

‘Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous’: *The Great Gatsby* in the 1980s

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Abstract

This essay illustrates the application of reception study, the subfield of literary history that emphasises the historical experiences of readers, to pedagogical contexts by investigating the teaching of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) in American high schools during the 1980s. Focusing on the episode in which Jay Gatsby leads Nick and Daisy on a tour of his mansion, the analysis draws on published lesson plans and other primary source documents and reimagines the contemporary cultural contexts to reconsider the novel’s lessons about social class during a decade that saw escalating wealth disparity, mirroring Fitzgerald’s 1920s and anticipating our present.

Keywords:

- *The Great Gatsby*
- Reception Study
- Secondary Education – The United States
- Wealth Disparity
- Literature Instruction
- 1980s

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I didn't read F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) in high school. I think my first encounter was in the late Constance Coiner's course on American and British Modernism at the State University of New York, Binghamton, in the Fall of 1988. I don't have a concrete memory, only a vague recollection of a mental image of those 'three modish negroes' and their 'white chauffeur' on the Queensboro Bridge, and Coiner commenting on Nick Carraway's contemplation: "Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge," I thought, "anything at all..." (Fitzgerald 2004, 69). I didn't know, at the time, that my professor was a campus radical, especially involved in working-class and feminist issues. Her alma mater, UCLA, would later honor her memory with the Constance Coiner Prize for undergraduate research in these areas.¹ So I wonder, in retrospect, about how she taught *Gatsby*, and how we experienced it. Without any direct documentary evidence, such as Coiner's lecture notes or our own response papers, I can only arrive at a speculative reconstruction of this dynamic encounter between a 'masterpiece', a leftist professor, and a group of mostly middle-class state-university students (including one who seemed constantly to have his hand in the air) in central New York during the final year of the Reagan administration. I think, because I don't remember, that Coiner may have warned us to not to let *Gatsby* throw dust in our eyes (to paraphrase Tom Buchanan), and prompted us to critique of its representations of class and gender (2004, 178).

A text, its readers, and a historical time and place, with its cultural cross-currents and contemporary events: these are the criteria for the interpretive approach known as reception study, just as a text, its author, and a historical time and place are the coordinates for conventional literary historicism. Surely, as introductions and reader guides assert, some

knowledge of the ‘Roaring Twenties’ or the ‘Jazz Age’ and the basics of Fitzgerald’s biography is essential for understanding what Fitzgerald intended by *Gatsby*. What *Gatsby* has meant to generations of readers, however, especially after the decades-long interval between its publication and its popular success, has also been shaped largely by these readers’ own individual and collective experiences, by what the reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss terms their ‘horizon of understanding’ (2001). Reading *Gatsby* again, in 2017, links me to the interpretive community I read it with in 1988; in turn, reading the novel in 1988 linked me to readers in previous generations.²

College and secondary-school students who read curricular classics, along with their teachers, are participants in a cultural tradition. Typically, they don’t consider all the links in the chain; they relate their reading to their present moment, and they skip right to the beginning, to the anchor in the author’s historical moment, or, in the case of historical novels like *The Scarlet Letter*, still further into a fictional past. The premise of this essay, though, is that it is interesting and rewarding to bring intervening links into view, and to consider our collective encounters with canonical texts as experiences that connect us with earlier interpretive communities. With regard to *The Great Gatsby*, specifically, this essay proposes to look forward by looking back, to think about its implications for equity not by illuminating its Jazz Age context but by imaginatively joining a class of high-school students in their reading of the second half of the fifth chapter, which recounts the tour of Gatsby’s mansion, during a decade that, dismayingly, is very much impinging on our present. Considering pedagogical interpretations of this scene against the backdrop of 1980s culture, I argue, highlights the novel’s troubling mixed messages about wealth and morality.

