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The American University in Cairo  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*:  
Critical Reception and Visual Interpretation**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Department of English and Comparative Literature

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
The Degree of Master of Arts

By  
**Ahmed G Maklad**

Under the supervision of **Dr. Ferial Ghazoul**

**January/ 2015**

The American University in Cairo

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
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Has been approved by

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# **Abstract**

American University in Cairo

MA Thesis

Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: Critical Reception and Visual Interpretation

By Ahmed G Maklad (Advisor: Professor Ferial Ghazoul)

The thesis explores how the literary status of Fitzgerald's novel published in 1925 evolved from being dismissed to becoming a canonical work of American Literature after the death of its author. The role of criticism and adaptations and how they intertwined to popularize the novel among the academic elite and the general public is examined. Four critical studies in different decades of recent history are analyzed to show the different approaches to the novel as well as its relation to the American Dream. The thesis suggests that the four critical studies discussed reflect viewpoints impacted by the cultural and socio-economic factors that marked the decade of their appearance: Kermit Moyer (1973), Ross Posnock (1984), Ray Canterbury (1999), and Benjamin Shreier (2007). Their approaches demonstrate the many ways *The Great Gatsby* can be viewed and thus its richness as a text. The three film adaptations of the novel in turn depict directors' take on the novel as well as exhibiting the limitations, predilections, and technical possibilities of the time of their production: Nugent's (1949), Clayton's (1974), and Luhrmann's (2013). The controversial aspects of these adaptations as indicated by reviews and articles, which evaluate them as to how they present Gatsby and the American Dream, have increased the debate and the interest in the novel. Though the novel is located in the U.S. in the Roaring Twenties associated with the Jazz Age, it continues to speak to present audience by evoking issues related to class, mobility, ethics, and romance.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

In my study of literature, I have always wondered what makes certain works function as key texts in a culture or in an epoch. Does it have to do only with the artistic quality of the work? Does the position of the author make a difference? Do certain periods welcome certain texts more than others? What is the role of academic institutions and particularly departments of literature in consecrating a certain author or a certain text? What about the role of adaptations and cinematic interpretations in making a work more important than others? In order to answer some of these questions I chose to address a modern classic of American literature, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, that was not met with critical and popular success in the beginning. Yet, it came to be considered a seminal text later. Since the 1950s up till now this novel has preoccupied critics as well as the general public.

This thesis will argue that *The Great Gatsby* was not only the product of its creator's personal inspiration, motivation and strife; it is, more eminently, an American work about America, providing insight into the shaping and constant reformation of the American collective consciousness, whilst discussing the key concepts that make America what it is today, and perhaps even prophesize its future. In this thesis I intend to examine four critical receptions of the novel by American scholars and how it was interpreted visually in films based on three different movie adaptations. Through Reception Theory and Reader Response criticism, I will reflect on how literary critics analyzed the work for the scholarly community and how directors interpreted the novel for the general public. I will discuss the different approaches critics have taken in understanding and presenting the novel.

Scholarly study of *The Great Gatsby* began in the 1940s; “its earliest focus was on its criticism of the American experience and as a work with universal themes and appeal” (Bryer 118), and continues until the present. My research is not to analyze *The Great Gatsby*, but to understand what affected the reception of *The Great Gatsby* from the time of publication until now. I wanted to use reception aesthetics to try and uncover the reasons behind the change in its reception for more than half a century. I intend to focus my study on several major critics of different orientations, who analyzed the novel and its relation to the American Dream in its idealistic version and realistic conditions. I will single out certain influential articles on the novel and expose their orientation and method, while examining how critics have evolved in their appreciations of the novel.

I will focus on the reader’s and audience reception of the text in terms of specialized critics (as encountered in the selected scholarly articles), as well as the general public responses (as encountered in films aiming at the general viewer) over the course of time. I will be looking closely at how the reader and viewer respond to the text according to readers’ own horizon of expectations. Book and film reviews will help determine how the novel and the film were received. When analyzing the film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*, I will be researching how they reflect the disposition of society around the time of production. This will be done by taking into consideration significant historical, cultural, and socio-political activities of the period that have influenced American sensibility in a given decade.

My research will explore why the novel turned into one of the most discussed literary works in American literature and why do critical essays continue to address *The Great Gatsby*, presenting not only different perspectives on the novel but changing attitudes and evaluations of

the American Dream itself. Finally, I will look into the many cinematic adaptations of the novel and their reception and role in popularizing the literary text of *The Great Gatsby*.

### 1. F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940)

F. Scott Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, his parents (Mollie and Edward Fitzgerald) were devout Catholics, the mother more so than the father. (Brucoli, *Some Sort* 19). Fitzgerald's father was not a successful businessman nor salesman which led to the family being financially dependent on wife Mary. Fitzgerald attended St Paul Academy in 1908 when he was twelve and his mother paid the tuition. Andrew Hook (Fitzgerald scholar) had shown in his research that in the year 1908, when Edward lost his job, the family realized they were going to depend on Mollie's inheritance to survive (Hook 4).

Fitzgerald joined the Newman School located in New Jersey because of his low academic standing and his family pressures (Hook 5). He attended Princeton; however, he was not a diligent student and mainly cared about his literary ambitions. Halfway through his college career Fitzgerald was put on probation and eventually dropped out. He joined the army in 1917; concerned about his likely death in combat, he wrote a novel entitled *The Romantic Egotist*. The publisher Charles Scribner's Sons praised the novel's originality but rejected it, asking for revisions (Brucoli, *Some Sort* 85).

Another major event that affected the life of Fitzgerald was how he met and fell in love with Zelda. In 1918 Fitzgerald was assigned to Camp Sheridan in Alabama. There he met the beautiful eighteen-year-old Zelda Sayre, daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court judge. They fell in love and got engaged; however, Zelda wanted to make sure Fitzgerald can financially provide for her an upscale lifestyle. When Fitzgerald requested that she wait until he becomes a success in New York working in advertisements, she declined and called off the engagement (Brucoli,

*Some Sort* 90). Over a year later he decided to return home and focus on his novel *This Side of Paradise* in hopes of getting back with Zelda when he becomes successful. In 1919 his novel was accepted by Editor Maxwell Perkins of Scribner's (Brucoli, *Some Sort* 103). His struggle in locating the appropriate position within society during the early twentieth century was a result of not belonging to the typical dominant WASP community or the elite. His father was born into a well-known family but had lost their fortune whilst the mother's family had massive wealth but no prominent family title. During his childhood, Fitzgerald's family enjoyed relative wealth, until his father lost his job, prompting him to relocate several times in search of a new occupation. This turn in fortunes created a tension between Fitzgerald and his father, which—like Gatsby his protagonist—resulted in a resentment of his past. Fitzgerald did not accept his childhood and wanted to reconstruct the past through the use of fiction (Brucoli, *Some Sort* 18-22). Edwin Fussell in *Fitzgerald's Brave New World*, argues that "Fitzgerald wrote the story of his own representative life, unless we are prepared to read his confessions—and then his evaluation of those confessions—as American history; and unless we reciprocally learn to read American history as the tale of the romantic imagination in the United States" (43). Gatsby, along with his extravagant party scenes, appears as a recreation of Fitzgerald's own neighbor on Long Island, which illustrates Fitzgerald's desire to recreate his own understanding of his past, and sheds light on both the writing process and the role of his finished novel.

Zelda's characteristics are paralleled in the novel by Daisy—as indicated in his own autobiography as well as the many biographical works on the author. Zelda was a symbol of acceptance of his quest for upward social mobility, which required him not only to establish a bond of wedlock with her, but to both finance and engage in her extravagant lifestyle, and in doing so attempt to secure his membership into the wealthy leisure class. Malcolm Cowley

comments on Fitzgerald's adoption of Zelda's understanding of status, in the spending habits of the couple: they focused on unnecessary consumption and secondary outlets for their money, which eventually led to their financial ruin (10). This bit of historical information displays great resemblance to *The Great Gatsby* and its major themes and characters. Matthew J. Bruccoli points out: "F. Scott Fitzgerald created his own legends. His life overshadows his work as he has become an archetypal figure – or a cluster of overlapping archetypes: the drunken writer, the ruined novelist, the spoiled genius, the personification of the Jazz Age, the sacrificial victim of the Depression" ("Introduction" xix).

Fitzgerald's aspirations as a young American were not unique, yet his path to success certainly was. Like his peers, his determination and endeavors for financial success and status forced him to attempt to comprehend the pecuniary world and its capitalist dynamics, yet "it was the emotion he put into his dreams, and the honesty with which he expressed the emotion, that made them seem distinguished" (Cowley 3). Fitzgerald was exceptional because of his close attention to American concerns, which allowed him to establish a new mode of communicating with his readers by exposing his novels to unanswered questions about American identity at the time of the validity and possibility of the American dream. Fitzgerald stated: "I want to write something new—something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned" (qtd. Bruccoli, "Introduction" ix). The author's philosophical concern with the American spirit allowed him to closely dissect the dilemma situated within the ethical human questions surrounding the American dream (Fussell 43). It is through *The Great Gatsby* that Fitzgerald unpacks the ambiguity of the American Dream, while raising questions regarding the authenticity, attainability, and pursuit of this dream.

## 2. *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is perceived as one of the most influential novels in modern American literature. It is frequently assigned in today's classrooms because of its literary and historical relevance to contemporary American issues of society. It related to the American Dream—a utopian theme that persists in American culture from the Declaration of Independence to contemporary presidential speeches. The American dream upholds that the United States is founded on the basis of equal opportunity for all. It assumes that starting from humble beginnings and reaching tremendous wealth through hard work, sacrifice, risk taking, and education is possible for all. As one grows up in the United States, one assimilates the common ideology at the center of the American Dream, namely, having equal opportunity to pursue happiness and welfare. According to the terms of the American Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (US 1776). Any country that is built on these principles allows its citizens to have hopes and dreams to which they may aspire and achieve.

Harold Bloom describes the American Dream as “devoid of clear meaning... American writers who have engaged the dream... have been aware of this haziness and of attendant ironies” (Bloom xv). Yet these writers believe that it is possible “to have a nation in which all of us are free to develop our singularities into health, prosperity, and some measure of happiness in self-development and personal achievement,” all of which Bloom categorizes as the “Party of Hope” (Bloom xv). The American Dream is intended to be about personal achievement, but not necessarily about financial wealth, although it is often assumed that it provides economic security. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald shows the reader how elusive the American Dream is

and how deformed it has become. In the novel, it is in fact just an unattainable dream, as originally denoted in the Declaration of Independence, whereby the words “pursuit of happiness” imply that the dream is unachievable. In *The Great Gatsby*, the dream has been degraded: “The idealism of the colonists and the Founding Fathers has now mutated into a consumerist ideology; ‘liberty’ and the ‘pursuit of happiness’ become a series of choices about where one plays golf or what shirts to buy” (Reynolds xxi). Thus the American Dream is parodied in the novel to reflect its mythical dimension.

The novel is narrated through Nick Carraway, a member of the middle class, who exists both “within and without” (Fitzgerald 28) the confines of the upper class. The novel, first published in 1925, presents society through the extreme duality between the upper and lower classes in the post-World War I period, and during the prohibition of alcohol. This is examined through the characters of Tom Buchanan who represents old money, and George Wilson, a poor mechanic and owner of a garage who fixes Buchanan’s car, and is posed as his antithesis. The other two characters in the novel who illustrate the challenge of class and social mobility are Myrtle and Gatsby. Myrtle is a social climber who tries to enjoy the taste of the upper class by having an affair with Tom, while Gatsby tries to obtain acceptance into the upper class through masking his past. Through the journey of the protagonist, which is narrated by Carraway, one sees that Gatsby is an allegory of the American Dream and American history. He embodies the characteristics of what it means to be an American—determined, ambitious, innovative and cunning. The American Dream is embodied in the character of Gatsby and his twisted materialistic relationship with Daisy. His obsession with joining the upper class forces him to attain access to the upper echelon of society by joining a thug called Meyer Wolfshiem, who teaches him how to make quick illegal money through selling illegal alcohol and manipulating

bonds in the stock market. Gatsby's American dream is to become part of, and accepted by, the upper class. However, his tragic end shows that the American Dream is an illusion and social mobility is not as easy as it may seem.

