

**Reading the American Dream:
Critical Literary Theory in *The Great Gatsby* and *Finding Forrester***

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Introduction

I should begin with a confession: I did not read *The Great Gatsby* in high school. Nor did I read it in college. In my defense, it was never assigned. I did not read the Great American Novel (as it is thought by some/many/all) until I was about to teach it for the first time, in 2006. My first reaction was, “So that was *The Great Gatsby*. What’s the fuss all about?” Six years later, I have grown in my appreciation of Fitzgerald’s classic of Modernism, the Jazz Age, and the American Dream, and when I reflect on my original reaction, I come to a realization. Even though I was a college graduate with a Master’s degree and several years of teaching experience already under my belt, I was ill-equipped to independently critique the novel because I did not consider it in context. I could see some of the literary value—Nick’s first person narration, the symbolism of color, the realistic characterization and dialogue—but the historical and contextual significance was a bit lost. *The Great Gatsby* is, to me, one of the strongest examples of how context influences and strengthens a work without limiting its accessibility or connection to different media.

On the other hand, I remember going to see the film *Finding Forrester* in the theatre during its initial release in 2000. I was still a college student but knew that I would be a teacher. The premise of the film appealed to me, and I was engaged and impressed with the story, the acting, and the tone conveyed. It contains a powerful statement about the prejudice of expectations and the ways that people play into, manipulate, and explode those expectations given certain circumstances. The relationship that exists between Jamal Wallace and William Forrester is a fantasy, but a believable one.

I have been teaching *The Great Gatsby* for six years now and have a much better appreciation for the work, its literary value, and its context. I have also taught *Finding Forrester* as a text in my classroom. It fits particularly well after the students have explored Romanticism and Realism; as students watch the film, they trace examples of how both literary movements are represented and influence the overall tone. They conclude their study by arguing that the film is better defined as either Romantic or Realistic, using examples from the film as evidence. As a sidenote, it is amazing to me as a teacher how much higher the completion rate is for this essay than for any of the reading-based essays I may assign throughout the year. It only struck me this year, however, that these two texts, *The Great Gatsby* and *Finding Forrester*, have essentially the same theme: the American Dream. I am a bit shamefaced that it took me so long to

make this realization, but when I did, I concluded that there was potential for an interesting unit in an American Literature class. This unit would examine how the American Dream is represented in these two works, how the two different mediums influence the students' literacy skills and interpretation, and how critical literary theory can be applied to both texts.

Applying different perspectives to a piece of literature is a higher level of analysis than is being performed in many classrooms, and for a number of valid reasons. First, many students struggle with reading comprehension, and it is most important that they understand what they are reading before they try to analyze it. Second, critical theory is challenging and, unless approached from the right angle, can be overwhelming and seem doomed to fail by both the teacher and students. Third, the curriculum guides don't cover it, so it must not be appropriate. I do not know many teachers who would buy this last statement, but the curriculum that we are expected to cover can be so vast that adding something may very well be the straw that broke the camel's back. Additionally, critical thinking and theory loses its appeal when it is not going to be covered on the state tests, which not only affect student grades, but the school accreditation rating and potentially, the teacher's salary.

However, the Common Core Standards (CCS), adopted by forty-eight states, encourage a return to critical thinking and some teacher autonomy. The English/Language Arts Standards provide expectations of skills and ability, not specific texts or tasks, and the standards are more complex and set higher expectations for students and thus teachers. They specifically name skills that start at reading comprehension but then push beyond: analyze, interpret, delineate, evaluate, compare. Applying critical literary theory to compare a novel and a film is precisely the kind of valuable, higher order thinking that will contribute to student success with the CCS (for more, see "Implementing District Standards").

The Course

English III Honors is designed for juniors who are generally successful in school, but who choose not to take accelerated classes like Advanced Placement (AP) or the International Baccalaureate program (IB). The literary focus of English III is the entire span of American Literature—from Native American creation myths to modern works by Tim O'Brien and Leslie Marmon Silko. In all honesty, I usually only make it through Modernism and consider myself ahead when we are able to cover *A Raisin in the Sun*, published in 1959.

I provide a strong historical background in the class because without the context, the literature loses some of its meaning. I have taught the course as American Studies, in conjunction with a history teacher, and I see the value the students receive from understanding how the contemporary events reinforce the literary style, form, and

content. For example, without the Great Depression as background, does *Of Mice and Men* have the same tragic power, especially as their American Dream is a small farm they take care of themselves? Does “A Soldier’s Home” by Ernest Hemingway strike the same chord of disillusionment and modern apathy if we separate it from the shocking and violent modern warfare of World War I, which was so different from any prior war? My answer to these questions is “no;” the historical context is absolutely necessary to situating both the culture and the emotion that should accompany the study of literature.

A brief mention must go to the Graduation Project. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, all juniors and seniors must complete a Graduation Project, which consists of a research-based argumentative essay in 11th grade and a product, portfolio, and presentation in 12th grade, all centered on a topic of the student’s choosing. While the project is supposed to be student-driven and independently completed, it requires a substantial amount of support and focus in these grades, which comes out of the English classroom—partially due to the nature of the project and because the project counts as 20% of the English grade for both years.

The School

Myers Park is a large urban school in Charlotte, North Carolina; nearly 3000 students come onto our sprawling college-style campus every day. The student population is incredibly diverse. The school is located amongst some of the most expensive real estate that the area has to offer, yet 35% of our population is on free/reduced lunch. We house successful AP and IB programs as a neighborhood school, and have been recognized as one of the top 100 public high schools in America for several years in a row.

Objectives

This unit should take approximately four weeks in a 4x4 class (one that meets every day for ninety minutes). Daily engagement in the texts may be overwhelming to both teacher and students, so spreading out the reading of *Gatsby*’s nine chapters and the analysis of *Finding Forrester* are built-in components in the timing of the unit.