Readers tend to leave fewer traces of their activity than do authors, so the sources for reception study can be scant. However, one site for which the evidence of reception can be relatively rich, although it’s generally overlooked by academic literary scholars, is the secondary-school classroom. We can get a general idea of how works were taught and learned in different eras by examining published curriculum guides, classroom editions, and articles in pedagogy journals, and perhaps a more specific idea by analysing sometimes handwritten ephemera, when available, such as lesson plans and student essays. This sort of pedagogical reception study was the framework for an undergraduate honors seminar that I taught in Fall 2017 at Stony Brook University, in the same state university system as my undergraduate alma mater. The reading list for ‘The High School Canon’ comprised eight of the ‘top ten’ most frequently assigned book-length works in grades 9-12 in the United States in the 1980s, as reported by Arthur Applebee for the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature (1989, 4). I was surprised by how many of the sixteen students in my seminar had read these books in high school (Table 1). (Thirteen of them had read *The Great Gatsby*, more than any other work, perhaps in part because most had grown up in Long Island, where it is set.) It’s not a statistically relevant sample, but at least an indication of the canon’s continuity into the twenty-first century. Our class was an opportunity to revisit these curricular classics, to think about literature-instruction as a multi-generational cultural tradition, and to investigate the learning objectives and larger social purposes in the teaching of canonical works.

It was in preparation for the seminar that I read *Gatsby* for the first time in many years. I brought to it the same questions that I brought to its counterparts in the canon. Why this book? What sorts of lessons has it conveyed for students? Reading it skeptically, unencumbered by preconceived notions of *Gatsby*’s greatness – ‘Forget *great*’, the book critic Maureen Corrigan

recently asserted, ‘*The Great Gatsby* is the *greatest*’ (2014, 3) – I was unimpressed. I felt utterly unconvinced that Gatsby, or for that matter Nick, were characters worthy of admiration. And for all the vaunted beauties of its prose, I found the plot mechanics, especially those leading to the fatal climax, to be contrived. Mostly, thinking of the perspective of working- and middle-class high-school students, I wondered how much they could identify with the novel’s version of the American Dream, and with the sector of society it famously portrayed: ‘the Yale Club’, ‘the Plaza Hotel’, ‘West Egg’ and ‘East Egg’, with that overdetermined symbol of the green light at the end of Daisy Buchanan’s dock (2004, 21, 56, 125). Why should they care? I thought especially about student-readers during the 1980s, a decade that, economists agree, definitively put the United States on a steep trajectory to achieve the level of income and wealth disparity we saw in the late 1920s and we see again today (Saez and Zucman 2014).

Sure enough, the novel’s preoccupation with the wealthy elite has been an impediment to student engagement, but also a key to its social significance. Long before she came to regard *Gatsby* as ‘America’s greatest novel about class’, Corrigan, as a middle-class student in Queens in the early 1970s, ‘thought the Great Gatsby was a boring novel about rich people’ (2014, 3, 16). David Dowling, in the 2006 National Council of Teachers of English volume *The Great Gatsby in the Classroom: Searching for the American Dream*, acknowledges the difficulty in teaching a novel about ‘a social class’ most student ‘have little experience with’, but contends that it’s ‘a tremendously important novel because it addresses the issues involved when core values such as honesty and hard work come in conflict with the desire for money and material things’ (2006, 2). So how has the novel addressed those issues? What, in the hands of teachers, has it taught students about wealth and materialism? Are they supposed to admire Gatsby’s desire, as Nick apparently does, even as they recognise that its object, in Daisy Buchanan, is not

only unattainable but unworthy? ‘It’s not the green light, stupid,’ writes Corrigan, ‘it’s Gatsby’s *reaching* for it that’s the crucial all-American symbol of the novel’ (2014, 5). That’s a dubious distinction, but also a difficult one to bring across in the classroom. How does that work?