Nick Carraway, the narrator, is also a principal character. As such, he is not in a position to relay to the reader an unbiased account of the events even though he does not explicitly judge them as he himself states in the opening of the novel: "I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened my many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores" (Fitzgerald 5). As Daisy's cousin and Gatsby's admirer, the narrator is not exactly neutral even though his account is that of an observer. Fitzgerald thus employs Nick as a narrative device—"the device of having events observed by a 'central consciousness,' . . . a character who stands somewhat apart from the action and whose vision frames it for the reader" (Cowley 16). It is pertinent to note that more recent readership and literary criticism suggest that Nick is not entirely 'apart from the action' and is in fact caught within the very dilemma that Gatsby as a character poses. Nick is not entirely an outsider and not entirely an insider. Nick himself is aware of this: "I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life" (Fitzgerald 30).

Daisy—Gatsby's drive and motive—embodies the *desire* for power through acquisition. It can be suggested that she is an object competed for among men—Tom and Gatsby—striving for greatness. Daisy is a symbol of Gatsby's inspiration and his self-delusion regarding his own acceptance into a position of elevated social status. The author's rendition of Daisy and his elaborate illustration and detail of her character through the narrative and through Nick's perception of her, is of "an emptiness that we see curdling into the viciousness of a monstrous moral indifference as the story unfolds . . . communicated with a force of imagery so rare in

modern American writing, that it is almost astonishing that he is often credited with giving in to those very qualities which *The Great Gatsby* so effectively excoriates” (Bewley 133). Here, Marius Bewley highlights the craftsmanship through which Fitzgerald has written Daisy, whilst hinting at the ambiguity surrounding the pursuit of the American dream, which Daisy embodies.

Gatsby values Daisy not necessarily as a woman nor a figment of his romance, but as one would value and obsess over a dream. Her worth becomes much greater than he anticipated through her marriage to Tom, who represents the authentic aristocratic upper class—“the man is not attracted by the fortune in itself . . . so much as position at the peak of social hierarchy, and the girl becomes the symbol of that position, the incarnation of its mysterious power” (Cowley 13). Daisy is the emblem of Gatsby’s dream which is created through his journey to obtain the image and status of the aristocracy. The illusion of his surreal desire creates a disturbance and breaks the barriers between reality and dreams.

*The Great Gatsby* is set on Long Island; the Buchanan’s estate is located in East Egg, while Gatsby’s recently acquired mansion is situated in West Egg.<sup>1</sup> The New York setting created a sense of division between the upper class and the working class, which offered an opportunity for the reader to be involved in the social dynamics of America during the 1920s. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald* points out that “Great Neck provided the setting and background material for Fitzgerald’s ‘new angle.’ It was at that time a favored residence for show-business figures and promoters . . . a great place for parties” (qtd. Bruccoli “Introduction” xii). Citizens who reside in these areas represent the social elites, while also representing the social climbers who imitate the aristocracy. Prominent American author and critic Norman Pearson comments on the implied relationship between West Egg and East Egg and how they produce “counterbalancing of situations by parallelism or contrast” (22). Fitzgerald opts not to

describe the characters' personalities but rather their reactions to specific scenarios which will thus allow the readers to interpret the characters through their own understanding. The setting also helps construct the way readers' perception would be favorable towards the excitement of Long Island and the devastation in the Valley of Ashes. The Valley of Ashes is an important landscape in the novel because it connects the wealthy class to New York by showing them a glimpse of what poverty looks like first hand.

Set in the 1920s, following the second wave of industrial revolution, the novel situates itself among encounters in American history, the most obvious of which are the racial, economic, and social conflicts of that time. The temporal setting of the work shapes the narrative through the financial and economic aspects emerging in the 1920s. This was a time when the stock market and WWI (1914-1918) began impacting the new economy in unimaginable ways. The banning of alcohol (hence the illegality of Gatsby's trade and acquired wealth), the emergence of the Jazz age and the racial connotations of such musical trend with its specific social aspect in America, the Great War and the instability of the economy—are all crucial events occurring in the novel's setting and shaping its narrative. Such events influenced the racial, social and financial dynamics of the era, thus influencing the novel. Economic prospects allowed certain citizens the opportunity for social mobility through status and financial gain. Also the rapidity with which the economy grew created an unfair advantage to those who invested and established a monopoly on whatever industry Americans chose to participate in.

Fitzgerald, clearly aware of the temporal aspects of his novel's setting "tried to find the visible act that revealed the moral quality inherent in a certain moment of time. He was haunted by time as if he wrote in a room full of clocks and calendars" (Cowley 7). His novel eminently adopts this concern with time, as we witness Gatsby not only trying to re-define himself, but

more clearly reinventing himself, in order to achieve a new social status. *The Great Gatsby* situates its temporal setting as the locus through which the plot develops, climaxes, and resolves. Moreover, the setting of the novel provides an understanding of the emerging concept of ‘extreme’ individuality amongst Americans, where “Young men and women of Fitzgerald’s time . . . still clung to their childhood notion that the world would improve without their help; that was one of the reasons why most of them felt excused from seeking the common good. Plunging into their personal adventures . . . they believed in a happy ending” (Cowley 4). The ideology of the youth of the time is embodied in Gatsby, who likewise in pursuit of his own happy ending, ignores the immorality employed and apparently necessary to achieve it. The protagonist reinvents himself into the incarnation of a person who is willing to risk all to obtain the one object that will satisfy his desire, and maintain the illusion of coming one step closer to grasping his idea of success (acquiring monetary wealth in order to win Daisy).

The repeated rise and fall of the American economy, which affected families and consequently individuals at the time, contributed to cultivating a sense of disregard in the people for their *real* financial circumstances in favor of a façade of economic success: “The change went deep into the texture of American society and deep into the feelings of Americans as individuals” (Cowley 11), who aspired to their own American dream, blinded to their actual possibilities, ethical resources and their potential to obtain such a dream. Each of the characters in the novel represents a certain type of social and ethical decay. Myrtle for example, is a woman who commits adultery with Tom Buchanan in order to catch a glimpse of the life of the upper class, and her corporeal and immoral actions suggest that by using her body and her sexuality—the only two tools she possesses—she is able to provide herself with the illusion of social mobility and class distinction. Another example is Tom Buchanan, who uses his blue blood

ancestry to manipulate a woman into having an affair with him. He is also able to convince his wife Daisy to stay with him, even after knowing of his affairs in order to preserve her newly gained social status after marrying him. This example shows how social rank can be a prison for some and how the desire for social mobility can justify conjugal infidelity and immorality as in the case of Myrtle.

That the setting of the novel forms characters where each “represents some particular variety of moral failure . . . ‘treated as if they were ideographs,’ [is] a true observation; but the treatment does not detract from their reality as persons” (Cowley 16). During this time marital affairs created an easier escape from harsh realities. The conflict here is highlighted through the distinct choice of narrator, where Fitzgerald specifically selects Nick—Daisy’s cousin—for the role. Nick’s moral struggle to witness Tom’s infidelity and have no active role in preventing nor terminating it represents America’s questioned ethical stance towards its citizens and the immoral means through which they pursue their dream. The eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg in the billboard showed the growing importance of advertising and consumption over and above moral issues. It is as if the figure of Dr. Eckleburg on the road is watching the decay of Americans and American civilization. It “is a way of seeing behind the façade of American materialism and showing it for what it is: cruel, a lie, and ultimately, deadly” (Larson 286). Anthony Larson in his article “Gatsby and Us” thus suggests that the eyes signify the role of the novel’s temporal setting in passively allowing the citizens to rot in their pursuit of ‘the Dream’.

Fitzgerald, in writing, focuses on money as a motif central to his work, and so, in incorporating money as a locus within *The Great Gatsby* “he was dealing not only with an intimate truth but also with what seemed to him the central truth of his American age” (Cowley 12). The setting of the novel is a portrait of America at the time, yet the transcendentalism of the

work perhaps suggests a timelessness to Fitzgerald's America. *The Great Gatsby* is a novel which speaks to Americans across eras. America in the twentieth century promotes the idea that money and properties are the source of true happiness and success, and this very concept contributes to American identity and perception. During that time in American history, religion was used as a tool to justify the means in controlling wealth. Fitzgerald was influenced through this method, as he experienced "the young businessmen of his time, much more than those of a later generation, who had been taught to measure success, failure, and even virtue in pecuniary terms. They had learned in school and Sunday school that virtue was rewarded with money and vice punished by the loss of money; apparently their one aim should be to earn lots of it fast" (Cowley 9).

Specifically, the religion which dominated and promoted this economic dialogue was Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, as represented through the WASP character, Tom Buchanan. One can also argue that religion justified the capitalist approach in the United States market, which led to the rich feeling it necessary to over-work and abuse blue-collar citizens. Americans became obsessed with how they were *seen* in contrast to how they actually lived. Maintaining the image of aristocracy and elite culture became the prime concern for American citizens, who engaged in perpetuating conspicuous accumulation, considering themselves wealthy not through property ownership "but rather in dollars per year [as income]" (Cowley 10).

Herein lies one of the key differences between old money and new money; the bourgeoisie was in constant competition with the WASPs, regarding who had the most properties and possessions, thus signifying the authenticity of the WASPs against the lack of roots of the nouveau riche. Representatives of new money feel it necessary to flaunt their fortunes before an audience—hence Gatsby's extravagant parties. Yet who enters the Buchanan's home? Only close

relations and friends; it is intimate and private, as they don't need to display or parade their wealth. Their family name suffices.

“*The Great Gatsby* embodies a criticism of the American experience—not of manners, but of a basic historic attitude to life” (Bewley 125), suggesting that the American tradition of pursuing dreams regardless of obstacles or conflicting matters, is what makes America what it is. *The Great Gatsby* is not a tale of money or financial success but one of America, and how it manipulates the world to gain what it wishes. It is a tale of domination, power dynamics, and the constant evolution and reconstruction to maintain America's pioneering status within the larger social Darwinist game. As Pearson argues, Nick's character at the end of the novel realizes that he is not narrating a story about Gatsby, but about an understanding, not only of America and the narrative's *dream* of America, but of “what has happened to make the American dream, though still beckoning, a future that recedes before us” (Pearson 30). Since America's establishment, citizens have been concerned with freedom, social mobility, and the promise of a ‘fresh start.’ The importance of the dream seems to be focused around the pursuit, the promise, and the strife towards it, regardless of that quintessential moment of attainability. “The [American] Dream [is] about self-reliance, self-respect, neighborly cooperation and a vision of a better and richer life, not for a privileged class, but for all” (Lawrence 16) or so it seemed. Samuel Lawrence discusses the historical significance of the ‘American Dream’ and the role it plays in shaping American national and individual identity. He argues that understanding the American dream as a concept allows us to comprehend and unpack the workings of American society, politics, and economic dialogues. The binary effect located within the concept of this dream illustrates a juxtaposition where temporality and illusions are contrasted. This precisely is Gatsby's dilemma, where “at the heart of the plot, for the most outrageous irony in Gatsby's tragedy is his belief that he can buy

his dream, which is, precisely, to recapture the past” (Fussell 50). The translation of the dream through economic means leads Gatsby to a state of confusion between financial wealth and ‘authentic’ aristocracy, as he attempts to financially buy his past unaware of the fact that it cannot be done. Lineage cannot be procured, because it is beyond one’s control; Gatsby changes his name, acquires immense wealth, links himself within the most enviable of connections and networks, and purchases anything money can buy, yet fails at procuring that which he cannot control—his own history.

