

American Dreams and Dystopias:  
Examining Dystopian Parallels in *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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## Abstract

In this study I consider the recent trend of dystopian fiction in literature—both the broader genre of dystopias of the past century or so, and the contemporarily popular subgenre of young adult dystopian fiction—and examine whether certain American novels, while not typically considered dystopias, can fit into this genre or at least be established as having some parallels with works of this genre. Based on certain shared archetypes of the genre, such as “speculative myth,” a governing “ritual habit,” and a dissatisfied narrator or protagonist, I here propose that other American classics, specifically F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, can be considered within the dystopian genre or from a dystopian approach, despite not traditionally being included in this genre. Furthermore, given the recent upsurge in popularity of dystopian fiction, especially among the younger generation of students, I seek to apply these findings to pedagogy and to examine whether presenting these classics as works of dystopian fiction can make them more relevant or engaging to students at the secondary level.

### **Introduction: The Dystopian Approach**

With trends and developments in the field of literature continuously shifting and changing over time, new approaches, perspectives, and considerations of connections must sometimes be explored in order to keep discussions of texts relevant and ever-growing. While these new approaches must be careful to maintain their focus on the essentials of the text and to operate within the limits of what can be legitimately supported from it, many new theories and textual explorations do present worthwhile ideas that scholars, critics, and educators would do well to take into account in their thinking. One such example is the trend of dystopian fiction, which has gradually gained more and more momentum over the past century or so and more recently culminated into the widely popular subgenre of young adult dystopian fiction. In light of this current prominent trend and of increased studies into dystopian fiction, this study proposes to explore parallels and common elements that exist between the genre of dystopian fiction and certain American classics in their negative treatments of American society and ideals. Building from there, and recognizing the appeal that the dystopian genre seems to have garnered among teens and young adults especially, this study further seeks to investigate the possibility that connections and parallels between dystopian fiction and American classics can be beneficial both to educators and students in a literature classroom at the secondary level. By recognizing common elements between dystopian novels and more traditional American novels, focusing in this particular study on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* in particular, and incorporating those common elements into focused and well-informed teaching in the literature classroom, experienced educators and younger students alike may be able to consider classic, time-tested novels from a new and fresh perspective and gain a deeper understanding of and appreciation for them in the process.

The fact that works of dystopian fiction have had a large influence on culture both throughout the decades and in contemporary times is no secret to anyone who observes popular trends in literature and other media. While the concept of utopia was first articulated as such in the literary world with the publication of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* in the 1500s, more recent works within the past century or so have largely shifted the focus to the subgenre of dystopias. Indeed, with the passage of time and the gradual movement away from traditional ideals that has taken place since More's day in much of culture and literature, the public as a whole seems no longer so interested in utopian visions of perfection and order. M. Keith Booker in *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* examines the gradual cultural shift from utopia to dystopia, citing scientific progression and rising human skepticism as some contributing factors to this trend, and coming to the conclusion that

twentieth century literature has generally envisioned utopia as either impossible or undesirable. Powered by the horrors of two world wars, the grisly excesses of totalitarian regimes in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, and the specter of global nuclear holocaust, 'negative' texts like *We*, *Brave New World*, and *1984* have been far more prominent in modern literature than the positive utopias of earlier centuries. Even genres like science fiction, initially informed . . . largely by optimistic views inherent in technological process, have taken a dystopian turn in recent years with works . . . that show an attitude toward future technology that is ambivalent at best. And, in what may be even more indicative of a widespread pessimism, recent decades have seen the rise of a dystopian mood in popular culture as a whole. (17-18)

As Booker demonstrates, due to a combination of factors that have influenced human values and culture over time, people as a whole no longer idealistically hope for a human society completely

devoid of flaws and corruption. Rather, they have become fascinated with more negative dystopian visions and how they address various problems and faults in society and in human nature, leading among other things to a significant increase in popularity of dystopian literature in its various forms.

However, before examining the results of this shift and the recent dystopian trend, some preliminary terms and definitions must be clarified. Utopias and dystopias both deal with societies separate from our own, often—though not always—taking place in fantastical or futuristic worlds. However, the aspects that set these societies apart and make them noteworthy are not merely their locations in time and space, but also the goals, purposes, and behaviors of these societies and their residents. Northrop Frye in his article “Varieties of Literary Utopias” describes a utopia as “a speculative myth” (323) about a society that is “governed by ritual habit, or prescribed social behavior” (325). Thus, works of utopian fiction are imaginary stories about societies that are strictly governed and regulated in some way. This governance could take the form of official rules and laws, prevalent social customs and common expectations among members, or some combination of factors, just as More’s *Utopia* and its citizens must adhere to certain social customs and regulations laid out by More in thorough detail (48-123) in order to maintain their ideal state of order and peace. Dystopian fiction, usually considered a subgenre of utopian fiction, is similar in its portrayals of strictly ordered societies, but different in that these societies and their regulations are portrayed in a negative light. In dystopias, whatever methods the society in question uses to achieve order, perfection, or its other goals either are ineffective or, from the perspective that the author would have the reader accept, morally or socially wrong, exacting too high a price on the society and its citizens. Differentiating between the various attitudes that characterize both utopias and dystopias, Frye further comments that “as long as

ritual habit can still be seen as a possibility . . . there can be an emotional attitude toward it either of acceptance or repugnance. The direction of social change may be thought of as exhilarating, as in most theories of progress, or as horrible, as in pessimistic or apprehensive social theories” (326). For example, in prominent and enduring early dystopias such as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and George Orwell’s *1984*, the societies featured do endeavor to achieve order and progress, but they do so by oppressing and enslaving humanity or trying to suppress individual rights and personalities; thus, they are more dystopian than utopian because they convey a message that man’s attempts to achieve peace and perfection lead instead to corruption and dehumanization. According to Booker, “[t]he principal technique of dystopian fiction is defamiliarization: by focusing their critiques of society on spatially and temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (19). Authors of dystopian works such as the novels mentioned above look toward the future or to the direction in which society is moving and write their fears or criticisms of society into their fictions, demonstrating what horrors “ritual habit” and flawed human nature can produce if left unchecked or taken to an unhealthy extreme.

While dystopian works such as the aforementioned novels have been much more popular than optimistic utopias for at least the last century or so, another subgenre has emerged even more recently and become deserving of some consideration. The category of young adult dystopian fiction, combining dystopian societies with teenage protagonists, relatable issues of growing up and coming of age, and often fast-paced and futuristic sci-fi action as well, has risen to prominence in recent decades. Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, published in 1993, was one of the earliest and most recognized examples of this genre, but the trend has since grown rapidly,

expanding to wildly popular novels and series such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, Veronica Roth's *Divergent*, and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*. Young adult dystopias have become bestselling novels as well as multi-million dollar film adaptations, capturing the interest and adoration of teens and adults alike. Since dystopias are "in" among the current culture, especially among the younger generation of readers, most teens in America are at least passingly familiar with some of the aforementioned titles. Those middle and high school students who do read for enjoyment have likely read at least one young adult dystopian novel, and most other students have probably seen similar concepts in films and other aspects of popular culture. Celeste Lempke in her thesis on the emergence of dystopian antiheroes in contemporary culture comments on the recent shift from more traditional dystopian novels of the earlier half of the twentieth century to the less traditional young adult dystopias of the contemporary era, writing that "both readers and critics alike need to embrace the tension [and] recognize the shift dystopian literature has undergone in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century . . . [s]pecifically in the realm of adolescent literature and graphic novels" (3). While analyzing the various factors that have caused this current young adult dystopian trend would be an intriguing and likely worthwhile exploration, the present study concerns itself more with the possible effects and implications of the trend. Given the fact that the trend exists, what can be learned from it, and what could scholars and educators potentially do differently to incorporate young adult dystopian fiction into their ways of thinking and teaching? These questions will be addressed in greater detail in the following sections.

Archetypal literary criticism, largely developed and popularized by Frye, will be one of the major critical approaches used in this study, and therefore some explanation is necessary as to the central principles of this theory and their application to the study of dystopian fiction.

Archetypal criticism, taking a somewhat similar approach to that of Joseph Campbell's monomyth and to the general practice of comparative mythology across various cultures, recognizes similar tropes and recurring elements in patterns in various works of fiction from many different authors, cultures, and time periods, using those common tropes to draw parallels between stories and genres of different kinds. Given that the present study concerns itself with comparing and drawing parallels between two different genres that on the surface appear dissimilar—prominent works of dystopian fiction with more realistic American classics—the identification and exploration of certain archetypes will be extremely valuable to this comparison; the existence of recurring tropes, patterns, and themes is the primary basis upon which this comparison will be built.

As quoted earlier, Frye's article gives a working definition for utopias and dystopias; they are societies "governed by ritual habit, or prescribed social behavior" (325). As also alluded to earlier, dystopias are societies in which this ritual behavior either fails to achieve its desired ends, or achieves them through immoral or undesirable means at the cost of human rights and individuality. It is interesting to note, though, that these general criteria are fairly sparse and do not include many of the trappings that contemporary dystopias are well-known for having, such as a futuristic setting, dramatic conflicts that threaten the power of the dystopian government, or speculation on the misuses of advanced technology. While such elements of speculative fiction can often act as useful vehicles for exploring flaws within human nature and the direction of society, they are in reality only secondary to the true core requirements for dystopias as established in part by Frye's definition. Lyman Tower Sargent in his article "Utopia—The Problem of Definition" acknowledges the diversion between commonly accepted definitions of utopia and more accurate ones: "Too many scholars simply ignore the problem [of definition] or

assume it goes away by considering only the ‘mainstream’ of the genre and ignoring the vast bulk of the literature; thus, unfortunately, most scholars who have attempted to define utopian literature have not been familiar with more than the ‘mainstream’” (137). Later, Sargent comments that “before the 1940s almost no one would have said that science fiction was part of utopian literature. Today the utopian novel exists almost solely as a sub-type of science fiction” (142). Indeed, as Sargent indicates, there exist several prominent and enduring dystopian works which include little to no incorporation of science fiction or technological elements, but focus more on a secluded society rigidly dominated by a certain set of principles; some examples include Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and even the more recent graphic novel *V for Vendetta*.

Agreeing with Frye’s principles about the crux of a utopia, and citing and expanding upon Frye’s ideas about a utopia as a “speculative myth” (323), Robert Sayre comments in *College English* that “the most important myths of utopia have been in the center of the culture, not on the speculative edges” (615), signifying the importance of recognizing utopian ideals and elements within more realistic tales and representations of life. Sayre further notes that at least a few realistic American works, such as Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, can still be thus considered utopian or dystopian based on their treatment of secluded societies (614), despite the fact that they are set simply in a fairly realistic America around the same time periods when they were written. Based on these criteria, then, and on similar archetypes that recur among classic, realistic American novels as well as more typifying dystopian works, one may find that it seems more plausible to recognize dystopian elements in the former type of work or even to consider some such works dystopian themselves.

Thus, if dystopias, even those classified within a broader sense of the definition, are

characterized by certain common archetypes, determining what exactly those archetypes are is fundamental to aid further exploration of the topic. As Frye states, the work is “a speculative myth,” usually existing in a time or place distinctly different from the one in which the author is writing; though this setting may include real or realistic historical periods, as in some of the above examples, it is usually different enough from the real era in which it is written that the reader can recognize it as a separate society, and perhaps even let the dystopian portrayal act as a mirror to reflect upon the societal flaws existent in the present day.

In one sense, of course, all fiction is speculative; even when an author tries directly to recreate in fiction the realistic time period and culture in which he or she lives, his or her creation is still a fictionalized portrayal at best, influenced by personal values and biases, and yes, even speculations about what could or would happen within that time period. While this one aspect of the definition could be applied too broadly by an uncritical reader and run the risk of encompassing works that are clearly not dystopian, the fact remains that the large majority of dystopian works feature societies that are either futuristic or otherwise unrealistic and imaginative; however, even those dystopias that include more realistic settings still speculate to some extent on the societies they reflect merely by including the author’s opinions of those societies and of the range of possibilities they encourage. Sargent would seem to agree with the criterion of speculative myth, stating “that a Utopia must contain a fairly detailed description of a social system that is nonexistent but located in time and space” (143). While Sargent’s requirement of “nonexistent” might seem to challenge the concept of novels taking place in real historical periods being accepted as utopias or dystopias, one can argue that such historical periods do not exist *anymore*—and, indeed, the fictionalized portrayals seen only within novels never truly did—but that they are still located in a definite time and space, namely the America

of the past, the America with which the author speculates about the possible outcome and the direction of human society.

Furthermore, Frye's criterion of ritual habit and overarching social behavior is obviously one of the central defining archetypes; most, if not all, dystopias feature societies with a certain and very strict way of doing things, whether that habit is legally enforced by a totalitarian government, or forced upon individuals by common social tradition and enslavement to their own human desires. Whatever the specific case in each individual work of fiction, this overpowering force, government, or social authority is the most central and defining recurring archetype in dystopian fiction. However, going hand in hand with the concept of ritual habit, a third crucial element that establishes dystopias as separate and different from utopias is the fact that dystopian societies, despite their best efforts, cannot truly satisfy or control everyone who lives within them; this inevitable fact allows for another major archetype of dystopian works, which is that almost all of them contain a protagonist (sometimes more than one) who is dissatisfied with his or her society—who questions, challenges, rebels against, or in some way fails to fit in with the restrictive society around him or her. This protagonist is sometimes a first-person narrator, such as in *We* and *The Hunger Games*, and other times a more distant third-person character such as in *1984* and *Brave New World*, but in almost every case, this dissatisfied, outsider protagonist must exist in order to show that the society is really more negative than positive. Usually, the central conflict, or one of the central conflicts, of a dystopian work arises from the tension between the powerful governing authority and the questioning or rebellious protagonist. Dana Solomon discusses the recurring role of the outsider in her article "Individual Fragmentation: The Outsider and Dystopian Fiction," relying heavily for examples on the protagonist of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. Demonstrating the inherent

interrelationship between an overly controlling society and an excluded outsider, Solomon's analysis refers to "those mechanisms that construct the traditional conceptualization of the outsider, that lonely individual with no collective memberships to speak of, but also those broader trends and machinations that result in a state of society in which fear traps individuals in a constant state of paranoia" (149). While the "constant state of paranoia" to which Solomon refers may vary from one dystopian work to another, depending on the nature of the dominant ritual habit and the particular personality of the outsider character, the "broader trends and machinations" that isolate individuals from groups and oppress those who do not conform to the system are an enduring, universal element of most dystopian works. Thus, the central dystopian archetype of the society dominated by ritual habit is contrasted by the archetype of the outsider protagonist who tries to resist the overpowering influence of the social system.

In summary, this study will consider three major prevailing archetypes by which a story can be established as a work of dystopian fiction. First, the work is a speculative myth, usually taking place in a created or fantastical society, but sometimes including authors' portrayals of more realistic settings as well. Secondly, this society features the archetype of a persistent ritual habit and a strong, dominating force that enforces this habit, portrayed in a negative light because of its goals or actions, or the effects of those actions. Thirdly, there is at least one protagonist who in some way comes into conflict with this strong governing force. Ultimately, these archetypes help to demonstrate the common elements central to all dystopias: a society striving for progress, order, and perfection, especially by man's strict adherence to certain societal or cultural expectations, coupled with his utter inability to achieve those goals. These common elements will be used to further exploration of whether or not certain American novels can fairly be considered to fit within the dystopian category.

In addition to the primary approach of archetypal criticism, historical criticism is also a major component of this study. Historical criticism, with its practices of examining the influence of the historical background on a given work, as well as the culture of the time period and even the events of the author's life, is inherently relevant to a study that concerns itself with the societies and time periods in which the events of a novel take place. As established, a utopia or dystopia is defined in part by featuring a society, government, or community that exists somewhere in time and space separate from the present reality, in order to be classified as a "speculative myth"; although this definition often applies to fantastical or futuristic worlds, it can apply to real periods in history as well—or, rather, to authors' fictionalized portrayals of those periods. Thus, an examination of the real-life time periods in which certain American novels take place, the authors' positions or opinions on those time periods, and a consideration of their influence upon the texts in question is instrumental in determining whether or not these periods and the texts that reflect them can accurately be said to meet the aforementioned criteria of a dystopia. Considering general knowledge of history and culture along with other relevant texts from historical eras such as the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression, in conjunction with the primary literary texts themselves, should be a significant determiner of whether these stories can reasonably be classified as speculative myths of societies governed by ritual habit in a negative sense that ultimately failed to satisfy its citizens.

In addition to the question of whether or not various novels can be validly classified as dystopian or read as works of dystopian fiction, this study also explores the application of these findings to teaching and to best pedagogical practices. As established earlier, the fact exists that dystopian fiction, particularly novels in the young adult dystopian genre, have gained immense popularity in recent years, being enjoyed as the recreational fiction of choice by many students

and teens. Given the prominence of this recent trend, the question seems worth exploring of whether taking into account the current popularity of dystopias can be beneficial to educators at the secondary level or to students' instruction. In this regard, it is interesting to note that, to some extent, dystopias already have a significant place within many high school literature curricula; required reading for high school students at various grade levels has already included, for some years, classics such as *Brave New World* and *1984*, and, in some cases, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Ayn Rand's *Anthem*, and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. More recently, even young adult dystopias such as *The Giver* and *The Hunger Games* have begun to be studied in high school classrooms as well. The significant position that this genre already holds in high school literature classrooms may well be a testament to its meaningful place in contemporary society or to its appeal or effectiveness among teens. Even so, further implications must be considered and explored as well, especially in relation to the possibility of drawing comparisons between dystopian fiction and more traditional American classics.

One such implication is the hope that exploring dystopian elements in American novels can be beneficial for student engagement and interest. While it may seem like a simple and straightforward principle, educators at any level would always do well to remember that students tend to be more focused and motivated to learn when they care about the subject matter; this is why teachers at the secondary level are constantly seeking to vary instruction, to create fun and enjoyable learning activities that will appeal to students, and to draw cultural connections to the subject matter where possible and relevant. Therefore, identifying dystopian elements and drawing such connections between novels could help students to become more engaged and interested in the instruction of certain novels; if parallels exist between the traditionally required novels in secondary literature classes and the young adult dystopias that many students are more

familiar and comfortable with, then students may be more willing and eager to engage with the former type of novel based on its connections to the type that they already enjoy.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, comparisons between American classics and popular dystopias should help students to broaden their horizons in making intertextual connections. This practice entails the recognition of parallels and similarities among multiple different texts, and is an integral component of secondary literature curricula and a necessary skill for students to develop. According to Susan Davis Lenski in an article published in *Reading Psychology*, “[l]earning is the process of making connections, of connecting new information with previous knowledge” (315). Lenski elaborates on this principle in the context of a study conducted to explore a particular classroom and the teacher’s guidance of the students in the making of intertextual connections; she writes that “readers use many texts, past and present, to develop meaning from a new text,” and that “[t]he richness of a text’s interpretation, and subsequent student learning, lies in the ways students use intertextual links to construct meaning . . . Students, therefore, learn from interpreting a current text through their connections with multiple, past texts” (315). Therefore, for students to recognize and make connections between classic masterpieces of literature and more contemporary novels with which they are already familiar should not only make learning more enjoyable and interesting to them, but should also help them to better interpret new novels they read and incorporate those novels into their own personal understanding of literature and of the interactions between various texts over time. As Lenski also points out, intertextual meaning is not necessarily limited only to traditional literary texts that would be typically taught in a classroom setting, but can also include social and historical contexts or other sources that students might be previously familiar with through personal experience (315). Given this broad range of possible connections from which students

can potentially draw in order to deepen their literary understanding, the aforementioned process of using historical criticism to explore the relationships among various American novels and their historical and cultural backgrounds should be a beneficial one to students, as should the consideration of common archetypes and tropes that already exist to bridge the gaps between various otherwise dissimilar texts. Recognizing intertextual connections of various kinds, whether based on similar themes and archetypes, historical and cultural connections, or current popular trends that may be enjoyable and entertaining to students, is beneficial and ultimately necessary to their education, and so should be encouraged by literature teachers whenever possible. Considering, exploring, and teaching possible parallels between American classics and dystopian novels can be one innovative and relevant method of helping students to build these beneficial intertextual connections.