As a literature teacher, students enter my classroom with a set of expectations of what we will do: read, write, repeat. Many of them come by this expectation honestly; this is what they have been trained to expect from previous encounters of the English kind. And I will not claim to be a complete revolutionary. Yes, students will read from the textbook. Yes, they will respond to comprehension and analysis questions in complete sentences. Yes, they will write essays, worry about capitalization, and learn about the Oxford comma. However, I tire of hearing students say that what we do in my class has no application outside of being an English major. Particularly in the face of new Common Core standards, students must be able to not only read, but to discern patterns in literature and between different media. Students must be able to not only recognize

symbols, but to give them meaning and interpret the context. Students must be able to not only read and comprehend an argument, but to evaluate the quality of the argument and understand the rhetorical qualities. In other words, a lot more happens in my classroom than just read, write, repeat.

The goal of my unit is to teach a skill set that will hopefully train the students to cast a more critical eye on the world around them. Students will engage in the study of two different types of texts, the novel *The Great Gatsby* and the film *Finding Forrester*, and examine the presentation of the American Dream in each. Students will be exposed to multiple critical literary theories and they will work to understand those theories and apply them to the two texts—and hopefully beyond. Reader Response theory has been the dominant mode of criticism in the high school classroom because it gives some power to the students and allows them to critique a work based on their interpretation when supported by text evidence. I am a supporter of Reader Response theory, but I think we do our students a disservice by not explaining to them what the theory is and how they are using it regularly. Additionally, they will be exposed to the many different kinds of theories once they enter college—which most of my students will—and I want them to feel somewhat prepared and perhaps remember me fondly for introducing the concepts in a high school English class (dare to dream). There are several critical literary theories that can be applied to a reading of *The Great Gatsby*, which my students will then apply to a “reading” of *Finding Forrester*. When I began thinking about this unit, I had a list of six critical theories. When I started putting it together, I realized I was writing a book, not a curriculum unit. Therefore, while there are many theories that could be applied in tandem or in place of the following, I have included Reader Response theory, Marxism, and Gender Studies. I have created an activity to introduce critical literary theories to students through an unconventional text, and I believe it helps them to understand how literary theory can be applied in a variety of media (this is elaborated in the Strategies and Activities section).

Literary and Critical Background

The Great Gatsby

When F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby*, he was living in France and wrote to his editor, “I think that at last I’ve done something really my own.”¹ This has proven to be true in the near century that has passed since the novel’s initial publication in 1925, perhaps to a stronger extent than Fitzgerald would have ever imagined. Generations of high school students have three texts in common when they graduate: William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (this writer notably excluded). Fitzgerald himself may consider this fact wryly ironic, given that immediate sales in the 1920’s were mediocre and his novels were ignored through the 1930’s and 40’s. “However, a growing Fitzgerald revival, begun in the 1950’s, has led to the publication of numerous editions of

his novels and stories. Today, *The Great Gatsby* is the subject of many and diverse critical assessments and reappraisals that have elevated the novel to its current prominent position in American literature.”² The title character, Jay Gatsby, is not introduced until chapter three, fifty pages in, and he remains a mystery throughout the text. His enigmatic nature is part of the appeal, however, along with his unwavering—and tragically misguided—love for Daisy Buchanan and his dogged pursuit of the American Dream.

Narrated by Nick Carraway, the novel reveals the tragedy of Jay Gatsby via flashback. Chronologically, James Gatz grows up impoverished in Minnesota. He leaves home, changes his name to Jay Gatsby, and is mentored for a short while by a wealthy businessman named Dan Cody. In 1917, when America joins World War I, Gatsby joins the army and while in basic training, he falls in love with the highly desirable Daisy Fay. She promises to wait for him but her family intervenes and she marries Tom Buchanan of Chicago, whose level of wealth far exceeds what she knows from Louisville, Kentucky. Five years later, Nick Carraway, the narrator and Daisy’s cousin, moves into a small house next to Gatsby’s palace. Gatsby maneuvers to have Nick invite both Daisy and himself over and the reunion, while awkward at first, allows Gatsby to show off his incredible wealth and sparks an affair between Daisy and Gatsby. Meanwhile, although Daisy’s husband Tom is carrying on an affair with Myrtle Wilson, a mechanic’s wife, Tom is suspicious and jealous of Gatsby. Gatsby is determined to make Daisy love him and leave Tom, revealing a naïve belief that the past can be rewritten. Events come to a climax when the group travels to New York City together and concurrently, Myrtle’s husband finds out about her affair. Three characters lose their lives, but Daisy and Tom come out unscathed and still married, while Nick moves home to the Midwest and writes Gatsby’s story.

Finding Forrester

The entirely fictional film *Finding Forrester* features a different perspective on the American Dream and the Great American Novel. The title character William Forrester wrote *Avalon Landing* in the 1950’s, was heralded by critics and the masses, and then retreated from society and never published another book. In contemporary Bronx, he is living life as a hermit as the neighborhood around him has changed. He is referred to as “The Window” by Jamal Wallace and his friends. On a bet, Jamal breaks into Forrester’s apartment and, through a series of events, Forrester mentors Jamal as a writer. At the same time, Jamal is faced with deciding to attend a private school that would offer him many educational and social opportunities, but he would also leave the comfort and familiarity of life as he knows it. While visiting Mailor-Callow Academy, he meets Claire Spence—the white, wealthy daughter of the school’s board president. The attraction is mutual, but not everyone is enamored with Jamal; Professor Crawford, his English teacher, becomes convinced that Jamal must be cheating in order to have improved so dramatically between his two schools. In addition, in order to maintain his scholarship, Jamal must play basketball and help the school win the state championship.

The pressure and expectations take a toll on the relationship between Jamal and Forrester, and each one is forced to make a choice that will affect the other. Overall, this text has a happier ending because the main characters learn from each other and strengthen their bond, which leads to a bittersweet conclusion.

The American Dream

The theme that unites these two disparate works is the American Dream, which can be defined as “the belief that individuals have the freedom and opportunity to achieve their goals through hard work.”³ A central tenet of early twentieth-century literature, it shifted from a sense of promise and optimism before World War I to myth and disillusionment afterward. America was thought to be the land of opportunity, and anyone could rise above the station of his birth with discipline. By applying his natural talents, he could secure an education, prosperity, love, and financial and spiritual wealth. However, one need not be a postcolonial theorist to see the flaws of this idealistic thinking: people of color and women were not able to share in the wealth and the system seemed to be biased against others who did not have the right connections, family, or background.

