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THE ENDURING INFLUENCE OF *THE GREAT GATSBY*

Journalists, scholars, film critics, reviewers, and other commentators have written countless millions of words about F. Scott Fitzgerald's slim masterpiece and its film adaptations over the last ninety years. Yet, in attempting to boil its enduring influence down to an essential quality, one might venture a single word: ambiguity. *The Great Gatsby* remains weighty because its inherent ambiguity enables readers and film viewers to use the novel as a barometer for measuring their own lives and culture.

While the film versions of the novel force its characters to life, *Gatsby* stays elusive and adaptable because its real concern is ideas and concepts as cogent now as they were in 1925. Fitzgerald's themes range from the fulfillment of the American Dream, to the decadence of the wealthy, to economic inequality, to hero worship. Over the twentieth century, popular culture has emerged to play a central role in how Americans know themselves, and *Gatsby* established or developed many of the tropes that would be dominant in that culture. In fact, the universality of its ideas enabled the novel to enter even headier territory–American folklore.

Popular culture creates, reflects, and disseminates the central narratives that constitute life in contemporary society. Popular culture's centrality is, according to scholar Ray B. Browne, "as the everyday world around us: the mass media, entertainment, diversions, our heroes, icons, rituals—our total life picture."[1] Our existence as language-making creatures centers on our ability to interact with one another as storytellers. These narratives created by individuals, groups, and organizations establish, shape, and reflect all that we are and someday hope to be.

Unlike any of its rivals for the mythic title "great American novel," *The Great Gatsby* slipped its way into the broader popular culture and then solidified its position as hundreds of thousands of uses of the term "Gatsby" or "Gatsby-esque" were read, heard, and seen across mass media. I label this overarching idea "meta-*Gatsby*," which symbolizes the way the novel is employed across mass media and in the collective public consciousness.[2]

If one were to walk up to any stranger and utter the word "Gatsby," the receiver would immediately conjure up some image that related to the book or one of the film adaptations. It might not be a specific example, but instead a general impression such as a mental picture of a decadent party or a remembered photograph of a Jazz Age flapper. Thoughts might also jump to the concrete, such as an image of Robert Redford's 1974 or Leonardo DiCaprio's 2013 Fitzgerald. The ubiquity of the novel and its tangents

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created meta-*Gatsby*. And these mental images associated with *Gatsby* also significantly influence the way contemporary audiences think about 1920s America.

While using *Gatsby* as a sign symbol is universal, not everyone who uses it does so properly. Examining the hundreds of thousands of pages of uses across the global mass media from the 1940s to 2010s reveals that misdirection is common.[3] Either people using "Gatsby" in this manner do not understand the novel and its characters well or simply want to make use of the symbol without a particular interest in the original text.

In other words, *Gatsby* is reduced to a generic group of synonyms, such as "wealthy," "lavish," or "rags-to-riches," particularly in newspaper and magazine articles and in Internet material. The important question here is what it means for a novel to enter the cultural mindset of a nation, particularly if that appearance opens the book up to speculative or even incorrect uses. Does *Gatsby* distort the public's vision of the Roaring Twenties? Over and over again, "Gatsby" is used in ways that reduces the novel to some basic theme that oversimplifies what Fitzgerald wrote to the point of trivializing his ideas.

The meta-*Gatsby* is made all the more influential by the widespread use of the novel in high school and college classrooms. Despite technology, books, literature, and the humanities matter in contemporary society. A work of art such as *Gatsby* can have a transformative influence on people's lives by serving as a tool for them to better comprehend themselves, the society around them, and their possible futures. The idea of education leading to a more nuanced and deep relation to one's world is critical. Maxine Greene claims, "We need to hold in mind the fact that the arts are almost always inexhaustible. There is no using up of a painting or a concerto or a poem. If they have any richness, say destiny at all, they are inexhaustible; there is always more."[4]

Today's popular culture heroes often do not operate within a black-and-white code, like superheroes of the past. Instead, they acknowledge or are forced to operate within the gray spaces that exist in both day-to-day life and extraordinary situations. Some of this transformation reflects the vibrations radiating through history, like the rise and fall of individual politicians and larger political parties. The public is accustomed to looking for the fallibility in those it emulates, recognizing that those placed on a pedestal often have flaws that may be revealed upon scrutiny. Audiences enjoy Jay Gatsby the same way they like other seemingly normal underdogs who have extraordinary (but somewhat believable) powers, ranging from the undersized action heroes played on film by Bruce Willis, Kevin Costner, and Patrick Swayze to the up-by-the-bootstraps figures represented by Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.