This notion of ‘purchase’ and ‘dollar worth’ traps Gatsby into believing that he can attain his American dream, and the tragedy becomes illustrated through the protagonist’s inability to fulfil his dream apparently because of America itself: “Fitzgerald begins by exposing the corruption of that dream in industrial America; he ends by discovering that the pursuit is universally seductive and perpetually damned . . . the Fitzgerald hero is destroyed by the materials” (Fussell 44). With the introduction of industrialization, greed is introduced into the equation, due to the middle class’s desire to emulate what the upper class possessed; the upper class found a way to sell the mere image of their actual wealth and increase their profits whilst the poor became poorer due to image consumption. Gatsby is not only a pursuer of the American dream, “he is also the instrument by means of which Fitzgerald will register the tremors that point to its self-contained possibilities of destruction, its *fault* (flaw), in the geological sense” (Fussell 46-47). Fussell highlights the suggestion that the American dream as a self-righteous notion may be inherently flawed, and that the sheer possibility of such imperfection blemishes the belief that it is ‘free for all.’

“That the term ‘American Dream’ was created in the darkest days of the Great Depression was all the more interesting given that many feared it no longer existed” (Lawrence

13), yet what is most compelling is how *The Great Gatsby* as a novel was written before the actual term was coined. During the novel's setting, America was not aware of its near future (WW II, great depression, stock market crash, etc.) which would largely become instrumental towards the transcendentalism of *The Great Gatsby*, whereby the novel becomes prophetic, serving as a precursor to America's impending doom. Herein lies the ability of the novel to speak to generations across vast spectrums of time.

### 3. Reception Aesthetics

Pearson discusses the transcendent temporal nature of the novel in linking it—as a concept—to 'readership': "No novel is alive unless it is read. *The Great Gatsby* is now our material. It is what we have to deal with 'ever afterward'" (30). According to Michael Groden et al.: "Reader response can be defined through the importance of the text during its time of production, while it also concerns how critics of the time—of writing and publication—have influenced and affected the direction of the novel's main ideas and general message" (793). Reception is useful in distinguishing and understanding the literary tastes of a certain time period. It provides the reader with a perception of how readers contemporary to the text understood or disliked the author's criticism of his time. The 'history' of a text evolves into a partnership between literary history and criticism. This creates a new realm for analysis as it utilizes such tools as sociology, psychology, and philosophy in order to critique the texts: "Reader history joined the history of works . . . [thus] the investigation of literary taste was declared the true goal of literary history" (Hohendahl et al. 36). By grasping the 'reader history' one can unpack the text's effect on the general population, and in turn, how it influenced literature for years to come. Fitzgerald's understanding of his writing process influenced his novel in such a way that *The Great Gatsby* was probably written with an intended audience in the

future, rather than one contemporary to Fitzgerald, causing the work to act as a testimony of history for a timeless audience.

When discussing the novel in terms of its reception in the early 1920s, one can assert that the novel was not received well by the general public and specialized critics of its time. Due to the novel's ambiguity and complex characters, an encouraged sense of dissociation from the characters and the idea of the American dream emerged. In the historical sense, during the time of the novel the American dream was still being defined, and as such not yet fully understood. Through Fitzgerald's attack on the so-called American dream, which he himself was living in certain respects, his credibility is placed under the spotlight and questioned. The nature and reception of his works preceding *The Great Gatsby* prompted a criticism of the novel through prior presumptions. This was the first novel of Fitzgerald's through which he would prove his skills to his readers; it was to be his masterpiece and he intended it so. After all, "the history of literature becomes a crucial element in literary criticism because it allows us to comprehend the historical determiners of our understanding [,] the set of expectations against which readers perceive the text" (Grodén et al. 798). Readers and critics expected Fitzgerald to fail even before he wrote his novel, as he only wrote to make money when he married Zelda. However, after investigating Fitzgerald's works Brucoli saw a writer ahead of his time.

Reception of productions based on the book is sometimes centered on readers' understanding and perception of the book, and is altered depending on how such understanding changes or evolves. Criticism and reception of film adaptations are somewhat influenced by the relation of the visual productions to the original written work, and even to the history and perceived understanding of Fitzgerald himself. By creating film adaptations of the novel the text is revived, which consequently introduces new criticism and forms of reception theory. As

Hohendahl et al. point out the “shift in perspective places impact studies, which before had been marginal, into the center of discussion” (39). The fact that the novel has been reproduced multiple times through different visual and staged outlets confirms how the essence of the work and its central themes remain significant to this day.

Another aspect of reception can be defined in economic terms, such as how “the reader appears as part of a socially stratified public, as buyer and consumer of books and as recipient who permits literary works to affect him. The work appears as a message directed at the public, known to the author and as a commodity produced for a specific market” (Hohendahl et al. 40). In fact, the novel translates into a commodity being bought by the consumer (the reader) of a certain era. The artist is, at times, unable to produce his best work due to the audience’s inability to grasp the complexity of his literary skill. Hence, to reach a broader audience by adapting the novel into other forms of performed representations, the general message of the work should be simplified to meet the consumer’s demands. As Hohendahl et al. put it: “Scholarly debate reflected this dilemma of the bourgeois public sphere, though sometimes in a distorted form . . . [due to] the disintegration of the bourgeois reading public, [and] the dissolution of literary societies and clubs, which had served as control points for aesthetic communication in the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (36). When *The Great Gatsby* was published, for instance, the political and economic situation had a profound effect on the common people of that time which resulted in negative reviews. One could argue that the dissemination of the publication in the late 1920s and beyond was impacted by the depression of 1929. Thus the roaring 1920s as represented by Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* seemed a bipolar opposite of that critical period of the national economy.

“The form of fiction provides the author with an opportunity to produce an illusion of what can be considered real, to the point where the reader is unable to distinguish between reality

and illusion” (Pearson 21), and this very conflict between dreams and reality seems to be what has haunted directors, *Great Gatsby* scholars, and academics of reception theory, causing the novel to be countlessly revisited, in what appears to be an American obsession with the Dream.

## Chapter II: Critical Approaches to *The Great Gatsby*

In this chapter, each of the influential articles which have affected the novel's reception and exposed its orientation will be discussed. The chapter will observe how criticism has evolved through the past several decades in its appreciation of the novel. By exploring the articles chronologically in order to suggest their significance through time, the chapter will be broken down into sections discussing each article thoroughly. As the chapter unfolds, different views in understanding *The Great Gatsby*, will be highlighted. Looking at the novel through the individual critic's approach will show the richness of the text and its potential to engage a variety of literary scholars with their diverse approaches and ideological stances. No doubt, the critic's view is related to the context—that of American history and literary history.

The focus will be on several major critics of different orientations who analyzed the novel and its relation to the American Dream, both as an ideal and in terms of actual application. The articles which will be discussed are : “*The Great Gatsby: Fitzgerald’s Meditation on American History*” (1973) by Kermit W. Moyer, Ross Posnock’s ““A New World, Material without Being Real’: Fitzgerald’s Critique of Capitalism in *The Great Gatsby*” (1984) , Ray Canterbury’s “Thorstein Veblen and ‘The Great Gatsby’” (1999), and “Desire's Second Act: ‘Race’ and ‘The Great Gatsby’s’: Cynical Americanism” (2007), by Benjamin Schreier

The first article I address, “*The Great Gatsby: Fitzgerald’s Meditation on American History*” (1984, originally published 1973) by Kermit W. Moyer, a distinguished critic and dedicated historical scholar of F. Scott Fitzgerald, discusses the idea of ‘American history’ and how it constantly shifts according to the political, economic, and cultural issues of its time, which gives America its pioneering identity. In terms of the novel’s relation to American history, Moyer references critics such as Edwin Fussell to argue that there is a correlation between

Gatsby's personal experience and the formation of the spirit of the American nation.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the economic condition of the U.S. seemed materially promising compared to where it stood after WW II, but social fulfillment seemed unrealized.

Rebelliousness and hippy subculture drew attention to lack of satisfaction with the standard norms of American society. At this time Ross Posnock, Fitzgerald scholar and critic, publishes the article “‘A New World, Material without Being Real’: Fitzgerald's Critique of Capitalism in *The Great Gatsby*,” in which he uses Marxist theories of money and commodity fetishism to critique the novel. The critic distinguishes between use value (actual need) and exchange value to highlight the symbolic need to enhance one's status, and how the power of status symbols overtakes actual human relations. The article establishes a historical approach on the progress of the so-called 'New World' through the use of capitalism, which supported the elite achieving full control of the government. This led to exploitation of the middle class and the destruction of their humanity, as illustrated through incidents in *The Great Gatsby*.

In the 1990s, the condition of the U.S. economic and political scene point to an economy that peaked significantly as America pioneered in almost every aspect globally (education, military power, etc.). The economic and historical situation of the U.S. had become more stable on one hand, and on the other hand a cultural revolution related to issues of values, race, gender, and generation and class was evident. This probably affected the development of literary criticism and cultural expectations, hence moving away from the idea of the American Dream of joining the prosperous white upper class. Ray Canterbury, economic specialist, scholar and Fitzgerald critic, wrote the article “Thorstein Veblen and ‘The Great Gatsby’” (1999), where he discusses *The Great Gatsby* as a novel that embodies the principles outlined in the book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899). The book used an

application of Darwin's social evolution theory to the study of modern economic life. Martha Banta, a scholar and critic of American literature and cultural studies stated, "Veblen was . . . a 'restless analyst' of the American scene whose non-fiction study opened the way for the insistence by the novelists that sociology, economics, and literature share (and must share) a common aim to expose (through satire, wit, and passion) the lopsided nature of social institutions of power" (viii). American society had changed and the big corporations had taken over the so-called 'free market' which allowed them to control and exploit social mobility, resulting in the near impossibility of climbing the social ladder.

In 2007 the political and economic situation in the country had changed from better to worse and the big burst came in 2008. America was experiencing a traumatic economic recession caused by the housing sector, and the stock market plummeted. This disaster resulted in American citizens becoming pessimistic towards the American identity and destroyed the ideal of hope in the American dream. This might have influenced literary critics and scholarly work negatively because of the distrustful nature of the future of the U.S. In the article "Desire's Second Act: 'Race' and 'The Great Gatsby's': Cynical Americanism" (2007), Benjamin Schreier focuses on the deteriorating American identity and how it is represented in the novel, distancing it from "the confidence that the novel offers a straightforward description of something called "America" or "American" identity" (153). What is being illustrated in his work is the concept of the 'American' identity as an intangible term falsely defined and redefined, forced into generic interpretations, whereas it is in fact an entirely individual and subjective perception and concept. Schreier's argument is that *The Great Gatsby*, a work frequently considered as a representation of American history, is in fact non-historic, which is a clear withdrawal from its reception by Kermit Moyer.

In the year 2008 for the first time in American history, the middle class was victorious in choosing a president who represents the masses. The first African American president, Barack Obama, achieved a staggering triumph in the elections. President Obama's victory was a revival of hope in the American dream: a young man who came from a humble past, rose against all odds and became the leader of the free world. The American spirit was resurrected and brought back to life. This prompted literary critics to examine the concept and root of the 'Dream'. The American Dream figures also in "*The Great Gatsby: The Tragedy of the American Dream on Long Island's Gold Coast*" by Tanfer Emin Tunc (2009), a Turkish critic and cultural historian of the modern United States. The author addresses a multiplicity of issues including class, gender and race in order to illustrate the relevance of the novel to American culture. Tunc mainly focuses on the novel's portrayal of the American dream to investigate its truthfulness. The critic provides a compelling discussion of the "rise and fall" of the American dream, where she suggests the novel is a representation of the ambitious middle-class and the false hopes of one day entering the realm of the upper-class. I mention her work in passing since I am concentrating on American critics. However, the article demonstrates how art possesses the ability to motivate and inspire today's youth both in the New World and the Old World. Hope is still alive pushing young people to follow their dreams. *Gatsby* in the twenty first century represents the global spirit, the motivation, and determination that pushes one to achieve one's goals.