In a lesson plan on *The Great Gatsby* published in 1989, Lynn P. Shackelford of Greenville, South Carolina listed the following two-part discussion question: ‘What does the novel say about materialism? What, if any, are the similarities between the 1920s and the 1980s?’ (1989, 11). For students in the 1980s, a green light signaling an unbridgeable distance between modest roots and extreme wealth was on constant, garish display. Jim Fletcher, a high-school teacher from Georgia who produced a lesson-plan on *Gatsby* as part of a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute in 1987, suggested that ‘students who avidly follow every episode of *Dallas* or *Dynasty* will have a frame of reference for the glittering veneer and rotten core of the unspeakably rich’ (1987, 65). In addition to these primetime soap operas, both of which, significantly, have had twenty-first-century revivals, other cultural referents also come to mind, such as Robin Leach’s superlatively tacky *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* (1984-1995), a precursor to much of today’s reality TV.

For some, *Lifestyles* epitomised the twisted values of the 1980s. In a 1991 speech, Sharon Pratt Dixon, then Mayor of Washington, DC, lamented that while her own generation’s President, had inspired service (‘ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country’), her daughters’ generation’s President had gotten elected in 1980 by appealing to self-interest (‘Are you better off today than you were four years ago?’).³ Similarly, whereas she had come home from school to wholesome shows ‘like Howdy Doody and the Mouseketeers’, her daughter had come home and watched programs like ‘Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous’. She explained: ‘That speaks volumes about the changed ethic in America, because

ultimately the people that my children were asked to look up to were models strictly interested in amassing personal wealth – Donald Trump and Ivan Boesky – men who basically contributed nothing to anyone’ (*The National Chronicle* 1991). During the Reagan Era, both Trump and Boesky, who was infamously implicated in an insider-trading scandal, drew comparisons to Gatsby. Together with Leach and *Lifestyles*, they were part of the swirl of glitz and greed on the reader’s horizon during the ‘Roaring ‘80s’ (Smith 1988, 210).

Leach himself recognised *Gatsby*’s relevance to his show: addressing the turn from 1980s expansion to 1990s recession in a *New York Times* interview, he commented that “‘there’s more fascination with a Gatsby in a depression, when no one’s rich, than in a time when everyone’s rich”” (Collins 1990). His analysis is wrong; there was no interest in *Gatsby* during the Great Depression; it became popular during the post-war era, when there was an increasing proportion of stakeholders in the American Dream. Nevertheless, for the occasion, this ‘lower-middle-class’ Englishman with a ‘famous harsh, manic voice’ (Collins 1990) might be an appropriate selection to imagine reading out loud as Nick followed Daisy and their host ‘through period bedrooms swathed in rose and lavender silk and vivid with new flowers, though dressing-rooms and poolrooms, and bathrooms, with sunken baths...’ (Fitzgerald 2004, 91). Gatsby’s home was indeed the 1920s counterpart to the type of mansion students would have seen on TV.

‘Why’, asked one of Fletcher’s discussion questions, ‘does Gatsby want to take Daisy on a tour of his mansion?’ (1987, 61). The answer, presumably, is that he wanted to impress her with his wealth, to demonstrate that he had attained the class status he had lacked five years earlier. The understanding that his materialism was a means to an end, a romantic end, underlies the moral ambiguity of the novel, which holds Gatsby to a different standard than the other

characters. Indeed, in terms of value, he's 'worth the whole damn bunch put together', as Nick declares near the conclusion (2004, 154). Why should that be?

