1. Excerpt from:

BONFIRES OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN AMERICAN RHETORIC, LITERATURE, AND FILM

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1. INTRODUCTION

Has there ever been a more (seemingly) heartwarming movie than Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*? Or one more steeped in anger, hatred, and resentment towards, not just the rich, but also the poor and hapless, who hamstring and ruin George Bailey's life by triggering feelings of responsibility for their welfare? How reassuring is George's redemption, actually, when it requires the jokily depicted intervention of a dopey angel from Heaven? And why might the film have mutated, in viewers' eyes, from being "Communist propaganda" according to J. Edgar Hoover's FBI when it first came out (Johnston 2018, 3), to being the "perfect film for the Reagan era" (Wolcott 1986) just forty years later?

Such questions help to show how works of popular art, and evolving audience reactions to them, can illuminate societal attitudes about status, class, and social mobility (among myriad other topics). *It's a Wonderful Life* is just one of the innumerable films, books, and other cultural products that can enrich our understanding of America's jumbled and ideologically freighted set of attitudes over time regarding the rich, the poor, and the "American Dream" of self-advancement and due reward.

Today, Americans are living through an era of unparalleled (since the Civil War) hatred and enmity between the members of different self-constituted groups, giving urgency to the question of how our social and political culture could have led us to so dark a place. Our long history of white supremacy, enforced both violently and through cultural norms, is obviously an important part of negative American exceptionalism. Yet there is also our extraordinary lack of social solidarity, even just between Whites – manifested, for example, in widespread hostility, first to mask-wearing and then to vaccination, amid a pandemic.

An important element of this distemper involves the tension between egalitarianism and what I call market meritocracy. Egalitarianism of some kind, at least for white males, has been a core American value for centuries. Exactly what it means, beyond its ruling out a titled nobility, is contested and unclear. The Declaration of Independence proclaims that all "men" (apart, perhaps, from Indians and enslaved persons[1]) are "created equal" and possess "certain unalienable rights," such as to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." These words appear to demand, at the least, some degree of equality in people's legal entitlements, and perhaps in how they are valued and respected. It can also readily be interpreted as demanding a degree of equality that extends to such real world dimensions as the distribution of economic opportunity and political power. More controversially, it can be interpreted as condemning excessive inequality in people's economic outcomes, whether this involves poverty at the bottom or extreme wealth concentration at the top.

American egalitarianism's broader attitudinal fingerprints are apparent even when its meaning and demands are in dispute. I have elsewhere noted the longstanding American usage of "aristocrat" as a hostile epithet, rather than a term of self-description or respect (Shaviro 2020, 15). Likewise, to this day, "elite" and "elitism" are dirty words, which the members of particular elites not only disclaim as to themselves, but deploy disparagingly against the members of rival elites (115).

A second important strand of American ideology holds that, in a land that is ostensibly one of great opportunity, anyone can rise economically and socially – fulfilling the American Dream – through hard work backed by the requisite intelligence, self-discipline, and talent.

[1] The Declaration openly supports a Whites-only reading insofar as it refers to "merciless Indian savages," and complains that King George III has "excited domestic insurrections amongst us," referring to the threat of slave revolts.

Economic outcomes therefore rightly vary depending on each "man['s] … ability or achievement" (Adams 1931). This is a meritocratic view, under which market outcomes both depend on and reveal one's degree of personal worthiness. I call it *market* meritocracy because the worthy could instead be defined quite differently – based, for example, on test scores, religious faith, social skills, or athletic ability.

Market meritocracy ineluctably conflicts with egalitarianism if one views the latter as pertaining to ex post economic outcomes, not just ex ante opportunities. However, even insofar as the two are intellectually reconcilable, they are attitudinally in conflict in how they imply that one should view the rich and the poor. Under market meritocracy, both success and failure are truly and personally earned. Winners and losers are not equal after all – rather, the former are better and more deserving people than the latter. The rich owe the poor nothing – not even compassion or respect, and certainly not material aid through government.

Psychologically, no less than politically, this adds a nasty edge to the American Dream. Rather than just counseling supportively at the front end that one *can* succeed, it offers at the back end a potentially harsh judgment, depending on whether or not one *did*. Wealth becomes the supreme test, not just of how comfortably one will get to live, but also of one's fundamental worth as a human being.

This not only raises the stakes regarding career outcomes, but promotes self-congratulation and lack of empathy. Moreover, it does so not just among the rich, but also among those in lower economic strata who are eager to think of themselves as merely not rich *yet*. Consider Americans' frequently self-reported "unrealistic[] optimis[m] about their relative and absolute economic circumstances," such as a poll showing that "39% … believed that they either were already in the top 1% of wealth or 'soon' would be" (Graetz 2016, 807).

American Dream triumphalism, based on both real and imagined success, also helps to promote hatred and contempt for the poor. In this respect, it adds to the toxins already guaranteed by racism, given the widespread (and false) assumption among Whites that poor people are generally Black (see, e.g., Wetts and Willer 2018). Meanwhile, American Dream-fueled status anxieties may make it all the more urgent, for many Whites, to know of a subordinated group that will always, no matter what, rank below them.

While these dark byproducts of the American Dream can be seen across a wide historical spectrum, their virulence varies across time. The anxieties and hatreds grow stronger in eras, like our own currently ongoing Second Gilded Age, in which there is extreme wealth concentration at the top. Challenges to white supremacy may also feed anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic rage. Cultural works from different eras, and/or whose reception has differed as between eras, not only help to show this, but can aid one's struggle to understand it better.

In this book, I develop these themes by offering three in-depth case studies, each from a different expressive realm. The first is published rhetoric about success and economic merit. Here I start with the "single most famous piece in all success literature" (Hilkey 1997, 92): Russell Conwell's Acres of Diamonds speech, which the author delivered more than 6,000 times between 1870 and 1925, thereby earning enough money to fund his establishing and endowing Temple University. I compare and contrast this speech with one that appeared in fiction several decades later: the 60-page, 33,000-word screed that the character John Galt purportedly delivers to the American public, on all radio channels, near the end of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*.

As we will see, despite Rand's using a fictional character as her mouthpiece, the Galt speech consciously sets forth a "philosophy" that has found immense cultural resonance in America, extending to a wide swath of the economic and political elite (Duggan 2019, 78), as

well as to millions who merely think about themselves optimistically. It overlaps ideologically with the Acres of Diamond speech. Yet, rather than similarly using humor and conveying optimism, it is tellingly spittle-flecked with rage, grievance, and anxiety.

Second, from the realm of literary fiction, I examine F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* – a work that has come to be viewed as the "quintessential" (Cullen 2003, 180; Schudson 2004, 571) literary critique of the American Dream. *Gatsby* is perhaps a surprising choice for so culturally central a role, given its apparent view that inherited social rank is impervious to mere personally achieved wealth – in tension with the premises of both egalitarianism and market meritocracy. As we will see, however, its rollercoaster journey across time, from "flop" (according to Fitzgerald) when it first came out, to near-complete obscurity by the mid-1930s, to its post-World War II reemergence and canonization, and finally to its status today as required English class reading for millions of American middle and high schoolers, bears a relationship to broader economic and associated cultural changes.

Finally, from the realm of American popular filmmaking, I examine and compare Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* and Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*. These films prove to have a lot more in common than one might initially have thought. For example, each follows the career of an able young man who is born into the middle class, aspires ambitiously to achieve great things, chooses a career in finance, and runs there into legal peril that tests his loyalties.

The two films' commonalities help to sharpen their stark attitudinal and other differences. These reflect, among other things, the cultural gulf between the Americas of their respective eras. *It's a Wonderful Life*, although released in 1946, in many ways reflects attitudes from the Great Depression, during which much of it takes place. *The Wolf of Wall Street* mainly takes place in the late 1980s and 1990s, but it looks back at those years from a twenty-first century

perspective that reflects multiple public subsequent exposures of business chicanery, ranging from the 2001 Enron scandal to the misbehaviors that helped trigger the 2007-9 Great Recession. *Wolf* also seems strangely to anticipate the Trump era, reflecting the parallels between its featured grifter, Jordan Belfort, and the far more malignant one who would become president several years later.

My primary focus will be on how these texts, and their changing reception across different eras, reflect core tensions in American culture, such as that between egalitarianism and meritocracy. We may also, however, see occasional hints that the process of influence runs both ways. That is, popular works may themselves shape the broader culture in which they attract attention. As case in point, Ayn Rand's shadow is large enough to raise the question of whether she has actually strengthened the political and cultural appeal of cruelty and selfishness, while also winning both mass and elite adherents to libertarianism (despite her stated distaste for it). Likewise, the genre of rogue-financier movies, dating back at the least to Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*, might reasonably be viewed as having shaped the malign aspirations, not just of the actual Jordan Belfort, but of countless others (for example, Martin Shkreli).