The Great Gatsby remains a seminal work regarding disenchantment and the American Dream, and there are many critical analyses exploring that connection, so this will be a short overview. Jay Gatsby follows all of the rules: serving his country, working hard, and rising through the ranks of society. At the end of the novel, Gatsby’s father comes to his son’s funeral. Despite his son’s premature death, “[h]is pride in his son and his son’s possessions was continually increasing,” and he shows Nick a picture of Gatsby’s house—which they are standing in—and a schedule that Gatsby had created as a boy.⁴ He claims, “Jimmy was bound to get ahead. He always had some resolves like this or something. Do you notice what he’s got about improving his mind? He was always great for that.”⁵ In Mr. Gatz’s mind, Gatsby’s material achievement of the American Dream is perhaps more significant than his son’s life.

However, by falling in love with the wrong girl, upon whom the spiritual achievement of his dream rests, Gatsby loses everything, including his life. Fitzgerald defined this female’s role as “the Golden Girl”—the one all the men want but none could really have, who combines beauty, wealth, and is unattainable—and Daisy executes this role perfectly. When Gatsby notes, “Her voice is full of money,” Nick realizes “that was it. I’d never understood it before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm...high in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl...”⁶ Gatsby has doggedly and secretly pursued Daisy for years, amassing wealth in order to be good enough for her. However, because his money is earned, not inherited, and most likely from illegal sources, Gatsby is *nouveau riche* and will therefore always be a status level below the Buchanans. This is represented by his enormous, newly built mansion on West Egg, while he gazes longingly at the green light at the end of the Buchanan’s dock on East Egg. While Daisy is married to Tom Buchanan, they both have affairs, which show

that their relationship cannot fulfill them. However, they both know that the other will never leave; “they were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together”.⁷ Nick’s insightful commentary shows how their wealth binds them together and insulates them from the world.

The concept of the American Dream is so closely tied to early twentieth century literature that it can be challenging to pick up on strains of it in media from other time periods. The idea’s appeal has not faded, however, and it is more open to minorities and women (though some might rightly argue, not open enough) than ever before. In *Finding Forrester*, the path to the American Dream is twofold: education and athletic stardom. Jamal Wallace is sought out by a private school because of his talent on the basketball court and because of his standardized test scores, which show an academic ability far beyond what he displays at his public school in the Bronx. The audience knows that Jamal purposefully earns mediocre grades so he will fit in with his friends and community; his teacher tells his mother, “Jamal maintains a C average which means he does enough to get by and just enough not to stand out...[but] basketball is where he gets his acceptance. The kids here don’t care about what he can write.” Jamal also looks up to his older brother Terrell, who had his own dreams of playing “college ball, then start signing checks for everyone, solv[ing] their problems,” but he is now a parking lot attendant who raps on the side. Jamal’s background and inherent talents make him a prime candidate for pursuing the American Dream, which is offered via acceptance to Maylor-Callow Academy. While his test scores provide the initial interest, the school’s representative makes certain that Jamal knows that “many of our students have gone on to play college ball. Three have made it to the professional level.” This kind of one-in-a-million shot to stardom is a highly recognizable path to the modern American Dream. Having taught low income students, I know that education is not always the preferred path to a higher status; indeed, the film’s tropes of athletic or music industry success are entirely too familiar and can provide a good opening for discussions of how the American Dream has changed over time and within different communities. The climax of the film, however, shows Jamal playing in the state basketball championship and missing two foul shots, losing the game. The audience presumes he missed the shots on purpose so the school would have to reckon with him academically and treat him as more than just “a basketball player...from the Bronx.”

The Golden Girl aspect of the American Dream is presented in this text as well, though it serves to add dramatic tension, not to be Jamal’s total downfall. Claire Spence is first introduced as the Maylor-Callow student who will show Jamal around campus, but the flirtation begins before the end of their first meeting. Claire’s attendance at Maylor is enough to prove her family’s status, but the audience soon finds out that she is metaphorically “the king’s daughter,” just like Daisy. She lives in an enormous penthouse and her family hosts the post-basketball game party, featuring a live band and what appears to be well over one hundred people (calling to mind Gatsby’s parties at his

West Egg mansion). Jamal is clearly interested in her—he follows Forrester’s advice of a surprise gift and gives her a signed copy of *Avalon Landing*—but unlike Gatsby, he knows they are different and tries to distance himself from her. When Claire presses him, he says, “I don’t think that’s going to work” because of her father. A relationship with Claire would create issues, at Mailor-Callow and with Jamal’s neighborhood friends, but at the end of the film, they are holding hands. The audience is left believing that their young love will overcome the adversity that they face in their different worlds.

Reader Response (RR) Theory

Most students are familiar with Reader Response theory even if they can’t name it, as it has become the dominant lens through which high school students interpret literature. No matter whether the students are in a standard, honors, AP, or IB class, teachers will ask students what they thought about a text and will receive a variety of answers—thus the Response of the Reader. This is a valuable theory as a method of introduction to critical perspectives for multiple reasons. First, it values what the student thinks about the text. Second, students frequently want to know the “right answer” and this approach eliminates (or at least reduces) the focus on right versus wrong. Third, it places a burden of proof on the student and reduces the reliance on secondary analysis sources, like Cliff Notes. Finally, the theory stresses relationships: between text and reader, and between the community created by the readers themselves. There is, however, a well-founded fear that this theory embodies all of the overly subjective, touchy-feely attitudes toward literature explication. One may argue that “since our responses to literary texts are particularly and uniquely ours, then what is it that anyone, teacher or classmate, could offer that would either enrich or contradict them?”⁸ This criticism is a perfect example of why students must be aware that they are learning a critical literary theory, which is simply one way of interpreting a text, and not just sharing their feelings. While individual experiences affect the way we independently read a text, the text is what unites us and provides an objective starting point for analysis.

