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**Don't Cancel The Great Gatsby**

I have read and re-read *The Great Gatsby* so many times that I can recite its lyrical and descriptive passages from memory. My first encounter with this classic of the Jazz Age was in high school in the 90s. As I read Fitzgerald's social commentary about covetous and morally bereft individuals blinded by the dazzling promise of the American Dream, I paid very little attention to the representation, pejorative terms and stereotypes present in the narrative. It was only as I re-read the novel as an adult, in preparation for teaching it to my own students, that I felt a certain sting; however, I did not want to shy away from engaging with this deep and meaningful work, which captures an era in time so vividly. In fact, I wanted to use this text to teach important life lessons and approach it in a way that I had not been exposed to. A literary work requires understanding the particular context of that work; if taught in a certain light, controversial texts like *The Great Gatsby* are more relevant than ever and actually encourage readers to better comprehend society's harmful biases and feel empathy for those who are underrepresented.

*The Great Gatsby*, written in the "Roaring 20s", successfully depicts the era's post-war energy and ensuing decadence of the privileged. Although it is normal for modern day readers to struggle with the novel's uncomfortable moments, I would argue that the book still provides one of the strongest critiques on American values, specifically the careless behaviour of the upper class. Today's audience is quick to criticize and condemn the novel for its focus on wealthy characters who feel superior to anyone outside their religion, race and social class, but these readers fail to see Fitzgerald's acerbic assessment of those same entitled individuals. Readers are not meant to like the snobby, racist and misogynist Tom Buchanan and are supposed to cringe when he goes on his diatribe about the fall of civilization and how the white race "will be utterly submerged" (Fitzgerald 18); similarly, when Jordan Baker makes the tone deaf statement, "We're all white here" (137), during some heated tension at the Plaza Hotel, we are completely unimpressed. In addition, Daisy's echoing of her husband's racist opinions and Nick's antisemitic description of the "flat-nosed Jew" (73) Meyer Wolfsheim, who sports human molars on his cuff buttons and who supposedly "fixed the World's Series back in 1919" (78), can be difficult to digest. Even minor characters like Mrs. McKee and Catherine, Myrtle's sister, make racial slurs against those to whom they consider themselves superior, but both women are portrayed by Fitzgerald in a very unflattering light. One of the most troubling moments in the novel occurs when Nick and Gatsby cross the Queensboro Bridge and they see "a hearse heaped with blooms" (73) and a few minutes later, a limo. Fitzgerald cleverly connects the concepts of mortality and opulence here, but the focus is overshadowed by the condescending Nick who notes this occurrence and actually "laugh[s] aloud" (73) because the driver of the limo happens to be a "white chauffeur" (73) while the passengers, according to Nick, are "haughty" African Americans (73). Nick consequently thinks of the endless possibilities that living in America provides and muses that "even Gatsby could happen" (73). Educators can use this example to point out that the limo passengers have successfully managed

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to obtain a high level of status, however, the underlying idea is that sadly, they, much like Gatsby himself, will never be accepted or respected by old moneyed American snobs. Further, I would argue that Fitzgerald uses this incident to convey Nick's concerning hypocrisy; Nick is, without a doubt, judgmental and not the tolerant person he claims to be and certainly the book does not need to be cancelled because of Nick's narrow and racist views.

Moreover, today's readers learn to discern that Fitzgerald has forced them to see the entire narrative filtered through Nick's white, male and privileged eyes. Nick is the self proclaimed "pathfinder" (8) and the story is his version of events, entirely based on his perceptions of the truth. We need to be aware not only of Nick's personal biases, but the stories that aren't being told by this flawed storyteller; they are of great importance. Nick chooses to share and he also chooses not to share. He prioritizes Gatsby's story and provides him a legacy because Gatsby's wealth and ambition fascinate him. Consequently, I have urged my students to think about the stories of those individuals who are not fortunate enough to live in East or West Egg like the Buchanans and Jay Gatsby, or like the "restless" (7) Yale graduate Nick, who has a "well-to-do" (7) family financing him as he putters around and "learn[s] the bond business" (7) in the East. The stories of kind and honest hardworking human beings, like Michaelis, who can not seem to escape the Valley of Ashes, the "dumping ground" (28) site of American progress, are no less significant than a "golf champion[s]" story (62), but Nick finds the wealthy Jordan Baker intriguing and attractive, so he writes about her. The Jazz musicians who entertain the hedonistic guests at Gatsby's parties as well as Gatsby's servants who are hired to clean up and "repair the ravages" (43) left over from his extravagant affairs, should matter more than the selfish and disgraceful partygoers who "conduct [ ] themselves according to the rules of behaviour associated with amusement parks" (45) and show up uninvited to Gatsby's mansion. The Great Gatsby is not objective reality; instead, it is Nick's perception of that reality. Nick is in control of the narrative and he intentionally leaves out key details about himself and others. Nick's sexuality is unclear and there have been several theories on why his relationships with women fall short and whether he had a one night stand with Mr. McKee after the wild soiree in Myrtle's New York City apartment. Nick admits how alcohol affects his point of view and notes how "dim" and "hazy" his lens becomes after drinking (33) and Fitzgerald skillfully incorporates Nick's drunken perspective into his narration in such a way that the events Nick describes are completely fragmented. Noting that Nick's point of view is limited, really helps modern day readers see that the reality he is sharing is likely skewed and yet, Fitzgerald chooses the fallible Nick to narrate this story because it is practical; Nick has the unique ability to float between East Egg, West Egg and New York. Nick's affluent upbringing and well-heeled social connections allow him certain freedoms. However, it is imperative to understand that in his focus on the minutia of other people's lives, specifically those who belong to the upper class, Nick leaves people out of his storytelling and his privilege is evident through every step of his journey. Nick's ethnocentric perspective should not be reason enough to cancel Fitzgerald's masterpiece.

The silence of missing voices in *The Great Gatsby* can feel deafening,

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however, I urge you not to dislike and dismiss this classic novel because of its perceived shortcomings. Instead, as modern day readers and educators, we can do our best to address those human beings who are marginalized in this cautionary tale about the American Dream, excess and the Jazz Age. We can deconstruct the harmful stereotypes perpetuated by the characters and we can try to better understand the context in which they appear. Tackling and teaching controversial works is not an easy task; teachers constantly need to adjust their methods and their focus in order to adapt to the changing times in which we live, but the solution is not to simply toss a brilliant and renowned text into the trash. Fitzgerald's classic novel might not appear to be socially conscious and progressive, but upon guided reflecting, we certainly can teach that it is.

Work Cited: *Fitzgerald, F. Scott. The Great Gatsby. New York: Scribner, 1925*