The First Gilded Age ended peaceably, unless one attributes its full demise (after what historians call the Progressive Era) to the onset of World War I. Will the same happen to America's ongoing Second Gilded Age, and to the dystopian rage and discord that it has so energized? It is easier to hope so than to know. But if we do move on to brighter days, then perhaps tomorrow's books and films (if not long-form speeches, a dying cultural form) will help us better to understand the distinctive American cultural elements of the abatement.

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3. PESSIMISM FOR OPTIMISTS AND VOYEURISM FOR PESSIMISTS IN F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S *THE GREAT GATSBY*

A. Contours of the American Dream

The only thing worse than success is failure. Achieving your goals can prompt restiveness once the sugar rush has faded. Is that all there is? Was it worth the price? Did you deserve it? But if you failed, was it your fault? Are you a loser? Were you cheated? Unlucky? If you failed, does that mean that you have nothing? Or indeed that you *are* nothing?

What we call the "American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank" (Adams 1931, xx) invites asking oneself such questions. By counseling the pursuit of success, at the risk of finding failure, the American Dream valorizes personal aspiration and effort, in lieu of seeking contentment where one is. Yet, even if this has benign societal effects, the battle for success can prove unsettling for both winners and losers, prompting them to focus on whether the effort was worth it, and on whether the game was fair or fixed. The American Dream thereby helps to give a sociologically distinctive color to Americans' anxieties about social rank, personal satisfaction, and personal desert.

Although the American Dream is an "omnipresen[t]" cultural concept – to many, "the most lofty as well as the most immediate component of … American identity" (Cullen 2003, 5) – it has no single fixed meaning. Most obviously, it focuses on upward economic mobility. Yet it also connotes the pursuit of ends as specific as home ownership, and as vague or general as personal fulfillment.

Likewise, rather than being a "dream of merely material plenty" (Adams 1931, 405), or of "motor cars and high wages merely … it is a dream of [people's] being able to … attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable … [so that they will] be recognized by others

for what they are" (404). By succeeding, you gain not just material goods, but due respect from other people. If you *do* better than the average person, that implies that you *are* better.

For the American Dream to be fully realized, people's opportunities to "attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable … [must be] regardless of the fortuitous consequences of birth or position" (404). This is a vision of purely individualistic striving within a featureless social landscape. Believers in the American Dream assert that the requisite consignment of birth and position to their rightful irrelevance "has been realized more fully in actual life here than anywhere else, though very imperfectly even among ourselves" (405).

The American Dream's breadth and indeterminacy invite using literary fiction to help us in apprehending it. In this regard, one particular novel stands out as an obvious choice. By nearly – though not quite – universal consent, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is the "quintessential" (Cullen 2003, 180; Schudson 2004, 571) literary exposition or critique of the American Dream.[2] It holds this place even though the term "American Dream" was not invented until 1931, when popular historian James Truslow Adams made it the centerpiece of his bestselling book, *The Epic of America*, whereas *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925. Historians largely agree, however, that Adams was describing (even if also adapting) a long historical tradition, with roots going back to the New England Puritans, the Founding Fathers, and the Horatio Alger / Russell Conwell era, as well as being embodied in millions of American immigrants' expectations when they came to America (see, e.g., Cullen 2003, 5).

To some readers, *Gatsby* is "simultaneously enchanted and repelled" by the American Dream (Fussell 1952, 293), or finds it "irresistible" although a "mirage" (Corrigan 2014a, 9). To others, *Gatsby*'s pessimism goes further, exposing the Dream as "little more than a thinly veiled

[2] For a dissenting view regarding *Gatsby* and the American Dream, see Decker (1994, 67-68).

nightmare …. [awash in] waste, desolation, and futility …. that resound with the chords of moral horror and disillusion" (Bicknell 1954, 556-7). Yet if this harsh reading were clearly right – and even more so if the exact terms of its purported excoriation of American ideals were clearer – *Gatsby*'s canonical mainstream cultural standing would be quite perplexing. It is, after all, the book most universally assigned to American middle school and high school students. Exposing the American Dream as a hideous sham is not, presumably, a central pedagogical goal of middle school and high school curriculum boards.

Supporting the boards' complaisance, probably few of *Gatsby*'s captive student readers find it so wholly denunciatory. Indeed, to some, it is "just a boring [love story] about rich people" (Corrigan 2014a, 3). Others, with greater pleasure and surprise, may find a lurid, voyeuristic drop-in to a world of decadent glamor, like that which Baz Luhrmann offered in his 2013 film version of *Gatsby*. Still others may find that it connects powerfully, at an emotional level, with their own still vague and ambivalent hopes and fears regarding what adulthood may look like for them.

These differing impressions reflect *Gatsby*'s deliberate ambiguity regarding whether, at its core, it is about the quest for success, or the world of rich people. Fitzgerald could easily have written and organized it in such a way as to make it clearly one of these two things, far more than the other. Instead, he chose to give competing prominence to each.

Suppose *Gatsby* had simply followed the title character's life story in chronological order. We thus would first see his poor childhood and wandering teen years, followed by his sudden reinvention when the rich yachtsman Dan Cody takes him on board, followed in turn by his military induction, affair with Daisy, wartime experiences, postwar destitution until he meets his second sponsor (the gangster Meyer Wolfsheim), and thenceforth straight through to the end.

This would unmistakably be an American Dream story above all – Horatio Alger with an arsenic twist.

Now suppose instead that the book had followed the same time sequence that it actually does, but with a just-the-facts narrator, less poetry and symbolism, and no Jay Gatsby backstory beyond the fact of his recent crime-fueled rise from poverty. Then the book's predominant focus on the customs of the super-wealthy, including the apparently circumscribed social prospects of the merely nouveau riche, would likewise be clear. Instead, however, *Gatsby* leaves room for both perspectives regarding its primary focus and interest.

B. *Gatsby*'s Journey From Flop to Cultural Icon

These days, at least in the United States, *Gatsby* is easily the most widely read work of American literature. It has been called "America's greatest social novel about class" (Corrigan 2014a, 14). More particularly, the topics of broad sociological interest that it addresses include upward mobility, the born rich versus the nouveau riche, and how class relates to race.

All this plus *Gatsby*'s relationship to the American Dream make it a natural (or even inevitable) target of inquiry for a study such as this one. Yet the grounds for taking an interest in it pertain not just to the text itself, but also to the history of its cultural reception. Somewhat of a flop when it first came out in 1925, *Gatsby* had virtually disappeared from view by the time of Fitzgerald's death in 1940. By 1945, however, it had entered a period of startlingly brisk and steep rediscovery by the public, and reassessment by literary critics, who now often focused on its relationship to the American Dream. By 1960, the New York Times could deem it "safe now to say that [*Gatsby*] is a classic of twentieth-century fiction" (Lucey 2013).

More recently, while *Gatsby* has remained as culturally prominent as ever, its high-end scholarly eminence has faded somewhat since its 1950s critical heyday (Corrigan 2014a, 272-

274). As early as the mid-1960s, some began to disparage it as middlebrow (see, e.g., Scrimgeour 1966). Meanwhile, its place in popular culture has been altered both by its having become so iconic, and by the onset of America's Second Gilded Age.

Gatsby's cultural import has therefore evolved through four distinct periods. The first three were those of its appearance, disappearance, and revival. The fourth I will call its post-iconification period. We will see that, when optimism about upward mobility was high, *Gatsby* was rapturously viewed (at least by literary critics) as offering a harsh evaluation of the American Dream – making it, in effect, pessimism for optimists. By contrast, in the present era – generally a less hopeful one regarding Americans' individual prospects for upward mobility – it is more a vehicle for exciting escapism, inviting a glamorous wallow in the world of great privilege that it depicts. It thereby now functions, at least for popular audiences, more as voyeurism for pessimists.

C. Reading a (Somewhat Didactic) Work of Literary Fiction

This chapter's switch in genre from the didactic lectures discussed in chapter 2 to a work of literary fiction such as *Gatsby* has methodological implications. Both Conwell in the Acres of Diamond lecture, and Rand in the Galt speech, could scarcely have aimed more at giving their audiences clear and specific messages. By contrast, Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* is consciously aiming to create a work of art within a well-developed literary tradition that values ambiguity, open-endedness, and deliberate under-specification ("show, don't tell").

Yet, for this particular work of fiction, the distance from the didactic lectures is less than it would have been if one were reading, say, the work of a Lewis Carroll or a Samuel Beckett. *The Great Gatsby* uses realist conventions to examine a particular time and place. Moreover, it reflects a degree of deliberate didactic intent, focused in large part on sociological commentary.

