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Jessica Brown
Grand Valley State University

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Teaching *The Great Gatsby*: Challenging Canonicity

Jessica Brown

Grand Valley State University

The Great Gatsby is one of the quintessential novels of the 1920's. F. Scott Fitzgerald and Jay Gatsby are names known by adults all across the United States. Virtually every high school student graduates having read *The Great Gatsby*, and Fitzgerald's classic's popularity is hardly limited to high school English classrooms. Several dramatic adaptations have attempted to perfect the voice of Nick Carraway and to unravel the mysteries of Jay Gatsby. In addition to staged readings and theatrical interpretations, there have been five feature length film adaptations, including Baz Luhrmann's most recent adaptation, set to come out in May of 2013 – nearly ninety years after *Gatsby* was originally published. The novel has never gone out of print since its publication in 1925, and “sells 10 times as many copies per year as it did cumulatively in Fitzgerald's lifetime,” according to Charles Scribner III, whose great-great-grandfather founded Charles Scribner's Sons, the famous New York publisher who discovered Fitzgerald (Keller 2000). What is it about this novel that has caused it to persist for generations and makes it seem likely to persist for the foreseeable future? The history of how this novel came to be a staple in the American literary canon and its consistency in English classrooms across the country is complicated, but worth looking into. If students are involved in a conversation about *Gatsby*'s place in the American literary canon and are engaged in a wider variety of texts written in that era of American history, they can develop strong critical thinking skills and better understand the societal implications of Fitzgerald's great work.

In a study of curricula and instruction in the United States, Applebee (1993) found that *The Great Gatsby* ranked in the top ten most commonly taught novels in public, catholic, and independent high schools across the country. Similarly, *Gatsby* was one of the three most popular titles, along with *The Scarlet Letter* and *Huckleberry Finn*, in all three school categories in

eleventh grade English classrooms, the year that American Literature is typically required for high school students. Fitzgerald also ranks in the top ten most commonly taught authors of book-length works in both public and independent schools. It is worth noting that of the top ten most commonly taught authors in all three categories of schools there were no minority authors and only one woman author (Harper Lee), an issue which will be addressed later in this paper. Additionally, when asked about the amount of freedom public school teachers had in choosing the texts read in their classrooms, a very small amount of teachers (5.3 percent) had little to no leeway in their selections, but less than a third of the teachers (29.6 percent) had complete freedom of choice when selecting texts. *Gatsby* was not always such a popular choice, but to understand how it came to be a staple in American literature courses requires looking back to before American literature was even considered to have literary merit.

Previous to the 1920's, it was rare to find literature by American authors on a syllabus at all, let alone to have American literature be taught as its own separate subject as it often is today. Before World War I, English classrooms were largely structured around classical European authors, especially English authors. Those authors were presented “in terms of literary 'greatness,' while American literature was taught more typically in connection with historical contexts” (Renker 2010). The question of “What is American Literature?” became especially debated in the 1920's, spurred on by the patriotism felt by Americans after the first world war (Renker 2010). Implementation of American authors into English curricula, especially at a post-secondary level, was still met with a lot of resistance from English scholars “who considered American literature a field so easy that non-specialists could teach it and so unscholarly that anyone who could read English could pick it up as a sideline and teach it to others” (Renker

2010). Patriotism following World War I started the conversation about including American literature in English courses, but it was not until after World War II that there was “an outpouring of interest in the topic, both domestically and abroad” (Renker 2010). The American authors that were chosen to be major staples in English classrooms then were deemed the American Renaissance authors: Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman. Those five authors continued to dominate the study of American literature for four decades following World War II. It has only been in the last several decades that more modern authors have been included in American literature courses, despite the fact that Fitzgerald was an influential writer of the 1920's, a time where American literature as we know it was starting to be recognized as having academic value.

Although the texts that have been chosen for English classrooms have undergone many changes in the last century, the instructional practices that continue to inform how literature is taught have not altered as much as might be expected. Previous to World War I, students in literature classes were taught that it was their job to “get it right” (Chambers and Gregory 2006). They were expected to internalize what the teacher had to say and report back the same interpretation that the teacher had expressed to them because the teacher's opinion was the correct opinion. This teacher-centered instructional tradition persisted even through the revolution of New Criticism becoming the most popular way to interpret literature during the mid-twentieth century. Unfortunately for many books, including *The Great Gatsby*, New Criticism looked at the language and aesthetics of literature while ignoring the greater contexts in which the texts were written. This critical method largely reinforced the practice of teacher-centered instruction, as students continued to rely on the teacher's reading of the language of the

text as the correct interpretation. This left out discussions of the parts of literature that, as

Chambers and Gregory (2006) point out, make literature a humanistic experience:

As much as teachers tend to value literary experience for its own sake, they do not value it – for themselves or for their students – if 'its own sake' means supposing that it exists, or could exist, apart from the everyday lives in which human beings laugh, suffer, fear, love and die.