Like the best pieces of popular culture, *Gatsby* provides both a mirror and projection. According to writer Philip Hensher:

> When we are confident, and booming, and full of trust in our own splendor, *The Great Gatsby* seems like a curiosity, an anecdote as it did to its first readers. But when things are going wrong all round, and we are trying to remember what it was like to live within a magnificent dream–to be deceived by what we want–then it speaks to us. It buttonholes us, saying, not quite attractively or in a way that we can trust, "Old sport."[5]

The current fascination with reality television and obsession with everything related to celebrity has also transformed what it means to be a hero. The line between hero and celebrity is blurry, at best. The idea of being celebrated outruns whatever it is that a

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person is being recognized for doing. Attaining the spotlight is more important than what one does in the glare. Reality television pulses through the broader culture, showing that every moment of a person's life is up for scrutiny, criticism, and abuse. The medium also demonstrates that once in the spotlight, life becomes one enormous game show. Points are won and lost based on duplicity, deception, false fronts, and ill-begotten alliances against one's enemies.

Amazingly, *Gatsby* fits into today's cultural climate and may be used as a vehicle for understanding our moment in time, just as it has for decades. Writer William Voegeli discusses how the fictional character fits within contemporary thinking, explaining, "Gatsby is not Everyman. He is an American, and the struggle to fashion a life guided by practical wisdom in America faces special challenges that make his story even more poignant … something moral, the principles on which the American experiment is founded, and something material, the place where it unfolds."[6] It is the commitment to their own sense of righteousness that drives many popular culture antiheroes. Like Gatsby, they live by a code that they are sure has justifiable ends, even if the means take them into areas outlawed by traditional society and laws.

Gatsby wears a mask: sometimes it enables him to get closer to his dream, while at other junctures it covers his fraudulent life and dubious focus on wealth. In contrast to Gatsby, Tom Buchanan wears no mask. As a result, he seems a more "real" figure, stooping to the depths of a serial adulterer, elitist, and racist. Gatsby's lies all seem to have meaning, while Tom's lies just make him sinister.

Fitzgerald's creation of two central figures of this magnitude breathes timelessness into the novel, because Americans love dreamers, even if they are ultimately revealed to be frauds, while simultaneously begrudgingly admiring powerful figures like Tom, even if they are shortsighted morons. I think many people would lump today's corporate and business leaders, if not many politicians, into the latter camp.

Many similarities also exist between the 1920s and post-Vietnam and post-Watergate America, which makes the novel seem like a prediction. Thomas C. Foster compares Fitzgerald's 1920s with today, explaining that each is filled with "a bunch of seedy people with challenged ethics" and "greed and corruption were rampant."[7] Current readers can definitely relate to the sinister nature of business and the illegal world of gangsters in the pre-Depression era and find fingers of that time reaching into the days of the dot.com rise and crash and the Great Recession of 2008 and subsequent weak economy. According to Foster, Fitzgerald "presents all this as a perversion of the American Dream, which traditionally has had to do with freedom, opportunity, space to build a life, but which has been replaced by grasping, win-at-all-costs materialism."[8]

We know that Gatsby is doomed, because unforeseen (almost predestined) forces rise up to stamp down dreamers. Few people–real or fictional–get everything they want, even when it seems so close. From a lifetime of popular culture influences, from blood-splattered movies and television shows to the sensationalism of the news industry, today's reader will recognize the poignancy of Gatsby getting gunned down. One can almost visualize a similar scene today: a wealthy celebrity found murdered, the body of his stalker found nearby, dead of suicide. The resulting pictures would end up in a trashy tabloid and inevitably on the web in full-colored gruesomeness.

Fitzgerald, despite his claims of not really understanding Gatsby as he created him, desperately identified with the dreams the character espoused. He knew the pain of

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losing the girl and the joy in attaining her. Even deeper, however, Fitzgerald understood the dual role of insider-outsider that enabled him to go deeply into the minds of his characters as they played out their goals and aspirations. The ability to capture Myrtle and Tom, for example, and then reveal how modern life could bring them together and eventually result in tragic consequences necessitated that Fitzgerald hold innate command of the people who inhabited the world in the 1920s.

Ray Browne probed the significance of popular culture and folk studies, finding that they had real-world application. He called folk studies, for example, "society's way of life, the timeless and world-wide comparative attitudes toward the problems of life and those people's ways of adjusting to and coping with those problems."[9] In the end, he felt that understanding folk and popular culture might lead to people developing solutions "for the benefit of all society."[10]

The enduring significance of *Gatsby* underscores, in the Browne tradition, that a literary work can have a transformative influence on people's lives by serving as a means for them to better grasp themselves, society, and possible futures. Rather than dismiss Browne's ideology as Pollyannaish, as some critics might, I concur with his rationale for the power of the humanities when he states:

> The humanities are those aspects of life that make us understand ourselves and our society. They are a philosophical attitude and an approach to thinking and behaving which interpret life in a human context. In other words, the humanities humanize life and living, make it more understandable and bearable and human.[11]

Given its omnipresence in the nation's classrooms, educators in high schools, colleges, and universities obviously recognize the novel's practicality across many ideologies at the heart of good citizenship and social responsibility.