Fitzgerald called himself a "moralist at heart," and said he wanted to "preach at people" (Schulz 2013, 4).

Gatsby is most clearly didactic when it addresses the topic that Fitzgerald "preached about most … the degeneracy of the wealthy" (4). As we will see, it illustrates, with little ambiguity, his beliefs about how and why, as stated in his nearly contemporaneous short story, *The Rich Boy*, "the very rich …. are different from you and me." There thus is little room for flexible interpretation of his portrait of Tom Buchanan, the book's preeminent representative of America's most privileged, or even of Tom's wife (Gatsby's inamorata) Daisy.

Then there are the specific moral and/or aesthetic judgments that *Gatsby*'s first-person narrator, Nick Carraway, offers regarding its title character and what happens to him. Gatsby had at first "represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn." Yet there proved to be "something gorgeous about him," and he "turned out all right at the end." Gatsby's "belie[f] in the … orgastic future that year by year recedes before us …. [as] we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past," makes him no less heroic than doomed.

These are not just idiosyncratic judgments about a particular fictional character. Their broader sociological content is made clear by *Gatsby*'s treating its characters – most of all, but not just, its mythified title character – as "ideographs" (Trilling 1945) or social archetypes who are deliberately rendered flatly (Rothman 2013).

Yet the book's judgments about Gatsby and what happens to him are harder to pin down than its very clear viewpoint about the Buchanans. Not only are the verdicts that Nick shares with us themselves ambiguous, but one can question the extent to which he is a reliable narrator. Consequently, other than in its view of the rich, *Gatsby* offers readers "a Rorschach test. Some see it as a celebration of the decadence of wealth, and others see it as a fable warning of the

repercussions of that shallow lifestyle" (Chalupa 2013). Likewise, some, following Nick's lead, find Gatsby's fervid embrace of hollow illusions to be gloriously ennobling. Others view the lesson learned as precautionary, in the sense of its showing the deadliness of a self-deluding obsession with the past.

Such ambiguities make reading *The Great Gatsby* very different from reading the Acres of Diamonds lecture or the Galt speech. They prove, moreover, to be crucial to the book's capacity to speak in different ways to people in different eras. In particular, they help to support its dual character as a pessimistic text for optimists, and a voyeuristically escapist one for pessimists.

D. *The Great Gatsby* in the 1920s

1. The Gilded Age Versus the Jazz Age

Fitzgerald first thought of the story for *The Great Gatsby* while in Long Island in the spring of 1924 (Flanagan 2000) – perhaps not far from the spot where its title character stares across the bay at the Buchanans' mansion. The book's thorough immersion in the "irresponsible world of American wealth in the early Twenties" (Berryman 1946) adds to its capacity to provide contemporary social commentary. Yet Fitzgerald initially planned to set the story in 1885, or right in the middle of the Gilded Age (Canterbery 1999, 297).

This may have reflected a view that the 1920s were sufficiently like the Gilded Age – widely viewed, with good reason, as a plutocratic era in which the wealthy towered high above the rest – for the earlier era to serve as a stand-in for the later one. And indeed, Tom and Daisy Buchanan's arrogance and sense of entitlement bring to mind characters who were born to wealth in literature that is set in the Gilded Age. Consider George Amberson Minafer in Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons*. George's distasteful arrogance, rooted in an extreme

sense of inherited superiority that is wholly undimmed by his family's having been rich for just two generations (since 1873), allows readers to enjoy, if also to pity, his wholly deserved and complete "comeuppance" (as the novel calls it).

Moreover, while Jay Gatsby, as a bootlegger, could not, as such, have been a Gilded Age figure, works from that era likewise feature insecure arrivistes whose arrival at high wealth levels collides with their lack of the requisite breeding and social self-confidence. Consider William Dean Howell's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Here the eponymous lead character, having earned a sudden fortune through the paint business, finds himself so lost amid, and overwhelmed by, Boston high society that he actually is relieved when he loses his fortune and must return to his prior home in the rural outlands.

Despite such parallels, which help to make sense of Fitzgerald's initial impetus to set the story in the 1880s, he gained a great deal by choosing instead a contemporary Jazz Age setting. Most obviously, this enabled him to supply the glittering backdrop that eventually proved so crucial to the book's mass appeal. In addition, it allowed him to present the social tensions around wealth as not just the product of huge inherited fortunes. *Gatsby* goes well beyond being a "return to normalcy" story (in Warren Harding's famous phrase), in which peacetime and the end of the Progressive Era allow for the resumption of Gilded Age social practices. It shows as well how recent social changes have altered the dynamics around wealth inequality.

One important change that *The Great Gatsby* depicts extensively – in tension with its central thesis about the dominance of inherited wealth – is the rise, not just of new fortunes like Gatsby's, but of a new and very modern type of alternative social elite. Consider the "zany collection of nouveau riche immigrants as well as theater and movie people" (Corrigan 2014a, 97) who flock to Gatsby's parties. Gatsby says that he likes to keep his house "full of interesting

people …. who do interesting things. Celebrated people." They include, for example, a "moving-picture director and his Star" who are so famous that even Tom and Daisy gawk at them. Tom disparages the party guests by saying "I don't know a soul here." Yet, "stung to envy by Gatsby's wealth and glamorous guests" (Fitter 1998, 9), he cares enough about the figure he cuts there to complain when Gatsby keeps introducing him to strangers as "the polo player."

All this helps to show that relationships at the top are not quite as simply vertical as in, say, the New York of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* – set just twenty years earlier. Wharton shows her heroine Lily Bart, in the course of her decline, passing through one distinct social set after another, each with its own leaders, main places, and practices. In Wharton's New York, however, these circles' relative ranks are absolutely clear, and those in the lower ranks generally would welcome promotion (or even just being noticed by those from above). It is not so clear that Gatsby's nouveau riche businesspeople and celebrity artistes would generally be thrilled by the chance to gain entrance to Tom Buchanan's world. Indeed, for those from Tom's tier who are more self-confidently venturesome and less over-the-hill than he is (we are told that he peaked at age twenty-one and has faced "anticlimax" ever since), it might even be the other way around.

A second important feature of *Gatsby*'s social world involves the 1920s rise of white racial anxiety. In 1924, while Fitzgerald was writing *Gatsby,* the Ku Klux Klan achieved a new historical membership peak (Michaels 1995, 23). The Klan's revival had less to do with any fresh challenges to the subordination of African-Americans than with several years of roiling controversy over immigration, in particular by non-"Nordic" immigrants from Europe (Decker 1994, 59-60). Anti-Semitism was especially prominent in the mix, at a time when neither Jews,

nor others from eastern and southern Europe, were coded socially in America as White to the degree that they are today.

White hysteria responded, not just to immigration itself, but also to the rise of organized crime. Prohibition, by creating bootlegging, had "propelled organized gangsterism to new heights" and induced a broader "association of immigrants with lawlessness" (60). *Gatsby* openly adverts to this with its stock anti-Semitic portrayal of Wolfsheim, whom Fitzgerald makes sure we will understand is based on Arnold Rothstein (by then infamous for having reportedly conspired to fix the 1919 World Series).

A third important change that we can see in *Gatsby* was the rise of mass consumer culture and a new "ideology of consumption," shaped by advertising that could trigger "intensive consumer tantalization" centered around ever-changing fashions (Fitter 1998, 7). *Gatsby* extensively depicts the importance both of fetishized high-end consumer objects and of advertising. Thus, consider Daisy's "orgasmic" (Posnock 1984, 208) response to Gatsby's piles of beautiful new shirts – she actually weeps as she fondles them. Or consider her telling him that he always looks so "cool …. "[y]ou know[, like] the advertisement of the man," when she is at last expressing her love for him in front of Tom. The relationship between this aspect of 1920s culture and *Gatsby*'s fascination with free-floating aspiration and desire would reemerge as a topic of scholarly interest in the post-iconification period.

2. *Gatsby*'s View of the Rich

On the subject of the super-rich, even if Fitzgerald is not quite a reverse Conwell or Galt – condemning arrogance, rather than exalting greatness – still, he chooses to be very straightforward and clear. According to *The Rich Boy*, what makes the "very rich …. different from you and me" is that "[t]hey possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them, makes

them soft where we are hard, and cynical where we are trustful…. They think, deep in their hearts, that they are better than we are." In *Gatsby*, this early-imbibed self-confidence – and its lack among those not born rich – helps Tom Buchanan rapidly to crush Gatsby, whose assumed persona "br[eaks] up like glass against Tom's hard malice" once he is exposed as a cheap crook – shamed more by the cheapness than the crookedness – and as "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere."

