

Teaching Introduction to American Literature: Holistic Literature of the
Heart and Mind

With The Great Gatsby as the example

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Abstract: Teaching *The Great Gatsby* to students in an *Introduction to Literature* course incurs the same essential problem that any instructor teaching any literary work encounters anywhere: How does one relate in a pragmatic format a text depicting an author's unique vision of a secondary world to very different students in their own unique primary world? Moreover, since the goal of teaching any literary text within a sequence of other literary texts is to develop a coherent holistic appreciation for literature, how does one teach a schema that provides a consistent learning framework that can teach a particular work of literature in the context of also teaching a universal method of appreciation? This paper will answer these questions incorporating the author's teaching experience and the language/literature theories of Aldous Huxley and W.H. Auden.

Keywords: American literature, *The Great Gatsby*, Aldous Huxley, W.H. Auden

Teaching *The Great Gatsby* to students in an *Introduction to Literature* course incurs the same essential problem that any instructor teaching any literary work encounters anywhere: How does one relate in a pragmatic format a text depicting an author's unique vision of a secondary world to very different students in their own unique primary world? Moreover, since the goal of teaching any literary text within a sequence of other literary texts is to develop a coherent holistic appreciation for literature, how does one teach a schema that provides a consistent learning framework that can teach a particular work of literature in the context of also teaching a universal method of appreciation?

In 1988, a high school (Queens, NYC) Reading-Writing Program responded to this issue. Assistant Principal John Walsh and four of his English teachers (including this author) developed in actual classes, a scheme to teach literature and writing to students of all abilities and backgrounds from grades 9-12, culminating in seniors writing an MLA-style, literary research paper. (John Walsh now teaches this methodology to English teachers at Queens College, CUNY and Hofstra University.)

In 1993, I further developed the Cardozo methodology as Coordinator of College Degree programs and English Instructor at a Federal Corrections Complex near Chapel Hill, North Carolina. This complex has students of every possible configuration from all over the U.S., and a holistic scheme was a necessity. The New York City program was implemented as a base and augmented with the language/literature theories of Aldous Huxley and W.H. Auden.¹ The schema that evolved can be applied to any text and any group of students. Herein is an overview of this schematic to be followed by its application with *Gatsby*.

¹ Aldous Huxley and W.H. Auden were literary artists who were also copious essayists on the nature and psychology of language. From 1923 to 1973, their view of language for the people and the poet was based in a holistic metaphysics. A comparative study of their philosophy is detailed in this author's, *Aldous Huxley & W.H. Auden: On Language*.

There are five principles that lead up to the two questions students are to see as their focus: *Who am I? Whom ought I to become?*

(1) Life is a perpetual continuum where all antecedent influences condition present actualities for the individual and society. An individual becomes who he is based on what he has learned from others directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously. This applies to the one and, by extension, to the many. There is always a story behind the story. A reader can understand literature because a writer uses the language common to each and that language is the implied philosophy of the society it represents.

(2) The best art is parable-art: the artist is an individual who expresses his private feelings through a public medium and makes the particular universal. People learn more from art that teaches indirectly rather than didactically. The best art has this effect on the audience: it should be a mirror from which one sees a reflection as a revelation-- "Oh I've always known that but I never realized it before." A reader will see the particular in the artist's parable, relate it to the universal, and reconstitute this particular to fit his own particulars. Meeting a book, play, or poem is like meeting a person about whom one forms judgments.

(3) Life is a constant process of juxtaposition. One compares his particular existence to another particular existence and is doing so in reference to universal existence. When meeting a real person or a fictional one, we compare the other to more "others" we already know, including ourselves. One subconsciously or consciously asks: "Who is this person? What makes him tick? What does he want from life? What does he want from me? Why does he do the things he does? What are his goals?"

(4) A writer learns about himself when he raises these questions through his art. Since what he feels can be felt by others through his parable-art, those others can learn as well. Literary art is a game of clues contained in the writer's choice of language. Words are symbols of the particular made universal so individuals can share experiences in a

medium that is mutually understandable--more or less. Since each individual references words analogously to his own particular interpretations which are different than someone else's, every dialogue or writer/reader interaction is a feat of translation. Thus, *meaning* exists between the words, not in them. The words/clues are to be observed, and inferences derived from them. To teach literary art-as-parable, according to Auden, is to participate in the writer's "game."

(5) By evaluating the writer's text and characters therein, readers question what these people are about in reference to themselves. For a reader to ask, "Who are you? Why are you the way you are?" is the inverse of what a reader is really asking of himself: Who am I? Whom ought I to become?"² The reader compares himself to the writer's characters to accept the hero, reject the villain, and think about all the determinants in between. To understand others is to understand one's Self. (The upper case "Self" refers to the collective Self within the individual, lower-case self.) In teaching literature to inner city students who "think" they can't relate to it, the key is finding the "clues" (words) that are symbols from which they can take the universal and find the particulars that reside in themselves in their own inventory of emotions.