Fitzgerald certainly provides an abundance of brilliant prose in *Gatsby*, full of imagery and symbolism ready to be analyzed and interpreted in a New Critical style. It is no surprise then, that *Gatsby's* place in the canon was solidified by the time Applebee conducted his study of American secondary English classrooms. There is a reason that the green light at the end of Daisy's dock has become such a popular symbol of hope and why the color yellow at the center of daisies and eggs will continue to evoke ideas of corruption at the center of the outwardly pure Old Money families. This is not to say that *Gatsby* is taught without any mention of contexts such as the coming of the Great Depression or bootlegging because of prohibition in the 1920s. But New Criticism certainly helped *Gatsby's* path to becoming a Great American Novel.

Gatsby has continued to be a staple in the American literary canon, and therefore a staple in American literature courses, but there are ways in which teachers can help students examine the novel more critically and potentially challenge *Gatsby's* place in the canon. First, teachers need to inform students about the contexts that *Gatsby* was written in and the biases it portrays. Teacher-centered New Critical instruction falls under the category of what Applebee (1996) calls “knowledge-out-of-context.” He argues instead that literature should be taught by taking the contexts and biases that literature was written in and applying them to the experiences of the

students and the modern world. He calls this form of instruction “knowledge-in-action.” Reading texts in context allows us to “learn to draw upon many different traditions that provide alternative, often complimentary, ways of knowing and doing – of defining the world and existing within it,” which allows students and teachers to construct knowledge-in-action together. Without knowing those traditions, students have no hope of connecting what they are reading in school to their own lives, which is a shame, since literature exists in part to forge a connection between the reader and writer, despite what generation or culture the writer comes from. As Applebee points out, “texts live long after their authors have left the conversation because this process of reconstrual allows texts to be made relevant in new contexts, by new participants” (1996).

Many teachers start out with good intentions behind what they are teaching their students, but quickly revert to what is most comfortable and familiar to them. Unfortunately, the way that educators were taught to read literature in their schooling experience is not necessarily the most beneficial for their students later. Teachers do not intend to give their students a sub-par literature experience for the sake of their own comfort and ease, but that is often what ends up happening anyway. According to Applebee (1996):

Although teachers claimed to have broad humanistic goals for literature instruction (building interest in reading, encouraging creativity and independent thinking), observation of classroom practice found that the teaching of literature continued to be a relatively traditional enterprise. Knowledge about text – in particular, knowledge of its parts and how they contribute to the agreed-upon “author's meaning” – dominated most lessons.

How, then, can teachers with the best of intentions for their students make sure that they are practicing methods that accomplish their “humanistic goals for literature instruction?” To begin with, they can make sure they know the purposes behind teaching texts such as *The Great Gatsby*. Telling students that they are reading a novel simply because it is required or because it is a book that the teacher enjoys are not good enough reasons to introduce a novel into an English classroom (Chambers and Gregory 2006). Luckily, finding good purposes behind texts should not be too complicated for teachers to discover when armed with the the fact that the ideas of historical tradition, moral growth, and societal commentary are important to consider when reading texts. Purposes for reading *The Great Gatsby* can range from examining American society's materialism, to the interpreting the persistence and changes of the American Dream since the 1920's, to identifying and building a community around the well known and deeply felt emotions that accompany lost lives and lost love. As long as the teacher is aware of their purposes for having students read the text and communicating those purposes with students, quality conversations and comprehension of both the text and the human experience represented by the text are within reach.

Once the purposes for potential texts are decided on, teachers must put together the syllabus for their course. If done correctly, a thorough understanding of the selected texts and of the students, “combined with the teacher's value judgments and enthusiasms, can result in courses that are novel and exciting for teachers and students alike” (Chambers and Gregory 2006). This process is far from simple, however. As Applebee (1993) found, less than a third of teachers have total freedom over which texts are required in their curriculum. This can be a tricky balance between what the school requires to be taught and what the teacher thinks the

most engaging and beneficial texts are for the students. However, even texts that the teacher finds “less than ideal can be transformed when embedded in a new conversational domain,” (Applebee 1996). Even if required canonical texts are not what teachers might have chosen if given complete freedom, it is the duty of the teacher to determine the purposes and uses those texts have in the curriculum and to structure lessons and discussions around those purposes. This is not to say that teachers should blindly accept the list of texts given to them and teach the texts as if they are the only works of literary merit that students might read. Doing so would revert classrooms back to the ideologies of before the first world war by implying that the only texts of worth are ones that have been chosen to be a part of the canon, which would further imply that texts written by women and by multicultural authors do not have as much value as those written by white men.