My favorite way of explaining Reader Response is that as long as the student provides text support for an opinion, it’s not wrong. While a bit simplistic, it is a good introduction and encourages students to value their own thoughts regarding a text, but it also gives them responsibility. They must be thoughtful about their responses, be able to explain their points of view and how it connects to the text, and listen critically to their classmates explain their interpretations and find connections and divergences, and to think about how and why these occur. This method also asks students to be metacognitive; they need to consider how their own life experiences influence how they interpret the text. Finally, students engaged in this theory need to think of themselves as a community; their individual responses are important, but the group discussion creates another genuine response to the text that can bring to light different elements or issues.

Thousands of classes have begun their study of *The Great Gatsby* with the following “anticipatory set” question(s): “What is the American Dream? What is your American Dream?” While cliché, I see nothing wrong with this introduction to the novel as long as it is preceded or followed by an explanation of Reader Response theory. Students deserve to be told that teachers have a purpose, and these particular questions serve to give the students a personal connection to the novel. If a student’s dream is to be wealthy, Gatsby and the Buchanans clearly demonstrate that. If the dream is to fall in love, the drama between Daisy and Gatsby can certainly represent that aspect. If the dream is to own a mechanic’s garage in the middle of nowhere, George Wilson is your man! (To be fair, no one aspires to be poor George Wilson...the anti-American Dream.) Despite the fact that the novel was written and set almost one hundred years ago, there are some surprisingly still-modern concerns presented, and a Reader Response approach can be valuable.

The novel lends itself to this interpretation partially because of the narrative style. Nick Carraway’s first person point of view imposes a subjectivity that must be considered by the reader. Despite his claim that “I’m inclined to reserve all judgments,” a quick activity on first impressions or unspoken judgment can highlight the fallacy of human objectivity.⁹ In essence, Nick is responding to Gatsby’s story, and we as the readers are responding to Nick’s interpretation with our own. Having read “The Pit and the Pendulum” by Edgar Allen Poe and “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” by Ambrose Bierce, students are familiar with the unreliable narrator. Even though Nick says that “Gatsby...represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn,” it is clear that by the end of the novel, his scorn is reserved for other and Gatsby is the hero of the work.¹⁰ Questioning Nick’s reliability or bias is a good way to apply Reader Response theory with the text and making it explicit, which is the central purpose of this unit.

Film is such an immediate medium that Reader/Audience Response is the most natural way of critiquing it. While film critics may have been trained to look at film for its objective techniques, like framing, angle, and focus, anyone can watch a movie and give a gut reaction. Gus Van Sant is a respected director, and there are certainly elements of quality filmmaking that are demonstrated in *Finding Forrester* (I particularly like the influence of music and setting on the tone of the film). My goal is to have students respond based on more than their gut reactions, but without necessarily having to know a great deal about filmmaking. Once again, the focus is on the American Dream, and students in the RR group will trace how the American Dream is presented, analyze how they interpret that presentation, and consider how their point of view affects their reading of the film. For example, students may identify with Jamal’s race or class background and therefore have a valid point of view when asked, “Would you decide to attend Maylor-Callow if you were Jamal? What factors would influence your decision?” The teacher may also choose to focus on relationships as a way to engage a RR perspective. Students may recognize some personal connection to the mentor relationship between

Jamal and Forrester, or the antagonist authoritarian as presented by Professor Crawford, or even the fraught romance between Jamal and Claire. Examining the nature of any or all of these relationships will provide a strong RR analytical foundation.

Marxism or Social-Class Theory

“What does Communism have to do with this story?” I have heard this statement several times, usually with a derisive intonation, when I have introduced Marxist literary theory. Despite my emphatic explanation that the theory is not about Communism or Socialism specifically but rather a focus on the social or political undercurrents of a text, students have a hard time separating what they know (or have heard) about Marxism and I have been regarded suspiciously for introducing this language in an English classroom. In her book on teaching literary theory in high school, Deborah Appleman notes, “[I]t would be cavalier and unfair to underestimate the political pressure that is brought to bear on teachers, or the degree to which certain terminology can imperil an innovative curriculum.”¹¹ Having experienced a hint of this myself, I can appreciate the move to refer to Marxist theory as social-class theory, and the two terms will be used interchangeably in this unit.

The goal of social-class theory, as well as gender studies theory, is that it makes visible what is embedded in any given text *or reader*. I think it’s important to point out the biases of both so that they can be recognized, identified, and analyzed. It asks students to see the text not as a work of art created in a vacuum, but as a work of art influenced by the world which shaped its author; this should prompt students to examine how they have been influenced culturally, socially, and politically, and how that affects their interpretation. Specifically, Marxist theory examines how power, oppression, socio-economic status, and even ethnicity or race inform a text and the reader’s reaction to it.

Social-class theory can be applied to *The Great Gatsby* in a number of powerful ways but primarily through wealth. For example, Tom Buchanan’s “family were enormously wealthy—even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach...it was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was [that] wealthy”.¹² Tom clearly comes from old money, which serves to justify several aspects surrounding his character: his house on East Egg as opposed to West Egg, his attendance at Yale, and his general demeanor. Students usually take note of the initial description of Tom: “Two shining, arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward.”¹³ And then there are Tom’s first words: “I’ve got a nice place here.”¹⁴ Tom has always had money and will always have money and therefore he is powerful; it is inconceivable to him that there is anything that he cannot have, which extends to his ideas about women—he can have an affair, but Daisy cannot.

On the other hand, there is Gatsby, who is *nouveau riche*, or new money. It is sometimes difficult for students today to understand that how a man’s wealth was

acquired affects his status in society—like, why does Gatsby live on West Egg rather than East Egg, when Nick has described it as “the less fashionable of the two”?¹⁵ Gatsby proudly announces, “It took me just three years to earn the money that bought it.”¹⁶ Gatsby’s source of wealth remains a mystery throughout the novel, though there are many theories and some textual hints about it. Remembering it is the 1920’s, Tom believes that Gatsby is “some big bootlegger” who sells alcohol illegally through drug stores. The reader also meets Meyer Wolfshiem, Gatsby’s associate who “fixed the World’s Series back in 1919” and has human molars for cufflinks, described as a “gambler,” but perhaps more accurately, a gangster.¹⁷ Gatsby has money but he has earned it—probably illegally—rather than inherited it, and while it can buy him a dream home, it cannot get him his dream girl.