### 1. Moyer: Fitzgerald's Meditation on History

This article is essential because it addresses how the text has been studied historically. Yet, rather than discuss the novel through the immoral means by which money was made during the Roaring 1920s or the depiction of class and wealth, the article instead focuses on a critique of

the role of money and its degrading effect on the characters of the novel by going back to the earliest views of how America was imagined.

In his article (originally published in 1973), Moyer argues that not much has been devoted to how the novel personifies American history. In the novel, the notion of American history is addressed in terms of a 'history' that is based on the concept of achievements, which are constantly concerned with materialistic paradigms. Moyer argues that "Gatsby is an extended flashback: events are narrated by Nick Carraway some two years after they have occurred. This technique gives the novel a formal circularity" (Moyer 216). He implies that Fitzgerald created a novel which blurs the past and the present, thus navigating his own interpretation of history—as a theme in his novel—in which Gatsby's character embodies the ambitious American struggle, pursuing equality, life, freedom and happiness. The natural structure of time has been altered to achieve a state of transcendence, where the reader is able to experience how the historical changes have caused the struggle between the beauty of the perceived life — the illusion we create of life — and the harshness of reality.

Moyer suggests that this notion is circular due to its never-ending rotation, where one is always chasing a fantasy. Gatsby embodies this notion of circularity through his un-ending quest and desire to acquire Daisy. As Moyer argues, "for Gatsby, the future has become simply an avenue leading back to the past--or, more specifically, leading back to the glittering possibilities the past once seemed to offer" (Moyer 217). Gatsby's journey becomes an everlasting and endless quest for a specific moment and sensation that Daisy has once inspired. However, his eagerness to obtain Daisy creates a false lens through which Gatsby believes he can use monetary means to change the past and by so doing become deserving of Daisy. This is exemplified when Jay Gatz, the protagonist, was an officer pretending to belong to the social

sphere of WASPs. This notion of purchasing time is an important subject discussed in this article, because the novel attempts to unveil the myth of altering history or changing one's past. As Moyer illustrates, the constant desire embodied in Gatsby's obsession with his past creates an illusionary world where wealth is able to affect the perception of that past.

Moyer points out that "Gatsby's transcendentalism, of course, is not only tainted by materialism, it is revealed as disastrously circular since it seeks by embracing the future to regain and freeze that instant in the past when Daisy seemed equal to the demands of Gatsby's transcendental imagination" (218). Gatsby's blend of idealism and materialism leads to his downfall, because while attaining success, he leaves behind his romantic wonder that motivated him through his idealism, and is left only with his addictive materialism. Moyer significantly critiques how this tragedy relates to Gatsby's end, because once he realizes his entire ambitious struggle to acquire Daisy and change his past, his aspirations become compromised by his materialistic nature, which ultimately destroys him.

Moyers then suggests that American history is evident throughout the novel as a whole, an example of which is Fitzgerald's reference to the Dutch sailors in the novel, representing Gatsby's understanding of the American dream. Moyer shows how the Dutch sailors came to the New World because of "the essential meretriciousness of the New World's spiritual and imaginative appeal" (220). The scholar later reveals the relation between Gatsby and his dream of objectifying Daisy, whereby he utilizes her as a representation of the new world, where she – and only she – can grant him access into the upper-class. Moyer compares Gatsby's own history to how "American history has been the record of a futile attempt to retrieve and sustain a moment of imaginative intensity and promise" (220). The argument Moyer is making, is that just as the American frontier dreamed of recreating that past moment of wonder when founding the

new world, Gatsby falls into the same problematic experience of attempting to recreate the past.

According to Moyer, each character in the novel represents certain forces that helped shape the American identity throughout American history. Moyer highlights how the Buchanans symbolize the American upper class. Their ability to purchase and reside wherever they please creates a longing amongst the lower classes to imitate them. Moyer describes Jordan Baker, a famous golf player who represents a new type of women in the 1920s (harsh, independent and self-sufficient), as having the same attributes of the Buchanans, but also representing the upper class superior physical strength as well as their deceitfulness. It is suggested that her role in the novel is an extension of the Buchanans through her arrogant and undermining tone throughout the narrative. Daisy, on the other hand, symbolizes the financial self-indulgence of the aristocrats while staying true to “Gatsby’s transcendental idealism” (221). Moyer thereby suggests that the WASPs have lost their moral and ethical American spirit, and have no desire to chase the notion of the American dream because they are living it.

As Moyer suggests, Gatsby loses sight of his spiritual dream and his materialistic obsession clouds his judgment, which forces him off his spiritual pursuit of the American dream. Moyer’s critical approach is based on unpacking and questioning the ideologies Fitzgerald illustrates in the novel.

## 2. Posnock: Fitzgerald’s Critique of Capitalism

Posnock’s economic approach to the text creates a new understanding of the novel through a Marxist standpoint. To Marxists, *The Great Gatsby* can be considered a historically accurate depiction of the U.S during a time when greed and immorality were at the root of the American spirit. Posnock argues, moving beyond previous critics, who have debated that “the novel is a criticism of American worship of success, the destructive effect of money, love

becomes a commodity, as do women, who are perceived as mere projections of class and wealth” (212). As stated in the notes of his article, Posnock is not interested in this type of critique of the text. Instead he would like to “generate a new insight by employing a Marxist framework” (212). As such, Posnock uses Lukacs’s interpretation of Marx in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and employs a Marxist conceptual framework to rediscover the root of American capitalism and its discontents.

In his article (1984), Posnock’s approach to analyzing the text is purely economic, aiming to expose the novel’s veiled use of a Marxist critique of capitalism by displaying how class is being represented during the time of the novel’s production. This particular approach is important in the scholarship of Fitzgerald, because it is the first time a critic has shifted the focus of analysis from studying the text as a whole, to applying a Marxist framework in order to understand the economics within the novel. Posnock examines “the novel’s concern with the power of money upon human relations, and reveals that Fitzgerald’s vision of capitalist social reality possesses a profounder intellectual coherence than previously recognized” (201). Posnock at this point reflects on Marxist understanding of how the existence of a man in the capitalist world is determined by social conditions and perceptions of wealth, which in turn creates false consciousness.

Posnock argues that the novel focuses on society’s perception of individuals as commodities, rather than understanding them as beings aware of their own authenticity and place in society. He demonstrates how the concept of money in Marxist terms can be considered one of the most important commodities because it has the ability to purchase anything, not limited to objects, but also individuals. He argues that “Capitalism, since it is founded on commodity exchange and production, forces the worker himself to become a thing to be bought and used”

(203). The critic's explanation can assist the reader in understanding *The Great Gatsby's* underlying dialogue of class consciousness by implementing a Marxist framework to the characterization of the main characters. Posnock argues that the "moral, emotional, and spiritual chaos unleashed by money is at the center of *The Great Gatsby*" (204). As Posnock demonstrates, Gatsby's pecuniary consumption in the novel is intended to create a new identity, an illusion instead of reality, to recreate and alter the past, and fabricate a new persona similar to that of an advertisement.

Posnock illustrates how the term money, as stated by Marx, can be used to describe its relation to Daisy: "Since [money] has the property of purchasing everything... [it] is the object par excellence" (203). In this case the object *par excellence* is Daisy, who is the object of desire, and the way to possess her is by becoming wealthier than her husband Tom and stealing her away with his money. Gatsby's money unleashes, as Posnock states, "the moral, emotional, and spiritual chaos," which is his obsession with acquiring anything he wants. He is justified by his compulsive collecting of rare objects as a means of showing his class. Posnock argues: "She is never simply Daisy, but is inseparable from the objects that surround her . . . Daisy, of course, represents the object par excellence as Marx defined money" (206), because she is the most valuable object that money can buy. Posnock implies that Gatsby's desire for obtaining priceless objects derives from his emulation of upper-class materialism, a suggestion which shows how money is able to buy intangible objects, such as emotions and image. He believes this to be a key aspect when critiquing the novel.

Posnock explains how Daisy's shallowness throughout the novel objectifies her, accordingly, making her one of the primary focuses in his essay. Gatsby pursues Daisy because she is the most desirable object that everyone wants to acquire: "Gatsby's interest in her is not

simply spontaneous or self-generated, but stimulated by others' desires" (206). The fact that she was the talk of the whole town and that she married Tom (who represents old money and thus American aristocracy) makes her the more valuable and worthy of the chase. Gatsby believes that the more wealth he accumulates the more desirable he will become: "Fitzgerald brilliantly dramatizes how social existence (Gatsby's capitalist orientation) determines consciousness (he expresses his sexual desire by projecting it into things)" (Posnock 206). Posnock argues that the novel displays how capitalism has shaped the so-called American identity, as it illustrates a more liberal view of the real corrupt nature of the American people.

Posnock also suggests that Gatsby's identity is created through his understanding of how the upper-class perceives one's past as defining their future. In order to convince society of his authenticity Gatsby must produce a tangible piece of evidence to prove his past. Posnock points out: "if speech is precarious, an unstable means of creating a self, objects acquire an unmerited but unimpeachable authority" (205). Gatsby uses the only valuable asset, which is his life, in exchange and in hope for a mentor who can teach him how to belong to the upper class. This passage in the book can be seen as the first valuable commodity exchange witnessed by Gatsby. After the death of his mentor, Dan Cody, a billionaire yacht owner, Gatsby is left with no inheritance, and from that moment only money will drive Gatsby's existence.

Posnock illustrates how Gatsby's obsession with money leads to his demise at the end of the novel, because he loses everyone following his affair with Daisy. He sends home all his servants and becomes vulnerable to society in terms of how he is perceived and understood by the elite. Posnock explains that in "revealing the inescapable dialectic between Gatsby's 'appalling sentimentality' and his heroism, between capitalism's grotesque inversion of human values and its power to endow 'mobility and grace'" (212), the irony lies in Gatsby's struggles to

possess Daisy: He loses all including Daisy herself. Gatsby represents the ideology of capitalism because he does not *view* the society that he is a part of, and instead believes his money is able to create an identity that does not belong to him. Posnock illustrates through his Marxist lens how Gatsby creates his own view of reality and continues to believe in this illusion until his demise. By implementing a Marxist view and employing Lukacs's perspective, Posnock exposes the corrupt nature and the lies that capitalism imposes upon its people and the false consciousness it leads to as presented in *The Great Gatsby*.

### 3. Canterbury: Fitzgerald's Veblenian Satire

Canterbury's approach to *The Great Gatsby* can be best described as a philosophical one, where he analyzes the parallels between the novel and views of a well-known philosopher, Thorstein Veblen (whom Canterbury claims may have influenced Fitzgerald during the writing of the novel). This interpretation of the novel is important to critical reception because it moves the scholarly attention away from the typical historical and economic approaches. It focuses on the inspiration and philosophical influence that shaped the work. Canterbury illustrates how during the time of the novel's progress, Fitzgerald gives credit to the Marxist influence on the novel, yet, never so much as mentions or credits Veblen due to the negative reception he received during the production of *The Theory of Leisure Class* in 1899. Veblen's theory of the upper class was ahead of his time; it was misunderstood and not seriously considered due to its satirical dimension, as Canterbury argues throughout his critical text.

In the article (1999), Canterbury controversially argues that "the parallels between [Fitzgerald's] depiction of class, especially in *The Great Gatsby*, and Veblen's sharpest satire [*The Theory of the Leisure Class*] may have been too close for comfort, providing a motive for distancing himself from Veblen" (303). Canterbury discusses the similarities and the influences

of Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* on Fitzgerald's theme of class distinctions in *The Great Gatsby*. Veblen's theory, simply put, unpacks how assets of the wealthy American become elements which are desired by the aspiring lower classes, who seek to imitate and acquire them. Thus they strive to obtain and replicate the *image* of the upper class.