Given the premise that certain American classics can be read as works of dystopian fiction, and with the consideration of the possible educational applications thereof, the question remains of which novels specifically these findings can apply to. Obviously, these connections cannot be legitimately applied to every classic American novel, and trying to force or invent connections where there are none can run the risk of violating the text, or of undermining the dystopian connections that really do exist in certain novels. Indeed, even in classics where the dystopian connections are more prominent, a critical and fair-minded reader must still take into account the fact that the authors of the texts probably did not intend for them to be considered dystopian, and thus a dystopian interpretation is certainly not the only correct interpretation. Nonetheless, based on the criteria that have been established for what commonly constitutes a work of dystopian fiction, a discerning reader or educator can indeed find significant elements of these dystopian connections in at least a few classic American novels.

A number of novels were initially considered for this study, based on their prominence in high school literature curricula and on their underlying dystopian elements. Among these considerations was Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, for, as briefly alluded to earlier in reference to *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne's works often deal with the themes of sin and imperfection entering into man's and society's attempts at perfection. Also in consideration was Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for its focus on a strictly regulated and repressive society from which the book's protagonists escape to form their own small company on the raft. In the end, however, two novels were selected for the limited space and focus available in this study. They are F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* for its treatment of a society dominated by wealth and material pleasure and its disillusioned portrayal of the American Dream, and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* for its setting in the midst of the Great Depression where citizens suffered from both economic hardship and social prejudice.

In addition to the individual elements that help to establish dystopian parallels in both *Gatsby* and *Mockingbird* separately (elements which will be elaborated on further in later chapters), there are also reasons for choosing both of these books together and studying them in conjunction with each other. In a few different ways, these two novels and their settings seem to parallel each other, representing what could be interpreted as two different sides of the same coin. Firstly, in examining the historical and cultural contexts in which the respective novels are set, an understanding of both time periods should help to demonstrate their interconnectedness. The Roaring Twenties, that period of economic and cultural prosperity in which *Gatsby* is set, led upon its collapse into the harshness of the Great Depression when *Mockingbird* takes place. This established causal relationship in real history may help to broaden students' contextual understandings of the two different novels and the historical influences upon them, showing how

the two distinct settings depend upon each other historically and yet also represent two opposing extremes of American life and societal and economic conditions.

Additionally, though, the novels also align with two distinctly different types of dystopias that have both been represented in various types of fiction. As has been alluded to previously, there are several dystopian works which deal with man being oppressed by an outside force, such as a restrictive government or a dehumanizing social law, while there are others that focus more on man being enslaved by his own desires and becoming overly dependent on technology, pleasure, or convenience. Two of the most prominent dystopias, *1984* and *Brave New World*, fall clearly into this dichotomy; other examples of the first type include *We* and *The Hunger Games*, and other examples of the second type include *The Giver* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*. In this instance, *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* also fit well into this dichotomy; *Mockingbird* focuses on societal laws and outward conditions that afflict the common citizen, while *Gatsby* shows the negative outcomes that can result from man's excessive pursuit of pleasure, hedonism, and misplaced hope. Thus, the two novels represent not only different opposing extremes in their interconnected time periods and social conditions, but also in the specific elements and archetypes that would potentially classify them as dystopias. Further consideration of these elements and of the novels' historical and cultural contexts will be explored in the separate chapters devoted to each individual novel.

Therefore, based on the preceding information and the establishment of interconnected relationships among the various elements of this study, it seems reasonable to begin recognizing potential dystopian elements, themes, and connections in various literary works such as American classics, or at least to consider the possibility and explore it more for further study. In the following chapters, I delve further into this theory by examining both chosen novels

individually—first *The Great Gatsby* and then *To Kill a Mockingbird*—with a particular focus on the various archetypes that could establish them as dystopian: the speculative settings, the societies governed by ritual habit, and the dissatisfaction or rebellion of the protagonist or narrator. I will also examine educational strategies and approaches for both these novels and consider how they intersect with the aforementioned elements to support or at least allow for a dystopian focus or approach in teaching the novels. Through these methods and consideration of the available scholarship and information, I hope to discover whether *Gatsby* and *Mockingbird* can legitimately be read as dystopias and whether this reading or educational focus can be beneficial to students in the secondary classroom.

## **Reading and Teaching F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* through a Dystopian Lens**

F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* is undoubtedly an American classic, considered by many to be a prime example of the great American novel. While the novel performed poorly financially during Fitzgerald's own lifetime, readers and critics over the following decades have almost universally declared it Fitzgerald's masterpiece, acknowledging his mastery of craft, his complex and intricate characters, and, most prominently, his thoughtful and poignant reflections of the highly esteemed concept of the American dream that have resonated with generations of Americans long after the book's first audience. For these reasons, not only have scholars and critics alike devoured the book, examining and reexamining it from almost every possible angle, but it has also become a nearly indispensable staple of high school American Literature curricula over time, challenging and engaging numerous classes of students. In this chapter I propose a new way of looking at and teaching *The Great Gatsby*: through the lens of dystopian fiction. I hope to explore and establish how it fits the definition of a dystopia, based on Frye's criteria and other common archetypes as established in the previous chapter that help to frame the novel in more of a dystopian light. I will also examine how various educators have incorporated these elements and archetypes into their teaching strategies for the novel, and attempt to synthesize these vast ideas and approaches to the book into a unified whole that can be refreshing to educators and beneficial to students by presenting a familiar old classic in a brand new way.

In order to determine whether or not *The Great Gatsby* can be reasonably considered a dystopia, the work will be examined in the context of the major archetypes and tropes which Frye establishes in his definition, starting with that of the speculative myth. On the surface, *The Great Gatsby* does not seem to fit into this category, as its setting and major premises do not

involve a particularly high amount of speculation. The story, unlike some of the more typifying dystopias which have come since its publication, takes place in actual history in the same time period when it was written; it involves realistic, believable characters, and, judging from what is historically known of Fitzgerald's life, seems to be at least somewhat influenced by the real-life lifestyle of the author living in the particular era and culture he is writing about. Still, a closer examination may reveal a more speculative look into the unique culture of the Roaring Twenties that helped to spawn Fitzgerald's multifaceted masterpiece.

It seems self-evident that *The Great Gatsby* is, among other things, a reflection of its time period, given that it quite literally and plainly depicts the culture that inspired it. Many readers and scholars would probably also agree that the book is, to at least some extent, a commentary on its time period. Additionally, Fitzgerald was likely aware that his writing about characters and settings within the Roaring Twenties would inherently and quite plainly reflect his own culture. The question often up for debate when considering the book and its historical influences, then, is to what extent or in what specific ways Fitzgerald meant *Gatsby* to act as a piece of social commentary or criticism on the society around him. Opinions of readers and scholars have varied widely, from those who take the plot largely at face value and focus primarily on the life of the man named Gatsby, to those who are adamant that Gatsby's quest represents something deeper about the state of America and human nature, some even going so far as to suggest that Fitzgerald's portrayal of the failure of Gatsby's quest prophetically predicts the untimely end of the Roaring Twenties with the stock market crash in 1929. English professor Thomas C. Foster writes about the way in which *Gatsby* represents the fate of the American Dream and even looks forward to the unhappy ending of its era:

[Fitzgerald] presents all this [immoral behavior] as a perversion of the American Dream,

which traditionally has to do with freedom, opportunity, space to build a life, but has been replaced by grasping, win-at-all-costs materialism. Had this novel appeared in the 1930s, that insight would not have been remarkable. But it was published in 1925, more than four years before the [stock market] crash, about which, I believe, it is prescient.

(146)

Of course, those who lean toward the latter camp and ascribe a certain level of social criticism to Fitzgerald's novel must also acknowledge the inherent irony in such a position; this conclusion would require Fitzgerald, who is well known to have himself reaped the many benefits and pleasures of the material excess afforded by the Roaring Twenties, to speak out against the common habits and pursuits that he himself was so thoroughly involved in along with the Americans of his era, or at least to question and scrutinize them to some extent. According to Foster, "The most penetrating critique of the excesses of capitalism in New York during the Roaring Twenties [came] from a young man who spent every waking hour trying desperately to take part in those excesses, to make sure the times roared" (135). Still, the irony does not seem lost on the many teachers and scholars over time who nonetheless maintain that Fitzgerald's text does act as social commentary of sorts, perhaps as a fable or a cautionary tale of what certain behaviors and actions within such a luxurious era could potentially lead to. Indeed, as familiar as he clearly was with the lifestyle and habits of the Roaring Twenties, Fitzgerald was also no stranger to their consequences, struggling with alcoholism, financial problems, and failed relationships due to the lifestyle he pursued (Foster 135-6), and thus perhaps was especially qualified to offer firsthand insights into the unique culture of the Roaring Twenties and all of its aspects, both positive and negative. Nonetheless, given the multiplicity of opinions and the apparent contradictions that may exist between Fitzgerald's possible message and the details of

his own life, we must ask and explore the following question: can it legitimately be established that Fitzgerald used *Gatsby* to comment on the condition of the Roaring Twenties, or even to speculate about its possible end?

Considering the text itself, there does seem to be noteworthy evidence that Gatsby's failed quest for Daisy's love represents more than just a tragic ending for one man, but rather Fitzgerald's attitudes toward the direction of the country as a whole as well. Few would contest the notion that Gatsby's pursuit is to some extent representative of the American dream as a whole; he strives not only for Daisy's love and affection, but also for the high social status that a marriage with her would grant him, and most of all for his grand conception of perfection and happiness that would come with this relationship. One can conclude that the complicated chain of events that culminates in Gatsby's death represents the loss of not only his love for Daisy, but also of all of his hopes and dreams for a happiness he could never achieve. Interestingly, Katherine B. Trower, when writing of Gatsby's loftily unreachable goals in her article "Visions of Paradise in *The Great Gatsby*," makes comments which seem related to the concept of speculative myth: "It would seem to be Fitzgerald's view that as the pleasant place or terrestrial paradise stands removed from men in space, so men's memories and dreams of happiness are located in the temporal reaches of past and future" (23), unattainable in the reality of the here and now. In this view, while *Gatsby* is a speculative story, the perfect existence which Gatsby strives for exists only in speculation and cannot be reached in his real life. This absence of an earthly utopia logically suggests a broken, imperfect world instead, one that, if it comments on real life culture at all, does so negatively and with a focus on the flaws inherent in human society. In reflection on this society at the end of Gatsby's quest, Nick's famous words from the novel's conclusion help the reader to make sense of what has just transpired: "Gatsby believed in the

green light, in the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . and one fine morning . . .” (Fitzgerald 180). It is interesting to note how, in this famous quote, Nick almost immediately equates Gatsby's own goal with the goals of a larger collective, shifting from a focus on Gatsby as the subject of the sentence to something that escapes “us,” to a desired future happiness that is allegedly out of reach for many, presumably including Americans of the time period and possibly even extending to humanity as a whole. This equation seems to suggest to Nick—and likely also to Fitzgerald as the author—that Gatsby is not alone in his quest for love, status, and happiness, but that his striving represents something deeper and more universal—and that, like Gatsby, those who follow in his footsteps with similar quests also often find that what they desire most has constantly eluded them at every turn. In fact, author James Phelan suggests that this concluding passage to the book is one of the most direct and obvious examples of Fitzgerald speaking to his audience (107-8), saying that “Nick is now such a reliable spokesperson for Fitzgerald that we have the sense of being almost directly addressed by the author. The advantage of this technique is obvious. It allows Fitzgerald simultaneously to show Nick's more mature understanding of Gatsby and of the significance of his quest and its failure and to articulate for his audience what is admirable and futile not just in Gatsby's dream but in all our dreams” (108).

Gatsby's pursuit and his ultimate tragic end extend far beyond merely Gatsby himself. They are Fitzgerald's way of examining the common desires of Americans in the Roaring Twenties—those that he saw in himself and undoubtedly in many other lively, passionate partygoers—and drawing the conclusion—or, if you will, the speculation—that such quests as Gatsby's would not bring ultimate happiness and peace to those who sought them, despite their

unyielding hopefulness and optimism. When discussing Gatsby's character and his quest in relation to the broader values of the Jazz Age, educator Stephen Brauer writes, "I want my students to understand that Fitzgerald is . . . bemoaning the difficulty of following the green light and what this evokes about achieving the American dream . . . There is tragedy in this novel, but also . . . a correlating critique of the culture of the 1920s. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald offers a damning portrait of success and the desire to achieve one's dreams regardless of the costs" (91). Gatsby's end seems to be Fitzgerald's statement on the lives and goals of Americans and the direction in which their culture at the time seemed to be heading. If this is a reasonable conclusion to draw, then *The Great Gatsby* is Fitzgerald's way of using story or "myth" to speculate on his culture, on its moral implications and inevitable direction, while criticizing the values and habits that made it what it was. Just as better-known dystopias have used social criticism to warn against totalitarian futures, misuses of human innovation, and various other social behaviors, *The Great Gatsby* acts as a criticism on the unhealthy obsession with wealth, status, and pleasure that consumed the Roaring Twenties, meeting the "speculative myth" requirement for a dystopian novel.

Another issue to be explored in the question of whether or not *The Great Gatsby* can be considered dystopian is, in accordance with Frye's definition, the issue of ritual habit. Once again, some contextual and historical background must necessarily be established. Scholars should be well familiar with the novel's historical setting of the Roaring Twenties, as well as with the common images and stereotypes that—fairly or unfairly—tend to be associated with this decade: wild and outrageous parties, excessive spending and pursuit of wealth, reckless drunkenness and revelry, economic and social prosperity juxtaposed with pervasive moral decay. While many of these images and the statements they make are true of the Roaring Twenties, a

more thorough examination should reveal that they are not the whole truth, and that the era was a multifaceted one which affected different people and different classes in a number of different ways. Nonetheless, some prevailing trends which transcended social boundaries did exist and influence the era prominently enough to be remembered as its defining traits. A closer look at the era—or, rather, at Fitzgerald’s fictional portrayal of the era within *The Great Gatsby*—should help establish exactly what some of those trends are.

As has been mentioned, it is well known and commonly accepted that the Roaring Twenties was characterized largely by various varieties of hedonism. After the end of World War I, Americans returned home from the battlefield, and many wanted to celebrate their newfound peace and happiness. These conditions resulted in a booming and prosperous economy, fueled largely by excess spending from veterans and civilians alike who wanted to enjoy themselves to the fullest extent. The expanding economy was also helped by the advent of relatively new technologies, perhaps most notably the automobile, just as the pleasure-seeking and partying mentality was helped by new forms of entertainment, such as jazz music and dance, earning this era the nickname of “The Jazz Age.” Additionally, Prohibition laws in America did little to halt the sale and consumption of alcohol, only rendering it cheaper to buyers due to the illegal nature of bootleggers and the lack of government tax. Some women adopted styles that caused them to be known as the “flappers,” those who wore short hair and short skirts, drank and smoked along with the men, and challenged traditional values about gender norms and sexual morality. These elements all came together to form the lasting images and impressions which the Roaring Twenties is most frequently remembered for: lavish, luxurious parties full of music, dancing, drinking, sex, and the wild, unrestrained pursuit of pleasure.

This popular image of the Roaring Twenties is reflected to a large extent in *The Great*

*Gatsby*. The most obvious example is in Gatsby's parties themselves, at which a number of New York's rich and social elite regularly gather to enjoy themselves with song, dance, and drink well into the night. However, even when Gatsby himself is not directly involved, these habits extend to others as well. Nick also reports a drunken party involving illicit affairs early on in the story, before he has even met Gatsby, when he is with Tom and Myrtle in another part of town (Fitzgerald 28-38). People such as Tom, Daisy, Myrtle, and others almost seem never to slow down, always looking for the next party, the next dance, or the next excessive pleasure to keep them entertained and happy. Daisy at one point asks, "What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon? . . . and the day after that, and the next thirty years?" (118), indicating a restlessness with the circumstances around her and a need to always stay occupied with something new and exciting. Based on qualities such as these, one might suggest that the dystopian ritual habit that dominates at least a portion of American society within *The Great Gatsby* is hedonism, the overarching and unceasing pursuit of material and physical pleasure in its various different forms. Considering the behaviors of many characters within the upper social class, one would not be entirely wrong to posit this assumption; however, the wider scope of characters within the novel, along with their complex and varied behaviors and motivations, reveals habits somewhat different from and deeper than mere hedonism and pursuit of physical pleasure.

To get a fuller picture of the habits and drives that motivate characters and society members within *The Great Gatsby*, one must give some consideration to the issues of money and social status. These elements are somewhat interrelated with the aforementioned issue of hedonism, given that excess spending and materialism are largely made possible by one's wealth, and the parties which one attends are largely influenced by one's social status. Still, for many, both in actual history and within the novel, the pursuit of pleasure and wild parties is only

one symptom of the deeper desire for material wealth and high social status. The predominant example of this principle in the novel is Gatsby himself. While he is the host of many flamboyant and excessive parties, he is rarely seen indulging in drink or dance along with his guests. Rather, his true motivation is gradually revealed throughout the novel: he wants Daisy's love, he wants to realize and secure his perfect fantasy of what he has decided his life must be like, and in order to do this, he believes he must achieve enough wealth and social status to be worthy of Daisy's affections. While it is part of Gatsby's goal to amass vast wealth through the illegal sale of alcohol (Fitzgerald 133), the point is made by Tom that mere riches are not enough; there is a major social division between the "old money" from which Tom and Daisy hail and the "new money" of a self-made man such as Gatsby, which is why Gatsby lives in the "less fashionable" district of West Egg (5) as opposed to the more socially elite East Egg. Gatsby believes that earning Daisy's love and marrying into old money will grant him an equal social status with her and with the culturally elite, and so he pursues this goal relentlessly as part of his all-consuming American dream of prosperity, peace, and happiness. Like many in Fitzgerald's portrayal of the Jazz Age, Gatsby is motivated by the pursuit of not only pleasure and materialism, but also of material wealth and social status that will supposedly bring about the perfect ultimate ideal of happiness that he dreams of.