Then there is Nick's famous judgment near the end of *Gatsby*: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made." This comes after Daisy has killed Myrtle Wilson while driving Gatsby's car, but declined to step forward and take responsibility, while Tom has deliberately brought about Gatsby's death by siccing the grieving George Wilson on him. So the smashing with which they are charged here is not just metaphorical.[3]

The book's moral condemnation of the Buchanans is enhanced by their relatively monochromatic presentation. The other main characters can be viewed from multiple angles. Gatsby, for example, is both a flashy tough and a misty-eyed dreamer. Jordan Baker is languid and dishonest (according to Nick), but also capable of being moved by Gatsby's story about Daisy, and of having her feelings hurt when Nick "thr[ows her] over on the telephone." Nick is a self-styled moralist who boasts early on about his extraordinary honesty, but Jordan finds him to be otherwise. His passivity and withdrawal add mystery to his self-portraiture.

Tom Buchanan, by contrast, could scarcely be less ambiguous. The novel's words and phrases, when discussing him, fall into a narrow range. They include, for example: hard,

[3] Jordan Baker, who is in the Buchanans' social circle but not as wealthy, calls herself "careless," for not realizing that Nick, like her, is a "bad driver" rather than an "honest, straightforward person." Here, however, not only is the resulting smash-up that she experiences just metaphorical, but she, not others, is the one who bears its ill consequences. The Buchanans only hurt others through their carelessness.

supercilious, arrogant, dominance, aggressively, cruel, fractiousness, paternal contempt, stronger, more of a man, and restlessly. Tom looks the same from all angles, and no sympathetic reader of the novel could view him favorably.

Daisy is a bit more ambiguous. From the outside, we get a lot of the male gaze, albeit focused more on her social type than her physical attributes. From the inside, we see her sadness and ambivalence about the path with Tom that she chooses both on their wedding day and again at the novel's climax. We also get to see – as she does – that Gatsby's demands of her are unaccompanied by any interest either in trying to understand her, or in respecting her feelings or needs. One therefore has grounds for affording her more compassion than any of the novel's male characters ever do. Yet our final view of her, coldly and companionably plotting with Tom while poor Gatsby lingers outside, is sufficiently distasteful that "[f]ew critics write about … [her] without entering the unofficial competition of maligning her character" (Person 1978, 250). Daisy the woman may draw sympathy (along with sexist disparagement), but Daisy the rich debutante turned full-fledged Buchanan does not.

The book's portrayal of Tom and Daisy amply conforms to *The Rich Boy*'s diagnosis. For example, Tom *tells* Nick "I've got a nice place here," whereas Gatsby *asks* him, "My house looks well, doesn't it?" (Donaldson 2001, 207). When the Buchanans ask Nick whether he is engaged to a "girl out West," he finds their interest so surprising – even as Daisy's cousin and Tom's college classmate – that it "rather touched me and made them less remotely rich," although they remain an object of "disgust[]" due to their other failings.

Thus viewed, Tom and Daisy fall outside the reach of the novel's sympathy – leaving aside Daisy's vulnerability and mistreatment as a woman in a male-dominated society. So when Tom insists at the end that he has suffered too, Nick in effect rolls his eyes, even if he lacks the

resolve to refuse the proffered handshake (which itself is just the coda to Tom's being "rid of my provincial squeamishness forever").

How should one evaluate Fitzgerald's didactic viewpoint, so clearly expressed in *The Great Gatsby*, regarding how and why the "very rich …. are different from you and me"? Ernest Hemingway famously mocked it, saying in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* that the rich are different from the rest of us only insofar as they "have more money." He adds that they are dull, repetitious, drink too much, and play too much backgammon. Hemingway accuses Fitzgerald (aka "Julian") of so yearning to view the rich as a "special glamorous race" that he ultimately was "wrecked" by the realization that he was wrong, and Hemingway (of course) right.[4]

Hemingway's diagnosis of Fitzgerald seems itself wrong. The view expressed in *The Rich Boy* and *Gatsby* has less to do with keening for "glamour" than with life experiences about which Fitzgerald was quite self-aware. He explained his lifelong "two-cylinder inferiority complex" (Corrigan 2014a, 46) as a consequence of his having grown up as, in turn, "a poor boy in a rich town; a poor boy in a rich man's school; [and then] a poor boy in a rich man's club at Princeton … [Thus] I have never been able to forgive the rich for being rich, and it has colored my entire life and works" (56). In short, Fitzgerald's viewpoint reflects the experiences of a moderately affluent American (with a particular temperament) whose circumstances, along with his own ambitions, happened to throw him in extensively with people far richer than he was.

The very specificity of these biographical roots sits ill with viewing Fitzgerald's view as to why wealth inequality matters in America – because it triggers unequal degrees of self-confidence – as providing a sufficiently broad and deep answer to the question. Viewing

[4] The rich Americans whom Hemingway shows in this unglamorous light, in such stories as *Kilimanjaro* and *The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber*, are out of their domestic comfort zones, by reason of their traveling in international circles where it is unsurprising that, say, a macho big game hunter could humiliate one of them who is trying to impress a trophy wife.

childhood wealth (or its absence) as the master key could also lead to some surprising broader conclusions. For example, if growing up rich versus poor is all that really matters – given how little Gatsby's too late-achieved fortune seems to help him – then inequality's harms might stay fixed even if, for the members of any age cohort, wealth was completely equalized by age 30. This seems unlikely to be true. Alternatively, suppose everyone started out equal, but that extreme material disparities emerged by age 30, by reason of some people's winning, and others' losing, economic "tournaments" that started after college graduation. Surely the resulting inequality would matter a great deal, even if not by *The Rich Boy*'s proposed mechanism of early-acquired unequal self-confidence. *Gatsby* thereby merely offers one set of reasons, among many, why class and wealth differences might matter.

3. Upward Mobility

Gatsby most definitely takes an interest in upward mobility and what we now call the American Dream. As Lisa Corrigan (2014a, 44) puts it: "Whether all our frantic effort is noble or wasted – whether, in short, meritocracy really exists in America – is one of *The Great Gatsby*'s central questions." Here, in contrast to its relatively unnuanced treatment of the rich, it is distinctly Janus-faced.

On the one hand, one could scarcely rise to wealth faster, or seemingly more effortlessly, than Gatsby does. Even his gangster connections do little to harm him, other than when (in the highest social circles) Tom uses them to shame him in front of Daisy. To the crowds at his parties, the surrounding scent of mystery and crime only makes him exotic and fascinating, not someone to shun. We also never get the sense that he is at risk of being killed by rival gangsters. And, while *Gatsby* stereotypes the likes of Wolfsheim as heavily ethnic Jews with thick accents and tiny eyes, it lacks the sense of menace around bootlegging and other organized crime that

would become so culturally prominent in, say, the James Cagney / Humphrey Bogart / Edward G. Robinson movies of the 1930s.

Yet Gatsby's profession clearly undermines the optimism about economic opportunity that his success might otherwise seem to validate. "Fitzgerald chose to make [him] a gangster. He could have affirmed the idea of a meritocracy by having Gatsby rise rapidly up the corporate ladder, be a banker or a grocery-store mogul" (Corrigan 2014a, 138). The fact that Gatsby actually is starving on the streets until Meyer Wolfsheim intervenes can support viewing the book's 1920s New York – despites its nouveau riche tier – as, for most people, a "landscape of bleak class-entrapment and dead-end labor, where rich and poor are frozen in polar extremes" (Fitter 1998, 12).

Such a barbed, rather than optimistic, take on Gatsby's career is reinforced by the novel's deliberately paying "curled lip service" to Horatio Alger's naïve success stories (Scharnhorst 1979). In earlier work, Fitzgerald had repeatedly, and generally sarcastically, invoked Alger's work (which had been hugely popular during his adolescence). *Gatsby* itself may deliberately parody Alger's *Jed the Poorhouse Boy* and similar stories. For example, "Alger's hero Jed Gilman, like James Gatz (who shares his initials) meets his Benevolent Patron aboard the Patron's yacht; each one is hired as a kind of personal secretary … receives a new suit of clothing …. [and] changes his name" (Scharnhorst 1979). Only, Gatsby's patron is a "pioneer debauchee" rather than a paragon, and Gatsby is cheated of his bequest rather than getting to live on it.

One way or another, *Gatsby* challenges *both* of the competing narratives that I call egalitarianism and market meritocracy. Under its view of the rich versus the rest of us, differing childhood circumstances plus inheritance crush any prospect that equality could ever be more

than an empty phrase. Moreover, even if the talented can get rich, as Gatsby does, his rise fails to validate his success morally given its criminality. Indeed, his main talent, first recognized by Wolfsheim, is simply a capacity to pass among the plebes, if not in higher and more discerning circles, as a "man of fine breeding" (i.e., as plausibly a well-born WASP). Then, as a final blow to the rags-to-riches faith, the book suggests that even getting rich is not success enough, at least if one is as trapped as Gatsby is in yearning for acceptance by those who were born rich.