Finally, there are George and Myrtle Wilson, who are the working class. They live between the Eggs and New York City, in a no man’s land referred to as “a valley of ashes.”¹⁸ George himself is a human representation of the locale; “he was a blonde, spiritless man, anemic and faintly handsome... a white ashen dust veiled his dark suit and his pale hair as it veiled everything in the vicinity”.¹⁹ George is part of the working poor. He has no money or power and he ultimately loses what little he did have—his wife and his own life. His wife Myrtle has an affair with Tom, to whom she is drawn because of his power and wealth. Myrtle describes Tom when they first met, focusing on the wealth obvious from his style of dress: “He had on a dress suit and patent leather shoes and I couldn’t keep my eyes off him”.²⁰ This is in contrast to her husband George, whom she married “because I thought he was a gentleman... I thought he knew something about breeding but he wasn’t fit to lick my shoe.”²¹ She believes he tricked her into marrying him by misrepresenting his class. George “borrowed somebody’s best suit to get married in and never even told [her] about it.”²² This is in direct contrast to the description of Tom’s expensive clothing. Through these examples, a Marxist reading of the novel is fully accessible to students, who are very aware of class presentations in society.

A social-class interpretation of *Finding Forrester* is also easily applicable. As soon as the offer from Mailor-Callow is introduced, it is clear that socio-economic status will have an impact on the story. During the meeting with the school’s representative, Jamal’s mother frankly states, “There is no way we could pay for this.” Jamal is then offered a scholarship based on his test scores and his basketball ability, and it becomes clear that the school holds power over Jamal’s future. After Jamal misses the two foul shots, his brother makes explicit the class consciousness: “They always let you get but so far before they take everything away from you. He’s such a good kid, man. Then he gets to come back to this shit.” The amorphous “they” is used for the rich and powerful, a substitute for Professor Crawford, Dr. Spence, and the other privileged white men who make decisions about the school. Jamal’s race is a clear factor connected to his status, and therefore his power. The audience first notes that when he is on the subway to the school, he is surrounded by white businessmen. Jamal is not the only student of color at Mailor, but it is interesting to note that when he plays basketball for the first time, he is

paired with John Hartwell: a very light skinned black (or biracial) student who seems to be angry to be put with Jamal, who is considerably darker. At the end of their game, Hartwell says, "You may think we're the same. We're not." It's interesting to ask students to explain in what context Hartwell means this comment. Is it related to their race? Class? Intelligence? How are they different, and what signifies that difference?

Feminist or Gender Studies Theory

I graduated from college with a double major in English and Women's Studies. This is a fact of which I am personally quite proud, but I stopped openly telling students about my second major because of the reaction of some students, asking if that means I don't shave my legs, or something similar. Like the term "Marxist," "Feminist" is a loaded term that is not fully appreciated by all high school students. There is another element at work here, however. While "Feminist theory" implies that the interpretative focus is solely on women writers, characters, and readers, "Gender Studies" encompasses all genders and invites the reader to consider how her/his gender influences the way s/he reads masculinity and femininity. "This should suggest what it is useful nonetheless to say explicitly: that speaking of gender does not mean speaking only of women. As a critical term 'gender' invokes women only insofar as in its absence they are essentially invisible. And it brings them up not only for their own interest but to signal the sexed nature of men as well, and beyond that the way the sexed nature of both women and men is not natural but cultural."²³ Thus I will be using Gender Studies rather than Feminist to describe this theoretical lens.

The goal of the Gender Studies perspective is very similar to that of the social-class perspective: to make students see what has been traditionally been invisible, that the social constructs of gender and gender role expectations influence the author, the textual world, and the reader. "As students read and interpret literary texts, feminist theory can help them to notice salient issues of gender—the portrayal of women in the world of the novel, the gender of the author and what relevance it may bear on how the work is both written and received, the ways in which the text embraces or confronts prevailing ideologies of how men and women are situated in 'the real world,' and the ways in which our own interpretations as individual readers are gendered."²⁴ I think it's important to remember that both historical and cultural context influences the creation of the text and the audience's perception, and that needs to be an explicit part of the discussion within this group.

In *The Great Gatsby*, gender plays an important role in the American Dream. Remember the Golden Girl? There are some inherent issues there. First, the Golden Girl is significant more as a symbol than as a person. It is in acquiring the Girl that she is important, not in the girl herself. She is a trophy, a representation that all of the requisite parts of the Dream have been achieved. In *The Great Gatsby*, it becomes clear to the reader that Gatsby is less in love with Daisy than he is in love with the memory of Daisy

from five years ago. “He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: ‘I never loved you.’ After she had obliterated three years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house—just as if it were five years ago.”²⁵ When Gatsby realizes that cannot happen, everything he had worked toward seems meaningless and some critics have argued that it is better that Gatsby died, because he had nothing left to live for. At the end, Daisy is a possession being fought over by Gatsby and Tom and she does not speak for herself; in fact, she does not appear again in the novel after she leaves the hotel room with Gatsby. Daisy’s only power is the level of attraction that men have towards her, and she knows it. When her daughter is born, she tells Nick that she said, “I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best that a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.”²⁶ I have always been fascinated by the level of self-awareness Daisy shows in these lines. She appears to be vacuous throughout chapter one, but I am convinced that it is an act to protect herself, and that her wish that her daughter be a “fool” is an earnest one—she hopes that her daughter is beautiful enough to attract a man but not intelligent enough to know that she will be treated badly, as Daisy is treated badly by Tom.