In terms of members of this so-called 'leisure class' and how they do not necessarily toil to achieve their wealth — for example, through manual labor—is explained as an attitude and ideology where 'hard work' seems demeaning if not worthlessly time consuming. Veblen's argument is that elements in "conspicuous consumption... [or] unproductive consumption" (Canterbery 48) are employed in a manner resembling stage props; they are not a product of, nor a means to, any form of economic development, but are a mere representation or display of wealth—a representation of the 'leisure' class. This system conflicts with working class survival and needs.

Canterbery argues his point of view by breaking down his article into five main analytical stages. Each section is employed to portray how Canterbury is arguing that *The Great Gatsby* is not merely an artistic work of fiction, but that it should be read and studied as a work that emulates the socio-economic dialogue of its setting and era (297). Hence, *The Great Gatsby* becomes an allegory representing the historical and socio-political events of its time. This approach is vital because it shifts the critical response that progresses from a historical perspective, to an economical, and ultimately a philosophical methodology in critiquing the upper class.

The novel has many direct relations to Veblen's theory such as the many letters written by Fitzgerald which mention how he consciously read and understood Veblen's theme. Canterbury seems to imply that "Fitzgerald's masterpiece is the supreme Veblenian parable of conspicuous

consumption, of conspicuous emulation, of pecuniary culture, and of vicarious consumption—even of waste and the leisure class itself” (300). He also suggests that Fitzgerald’s novel is based on the idea of the corrupt nature of American society in terms of how the dynamics of the rich were to gain wealth through unethical means, such as bribery, inside trading in the stock market, and monopolies. Conspicuous consumption is a concept utilized in *The Great Gatsby*, embodied in the characterization of Gatsby, where he buys the expensive yellow Rolls Royce, the countless silk shirts, his general attire, etc. This concept can be illustrated through the following scene where Gatsby stated “I’ve got a man in England who buys me clothes. He sends over a selection of things at the beginning of each season, spring and fall” (Fitzgerald 72). Gatsby is showing how wealthy he really is and how he doesn’t bother going shopping where normal people shop; he has his cloths imported from England to display his wealth.

Canterbery further explains how conspicuous emulation can be examined in the procurement of the Buchanans’ Georgian mansion, which Gatsby imitates in order to qualify in the upper class game. In an adherence to pecuniary culture, Gatsby must not only acquire commodities superior to Tom’s (the attributes of Gatsby’s car, home, etc.), but more importantly he must acquire Daisy, in a commemoration of “the practice of seizing women from the enemy as trophies” (Veblen 23). Canterbury suggests that what Gatsby does not take into account is that Daisy’s price is far too great for him to comprehend, because of the Buchanan’s membership in the leisure class, which cannot be bought, but rather is only acquired through birth and lineage.

Indeed, Canterbury’s article raises awareness of Fitzgerald’s understanding and influence of Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Gatsby becomes the embodiment of the advertisement of success. Using the conceptual framework of Veblen, Gatsby’s representation of wealth is a cultural impression of what people perceive to be the epitome of success (Canterbery 300).

Success here can be defined as monetary achievement over ethical and spiritual realization, because of the former's tangibility and the latter's lack of codified ability. Canterbury's argument intrigues the reader's curiosity into investigating how literature is influenced by the philosophical minds which shape the historical understanding of each era. In light of this, works such as *The Great Gatsby* can be considered a reflection of, and simultaneously a confrontation with, the collective consciousness of America during a time when greed overpowered honor and principles. Critical reception of such works allows readers to formulate enhanced understanding, thus shaping readership and response of a specific generation. Each generation in general alters its perception according to the economic and historic events occurring at the time.

#### 4. Shreier: Fitzgerald's Skepticism about American Identity

Benjamin Schreier's article (2007) shifts from the typical New Criticism approach to a deconstructive Americanist approach to illuminate a new focus on historicism and racialization found earlier in *The Great Gatsby* by such critics as Walter Benn Michaels, Bryan Washington, Carlyle Van Thompson, Meredith Goldsmith, and Betsy Nies. Shreier focuses on the American individual identities illustrated in the novel rather than the collective American identity that most scholars previously paid close attention to. The importance of this article, in relation to its time of production, lies in how the socio-political situation of the U.S. had reached one of the worst moments in its history with 9/11 terrorism undermining the security of the nation. The American dream was being crushed by the increased economic recession and the decline of the positive American spirit. The American people began experiencing an identity crisis once the 'collective identity' failed to represent all Americans. A new ethnic and racialized identity was located by critics in *The Great Gatsby*. Benjamin Schreier reads *The Great Gatsby* as a novel that uncovers an encoded American identity, which he argues is constantly shifting throughout time. Instead of

following the scholarship that most critics offered during the past few decades of understanding the novel as a representation of America, Schreier instead looks at the novel as a representation of a skeptical attitude towards national identity.

Schreier discusses how critics have been focusing on specific elements in Fitzgerald's novel to produce a generic understanding of the text, whilst Schreier suggests that a more efficient way to read the work would be to focus on the narrator Nick and his ambivalence as both insider and outsider. Schreier highlights "how *The Great Gatsby* resists precisely the recognizant expectations upon which historicism, especially in the guise of an analysis of the novel's interest in racialization, is based and how in doing this it points towards the possibility of a more open and critical form of reading" (154). Through this mode of reading it can be suggested that race and desire in *The Great Gatsby* are considered to be motivating factors that resist shaping a definitive American identity. He points out how American identity has been presented by critics of the novel in terms of racial mosaic, thus paradoxically undermining the very concept of a unified American identity: "The desire to read American history into *The Great Gatsby* [by other critics] ends up locating in the novel particular racial or ethnic representation of American identity [and] illuminates the book's cynical relationship to the representational enticements of a nationally encoded identity" (Schreier 154). The critiques of such studies point obliquely to the view that Fitzgerald doubts the American dream in his cynical novel, thus portraying Americanism as a literal 'scam' that continues to reproduce a 'longing' for that which cannot be attained: the American identity. Schreier explains that the dilemma of ambiguity lies within Fitzgerald's narrative techniques of opposing desire of Jim Gatsby to knowledge of Nick. This opposition makes conclusive reading of American identity an elaborate illusion. This wavering confuses critics and scholars who deem *The Great Gatsby* to be a nationalist and

historic American work—an embodiment of the American dream.

According to Schreier, duality in *The Great Gatsby* is used to illustrate how America cannot possess one identity, but instead creates individual perceptions of identity in accordance with one's desire for self-development in 'the land of the free' where opportunities are presumably unlimited. Schreier further explains this notion by stating that "this novel stages a splitting of identity into a desire and a knowledge that can never coincide. This novel is not about American identity; instead, it offers disappointed testimony to the impossibility that America can mean anything one wants it to mean" (176). What the critic seems to imply concerning identity is that it is a false problem.

This is the key focus of Schreier's argument, for here, American cynicism comes into play. The question is bluntly: who has the right to be a citizen, and who has the right to the American dream? "Race becomes, then, another attempt to displace, by reinscribing, this fundamental challenge to statist thinking. The cynical American, Nick, looks back . . . as 'America,' the ideal anchor of American literary criticism, dissolves in the inessential sentimentality of naïve desire" (Schreier 176). Here, Schreier goes further than the disappointment with the American dream. He implies that *The Great Gatsby* is about interpretation rather than the theme of American identity.

Ultimately, Schreier argues that the text has been misrepresented and misunderstood by literary critics, because historically America's identity had yet to be formed. The critic's argument seems to indicate that it is impossible to define America from one single perspective, and elaborates on the fact that America cannot be defined; it is constantly changing, and citizens' perception will always alter and shift, due to America's shifting attitudes concerning race, ethnicity and the constant yearning, desire and struggle to be fulfilled. Schreier emphasized the

indeterminacy in *The Great Gatsby*, which has been ignored or dismissed by other critics in favor of decisiveness. This article written in the early decade of the twenty first century—has undermined earlier conclusive and confident readings. Shreier thus relocates criticism of *The Great Gatsby* from assertive definitions to the realm of questioning hence revealing its composition as contemporaneous to aesthetics and philosophical concerns of our present context.

These four articles take different approaches to the novel revealing how timeless is *The Great Gatsby*. Each generation finds in it meaning and relevance, critique of society and psychological realism. The reception of *The Great Gatsby* has been interestingly enough a way of seeing how timeless the novel has become. The various approaches seem as if they are communicating with each other throughout time. I am able to identify with each of them because each has an important central theme and argument, namely, how Fitzgerald was an author ahead of his time. After reading several critical studies on the novel, I have chosen these four critics because of their publication dates and their different yet central arguments which support my claim that the scholarly reception of *The Great Gatsby* has changed, but Fitzgerald's appeal remains constant. The spirit of the American Dream is constantly examined and criticized depending on the sociopolitical events of the periods and in the light of distinctive culture of a given era and its concerns.

In reviewing these articles, one notices how the novel stimulates different discussions and arguments partly because the text is rich and offers multiple and complex issues, and partly because new temporal contexts provide new ways of looking at the novel. Kermit W. Moyer discusses the term 'American history' and explains how it refers to the constant shift in political, economic, and cultural changes, which gave America its pioneering identity. Moyer examines the similarities between Gatsby's personal experience and the formation of the American nation.

Ross Posnock uses Marxist concepts such as ‘money’ and ‘commodity fetishism.’ He distinguishes between use value (actual need) and exchange value (symbolic need) to highlight the need in a capitalist society to enhance one’s status, and how the power of status symbols overtakes actual human relations. The article establishes a correspondence between Marxist concepts and incidents in *The Great Gatsby*. Ray Canterbury discusses *The Great Gatsby* as a novel that embodies the principles of the Leisure Class as outlined by Veblen and as an application of Darwin’s evolutionism to the study of modern economic life. Benjamin Schreier focused on the ambiguity of the American identity and questions how critics anchored it to nationalist history instead of seeing it as an identity in the making. These articles communicate with each other in terms of how the main themes are connected and intertwined such as American identity, social mobility, critique of capitalism, and American history.

### Chapter III: Adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*

*The Great Gatsby* has been adapted into several artistic interpretations over the years including theatre, opera, ballet, and most importantly, films. Over the years, the novel has been a source of inspiration to those who believe in the American dream and its unlimited possibilities. For others it is a warning of the moral and ethical corruption that occurs when financial success takes over the 'Dream'. Each adaptation illustrates how the director interpreted the novel's main themes and moral message during the time of production. During the process of each adaptation, directors took into account the economic and political environment in order to produce an adaptation that speaks to contemporary viewers' concerns. Upon reading *Novels and Films: A Limited Inquiry* by Richard A. Hulseberg, one can understand the difficulties of converting a novel to film and how the director becomes the lens through which the audience view the text. Hulseberg argues that "In the novel-film comparison, we confront not only the inherent liabilities and assets of the two 'ways of telling' a story, but also our own cultural biases (novelistic or filmic), elements of the business of film-making which tend to obliterate artistic concerns" (58). In order for a motion picture adaptation to succeed the director must alter the original novel in order to satisfy the general public and the censorship during the time of its production.

After reading the novel first and watching the three movies, each adaptation proved to be confined to the historical and social norms of the given time of production. Each of the adaptations displayed a certain level of understanding towards the general public and how to present Gatsby as someone the audience can relate to. Each version has proved to have its own specificity. The 1926 film version by Herbert Brenon has been lost and the only trace found was the silent black and white trailer. Dixon has explored and looked into finding this film and found "There is, supposedly, one copy of the 1926 version of *The Great Gatsby* surviving in an archive

in Moscow, but most film scholars dismiss this as merely a fanciful rumor. After a diligent search, [he] was unable to locate any screening prints in either Los Angeles, New York, the archives of Paramount Pictures, the American Film Institute, the British Film Institute, George Eastman House, or even the national archives in Washington D.C., where the film was registered for copyright” (288).

