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Teaching F. Scott Fitzgerald's

The Great Gatsby

from

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Great Gatsby*

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 24, 1896. He was named for the author of the “Star Spangled Banner,” who was a distant cousin. Fitzgerald’s father experienced a number of business failures, but the family lived comfortably on money Fitzgerald’s mother had inherited. Fitzgerald attended the St. Paul Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota. His first “published” writing was a detective story in the school newspaper. He was thirteen.

From 1911-1913, Fitzgerald attended the Newman School, a Catholic prep school in New Jersey. He attended Princeton (class of 1917), but he neglected his studies in order to pursue his writing. He wrote the scripts and lyrics for the Princeton musical-theatrical group, and the Princeton literary and comedy magazines. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Fitzgerald enlisted and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the infantry. He quickly wrote his first novel, *The Romantic Egotist*, firmly believing that he would be killed in the war. The novel was rejected by Charles Scribner’s Sons, but the letter of rejection asked Fitzgerald to revise it and submit it again.

In June 1918, Fitzgerald was stationed at Camp Sheridan, near Montgomery, Alabama. Here he fell in love with the eighteen-year-old Zelda Sayre, the youngest daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court judge, and a celebrated “Southern belle.” Now strongly desiring the money and social respectability that literary fame would bring him, Fitzgerald was even more hopeful for the success of his novel. After he revised it, however, Scribners rejected it for the second time. The war ended just before Fitzgerald was to be sent overseas. He was discharged in 1919 and went to New York City where he began to work for an advertising agency. Unwilling to wait while Fitzgerald became successful in advertising and unwilling to live on his small salary, Zelda broke their engagement.

Frustrated and brokenhearted, Fitzgerald quit his job and returned to St. Paul to rewrite his novel, now calling it *This Side of Paradise*. It was accepted by editor Maxwell Perkins of Scribners. After the acceptance of his first novel, Fitzgerald started writing short stories for popular magazines. He would interrupt work on his novels to write moneymaking popular fiction for the rest of his life. His early commercial stories were about young love and introduced a new character: the independent, determined young American woman.

The publication of *This Side of Paradise* in 1920, brought Fitzgerald overnight fame. He married Zelda Sayre in New York, and they began their extravagant life as young celebrities. Fitzgerald struggled to earn a solid literary reputation, but his image as a fast-living womanizer affected the way his works were reviewed.

Feminist Theory Applied to *The Great Gatsby*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are believed to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.

Activity One

Examining the Incompleteness of Men and Women in the Book

1. Divide the class into three groups (or a number of groups divisible by three). Assign to each group one set of characters: Daisy, Gatsby, and Tom; George and Myrtle Wilson; Jordan and Nick.
2. Have each group skim the book for episodes involving their assigned character set and answer the following questions:
 - In what ways is (are) the male(s) in the set “incomplete”? What obvious qualities do they possess? What traits do they obviously lack?
 - In what ways is the female in the set “incomplete”? What obvious qualities do they possess? What qualities do they obviously lack?
 - How “adequate” is (either one of the) the male(s) in the set as a “completion” of the female?
 - How “adequate” a completion of the male(s) is the female?
 - What qualities are still lacking?
 - What qualities conflict with one another?
 - What stereotypically “male” characteristics does the female character possess?
 - What stereotypically “female” characteristics do(es) the male character(s) possess?
3. Reconvene the class and discuss what the relative “completeness” or “incompleteness” of the characters contributes to the social comment of the book.



Activity One

Examining the Automobile as A Symbol of Power

1. Divide the class into pairs or groups of three (or allow students to self-select their own pairs or groups).
2. Have each group skim the novel for instances in which cars figure into the action—e.g. deciding who will ride with whom on their jaunt to New York, Tom's toying with Wilson about selling his car, etc.
3. Each group should note whether the episode offers any evidence of a power struggle and then answer the following questions:
 - who is involved in the power struggle?
 - what social class does each person involved represent?
 - what other class (gender, ethnicity) does each person involved represent?
 - what is the outcome of the power struggle?
 - how do social class and/or gender/ethnicity affect the outcome?
4. After each group has answered the above questions for each car episode, reconvene the class and discuss their findings.
5. As a class, discuss the role that the material object—the automobile—plays in the distribution of power and the exertion of power in the novel.

Mythological/Archetypal Criticism Applied to *The Great Gatsby*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, created long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Examining Archetypal Images and Situations in the Novel

1. Divide the class into four groups (or a number of groups divisible by four) and assign each group one of the following possible archetypal images and situations:
 - COLORS: especially the colors of Gatsby's car, the light at the end of the dock
 - YIN AND YANG: especially Gatsby and Tom; Daisy and Myrtle; Jordan and Nick
 - THE QUEST: consider exactly what it is that Gatsby has attempted to achieve and to what degree he has achieved it
 - INITIATION: compare the Nick who arrives in the East at the beginning of the novel to the Nick who returns to the West at the end
2. Have each group examine the book for the use of these mythological motifs, keeping in mind their archetypal significance.
3. Have each group report back to the class.