Myrtle is an interesting character because she believes that she holds some power in her relationship with Tom. She persuades Tom to purchase her items—“a copy of Town Tattle and a moving picture magazine and...some cold cream and a small flask of perfume”—that she would never get from George, which leads her to believe that she has some hold over Tom.²⁷ However, when she chants Daisy’s name to taunt him and Tom strikes Myrtle, he demonstrates very clearly that all power belongs to him, and that his version of power is authoritative and violent.

Gender is a bit more invisible in *Finding Forrester*, and this may be due in part to the contemporary setting. Also, there are only two female characters of consequence—Jamal’s mother, referred to only as Mrs. Wallace, and Claire Spence. This may say something about either the irrelevance of females or the irrelevance of gender; I believe different students would interpret that differently. Mrs. Wallace is a single mother and she is a strong, if generic, woman who wants the best for her children. Her pride in Jamal is evident and the audience sees she had the same dreams for Terrell; when she shows Terrell the pamphlet on Mailor-Callow, she admonishes him, “Don’t mess it up,” but she also says, “You could have done the same thing.” Her presence in the film is just enough to show that she is a caring mother who supports her sons, and perhaps that is its own commentary: women, even mothers, ultimately have minimal impact on the decisions that young men make.

The strongest parallel to gender roles and *The Great Gatsby* comes from Claire, who is the attainable Golden Girl. She, like Daisy, is treated like a possession by her father—less so by Jamal. At the party, Jamal and Claire are flirting while playing basketball when her father calls her to his side. He puts his arm around her...protectively or

possessively? Is there a difference? Later, Jamal asks how she came to attend the exclusive school and she says, “Maylor was originally an all boys’ school. So my father did what anyone in his position would do: he got on the board and changed the rules. And every kid there knows...I’m Dr. Spence’s daughter.” Her attendance at Maylor seems to be less about her academic success and more about his display of power.

There are two brief moments of homophobia in the film that are worth noting, I think; teachers can decide if their students are mature enough to discuss them academically. This might be more appropriate from a Queer Studies perspective, but it does speak to social constructs of masculinity. First, when Terrell is looking at the Maylor-Callow booklet, he makes a face and says, “From the cover, this looks like the funny-man school to me.” His mother directs him to eat his food and he reassures Jamal, “You gonna be just fine, baby bro, ‘cause Mama don’t make nothing but soldiers.” While not overt or explicit homophobia, it is directly reinforcing heterosexual expectations of masculinity in the African American community. The school’s cover depicts a group of white students in uniforms, presumptively wealthy, and there is something about that presentation that doesn’t read as “straight” to Terrell. The use of the word “soldiers” as code for heterosexual is interesting as well; it indicates power, discipline, and even violence, which are therefore the opposite of being gay. (Even more interesting considering the film was released in 2000, during the era of the military’s policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”) The second instance is during a visit to Forrester. Forrester is looking out of the window with a video camera when he suddenly says, “What I have here is an adult male, quite pretty, probably strayed from the park.” The camera pans back to Jamal. The teacher might ask for students to choose one word to identify the expression on his face before showing the rest of the scene: Forrester turns to Jamal and shows him that he has recorded a yellow bird—“the Connecticut warbler.” Depending on the maturity and comfort level of the class, these examples might reveal some invisible ideas about masculinity as a gender role construct in our society.

Teaching Strategies and Classroom Activities

Before launching into a study of either *Gatsby* or *Forrester*, students should be introduced to critical literary theory. Many of them have and just don’t know it, but learning to name and identify the concepts they are being exposed to is an important part of this process and for this unit. One method I have used successfully employs a nine minute cartoon from 1939 called “Peace on Earth.” Produced by Hugh Harman at MGM, it holds the distinction of being the only cartoon to be nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. I first saw it as a special feature on a DVD of the 1938 version of *A Christmas Carol*, and I was both shocked and impressed by the visuals and the tone. As the cartoon opens, childlike voices sing a Christmas carol but the snow-covered landscape reveals a war-torn location; there are cannons, barbed wire, and abandoned guns and helmets. Grandpa Squirrel sings the refrain, “Peace on Earth, Goodwill to Men,” and his grand-squirrels ask what a man is—introducing the idea that man no longer exists. Grandpa

explains that man was enamored of war: “They was like monsters... [t]hey was always fighting and feuding and shooting one another. They no sooner would get one argument settled than they’d start another one... One day, they all got into a terrible squabble.” The imagery is stark: as Grandpa Squirrel is acting out scenes of war for the children, the play becomes real and the audience is transported to an actual battlefield. Machineguns blaze, planes drop bombs, and the soldiers are frighteningly dehumanized in helmets and gas masks. According to Grandpa, the humans fight until there are only two left, who fire on each other at the same time and both die. At this point, the woodland creatures, very cute and cartoonish, come out to assess the damage and stumble upon a Bible, focusing on the lines, “Thou shalt not kill” and “Ye shall rebuild the old wastes.” The industrious animals use the remainders of war to build houses and shops out of helmets and bombs; they name this town “Peaceville.” The flashback ends with the squirrel children asleep and Grandma Squirrel singing, “Sleep in heavenly peace.”

I knew that I wanted to share this piece with my students, and I realized that there were multiple ways of interpreting the cartoon: Reader Response, Historical, Formalism, Avant Garde, Gender Studies, and Marxism. All of these have interesting applications to the cartoon, and were accessible to high school students, given the right description and parameters for interpretation. I have used this activity with tenth grade honors students and AP-level seniors, so there is a wide applicability when it is structured appropriately. To begin, I ask students about the history of cartoons and whether they believe the audience for cartoons has changed since their inception. Many students recognize that there are a wide number of adult cartoons now that are not meant for children. While they watch the cartoon, students are to note at least five examples of war imagery and five examples of Christian imagery (a major undercurrent of the text is that if man had followed “the book of rules,” they would not have ended their existence). Afterwards, I ask students to discuss their examples and whether they believe the cartoon is appropriate for children—is it too scary? Many students find the cartoon to be perfectly acceptable to children, but they agree age five is probably the youngest that should see it. The violent imagery ranges from fantastical to realistic—there is one particular moment when a soldier has been shot and he is drowning; he reaches up one tense hand and blood bubbles burst on the surface of the water—but perhaps because the cartoon ends on such a positive note, the previous war images have faded away.