Reading required canonical texts does, however, present teachers with an opportunity for students to look critically at the literary canon and to have frank conversations about how those texts came to be viewed as Great Works and what values those texts have brought to the forefront of society. Teachers then can facilitate conversations with their students about whether the values imbibed on society by the literary canon foster equality and social justice among the various races, genders, socioeconomic statuses, and other demographics that make up American culture. Such conversations can allow students to view the world with an informed and critical eye and to actively question whether social norms are truly just. Viewing texts critically while examining the contexts in which they were written and how they came into the canon can help students “understand much more firmly that cultural priorities and values...are not givens, abstracted from history, but the results of historical clashes between contending groups and classes” (Lauter

2010). Teachers can use their expert understanding of such texts and issues to take less than ideal requirements placed on them by administrators and turn them into extremely valuable learning experiences.

For *Gatsby* in particular, there are many misrepresented or under represented groups that could be examined in the classroom. For example, what kinds of stereotypes does Fitzgerald's description of Meyer Wolfsheim promote? Are they fair or socially just? How are women portrayed in the novel? How would the story be different if it were told from the viewpoint of Daisy, Jordan, or Myrtle? The people who work in the Valley of Ashes are extremely under represented. Who do those people represent? What kinds of values are expressed because of this under representation? There are only some of the ways to examine the values and societal messages *Gatsby* teaches by examining these groups that are not given strong voices, if they are given voices at all. In addition, supplementing *Gatsby* with other texts written in the 1920s by those misrepresented or under represented groups can give students a wider view of the time and a better lens through which to view *Gatsby* critically and discuss its place in the canon.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, teachers given the freedom to choose what they consider to be “the best” texts for their courses need to take an equal amount of care in structuring syllabi and conversations, as even “the 'best' materials can be stripped of their interest if they are not made a part of a living tradition of conversation, one that will sustain competing interpretations, exploration, and debate” (Applebee 1996). It is the responsibility of the teacher to constantly rethink and revise the syllabus to fit the needs of students. Changing a curriculum once it has been practiced for several years can be a lot of work, but if teachers truly want to maintain their humanistic goals for their students they must take into account that the needs of

students differ from year to year and generation to generation. As Lauter (2010) points out, “the initiation of a syllabus is, or certainly should be, a creative act of scholarship that involves relearning the literature regularly, understanding more recent developments and discoveries, making a range of decisions of intertextuality and sequence, and the like.” Only then can conversations surrounding these texts remain novel and engaging.

In addition to carefully structuring conversations about canonical texts such as *The Great Gatsby*, it is important to supplement those texts with literature from varying viewpoints within the theme or time period that the teacher is structuring the unit on. As evidenced by Applebee's 1993 study and discussed by numerous other English scholars, white, male authors dominate the texts commonly taught in schools. Paul Lauter is one of the main proponents of creating a new, more diverse set of canonical texts. The lack of female and multicultural authors is a problem, he points out, and “we must be aware that no culture values all experiences equally and that our curricula ... have validated certain experiences at the expense of others” (1991). The way English courses have been constructed and the texts that are read most frequently send very strong messages to students about whose words and experiences have the most value, and, consequently, whose have the least. It is not the intention of English teachers or administrators who set up curricula to tell students from minority backgrounds that writers who come from similar backgrounds to them are of less cultural and societal value, but that is what happens nonetheless. The idea that females or minority authors produce work that is not as valuable as work by white, male authors is, of course, a societal construct that is untrue. There is hardly a lack of literature written by women and multicultural authors, yet schools study white, male authors far and beyond more frequently than women and multicultural authors. This issue is

perpetuated by mandated curriculums and texts that English teachers are being required to teach. While there have been some movements toward creating a more diverse and inclusive set of texts, there is still a long way to go before the texts that educators are having students read accurately reflects the demographic makeup of high school students across the country (Lauter 1991).