² In his essay "Robert Frost," Auden said:

Any poetry which aims at being a clarification of life must be concerned with two questions about which all men, whether they read poetry or not, seek clarification.

1) *Who am I?* What is the difference between man and all other creatures? What relations are possible between them? What is man's status in the universe? What are the conditions of his existence which he must accept as his fate which no wishing can alter?

2) *Whom ought I to become?* What are the characteristics of the hero, the authentic man whom everybody should admire or become? Vice versa, what are the characteristics of the churl, the inauthentic man whom everybody should avoid becoming?

We all seek answers to these questions which shall be universally valid under all circumstances, but the experiences to which we put them are always local both in time and place (344-45).

An instructor's goal is to teach the *whole* class with a balance that is inclusive for all students from the least to most capable (or most introverted or extroverted) without shortchanging either. Inner city (or inner-prison) students are a combination of jaded worldliness matched with cultural naiveté. They are street-smart, but not always "book-smart." However, this savvy can be positively applied to literature. As college teachers know, former high school students are not always ready to read literature in college. (In high school, did they really read it, let alone understand it, or did they "understand" pre-packaged notes or see the movie?) If this is so, it is helpful to begin the semester with modern, colloquial short stories that are viscerally emotive and strong discussion stimulators which will give students a comfort level towards the instructor and each other, as well as to ground students in an inventory of emotions which they already have within them and will become references for their later reading of more subtle texts.

In conjunction with the short-story evaluations, there can also be peer expression with exercises like journal writing, mutual interviewing, role-playing, TV and film reviews, and much round-table discussion as pseudo "group therapy" where students can face each other and share their feelings. (The teacher also benefits by learning about his students' circumstances, thus using this knowledge to relate situations in the subsequent literature to their own.) The key component of the high school program was the foundation of "Observation before Inference (or facts before themes)." During this process of students analyzing stories as well as themselves, an inventory of emotions/feelings is cataloged in an ongoing notebook: starting with the general--love/hate, empathy/apathy, compassion/envy--then particular nuances are added: fear, guilt, remorse, sarcasm, jealousy, anxiety, contentment, enthusiasm, amiability, coyness, aloofness, etc. (Highlighting the duality of emotions--i.e., love/hate--as well as considering individual words as having positive or negative

connotations can be a first foray into simple inferencing.³) This catalog later becomes a reference for evaluating fictional characters. When students realize that emotions/feelings are universally shared with the peers they meet in class, they can leap into "sharing" the emotions/feelings of the characters they meet in literature who are now not quite as irrelevant as they might have been before. As students progress to longer more complex literature, they should be accustomed to seeking clues in words. The instructor emphasizes their roles as detectives and that the writer has "in-between-the-lines" intentions within the "game" he plays with his readers. The catalog of emotions that characters will be compared to grew out of the students talking about themselves. When they identify emotions in characters, they are, in effect, identifying their own emotions.

Simplicity precedes complexity; the observation of facts precedes the inference of themes. Students can grow into complexity from a base of simplicity as they learn how to appreciate a text. For example, pupils can chart each text they encounter with the same schema until it is instilled habitually.

³ Simple inferencing, through practice, evolves into more complex inferencing and then theorizing the particulars into universal themes. There are many themes in *Gatsby* that are universal as well as universally American. A teacher should give some background into history and Fitzgerald as pertains to the nature of America in 1922: the post-war euphoria of America as the world-saver; the effects of prohibition, which was an extended private party on one hand, but also caused the rise of organized crime which enabled some of the classes who had been excluded from the capitalist infrastructure to join in it, particularly recent or near-recent immigrant minority groups--Jews (i.e. Wolfsheim), Italians, and the Irish. Thus, the haves and the once have-nots are now in conflict. *Gatsby*, as is most literature, is about conflict and the duality of opposing forces. Since all literature is, in a sense, supernatural in that it imitates, but can never duplicate, the nature of immediate experience, it is also subject to, as per Huxley/Auden, metaphysical philosophy. Duality is a fact of life. Duality can also be thought of as a naturally occurring and recurring fission or reconciliation of opposites that fuels the progress of human consciousness.

	Nick	Tom	Daisy
1. Observation			
2. Inferences			
3. Problems / Conflicts			
4. Outcomes / Resolutions			
5. Major Themes			

(Charting *Gatsby* and the other texts they read gives students a file for comparing texts and preparing for exams or papers.)