But Gatsby is hardly the only one driven by the pursuit of wealth, status, and happiness, nor are these pursuits limited only to the rich. Just as the wealthy and the culturally elite in Fitzgerald's novel are occupied with their material and social pursuits, so are the poor and culturally low—just in different ways. Fitzgerald's portrayal of the Valley of Ashes, a poor, dirty, and unappealing area removed from the culturally elite, along with the residents who live there, reveals that the poorer and more common citizens are often just as preoccupied with

acquiring wealth and pursuing higher social status; the only difference is that the elite have the means to fulfill their desires by amassing more wealth and holding lavish celebrations, whereas the poor and common citizens strive continuously to transcend their social class, usually with little success. The most prominent examples of this principle in the novel are George and Myrtle Wilson, the uncultured mechanic and his wife who live right in the heart of the Valley of Ashes. Though they lack money and social status—George is so poor that he had to borrow someone else's suit for his own wedding (Fitzgerald 35)—they still pursue these goals frequently and tirelessly—or at least Myrtle does, as evidenced by her choice in men. She married George only because she “thought he was a gentleman” and that “he knew something about breeding” (Fitzgerald 34), but she scorns him upon realizing his true character, instead forming a relationship with old money Tom in an attempt to climb the social ladder. Veronica Makowsky notes how the unhappy Myrtle has not merely a passive wish to marry Tom, but that she struggles actively to be noticed by him and is extremely reluctant to give up her pursuit for higher class (81). Though the Wilsons do not possess money or status, nor do they progress very far in their attempts to acquire such, they are still dominated by their pursuits of these goals and controlled by their lack of these things, as is nearly everyone in Fitzgerald's New York of the 1920s.

This, then, seems to be the ritual habit that dominates the Roaring Twenties as depicted by Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*: everyone—rich, poor, and in-between—is controlled by the pursuit of wealth and status, and everyone is constantly pursuing more. Tom and Daisy are part of the elite, not only because of their money but also due to their family history of coming from a well-respected line—and yet they are not satisfied with what they have and continue to seek further happiness (a point which shall be elaborated on in greater detail below). *Gatsby* is close

to the elite with the money he has managed to amass, but his poorer upbringing is enough to separate him significantly from the likes of Tom and Daisy, and he continuously strives to transcend this social barrier. Brauer comments on the nature of the era as being dominated by wealth and materialism: “While we might excuse Gatsby’s displays [of wealth] as his attempt to capture Daisy’s notice and bring her back into his life, his belief that this is a viable strategy illustrates something fundamental about the culture of the time” (91). Similarly, George and Myrtle are just as defined by their lack of wealth as Tom and Daisy are defined by their having it, and they also pursue—largely unsuccessfully—more wealth and status than their social class has granted them. Whether they have it or not, wealth and status are the standards by which everyone is measured and valued by others in *The Great Gatsby*’s Roaring Twenties. They are the qualities that unite and divide, creating an exclusive society of the rich and elite while separating everyone else from that lofty standard. They are by and large the dominant habitual traits of both the real historical era and the fictionalized society within the novel.

In these ways, then, the ritual habit of *The Great Gatsby* reflects similar qualities also seen in other prominent dystopian works, helping to solidify *Gatsby*’s inclusion in this category as well. As has been alluded to in the introduction to this study, *Gatsby* shares some traits in common with dystopias such as *Brave New World* in that it involves not an oppressive, totalitarian regime, but rather an enslavement of man to his own desires. The citizens of the society in *Brave New World* are enthralled by fascinating new technologies that keep them entertained; they are addicted to pleasure-inducing drugs to moderate their moods, and they approach sex in a casual manner as a commodity to be shared by all. Similarly, the rich elite in *Gatsby* are obsessed with money and any material thing that can bring them pleasure, along with copious amounts of alcohol and largely superficial romantic or sexual relationships. The pursuit

of these things does not only please and entertain, but also dominates and ultimately harms the people who pursue them so recklessly, proving that the pleasure-filled paradise is not truly as good as it appears to be on the surface. Additionally, the rigid class divisions brought about by the obsessive focus on money and social status are also reminiscent of well-established dystopias. Many dystopian fictions, from *Brave New World* and *The Handmaid's Tale* to *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, include harsh inequality among classes and people groups as one of the defining features of their imperfect social system. These class divisions and society's perpetuation of poor treatment for the oppressed are another aspect that prove that the Roaring Twenties as portrayed within *Gatsby* cannot in fact be a perfect utopia for everyone, if indeed it is for anyone. Furthermore, in addition to these comparisons with other known dystopian novels, textual evidence from *Gatsby* itself about the society therein will be presented below to demonstrate that the world it portrays is more dystopian than utopian.

So far, the culture of the Jazz Age as depicted by Fitzgerald within *The Great Gatsby* seems to fit Frye's two major criteria for a utopia: speculative myth and ritual habit. However, as referenced earlier, Frye also points out that such a society can be seen as either positive or negative, utopian or dystopian. For this reason, we must further establish what makes the society in *Gatsby* dystopian rather than utopian. After all, in some ways the era seems very much like a paradise; economy, culture, and social life were at significant high points, and the rich and elite enjoyed new levels of luxury and pleasure. Why might one think, then, that this society is not quite what it seems, that all the money and pleasure actually do more harm than good, that this paradise is in reality a dystopia? This conclusion is derived from multiple different elements and themes throughout the novel that seem to render Fitzgerald's portrayal ultimately negative, pessimistic, critical, and even somewhat cynical.

One such element is, as previously mentioned, the Valley of Ashes and the low class, financially struggling citizens who call it home. At first glance, it should seem clear that at least this part of New York City during the twenties would, if anything, be more dystopian than utopian. It is a place far-removed from the elegant and luxurious New York found in East Egg or even West Egg; the living conditions are poor, unsanitary, and unpleasantly hot, while the inhabitants struggle tirelessly to support themselves financially. Fitzgerald's powerful use of imagery conveys just how dirty, empty, and hopeless everything seems to be in the Valley: "This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air" (23). Those ash-filled inhabitants who we do get to know throughout the book—George and Myrtle Wilson—are portrayed as selfish, naïve, and dissatisfied, driven by ultimately ineffective cultural ideals of what will allegedly bring them happiness. In fact, even the most prominent visual symbol from the Valley—the ever-watchful eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg—could be seen as contributing to the dystopian atmosphere; the impression they convey to the citizens of constantly being watched by an unflinching judgmental glare makes them seem not entirely unlike the Big Brother of Orwell's *1984* or the oppressive, invasive government of many other dystopias. Fitzgerald describes the eyes as "brood[ing] on over the solemn dumping ground" (24) and says that "[o]ver the ashheaps the giant eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg kept their vigil" (124). In all, the brokenness of the Valley of Ashes with the memorable imagery that Fitzgerald uses to describe it convey a poignant picture of a land largely unaffected by the optimism and prosperity of the era, characterized instead by constant discomfort, hopelessness, and desperation.

In fact, the Valley is so desolate that a number of commentators have considered it to

have been influenced by T.S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land," published in 1922, only three years before *Gatsby*; indeed, it is not difficult to see the connections and parallels between Fitzgerald's Valley of Ashes and Eliot's description of "[a] heap of broken images, where the sun beats, and the dead trees give no shelter" (Eliot lines 22-23). One scholar, John Michael Howell, suggests that *Gatsby* was one of the first of several prominent American novels to follow in the "Waste Land Tradition" as established by Eliot. Howell refers to "the decadence of New York and environs and the dream of wealth . . . [and the] pervasive theme of materialism and spiritual sterility" (11-12) as oft-cited elements that provide a thematic connection between "The Waste Land" and *The Great Gatsby*. Other critics agree; in an anthology of critical interpretations, Letha Audhuy references the "coherent, intricate network of significant details and what can only be specific allusions that points to a kind of *permeation* of *Gatsby* by *The Waste Land*" (122). An article in *Twentieth Century Literature* specifically draws parallels between the wasteland that Eliot describes and Fitzgerald's valley of ashes, citing how Fitzgerald was well-familiar with Eliot's poem and even used the term "the waste land" to describe his Valley at least once (Randall 51). Pearl James, writing on teaching *Gatsby* based on an understanding of how it was influenced by World War I, notes several other parallels between the two works, such as "Gatsby's attempt to romance its 'holocaust' with the poem's (arguably) similar task" and "an analogy between Nick's unreliable point of view and the poem's multiple voices" (37). The thematic connections between *Gatsby* and "The Waste Land" having been sufficiently established, Howell goes on to describe similar themes in other prominent American novels, such as *The Sun Also Rises* (31-58)—published just a year after *Gatsby* by Fitzgerald's friend and contemporary, Ernest Hemingway—as well as *The Sound and the Fury* (59-80) and *The Catcher in the Rye* (81-107). These explorations could provide further basis for the existence

of dystopian themes and elements throughout multiple works across American literature, if all of these novels really have been influenced by the broken land of confusion and hopelessness which Eliot portrays in “The Waste Land.” In any case, the connections seem especially clear in *Gatsby*, where not all of New York is dominated by the hopeful happiness brought by luxury, but rather many people are confined to the harsh and relentless Valley of Ashes. This valley and its similarities to a desolate wasteland help to underscore the negative side of the supposed paradise that the Twenties provided, highlighting Fitzgerald’s realistic treatments of American hedonism and gradual social and moral decline. This decline and its negative impact on people’s individual lives and on society as a whole help to underscore the dystopian nature of the novel.

While on the topic of the lower class of people who are oppressed and downtrodden by the overvaluing of wealth and status in this society, one would also do well to consider the plight of other marginalized groups portrayed in the novel, most notably women and black people. Issues of gender and race inequality are not as centrally thematic in *Gatsby* as they are in other significant novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but they are still present. As has been mentioned, unjust class divisions and mistreatments of various groups are one defining feature of many prominent dystopias, one that they clearly share with *The Great Gatsby* as well. Historically, of course, racial prejudice and segregation were fully alive and well in the 1920s of America, and the stronghold of gender inequality had only just begun to be dissolved by recent events such as women’s gaining of suffrage. The frequent treatments of these classes are reflected in *Gatsby* as well, in instances such as Nick’s derogatory perceptions of African Americans and references to them as “bucks” (Fitzgerald 69), Tom’s overtly racist opinions—“Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they’ll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white” (130)—and Tom’s

disrespectful and unfaithful treatment of the women in his life. He makes no secret of keeping a mistress, yet treats both her and his wife roughly and poorly, even going so far as to strike Myrtle and break her nose when it suits him to do so (37). To at least some extent, Daisy recognizes the restricting treatment of women in her era, stating that “that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool” (17), but remains powerless to do anything to change it. In fact, one author, Marilyn Elkins asks her readers to consider, “[b]y drawing attention to sexist clichés, does Daisy indicate an awareness of herself as a victim of patriarchy? Is she perhaps consciously playing the role of a foolish woman? If so, are her words to be interpreted as an act of subversion?” (191) If Daisy is aware of her oppression but simply unable or unwilling to break free of it, her situation may represent a further example of Fitzgerald’s criticizing the unjust traditions and habits that dominated the era and severely restricted people’s lives during this time period. In any case, the inescapable inequality and mistreatment among these various groups and classes further underscores the fact that the Roaring Twenties are hardly a perfect paradise for everyone involved, but primarily only for the elite, privileged, and well-respected according to the values of this society.

However, even when ignoring the harsh conditions of the oppressed groups and focusing on the rich and elite, one can see that, in some ways, life is really not much better for them either. While they enjoy more money and better living conditions, it quickly becomes clear that most of the rich are no happier with their lives than are the poor. While Tom is extremely wealthy and has married the beautiful Daisy, that is clearly not enough for him, as he continues to seek pleasure and satisfaction through an illicit relationship with a lower class woman, Myrtle. Daisy, despite her wealth and positive factors in her life such as her daughter, tells Nick that she has “had a very bad time” and is “pretty cynical about everything” (Fitzgerald 16); most likely, her

poor treatment from Tom is a significant contributing factor in her unhappiness, but the fact remains that Daisy's wealth, status, and marriage have ultimately failed to satisfy her or keep her content. At a later point in the novel, Nick reflects on Tom and Daisy's relationship, saying that "[t]hey weren't happy . . . and yet they weren't unhappy either" (145), indicating a sort of dull, passive contentment or acceptance, but with a lack of true joy or fulfillment. Similarly, Gatsby is not satisfied with his life, but in contrast to Daisy's casual acceptance of her circumstances, he actively seeks to change his life according to what he believes it should be like. Though extremely wealthy and apparently well-liked by many of his peers (although many of them probably care about him only for his possessions and parties), Gatsby is not content with what he has, but continues relentlessly pursuing more, believing that high social status and Daisy's love will secure his ultimate key to happiness, but never realizing that goal in his lifetime. These characters have each, to some extent or another, bought into the prevailing mentality and ritual habit of the age—the unyielding pursuit of status, wealth, and pleasure—but have little lasting satisfaction to show for it. According to Makowsky, “to Fitzgerald the rich are merely attractive facades that would tumble over if moved since there is nothing behind them and they have no foundations” (82). Instead of bringing peace and happiness as would be the case in a utopia of true perfection, this ritual habit brings jealousy, immorality, strife, discontent, and pain of various kinds to those who follow it unquestioningly. While pretending to bring provision and fulfillment to its citizens, this era and its prevailing values are, in Fitzgerald's portrayal, grossly ineffective at maintaining a utopian state of satisfaction. Instead, these unrestrained pursuits of pleasure come at the price of pleasure itself, exacting happiness, stability, morality, and even life as their costs. As in many dystopias, the ritual habit does not satisfy its citizens, and the effects it produces in the name of prosperity, convenience, and progress are in reality much more harmful

than beneficial. These negative results of alleged progress and of the society's underlying values further reveal its dystopian qualities.

However, perhaps the strongest evidence of Fitzgerald's negative portrayal of the Twenties, of the dystopian condition rather than a utopian one, is seen in the ultimate ending of Gatsby's quest. As mentioned, Gatsby has heavily invested his faith, actions, resources, and lifestyles in the prominent ritual habit of the era, in an unwavering confidence that pursuit of wealth and status will bring the love and happiness he has striven toward for so long. As the central character of the novel and the one with the most clearly defined, most obsessive, and most all-consuming pursuit of this life goal, Gatsby is the one on whom the viability of the materialistic Jazz Age worldview inherently stands or falls within this fictional portrayal. Furthermore, as established earlier, Nick's reflections at the novel's conclusion seem to relate Gatsby's pursuits with something more than just one mere man's happiness, but with the state of being of a collective group, and their constant strivings after a level of peace and fulfillment which are ultimately unattainable to them. While it is true that Nick's reflections maintain a certain level of optimism, reflecting a confidence that the people of his generation will continue striving for their goals undaunted by whatever obstacles may come, the fact remains that Gatsby's own quest ends in failure and violent tragedy, that his "boat against the current" is irrevocably overcome and that Gatsby, the central figure of the novel, will never be able to realize the goal he so desperately wanted. Had Fitzgerald seen the Roaring Twenties entirely as a benevolent paradise, perhaps he would have written a happier ending for Gatsby. As the novel stands, however, the events of Gatsby's life seem to be among the most compelling proofs that the ritual habit of the twenties within Fitzgerald's portrayal causes much more harm than good. Gatsby's pursuit of his goals and happiness, his unbridled ambition along with his rivalry with

Tom for Daisy's affections, help to bring about Myrtle's untimely death, followed closely by Gatsby's (and George's) as well. These events are so shocking and disturbing that they cause a troubled Nick to leave New York, further emphasizing the heavy toll that Gatsby's pursuits have taken on those around him. Gatsby's obsessive quest for his American dream, his full embracing of the ritual habit of his culture, ultimately brings no satisfaction or fulfillment to the protagonists and offers little hope for the condition of the country or the culture at that time. The results of this quest seem to reflect instead a sense of doubt, disillusionment, and dissatisfaction about this era, its culture, and its values as a whole. Foster writes that *The Great Gatsby* "showed us in a bad light. Because it had all those things that should have been fun—wild parties and speakeasies and gangsters and affairs and jealousy—but was definitely not a romp. Because its main character was a fraud, a caricature of our dream of success who ended very badly. Who despite the title was by no means great" (136). Fitzgerald's portrayal of Gatsby's negative, empty end and the destructive consequences of his quest seem to reveal a largely pessimistic attitude toward the Roaring Twenties, establishing the in-story portrayal of the era clearly as much more of a dystopia than a utopia. The violent, destructive end of the idealistic hopes for the achievement of the American dream, embodied in Gatsby but representing a broader collective as well, establish the era as a sort of broken inversion of paradise—a dystopia.

The next major archetype that helps to classify *The Great Gatsby* as a dystopia is that of the narrator or protagonist who is dissatisfied with the present society and questions or rebels against it. This common trope helps the work to fit within the broader utopian genre due to the mere fact that so many dystopias employ it, but it also helps to classify the work as more dystopian than utopian, as it represents the aforementioned fact that not everyone is happy with the present society and that it cannot provide paradise and contentment for all citizens as much as

it may seek or claim to.

As stated earlier, the major protagonist in *The Great Gatsby* is clearly Jay Gatsby himself, the man whose quest for happiness is the predominant plot of the novel. To some extent, then, Gatsby can accurately fit this category of the dissatisfied protagonist. He is clearly not satisfied with the current state of his life, and his active attempts to change it are central to the focus and main conflict in the story. However, the defining trait in whether or not Gatsby can meet the criteria of this archetype lies in the object of his dissatisfaction. While he is not content with the circumstances of his own life, he does not seem particularly dissatisfied with the culture and society in which he lives. Rather, he largely buys into the dominant ritual habit of the era, demonstrating a belief that his worth is judged by his wealth and status and that these are also the key to winning Daisy's love. Yes, at times he may question the established order or remove himself from it to some extent: he does not join all of his party-going guests in seeking hedonistic and materialistic pleasure for their own sakes, and he does seek to transcend the boundaries of the rigidly established class structure by trying to put himself on the same level as Tom and Daisy, despite their differences in family breeding and social status. In fact, one author, Jonathan N. Barron, believes that "[Gatsby's] story's main interest lies in his attempt to transcend the particularity of regionalism in America" (65-66), demonstrating the significant degree to which Gatsby does attempt to break free from this particular norm of his culture. Still, for the most part, Gatsby is not a rebel or a dissenter within the cultural spirit of his era. In fact, according to Nick's description, Gatsby is very much the product of his age and the embodiment of its values; Nick calls Gatsby "a son of God" who "must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty"—the ritual habit of hedonism and materialism that define the age—"and to this conception he was faithful to the end" (Fitzgerald 98). While

Gatsby does demonstrate some characteristics of the dissatisfied protagonist archetype, he ultimately never escapes from the values that have shaped him or the ritual habit that has ensnared him, and therefore he is not the most representative example of this trope's presence in the book.