What is also increasingly clear is that in its long life, *Gatsby* moved beyond mere novel to function as a part of American folklore. Furthermore, for better or worse, the mythic status of Scott and Zelda is included in this transformation: he the drunken (but angelic) genius; and she, his zany, madcap flapper wife. Like all powerful folk narratives, there is a community aspect in the novel's service to society and culture, which includes and extends beyond the common ideas and misperceptions of the book. Thus, *Gatsby* continues to influence the way audiences and readers decode the 1920s and draw parallels to that era today.

In other words, *Gatsby*'s place within American folklore is not dependent on readers or audiences understanding where the legend of Scott and Zelda weaves in and out of reality or that Gatsby was not throwing parties to demonstrate his wealth. Rather, the power of the book is conveyed through its central themes, which keep it fresh and evocative long after one would naturally expect it to lose its power. These topics run a broad gamut from the hero's journey to the ethics of wealth and how one might live a just life. The central theme, though, that turns *Gatsby* from important novel to part of the nation's folklore is its personification of the American Dream.

Some folklorists might quibble with placing *Gatsby* within the folklore label, given that it is a more formal cultural production than the kinds of traditions or material culture that many scholars study, such as regional oral history or music. That point noted, however, I counter that over time the novel has taken on new meaning for

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contemporary audiences, while simultaneously drawing us back to a vanishing era in American history, which can be mechanically reproduced in film and television, but in reality becomes more distant by the moment.

If we assume that countless numbers of students actually read the novel or were forced to sit listening to class discussions about it even if they did not, its symbols and ideas have found expression in popular culture. Richard M. Dorson explains:

> A tale is not a dictated text with interlinear translation, but a living recitation delivered to a responsive audience for such cultural purposes as reinforcement of custom and taboo, release of aggressions through fantasy, pedagogical explanations of the natural world, and applications of pressures for conventional behavior.[12]

Although the novel could have disappeared as merely a relic of a bygone era, *Gatsby* now exemplifies Dorson's thinking. Taken as a whole, the text itself, the film versions, and other forms of mass communications that have used it as an inspiration have transformed Fitzgerald's book into a living document that enables interested audiences to create, build, and strengthen their perspectives.

Gatsby provides readers and viewers with a kind of blank slate that can be employed to create and re-create their personal worldview. And, since the novel carries so many ambiguities, it serves that role well. According to literary critic Harold Bloom, this universality is an appealing trait across the lines that usually divide people. He explains, "There are few living Americans, of whatever gender, race, ethnic origin, or social class, who do not have at least a little touch of Gatsby in them."[13] We are all at some point and time dreamers, obsessive, status-conscious, lovesick, friends, enemies, voyeurs, among the multitude of ideas and moments that make up a life.

This slim book has become pivotal as a cultural touchstone that carries value that transcends itself. *Gatsby* defines what we suggest when we say that a thing is iconic, Americana, or folklore. It is part of popular culture and a larger idea within that sphere, as Browne deduces, the "popular culture of a country is the voice of the people—their likes and dislikes, the lifeblood of daily existence, the way of life … the voice of democracy."[14]

We all have a bit of *Gatsby* in us, because we certainly have *Gatsby* all around us. Fitzgerald's masterpiece is essential in our cultural world and foundational in understanding what it means to be American and formulating ideas about our past, present, and future.

NOTES

[1]Ray B. Browne, "Redefining the Humanities" in Marilyn F. Motz et al., eds., *Eye on the Future: Popular Culture Scholarship into the Twenty-First Century* (Bowling Green, KY, 1994), 252.

[2]For a detailed analysis of "meta-*Gatsby*," see Bob Batchelor, *Gatsby: The Cultural History of the Great American Novel* (Lanham, MD, 2014).

[3]Although news source databases are not perfect and are often skimpy in pre-1980s materials, in early 2013 searching for "Gatsby" via Factiva yielded 11,813 uses from 1971 to 2013. In contrast, a Newsbank's North American source search yielded 38,612 results from January 1980 to February 2013. LexisNexis turned up 6,928 hits in the 2000–2010 period alone. Similarly, a *New York Times* historical search for "Gatsby" generated 362,000 results.

[4]Maxine Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education* (New York, 2001), 206–207.

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[5]Philip Hensher, "Great Gatsby: A Story for the Modern Age," *The Telegraph* (London), May 23, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/film-news/9284394/Great-Gatsby-a-story-for-the-modern-age.html.

[6]William Voegeli, "Gatsby and the Pursuit of Happiness," *Claremont Review of Books* 3 (2003): 71.

[7]Thomas C. Foster, *Twenty-Five Books That Shaped America* (New York, 2011), 146.

[8]Foster, *Twenty-Five* Books, 146.

[9]Ray B. Browne, "Folk Cultures and the Humanities" in Ray B. Browne and Marshall Fishwick, eds., *Rejuvenating the Humanities* (Bowling Green, KY, 1992), 24.

[10]Browne, "Folk Cultures," 24.

[11]Browne, "Redefining the Humanities," 249.

[12]Richard M. Dorson, ed. *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* (Chicago, 1982), 21.

[13]Harold Bloom, ed., *F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, New ed. (New York, 2010), 5.

[14]Bloom, *Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, 5.

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