Characters are observed and related to the inventory of emotions from which students can compare how the characters feel in their "fictionalized" circumstances to emotions they have had in similar "real-world" circumstances: jealousy, anger, envy, compassion, etc. (In the perpetual continuum of existence, there is no real difference between fiction and reality as the former is engendered from the latter.) If they can relate their particulars to the characters' particulars, they will surmise the universal to better understand themselves, each other, and more literature.

The Great Gatsby: Continual emphasis on the writer's role as having conscious and unconscious intent guides students to seek the clues that reveal what those intentions are. Writers make choices. Fitzgerald chooses an epigram as prelude (or overture⁴) to the text: Why?

⁴ In theory, for those students also taking "Music Appreciation," an overture is a musical prelude that briefly introduces the different musical themes that will be expanded upon in the main body of the composition. Hence, chapters one and two are an "overture" to the rest of text.

Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;
If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,
Till she cry "Lover, gold-hatted, high bouncing lover,
I must have you!"

(Thomas Parke D'Invilliers)

Students can determine what to expect from the text from the epigram alone. They will observe the fact that the hat is "gold" (money) and infer that the hat is a symbol meant to (1) get attention, (2) prove the wearer has ambition to "bounce high" and attract the object of desire who, (3) in the hat-wearer's wish-fulfillment fantasy acquiesces wholeheartedly. Students, referring to the inventory of emotions and the residual memories of how they themselves can relate to those emotions, observe ambition, desire, compulsion, etc. They can be guided to infer that the "gold hat" or money is not the end of ambition but is the means to the true end, which is to impress and seek the approval of the object of desire.⁵ (Students related to this very well.) With this epigram, Fitzgerald has announced his intentions for what readers should learn from his parable. The goal for the class is to see if Fitzgerald provides the clues/themes in the text to fulfill his intentions. This means that readers should be able to identify the money, the pursuer, the pursued, the witnesses, and the ramifications to all concerned.

Gatsby is a great tragedy, Greek in its hubris and seeming predestination, Shakespearean in the poetry of language and blood spilled by the end. Tragedy infers the "eternal verities", but rather than see it from that height and descend to earth-bound explanations, one should start on firm ground and then ascend. Tragedy is also melodrama. Students can

⁵ William James said: "The greatest craving in human nature is the need to be appreciated." And, of course, this is a major theme in *Gatsby* as Gatsby, in his role of antihero/hero, chases his "end" which is Daisy, through the "means" of money. All human beings can relate to this need.

be advised that as Aldous Huxley said: "Stripped of their poetry, the plots of all the world's great tragedies are simply items from the front page of the *Police Gazette*" (*Literature and Science* 65). Further, W.H. Auden believed that the artist is a "bit if a reporting journalist" (357) and "a mixture of spy and gossip" (359).⁶ Thinking in this mode, inner city students are used to melodrama from the news media, TV and movies, and their own lives.

Tragedy is conflict, either between individuals, or individuals and nature, or individuals and fate. To delineate conflict is to emphasize duality. There is the duality of opposing interests by different people and the duality of inner conflict within the same person. To conceptualize this schematically, students should, as they read *Gatsby* begin the "pairing off" of characters and/or issues and study the evolving dynamics of these pairs. For example, if money is an issue in *Gatsby*, this entails a general "pairing off" of the "haves" and "have-nots," which, as the novel develops, is extrapolated into "old" money "new" money, class stratification, *noblesse oblige*, etc. As characters appear, they also will be paired off and subsequently analyzed.

As for the issue of money, students will see that Fitzgerald immediately follows up his epigram by beginning chapter 1 with:

⁶ Huxley and Auden believed that art's purpose was to report, spy, and gossip on the vulgar mundane reality of everyday life and transform it into the magnificent. Tragedies are the isolated happenstances that interrupt life, but they only have meaning in the context of the lives as lived before and after the tragedies took place. Huxley called this "Wholly-Truthful" art and said that it, overflows the limits of tragedy and shows us, if only by hints and implications, what happened before the story began, what will happen after it is over, what is happening simultaneously elsewhere (and "elsewhere" includes all those parts of the minds and bodies of the protagonists not immediately engaged in the tragic struggle). Wholly-Truthful Art contrives to imply the existence of the entire river as well as the eddy.... Our mood when we have read a Wholly Truthful book is never one of heroic exultation; it is one of resignation, of acceptance. (Acceptance can also be heroic.) The catharsis of tragedy is violent and apocalyptic, but the milder catharsis of Wholly-Truthful art is more lasting. There is no reason why the two kinds of literature should not exist simultaneously. The human spirit has need of both ("Tragedy and the Whole Truth 14-15).