Nick Carraway himself, Gatsby's friend and the story's introspective first-person narrator, is the more obvious and fitting choice for filling the role of the dissatisfied protagonist or narrator. He can be seen filling this role through several different aspects and examples, ranging from his passive removal from others within the society to his active judgments against certain behaviors and habits of the era. Unlike his peers and contemporaries, including Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, and Myrtle, Nick demonstrates little evidence of being swept up into the ritual habit of materialism and status that has consumed so many others. While Nick is wealthy enough to afford a house next to the infamous and much-wealthier Gatsby, he still lives in West Egg, the "less fashionable" district of the two (Fitzgerald 5), and is not particularly rich himself; furthermore, he does not obsess over seeking more money or actively try to transcend his social class, but seems fairly content with the relatively modest lifestyle he has, saying that "[m]y house was an eyesore, but it was a small eyesore, and it had been overlooked, so I had a view of the water, a partial view of my neighbor's lawn, and the consoling proximity of millionaires—all for eighty dollars a month" (5). In regards to hedonism and lavish, luxurious parties, Nick recounts early on that he has only ever been drunk twice in his life (29), indicating that such parties are not a regular occurrence for him; he first goes to Gatsby's party only because he has been invited, seeing it as a legitimate social call rather than merely as the default activity to do just because it provides pleasure and entertainment. Of course, Nick is not completely devoid of desire or pleasure; he does enjoy drink and social gatherings at times, and he also entertains

something of a romance with Jordan Baker throughout the book (58). However, he is not nearly as captivated and dominated by these desires as those around him are, claiming that he is “slow-thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on [his] desires” (58). Indeed, despite the prevailing norms of the era he lives in, the wild, loose, and hedonistic mentality is somewhat foreign to Nick, causing him to describe himself upon seeing some of these immoral yet oddly captivating scenes as “within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (35). Through many examples in the novel, Nick demonstrates that his personality, his desires, and his interests are substantially different from those of his friends and peers, establishing him as one who is not controlled by the ritual habit so prevalent in the Roaring Twenties.

However, in addition to his lack of interest in the common pursuits and passions of others around him, Nick also demonstrates a decided disapproval of many aspects of the traits, habits, and even people of his era. This judgmental quality in him is somewhat ironic, given his statement early on in the book that he is “inclined to reserve all judgments” (Fitzgerald 1), but by his own admission, his tolerance does have a limit (2) which is stretched thin by the events of the novel. While Nick does seem to show tolerance in his outward behavior, being admitted as a close friend to a variety of characters (1) including Gatsby, Tom, and Daisy, his inner thoughts and descriptions reveal a much more judgmental disposition than he lets on to his peers. For example, despite being taken into Gatsby’s confidence and developing at least something of a friendship with him, Nick says that he has “disapproved of him from beginning to end” (154), and furthermore, that Gatsby, embodying the cultural values and norms to which Nick’s attitude is indifferent at best, “represented everything for which [Nick has] an unaffected scorn” (2). He calls the values that Gatsby serves “vulgar, and meretricious” (98), revealing more of his

negative opinion about them. Similarly, while he does not actively speak out against Tom, Nick also does not seem to approve of Tom's lifestyle or adulterous behavior, saying that he is "a little shocked at the elaborateness of the lie" that has been invented to maintain Tom and Myrtle's illicit relationship (33). Additionally, he rebukes Jordan for being too careless when driving (58), contradicting the carefree and pleasure-seeking spirit of the age with his own more reasonable values and opinions. In discussing the different roles and functions that Nick serves in "The Triple Vision of Nick Carraway," E. Fred Carlisle describes Nick as a "detached moralist" looking back on his experiences and on the others in his life from a distance. He cites as an example Nick's reluctant arrangement of the meeting between Gatsby and Daisy at his house, saying that the tryst "violates Nick's usual standard of morality. Nevertheless, he does not become involved at any time in the scene, as he does on other occasions; his ironic perspective keeps him on the outside looking in even though he is present. As a matter of fact, he actually stands outside, in the rain—a kind of symbolic act which reveals how much of an outsider he actually is" (356). Nick intentionally keeps himself distant and withdrawn from the people around him and their morally questionable activities. He not only does not desire the lifestyle and values that characterize his peers, but he dislikes and disapproves of it, considering himself different and set apart from them.

Perhaps the strongest example of Nick's disapproval and dissatisfaction, though, is in his reaction to the novel's climax and resolution, which involve the tragic and untimely deaths of both Myrtle and Gatsby. While such gruesome fates would naturally be shocking and off-putting to anyone close enough to the situation, Tom, Daisy, and Jordan all seem to recover and move on from the situation relatively quickly, while Nick is much more deeply affected and is incapable of merely drowning the pain and trauma in the pleasure of another party. When Jordan entertains

him to come inside after Myrtle's death, he refuses and tells her that he has had enough (Fitzgerald 142), instead retreating on his own and further distancing himself from the values and mentality of the others around him. Not much later, Nick reflects that he "disliked [Gatsby] so much by this time" (143), largely due to his moral carelessness. At the end, Nick is so shaken and disturbed that he leaves New York and the reminders of what has occurred, saying that "[a]fter Gatsby's death the East was haunted for me" (176). When later reflecting back on the disturbing nature of what has happened, Nick says, 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" (2). Peter Lisca in "Nick Carraway and the Imagery of Disorder" comments on Nick's instinctive desire for moral order, saying that "[a]s Nick embodies in extreme the principles of order and decorum, so disorder and indecorum are embodied in all the other characters, from the anonymous people at Gatsby's parties to Gatsby himself" (21). Nick is not only separate from his peers and contemporaries but directly contrasted with them, passively wishing but ultimately failing to impose his concepts of moral order on the chaotic and destructive world he sees. Nick concludes his opening section of narration by saying that "what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams . . . temporarily closed out my interests in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (Fitzgerald 2). This quote further reveals Nick's opinion of Gatsby's goals, that he considers them "foul" and the cause of Gatsby's demise, as well as revealing that the entire episode with Gatsby produces a jaded, cynical, and discontented result within Nick's personality. The events of Gatsby's quest and demise, the taste he has gotten for a time of the Roaring Twenties and its values and consequences, have not been enjoyable, attractive, or fulfilling for Nick, but rather have sickened and repelled him significantly.

Ultimately, Nick's lack of interest and desire in hedonism and materialism, his disapproval of the behaviors of those around him, and his disturbed reaction at Gatsby's horrible fate all help to pinpoint him as the dissatisfied protagonist of the novel. He does not buy into the prevailing cultural values of the society in which he lives, but instead questions them, looks down on them, withdraws from them, and lives his own life in accordance with the principles and feelings that seem best to him. Nick is the opposite and foil of Gatsby in this respect; while Gatsby is dissatisfied with his own life but is heavily and inescapably influenced by the values of his society, Nick is content with his quiet, withdrawn, and modest lifestyle, but looks with more scrutiny and condemnation on his society and its values. Thomas A. Hanzo, in his article "The Theme and the Narrator of 'The Great Gatsby,'" also highlights aspects of Nick's character and lifestyle as they act as foils to Gatsby: "Gatsby is rich, Nick relatively poor. Gatsby is alone, mysterious, obsessed; Nick makes friends easily, his life is ordinary, and he is quite sane. Gatsby is without conscience except perhaps where Daisy is concerned, and Nick subjects every act and motive to the scrutiny of a lively moral sense" (183-4). In contrast to Gatsby, then, Nick enjoys a relatively normal and quiet life, and tends to look with moral disapproval on the lack of restraint with which his peers pursue relentless pleasure and wealth. While Gatsby does try to transcend and defy the values of his era to some slight extent, Nick much more clearly questions and rebels against the status quo, showing that he is not controlled by or content with the way things are in his culture. His dissatisfaction and lack of conformity demonstrate that, despite the common perception of the twenties as a paradise of peace, prosperity, and pleasure, the ritual habits of this dystopian society—the consistent pursuit of wealth, status, and personal enjoyment above all else—ultimately fail to satisfy the people of this era, rendering it more dystopian than utopian.

I shall now attempt to explore the teaching of *The Great Gatsby* at the secondary level as

a dystopia or through a dystopian lens. While several of the novel's elements that I have discussed already—the historical and cultural background, the driving values of the age, the outsider narrator, and more—are already frequent focuses when the novel is taught, I hope to unify and synthesize these elements under a dystopian viewpoint, incorporating research and practices from other educators in the field to support this method of teaching.

The cultural practices that constitute the era's ritual habit are among the most prominent focuses for educators teaching the novel. As has been explored, the ritual habits that govern the Roaring Twenties within *The Great Gatsby*—the active and continuous pursuit of pleasure, material wealth, and social status above all other pursuits or values—are essential elements to understanding the central contexts, conflicts, and themes of the novel, no matter what approach one takes to reading and studying it. Therefore, these elements are crucial for students to understand as they explore the novel and the historical and cultural factors that have influenced it. As such, many instructors have focused their teaching of the novel on these elements. However, this same focus on the cultural values that dominate the era is also integral to establishing the novel as a portrayal of a dystopia. It is important for instructors of *The Great Gatsby* to help students establish and recognize the fundamental values that define the culture in which the novel takes place. This may be especially important early on, in the pre-reading phase or at the beginning of the novel, so students have some context and understanding through which to interpret the characters and events they will soon be introduced to, although the values of the age are prevalent throughout the entire novel, shaping the actions of the characters and the course of the plot.

Students must grasp not merely the fundamental cultural emphasis on the hedonistic pursuit of wealth and pleasure, but also the fact that these pursuits are the core values of the era,

having replaced traditional morality as the socially acceptable standard, as Brauer demonstrates. Brauer explores the contrasts between true morality and Jazz Age ideals, as well as students' common perceptions of these values, in his essay "What Makes Him Great? Teaching *The Great Gatsby* and the New Historicism." Brauer begins by pointing out that "students tend to think in easy oppositions" and that, upon reading far enough to recognize the central conflict of the novel, they sometimes assume that Gatsby is the "good guy" while Tom is the "bad guy" (84). However, "[h]oping to provoke students into thinking further about what is at play in the novel" (91), Brauer questions the uncritical assumption that Gatsby is a "good guy" by asking what the values of a culture must be like in order for Gatsby, a criminal bootlegger who pursues an illicit relationship with a married woman, to be considered good or even great. Brauer writes that "Gatsby's possessions . . . all signify his wealth, but students need to see that they do not efface the reality of how he went about making his fortune. Rather, his moral corruption is merely hidden underneath his adherence to the social and economic tenets of a consumer culture" (91). Brauer also writes that "the 'appropriate education' that Gatsby receives [from Dan Cody] seems to be a preparation for succeeding in a culture in which ethics and morality take a backseat to the acquisition of money and the conspicuous display of consumption" (88). In further examining the moral values of the age, Phelan asks, "Is there something deficient in an ethical system that places a higher value on one's capacity to dream than on what one actually does?" (109), suggesting that the mere existence of Gatsby's desires and strivings does not necessarily make him morally good or heroic if the means he uses to attain those ends are less than noble, even if culturally accepted. Kim Moreland makes similar points about morality, values, and cultural perceptions of them in her essay "Teaching *Gatsby* as American Culture Hero," where she writes that Daisy's "bad driving reveals her moral carelessness and that of the class and time to which

she belongs” (93). Ultimately, Moreland concludes that, “By asking what makes Gatsby great, the instructor will elicit an unpacking of Gatsby’s identity. The ensuing discussion will enable students . . . to identify and to analyze critically those culture heroes that Americans honor and emulate” (98). Based on their experiences with teaching the novel, Brauer and Moreland both emphasize helping students to recognize dominant cultural traits and values by examining the novel’s characters and their actions, especially the titular protagonist who is arguably the novel’s “hero” (Brauer 84). Through thought-provoking questions and guided discussion, instructors help students not only to recognize these cultural values, but also to examine them critically and make connections that incorporate these values into their previous knowledge of the novel and of American culture as a whole.

As established, though, in addition to merely the abstract pursuit of pleasure in its various forms, culture and society within the novel’s portrayal focus specifically on pursuit of material wealth and social status, elements that also must be recognized in order for students to have a sufficient understanding of the novel. David Dowling, high school English teacher and author of *The Great Gatsby in the Classroom: Searching for the American Dream*, explains his strategies for introducing students to the cultural values behind the novel, including their materialistic aspects. After showing them one or two instructional videos that inform them about what the Roaring Twenties were like (7-8), he has students give responses to foundational questions such as “What values seemed to be most important to those living in the Jazz Age?” (9) and “How would you describe the ‘American dream?’” (10). According to Dowling, “[s]tudents always bring up the concrete, material elements of money, house, car, family, and so forth; usually, only later do they mention the more abstract values of happiness, success, and love” (10). It is interesting to note how students list goals and pursuits that are both material and abstract, not

only because characters in the novel want things in both categories, but because the novel conveys the cultural idea of the abstract's dependence on the material. In other words, according to this culture, the abstracts of success, love, and happiness hinge upon material wealth and goods, as demonstrated by Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy through displays of his riches and status. As stated earlier, material wealth in this society is not merely a goal or a desire, but the standard by which people's value and status are judged, further demonstrating the dystopian ritual habit that dominates the era as a whole.

Further research indicates that focusing on aspects such as materialism and consumerism can be especially useful and relevant to teaching dystopian literature to the younger generation of today's America. Focusing specifically on *Brave New World* and M.T. Anderson's *Feed*, high school teacher Rachel Wilkinson discusses specific principles from dystopian novels that are applicable to today's students in her article "Teaching Dystopian Literature to a Consumer Class." Although she does not directly relate this literature to American classics such as *The Great Gatsby*, the underlying principles she uses can also be applied to many of *Gatsby*'s main themes, especially given some of the previously mentioned thematic parallels between *Gatsby* and *Brave New World*. Wilkinson opens by noting that "[m]any students are struggling with more depression and anxiety than ever before. These are characteristic dangers of the 'consumer class'" (22), just as *Gatsby* would seem to demonstrate with the emotional and psychological results of materialistic hedonism that it reveals in its characters. Wilkinson further explains,

Mindless consumerism threatens physical, social, and psychological health; total abstinence, on the other hand, means starvation. How do we guide students to navigate such treacherous, shifting seas? I teach dystopian literature, which exaggerates our modern context so that we can challenge it. Providing for its readers a glimpse into a

horrifying but fully possible future, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and M.T.

Anderson's *Feed* show how unrestrained industry often relies on manipulation and herd mentality, an unspeakably grim encroachment on the individual. (22)

Commenting on the ability of such literature to reflect the flaws inherent in a materialistic culture, Wilkinson writes that “[d]ystopian literature such as *Feed* and *Brave New World* is to consuming as *Frankenstein* is to cloning—theoretical exploration and warning” (22), just as *Gatsby* functions as a cultural mirror and a cautionary tale for the Roaring Twenties and for succeeding generations. According to Wilkinson, “Huxley was a satirist, and he took seriously his duty of reflecting the flaws and imperfections of a society beset by industrialization” (26); the same could be said of Fitzgerald and his critical portrayal of American consumerism almost a century ago. Wilkinson goes on to explain “important traits of modern consumerism that [*Brave New World* and *Feed*] address,” including “powerful advertising and industry [and] mindless consumption based on instant gratification” (22), which are prominent traits in the society of *The Great Gatsby* as well. As Wilkinson goes to explain her specific methods for teaching each of these traits and connecting them to the lives of students currently in a consumerist culture (22-25), educators can relate many of her techniques to teaching *The Great Gatsby* as well, based on parallels between the novel and prominent dystopias that also relate to students' everyday lives.

While gender roles in Fitzgerald's era have been touched on briefly above, the way in which the novel's portrayal of gender roles is interconnected with the established materialism and consumerism can also be a useful focus for helping students understand the dystopian nature of *Gatsby*. Elkins describes how both men and women of the era are separately confined by the social expectations placed on them (185) and valued based on their monetary success and wealth (181). She writes that “earlier readings have invariably convinced students that as a nation we

have clung to the dream of success and made wealth its chief symbol” (183). She further comments that, after some discussion of the concepts at hand, students “understand the role that class plays in a woman’s ability to function as a symbol of success through Fitzgerald’s use of Daisy’s ‘voice full of money,’” and that “[t]hey see that in the world of the novel, a woman’s desirability depends on her ability to be ‘[h]igh in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl . . . ’” (183). After these descriptions of romance and love as apparent material commodities to be bought, sold, and traded, Elkins describes students’ greater understandings of the dominant materialistic habits that govern relationships in this era:

Near the end of our discussions, some students move toward a Marxist reading of *Gatsby* and see romance as a mutually agreeable business exchange. They suggest that men and women look at people as they would any other item that they intend to buy, trying to get the best value for what they can afford. If men are conditioned to be attracted to that which is already out of their reach, then they are compelled to increase their market value and increase their romantic purchasing power. (185)

Given the extremely prominent place which wealth and material value hold in this society, the acknowledgment of underlying Marxist values seems fitting, and Elkins is not the only one who has incorporated this critical approach into her teaching. Douglas Grudzina, in his guide *Teaching F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby from Multiple Critical Perspectives*, applies some of the principles of Marxism to the culture portrayed within the novel. Among these principles are the belief that “[s]ociety is not based on ideals or abstractions, but on things” (24), underscoring the idea that emotional and relational fulfillment are based on material items here. Another Marxist principle Grudzina mentions is that “[c]apitalism is flawed in that it makes people want things, so they shop due to commodification (wanting things not for their innate

usefulness, but for their social value). When one has money, one shows it by buying things—jewelry, large houses, fancy cars, etc.” (24). Based on Elkins’ descriptions, this Marxist principle of commodification is not only true of material goods in *The Great Gatsby*, but it also applies to human beings and interpersonal relationships just as much. This principle is evident throughout examples from the novel as well, from Myrtle’s pursuit of Tom’s social status to Gatsby’s material efforts to impress and woo Daisy. Through explanations of these governing principles and guided discussion questions to which students can thoughtfully respond, Elkins and Grudzina both provide effective means through which instructors can convey the extreme and ultimately dehumanizing brand of materialism that dominates lives, reputations, and relationships within Fitzgerald’s dystopian depiction of the Roaring Twenties.

The previously established elements which help to establish Fitzgerald’s portrayal of the Jazz Age as a negative and dystopian era have also often been the focus of instruction on the novel for many educators. These elements further help to establish the culture and society of the Roaring Twenties so that students are more familiar with it, but more importantly, they provide insightful glimpses into the author’s values and attitudes toward the components of his era by showing how he chooses to characterize them. Recognizing the author’s attitudes toward issues such as the war, class, gender, race, and the American dream as a whole can help with interpretation of the themes he wanted to convey through the novel, which in turn shape the way that readers, teachers, and students should perceive the novel’s setting and overall messages.

