The Diversity of the Outsider in Tim Burton’s: Edward Scissorhands, Big Fish, and Alice in Wonderland.

What is important and distinctive about works of literature is that each has its own main theme or purpose. These themes are often created by establishing minor themes and motifs in the work that emphasize the main theme. Similar themes can even be created using drastically different techniques. This is also true in film. For example, the theme of the Outsider is present in several of Tim Burton’s films such as: Edward Scissorhands, Big Fish, and Alice in Wonderland. In Edward Scissorhands and Alice in Wonderland, the motif of physical difference is used to establish the Outsider. Big Fish, on the other hand uses the idea of liminal existence. Each of these motifs is created using different aesthetics. In order to establish these motifs that establish theme of the Outsider, Burton uses shot length and mise-en-scene in Edward Scissor Hands, mise-en-scene and perception in Alice in Wonderland, and voice-over/voice-off and lighting in Big Fish.

Edward Scissorhands is the most apparent outsider of the three films because his physical difference is the most apparent. Despite the obvious clue of giant blades for hands, Burton is able to intensify Edward’s distance from the community using mise-en-scene, more specifically: costumes. When Edward first comes down from the mansion his black covering and pale skin are sharply contrasted with the bright pastel colors of the houses, cars, and clothing of the neighbors. He is immediately labeled as an outsider because his mere appearance causes a disturbance in the community as the women rush to their telephones. Edward maintains his outsider status even after he is given a change of clothes. Although his new outfit no longer has the leather and metal look, it still lacks the color seen in the clothing of the rest of the characters. Also, the safety pins
holding his suspenders together are a small detail that serves as a constant reminder of Edward’s condition. Therefore, with no way to remove his scars or remedy his appearance, Edward is irrevocably labeled as the Outsider.

This effect is then intensified using shot length to emphasize the physical difference marked by Edward’s Scissorhands. At his first dinner with Peg and her family, Edward’s hands take up most of the frame. When the frame shows the family’s point of view, medium shot is used to accentuate both his hands and the difficulty he has eating the food. The shot is close enough to make the metal hands seem bigger than they might actually be. This can be seen as a reflection of what the family member’s are thinking. The strange hands seem larger because they are all anyone can notice. This alone would set up Edward as the outsider, but by keeping the shot medium length all of Edward’s movements and facial expressions are observed. This shows him as an outsider because no normal person could have such a hard time eating peas. When the point of view switches to Edward, Burton employs the use of extreme close up. Edward is physically closer to his hands then the rest of the characters so it makes sense that they would appear to be larger than the previous shot, but the extreme close up makes the scissorhands seem unbelievably large taking up almost the entire frame. This is a reflection of what Edward thinks of himself. All he can see and think of is these monstrous hands from which he has no escape. His own preoccupation with his hands sets Edward apart as an outsider because there is no way the community could fully accept him if he cannot even fully accept himself.

*Alice in Wonderland* shares the motif of physical difference, but Burton establishes it using somewhat different aesthetics. Alice has no obvious physical deformities, but, by experimenting with visual perception, Burton uses Alice’s varying sizes to set her apart. A good
example of this can be seen in the Red Queen’s Garden. Alice’s immense appearance in this scene is emphasized by using a long-focal-length. This technique causes the illusion that there is less distance between planes. The wall behind Alice seems much closer than it may physically be and this makes her seem much larger than she really is. This effect casts Alice as the outsider because she clearly does not belong when compared to the other inhabitants.

Both Alice’s and the other character’s costumes enhance this effect. The costumes of the Red Queen and her followers depict them as being deformed and disproportionate. When Alice is appears out of place among such oddly shaped people, she is portrayed as the Outsider because she is an oddity amongst oddities. The fact that Alice can never seem to fit into her own clothes also shows her to be an outsider because it represents her inability to fit inside herself. When she arrives at the city of the white queen she discovers a suit of armor that is destined for her to wear in order to defeat the Jabberwocky. However, she is not able to fit in it because she is too large. This represents the distance she has from herself and her own life. It portrays her as the outsider because she cannot even fit into what was made for her. At the point when she is able to fit into the armor Alice’s role as the outsider is diminished. She is no longer at a distance from herself because she can fit into her destined costume. This is also shown by the fact that she is also now the same size as the inhabitants of Wonderland.

Burton’s film, *Big Fish*, also expresses the outsider, but it does so by entirely different means. This is because Edward Bloom is not subject to the same mistreatment usually experienced by the Outsider, but instead he is loved by everyone who meets him. In this film Burton uses a combination of voice-over and lighting to establish a liminal existence in which Edward Bloom can only be found somewhere between myth and reality which casts him as an
outsider. Before Edward’s face is ever seen, his voice is heard in the opening credits beginning with voice-over and switching to voice-off. By beginning the sequence with voice-over, Burton is setting up the motif of the story-teller. Commonly the story-teller is an observer rather than a participant in the tales he tells, but Edward is both the teller and the doer of these tales. This is shown when the voice-over changes into voice-off. The seamless transition between the two makes the change hard to notice, therefore, keeping this story-teller motif present. By casting Edward as the story-teller, he is also being depicted as the outsider because he exists both in the myths he tells and the world in which he tells them. So, in Edward’s reality, he exists in neither space but somewhere in between. The stories he tells are not entirely true, if it all, yet he cannot live fully in the physical world around him. This liminal existence causes him to be an outsider to both his family and the mythical world he has created. Even when Edward’s figure is depicted on the screen, one may consider the technique to be voice-off because Burton lights the scenes so that shadows are always covering Edward’s face and mouth. This leaves some doubt that the shadowy figure seen is indeed the voice being heard. The images of him as a man with no face, simply a voice made to seem implacable, reflects what his son thinks of him. The film stresses the dysfunctional relationship between the father and son. The dim lighting shows that this separation is caused by the son not really knowing his father. Edward is depicted as a voice rather than a face to show that all his son knows of him is his stories, most of them being false. This separation from his son casts him as an outsider because he is neither understood nor accepted by one of the people who, in theory, would love him most.

Burton’s varying aesthetics to create the Outsider in each film show just how flexible this thematic element can be. By using these different techniques he does not only vary the effect but
he is able to embellish and define a particular type of outsider that is specific to each film. His use of costume and shot length in *Edward Scissorhands* depicts the traditional outsider who is irrevocably distanced from society based on an unfortunate physical deformation. The experimentation with perception and costuming in *Alice and Wonderland* portrays an outsider who is such by choice and may re-enter society whenever she wishes. Finally, the combination of voice-over/voice-off, and lighting in *Big Fish* shows the Outsider who has been removed from the community due to his own perceived fame and inability to accept the dullness of reality. Just as an author carefully chooses each word of his story, Burton carefully uses and stresses specific aesthetics in order to have each film tell its particular story just right.


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