On reflection, the case for Gatsby's relative greatness is pretty strained, and it's a puzzling message to bring across to students. The common recognition that he's a flawed character has the corollary that he is also tragic and heroic. 'Gatsby is noble', Fletcher wrote, and presumably, like many teachers taught his students: 'despite the technical illegality of his methods, he has literally made himself. He has followed the 'rags to riches' path, and his motives have been far nobler than crass materialism'. In contrast, he added 'we find Daisy, Tom, Jordan, and Myrtle to be moral bankrupts whose choices and life-styles reflect the shallowness of their being' (1987, 64). 'Nobler', because he was idealistic rather than materialistic, a 'dreamer', as Margaret Lukens wrote for *English Journal* in 1987, characterised by 'his generosity, his capacity for love, and his willingness to give all in pursuit of his ideal woman' (1987, 46). A business professor who taught *Gatsby* during the 1980s in a course on ethics opined that while Tom and Daisy 'are careless, shallow people living in an eternal moral adolescence', we 'admire' Gatsby for being 'true to himself or at least to his invented self'; 'for taking a path that, in his case, seems to rise to the level of a moral conviction' (McAdams 1993, 655, 656). I would argue that readers admire Gatsby and deplore the others because they're told to by an eloquently sanctimonious narrator, seconded by literary critics and teachers. 'While Gatsby was driven to succeed and change', wrote a student in an essay published in 1988 in the journal of Oak Park and River Forest High School in Illinois, 'Daisy was still a frivolous, carefree woman who had no desire to change her behavior' (Donovan 1988, 48). Here the judgment, echoing Nick's, which perhaps expressed Fitzgerald's, as applied to a fictional representation of a bored, wealthy woman trapped in a loveless, socially-sanctioned marriage, seems somewhat inequitable.

Daisy’s plight may be that she is too materialistic to give herself over to romance but too romantic to be fully satisfied by materialism. In Gatsby’s bedroom, the materialism was figuratively embodied by materials. He began tossing ‘shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray’; the reader, like Daisy, is bombarded with sumptuous details: ‘the soft rich heap’ of ‘shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue’. Memorably, Daisy was moved to tears: ‘Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily’ (2004, 91–92). It is a representation that seems tailor-made for a discussion question like the one posed by Fletcher: ‘Is there any significance to Daisy’s reaction to the shirts? Explain’ (1987, 65). Daisy’s own explanation contributes little: “‘They’re such beautiful shirts”, she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. “It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such – such beautiful shirts before”” (2004, 92). Nick is unhelpful: Daisy’s quoted speech is followed by a section break, a lapse in the narrative, leaving the reader, the student, to parse its significance. Presumably, the explanation for her tears has to do with the metaphysics of romantic regret, the impossibility of recovering lost time, of undoing the recent past.

For many students in this era, their visualisation of this scene, and of the novel generally, would have been prepopulated by Jack Clayton’s 1974 film adaptation, in the same way that for readers today Fitzgerald’s characters may be animated by the cast of Baz Luhrman’s 2013 remake. Teachers have used the films in the classroom, and some students may even have had ‘now a major motion picture’ editions. ‘Obtain if you can the film version of *The Great Gatsby* starring Robert Redford and Mia Farrow’, suggested Shackelford. ‘It paints a memorable portrait of the excessive opulence of Gatsby’s world’ (1989, 10). In 2017, one of my own students, Justin

Lerner, juxtaposed YouTube clips from the 1974 and 2013 films on our course blog, and questioned the shirt-tossing scene’s message. For Justin, the films, even more than the novel, promote ‘materialism and gender stereotypes’. He wondered what high school students might ‘take away about the lavish lifestyle’ depicted in *Gatsby*’s fifth chapter. ‘Is it something to be desired, or does the materialism subtract from its appeal?’⁴ Shackelford, speaking from the 1980s, seems to anticipate this question: ‘the glittering world of the Roaring Twenties appeals to students, yet at the same time they are able to detect the artificiality and moral bankruptcy of the society Fitzgerald depicts’ (1989, 10). The tendency of Hollywood, however, enamored of movie stars and romance without much interest in class-critique, would be to accentuate the glitter, and mute the moral judgment. Why did Daisy cry? Because *Robert Redford* did all that out of love for her, and still the pile of shirts could never mount high enough.