4. Race and Class

Race features in three main ways in *The Great Gatsby*. First, the narrative casually expresses the era's racism, while offering us no reason to doubt that Nick is speaking for the author. It is dismaying or worse to read, while Gatsby is driving Nick into Manhattan: "[A] limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish Negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyes rolled toward us in haughty rivalry."

The insult here does not come just from the words "bucks," along with the *Birth of a Nation*-style visual "comedy" of the bulging "yolks." It comes also from Nick's enjoyment of black people's comic uppityness. How droll that these "negroes" should be so "modish" and haughtily rivalrous, as they style past Gatsby's itself garish "circus wagon" in a fast, flashy car that is driven by a white employee, no less.

As for Wolfsheim – literally, "Wolf's Home" – even beyond the rote Jewish stereotyping, "Fitzgerald goes the extra mile to make [him] repellent by endowing him" with hairy nostrils and human molar cufflinks (Rosenbaum 2012). Wolfsheim also, despite showing a touch of human concern for Gatsby – inadequate, however, to motivate his attending the funeral – is the novel's "symbol of all that is corrupt about America…. Meyer Wolfsheim is Scott Fitzgerald's Shylock" (Rosenbaum 2012).

Second, and perhaps slightly mitigating the first aspect, *Gatsby* mocks Tom Buchanan's crude racism, derived from his excited reading of "this man Goddard's" *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, which is closely based on an actual book by the white supremacist Lothrop Stoddard (Michaels 1995, 23). Daisy ridicules Tom for "getting very profound …. [by] read[ing] deep books with long words in them." One can almost see his lips moving as he reads. Moreover, it is clear that his own frustration and boredom have triggered what Nick calls this "pathetic" departure from his usual "complacency."

Third, *Gatsby* offers an account of how class and race interact in 1920s New York. Beyond Tom's ranting, his aggressive response to Gatsby's "presumptuous little flirtation" with Daisy reflects his view that it involves miscegenation (Michaels 1995, 46). Gatsby, born James Gatz, is only ambiguously White, and possibly Jewish (Pekarofski 2012, 60-65). Moreover, even if "Gatz" is not actually "Katz" – reflecting the same phonetic switch that Wolfsheim makes by saying "gonnegtion" and "Oggsford" (59) – Gatsby is tainted racially by his Jewish gangster associations. In Tom's words, he is not just a "common swindler," but also "one of that bunch that hangs around with Meyer Wolfsheim," and hence effectively Jewish at least by association.

Without its racial element, *Gatsby* might indeed just be, as it is often considered, a story about a poor boy who, once he has made good, tries to pretend that he has always been rich. But this is not just a book about knowing which is the salad fork, or that Oxford men don't wear pink suits. Gatsby must "pretend[] to be something he's not" because he and Daisy effectively "belong to different races…. Jimmy Gatz isn't quite white enough" (Michaels 2006).

In sum, *Gatsby* thereby combines (1) expressing racism, with (2) mocking it, at least when held too vehemently, and (3) depicting how race and class can toxically interact to create impermeable social barriers. As with its treatment of upward mobility, and in contrast to its

treatment of the rich, the book shows more than it tells, and leaves interpretive space through its ambiguity.

5. Consumerism

One of *Gatsby*'s most powerful aspects, at least to many modern readers, is its depiction of anomie, boredom, and disconnection amid the frenzied hedonism of its not-so-merrymakers. Nick, at the first Gatsby party that he attends, is on the verge of "get[ting] drunk from sheer embarrassment" at not knowing anyone until he sees Jordan Baker. Later in the evening, a drunk woman starts crying when she tries to sing, sending her eye shadow cascading down her face until suddenly she falls asleep. Meanwhile, "[m]ost of the remaining women were having fights with men said to be their husbands."

To similarly dismal effect, consider the uncomfortable luncheon that the Buchanans host for Nick, Jordan, and Gatsby, leading to Tom's conclusive takedown of Gatsby after they head to New York for even more "fun." Daisy asks: "What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon? …. and the day after that, and the next thirty years?" Her affair with Gatsby seems as much the product of boredom as of nostalgia, continuing attraction to him, or anger at Tom.

Meanwhile, Nick, belatedly realizing that he has just turned thirty, can see nothing before him but the "portentous, menacing road of a new decade …. the promise of a decade of loneliness … a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair." For Nick, unlike Tom (who had genuinely experienced a great peak in his days as a college football star), it is not as if his receding youth has been so delightful that he mourns its passing on that account. It had merely been a tad less dull and empty than what he sees lying ahead.

The book wisely does not try to tell us just what all these people are so unhappy or discontented about. However, it leaves enough clues to suggest partial answers. For example, the

dominant role of manipulative advertising in "develop[ing] and promot[ing] a new cult of glamour" – extensively on view in *Gatsby* – may leave its hapless targets feeling all the more entrapped in "terminal drudgery" as its "ecstatic" promises remain unfulfilled (Fitter 1998, 2).

Gatsby also amply, and perhaps consciously on Fitzgerald's part, illustrates Thorstein Veblen's famous analysis of pecuniary emulation and conspicuous consumption (Canterbery 1999, 300; Donaldson 2001, 202-203). As Veblen (1899, 31, 32) had explained in his classic late Gilded Age work:

> [T]he end sought by accumulation is to rank high in comparison with the rest of the community …. [Anyone below the average level] will live in chronic dissatisfaction with his present lot; … [but even after reaching it] this chronic dissatisfaction will give place to a restless straining to place a wider and ever-widening pecuniary interval between himself and this average standard. The invidious comparison can never become so favourable to the individual making it that he would not gladly rate himself still higher relatively to his competitors.

Gatsby's struggles give us a picture of how this anxious, joyless process can work even near the top. Daisy, who as his wife would have been the ultimate luxury accoutrement (Canterbery 1999, 300), proves unavailable for purchase. His status strivings are further undermined by inherited wealth's remaining more honorific than that which is self-earned (in keeping with Veblen's Gilded Age analysis), and by the detailed cultural knowledge that one needs to present oneself convincingly as a member of the leisure class (Donaldson 2001, 202-203).

In sum, both the poisonous lure of advertising and the frustrations around pecuniary emulation offer compelling, textually supportable explanations for the malaise that *Gatsby*

evokes. Yet they do not exhaust its interpretive significance, which remains open-ended. Readers in different eras have interpreted the malaise in multiple ways, reflecting the license that the text affords them, and eventually adding to *Gatsby*'s cultural resonance.

6. Geography

Gatsby also depicts geographic restlessness, of a kind particular to the twentieth century and afterwards. By the 1920s, the Western frontier has long since closed, but America's closer connections with Europe, in the aftermath of World War I, help to give New York City the special cultural place that it has held ever since.

Nick notes near the end that "Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life." Yet they all had been drawn to it – in Nick's case, reflecting that, after World War I, "the Middle West now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe." His return home betokens, not a rethinking of the East's superiority to the "bored, sprawling swollen towns beyond the Ohio," but a surrender to that boredom.

7. Economic Boom Times

Despite *Gatsby*'s strong flavors of pessimism and unease, it shows clear signs of its having been written in a boom period, when excitement and animal spirits were high. By way of contrast, consider Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* – published in 1939, after ten years of the Great Depression, and also sometimes viewed as a harsh deconstruction of the American Dream. *Gatsby*'s pessimism never approaches *Locust*'s bleakness of tone throughout, nor does its disconsolate ending aim for the apocalypse conveyed by *Locust*'s closing riot. *Gatsby* is dark only to a degree, offering gloom against a bright background.

E. *Gatsby*'s Initial Commercial Failure, and Subsequent Disappearance

1. A "Flop" in the 1920s

By the time he published *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald was a prominent Jazz Age chronicler. His two prior novels, *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned*, had each sold more than 50,000 copies. Knowing that *Gatsby* was his best work yet, he hoped to sell at least 80,000 in the first year (Corrigan 2014a, 205). Instead, it sank so rapidly, along the way to barely over 20,000 sales, that by May 1925 he had concluded it was a "flop" and "isn't going to sell" (207).

This failure was not the product of inattention. *Gatsby* received extensive newspaper reviews, which ranged from hostile to strongly supportive. The most frequent complaint, in a sampling of some lead instances (see Lacey 2013), appears to be that it is just too dark and glum. His characters exhibit "incredible stupidity" and "glittering swinishness" (according to H.L. Mencken's contemporary review). They forfeit sympathy through their "meanness of spirit," and are "dumb in their insensate selfishness." The book is "tired and cynical," and "full of really very unpleasant characters."