The second film adaptation was directed by Elliot Nugent in the year 1949. The director was hindered by the censorship of the Motion Picture Production Code, otherwise known as the Hays Code (named after Hollywood’s chief censor at the time Will H. Hays). The code restricted directors from producing any motion picture that sympathized with any morally and ethically unacceptable behavior, such as crime, evil-doing, and religious sins. The adaptation was not able to stay true to the novel’s main themes because most of the themes were in violation of the code. In order to be able to produce the movie, Nugent needed to create a villain (Dan Cody) who taught and influenced Gatsby into leading a life of sin. The film was in black and white, and the casting of the characters was not effectively selected, which affected the financial success of the movie. It was produced by Paramount Pictures and was pulled from circulation following the release of the 1974 remake, directed by Jack Clayton. The 1974 remake was in color and it captured the essence of the 1920s by using New York and Long Island as its location for production. The music, costumes, cars, and houses were physically and historically accurate, which created a sense of what the novel wanted to represent. The adaptation followed the plot and theme of the novel closely but because of the poor casting did not achieve success in the box-offices.

Almost four decades later, a new adaptation was produced by a director known for dramatizing and glorifying classics. His approach when adapting novel to film lies in getting the

general public's interest. In 2013, Baz Luhrmann's version of *The Great Gatsby* received positive and negative reviews from critics due to its extravagant and flashy use of 3-D. It was financially successful in the box-offices due to its focus on the younger audience and the complicated relationships between the characters, as well as its dazzling special effects. The film did not stay true to the original dialogue. Yet, it nonetheless managed to convey the message of the book more faithfully than its predecessors.

In *Fitzgerald and Hemingway on Film: A Critical Study of the Adaptations*, Candace Ursula Grissom explains how each of the adaptations can be observed through a psychological lens, which opens up possibilities to discover how the films produce an understanding of the American spirit. Grissom shows that "Filmmakers hoping to successfully adapt Fitzgerald's works for the screen must willingly enter Fitzgerald's ouroboric conception of a life within creative process, while searching their own lives for biographical parallels to Fitzgerald and to lay such insecurities open for public view" (9-10). Grissom explains that by looking through the lens of psychologist Henry A. Murray and his Icarus complex written in 1955, one can argue that the film adaptations can be seen as a reflection of Fitzgerald rather than of his novel being discussed. Murray's theory is that Fitzgerald represents a personality that upholds "ideals, regardless of gender, continually [striving] for high ideals in order to gain a sense of self-worth, not through actual achievement, but rather the pursuit of it" (Grissom 10). The Icarus complex can be adopted as a way of understanding the novel and film adaptations, in relation to Fitzgerald. Robert Wilson, a prominent sociologist who is known for analyzing literature, has interestingly enough applied the Icarus complex to Fitzgerald himself and found all five characteristics of such a complex instilled in his persona and in his work. As Wilson argues the "Icarus complex is distinguished by the following themes . . . burning ambition and exhibitionism; desire to ascend

to great heights; desire to be the center of all eyes; a precipitous fall; craving for immortality; [and] depreciation and enthrallment of women” (483). All of these themes can be found in *The Great Gatsby* and its film adaptations and will be examined through the different film directors’ interpretations of the novel in each adaptation.

### 1. Nugent’s Adaptation (1949)

During the time of production of Elliot Nugent’s adaptation, one can observe how historically speaking the U.S. was witnessing a period during which its society was starting to restore the moral fiber that was once missing in the 1920s, during the era of prohibition and its violation. In *Twentieth Century America: A Brief History*, Thomas C. Reeves explores how the twentieth century changed America for the worse because of the government’s loose morals and unethical behavior, which in turn altered the mentality of the everyday Americans. Grissom contends that it was very difficult for Nugent to attend simultaneously to limitations of the Hays code as well as be faithful to the criminal and immoral dimension of *Gatsby* (10). This created an issue for Nugent, because the novel’s purpose was to portray the loose morals of capitalist society during a time of excessive consumption. This drawback affected his style of interpretation because of the societal pressure placed upon him through censorship. As Grissom explains, “Nugent created a movie in the interpretive style that reflects the historical, social, and cultural sensibilities of his era” (18). During the time of production, most of the motion pictures being produced were used as a tool, warning society that those who commit crimes will be swiftly and justly punished accordingly. The films were used as a means to attempt to restore the original American spirit, and in order to do so, they needed to destroy the trend of glorifying gangsters and criminals. Two examples of films that were used during that time to warn about the dangers of living a life of sin were: *Scarface* (1932) directed by Howard Hawks and Richard

Rosson, and *Little Caesar* (1931) directed by Mervyn LeRoy. Such films were warnings for those who lived a life of crime that their end would either be death or getting arrested.

In *The Three Film Versions of The Great Gatsby: A Vision Deferred*, Wheeler Winston Dixon offers a similar argument to why Nugent strayed from the original plot and themes of the novel. Dixon illustrates how “the film departs seriously from Fitzgerald’s novel; inventing sequences in which Gatsby “bumps off” rival gang members during a Prohibition shoot-out, and using rather clumsily designed flashbacks to fill in the more shadowy aspects of Gatsby’s early life” (290). In fact, after the production of the motion picture, it received poor reviews and did not receive any critical acclaim due to its inferior representation of the American dream and immorality involved in trying to obtain that dream.

On the other hand, the novel does not explicitly show its readers whether Gatsby’s desire and struggle to obtain Daisy was morally sound or even real. Gatsby’s journey was what inspired the novel’s readers. He may have used immoral techniques to obtain his dream, but his spirit resembled those of the founding fathers, those who have traditionally pursued such paths prior to his existence. His inspiration comes from how he was able to overcome extremely difficult obstacles in order to fight for his love for Daisy, and against all odds he was able to briefly taste victory.

As the film was not a commercial or artistic success, it has not triggered much debate and thus its critical reception was minimal.

## 2. Clayton’s Adaptation (1974)

During the remake of *The Great Gatsby* in 1974, the United States had made tremendous progress in terms of economic strides. On the other hand, the lax morality of leaders was exemplified in the resignation of President Nixon following his involvement in the Watergate

scandal (1972). The scandal uncovered corruption in the White House and led to stricter campaign financing restrictions and closer observations of government officials. The U.S. seemed both to rise economically while decaying morally. As Reeves argued “the change that transformed twentieth-century America... was the bloody wars , the descent of popular culture, the breakdown of traditional family, the waning of traditional religious faith and morality, the pervasiveness of consumerism, the sharp decline in good manners . . . . many books have lamented these and other features of modern life” (299). *The Great Gatsby* was one of those novels that uncovered some of the corruption, and how the glitter of the Jazz age during the 1920s masked moral decadence. Jack Clayton recreated the visual history represented in the novel but failed to include the complex spirit of the 1920s. As Dixon argues, “The 1974 film is slow paced, verbose, and lacking in visual innovation, despite the visual potential inherent in the text of the novel” (293). The director created a visual experience where the audience felt that they were literally given an opportunity to view the past through the lens of the camera. However, by paying close attention to all of the visual details represented in the novel, the plot was too slow and uncaptivating to its audience.

In *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Problem with Film Adaptation*, Frank R. Cunningham’s main concern is to illustrate the issues that directors need to focus on in order to create a successful adaptation. He focused on the negative reception of the film to show the difficulties in creating an adaptation faithful to the novel’s main themes and arguments. He argues that problems with Clayton’s *Gatsby* included: “miscasting of the two central actors; the film’s pacing; problems in adapting Nick’s role as narrator; and Clayton’s alleged failure in successfully capturing the mythic spoiling of the Edenic Dream” (190). The critic offers insightful arguments against this adaptation due to its various flaws mentioned above, which

have taken away from Fitzgerald's literary brilliance represented through style.

In "*What Makes Gatsby Great?*" Martha Bayles looks at some of the positive aspects of the novel and how it is portrayed in the cinema. She argues that "one merit of the 1974 film is Mia Farrow . . . does not play Daisy as a spoiled, simpering victim. On the contrary, she brings out Daisy's arrogance – what Nick scathingly calls her 'carelessness'" (95). Bayles believes that Daisy is played as Fitzgerald would have perceived her in the novel, rather than seeing her as a misplaced actor as Cunningham argued.<sup>2</sup>

Clayton during this time did not have censorship issues to consider during production, but instead needed to keep in mind how the sexual revolution affected viewer response during the time of production. In the 1960s a revival of the sexuality of the 1920s began occupying the minds of the general public: "We see this treatment in the 1974 adaptation...produced six years after the demise of the Production Code and at the height of the sexual revolution. But by focusing so intently on the love story, this film diminishes the novel" (Bayles 94). The argument being raised here is that the director lost the audience's attention because the production was actually turning into a documentary rather than an adaptation of a novel describing the excitement and destruction of the American way of life. In *In Search of the Greatest Gatsby* by Irene Khan Atkins, the literary critic, offers an important understanding of how Clayton's adaptation remains true to the visual representation of the novel, yet fails to represent its thematic significance. Clayton's version of *The Great Gatsby*, suggests a milder approach in visualizing the American Dream, due to his focus on creating an adaptation faithful to the essence of the sexual revolution at the time.<sup>3</sup>

Clayton's attention to detail was not only visual, but he was also able to use authentic

music of the Jazz age during the party scenes and throughout the motion picture to complete the ambience described in the novel. Atkins illustrates how the adaptation “emphasizes the importance of the sound track and makes its impact as great as that of the visual opulence of the film” (221). However, there were slight complications since Clayton, like Nugent, still believed that Gatsby should be portrayed as a criminal or gangster, rather than allowing the audience to decide for themselves, as the book does. Atkins explains: “the shot of a gun bulging beneath the bodyguard’s coat again makes the point that Gatsby is some sort of gangster. It seems as if the subtleties of Fitzgerald’s sketchiness have once again been lost” (222). Just as in the 1949 version, the 1974 movie portrays Gatsby through a negative lens in order to prevent viewers from idolizing Gatsby. In order to use Gatsby as an example of how immorality can corrupt the American dream, they needed to produce a version where the audience does not have a choice. Instead the audience is given a clear direction of how Gatsby should be perceived through the director’s vision. Atkins explains how Clayton has created an adaptation that “will motivate those who see the film to take up the book, to read—or re-read—F. Scott Fitzgerald’s finest novel, and to find new images and echoes within its pages” (227). In this sense the motion picture has created a window of opportunity for its viewers to re-examine the main text and try to understand the complexity of Fitzgerald’s American dream and his view of the 1920s.

### 3. Luhrmann’s Adaptation (2013)

In the twenty first century, the U.S. economic and political situation declined and part of the downfall was due to the War on Terror and its effect on the American spirit. It was not until President Obama was elected that the American spirit of overcoming all obstacles to achieve one’s dreams once again became prevalent. He was the first President to represent ‘hope’ for the American people, and during the tough failing economy and tense political situation in the

country, he was able to unite the American people once again. At this instant Baz Luhrmann perhaps saw the perfect opportunity to create a new fresh adaptation that once again restored Gatsby as a representative for those who believe in the American dream. However bold Luhrmann's attempt to portray Fitzgerald's novel as it is described in the original literary text, critics seem to disagree on whether the adaptation does the Fitzgerald's classic justice or not. In "A Good Gatsby," Paul Giles argues that the director not only restored Gatsby but provided a new thought-provoking version (3). This new version, as I see it, speaks to today's youth more appropriately.