In regards to the confusion, chaos, and desperation that seem to characterize some aspects of the era in question, Pearl James focuses largely on teaching the culture of the Roaring Twenties as springing out of World War I and being heavily influenced by the global conflict. Like other commentators mentioned earlier, James recognizes the parallels between *Gatsby* and

Eliot's *The Waste Land*, teaching these works as part of a unit that also includes Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. According to James,

These texts share a preoccupation with World War I as a fulcrum that shaped—and distorted—both masculine identity and literary production. By making my students familiar with the history of World War I, I enable them to place literary texts in a larger historical context. Their ability to grasp that historical context, however, is not my ultimate goal; I expose them to contemporary sources and historical information to teach a practice of reading and interpretation—a practice that is historically informed but not historically determinist. (32)

While educators and interpreters of literature must take care not to place an unduly heavy emphasis on historical aspects or allow those elements to determine and define the entire meaning of the novel, a healthy understanding of the context and of the themes that it helps to illuminate will be immensely valuable for students studying this novel. For this reason, discussion of *Gatsby*'s postwar background is relevant to a proper understanding of the novel, and therefore comparisons among similar texts of the era should serve to provide further understanding of the themes. For this reason, Dowling and many other educators also choose to include Eliot's "The Hollow Men," published in the same year as *Gatsby*, in the discussion of this context as well (76), noting parallels between *Gatsby*'s desolate valley and Eliot's description of "dead land" and "cactus land" (39-40) and of "this valley of dying stars . . . this hollow valley . . . [t]his broken jaw of our lost kingdoms" (54-56). Indeed, one could even reasonably liken Fitzgerald's aforementioned portrayal of the rich as mere facades, empty of true substance or fulfillment, with Eliot's "hollow men" (1), whose "dried voices, when we whisper together are quiet and meaningless as wind in dry grass [o]r rats' feet over broken glass in our

dry cellar” (5-10). In all, James concludes with noting how the themes related to the war parallel and amplify the themes that dominate the novel’s present-day action: “*Gatsby* makes the experience of European war relevant in an American context and connects the experience of loss associated with the war to American evocations of loss: loss of the frontier, loss of innocence, loss of the American dream” (39). Understanding how the war influenced the era following it should help students to better understand the loss and brokenness that characterize the supposed societal paradise during the postwar decade as well. Although, like many popular dystopian societies, the Roaring Twenties were largely concerned with the effort to rebuild normal and prosperous life after a horrible, world-shattering event, Fitzgerald’s portrayal demonstrates that the hopelessness and corruption of the war era linger into the society of the following decade as well.

Perhaps more prominent in *Gatsby* is the issue of class distinctions, which significantly shapes the story’s central conflict and Gatsby’s quest to win Daisy’s affections. Many have taught about class distinction in the novel, almost universally portraying it as a negative aspect of that society, which Fitzgerald also seems to do by having his central protagonist strive against those distinctions. As Phelan asks his students to explore, “What kind of assumptions does Fitzgerald make about race and class when he implicitly presents Gatsby’s story as a version of the American dream?” (109) If *Gatsby* can indeed reasonably be said to portray class distinctions negatively, then it shares this trait with many literary dystopias, ranging from *Brave New World* to *The Hunger Games* and more; as explored already, ritually governed societies that seem to offer paradise and perfection can rarely do so in a fully fulfilling way for all their citizens, which is why many are left dissatisfied and oppressed. Several commentators and educators have explored how Fitzgerald’s portrayal of class underscores the negative and unjust aspects of the

seemingly utopian era. Makowsky explains how the rich and the wealthy tend to oppress and feed on the lower class, sometimes without even meaning to, citing as an example the fact that the upper-class Daisy is responsible for the death of lower-class Myrtle, and indirectly for Gatsby's death as well (80). Later, after noting that the wealth and possessions of the rich class do not make them happy—that their lives are still broken and dysfunctional under their prosperous exteriors—Makowsky comments that “[c]lass is essentially meaningless and empty, a façade, because it is composed of arbitrary categories that inhibit life, change, and motion” (83). While the novel's clear distinction between various classes can be difficult for some students to grasp at first—class distinctions often seem less rigid and noticeable in today's America, especially between “old money” and “new money”—educators may find it helpful, as Barron suggests, to emphasize the fact that “[w]herever he teaches, one can be sure there exists an implicit cultural hierarchy in the local culture. It would therefore be helpful to any appreciation of the novel to raise those local issues first so that students can be more attuned to their value as both metaphor and analogy when discussing *Gatsby*” (61). Additionally, Makowsky uses her observations of class to ask thought-provoking questions of students, such as how the superficiality of class distinctions influences Fitzgerald's portrayal of the American dream (82). With guiding questions like these and helpful connections to their own lives and cultures as well, students should be better able to discover the criticisms of class distinction that Fitzgerald makes in his portrayal of the Roaring Twenties.

As mentioned, the issues of oppression and prejudice based on gender and race, though not the most overt themes of the novel, are still present and worth commenting on to some extent. It is well-known that women and black people were both historically marginalized during this time period, and so it may be easy for some to interpret any sexist or racist elements in

*Gatsby* as merely a natural product of a culture and an author who knew no better. Conversely, some have pointed out that Fitzgerald may be criticizing sexism and racism by having them come through in the novel largely from Tom, the story's main antagonist and least likeable character. Given the complexities of the novel and of the culture that produced it, it seems likely that the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. It is worth noting, as commentator Michael Nowlin points out, that while most readers do not take seriously Tom's claims that the rise of the colored empire is leading to the decline of civilization (Fitzgerald 12), Fitzgerald does indeed portray the society as declining (Nowlin 51). In the larger context of the era, racial injustice does not seem to be its only or most defining flaw, but perhaps one aspect that contributes to an imperfect and unbalanced society, just as gender inequality also does. Although it is true, as Elkins has pointed out, that gender roles for both men and women are unfairly dominated by class and social status, the fact remains that "women were the other in Fitzgerald's depiction of the American dream" (181) and Daisy is often seen (by the social status of the time period, if not necessarily by the author himself) as an object to be coveted rather than as the active agent of her own will and desires (184). Elkins asks her students, "To what degree do the narrative strategies assume women to be incapable of agency?" (190) and describes how, after some class discussions on the issue, "...they [students] praise him [Fitzgerald] for his unblinking look at the disastrous effect of socially constructed gender roles that destroy the individualism of men and women—and their relationships" (187). Ultimately, Fitzgerald's examination of both racial and gender issues during the society of the Roaring Twenties further emphasizes the prevalent inequality of the era and the fact that the society is not a universal paradise, but only a utopia for perhaps a select portion of the population, if any at all. Because of the injustice and oppression that the dominant values of the age forced on so many people of different varieties,

one can see that the era in Fitzgerald's portrayal is much more dystopian than utopian.

Perhaps the strongest indicator of this era's negative, pessimistic, and dystopian portrayal is the ultimate failure of Gatsby's quest, his death at the hands of George Wilson and his utter inability to attain the happiness and success for which he had been striving. Overall, this failure represents not merely the end of Gatsby's life, but also the elusiveness and impossibility of the perfect state of happiness which many Americans hoped that the Roaring Twenties would bring them. Many scholars and educators have commented on the message that Fitzgerald sends with this poignant conclusion, helping their students to better interpret the novel's central messages and themes. Edwin S. Fussell in his article "Fitzgerald's Brave New World"—a work whose very title itself likens *Gatsby* to a prominent dystopian novel—discusses the nature of the quest in Fitzgerald's works and its ultimate end. He writes that

Fitzgerald's literary stature derives from his ability to apply the sensibilities implied by the phrase 'romantic wonder' to American civilization, and to gain from the conjunction a moral critique of that civilization. As this predominant motive took shape in Fitzgerald's writing, he approached and achieved an almost archetypal pattern that can be isolated and analyzed, admired for its aesthetic complexity and interest and valued for its ethical and social insight. (291)

This statement agrees with Grudzina's suggested strategies on teaching *Gatsby* from an archetypal perspective, citing the quest as one of the novel's major factors and defining it as "the hero's endeavor to establish his or her identity or fulfill his or her destiny" (33). Fussell further comments that "[o]bversely, the quest is a flight: from reality, from normality, from time, fate, and the conception of *limit* . . . Fitzgerald begins by showing the corruption of that dream in industrial America; he ends by discovering that the dream is universally seductive and

perpetually unreal” (291). Ultimately, Fussell concludes that “[t]he quest for romantic wonder and the inevitable failure were only the latest in a long series. It was thus that Fitzgerald conceived the tragedy of the American experience” (293). Highlighting the extremely prominent literary archetype of the quest should help students to recognize familiar traits in the character of Gatsby. The fact that the quest ends in failure may be a subversion of normal story structure—or, at least, of happily ending stories that students may be familiar with from much of commercial fiction—but, according to Fussell’s and others’ opinions about the representativeness of Gatsby’s end for America as a whole, this narrative conclusion is a major factor in understanding Fitzgerald’s themes and his larger attitudes toward the culture he was writing about.

Similarly examining Gatsby’s quest and its ultimate results, Trower, describes how Gatsby’s quest represents a searching for paradise, which could also be considered a utopia: “To buy Daisy, the pearl of great price, the heaven on earth for which he would ultimately sacrifice everything, Gatsby bought an earthly paradise in his amusement park of a house, which is invaded by the reality of the corrupt life around him” (22). Even when Gatsby attempts to attain and preserve paradise, he cannot escape the pervasive influence of imperfection, resulting in “the earthly paradise and Daisy . . . being exposed as terrifying and macabre” (15). Offering a comparable insight in his essay “Love, Loss, and Real Estate: Teaching *The Great Gatsby* in the Suburban Age,” Robert Beuka writes of Nick’s “final effort to preserve the idealized memory of Gatsby’s landscape” after his death, saying that “Nick’s erasure [of an obscene word scrawled by a child] stands as a last effort to maintain an idealized vision of place, to freeze a living, evolving landscape into a fixed and permanent symbol. That such an effort is doomed to failure is one of the principal insights of the novel” (74). Dowling also reflects on the implications of Gatsby’s failed quest in his chapter “Teaching Chapter 9: The Death of the American Dream.” He writes:

“An accident, a murder, a suicide—three deaths, and the enormous hope and potential of the American dream begins to shrivel and die” (56). He then goes on to discuss Gatsby’s funeral and the things the reader learns about his early life from Mr. Gatz, saying that “[w]ith the details of Gatsby’s early life now complete, readers can make sounder judgments about his values, quest, successes, and failures” (56). As Dowling suggests, students should, of course, form their own opinions and positions based on evidence from the text as they continue to deepen their understanding and critical thinking skills. However, a well-informed understanding of the novel will lead students in most cases to recognize the larger symbolic implications of Gatsby’s failure and death, realizing like so many scholars before them that, in Fitzgerald’s portrayal, a nation’s idealistic, almost utopian hopes and dreams seem to have died with him.

Another frequently taught aspect that is also central to the established dystopian understanding of the novel is Nick’s role as the dissatisfied outsider protagonist. As the narrator through whom the reader must view and interpret the entire story, Nick is a central figure and integral to a full understanding of the novel; therefore, many educators strive to incorporate discussions of him and his perspective into their teachings of the novel in order to help students recognize the intricacies and complexities that he brings to the story and the insights he sheds on the novel’s main themes. Grudzina, in laying out the novel through the lens of common archetypes with which students will be largely familiar already, asks students to consider Nick as filling the role of the “loner” or “outcast” (36), which is defined as “a character who is separated from (or separates him or herself from) society due to a physical impairment or an emotional or psychological realization that makes this character different” (32). Nick’s moral judgments and values, especially with the wisdom and experience he has gained by the end of the novel (Carlisle 351), certainly contribute a great deal to his fulfillment of this archetype. Danuta

Fjellestad and Eleanor Wikborg also pose thought-provoking questions about Nick's character to their students; after some discussion, "[s]tudents begin now to realize that Nick is always listening to, eavesdropping on, and watching other characters. Nick appears to be an obsessive voyeur" (192). However, the authors also bring up the fact that, whether or not Nick's perspective can be considered honest and reliable, "[b]y now, students have been alerted to the presence of the narrative I/eye in the text, and they are ready to discuss how Nick's judgments steer the reader's response to every aspect of the novel" (192). While there has been much debate over whether Nick's perception of the major plot events can be trusted, Phelan notes that "Fitzgerald occasionally uses Nick as a mask to speak almost directly to his audience" (107). Lisca agrees, saying that

[a]nother consequence, perhaps the most important, of recognizing the full extent of Nick's commitment to order and decorum and his biased role as narrator is that he emerges as a kind of Trojan horse. By having Nick tell the novel Fitzgerald is able to smuggle into the novel weighted descriptions and judgments with which to intensify the contrast between that order and disorder which is the novel's central axis, around which all other major meanings are oriented. (26-7)

While most scholars recognize that it is an error to automatically assume that a work's narrator represents its author in every situation, many critics seem to agree that Nick in *Gatsby* speaks for Fitzgerald at least to a significant extent, and that Fitzgerald shared much of Nick's desire for order and his skepticism or disapproval toward the values of his age. If this in fact the case, then a fully developed understanding of Nick's role as the narrator should also inform students' understandings of the novel's major themes, of the author's messages to his audience, and of his attitudes toward the imperfect, broken, chaotic, and ultimately dystopian era in which he lived.

*The Great Gatsby* is an extremely complex and multifaceted novel, and the fact that it has endured in the canon of American literature for so long is a testament to its numerous layers of depth and meaning. Thus, when teaching the novel, there are myriad different aspects and approaches that educators choose to focus on in attempts to help students grasp the most important central themes and ideas. These aspects range from the social and cultural values of the Roaring Twenties, the superficiality of the rich, the injustice and oppression of class distinctions, the failure of Gatsby's quest and its broader implications, and Nick's role as the outside narrator looking in on the story's main action. These elements and more have been explored in greater detail above, along with several suggested strategies from experienced educators for conveying these particular elements to students. I do not propose analyzing or incorporating completely new elements into the text of *The Great Gatsby*, but only that these existing elements—already familiar to scholars and educators—be framed in a larger context of being seen through a dystopian lens, based on its consistency with Frye's definition and with common recurring archetypes that the novel shares with several well-established dystopias. In addition to helping students analyze and evaluate the parts of the novel individually, seeing the book through this framework can help them to synthesize the parts into a larger whole and to continue making connections by building new information and understanding on top of previous knowledge. In all, reading and teaching *The Great Gatsby* as a work of dystopian fiction seems to be not only a reasonable and valid conclusion to make, but also helpful for engaging and maintaining student interest, organizing the relationships among various textual elements, and optimizing students' abilities to make intertextual connections. Educators approaching *Gatsby* for the first time, or even experienced teachers seeking fresh new ideas, should consider teaching the novel through the lens of dystopian fiction.

### **Reading and Teaching Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* as Dystopian Fiction**

Published in 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee's first and only novel for decades to come, was an instant classic. A poignant coming-of-age tale about a young girl growing up in the South, witnessing the effects of racism and prejudice all around her, and gradually learning to shape her own identity in contrast to the common values of her day, the book captured the hearts and minds of many readers across America right away and has maintained a long and impressive legacy ever since. Although it has sparked controversy and has been banned at times for dealing with sensitive topics, the book's messages about racism, prejudice, and equality have remained relevant to this day and have never really passed out of fashion in the public eye since its release. In addition to being widely popular, though, *Mockingbird* has become an almost ubiquitous staple of high school English curricula, having "appeared on secondary school reading lists as often as any book in English" (Johnson 14). Naturally, any book that has been taught so frequently has seen the application of numerous varied viewpoints, and several different themes or aspects of the text have been emphasized at one point or another, including the cultural context, the racial and social prejudice, and the role of the narrator. In this chapter I propose that these and other elements can be joined together and recast in the light of a dystopian reading of the novel, for the purpose of thematically unifying the aforementioned elements and of appealing more readily to a younger generation of students. Based on the established elements of Frye's definition, *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be accurately read as a work of dystopian fiction, and can be effectively taught as such as well.

In order to be considered in the context of a work of dystopian fiction, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* will be examined and tested by the established archetypes and elements that define a dystopia. The first question to be considered is that of whether or not the work can be

considered a speculative myth. Since *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes place in a realistic town within a real historical era—the 1930s in the midst of the Great Depression—it would not seem initially to employ very many speculative qualities. The harsh economic conditions and social customs of the Great Depression era are well known and historically documented with little room for uncertainty or need for further speculation. However, speculative possibilities and applications seem to increase when one considers that the work was written largely as a piece of social criticism; although the setting was real and the characters believable, Lee was examining the cultural values of the era and speculating about what their logical end might be, or what sort of story might be likely to take place in an era dominated by strict prejudice and class divisions. The story that she does tell, involving the developing plots and intertwined lives of Tom Robinson, Bob Ewell, Boo Radley, and others is the story that she comes up with on those premises; it is one which both reflects and yet speculates on the Depression era in which her childhood took place. While most critics and teachers of the novel accept that the story's major events are largely based on Harper Lee's own childhood—and, indeed, according to some sources, “[l]egal historians . . . who are familiar with *TKM*, invariably are struck by the similarities between the fictional trial of Tom Robinson and the actual Scottsboro case” (Johnson 4) that took place when Lee was young—the fact that Lee has fictionalized these events inherently makes the novel at least somewhat speculative, as it looks on a real era with real conditions but adds the author's own insights, opinions, and attitudes regarding the events and their logical conclusion.

However, in considering the novel's classification as a speculative myth, one must also consider that, while the book takes place in the Depression era, it was written much later and published in 1960, after a few decades had passed and once the American Civil Rights

movement was gaining significant momentum. Juxtaposing the era when it takes place with the era of its publication, some believe that *Mockingbird* is meant to reflect more on the society of the '50s and the underlying prejudice that still characterized that era than on the Depression era itself. According to Claudia Durst Johnson, “of historical significance is the national climate in which *To Kill a Mockingbird* came to fruition—the social and political climate in which the novel made its debut, and the tremendous impact that environment had on the reception of the novel. The book was engendered at the height of the Civil Rights movement in the South” (11). Later, after describing some specific and notable events that took place within the Civil Rights movement of this time period, she says, “A full appreciation, not to mention understanding of *To Kill a Mockingbird* derives from a grasp of these events in Alabama in the 1930s and 1950s. Furthermore, it would be hardly rash to assume that the composition of *TKM* was in some way affected by the events of the 1930s and 1950s” (12). If Johnson’s conclusions can be accepted as reasonable—if Harper Lee, though setting her novel in the '30s, was in fact influenced just as much by the social and political sphere of the '50s—then the speculative and dystopian nature of *To Kill a Mockingbird* becomes even more prominent. Like many dystopias, it uses a society worse than the one it is written in to subtly comment on and criticize the flaws of human nature and of the culture that produced it. Just as Huxley’s *Brave New World* foreshadows the futuristic misuse and overuse of technologies that were new at his time, and the ideologies taught to society’s oppressed victims within Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* reflect on the political and religious movements of the day, Lee uses a situation that seems like an extreme case of prejudice and racial injustice to point out to readers that such forces still menace their own society as well. Dana Solomon comments that

the dystopian genre is more accurately defined as a critical framework for examining the

present state of society, rather than any kind of illusory or spatio-temporally displaced location. The most significant aspect of the dystopian genre is that unlike the utopian novel . . . the temporal setting of the dystopian text is always the present moment. Despite its many artifices, the dystopian text is unalterably and inextricably tied to the current point in time. No matter how far off the dystopian future seems, the temporal context is always the *present*. In spite of how hyperbolic, unfamiliar, or devastatingly shocking the dystopian landscape appears, it is always a reflection of the *contemporary* landscape. (148)

Based on this principle, one can safely conclude that *To Kill a Mockingbird* does in fact reflect to an extent on the era in which it was written—not only in the sense that all literature is naturally a product of its culture, but in that dystopian literature specifically criticizes habits and practices from its own society and from the apparent direction of the future. While the two or three decades between the Depression and the novel's publication may have seen some slight advancements in civil rights and in a national move away from racial and social prejudice, such issues were still alive and well at the time of Lee's writing. Therefore, to draw her readers' attention to such problems, she uses an extreme example of injustice to show what could happen—to *speculate* on the likely outcome—if society continues to be bound by habitual prejudice. Lee's chosen setting of the '30s for her story juxtaposed with the '50s on which the events of the story subtly comment help to establish the novel as a speculative myth, meeting at least one criterion of Frye's established definition for a dystopian tale.