A second complaint is that the book is just too short: a "glorified anecdote" (Mencken again) or merely a "thin novel." Also, Fitzgerald's appointed role as the "philosopher of the flapper" has perhaps grown over-familiar. He is no longer fresh news.

Looking at the novel's main themes as discussed above, the lack of contemporary popular (as well as critical) enthusiasm becomes even easier to understand. The 1920s was not a populist era in which attacks on the rich much resonated. Moreover, *Gatsby*'s cynicism about Horatio Alger success stories was perhaps not even titillating at a time when Alger's sales and readership were rapidly falling (Scharnhorst 1979). Its portrayal of dispirited consumer ennui may have lacked commercial appeal, even among those whom the diagnosis fit. Only with time would some of *Gatsby*'s drawbacks, from the standpoint of popularity, turn into strengths.

2. Commercial Disappearance in the 1930s

Gatsby had sunk from view by the onset of the Great Depression, and hard times' persistence did nothing at first to revive it. The era's "proletarian critics … [thought] that all [Fitzgerald] wrote about were the beautiful people buoyed up on bootlegged champagne bubbles" (Corrigan 2014a, 35) – topics that lacked current interest. Wrote critic Philip Rahv, in a review of Fitzgerald's next novel, *Tender Is the Night*: "Dear Mr. Fitzgerald, You can't hide from a hurricane under a beach umbrella." Even the potential populist appeal of *Gatsby*'s attacking the rich seems to have foundered under the burden of its expressing unfashionable fascination with them.

The 1930s were also just too soon for 1920s nostalgia to stimulate public interest in the book. Fondness for a vanished era often seems to need more than a decade's gestation. Thus, consider 1950s nostalgia – epitomized, for example, by the hit TV show *Happy Days*, with its leather-jacketed faux biker character the Fonz. Set in Milwaukee in the 1950s, *Happy Days* debuted in 1974, and was a breakout hit by mid-decade. Or consider those supreme 1960s icons, the Beatles. They "seemed more *over* [in the 1970s] than they do now, further away than they'd ever seem again" (Sheffield 2017, 263). Only in the mid-1980s, and then even more explosively in the 1990s, did they fully regain their towering cultural standing (295).

Gatsby's revival required a similar time lag. Once enough time had passed, 1920s nostalgia served as an important trigger. It was not, however, the only one.

F. The *Gatsby* Revival, 1945-1960

Gatsby's rise to prominence, starting in the mid-1940s, spanned both its popular and its critical standing. The causes of its popular revival are simpler and more straightforward than its critical ascent, even if, in retrospect, neither ought to have been a surprise.

1. *Gatsby*'s Popular Rise

A key first step for *Gatsby*'s finding a popular audience was the creation, during World War II, of a program to send millions of free Armed Services Edition (ASE) books, printed cheaply in paperback, to American soldiers who were stationed abroad. In 1945, after Germany and Japan had surrendered but well before mass demobilization was imminent, the program sent out 155,000 copies of *Gatsby* (Corrigan 2014a, 236).

ASE books were sufficiently popular with their "[b]ored and homesick" soldier audience that, on average, they were passed around to seven users per book. *Gatsby* may therefore conceivably have had more than a million ASE readers, vastly exceeding its prior reach to any audience (Gash 2015).

The ASE book cover for *Gatsby* adverted both to its "well-remembered" Jazz Age setting and to what Maureen Corrigan (2014a, 236) calls its "bullets and booze" character. Soldiers who started it with this background in mind may have then been "baffled" by "Nick's elegiac opening words," as well as by much of the ensuing poetry and symbolism (236). Yet there was also plenty of raw meat to keep them interested. *Gatsby*, after all, features a potent mix of "bootlegging, crime, [and] explicit sexuality," not to mention three violent deaths (Corrigan 2014b). In addition, consider its precociously film noir-like structure – what with its often seedy settings, the "fated feel" of its doom-laden trajectory, and its presentation through voiceover narrative (Corrigan 2014a, 10). All this may have helped to make it seem more natural and familiar, as a matter of genre, to readers in 1945 than it had in 1925.

Gatsby's brevity also may have appealed more to 1945 readers of a free book than it had to prospective purchasers in 1925. For either a free or cheap book – including, not just ASE books, but the mass market paperbacks that started appearing in bulk after World War II – large

size may chiefly convey the threat of a burdensome reading commitment, rather than the promise of good value for money that matters for a costlier hardcover purchase. For *Gatsby*, therefore, a weakness, from a readership and sales standpoint, had been converted into a strength.

As the postwar paperback boom emerged, new domestic editions of *Gatsby* began "popping up like toasters" (Lucey 2013). A 1949 film version, treating it as an "underworld crime saga" with a noir sensibility (Corrigan 2014a, 131), offers a hint regarding the initial nature of its mass appeal. Only later, as it increasingly became assigned school reading, rather than voluntarily chosen escapism, would this aspect of the story recede relative to its being a doomed love story involving rich people, loaded with overt symbolism that one's teachers might tediously unpack.

2. *Gatsby*'s Critical Rise

Fitzgerald's and *Gatsby*'s critical revival in the 1940s, following his death and pushed forward by such prominent admirers as Edmund Wilson (1941) and Lionel Trilling (1945), was almost bound to happen. The book's quality, Fitzgerald's prominence and connections in literary circles, and the requisite passage of time all predictably helped. Less foreordained, however, was the particular form that the *Gatsby* revival took.

At a time when the United States had newly emerged as a dominant and outward-looking world power, the new *Gatsby* criticism focused from the start on the idea that Jay Gatsby is a "symbol of" or "stand[s] for America itself" (Troy 1945; Trilling 1945). More specifically, both William Troy and Lionel Trilling – prominent literary critics who were *Gatsby*'s two first revivalists – described its title character as symbolizing the American Dream.

Maureen Corrigan (2014, 219) suggests that, at a "time of Cold War calcification, when intellectuals are being asked whether they are on the side of America or its Soviet foe," *Gatsby*'s

"American qualities … somehow resonated." This is not, however, to say that critics who engaged with the book on this basis were looking for patriotic braying. To the contrary, they lauded *Gatsby* for what they took to be its harsh criticism of America. But the nature of the assumed criticism was itself highly flattering. It involved viewing American culture as thrillingly unique in its naïve hopefulness and idealism, even if to be (whether excitedly or mournfully) exposed as misguided and corrupt.

The American Dream school of *Gatsby* literary critics saw the book as supporting a view of America as a country that both needs and has a distinctive great literature, in which we criticize ourselves for national failings that reflect our extraordinary national origins, stemming from the first European settlements and the settlers' centuries-long westward march. America itself becomes a kind of tragic hero, brought low – but only metaphorically, as in a practical sense it was thriving – by its tragic flaws. Thus, as America's economy boomed, and its network of alliances stood triumphantly astride half the globe, the critics' despair (if that is even the word for so comfortable a distress) was like that of a Cicero crying out "O tempora, o mores!" as Rome unchallengeably dominated its Mediterranean world. Deep-rooted self-assurance allows one to be all the more self-lacerating in the realms of morality, happiness, and wisdom.

During the ten-plus years after Troy (1945) and Trilling (1945) first emphasized *Gatsby*'s Americanness, and related it to the American Dream, this take grew dominant in the critical literature. Ensuing critical studies asserted, for example:

--*Gatsby* shows the "corruption of [the American] dream in industrial America," as well as the Dream's "universally seductive and perpetually unreal" character (Fussell 1952, 291).

--It offers "some of the severest and closest criticism of the American dream that our literature affords." Its "profound corrective insights …. embod[y] a criticism of American

experience … more radical than anything in [Henry] James's [work] …. The theme of *Gatsby* is the withering of the American dream" (Bewley 1954, 223).

--*Gatsby*'s "searching critique of American society" implies that the American Dream may be "little more than a thinly veiled nightmare" (Bicknell 1954, 556).

--*Gatsby* is "of course … a criticism of the American dream," even if the label "oversimplifi[es]" because, rather than being "only that and nothing more," it also critiques "dream and illusion" more generally (Stallman 1955, 2 and 15)

--*Gatsby* "adumbrate[s] the coming tragedy of a nation grown decadent without achieving maturity – a nation that possessed and enjoyed early and in its arrogant assumption of superiority lost sight of the dream that had created it" (Ornstein 1956).

What, however, exactly constitutes the meat of *Gatsby*'s apparently devastating critique of the American Dream? Later writers find it "not easy to specify what that dream is" for this purpose (Wasiolek 1992, 15). Clearly, however, the critique that the American Dream critics find in *Gatsby* relates to its vaguer manifestations regarding self-realization and personal fulfillment. They decidedly do not view the Dream as focusing just on practical self-advancement, to the exclusion of mystical self-reinvention.

