

**Question:**

Writers often use a character who is alienated from his or her culture or society in order to explore cultural or social values. Examine this idea with reference to two works studied.

**Response:**

As a Jew in the 16th century Venice, Shylock loses all he values — religion, daughter, and fortune. After being sexually assaulted by Linden at the reservation, Geraldine kept herself away from all her acquaintances. Both Shylock, the antagonist of William Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice*, and Geraldine, mother of the protagonist in Louise Erdrich's novel *The Round House*, are characters who struggle to live through their societies. Shylock is alienated as a result of being a Jewish usurer and his merciless and selfish nature. Geraldine isolates herself because of her guilt of failing to save Mayla, but returns to normal life with care from her family. Regardless of the different causes and results of alienation, both characters' experiences reflect the core societal values of their times. In each story, alienation is shown through character interactions, and its implication on social values is revealed through contrasts. The final results differ when Shylock is dehumanized while Geraldine is healed by the power of land.

Shylock's alienation is shown through his interaction with Christians in Venetian society. His reaction is provocative and unreasonable. For instance, when asked why a pound of flesh, he replies, "if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge." Zeugma is applied to show the two meanings of "feed." In this way, Shylock displays his malicious intention to satisfy his desire for revenge by cutting Antonio's flesh. By saying out loud, Shylock claims himself against

humanism, which is an elevated value in Renaissance, when the play is originally shown. Therefore, he elicits disgust and hatred from Bassanio as well as the audience off the stage. Moreover, Shylock expresses his social isolation as a Jew in Christian Venice. "I will buy with you, sell with you... but I will not eat with you... nor pray with you." By using asyndeton and epistrophe, the speech is sped up and more dramatic. Readers can better feel the anger when Shylock says these words. He thus emphasizes that no more intimate space is possible besides living and trading with the Christians. Thus, he completely retreats from social activities and attributes this to his religion. Therefore, through the exasperation and provocative languages Shylock uses interacting with others, the stereotypical image of "the Jew" as an alienate "other" is shown to the audience.

Similarly, Geraldine's process of alienation can be seen through the change of her interactions with others. Instead of being anguish like Shylock, she remains mostly silent. When Geraldine is startled by Basil's hug, she "flushed darkly," but remains the "frozen suspension of feeling." This is not the silence due to oppression, but rather numbness and refusal to communicate her feelings. By responding to accidents with absolute silence, Geraldine refuses help from others and hence isolates herself from her family. Throughout the novel, this frozen atmosphere is furthered with the symbol of clocks. The stopping old clock implies the end of good old time before Geraldine's absence and silence. The clicking sound of the "ugly new clock", as Joe describes it, amplifies the extreme quietness in the kitchen, creating a stark contrast with the happy family atmosphere before. Joe voices his complaints by describing the clock as "ugly," in the hope that Geraldine would make sounds in the kitchen rather than the mechanical clock. With

the silence during the characters' interactions, Geraldine is alienating herself even further from her families.

Moreover, contrast between characters is used in the Merchant of Venice between Shylock the Jew and Antonio the Christian to show their high regard for mercies and expected conversion of the Jew in Venetian society. This is most evident in the trial scene in Act 4. Shylock, symbolic of the absolute "other," demands justice and refuses to show mercy. He believes that "an eye for an eye" and seeks revenge. By claiming that Antonio is his possession, he equivalents humans as possessions. In comparison, Antonio is ready to sacrifice for Bassanio without complaint. The contrast is thus created between Antonio's generosity and plea for mercy and Shylock's ruthless craving for law despite the dissuasion from the masses. Again, Shylock puts himself at the opposite of the believed value of the majority in the play as well as the Christian audience at the time, who would largely value mercies towards sins. The Victorian audience can also be reminded of the allusions of these two characters to the conflict between Judaism and Christianity. Antonio is the Christ who sacrifices for the sins of man, while Shylock is the Jew expected to convert in order to receive mercy from God. What he deserves in the end satisfies the audience's expectation and believed social values when Shylock is punished for his mercilessness and is converted with the mercy of Christian.

Similarly, contrasts between Geraldine before and after the accident show her alienation and departure from the cultural values of "motherly figures" at the reservation. Before the rape, she is a traditional, child-bearing mother. Joe describes her using an idealized mother picture as

“beautiful” and “calm.” When Geraldine doesn’t come home on time, Bazil’s anxiety also reflects Geraldine as a good mother who has always been taking care of the family. This image is furthered when Joe states that dinner used to be their “ritual” and “communion.” By elevating eating to a spiritual and religious action, both of which are cores to his being and the family, Joe links food with his mother. This is important in the indigenous culture because throughout the novel, women on the reservation, like Clemence and Granda Thunder, are ready to feed the boys. Such a motherly figure also echoes with the traditional story of woman buffalo, who sacrifices herself as food for future generations. However, after the accident, Geraldine stops her motherly role as a child-bearer and food-provider. The stop of Geraldine’s cooking is symbolic of Joe’s loss of his mother’s love, so Joe’s attitude towards his mother shifts accordingly. “Anything would be better...” by thinking about the alternative situations, Joe expresses his complaint about Geraldine’s change. Through Joe’s disappointment at Geraldine’s departure from the “motherly figure” she used to be, the expectations and cultural values towards mothers to be family-centered and child-bearing are evident in Ojibwe culture.

Lastly, Shylock is constantly dehumanized and alienated because of his occupation as a moneylender. This can be attributed to the Christian values on money and morals. The dehumanization is most noticeable when Portia asks at the trial, “who is the Jew, and who is the merchant?” Even though Shylock is a merchant as well, he is dehumanized in a way that his social function as a moneylender is not accepted and he is denied an equal membership of society. This has to do with the Christian’s early belief that spawning money out of money is a sin and fails to obey the law of physics. This can be verified when Antonio claims “I neither lend

nor borrow” at their first encounter. Moreover, because of Shylock’s job, Antonio’s dehumanization of Shylock as a “cut-throat dog” may be rationalized by the Victorian audience, who were blaming Jews for the growing debt in their era. Therefore, by dehumanizing Shylock and denying his occupation as a moneylender, the Christian values are shown that usury is an unacceptable sin. Meanwhile, the reception of the Victorian audience reflects their view of Jews as malicious usurers.

In contrast to Shylock’s further alienation due to dehumanization, Geraldine recovers from her isolation using traditional healing, evident in the power of land, which shows the indigenous worship for nature. Throughout the novel, there is a parallel between Geraldine’s recovery and the flourishing of her garden. After the attack, Geraldine’s flowers are left and “dried to crisps.” Knowing that Joe and Bazil replanted the backyard for her, as the flowers are nourished by land, Geraldine begins her first long talk with Joe. Therefore, the flowers and land are not only a way the family shows love but also an expression of healing power in the indigenous culture. At the end of the story, Geraldine is “kneeling in the garden’s earth,” as a significant sign for Geraldine’s returning to normal life, which can be linked to the indigenous belief of the power of land. Therefore, the highly valued power of nature in the indigenous society is shown through Geraldine’s recovery with traditional land healing.

In conclusion, in both texts, alienated characters are depicted, through which social and cultural values are reflected. This is done through character interactions and contrasts in both texts. The

difference in results can be seen in the dehumanization of Shylock versus land healing for Geraldine. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Christian values like mercy and generosity are emphasized, while jews and usurers are disdained upon. Such values conform with that of its Victorian audience, which serves successfully as a comedy at that time. In *The Round House*, indigenous cultural values about motherly figures and nature worship are revealed with Geraldine's alienation, which helps educate readers of the indigenous culture.

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