In addition to speculative myth, one of the most prominent factors that contributes to the dystopian quality of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is also perhaps the book's most prevalent theme: the extreme prejudice and strict social divisions that separate different types and classes of people in

the fictional town of Maycomb County. Historically, of course, minorities such as African Americans were known to be poorly treated and oppressed during the time of the Great Depression; racial segregation was in full legal effect and went unquestioned by many. While racial prejudice is unquestionably a prominent issue in the book, however, it is not the only type of prejudice explored, as other social groups and demographics are also mistreated and marginalized based on various factors such as gender and social status.

Racial prejudice is undoubtedly a major theme of the novel which heavily influences the central plot. The predominantly negative cultural opinion against African Americans can be seen in a number of instances throughout the novel, ranging from Mrs. Dubose's derogatory comments—"Not only a Finch waiting on tables but one in the courthouse lawing for niggers!"—(Lee 127) to negative perception of Mr. Dolphus Raymond with his interracial marriage and mixed children (228) to Aunt Alexandra's stern disapproval when Scout and Jem visit the church of Calpurnia, their family's black servant (154). It should be abundantly clear to anyone reading the novel that, as Johnson states in her book exploring the social boundaries imposed on members of this society, black people are consistently viewed as "the Other"; in fact, even the relatively socially conscious Scout inadvertently assumes this viewpoint before her experiences gradually lead her to mature and become more discerning and questioning (85). Ultimately, there are numerous instances throughout the novel, some large and some small, that feature African Americans being treated as unequal, lesser outsiders by the other citizens around them.

The example central to the novel's plot, however, is that of the court case involving Tom Robinson which takes up a significant portion of the novel's plot. Tom Robinson is a financially poor black man who has a disabled arm. He makes extra money by doing odd jobs for the

Ewells, an uncivilized, country-dwelling white family, and helping them out with jobs around the house and yard. A conflict arises when Bob Ewell accuses Tom of raping his daughter Mayella and the case is brought to the attention of lawyer Atticus Finch, the narrator's highly principled father. It quickly becomes clear that, before the case is ever officially tried, Tom is already found guilty in the court of public opinion—not because of any actual evidence against him, but simply because he is black, and the people of Maycomb County, being inherently products of their prejudiced generation, are extremely reluctant to believe a black man over a white man, even a white man as lowly regarded as Bob Ewell. The black Reverend Sykes notes the nature of this problem when he pessimistically describes the unlikelihood of the jury believing Tom: "I ain't ever seen any jury decide in favor of a colored man over a white man" (Lee 238). His words are backed up by the behavior of the townspeople around him, such as when a lynch mob forms at Tom's jail cell before the trial has even begun and is only stopped by the persuasive reasoning of Scout and Atticus. Later, during the trial itself, Atticus demonstrates compelling evidence—compelling, at least, to the reader, if not to the majority of jurors within the novel—that Mayella was abused by her own father rather than by Tom (232), pointing out among other things Tom's physical inability to have committed the crime in question due to his disabled arm (211). Despite this evidence, and despite Atticus' impassioned speech pleading with the jurors to look past their racial prejudices and consider people's characters and behaviors instead (232-233), the jury still convicts Tom and he is wrongfully sentenced to prison. Atticus notes after the trial that the jury took longer to decide their final verdict than he had expected, which could be indicative of the smallest beginnings of prejudice being chipped away in favor of fair-mindedness and truth. He says, "That was the one thing that made me think, well, this may be the shadow of a beginning. That jury took a few hours. An inevitable verdict, maybe, but usually it takes 'em just a few

minutes . . . You might like to know that there was one fellow who took considerable wearing down—in the beginning he was rarin’ for an outright acquittal” (253). Nonetheless, the fact that the jury still convicts Tom almost unanimously (240) despite the concrete evidence in his favor is a powerful testament to the sad reality of racial prejudice and the firm stranglehold it still has on the people of Maycomb County. John Carlos Rowe notes that “Lee’s antiracist argument in the novel is traditionally understood as a challenge to the inherent racism of southern laws and legal processes of judgment . . . Lee demonstrates how this economy is not only inherently racist—a legacy of slavery—but reliant on unquestioned hierarchies of gender, class and age that make southern racism even more difficult to identify and overcome” (2). Through residents’ racist perceptions of several characters throughout the entire book, and especially through the injustice of the racially motivated verdict that is placed upon Tom, Harper Lee portrays the ugly reality of the extreme racial prejudice that dominated the South of this era and oppressed black citizens wherever they were to be found. This portrayal is one aspect—perhaps the most prominent one—of the ritual habit of unjust prejudice that characterizes the novel as a work of dystopian fiction.

Dark-skinned people, however, are certainly not the only ones in the novel affected and mistreated due to this culturally inherent prejudice; many white people are just as restricted and constrained by their positions in the established hierarchy of the culture. According to Fred Erisman, “[a]nother illustration of Maycomb’s archetypal Southernness that is as typical as its caste system is the ubiquitous system of class distinctions among the whites. Miss Lee’s characters fall readily into four classes, ranging from the ‘old aristocracy’ represented by Atticus Finch’s class-conscious sister, Alexandra, to the poor white trash represented by Bob Ewell and his brood” (25-26). While the word of the Ewells is accepted in court as being more believable

than Tom's, they are merely one step up from him on the social ladder: a poor, uneducated, uncivilized white family considered dirty and repugnant by many. The Ewells are disregarded and looked down upon by nearly everyone else in the town, as evidenced by the universal assumption that their children only ever attend school on the first day of the year (Lee 30). Granted, the Ewells may largely perpetuate the stereotypes that have been placed on them; Burris Ewell seems to revel and delight in the reputation his truancy has earned him when he says, "Been comin' to the first day o' the first grade for three year now . . . Reckon if I'm smart this year they'll promote me to the second" (30). Furthermore, Bob Ewell's low character and dishonorable behaviors are proven to the reader numerous times, from his dishonesty in court to his subsequent attacks upon those who he perceives as having wronged him, including Atticus (248), Judge Taylor and Helen Robinson (285-286), and Jem and Scout (306). According to Scout, "Atticus said the Ewells had been the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations. None of them had done an honest day's work in his recollection . . . They were people, but they lived like animals" (33). Based on these behaviors and lifestyles, Bob Ewell may well be responsible for bringing poor treatment upon himself and his family to at least some extent. Even so, whatever else they may or may not be, the Ewells are nonetheless recipients of prejudice that restricts and constrains their role in society. The people of Maycomb collectively turn a blind eye to the fact that the Ewells do not attend school and that "Mr. Bob Ewell, Burris's father, [is] permitted to hunt and trap out of season," because, as Atticus says, "it's certainly bad, but when a man spends his relief checks on green whiskey his children have a way of crying from hunger pains. I don't know of any landowner around here who begrudges those children any game their father can hit" (34). Although the town is willing to make special concessions for the Ewell family in some cases, showing them positive treatment rather than negative treatment such as what some

marginalized groups receive, even this positive treatment is a form of prejudice because it is based on the assumption that the Ewells are a base, low, and uncivilized family who cannot live in society any other way. Despite their race and certain advantages that society does concede to them, the Ewells are still victims of the ritual habit of socially restrictive prejudice along with many other people and groups, further exemplifying this dystopian characteristic.

Similarly restricted are the Cunninghams, honest but poor white farmers, who, unlike the Ewells who choose not to work and to live apart from civilization, have no control over their economic circumstances and cannot be faulted for bringing their plight upon themselves in any way. The issue of the Cunninghams' extreme poverty seems to be a secondary concern when considering their hardship in relation to cultural expectation and this society's ritual habit; the economic conditions are not a factor that any member or group of society can choose or control. However, due to their poverty and other factors, such as their family background and overall social status, the Cunninghams are victims of social prejudice as well, being looked down upon by more proper and accepted members of society. For example, even Scout, who is often remembered among readers for being one of the characters who most challenges stereotypes and opposes prejudice, displays a stereotyping attitude against the Cunninghams early on in the book, before she befriends one of them and grows into a more mature character. When Walter Cunningham, a young boy in Scout's class, visits the Finch home for dinner, Scout objects vocally to Walter's mannerisms and tells their housekeeper that "[h]e ain't company, Cal, he's just a Cunningham" (27). Much later, Aunt Alexandra shows staunch disapproval when Scout brings Walter, now her friend, over to their house, even going so far as to call Walter "trash" (256). As with the Ewells, the Cunninghams may not be openly mistreated to the same extent that black people are, but they are still the victims of cultural disdain from others who only

grudgingly accept their customs, such as how they refuse to accept charity from anyone (21-22) despite only being able to barter for services rather than pay any actual money (22-23). The Cunninghams are prime examples of how strict class divisions and culturally ingrained prejudice govern and dominate Lee's fictionalized portrayal of the Great Depression, based on social status and other factors in addition to merely race. They help to show how the dystopian ritual habit of prejudice and strict, impenetrable class lines affect nearly everyone in this society.

While not necessarily part of specific social groups, other characters in the novel are also marginalized in different ways based on their own qualities and the fact that they do not fit in with the norm or with the culturally accepted standard of their society. One such example is Dill, Scout's childhood friend, who is frowned upon by proper society for being an outsider with no parents and a different background. Another is Boo Radley, the mysterious and socially inept recluse about whom horrible rumors have formed, so much so that the children unthinkingly incorporate his legends into their games and horror stories (Lee 43-44), simply because he chooses to stay at home apart from society (Lee 259). Both characters are examined through the lens of strict social standards and prejudice that dominate the era in this dystopian, socially restrictive setting.

Also worth consideration is the treatment of women and girls in the antiquated society of the novel. Females in this novel are not marginalized or prejudiced against in the same ways that other groups are; they are not a separate social class who can be segregated as a whole apart from society, and there are few, if any, notable instances in the novel of male characters mistreating or showing prejudice against female ones on the basis of gender. However, women and young girls are placed under certain strict social expectations of propriety, orderliness, and what it means to be a lady—expectations that become prominent in the life of Scout, the young female narrator,

who prefers to be outdoorsy, intelligent, and independent rather than quiet, proper, and submissive. In one brief instance, when chiding Scout about her swearing, Scout's Uncle Jack asks Scout, "You want to grow up to be a lady, don't you?" Scout responds with "not particularly," but Uncle Jack answers, "Of course you do" (90), indicating a strong sense of cultural propriety that he wishes to impress upon Scout. However, in most other instances throughout the novel, it is not men who perpetuate these expectations upon young girls, but rather it is other, older females. One such female is Mrs. Dubose, an older neighbor who has very rigid and old-fashioned ideas about how a young lady should dress and compose herself (117). These standards of femininity are brought upon Scout through her proper and socially conscious Aunt Alexandra (144-145), who is concerned about Scout's upbringing under a single father. Alexandra says to Scout, "We [Alexandra and Atticus] decided that it would be best for you to have some feminine influence. It won't be many years, Jean Louise, before you become interested in clothes and boys—" Scout reflects on these comments in relation to her own personal preferences, thinking, "I could have made several answers to this: Cal's a girl, it would be many years before I would be interested in boys, I would never be interested in clothes...but I kept quiet" (145). While Scout is not openly treated as inferior merely because she is female, the prejudice comes because she is female but does not adhere to traditional social expectations for females of her age; she is looked on by others as strange, concerning, and perhaps even immoral because she does not conform to the expected or established standards for females in her culture. As one author, Rebecca Best points out, "her [Scout's] attempts to defy the sub-division of 'lady' also elicit frequent rebukes and chastisements from Aunt Alexandra, Calpurnia, and Mrs. Dubose" (545). Thus, she is also a victim of rigid social expectations, an extreme focus on old-fashioned values, and culturally ingrained prejudice. Scout's experiences with the prejudicial

women of the socially elite class around her further demonstrate the power of the dystopian ritual habit in her community and its opposition to anyone who would try to escape or defy the system's expectations.

Ultimately, the ritual habit of this society manifests itself in strict social expectations and cultural values about the proper role of certain people and groups, and these habits and values define social perceptions and conditions for nearly every character in the book. Whether one is embraced by these social standards as a proper, upright, and well-respected member of society, or—almost more commonly, it seems—rejected, restricted, and looked down upon because of one's differences, this set of seemingly arbitrary cultural expectations is the dominating standard by which everyone is evaluated, whether positively or negatively. Examining the dominant and socially mandated values of the culture of the Great Depression, Dean Shackleford calls the era “a racist, segregated society which uses superficial and materialistic values to judge outsiders, including the powerful character Boo Radley” (103). While the racial and social prejudice in this culture affects and marginalizes entire groups and demographics, the significant character of Boo Radley, one individual loner, also falls victim to these forces simply because he prefers to stay within his own home, secluded from the flawed society around him. Furthermore, Best comments on these dominant and divisive social divisions and how they are constantly perpetuated and enforced by the various people groups of Maycomb: “Lula, Aunt Alexandra, Mrs. Dubose, Miss Stephanie Crawford, the ladies' Missionary Society, and the mob that attempts to lynch Tom Robinson represent the social watchdogs who reinforce those restrictions by identifying and censuring those who violate the social system that, for all its abuses, is valuable to them” (548). Just as Scout points out that Maycomb County has a well-established caste system (Lee 149) and Jem reflects that “[t]here's four different kinds of folks in the world.

There's the ordinary kind like us and the neighbors, there's the kind like the Cunninghams out in the woods, the kind like the Ewells down at the dump, and the Negroes" (258), everyone fits into the hierarchy somewhere, and escaping or circumventing it is nearly impossible. This social hierarchy and the values and judgments that go along with it are by far the dominant ritual habits of this culture, further solidifying it as a dystopia. Just as in many other prominent dystopian works, ranging from *1984* to *The Handmaid's Tale* to *The Hunger Games*, cultural differences and individual expression are generally discouraged and avoided in the society of Maycomb, Alabama, leaving anyone who questions the system or does not fall in line with the reigning social group to be marginalized and oppressed. One article by Nanelle R. Barash and David P. Barash comments on this quality of enforced social isolation in dystopian fiction. Although these comments focus primarily on *1984* and not directly on any American classics such as *Mockingbird*, similar principles can be discerned across the various texts. The authors write, "perhaps most inhuman, and therefore most disturbing, about the state of Oceania is its routine undermining of social interactions. No wonder the hero, Winston Smith, is most sympathetic during his futile attempts to establish personal connections with a fellow human being." Later, the authors also note that "[s]ocial destruction in this antibiological dystopia includes even the elimination of basic sociality . . . our species shudders at being alone" ("Biology, Culture, and Persistent Literary Dystopias"). Just as Winston tries to transcend governmentally enforced boundaries to establish meaningful human connection, Scout also attempts to befriend and embrace those outsiders who the corrupt social system has coldly condemned to be outcasts. In doing so, Scout defies the cultural expectations placed upon her by the ritual habit of the dystopian society in which she lives. This social condition is the most prominent dystopian element of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, although the factors that make it dystopian will be discussed

in greater detail below.

As has been explained, according to Frye's established descriptions of a utopia, one can take either a positive or negative attitude—exhilarating or apprehensive—toward the ritual habit that defines and governs a given culture or era. This being the case, a reader or teacher who seeks to approach *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a dystopia must next establish what exactly makes the novel and its setting more dystopian than utopian. Why is the ritual habit of strict social expectations and prejudices a bad thing? Furthermore, can it be said with certainty that Harper Lee portrays these prejudices and social restrictions in a negative light? The answers to these questions may seem obvious and almost unnecessary to some, especially when considering the novel's era through the lens of our modern perspective which decries racism and marginalization of social classes more vehemently than previous generations often did. Still, it must be noted that, for at least a few characters in the book and many residents of Maycomb County, the social structure of the day and age is a perfectly good and acceptable thing, and indeed, a necessary staple of ordered society. Given these opinions from characters such as Aunt Alexandra and others, who is to say that this society and its restrictive habits are negative elements, or that they are portrayed negatively by the author? For these questions, one must examine the factors contributing to the dominating social conditions, the main protagonists' attitudes toward these conditions in which they live, and finally the various effects brought about in characters' lives by these social conditions of ritual habit.

The negative social and economic factors contributing to this society's ritual habit are part of what classify it as a dystopia rather than a utopia. As established, *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes place right in the midst of the Great Depression, an era of hardship and turmoil for almost everyone. The harsh economic conditions and the extreme poverty that plague the people of

Maycomb County may be a somewhat separate issue from that of the racial and social prejudice that dominate the town. The poverty is not chosen, controlled, or perpetuated by the decisions of social groups or governments, but is more of an external oppressive force that conditions have forced upon the people. Nonetheless, a society that still has such a prominent problem with poverty would be hard-pressed to fit the definition of a utopia, as it cannot provide order, stability, happiness, or perfection for a great many of its citizens. Furthermore, the oppressive economic conditions do seem to have some effect on the dominant social restrictions; while racial prejudice seems largely unrelated to economic factors, at least some of the prejudice in the novel is based on how poor one's family is. It is true that the Great Depression has severely impacted nearly everyone in the novel; unlike *The Great Gatsby*, *Mockingbird* gives little or no attention to the rich elite of society, but focuses instead on the ordinary citizens struggling to make their living from day to day against the difficulty created by desperate conditions. Thus, even people like the Finches, who are relatively respected and close to the top of the social hierarchy, are still poor according to Atticus (Lee 23), but people like the Cunninghams, farmers who live by trading and bartering and who represent the next rung down on the social ladder, are even poorer (33), and the Ewells, who hunt for their food out in the dirty and uncivilized wild, are poorer and socially lower still. The economic conditions brought about by the Depression have a severe negative impact on everyone in the book, but they also contribute to some extent to the unfair social prejudice that dominates the era and characterizes it as dystopian.

Additionally, while some less central characters accept the social divisions of this society as being a good and natural thing, the opinions and perceptions of the novel's main protagonists portray the ritual habit of social restrictions in an extremely negative light, largely revealing the author's opinions and attitudes as well, opinions and attitudes which she likely hopes the reader

will share with her. Although in literary studies it cannot always be assumed with certainty that any character represents the person or the views of the author, in the case of *To Kill a Mockingbird* it is widely believed, as previously mentioned, that Harper Lee based the character of Scout on herself, that of Atticus on her father, and many of the circumstances of the novel on her own childhood. Thus, these characters and their disapproving attitudes toward the prejudiced behavior of most of their society are a strong indicator of the wrongness of that prejudice within the context of the novel and its major themes and messages from the author's perspective.