Grissom argues that Luhrmann was prepared for the reaction of film and literary critics while producing the motion picture because of how other directors have tried but not yet accomplished an adaptation that was deemed successful by today's critics. Grissom stated that "the way in which Luhrmann appears to deliberately drop in such references<sup>4</sup> gives the film almost a post-modern effect. His directorial eye is similar to Dr. T. J. Eckleberg's always watching in anticipation for film critics who are quick to call his spectacle frivolous, only to show them that they are unable to see the rich depth of research that went into the production when it is clearly placed in front of their own eyes" (95). Most film critics who have given Luhrmann's adaptation a negative review do not notice the amount of research and effort used in not just understanding the novel, but also in understanding Fitzgerald and what he might have wanted for Gatsby's fate. Giles even explained throughout his article how Luhrmann "makes extensive use of 'Trimalchio' (one of the many titles Fitzgerald ruminated for his novel)—even restoring a scene, not contained in the final version of the novel, where Gatsby confesses the story of his past to Carraway on the night after the car accident that kills Myrtle Wilson" (5). This added scene gives the viewers an opportunity to see Gatsby's hard work and humble past

thus showing modern day viewers how one accomplishes the impossible by staying true to one's dreams. It also changes the way we view Gatsby: Instead of viewing him with disdain as the previous adaptations have done, Luhrmann chooses to have the viewer feel a connection or even sympathy towards Gatsby's life circumstances. Giles explains how important this adaptation is in understanding the novel, how it may be read in the twenty first century, and how its visual interpretation will have to take into consideration its new modern setting, and the historical changes that help shape our understanding of the novel as a whole (3).

In "A Film in Review," Charles Taylor, member of the National Society of Film Critics, discusses Baz Luhrmann's 2013 *The Great Gatsby*, arguing early on that he personally felt that the adaptation did not do Fitzgerald justice, and using other critics to reinforce his negative point of view in order to justify his claims. An example is when he quotes Leon Wieseltier – New Republic literary editor – who explains that "the movies become complicit in the excessively materialistic culture that the novel set out to criticize.... [Filmmakers] get seduced by the seductions that the book itself is warning about" (qtd. Taylor 193). As Taylor argues, "I think Luhrmann responded to the novel in the same way many readers have. He located the pleasure and the romance of the story in the luxury and excess, and its sadness in Gatsby's dream, which, doomed as it is, is still glorious" (200). Here Taylor is making a claim that the modern reception of the novel has been the driving force behind the director's adaptation.

One of the main positive criticism that has been mostly agreed upon by film critics is Luhrmann's choice of casting. Luhrmann has been able to select the right stars to complement each other. Another noteworthy example is the director's attention to even the smallest detail, such as Daisy's voice as Fitzgerald imagines it in his novel. Taylor argued that "Mulligan's [the actress who plays Daisy] voice is extraordinary, charming without being warm, intimate without

being trustworthy, light but never tinkling, possessing instead unexpected round bottom tones” (202). What is significant about the timing of this adaptation, according to Taylor, is how the American capitalistic society has not changed much since the 1920s, where the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Taylor explains that “a great American novel that takes wealth at least partly as its subject is judged to be most useful as ammunition in the condemnation of those crimes” (203). In a way, *The Great Gatsby* is able to address the corruption of the leisure class without being offensive to upper-class that is represented in the novel and on screen. The novel presents the upper-class as people who have no idea of what the American spirit and dream encompass, or are even aware of how they repress the middle class through making social mobility nearly impossible by requiring a line of ancestry to prove your status. The film adaptation does not include this critique of the upper-class. Instead it glorifies the extravagant lifestyle of the rich and famous.

An important aspect to address is how the film adaptation illustrates the novel's original historical context. The director employs an interesting approach, in which he displays Fitzgerald’s obsessions, as explained earlier in the Icarus complex, while still displaying the ideas and motivation located in the novel. Taylor argues that Luhrmann “has given us a Gatsby as in love with and as suspicious of success and wealth as was Fitzgerald himself, a movie in which the richness and contingencies of experience, including sensual experience, trump the unquestioning certainties of moral condemnation. Luhrmann’s movie is both foolish and brave, coming at a time so heartless that the voices of critical conscience are those of people unable to weep over Gatsby’s shirts” (203). In a way, the critic is offering his readers a way of understanding the duality that is required in comprehending the text and the author. Fitzgerald has always been known to discuss this duality of life and how his characters represent that

concept in his literary works. The director took this into consideration during his research and finally adapting the novel to screen, focusing mostly on the psychological aspects of the text. As Grissom argues “the most obvious manner of adaptation Luhrmann uses is psychological” (93), which is clearly present cinematically in scenes and through sections of the script selected from the novel itself. Grissom adds: “by the end of the novel, readers can sense that Nick has learned what it means to be part of the so-called sophisticated high society, and deciding that he wants no part of it, chooses to move back west. However, Nick displays little sense of such realization in Luhrmann’s adaptation” (94). In this sense, the director changed the original text’s message by adding a psychoanalytic element. The film starts with Nick in a psychiatric ward where he relates the story of his neighbor Gatsby through a flashback and the film ends with Nick back in the ward, thus adding to his flashback narrative a psychoanalytic dimension. Interestingly enough the ward is named after Fitzgerald’s editor Max Perkins who guided him throughout his literary career (Brucoli, “Introduction” ix), to display how one would react in a world that has lost its sense of morality. Instead of heading west, which is now today’s Hollywood, one can argue that seeking psychological help would be more accurate in modern times.

The novel has always been difficult to interpret due to the open-ended questions Fitzgerald leaves for readers to unfold and understand on their own terms. Taylor offers a different perspective of *The Great Gatsby*, in which the novel is currently being used to challenge the idea that America will not have the same opportunities for the American dream as it had in the 1920s. The director has influenced his audience through his vision and recreated Gatsby as an underdog who falls for someone out of his reach.

The motion picture sound track in Luhrmann’s adaptation has been a subject of criticism by most scholars and film critics, due to his choice of music producer. The music chosen by

previous directors ultimately wanted to stay true to what the society of the 1920s would have listened to. Instead in the 2013 version, the music represents a new interpretation of old-meets-new. The sound track represents how the youth would have looked back and enjoyed some of the tunes used in the past, while also adding some new flavor. Grissom argues, “Luhrman[n]’s choice to have the creation of the film’s soundtrack supervised by African American hip-hop music mogul Shawn ‘Jay-Z’ Carter shows creative consistency with his overall vision of the film to represent a synthesis of old and new cultures” (94). Thus the reader/viewer has the chance to look at this adaptation not as a remake, but as rejuvenation of Fitzgerald’s dreams and desires, albeit through the lens of twenty first century youth. Even the fact that the genre of music that was chosen was hip-hop represented how the American dream has shifted from Wall Street to the recording studios. As Grissom asserts: “Hip-hop, in particular, is the musical genre most concerned with chronicling how monetary success is the key to unlocking the capitalist American Dream of enhanced social status” (95). Luhrmann repeatedly and distinctively chose to address race both explicitly and implicitly in the film, in order to display racism of the 1920s that may still apply in the minds and experiences of twenty first century audiences. In the production of the film, not only has the American dream been affected by the entertainment industry, but the economy has been influenced greatly by this new culture of emulating the leisure class. Thus, “Luhrman[n]’s choice to film *Gatsby* in 3D is completely appropriate” (Grissom 100), since he aimed at attracting a younger audience. It generates and brings attention to a novel that keeps Fitzgerald’s spirit alive, just enough to affect today’s youth and instill hope in a society filled with dreamers. This technology makes it more interactive with its audience; it creates a sense of realism as if the viewers were actually attending the lavish parties at *Gatsby*’s mansion with all the film’s attention given to the minute details of such occasions.

In his 'Author's Apology' for *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald claimed his whole theory of writing was that "an author ought to write for the youth of his own generation, the critics of the next and the schoolmasters of ever afterward" (qtd. Grissom 100). Fitzgerald was a writer who knew his work was going to be discussed by future generations. The critics continue to ponder his artistic vision and argue whether it represents the typical and persistent American Dream or criticizes its very destructiveness and impossibility in a world where the rich exploit the poor.

After closely examining these three adaptations one can argue that each film brings to light during the time of production how *The Great Gatsby* adaptation was received by the general public and contemporary viewers. In 1949 viewers were not able to perhaps fully comprehend the significance of the novel during an awkward transition between the strict Hays Code and free artistic expression. However, in the 1974 adaptation, when film makers were allowed more freedom in terms of their content, the director was perhaps not able to capture the essence and spirit of the novel because of the temptation to try and generate as much income to make up for his investment. The film focused more on creating a movie to attract viewers who wanted to see a more sexualized view of the novel. Finally, in 2013, the director wanted to revive the novel and illustrate the importance of the main thematic properties that Fitzgerald is likely to have wanted his readers and viewers to experience. The adaptation focused its attention on giving the audience an opportunity to see the main character, Gatsby, not as a criminal, but a man trying to get ahead using any means necessary. All in all, the reception of these three adaptations has created controversy among film critics and contemporary audience. A debate ensued as to which of the films best captures the spirit and message of Fitzgerald.

## Chapter IV: Conclusion

The purpose of my research was to try to discover the reason why *The Great Gatsby*, which described the American way of life in the roaring twenties, has been placed and ranked as one of the most influential American novels written in the twentieth century. I wanted to discover why it received a negative reception during the time of publication and why it is currently being revisited. The novel has been analyzed in many fields of study and has captivated its readers when taught in classrooms. It has been adapted into different forms of media throughout the last decades. Fitzgerald produced this novel with the intent of making this work of art his legacy. However, the audience (readers) during the 1920s did not appreciate or understand his style or technique as they did afterwards. It is a novel ahead of its time and continues to speak to us, representing both a period literary work that captures USA in post WWI as well as depicting a universal theme of desire, wealth, and eventual fall. Only after Fitzgerald's death did the audience come to realize the historical accuracy of class aspirations and could truly comprehend Fitzgerald's passion and intensity about the temptation and the illusion of the American dream.

When reviewing the literary reception of the novel one notices how each critic has chosen to investigate the novel from different perspective. This in turn influenced a more positive perception of the novel after the death of Fitzgerald, appealing to readers interested in fiction that lends itself to multiple interpretations. Readers interested in any field—be it literature, economics, history, race, or gender—would find something of relevance in it. The reception of the novel during its first publication was not received positively because of its complex sociological critique of immoral upper-class and Fitzgerald's previous commercial literary works. However, in the early 1950s the novel received great reviews when the many film adaptations started to shed light on the concept of social mobility and the American dream.

Critics started to analyze the novel in order to pinpoint its transcendental and crashed hope of social mobility and the possessing of the beloved.

Matthew Brucoli, one of the most acclaimed of Fitzgerald's critics, explains that the early reviews were more or less convinced that "it is a simple story—that Fitzgerald seems to be far more interested in maintaining its suspense than in getting under the skins of its people" ("Introduction" xxii). But for the last half a century and more, *The Great Gatsby* engaged the public and remains the focus of critical debates. Different critics have found various angles to analyze *The Great Gatsby*, precisely because it offers so many themes—ethical, economic, social, erotic, etc.—to explore.

One interpretation for why the novel has been adapted so many times into motion pictures in the past is as Grissom argued "Gatsby has tended to rise in public esteem during periods of time in which public anxiety about money has reached fever pitch" (91). The novel addresses economic factors and has been a source of criticism of the capitalistic society in the U.S. Grissom argued that Luhrmann's difficult challenge in making the film based on Fitzgerald's novel was "starting with a text written in the best of economic times and re-creating it for jaded, 21<sup>st</sup>-century eyes in such a way to make audiences long for the orgasmic energy of America as it had been, when it was still a young, exuberant nation in which anything was possible" (91). The class culture of society has changed drastically since the Roaring Twenties because of the ability to purchase products and homes on credit has given the lower class opportunities for mobility. The definition of class has become more elastic and status symbols are often acquired by the lower classes even if through borrowing.