At this point, students are given another short handout that has one of the five critical theories on it. I usually do this randomly, but other teachers may decide to group students more purposefully. On the handout is a brief description of the theory and some questions specific to the film to prompt discussion. The directions are as follows: “You have been assigned to critique the text (yes, the cartoon is a text!) from a specific lens of critical theory. The goal of this exercise is to show how literary criticism and theory can be applied to practically any text, even a cartoon, and that the resulting interpretation offers a perspective that may not have occurred to you before.” Students then discuss in a small group how the literary theory may be applied to the text, and then they write a

short response connecting the theory to the cartoon. After that, they move into jigsaw groups (one person from each of the different theories) to discuss how their theory interpreted the cartoon. While it does take time, this has been an interesting way to introduce the students to multiple theories in a single class without belaboring the theoretical foundations of each; students are actively engaged in analysis, based on a short, visual text that is not difficult to understand.

The goal of having students understand the concept of literary theory prior to reading *The Great Gatsby* is so that they can apply a theory to the novel and already have a working knowledge of how theory connects to a text. As we begin *The Great Gatsby*, we would review the theories covered from the “Peace on Earth” activity, which I usually do in December, and *Gatsby* in the spring. After review, students would be broken into groups which will focus on a single theory throughout the text. I am inclined to let students choose which theory they want to work with, but do it by paper ballot, so they would not just choose groups based on friends. Because this model uses three theories and class sizes in my district tend to be between 30 and 40 students, I would create multiple groups for each theory: Marxism A, B, and C, and so on (another way to give the teacher some control over group dynamics).

I usually allow for three weeks to read the novel: every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, a chapter is due. Students are responsible for annotating the text as their evidence of having read. Each day that a chapter is due, there is a large group discussion to cover reading comprehension and analysis as well as student questions. Once a week, students will meet in their groups to discuss how their literary theory affects their interpretation of the novel and to work on their final project: a presentation of how their critical literary theory affects a reading of the text. A successful project will give a strong overview of the theory, focus on at least three events in the novel and how to interpret them through their specific lens, choose one character to analyze in detail according to the theory, and finally, explain how the novel’s treatment of the American Dream is interpreted from their critical perspective. The project must incorporate some kind of technology—video, powerpoint, Prezi—and show a unified group effort.

The film *Finding Forrester* will cement the applicability of critical literary theory in students’ minds, and not just for literature, but for anything that can be “read”—film, television, advertisements, etc. Students will keep the same theory as they watch the film, and individually, they will describe how the American Dream is presented and how their theory applies to the film using at least two specific examples. They will then jigsaw—creating small groups that have one member from each critical theory—and share how they interpreted the film. They will already have some basic familiarity with the other theories because of the group presentations on *The Great Gatsby*, and the intimacy of the jigsaw groups will allow them to discuss and debate not just their own theories, in which they are now experts, but the others as well.

Conclusion

I feel that I have come a long way in my appreciation for *The Great Gatsby*, even throughout the writing of this curriculum unit. However, this unit isn't just about that single text but about critical thinking skills as applied through interpretation and analysis. I am also more convinced now that there are interesting and powerful parallels at work between *The Great Gatsby* and *Finding Forrester*, and that film is a text that can be critiqued, interpreted, and analyzed as deeply as anything written. The purpose of pairing *Gatsby* and *Finding Forrester* was not just to highlight the American Dream, but to prove a point about explicit teaching. Students deserve to know why they are learning what we teach, and it helps to "pull back the curtain" in a unit like this one. Directly naming the type of analysis involved and empowering students to learn it and teach it themselves offers them freedom and responsibility. It encourages them to think independently and work collaboratively, which is a hallmark of the twenty-first century learner. I wish I had the time and space to apply other critical theories to the texts, but I hope that this will serve as a template for such analysis to be completed by others in their classrooms.

Bibliography for Teachers

Deborah Appleman. *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents* (New York: Teachers College Press), 2009.

This became one of my favorite sources! It is essentially a book-long argument for why high school students should be taught critical theory explicitly, and the author goes into detail for Reader Response, social-class, gender studies, postcolonial, and postmodern theories. There is also a wonderful appendix that provides student-friendly synopses of the theories and myriad activities and applications. Truly worth reading.

Finding Forrester. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Perf. Sean Connery, Rob Brown, F. Murray Abraham, and Anna Paquin. Columbia Pictures, 2000. Film.

The film is widely available on DVD and on Amazon Prime for rent or purchase; it is 136 minutes long and rated PG-13 for some language.

“F(rancis) Scott (Key) Fitzgerald (1896-1940).” *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* 14 (1984): 146-190, accessed October 28, 2012.

A good overview of Fitzgerald’s life provided by a collection of scholars.

Henry Dan Piper, ed. *Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby: The Novel, The Critics, The Background* (New York: Scribner Research Anthologies), 1970.

Surprisingly, there is no Norton Critical Edition of *The Great Gatsby* (perhaps one will be forthcoming?). I found this version at a library sale and have referenced it repeatedly, despite its age. The ancillary materials are a great help and the critical essays provide a variety of interesting perspectives on the novel.

Myra Jehlen. “Gender” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 263-273.

I purchased this text in graduate school and have pulled it out far more frequently than I expected to. There are twenty-eight chapters with different literary and academic topics such as “Structure,” “Narrative,” “Interpretation,” and “Race,” in addition to the valuable chapter on “Gender” that I used for this curriculum unit.

“The American Dream in Literature.” *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* 210 (2008): 1-105, accessed October 25, 2012.

I primarily used two sections from this overview—the introduction and an essay by Maurice Yacowar comparing *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*. It gave me insight into both film and textual analysis.

Reading List for Students

F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Simon & Schuster), 1992.

Web Resources

<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical.html>

An excellent and approachable overview of several different types of literary theory. It also offers an essay model of how to implement the perspective for many of the styles.