According to one author, "From the start of the novel Lee depicts the revered structures of society—the educational system, the court system, the church—as thoroughly corrupt or at best absurd" (Fine 62), representing how socially mandated racism and prejudice have permeated nearly every sphere of small-town life and contributed to an overall negative society in the author's portrayal. Numerous other examples also demonstrate the disapproval of Scout, Atticus, and other characters for their society's standards of acceptance. With her childlike innocence and relative unfamiliarity with the ways of the world, Scout verbalizes at least once that she does not understand how one man can be so unkind and cruelly prejudiced toward another: "Jem, how can you hate Hitler so bad and then turn around and be ugly about folks right at home[?]" (Lee 283). The other children make similarly motivated remarks. After the unjust sentencing of Tom Robinson, Jem repeatedly articulates through tears that "[i]t ain't right" (242), and Dill, to avoid dealing with the pain of the injustice that has transpired, concludes, "I think I'll be a clown when I get grown . . . There ain't one thing in this world I can do about folks except laugh, so I'm gonna join the circus and laugh my head off" (247). While Atticus' statements of his opinions are usually more refined and less directly critical of any person or group, his stance on the subject of restrictive social prejudice is made evident by his willingness to defend Tom

Robinson, a socially ostracized black man, in court. Although he is assigned by the court to defend Tom, he also states that he wanted to take the case, and that his choice is a strong matter of personal conscience: “if I didn’t I couldn’t hold my head up in town, I couldn’t represent this county in the legislature, I couldn’t even tell [Scout] or Jem not to do something again” (86). Furthermore, he demonstrates his firm beliefs on the topic of prejudice and injustice through his unwavering commitment to standing for one’s beliefs in what is right, even in the face of impossible odds. He tells Scout plainly that he does not expect to win the case for Tom, but that “[s]imply because we were licked a hundred years before we started is no reason for us not to try to win” (87). Elsewhere he supports this same belief and conviction, saying that “[courage is] when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do” (128). Atticus’ inspiring, idealistic refusal to give up his fight against injustice even in the face of overwhelming odds encourages the reader to want to side with him and support his cause. Through the sympathetic portrayals and compelling causes of characters such as Scout and Atticus, Lee clearly and powerfully demonstrates her position on the issues at hand, contrasting the overwhelmingly negative qualities of social prejudice with the positive ones exemplified by her protagonists.

However, one of the strongest examples of Scout’s and Atticus’ opinions on this matter—and thus likely of the author’s as well—is the book’s central metaphor which also lends itself to the title: the concept of killing a mockingbird. Atticus has taught Jem and Scout that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird, meaning that it is wrong to harm something beautiful or innocent without good reason. As Miss Maudie Atkinson explains it, “[m]ockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don’t eat up people’s gardens, don’t nest in corncribs, they don’t do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird” (103).

Throughout the book at least a few different social scenarios are symbolically likened to the wrongful killing of mockingbirds. These include Maycomb's marginalization of the mysterious Boo Radley, when Scout realizes that betraying his wishes for privacy after he has shown such kindness and protection to the children would be "sort of like shootin' a mockingbird" (317). Similarly, the protagonists' surname of "Finch" can also be interpreted as a representation of the bird motif, and thus Bob Ewell's attacks on the innocent Scout, Jem, and Atticus also becomes comparable to the sin of killing a mockingbird. However, the most notable among these situations is the wrongful prosecution and violent death of the innocent Tom Robinson. The metaphor is hinted at in relation to Tom's situation based on a segment in the local newspaper: "Mr. Underwood figured it was a sin to kill cripples, be they standing, sitting, or escaping. He likened Tom's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children" (275). For Tom's mistreatment at the hands of a thoroughly racist society to be compared to an action that both Scout and Atticus call a sin is a strong demonstration of the protagonists' and author's positions on such behavior. Through the main characters' perceptions of and attitudes toward the inherent prejudice that has so thoroughly and restrictively permeated their society, the reader can see that these elements most certainly render the ritual habit negative, and the society more dystopian than utopian.

While the protagonists' perceptions of the prominent prejudice may be compelling evidence of the dystopian nature of Southern society during the Great Depression, perhaps no evidence is more compelling than the prejudice itself and its effects on the lives of its victims. Again, the novel's most central example of the horrible effects of social prejudice is the case of Tom Robinson, which occupies a significant amount of the novel's plot in the middle of the book and continues to have ramifications for several characters until the end. The harsh effects of

prejudice are shown through the trial in which not only is Tom wrongly accused of rape, but he is also presumed to be guilty from the start by most of the townspeople simply because of his race. Despite the obvious truth of the situation once Atticus has presented compelling evidence to indicate that Mayella's abuser is her own father (Lee 230-231), and Atticus' impassioned pleas with the jury to act based on conscience and reason rather than on socially ingrained preconceptions, Tom is convicted in court and sentenced to prison. This outcome is further testament to not only the reality of prejudice among the townspeople but also its destructive influence on the lives of anyone who is different or regarded as inferior in the eyes of society. Later, once Tom has been unjustly imprisoned, he is shot dead while trying to escape (Lee 268), demonstrating just how little chance at fair treatment he had during his lifetime and how crushing and permanent the consequences of prejudice can be. The entire incident not only represents a gross moral failure for the people of Maycomb, but also results in another poor, oppressed black family being robbed of a husband and father, demonstrating the heavy consequences of racism in a real, tangible, and poignant way. The horrible injustices visited on Tom and his family merely because of their race are perhaps the most prominent factor that establishes a strongly negative and apprehensive attitude toward this society's dominant ritual habit, further characterizing it as a dystopia.

From these factors combined—especially the protagonists' perceptions of the society around them and the harsh reality of the injustices perpetuated by social prejudices—it becomes fairly clear that the author intends to portray this society's behaviors and customs as largely negative. Thus, if it can be called a utopian society at all, then it is truly much more dystopian than utopian. Erisman describes Lee's view of the society she portrays in her works, noting that, while she does see some glimmers of hope and social reform in characters such as Atticus, she

largely has a pessimistic view of the conditions that currently dominate the culture:

Throughout *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee presents a dual view of the American South . . . she sees the South as still in the grip of the traditions and habits so amply documented . . . caste division along strictly color lines, hierarchical class stratification within castes, and exaggerated regard for kin-group relations within particular classes, especially the upper and middle classes of the white caste. (30)

Despite some of the society's positive elements, this largely negative view of Lee's regarding strict cultural divisions and the overall fragmentation of society serves to further emphasize the dystopian qualities of the society within the novel.

The next common element to be explored when considering *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an example of dystopian fiction is that of the outsider, or the dissatisfied narrator or protagonist. As mentioned, while some among the old-fashioned and socially proper elite of Maycomb are comfortable and satisfied with the existing social conditions and dominant ritual habit of their culture, many others are left not only dissatisfied, but also marginalized, mistreated, and oppressed. Indeed, many characters in this novel could be considered outsiders who are likely dissatisfied with the habits and regulations of the society around them. Boo Radley is one such example; since he is different and looked down upon by other members of his society, he chooses to stay inside and live apart from them as much as possible, content with his own style of life even if it contradicts the established social norm. Similarly, Mr. Dolphus Raymond chooses to subvert cultural norms of the day by willingly spending most of his time with members of a different race (Lee 218), and he even goes so far as to pretend to be a careless drunkard so that other society members will at least be able to attribute his strange behavior to a reason that makes sense to them (228). As has already been explored, Tom Robinson could also

be considered an outsider to this society, being a member of an oppressed group and a prime example of the unjust way in which such people were treated by society. However, while all these characters could be considered dissatisfied outsiders from their culture, they are more so among the many victims of social prejudice rather than being the novel's protagonists or main characters, and thus do not fit the requirements of this trope as easily as do some others.

Atticus Finch, the kindhearted and extremely scrupulous lawyer who is in some ways the main hero of the novel, could be considered a fulfillment of the dissatisfied protagonist trope. As Fine comments, "To make a hero out of a white man who fearlessly combats the entrenched racism of his society was revolutionary indeed" (75), demonstrating the countercultural qualities of not only the author's decisions but also of the character of Atticus himself. Indeed, Atticus is to a large extent a rebel who opposes the established system to fight for what he believes is right at all costs. While Atticus does work within the system of law and according to the guidance of unwavering moral values, he actively opposes the established cultural values that restrict, relegate, and oppress other members of society. He demonstrates this countercultural behavior in his everyday life, by showing genuine politeness and respect to everyone he encounters, despite differing beliefs or backgrounds such as in Mrs. Dubose's case (128), but also through the bold act of choosing to defend Tom Robinson in court. This choice brings scorn and shame on Atticus and his family in the eyes of many other townspeople (Lee 86), but these consequences do not deter Atticus from following his chosen course of action. Through defending a man who most of his peers have already condemned, and through pleading with them to challenge the social system as well and look past their blinding stereotypes, Atticus demonstrates his position as an outsider protagonist who is not satisfied with the state of the world around him, and thus actively seeks to change it for the better.

Yet, while Atticus does have a prominent role as one of the main protagonists of the novel, Fine states that “the story of Atticus Finch’s noble fight is obviously not the whole story of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The story of how the protagonist Jean Louise Finch evolves into the adult narrator of the novel is at least as important” (75-76). As Fine alludes to, the most prominent and best-fitting example of the dissatisfied protagonist in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is Scout herself, the narrator and central character through whom the reader sees the other characters and all the action of the story. Scout is remembered by many readers as not only the central character of the novel, but also the one who most openly challenges and refuses to conform to the ritual habit of social conventions around her. However, as a dynamic character growing through years of her life during the course of the novel, Scout is not always completely opposed to the values of her society, but gradually and over time comes to realize how artificial and destructive they are. Many commentators have recognized not only Scout’s gradual progression but also Atticus’s role in helping Scout to shape her own values and follow her own path, confirming the idea that both Atticus and Scout can fit in the role of the dissatisfied protagonist to some extent. Fine writes, “Indeed, though Atticus insists Scout respect the authority of her Aunt Alexandra, a supremely conventional southern lady, he does allow his daughter to defy conventional standards for the attire and behavior of girls and women . . . Atticus permits his daughter to defy the norms of behavior for girls in order to find a more empowering gender identity” (Fine 65). Shackleford seems to agree with this concept, stating that “[t]hroughout the novel . . . the female voice has emphasized Scout’s growing distance from her provincial Southern society and her identification with her father, a symbol of the empowered” (113-114). Kathryn Lee Seidel further comments on Atticus’s important role in influencing Scout’s countercultural values, explaining how she learns to resist traditional norms

for not only race and gender but also for southerners in general: “Most influential in her development is her father, Atticus, who counters southern dicta for southern children with a philosophy of calm courage and rational strength” (80). Atticus’ significant influence in Scout’s life helps her to gradually establish her own set of values separate from those of her corrupt culture, resisting the dominant ritual habit of the dystopian culture around her.

Scout’s distance from her society and her role as an outsider dissatisfied with her surroundings manifest themselves in a number of ways. It becomes clear from the beginning that she does not have particularly much in common with other young girls in her peer group; she is ahead of the other students at school, with an enthusiastic love for reading on her own even against her teacher’s wishes (Lee 19-20), and yet she also enjoys playing outdoors with boys, such as her brother Jem and their friend Dill. Much to the chagrin of some of the older and more respectable ladies in the town, such as Scout’s aunt Alexandra, Scout does not fit in to the traditional roles that polite Southern society has laid out for young girls, preferring instead to carve her own path and to participate in activities she enjoys, regardless of whatever criticism may come. However, Scout shows this rebellious nature against the established values of her culture not only through mere leisure activities like reading and playing, but also through her reactions to all the prejudice and social restriction she sees around her. As mentioned previously, Scout in her youthful innocence and inexperience cannot fathom why some people would be treated worse than others based on factors such as race. In multiple instances throughout the novel, she vocally objects to clear instances of racial prejudice, such as the unjust verdict of the Tom Robinson case, but also to other forms of prejudice, such as Aunt Alexandra’s insults toward Walter Cunningham and the whole town’s general outlook toward Boo Radley. While she may have understandably begun as a product of her culture, knowing no better than to see

society and everyone within it just as traditional southern values have taught her to, a combination of Atticus' influence and her own experiences with prejudice—witnessing it against others and seeing others try to use it to confine her—leads Scout to gradually develop a more mature perspective and to challenge the assumptions that she once took for granted. Seidel comments that “Scout does learn, but in doing so she must accept or resist other characters in the novel who represent myriad points of view which reinforce or contradict Atticus’s teachings” (86). In doing so, Scout learns to challenge the largely unthinking views of those around her and to gradually figure out what her own values are instead. Furthermore, according to Fine, “Despite the novel’s overt focus on the ugly racism of 1930s Maycomb, Alabama, through its highlighting of the Tom Robinson case, the book’s subtext is the drama of Scout herself, of her conflicted private hopes to be accepted as an outsider” (Fine 62). Scout develops her role as the dissatisfied, rebellious outsider by questioning the values around her, refusing to conform to the roles others would try to lay out for her, and identifying instead more with other characters who are also marginalized, outsiders, or nonconformists within their society. Along with some of these other characters, she very strongly fills the role of the rebellious, non-conforming outsider who is prevalent in so much of dystopian fiction.

In addition to being the story’s protagonist and the dissatisfied outsider who challenges the culture around her, Scout is, of course, also the narrator, a role which helps to reinforce her values and the novel’s underlying themes that the author wishes to impress upon the reader. In any story told from first-person perspective, the narrator by default will always be the closest character to the reader, and thus, in many cases, the one whom the reader most believes or identifies with. This narrative strategy exemplified through Scout seems to reinforce the themes of equality and social acceptance that Lee wishes to convey. While narrators are not always fully

reliable characters in literature, and as alluded to previously, one must be careful to avoid the fallacy of assuming that the narrator always speaks for the author, the somewhat autobiographical nature of the novel, as well as the novel's previously established themes, seem to suggest that in this case Scout's opinions and attitudes can be largely equated with Lee's. Furthermore, one must consider that, as many readers and commentators have noted, the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not Scout as a child, but rather Jean Louise Finch as a grown woman looking back on her childhood; this more mature perspective of a learned and thinking adult seems to lend further credibility to the narrator's opinions as well. In a chapter on the impact of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Thomas C. Foster comments on the maturity of Scout's adult perspective and on parallels with other novels that have used similar devices:

One of the oddities of the novel form is that so many of its examples press forward by looking backward. You can think of it as the after-the-catastrophe effect, since such novels are almost never comedies. *The Great Gatsby* would be such a novel, with Nick Carraway looking back over disastrous events . . . There's a second element common to these two books and a great many like them: they have first-person narration. This makes sense. A godlike, omniscient presence, or even a more limited third-person narrator, need not try to reassemble the pieces of life or memory; after all, it was not his life that was ruined, her friends who were destroyed. (273)

Foster's view suggests that Lee's use of a first-person adult narrator recollecting the events of her childhood is a particularly effective one to convey the central societal criticisms of the novel. While it seems an exaggeration in Scout's case to say that her life is "ruined" or her friends "destroyed," Scout does witness firsthand the unjust ruination of at least one man's life due to social and racial prejudice; she sees mankind's inherent capacity for ignorance, hatred, and

cruelty, and as a relatively innocent young girl, she can hardly emerge unscathed from such an ordeal. Therefore, the use of an older Jean Louise looking back on her younger self helps to emphasize the impactful consequences that such prejudice has had, both on her and on the many others close to the situation. Fine further comments on the interrelationship between Scout's role as the mature narrator looking back and her consistent conveyance of social criticism:

Scout offers naïve and thus innocent critiques of gender rules and racial distinctions that the adult narrator surreptitiously endorses. The shifty narrative voice becomes a powerful tool: an eight-year-old's social critique seems harmless and forgivable. Shifting between the boundaries of the adult and child perspectives is a safe way to make piercing criticisms of small-town southern society. The narrative voice's having it both ways opens the space for Scout to do the same, to shift identities, to find an opening to explore her identities. (67)

Scout's role as the questioning, dissatisfied, and rebellious narrator within the dystopian society of the Great Depression era not only helps her to establish her own values in contrast with those of society, but also to offer social criticism that is mature, impactful, and perhaps more readily accepted by the reader. Her character is the ideal choice to fulfill this common archetype in a dystopian reading of the novel.

Having established these major qualifications for reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a dystopia—the quality of “speculative myth” with which the work comments on its own culture, the oppressive ritual habit dominating the era in which it is set, and the prevalence of the dissatisfied outside narrator—I shall now examine some pedagogical approaches to the novel. As before, many of the individual elements that constitute the novel's dystopian quality are already frequently taught in high school classrooms, including the novel's historical and cultural

backgrounds, the social, cultural, and racial forces at play throughout the book, and Scout's perspective as the narrator. By examining and synthesizing some of the available scholarship on teaching the novel, I hope to demonstrate how current methodologies for the novel can help to support the dystopian reading and teaching.

For decades—probably since shortly after its release—*To Kill a Mockingbird* has been taught quite frequently in classrooms, especially in high school ones, all over America and elsewhere. There seem to be a number of good reasons for this fact, including the novel's timeless messages of equality, kindness, and courage, as well as the fact that it is, as one experienced English teacher notes, “a book that most, if not all students will like, discuss with enthusiasm, and remember fondly” (Milburn 90). Since the novel has been taught for so widely and so long, it has also been taught in a number of different ways, from many varied approaches and with emphases on any and all of its multifaceted themes, from the social and racial messages to the coming-of-age aspects of Scout's character progression. A number of these approaches are also consistent with teaching the novel as a work of dystopian fiction.

Given that an understanding of the historical and cultural context is essential to a proper understanding of the novel, some teachers have emphasized teaching from a historical approach, examining the real-life factors that influenced the events, characters, and themes of the novel. One source that takes this approach is a recent volume entitled *Using Informational Text to Teach To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Audrey Fisch and Susan Chenelle. In conjunction with the requirements proposed by the Common Core standards for education, Fisch and Chenelle propose that a classroom teacher pair a reading of the fictional *Mockingbird* with various nonfiction texts from the era in question in order to provide students with a fuller understanding of the society that influenced the novel. Fisch and Chenelle justify their rationale for this

approach, stating that “[i]nformational texts . . . help students make connections between literary works from the past and present-day concerns; the juxtaposition of literary and informational texts enables students to begin to understand and articulate their reactions to the ‘whys’ of the world” (xii). Thus, understanding the culture of the Great Depression era through their exposure to informational texts should help students not only to learn more information about the era in question, but also to recognize causal relationships and a pattern of influence between the real-world aspects and the world of the novel. These elements will also help to establish a dystopian reading of the novel when framed in such a way by an instructor, as they demonstrate characteristics of this particular culture and society that contribute to the restrictive habits and conditions that dominated many people’s lives.

Fisch and Chenelle suggest several specific nonfiction texts that would be beneficial to the teaching of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Among them is President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s famous speech, “The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is Fear Itself” (9-12), which addresses many common concerns of citizens of this culture, such as the economic and social issues which have been elsewhere established as contributing to the overall dystopian nature of this society. This speech should help students to establish the social and political climate of the era and the struggles and hardships facing ordinary citizens, such as the ones they meet of various classes from all throughout the book. Similarly, this collection of informational texts further establishes the poor conditions and restrictive laws dominating the era by including an excerpt by professor Jens Beckert, entitled “Political Structure and Inheritance Law: The Abolition of Entails,” (38-40) which helps to explain why certain families such as the Cunninghams have been hit so hard in particular by the economic conditions of the Depression (38). Recognizing these factors that contributed to the overall era should also help students to more thoroughly understand and

appreciate some of the novel's central conflicts, especially the ones among different marginalized and oppressed social groups whose existence serves to underscore the dystopian nature of the era.