Both film adaptations, by resequencing events so that the scene culminates with Daisy crying over the shirts, *Gatsby* consoling her, and Nick taking leave of the reunited couple, deplete the rhetorical effects that intrude upon the romance with doubt and foreboding. One of these is *Gatsby*’s brief phone conversation with one of his criminal associates (“‘Yes... Well, I can’t talk now.... I can’t talk now, old sport...’”), which Fitzgerald implausibly contrives to remind the reader that *Gatsby*’s lavish fortune was ill-gotten (2004, 93). That detail, too, may have had particular associations during a decade signposted by Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street* (1987). The mantra of the iconic antagonist Gordon Gekko – ‘Greed is good’ – inspired by an actual speech by Boesky, continues to reverberate. The movie depicts a generational conflict in values, pitting the unionised middle-class against the rising generation’s financial industry. It’s clear whose side Stone was on, but in order to deliver the moral he had first to depict the

enticements of fabulous wealth, and as with *Gatsby* there was no guarantee the lesson would stick.

A final significant detail, from the fictional house tour, was the background music: specifically, the house guest Klipspringer’s rendition of the foxtrot ‘Ain’t we got fun’, which was first published in 1921 and, partly because of *Gatsby*, has become emblematic of the 1920s. The song receives little notice in the critical and pedagogical literature on *Gatsby*, but it warrants analysis as a snippet of re-contextualised satire: a privileged hanger-on in a nouveau-riche man’s mansion singing a song that represents the voices of the indigent. Fitzgerald calls attention to the lyrics, setting them up with one of Nick’s epochal meditations on the outside world:

It was the hour of a profound human change, and excitement was generating on the air:

‘One thing’s sure and nothing’s surer

The rich get richer and the poor get – children.

In the meantime,

In between time—————’ (2004, 95)

It’s on this note that Nick goes over to say goodbye to *Gatsby* and Daisy. The song itself, in full and in its original context, is subject to interpretation. As it appears in *Gatsby*, it provides an occasion to think about the drastic wealth disparity that characterised the novel’s moment of production and, for readers from 1980 to the present, its moments of reception. ‘The rich get richer and the poor get – children’ accurately describes the combined effects of Reagan-era fiscal policies and the higher fertility rate among the poor (Lichter and Eggebeen 1993). By far, the larger proportion of *Gatsby*’s young readers have found themselves on the more impoverished side of this expanding divide.

For them, *Gatsby* has offered a version of the American Dream that has entailed continuously striving to reach 'a green light', an 'orgastic future', that has remained always beyond their horizon (2004, 180). So, as Shackelford asked in 1989, 'What seems to be his message about the American Dream as expressed in the last two paragraphs of the novel?' (1989, 11). Arguably, the teaching of *Gatsby* has contributed to the changing understanding of the American dream as the longshot success, of beating the odds, rather than climbing an accessible ladder to financial security. During the 1980s, this more modest dream was indeed being 'borne back ceaselessly into the past'. An irony of *Gatsby*'s famous final lines is that during the post-war era, for many Americans, helped along by the G.I. Bill and union-negotiated contracts, this more modest dream didn't involve rowing 'against the current' (2004, 180); the tide had been favorable. During the 1980s, it began to shift back to the way it had been in the 1920s; in 2018, we are just about there.

This article is intended to showcase the concept of the pedagogical reception study. I suggest that it would be useful for student readers of *Gatsby* today to consider the novel not simply as a relic from a distant past but as one that has been handed down through generations, accompanied by traditional interpretations and aesthetic and moral judgments. A reception study approach, paradoxically, may free them, and their teacher, of some of this weight. Reconstructing the changing horizons of past readers can help students recognise themselves as historical readers in their own present.

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¹ As UCLA’s Center for the Study of Women explains in the description of the Constance Coiner Undergraduate Prize, Coiner died with her daughter on TWA Flight 800 in 1996.

² For an illustration of this diachronic perspective, please visit ‘The *Great Gatsby* across the Changing Horizons of Student Readers,’ an interactive timeline, at <http://andnewman.org/tc/gatsby/ggtl>.

³ Referring to John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address (1961) and the October 28, 1980 Presidential debate between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter (CPD 2015).

⁴ Cited with permission.

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