While teachers may not have complete freedom in choosing texts in their classrooms, very few teachers (only 5.3 percent in Applebee's 1993 study) have are unable to choose any of the texts they teach. With any leeway that a teacher may have, it would be in the best interest of the students, whether they be of a diverse population or not, to try and round out the curriculum with multicultural authors and female authors so that students may be given “opportunities to learn of experiences and cultures not their own and to encounter and to begin to judge differing values” (Lauter 1991). Teachers need to familiarize themselves with texts from a variety of authors so they can supplement, if not fully diversify, their curriculums with texts of great literary value. This does not mean that teachers should throw texts into their syllabi written by authors from varying backgrounds simply to say that they have included variety of cultures in their curriculum, but rather that they find texts of equal or greater literary value to those typically taught in classrooms. Doing so will demonstrate the value of a variety of viewpoints which students might come from and enrich the curriculum with talented writers. Teachers who truly have their students in mind when designing their syllabi will continually update their curricula to include the greatest and most powerful variety of texts that can help their students take the most away from the course. As Lauter (1991) says, “the job of reconstructing American literature is part of a broader movement for equal and fulfilling education. And its importance lies precisely

in placing the study of our national cultures (plural) at the heart of educational renewal.” If, as so many English teachers claim, we are to encourage morality in our students, we must as teachers demonstrate the value of equality through the texts we choose to have students read.

For *The Great Gatsby* in particular, there are a wealth of texts from a great variety of authors and genres which would help students to further understand the societal viewpoints and cultural changes that were taking place during the Roaring 20's. For example, a teacher might have students read selected essays by Zelda Fitzgerald and use them to provide a differing viewpoint on Daisy and of women of wealth in that time. Allowing them to look at Daisy from a lens other than the heroic romanticism that Nick Carraway provides could shed new light on Daisy's actions and motivations. One might also find it rewarding to look at writers of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and W.E.B. Dubois to compare the themes and struggles of those writers to *Gatsby* and to think critically about how the contexts and biases in which the texts were written influences the ideals that are represented in their writing. The American Dream could also be very interesting and enlightening to look at from more views than just Fitzgerald's upper-class materialism and romanticism. Including authors from Harlem Renaissance could allow students to analyze writers' views on society based on their backgrounds and experiences, despite the fact that Long Island and Harlem are geographically not very far from each other.

There are a wealth of non-Harlem Renaissance poets from that era as well, including Edna St. Vincent Millay and T.S. Eliot (“The Waste Land” could be a good choice for examining issues with modern society both then and now.). It might also be powerful to examine the roots of jazz music in comparison to modern punk or rap music and have students discuss music as a

form of rebellion and a sign of changing times. Since there have been five movies made about *The Great Gatsby*, perhaps an activity could be put together where students watch clips or trailers from the movies and compare the interpretations of the different directors, analyzing how the times in which each movie was produced affected the way the characters were portrayed. Providing a wealth of supplemental material and allowing students to experience a variety of viewpoints and cultures from the 1920's would allow students to look at the novel critically. Students would be better able to understand the purposes and themes represented by *Gatsby* if they are fully informed of the contexts and biases in which it was written, and would be able to further connect to (or disagree with) the characters and their struggles than if instruction was solely focused on Fitzgerald's language and literary devices out of context.

The Great Gatsby is undeniably a great work and has its place in American literature classrooms across the country. It is very important, however, that if teachers value encouraging high humanistic ideals in their students that they do not teach *Gatsby* out of context. Fitzgerald's language is intricate and aesthetically pleasing, but it is not the only novel to show a command of the English language and literary devices. It is important to note, then, that part of the reason it has become such an important text in schools is because of the values determined by New Critics, which present a specific set of biases. Examining the biases that allowed *Gatsby* to become solidified in the canon and thinking critically about its place there allows students to develop a greater understanding of *The Great Gatsby* and the 1920s. It would be irresponsible for teachers to assign this novel to students without giving them a comprehensive view of the issues present in the 1920's, and teachers cannot expect students to fully understand the 1920's critically without examining literature written by women and minority authors of the time. Only then can

students fully examine the novel critically, in terms of its place and history in the canon, the biases and values that it portrays, its historical contexts, and the purposes of reading it today. *The Great Gatsby*, along with many other texts written in the 1920's, can allow teachers to encourage critical thinking in their students and to achieve the humanistic ideals in their students that so many teachers strive for.

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For supplemental multi-media resources for reading and teaching *The Great Gatsby*, please visit <http://eastandwestegg.weebly.com>, a website created by the author of this paper to help cultivate critical thinking skills about Fitzgerald's novel.