Yet, given how much the American Dream has to do with the hope of getting rich – even if it is not "merely" about that (Adams (1931, 405) – a takedown cannot ignore the argument that actual upward mobility validates it. The main stances that one could take, in response to such an argument, include the following:

1) <u>Practical critique</u> – Suppose that economic opportunity has sufficiently faded that one really cannot make it to the top without the requisite birth, position, or access to capital. Then the American Dream's promise to the aspiring masses is false.

2) <u>Cynical critique</u> – Suppose that success goes to the cutthroat and the dishonest, rather than to those who are honest, intelligent, creative, or hardworking. Then, while there is upward mobility just as the Dream promises, it rewards the wrong people and fosters bad values.

3) <u>Hipster critique</u> – While "hipster" is a modern term – albeit, with roots going back to the 1920s and 1940s – it can be used more broadly to connote a countercultural sensibility that rejects mainstream values, conventional careers, and vulgar, mass-marketed materialism. Thus, at the risk of neologism, one could say that a hipster – or beatnik or hippie – critique of the American Dream involves viewing its quest as deluded, empty, false, anxious, neurotic, and hence bound to be unsatisfying, even if one actually can get rich.

Gatsby itself could reasonably be read as supporting each of the above three critiques of the American Dream. Its title character succeeds economically, but is unable to join the upper class socially, which is all that he cares about. He succeeds through crime, rather than honest enterprise. And his quest is fundamentally deluded in its obsession with an unworthy romantic object, and with the goal of restoring yet denying the past. Plus, the book's depiction of pervasive consumer ennui, extending from the bored Daisy Buchanan, to the almost inert Nick Carraway, to Gatsby's frantic yet joyless party guests, suggests that the culture cannot satisfy the cravings that its institutions (such as advertising) help to shape.

For the American Dream *Gatsby* scholars of the 1950s, however, it is almost entirely hipster critique. For example:

--Edwin Fussell (1952) lauds *Gatsby*'s "indictment of American philistinism" (296), while praising Fitzgerald's capacity to expose "the corruption of imagination" by "Hollywood sentimentality and meretriciousness" (303).

--John Bicknell (1954) sees a "vision of society [in which] we have only a choice of mindless evils or pathetic follies" (558). Fitzgerald powerfully illustrates the "liberal and radical … [social critics'] conviction that contemporary society in its present stage is ruled by a complex of forces destructive of basic human values and subversive of man's vision of the good life" (572).

--Maurice Bewley (1954) revels in the broader critique of American culture that he sees as embodied in Gatsby's personal "immature romanticism," "insecure grasp of social and human values," and "compulsive optimism" (245). These "terrifying deficiencies," which are "inherent in contemporary manifestations of the American vision itself," not only doom Gatsby personally, but raise the "more important question … [of] where they have brought America" (245-246).

Such hipster critiques of American culture – however compelling (or not) one may find them – bring to mind the expressions "First World problems" and "white people problems." By analogy, only in a food-secure country do people start complaining that mass-marketed food products ought to taste better, or to be fresher and more nutritious. Primary needs must be taken for granted before secondary complaints command attention.

Suppose upward mobility were wholly impossible – one was either born rich, or else condemned to lifelong poverty. Then the question of whether wealth and its pursuit are deeply unsatisfying would not even arise. Upward mobility must be feasible to begin with, before people start scoffing at its psychic efficacy.

America in the post-World War II period was experiencing significant economic growth. It also had more widespread upward mobility than we observe today. The Great Depression was decisively over. The GI Bill was helping millions of former servicemen to find better lives than their parents had ever known. Moreover, people's material lives were improving even more than

a purely dollars-based measure would have suggested, whether judged by the rise of home ownership, highways, antibiotics, or television. Accordingly, this was not an era when a practical critique of the American Dream, holding that one simply cannot rise economically, would have gained much credence.

Yet the very fact that things were going so well, so far as the practical critique of the American Dream was concerned, was good news for the hipster critique. In a materially optimistic era, it provided a natural vehicle for expressing alienation from the dominant mainstream culture of, say, Eisenhower and big business. (I say "materially optimistic" because the 1950s had other anxieties – concerning, for example, the threat of nuclear war, and the early stages of rising new challenges to racial and gender hierarchy.)

Gatsby does indeed offer a degree of textual support for the hipster critique of the American Dream – albeit, without being so thoroughly lacerating as a work like *The Day of the Locust*. For example, even beyond the agita around Gatsby's false but entrancing vision, consider the book's depiction of pervasive consumer ennui and malaise. Yet the Dream critics were flattening the book's portrait of American social and cultural tensions in an era of economic excitement. Neither its view of the rich as fundamentally different from everyone else, nor its multifaceted dabbling in 1920s racial unease, receive due emphasis in these accounts. These downplayed aspects helped to leave room for *Gatsby* readings to change in the post-iconification era.

G. *Gatsby* Today

1. Changing Critical Views

Backlash against *Gatsby*'s critical canonization and mass adoption as an assigned school text was bound to emerge, and soon did. Gary Scrimgeour (1966) offered an early example, in a

piece entitled "Against *The Great Gatsby*" that asserted its literary inferiority to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (which likewise employs a first-person narrator who is fascinated by the lead character). Scrimgeour begins by snarking that *Gatsby* is "just good enough, just lyrical enough, just teachable-to-freshmen enough (and more than 'American' enough) for unwary souls to call it a classic" (75). He eventually resurrects its literary worth, but on the ground that the Dream critics have wholly misread it. If Gatsby is merely "a boor, a roughneck, a fraud, a criminal" (78), and his misty dreams are entirely Nick Carraway's deluded invention, it becomes far darker than the Dream critics had realized, and rebuts both their and Nick's "sentimental pessimism" (86).

Even when the Dream critics were not being rebutted, however, there was a shift away from sharing their interests. Later accounts of just how *Gatsby* challenges the American Dream tend to interpret the Dream far more narrowly and literally – for example, as simply promising "material success as the reward for honest hard work and enterprise" (Corrigan 2014, 138). Or: "Fitzgerald's commentary on the American Dream appears to be this: The people in the middle pay the price for getting mixed up with the people at the top, the people in control" (Johnson 2002, 43). Or, the American Dream critics are simply "mistaken" in interpreting it as being about the "romantic gamble," rather than "the main chance…. The actual American dream [of practical material self-advancement] … is very much about living in reality" (Schudson 2004, 571-572).

This reflected a relocation of cultural criticism. The notion of *Gatsby* as hipster critique of the American Dream began to seem increasingly mild gruel as academic writing began to accommodate far sharper criticisms of mainstream American culture – for example, as being racist, sexist, and founded on capitalist exploitation. *Gatsby* could now, with textual support, be

interpreted as bearing on issues that, during the 1950s, may have lain outside boundaries of polite (and career-compatible) critical discussion. For example:

Race: *Gatsby*'s enmeshment in the world of 1920s anti-immigrant racism, and its both expressing and exposing anti-Semitism, began receiving extensive critical attention. Jeffrey Louis Decker (1994, 67-68), for example, argues that *Gatsby*'s purported relationship to the American Dream misconstrues what is actually an anti-immigrant nationalist vision with a "Nordic inflection."[5]

Gender: Daisy Buchanan's role, not just as an object for men to possess and a careless smasher of the less privileged, but also as a victim of the society's sexism and that of the men she knows, began receiving more sympathetic attention.[6] Sarah Beebe Fryer (1984) for example, notes how little any of the male characters understand her, and emphasizes her honesty and unmet emotional needs.

Sexual Identity: *Gatsby*'s hints of ambiguous sexual identity had been noticed early on. For example, Lionel Trilling (1945) refers in passing to the "vaguely homosexual Jordan Baker." Moreover, one can scarcely fail to notice how much more alluring and exciting Nick Carraway seems to find Gatsby than Jordan or his other passing female love interests. Yet this side of the book had been little discussed, presumably reflecting the boundaries of accepted discourse. Indeed, American Dream critics, tended generally to downplay sexuality's importance in the text. Maurice Bewley (1954, 235), for example, sniffs that even the heterosexual love affair between Gatsby and Daisy is "vulgar and specious. It has no possible interest in its own right."

With time, *Gatsby*'s arguably reaching beyond the strictures of conventional heteronormativity began, not only to draw more critical attention, but also to be extended beyond

[5] For similar critiques, see, e.g., Michaels 2006; Pekarofski 2012; and Schreier 2007.
[6] See, e.g., Person 1978; Fryer 1984.