During the Roaring Twenties one of the main factors of moral decay and also one of the main themes in *The Great Gatsby* is illegal bootlegging of alcohol. In fact, selling alcohol

created the wealth of Gatsby and gave him an opportunity to try and purchase his way in the fluid, immoral upper-class. As Reeves states: “Ironically, prohibition undermined rather than elevated public morals. It fostered hypocrisy and disrespect for the law, it made criminals wealthy, and it strengthened the public’s appreciation of hard liquor” (92). During the 1940s the Hays Code forced the movies that were typically produced to warn and display how the corrupt actions of those who broke the moral and ethical boundaries would be punished. In this respect, Nugent’s adaptation of 1949 showed how it suffered as Grissom argues “from the pressure to conform to both delicate sensibilities of Hays Code-era filmmaking and stifling conventions of the film noir genre” (Grissom 10).

One must be able to distinguish and respect the director’s portrayal of America while attempting to produce a drama with a complex narration; in the case of Clayton’s 1974 version: “It is imperative to regard the film on two levels: first as a re-creation of a segment of Americana, portrayed in almost documentary proportions: second, as a drama. Where the film falters, if it does, is in the effort to present a suspenseful story. It is too long: ...as if Clayton had become enmeshed in the web of his own creation of visual and aural beauty” (Atkins 221). Atkins offers great insight into how the viewer is able to catch a glimpse of how the text’s descriptions come to life on screen yet fails to portray Gatsby’s intentions and desires, which are not only to acquire Daisy, but to examine the concept of the American dream and its truthfulness.

One of the main aspects of *The Great Gatsby* that is still relevant today is how the reader still questions to what age one belongs and when the time will come to feel as if you are a true citizen of the United States. One of the discoveries that was found when concluding my research was the importance of critical reception and filmic adaptations in the dissemination of the work. *The Great Gatsby* is visually enticing with its flashy parties, gorgeous mansions, and elaborate

sets; thus turning it into a film is compelling. Even a film not based on *The Great Gatsby* such as *Scarface* (1932) borrowed elements from the novel to present a gangster motion picture (Roberts 71-77). In turn such movies probably affected the production of films based on *The Great Gatsby* such as Clayton's. The combination of film and novel, of text and its interpretation, made the work more popular and welcome in classrooms as Dennis Cutchins points out in "Adaptations in the Classroom: Using Film to 'Read' *The Great Gatsby*" (295-303).

Furthermore, one can notice how critics have chosen to investigate the novel from different literary, economical, historical and racial perspectives, which influenced a more positive perception of the novel after the death of Fitzgerald. In the early 1950s the novel received great reviews when the many film adaptations started to shed light on the concept of social mobility and the American dream. Critics started to revive the novel in order to study the transcendental hope that the novel represented.

To conclude, the novel was not received positively at the time of its publication because of Fitzgerald's educational reputation from his early college days into his early publications. Henry Dan Piper argues, in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Critical Portrait*, in the chapter entitled "The Tragic Sense of Life," that the reputation of Fitzgerald was put into question by English scholars because of his previous academic standing which caused suspicion among that community of critics (290). An example of this is that having failed out of Princeton due to his lack of serious commitment towards his education, Fitzgerald has automatically brought upon himself an unfortunate notion of ill-fated preconceptions.

Piper states that "Fitzgerald had the satisfaction of knowing that his work was admired by a small, but select group, of contemporary writers whom we now acknowledge among the most notable of the period – Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Ring Lardner, Ernest Hemmingway, Edmund

Wilson, John Dos Passos, H.L. Mencken, Thomas Wolfe, Thornton Wilder, Nathaniel West, and John O'Hara" (289). Some of these artists have even commented that Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was a great work of fiction; future critics followed in this esteem, but it was only after his death that people realized his true artistic worth (Piper 289).

Another problem during the time of publication of *The Great Gatsby* was the fact that Fitzgerald could not create a character to embody the characteristics of a tragic hero (Piper 295). An example of this, as Piper argues, lies in having "two half heroes—Nick the thinker, and Gatsby the doer—instead of a single tragic hero," in the novel and thus "its artistic power is divided and defused and it fails as a formal tragedy" (295). Fitzgerald's intellectual genius could not be understood by critics and contemporary readers of his time because of the complexity of his writings and his unique style which was not appreciated during his era.

Essentially, what Fitzgerald has accomplished in both *The Great Gatsby* and his own world have parallels as far as the accomplishment of the American dream is concerned. For example, Gatsby aspired to overcome his common lifestyle and merge with the upper class by portraying a false image of himself in order to be accepted; such was the case with Fitzgerald who abandoned his very education to fit in a class he was not part of, which eventually resulted in his academic failure. The reputation he acquired at college is what led to a chain of events whereby the critics failed to believe this is the same man behind the words of his novel.

Moreover, film and novel seem to make the borders between past and present hazy. In fact, one becomes almost engulfed into the past, and the present becomes unstable because of the similarities between the two. Just as Gatsby believed he can alter the past using pecuniary means, the reader perceives the intertwining of the 1920s with the present. In a way, the reception of *The*

*Great Gatsby* becomes a way to discover America's past and how the present day, despite changes, has the same spirit as the past. The twenty-first century has become so saturated with finding an ethnic, gender, race, or religious identity and affiliation, that one has forgotten about citizenship, independent of these issues. In the past, America was given the opportunity to offer a residence and safe haven for those who were not able to fit in or were subjected to inequalities in their own countries. What was learned from the novel is that we are still searching for a place to belong to and an identity which is suitable for the current society's needs. Just as society influenced Gatsby's standard of living and romantic inclinations, his imagination created a world where nothing existed but Daisy. After reading Martin J. Sklar's book, *The United States as a Developing Country*, one can argue that the U.S. is still in a period of developing its own identity and has been constantly changing since its founding fathers. As Sklar interestingly enough argues that "we are unable to identify our own age, that we continue to view ourselves as living *between* ages, as estranged from our history, that we are unable to define our epoch in terms of its characteristic social, political, and economic conditions, actual and potential—subject to our practical efforts at change in accordance with our intent—this is the measure of our submission to the present social system and its predominant mode of thought and activity" (208). What this quote implies is that whether you are a director, viewer, scriptwriter, reader, critic, etc., in the end everyone will come up with his/her own interpretation and visualization of the work of art. The reception of the film is not judged according to whether or not the film has stayed true to the text, but also, if it adhered to the preconceived artistic version of it that readers had in their mind prior to viewing it. One important question still remains: Will the reception of *The Great Gatsby* be received negatively or positively by tomorrow's youth while studying the novel in their classrooms and will today's youth be able to recognize, relate to, and learn from the text or

perhaps they will walk away believing just as they did in 1920s that the novel is a poor attempt of fictional writing? In other words, will this modern classic continue to flourish in the future and remain a canonical work in American literature?

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed map in the appendix shows the geographical layout across which the narrative is set (Goss, n.pag.)

<sup>2</sup> In my opinion, Mia Farrow did not portray Daisy as Fitzgerald would have wanted her to. Daisy in the film seemed different from Daisy in the novel. Farrow's acting style prevented the audience from seeing how naïve and inexperienced she was when dealing with her problems.

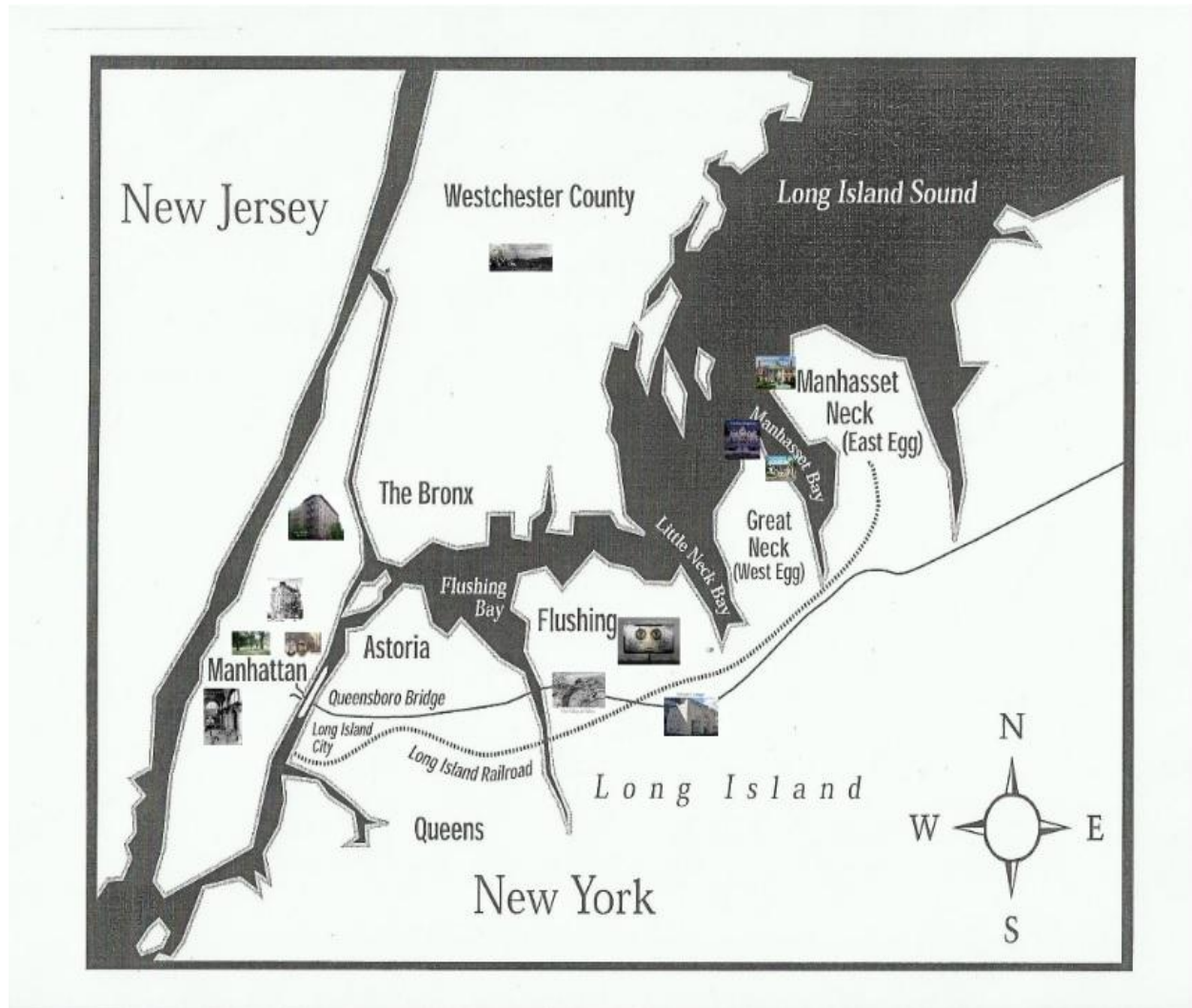
<sup>3</sup> An example of this is how each of the slightly romantic scenes which contained intimacy or sensuality have been touched by the Hollywood effect and amplified in order to create more emphasis on the romance of the novel, rather than staying true to the theme presented in Fitzgerald's novel, such as the spirit of the American Dream. Clayton's version is trying to target an audience that has recently been able to break free from the Hays-Code by focusing on an immoral romance and lust. For example in the hotel party scene, Myrtle speaks in an extremely sensual way about Tom with the party guests and gives off an erotic presence in that scene that cannot be located in the novel. Even Daisy throughout the film is constantly having her lips locked with Gatsby's in most of the scenes when they are alone.

<sup>4</sup> In the beginning of the Luhrmann's film, he inserts a scene where Max Perkins, who was Fitzgerald's editor and mentor, was the Psychiatrist examining Nick Carraway and whose name was also on the psychiatric ward. This shows how the director incorporated biographical facts from Fitzgerald's life into the film discreetly.

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## Appendix

### Map of *The Great Gatsby*



Goss (n.pag.)

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