unique province of the contemporary artist, disregarding, as they do, the very fabric of tragedy and much that is best and most viable in romantic fiction. (17-18)

In general terms, critics have used the concept of "alienation" to allude to highly diverse types of experience in Literature. In its most specific use it has been applied to those works where the characters' estrangement is determined by fate: they are born alienated, and there is no possibility for them to create a sense of order in life; they find themselves in a "wasteland". This interpretation reflects Sartre's theories about human life. In a much broader sense, this notion has been used to designate any characters who become estranged when forced to confront the absurd world of the twentieth century. These individuals, unlike the former ones, eventually attain some kind of order and learn to live with the conflict, which is often due to external conditions. It is questionable whether this other type of experience can be really termed as "alienation". Camus' words, as quoted in Galloway, may be useful in order to support this assertion: "A world that can be explained with bad reasons is a familiar world" (5).

An analysis of two twentieth century American novels, paying especial attention to their final chapters, demonstrates how the concept of "alienation" has actually been used to refer to completely disparate experiences in the manner explained above. Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

presents a group of absurd characters in an absurd world with no possible escape. Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, on the other hand, treats the individual as living in a world which does not allow him to fulfill his "spiritual" needs. In the end, however, this individual succeeds in ordering his experience and maintaining some kind of human dignity. In *As I Lay Dying* the ending does not offer any means of escape for the absurd life of the characters due, among other things, to the fatalism present in the novel. Will and Ariel Durant consider this as a pattern in most of Faulkner's fiction:

Faulkner resigned himself, in his books to pessimism, determinism, even fatalism. He spoke of "an infallibility in events". He found not purpose or meaning in history. He spoke of History as something to be borne rather than enjoyed. (Quoted in Rosski 26)

Another factor that does not allow the Bundrens to terminate their state of estrangement is their pathetic nature, which prevents them from viewing the world logically. Sartre affirms that life has no meaning in itself and that only the individual can bring some partial meaning to it by the free choice of his goals and by recognizing responsibility for the results of his actions. The Bundrens seem to have a very clear purpose throughout the novel: to bury Addie Bundren's corpse. However, this action loses its ultimate significance of fulfilling her last will, since each of the members of the family reveals an unconscious egotistic motive for going to Jefferson. In addition, Anse's apparent love towards his wife is soon contradicted by his marriage to another woman. Their decision to send Darl, perhaps the most rational member of the family, to an asylum shows the absurd nature of the family. Their distorted, fragmented vision of reality separates them from society, contributing to their alienation. Their vision of life is undoubtedly not the most adequate one in order to survive in the real world. Their goals have not taken them anywhere, and their situation has not improved at the end of the novel: Dewey Dell is still pregnant, the family has lost one of its members, and their financial situation is still miserable. Consequently, the Bundrens are clear examples of alienated individuals: absurd human beings living in an absurd reality. Even if they attempt to search for some kind of unity, they fail to pursue it in the right manner. In this sense, the concept of "alienation" as Sartre conceives it, can be perfectly applied to this novel.

Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* has also been interpreted as a novel about the alienation of the individual. Paul Comeau, among other critics, considers this as the central theme of the novel. It seems contradictory that two novels with a rather dissimilar depiction of human experience have been classified under the same term. A variety of details make Professor St. Peters' sense of estrangement quite different from the alienation experienced by the Bundrens. First, the Professor is not an absurd character by nature. It is the necessity of confronting a world that he considers absurd which makes him an absurd character. His source of estrangement is based on external factors, the most relevant of which is the materialism and egotism characteristic of his environment. St. Peters finds it difficult to accept that his family and friends have such a superficial, negative attitude in life. This feeling leads him to exclaim: "There was the trouble. If Outland were here to-night, he might say with Mark Antho-

ny: 'My fortunes have corrupted honest men'" (131). On the other hand, St. Peters' sense of inadaptability has not been necessarily present throughout the different periods of his life. He ponders, specially, about a past state of innocence and "delight" during his childhood in Kansas: "Now the vivid consciousness of an earlier state had come back to him, the professor felt that life with this Kansas boy, little as there had been of it, was the realest of his lives" (240).

Similarly, and as opposed to the situation described in *As I Lay Dying*, there is a possibility for him to find some kind of meaning and attain an order in his future life. The process of estrangement which he has experienced in his life is similar to that described by Camus:

The first step in the development of the absurd consists on the individual's shocking recognition of the now apparent meaninglessness of the universe. The second step consists in the absurd man's living the now apparent conflict between his intention (his inner voice) and the reality which he will encounter; finally, the third step consists on his assumption of heroic dimensions through living the conflict and making it his god. (Galloway 16)

There are two channels through which the professor resolves to escape this state. On the one hand, he sees the necessity of learning to live without delight. He needs to go back to the original state of his childhood and recapture his former condition, more natural and less involved in social life. In other words, he needs to experience a process of adaptation and acceptance. On the other hand, he turns his eyes to Augusta, the kind and innocent sewing woman who shares the study room with him. Augusta's simple character represents everything that is "real", as opposed to the false interests of his material society. The attitude towards life that the professor sees in Augusta parallels Camus' conception of a new type of ethical code. As Galloway phrases it: "since man is in a position to edify, without God, a humanism of high nobility, he is in a position to restore human dignity" (17). Therefore, St. Peter's sense of estrangement is not an existential state, inherent to human life. It is caused by his confrontation with an external factor, a society which does not conform to his values. Furthermore, the fact that the professor is able to overcome his dissatisfaction at the end of the book suggests the possibility of finding meaning and unity in life. In this sense, the protagonist of Cather's novel does not represent an alienated man, but rather a man in conflict with a situation.

This clearly shows that the concept of "alienation" loses on occasions its original meaning, which alludes to an individual incapable of finding meaning in an absurd life. It is used, instead, in too general a sense to refer to any conflict between a character and his / her environment. This causes fictional experiences of very disparate natures sometimes to be labelled with this same catch-all term. Specifying or de-generalizing the concept of "alienated self" would help to transform it into a more useful critical tool.

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