Nick and Jordan. Thus, Edward Wasiolek (1992, 21) suggests that Nick "loves Gatsby and hates Tom … because Gatsby throws a veil of glamor and fateful romance over his displaced homosexuality, while Tom reveals it in a vulgar and irredeemable form…. [Tom's] exaggerated masculinity is as much a sign of his homosexuality as is Gatsby's idealism."[7]

Capitalism: The hipster critique of the American Dream questions the value of capitalist striving, but without fundamentally indicting the system. Instead, it wistfully "align[s] the failure of economic and cultural aspiration with a tradition of high metaphysical defeatism" (Fitter 1998, 2). However, while a view of *Gatsby* as more radical than this might have been poorly received during the prime Cold War period after World War II – and does not appear to have occurred to 1930s Marxist literary critics – it emerged later on. Some now view *Gatsby* as offering a sophisticated Marxist critique of 1920s capitalism, rooted in an understanding of how "commodity fetishism" (Posnock 1984, 206) or the "hegemonic code of glamour" (Fitter 1998, 14) allow an exploitative status quo to retain its ideological grip.

Lessened highbrow critical reputation: Despite all these new critical vistas, *Gatsby*'s highbrow literary reputation appears to have declined somewhat in recent decades. Maureen Corrigan (2014, 274) compares its image in leading English departments, where it is considered "somewhat passé," to that of an "American cheese sandwich on Wonder Bread." She notes that, while *Gatsby* is inevitably included in American literature survey courses, Fitzgerald (along with Hemingway) tends not to feature in upper-level seminars with anything like the frequency of such contemporaries as James Joyce, William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, or even Willa Cather.

This change is probably not just backlash from *Gatsby*'s having become so canonical. The book's being at once accessible rather than abstruse, yet tasteful rather than extreme, along

[7] On *Gatsby*'s departures from depicting conventional heteronormativity, see also, e.g., Fraser 1984; Froehlich 2010.

with its self-consciously beautiful and poetic style, and its extensive deployment of carefully worked out symbolism, are not entirely to modern (or postmodern) critical taste. This has had little evident impact, however, on its continued preeminence in popular culture.

2. The Public's New *Gatsby* in our Second Gilded Age

To the general public today, *Gatsby* is famous not just for being famous, but more specifically for being required reading in so many middle and high schools. Its conscripted readers, no less than voluntary ones, may start out with expectations that end up affecting how they read it. In particular, they may know in advance that Jay Gatsby is a rich, handsome, and mysterious figure – almost inevitably played by Leonardo DiCaprio in the 2013 film version, as he had been played by Robert Redford in 1974 – who throws fabulous parties. Gatsby parties, after all, have long been a thing culturally, both predating and reenergized by the 2013 film.

In the actual text, Gatsby first appears in this vein, and we only learn later on about his rise from humble origins. However, whether or not popular readers ever chose the book for its American Dream aspects, they are now more likely than ever to view it instead as being primarily a novel about rich people. Even if they end up connecting emotionally with its pessimism and dissatisfaction – relating this, perhaps, to their own adolescent anxieties about what the future might hold – the notion may linger that its chief virtue is its giving us the chance to gaze voyeuristically at the cavortings of the super-rich.

Baz Luhrmann's 2013 film version reflects this sense of *Gatsby* as offering an entrancing spectacle to be viewed from the outside, nose pressed against the glass. His film is a "splashy, trashy opera, a wayward, lavishly theatrical celebration of … emotional and material extravagance" (Scott 2013). It "explod[es] with the kaleidoscopic colors of the bacchanalian scene" (Dimock 2013), "walloping you intentionally and un- with the theme of prodigal waste"

(Edelstein 2013). The Gatsby-Daisy romance gets foregrounded even more than in the novel. (For example, it is no longer clear that Nick and Jordan connect romantically.) However, the central romance itself is more a voyeuristic movie convention than a mechanism for direct personal identification, as one views large-screen close-ups of glamorous, beautiful, and famous actors' well-lit faces.

By increasing the relative prominence of *Gatsby*'s appeal to voyeurism, the Luhrmann film downplays its American Dream-questioning aspect. Voyeurism is a stance that can work at least as well for pessimists as optimists about the feasibility of rising economically. After all, one need not deem the uppermost circles potentially permeable in order to enjoy a fantasy visit – whereas questioning whether the rise is worth it presupposes its being at least possible.

Gatsby today may indeed predominantly be, in the public mind as in the 2013 film, an amped-up "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," set in a glamorous past period that is delightful to visit (and all the more so if, like Lurhmann, one supplements its jazz with contemporary pop and hip-hop). This outcome is ironic, given the book's depiction of consumer ennui, and its attack on the emptiness and "vast carelessness" of the super-rich. Yet these casual modern departures from a fully attentive reading of *Gatsby* reflect Fitzgerald's success in doing many different things at once, while often leaving open what it all might mean.

H. An Ambiguous Messenger

Two topics of primary sociological interest in *The Great Gatsby* are (1) how the super-rich relate and compare to other Americans, and (2) the American Dream of upward economic mobility, whether this is interpreted more narrowly or more broadly. The fluctuating relative prominence of these two topics in reader perceptions of *Gatsby* sheds light on prevailing cultural

interests in different eras. However, *Gatsby*'s reception across time also shows elements of cultural continuity.

The super-rich – While *Gatsby* is often allusive and subject to multiple interpretations, its view of those who were born to great wealth verges on the didactic, reflecting beliefs that Fitzgerald spelled out at about the same time (in *The Rich Boy*) and that were rooted in his personal life experiences. Reducing wealth's sociological significance to how, when enjoyed from childhood, it affects self-confidence seems both simplistic and reductionist. Moreover, within the novel itself we see rising new alternative elites whose members may care less than Gatsby does about the Social Register class of rich people.

Despite high-end inequality's substantial rise over the last few decades, *Gatsby*'s particular critique of rich people may have resonated more during the era of its postwar reputational rise than in today's post-iconification period. Members of the old WASP / Ivy League social elites – that is, people like Tom Buchanan, apart from his being a Chicagoan rather than a New Englander – were more socially and culturally dominant in 1950s America than they are today. The early post-World War II period also predated the full transformation from viewing inherited wealth as the most honorific kind (as in Veblen's Gilded Age writing) to today's norm, under which earning a billion dollars is so much more admired than inheriting it that even people who were born to huge fortunes like to pretend they are self-made. In today's world, even a shady self-made criminal like Gatsby might enjoy a status advantage of a sort over a Tom Buchanan, unless Tom's college football stardom came to his rescue.

What may have resonated comparably in all the different periods, however (apart, perhaps, from the 1930s), is *Gatsby*'s treating rich people, including its title character, as objects of an intense fascination that is mingled with resentment. Egalitarian sentiments are not much

directly in evidence throughout *Gatsby*, reflecting its Gilded Age-like character and Fitzgerald's focus on the rich. Yet the democratic pretense of broad social equality, at least among Whites, and the lack of a settled model for vertical hierarchical interactions, help contribute to the book's pervasive sense of unease.

Upward mobility and the American Dream – *Gatsby* is not as centrally focused on upward mobility, or the American Dream as interpreted narrowly to denote achieving "merely material plenty," as its reputation sometimes suggests. Again, we meet Gatsby as a mysterious plutocrat many pages before we hear his life story. Even Nick's early expressions of fealty to Gatsby, which tell us that he is not just a plutocrat, turn on his vision, not his rise. Mere economic striving has also been left far behind once one gets to the famous closing, with its orgastic future and boats beating against the current.

That closing can help support reading *Gatsby* as a critique of the broader American Dream, if interpreted as being about finding meaning and self-fulfillment through self-application and self-improvement. Yet *Gatsby* also may not endorse simply finding an off-ramp. After all, Nick's final escape back to the Midwest seems poised to offer him no more than a life of boredom and melancholy nostalgia.

The book also examines racial tensions amid the contested boundaries of whiteness. It depicts consumerism as frenetic yet joyless, for reasons that may relate both to the lure of manipulative advertising and the impulse to engage in competitive display. It explores geographical unrootedness, what with a narrator who, by the end, can neither abide New York nor imagine finding stimulation elsewhere. And it dramatizes the tensions between vast economic inequality and the cultural presumption that at least all White people are social equals.

Again, however, *Gatsby*'s diagnosis of American social dysfunction, while broadly suggestive, is deliberately left ambiguous and underspecified, other than in its distaste for the rich. And even that aspect is mingled with a fascination that encourages reading about the book's rich characters in a spirit of voyeurism, rather than just exposé. Thus, while one can readily find a harsh critique of American culture in *Gatsby*, the exact content of which is unclear, one also can just sit back and enjoy the ride.

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