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

"Whenever you feel like criticizing any one," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages you've had" (1).

(At some point, it should be noted that *Gatsby* is told in the first person instead of the third and that is Fitzgerald's intentional choice. The question to be posed is why?)⁷

The still-unidentified Nick Carraway, as can be inferred by the facts in his words, makes a good first impression to the reader as likely having compassion. (And, of course, he does, as subsequent evidence will bear out.)

The first "pairing" off of characters will be the "as-yet-unidentified" Nick, and Gatsby, to whom he initially refers to in this context:

When I came back from... [the army and World War I]...I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby...was exempt from my reaction--Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. [He had] an extraordinary gift for hope...which it is not likely I will ever find again (1-2).

Herein can be identified the seemingly contradictory duality of a Gatsby who, for Nick, is associated with both "scorn" (negative) and "hope" (positive), with the hope winning out in Nick's purview. The pair of "Carraway/Gatsby" is charted, and their evolving dynamic will be played out as will the dynamics in the subsequent pairings of: Nick/Tom,

⁷ In an Introduction to Literature course, a reiteration of the differences between first and third person narrative is helpful. Students need to be reminded that the writer makes the choice of which to use, even if it is subconscious, and there are literary as well as psychological implications in the choice.

Tom/Daisy, Nick/Miss Baker, Tom/Mrs. Wilson, West Egg/Queens, NYC (Ashheaps⁸), Gatsby/Wolfsheim, et al. Through continuing analysis of the pairs, sub-themes and major themes can be identified thus once again relating the particular to the universal, or seeing the "eternal verities" from the ground up. (The effort or "game" of climbing up renders the eventual view from the top that much more comprehensive and satisfying.)

On the way up, students are still looking for clues to guide them; these clues are the writer's words. When Fitzgerald (Nick) introduces Tom, students should observe and list words or phrases that give evidence to Tom's character: "arrogant, cruel, gruff, contempt, fractiousness, harsh, defiant, hated" (5). Some students may also temper this negative impression with Nick's observation that Tom "approved of me and wanted me to like him with some harsh, defiant wistfulness" (5). The inference is that all people wish to be approved of even if they, like Tom, seem to demand the approval. When first meeting the characters, however, observations should be emphasized, with inferences touched upon lightly until more evidence is gathered. Consequently, when Tom breaks Mrs. Wilson's nose (25) and sends Mr. Wilson after Gatsby, in effect, to kill him (108), the early observations will hold up. The next character displayed is Daisy with her "absurd, charming little laugh" (6) of which will later be said "her voice is full of money" (80). Daisy is followed by Miss Baker, and so on into chapter two where the Wilsons appear as well as the contrast of different classes.

In *Gatsby*, due to its brevity, Fitzgerald gives a great deal of information in the first two chapters which teachers can scrutinize in close reading and establish a strong foothold for their climb to the high points to be reached by the novella's end. These two chapters are also the staging

⁸ This author actually taught in a Queens, NYC high school while living on Long Island, so the contrast of Long Island to the "ashheaps" had even greater resonance; however, there are analogous situations in any area of the country as the location is not so important as the relevance that in this world there are haves and have-nots.

area for anticipating Gatsby himself, who tries so hard with his money to please and win the approval of others, especially Daisy, his obsession. (At the end of chapter One, Gatsby is observed to be reaching across the water and "trembling" (15) which is, at that point, an intriguing fact to be observed, rather than as yet defined. The instructor, of course, has the class hold it in abeyance until further notice.) Students, by having charted the story by first observing characters in detail--and they do so while referring to their existing inventory of emotions--then analyze those details, identifying the "problems/conflicts" of the characters and how these will lead to certain "resolutions/outcomes." There is a great deal of flexibility in the method above described that allows teachers to use it as a pragmatic starting point for students to be introduced to literature.

Students have a framework to lean on which they can refer to as they learn how to stand on their own: the inventory of emotions, the charting of characters and story, the "pairing-off" of characters and issues that follows their evolving emotional dynamics. Teachers benefit because they can use this method to get started but are free to emphasize certain ideas and themes which suit their own interpretations and, more importantly, can be directed to the particular make-up of a particular class, be it inner city or not. The key in any literature class is to help students find their own emotional range which is much wider than they consciously realize, and establish this inner range as the base from which they can identify, sympathize, and empathize with the characters they meet. In effect, by learning about his or her own emotions each aspiring human being will tacitly or explicitly ask: "Who am I?" Then, when reading literature, they also tacitly or explicitly ask of the people they meet: "Who are you? Why do you act the way you do?" Finally, through the comparisons of themselves to the characters, each student will not only ask: "Who am I?" but also, "Whom ought I to become?"

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