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/literary/>

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy has a good overview of literary theory and different types of criticism. This is a useful refresher for teachers and is readable for upper-level students. I would provide a link to this site from my webpage.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8stkqssLYc>

This is a link to the cartoon “Peace on Earth” on Youtube.

Appendix: “Peace on Earth” Handouts

Handout 1: Whole class

Analyzing Film: “Peace on Earth” (directed by Hugh Harman for MGM, 1939)

1. Before you watch:

Do you think the audience for cartoons has changed in the last 100 years? Explain.

2. While you watch find 3-5 examples of each:

Religious imagery	War/violent imagery

3. After you watch:

Who do you think the audience is for this piece? Why?

How are animals used in this text? Is it significant? Could it function as effectively without animals?

Comment on the impact of the juxtaposition of religious imagery and violent imagery that you noted.

Handout Two: Small groups

You have been assigned to critique the text (yes, the cartoon is a text!) from a specific lens of critical theory. The goal of this exercise is to show how literary criticism and theory can be applied to practically any text, even a cartoon, and that the resulting interpretation offers a perspective that may not have occurred to you before.

The process:

1. Read the attached information about your theoretical lens and brainstorm some ways to explore the connection between the theory and the text.
2. Meet in a group with your theory and discuss ways to interpret the text through this lens.
3. Compose a written response of one page which displays your understanding of the critical theory and how the text can be interpreted through that theory.
4. Meet in a group composed of different theoretical interpretations and discuss the perspectives and the effect on interpretation.
5. Turn in your written response with your notes/thoughts about the other critical theories.

Your perspective is...

Formalism/New Criticism: Essentially, the text should be examined in a vacuum without reference to historical context, bibliographic background, cultural constraints, etc. Only the elements of the text should be examined for significance in their connection and meaning. Focus on plot, characterization, imagery, tone, symbolism, etc.

Guiding questions:

- What are the most important elements of this text? Think in terms of a piece of literature, but apply it to the cartoon! Consider plot, setting, characters, narrative structure, imagery, personification, symbolism, tone, and theme.
- How do the elements that you named connect to the broader meaning of the text as a whole?

Your perspective is...

Marxist Theory: Aesthetic or literary elements are less important than a social or political meaning. Aesthetic matters cannot be separated from the politics, economics, and culture which contributed to their creation. (This is NOT necessarily a communist or socialist perspective, but merely one which takes these issues into account for a valid interpretation.)

Guiding questions:

- What would the political message be here? How is it achieved, and is it a message worth expressing?

- How might you critique the social/political perspective of this text? Whether you agree or not, does it achieve its goal? What could make it clearer? What does it do well?

Your perspective is...

Cultural Criticism (AKA Avant Garde Theory): Seeks to blur the distinction between art and life by introducing elements of mass culture; focus on breaking down divisions between traditional concepts of “high” culture (the Mona Lisa) and “low” culture (a comic strip). Avant-garde literature and art challenged societal norms to "shock" the sensibilities of its audience.

Guiding questions:

- One could argue that cartoons are a mode of popular culture. How is the traditional concept of the cartoon challenged in this particular text? Is the goal of this to shock the audience? Does it challenge societal norms?
- How does the mode affect your interpretation of the message? Is it less serious than it should be? Why?

Your perspective is...

Reception (Reader-response) Theory: Each individual brings to a text his/her personal experiences that create significance and meaning; in other words, an interpretation is the result of a relationship between the reader, his/her past experiences, and the text. This type of criticism reduces objectivity—or a “right” answer/interpretation—and respects the subjective, personal connection between text and audience. However, be sure to root your response in the text and use it as a guide.

Guiding questions:

- What’s your personal opinion about war, and how does the text support or rebut that opinion?
- What memories do you have of watching cartoons? How do those memories affect your interpretation of this one?

Your perspective is...

Historical Criticism: Rather obviously, focuses on developing meaning by examining the text in its social and cultural timeframe. Released in 1939, multiple artists were veterans of WWI (1914-1919). In September of 1939, Hitler’s Germany invaded Poland, and Britain, France and Australia declared war on Germany two days later. That same week, the United States declared neutrality. (Remember that Japan did not bomb Pearl Harbor until December 7, 1941, which prompted the US to join the Allied war effort.)

Guiding questions:

- What impact does this historical context have on your interpretation? Is it necessary, or does it merely support your previous notions about the text? Does the information add substance to your interpretation?

- Can you draw any direct parallels between the cartoon and your knowledge of WWI and WWII? Would someone unfamiliar with this period of time struggle to understand the text?

Your perspective is...

Gender Studies criticism: What does it mean to be a man or a woman in our society?

The social constructions and expectations of gender affect how we see what we see.

Society's ideas of what is feminine or masculine affect us on a daily basis, but it tends to be invisible by virtue of being so pervasive. Gender studies seeks to make it visible by pointing out specific elements of gender roles and expectations and asking why these constructions occur and how they influence us.

Guiding questions:

- When and where in the cartoon does gender become apparent? Are the animals presented as male or female? How do you know?
- What presumption can be made about the gender of humans in the text? What in your experience leads you to make these presumptions, and how certain are you?

Notes

- ¹ Fitzgerald letter, qtd. in Piper, 101.
- ² "F(rancis) Scott (Key) Fitzgerald (1896-1940)," 146.
- ³ "The American Dream in Literature," 1.
- ⁴ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 181.
- ⁵ Ibid. , 182.
- ⁶ Ibid. , 127.
- ⁷ Ibid. , 187-188.
- ⁸ Appleman, *Critical Encounters*, 32.
- ⁹ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 5.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. , 6.
- ¹¹ Appleman, 52.
- ¹² Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 10.
- ¹³ Ibid. , 11.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. , 12.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. , 9.
- ¹⁶ Ibid. , 95.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. , 78.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. , 27.
- ¹⁹ Ibid. , 29-30.
- ²⁰ Ibid. , 40.
- ²¹ Ibid. , 39.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Jehlen, "Gender," 265.
- ²⁴ Appleman, *Critical Encounters*, 69.
- ²⁵ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 116.
- ²⁶ Ibid. , 21.
- ²⁷ Ibid. , 31.