Another important informational text suggested by Fisch and Chenelle is an excerpt from Lillian Eichler's *Book of Etiquette* (59-61), a 1921 volume which details many cultural and social expectations for young women and girls of its day. Although this volume was published almost a decade before the Great Depression and the events of *Mockingbird*, one can reasonably conclude that cultural expectations for young girls changed and shifted only slightly and gradually from Eichler's day to Scout's. In any case, the *Book of Etiquette* is helpful in further exploring the societal pressures placed on girls such as Scout and the cultural expectation for them to be proper and ladylike, which will help to better establish exactly what standards Scout questions and fails to conform to. For example, Eichler explains how a young girl's intelligent conversation and repose of manner are meant to differentiate her from the girl of the past, who would partake in idle chatter and have little virtue beyond "a pretty face, or an elaborate gown" (61). Interestingly, based on statements such as this one, Eichler seems to believe her suggestions liberating to women and somewhat countercultural, and perhaps they were at her time in comparison with previous generations. Eichler also writes:

[T]he young miss of today is certainly more thrilled with life and its possibilities than her sister of two decades ago was. Life is no longer shown to the young daughter as a plaything by parents who plan no future except marriage and social success for the young woman whose future rests in their hands. To-day life is shown to her as it is shown to her brother—as something beautiful, something impressive, something worthy of deep thought and ambitious plan. (60)

While Eichler's descriptions may sound independent and empowering to women, at least relative to the time period in which she was writing, a modern-day reader will quickly realize that even the allegedly liberated and capably intelligent young woman she describes is more well-mannered and traditionally feminine than the type of lifestyle that Scout prefers. The expectations of formal conversation, "repose of manner," and an "elaborate gown" certainly seem old-fashioned and restrictive in comparison with contemporary values with which students are most familiar, and also with Scout's emerging values and desires based on the types of things she enjoys doing and the type of person she discovers she wants to be. However, reading an excerpt from Eichler's book may be helpful to students in recognizing the conflicting values of this time period and the dystopian cultural forces against which Scout gradually and subtly rebels.

In addition to Fisch and Chenelle's sources, educators may benefit from the use of another recent volume, a collection entitled *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird: New Essays*. Published for the novel's fiftieth anniversary in 2010, this volume contains several essays about various themes and aspects of the novel, as well as a section on educational approaches to the book. In a preface to the anthology, editor Michael J. Meyer further emphasizes some of the major themes underlying the novel, such as the ritual habit and social prejudice that dominate most of society in Maycomb County:

Ewell highlights the fact that throughout *Mockingbird*, characters that Maycomb society deems 'the other' are dehumanized, ostracized, or isolated . . . Indeed, a large number of the characters in *Mockingbird* are nonconformists who live by their own lights, to the extent that they can do so, surviving within the microcosm of Maycomb and the macrocosm of the South in the 1930s, a region just sixty-eight years removed from

secession from the Union and from the resentment and resistance to Reconstruction that followed the Civil War. (xi)

Later, Meyer summarizes this information and this major thematic aspect of the text, stating, “Clearly, Harper Lee invites readers to consider gender roles, gender codes, and sexism as well as social roles, social and religious codes, and racism” (xii). With these underlying assumptions and central themes as its groundwork, the volume of *New Essays* continues to explore various aspects of the novel and approaches to both reading and teaching it, many of which heavily involve the social and cultural elements that are also integral to a dystopian interpretation.

One essay in Meyer’s collection, written by James B. Kelley, discusses a “grounded theory” approach to teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This approach surveys many experienced teachers on their typical approaches to the novel and examines prominent trends that emerge in how the novel is generally understood and presented (4). Kelley’s study found that text and context were among the most common themes or aspects emphasized by teachers, and that such teachers, as with other approaches mentioned earlier, focused on the cultural, social, and racial aspects influencing much of the novel’s conflict (11-12). This frequent focus brings up an interesting intersection of ideas, for as Kelley notes and as many educators have often assumed, teachers at the high school level often approach literature primarily from the standpoint of New Criticism, which acknowledges and emphasizes only the text itself, whereas a text and context approach must inherently acknowledge backgrounds, forces, and movements outside of the text (13). Exploring these ideas further, Kelley references yet another helpful teaching resource, *Teaching Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird from Multiple Critical Perspectives* by Marie K. Smith. Smith’s volume recounts the basic principles of a few socially based critical theories, most notably feminism (13-16) and new historicism (23-26), and asks students thought-

provoking questions that apply the theories in question to the novels. Since the theories in question here deal largely with social conflict and marginalization of oppressed groups, they seem fitting for applying to this particular novel. Approaching the text with elements of theories such as these, as Kelley's study found that many teachers have done, can be useful for furthering students' understandings of the major conflicting forces at work in the novel, which are also two of the central dystopian archetypes: the ritual habit governing the society and the marginalized groups or outsiders who oppose it.

Based on these sources and approaches used by experienced educators across the country, it seems appropriate, fitting, and relatively easy to synthesize the various elements of the novel that are most often taught and focused on into a dystopian reading of the novel. The cultural and historical contexts of the novel are inextricably intertwined with the dominant ritual habit of social prejudice, a force which is in continuous conflict with the outsider protagonist of the story. Effectively teaching all of these elements together and their interrelationships with each other through a dystopian lens can be greatly beneficial in helping students to understand and think through a thorough interpretation of the novel.

### Conclusion: Further Reasons and Studies

Having now laid out my theories and evidence, I hope to conclude this study with two main points: a reiteration of why these two novels in particular are ideal for teaching from a dystopian approach at the high school level, and suggestions for further studies that other scholars or educators could undertake from this approach.

Based on the criteria and information laid out in the preceding chapters, it should seem reasonable and plausible to accept Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* as works that could fit within the dystopian genre. Due to their natures as "speculative myths" on the cultures that produced them and to their explorations of flawed societies governed by dominant habits, one can legitimately view both books and their interpretations of the societies therein as dystopias. They both show examples of societies that go to the extreme in trying to maintain social order or preserve and enforce an established way of life, but which do so at the expense of humanity and morality. Since these societies attempt to prosper and thrive based on flawed premises and behaviors, they cannot truly satisfy all the masses, resulting in the dissatisfied protagonist, as well as the dissatisfied author who tries to use this sort of tale as a cautionary one to the reader against such behaviors. Thus are the works more dystopian than utopian while still speculating on societies of ritual habit.

However, in addition to the various criteria for considering these individual novels as dystopian independently of each other, I have also mentioned—and will attempt to further establish here—reasons for examining them together in this study. As I have pointed out, *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are, among other books, nearly universal staples of the secondary literature curriculum in American schools. Although they are generally taught at different grade levels—*Mockingbird* in 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade and *Gatsby* in the typical 11<sup>th</sup> grade

American literature course—both are highly revered American classics that most educators acknowledge students should read and discuss. Therefore, they seem to be among the best and most fitting choices to examine in light of recently popular trends in adolescent literature and to try to make more relevant to students based on these connections.

Additionally, examining both books together or in conjunction with each other offers the ability to make certain connections that may not otherwise be readily available. Again, the current setup of the education system does not generally have these books taught in the same year or to the same class, but students who have read one book in a previous year should be able to recall it again later, and therefore any interconnections that exist between the two books can still be useful for instructors who teach both novels, even if to different classes. When one approaches the books from a historical perspective, *Gatsby* and *Mockingbird* are inherently interconnected due to the time periods in which they take place, given the fact that the Roaring Twenties of Fitzgerald's day eventually collapsed into the Great Depression era in which *Mockingbird* takes place. Understanding the historical background and cultural context of the works they are reading can help students immensely in understanding the works themselves, especially for novels such as these two in which the plot and themes are so heavily influenced by the values of the cultures that produced them. Therefore, understanding the interrelationship of the two periods—how the failure of paradise and the American dream in *Gatsby* led to an era of desolation and oppression in *Mockingbird*—can increase students' understandings of both works and the cultural factors that influenced them.

Furthermore, as I have alluded to briefly, *Gatsby* and *Mockingbird* respectively represent two very different types of dystopias that seem to be prevalent in the more typifying works of the genre. While some dystopian fictions focus on external forces such as government or society

oppressing individuals, others deal with man becoming enslaved by his own desires and falling prey to the futility of his own pursuits of pleasure. Author Neil Postman discusses these two types of dystopias in the foreword to his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, using as examples two of the most prominent and enduring dystopian novels, George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. He writes:

Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity, and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think . . . In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. (xix-xx)

In accordance with the dichotomy established by Postman, *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, respectively, deal with two different kinds of dystopias just as two of the most well-known dystopian novels do. *The Great Gatsby*, the earlier of the two novels dealt with in the present study, corresponds with *Brave New World*, the earlier dystopian novel. Just as the populace within *Brave New World* is addicted to excessive pleasure through casual sex and feeling-inducing drugs, so do hedonistic pursuits of money, drink, revelry, and superficial love dominate the wealthy class within *Gatsby*. Conversely, while *1984* addresses external oppression by totalitarian government, *Mockingbird* features a society oppressed by economic hardship and unbreakable class distinctions that limit people's freedom and keep them confined in an inescapable position. As with the real-life historical periods that influenced the novels, there seems to be a logical progression in these different types of dystopias as well; just as *Brave New*

*World* was published more than a decade ahead of *1984*, *Gatsby* takes place about a decade ahead of *Mockingbird*. Thus, when considering the order of historical events and the shifting of the dystopian attitude over time, it almost seems that the superficially bright and cheery dystopia of the Roaring Twenties, the supposed paradise on earth, eventually led into a society that was not more oppressive but merely more obvious about it, revealing the true face that the previous era had in reality held all along. Seeing the parallels of these two American classics to two other prominent dystopias, along with the interconnections between the cultural influences on the American texts, can also help increase students' understanding of the novels.

One other, and comparatively lesser, consideration influenced the choice of novels for this study to some extent. That factor was the American Civil War. Originally, at least four novels were under consideration for inclusion in this study, including two taking place before the Civil War and two taking place afterward. Since the Civil War was a major turning point in American literature—even in American life and culture as a whole—it seemed to make sense historically to keep the focus of the study on either one side or the other of the Civil War. Thus, although *Gatsby* and *Mockingbird* are already close to each other in their interconnected time periods, I chose them, among other reasons listed above, because they came well after the Civil War, from the very different America that had developed in the six or seven decades since the war's ending. However, given the groundwork laid throughout this study and the established defining criteria for a dystopia, other studies could conceivably be done in the future to continue exploring this dystopian connection across various novels. If the techniques provided within this study prove effective for teaching *Gatsby's* and *Mockingbird's* main themes and for better connecting them to the understandings of high school students, then the same techniques can also be applied to other widely revered American classics frequently taught at the high school level.

Below are brief descriptions of the two pre-Civil-War novels that I also originally considered for this study and which could easily be further explored in light of a dystopian approach.

By the previously established definitions, it does not take much stretching of the imagination to consider how some works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, including *The Scarlet Letter*, could fit into the dystopian category. While Hawthorne wrote in the mid-1800s, he set some notable works a few centuries earlier during the Puritan era. Even in actual history, disregarding the settings of fictional novels, the mission of American Puritans seems inherently utopian, as they were pilgrims who had fled from England to America to establish a separate society in which they could practice their religion freely without interference from political or religious forces who would oppose or oppress them. Although the Puritans strove to keep themselves and their society untainted by sinful influences, Hawthorne's works often explore the complex dichotomy between holiness and sin, and demonstrate that even an attempted religious utopia with strict moral regulations cannot be completely free from the inherent corruption of man. Hawthorne even acknowledges the inescapable presence of such corrupting influences in the very beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*, when he writes that "[t]he founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison" (36), implying the inevitability of both crime and death even in an isolated religious community. Lauren Berlant, one commentator on Hawthorne's fiction, seems to agree, stating that "[d]eath, sin, and legal transgression are the evidence the narrator wields to prove the failure of utopian theory" (59), further suggesting that even this society's rigorous religious rules and regulations cannot fully achieve perfection or keep out all the negative elements of the world. Even though many critics seem to consider

Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* to be the most overtly dystopian of his works, *The Scarlet Letter*, as the story of an adulteress in a strictly regulated society suffering the consequences of her sin, nonetheless also offers some profound insights into the ultimately dystopian and imperfect qualities of even the most well-intentioned manmade societies.

In addition to its themes of an outwardly holy society being tainted by inner sin, *The Scarlet Letter* furthermore fits at least two of Frye's other aforementioned criteria for a utopia: ritual habit and speculative setting. It seems apparent that the Puritan society of extreme religious piety is built upon a heavily enforced form of ritual habit. Richard Harter Fogle, author of *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark*, writes that "[t]he Puritan code is arrogant, inflexible, overrighteous" (119), having become perhaps overly strict and coldly legalistic by taking its original motives of holiness too far to a wrong extreme. This ritual habit helps establish the Puritan community, or at least its fictional representation in *The Scarlet Letter*, as a dystopia governed by absolute regulations but enforced by human beings who are themselves ultimately flawed. While the society's leaders believe that rigorous laws will allow them to achieve a utopia of moral perfection, Berlant explores the complex relationship between the law and the utopian ideal. She states that "[t]he terms of the novel's inquiry into utopia and the law are both political and ethical: but . . . at a certain conceptual point, they come into contradiction" (60), demonstrating that rigid legalism does not always agree with and does not necessarily coexist with utopian perfection as the Puritan leaders had hoped. The failures of these hopes, along with the flaws inherent in this political and legal system, reveal the society as a dystopia rather than a utopia.

Similarly, the placement of the story in a bygone time period makes the setting a more suitable vehicle for the projection of Hawthorne's messages and themes about the inescapability

of imperfect human nature; even though the Puritan era did exist in actual history, it is different enough and far-removed enough from the time of Hawthorne's writing to still act as a form of speculative fiction. Fogle writes, "The distancing of the story in the past has the effect of ambiguity. Hawthorne so employs the element of time as to warn us that he cannot guarantee the literal truth of his narrative and at the same time to suggest that the essential truth is the clearer; as facts shade off into the background, meaning is left in the foreground unshadowed and disencumbered" (115). In accordance with Frye's aforementioned criteria of a utopia or dystopia being a speculative story, Hawthorne's use of a separate setting, isolated from the then-modern world, helps solidify his classification of the Puritan community as an attempted utopia, and the truths he successfully illustrates about the negative potential of strict religious laws and the irrepressibly rebellious tendencies of human nature prove that this community is in reality more dystopian than utopian. Indeed, Fogle comments on Hawthorne's portrayal of the fallibility of all such attempted utopias, saying that despite the readily apparent flaws of the Puritans, "one might well ask what merely human society would be better" (119). Through his speculation on the society of a bygone era, Hawthorne illustrates the essential truth, applicable to any time period, that a paradise or utopia built upon merely human law, or even human enforcement of divine or spiritual law, can never truly achieve perfection.

Like Hawthorne's works about strictly regulated societies, some of Mark Twain's novels, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, can also be considered dystopias based on the above definitions and terms. While dystopian elements may not be as readily recognizable in *Huckleberry Finn* as in some of Twain's other works (the most commonly cited example of Twain's utopianism being *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court*), one can nonetheless discern them when closely considering the major characters and their attitudes and actions in

relation to larger social constructs and prevailing themes. Thomas Bulger, a contributor from Sienna College, writes, “Throughout his literary career, the idea of a utopian society fascinated and frustrated Mark Twain. Utopianism is an underlying theme in much of Twain’s fiction, including . . . *Huckleberry Finn*” (235). Twain wrote a few decades after the Civil War but set many of his stories before it, exploring an era largely characterized by the institution of slavery. While this era was not quite as strict and isolated a religious community as that of the Puritans with whom Hawthorne dealt, it was still an era characterized largely by rigid ideology composed of Southern cultural Christian tradition and racial prejudice. These characteristics help fulfill Frye’s aforementioned utopian requirement of ritual behavior in that every respectable member of society in this day and age was expected to believe and behave in a certain way, and those who failed to conform became outcasts or pariahs. This pre-Civil-War era that Twain chooses to explore can be classified as a dystopia in its attempts to maintain and preserve an established social order despite its flawed elements such as slavery, and its failure to assimilate outsiders such as Huck. Indeed, Twain knew at the time of his writing that this imperfect society and its flaws were unviable as a lasting social model and were not destined to survive much longer, given that the Civil War not only abolished slavery but also redefined the entire social and political climate of the country, effectively bringing an end to this particular restrictive social order. Twain’s portrayal of the South pre-Civil War can fit into the definition of a dystopia because it is a society under the strict influence and domination of cultural customs, traditions, and rituals that ultimately prove to be flawed and ineffective.

*Huckleberry Finn* is also dystopian in its treatment of the titular character as the archetypal narrator who does not conform to the established social order and seeks his own preferred form of peace and perfection. The beginning of the novel finds Huck, after the events

of *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, forced to live in orderly civilization with the Widow Douglas, and struggling to grow accustomed to it while still preferring the freer and more independent lifestyle he is more used to. Eventually, circumstances lead Huck to run away with Jim, an escaped slave, both of them acting as oppressed victims who leave their oppressive society behind and form the beginnings of a new one consisting only of each other's company on the raft. Sacvan Bercovitch, writing for the *New England Review*, comments that "Huck and Jim on the raft have been taken as a kind of communitarian utopia, the emblem of the 'ideal society.' In contrast to the restrictive possibilities associated with settlements, together they . . . represent the 'spiritual values' of 'voluntary association,' 'personal freedom' in a context of 'true brotherhood,' 'responsibility and equality entwined'" (24). Another author, Nadia Khouri, seems to agree with this perception of Huck's rejection of his own society and decision to run away with Jim, arguing that his decision emphasizes such countercultural values as "self-sufficiency instead of utilitarian economic growth, harmony with nature rather than control over it, the brotherhood of man instead of competition or assertive individualism, all . . . within the framework of a pristine type of freedom understood as freedom from environmental determinism" (126-7). To be fair, one must acknowledge that some commentators have enthusiastically overstated the extent to which Huck, a young, uneducated boy, consciously plans to escape from society and live as an equal with Jim. In actuality, the novel makes it fairly clear that both Huck and Jim initially run away out of practical and selfish necessity, that "their journey is indeed a flight from tyranny, not a flight toward freedom" (127), and that Huck, being inherently a product of his culture, still largely retains his ingrained positions of prejudice and racism while on the raft (although he does start to question them more as time goes on). Nonetheless, even if a utopian society of equality was not the characters' intention, it may still have been part of Twain's purpose in having Huck and Jim

escape and live on the raft together to subtly present his criticism of society, to oppose certain values of the restrictive dominant social order and espouse certain other values of Huck and Jim's new isolated society (inasmuch as two people on a raft can be considered a society). Through Huck and Jim's escape from a restrictive social order and establishment of their own order on the raft, Twain depicts a utopian vision of hope and freedom in contrast to the dystopian social order of the day.

For whatever reasons that might be buried deep in our national or human consciousness, dystopian fiction in a number of forms and media has grown immensely more popular in recent years, especially among young adults and the next generation of readers. While trends never last forever and all fads must blow over someday, the popularity of dystopian fiction shows no sign of decreasing anytime soon. As long as this trend continues to grow and produce even more popular fiction, it is in the best interests of scholars and educators of literature to acknowledge this trend and use it to their advantage, which they can do by recognizing the dystopian elements inherent in such classic novels as *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and others, and bringing those elements more to the forefront of discussion on these novels. Only time will tell where these discussions may lead and what benefits may result.

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