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Cinematizing the Great American Novel

by Megan Posch

(English 154)

The Assignment: Compare and contrast a novel or short story collections to its screen translation.

Literature critic James Dickey hailed F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby as "an American masterpiece" and his judgment is validated by the novel's ability to withstand the test of time. Today, more copies are sold annually than all the versions published within Fitzgerald's lifetime combined. Although the incidents are set during the "roaring twenties," the story and the eloquence of the narration have captured readers for decades. Considering the novel's popularity, it is unsurprising that film versions eventually followed. The task taken on by these films was greater than that of a screenplay written solely for the purpose of film. By choosing a piece of classical literature, you are obligated to stay true to a story that many people are very familiar with. A celebrated novel like The Great Gatsby cannot simply be repeated or regurgitated into a film. There is a responsibility taken on by those who make this type of film to capture the essence of the story and characters loved by many. This is why I believe that cinematizing the great American novel may be a task even more difficult than usual movie making. There are many films taken from literature that stray completely from the original written composition. Most of the time we just shrug it off and say "that's Hollywood." But for some reason that is harder to do when the novel is considered a classic. Great works in American literature are hard to replicate in another form of media because people have their own perceptions and feelings associated with such works. However, in some cases, the final result embodies what made the original work unique and treasured. The 1974 film version of The Great Gatsby is an example of a film that does not strive to change the experience of the novel, but instead bottles all the critical elements of the story and provides us with a visual version of an "American masterpiece."

The Great Gatsby could easily be one of my favorite books and when I encountered the film I was really not interested in seeing it. To me, the book was so special that I did not want to change the images that Fitzgerald had created for me and replace them with another person's artistic vision. The 1974 film version of the novel was directed by Jack Clayton and followed a screenplay adapted by Francis Ford Coppola. To my surprise this film did not disappoint me in the way that I had anticipated. My biggest hope for the film was that the dialogue would be followed because Fitzgerald's use of language is what I think makes the story so memorable. He had a way of revealing so much about his characters through both the way they spoke and what they said to one another. The conversations were more than just words. Often, they carried a tone regarding the speaker's relationship to his or her fellow characters. For example, in the novel Daisy and Tom have Nick over for dinner one summer evening. All those that are present are chatting in a distracted, casual matter until Tom decides to bring up his views on race and a book he is currently reading. The way in which he speaks leads you to notice that he is not intelligent himself but simply a pseudo intellect. He has read a book and has now decided to assert his

opinion on the matter. Daisy begins to speak at this time and is cut off each time by Tom (Fitzgerald 13-20). This interaction is Fitzgerald's way of establishing Tom's dominating and disrespectful relationship with his wife. Interactions that reveal just as much are scattered throughout the novel and are replicated word for word within the film.

Nick Carraway begins the film with a narration taken directly from the text of the novel. The film introduces his character to you with a voiceover and a view of him piloting his small boat across the bay to Daisy and Tom's home. Both Fitzgerald's written work and the film open with Nick voicing the advice given to him by his father when he was younger. More direct narration of this kind continues throughout the film.

In Chapter Two of the book, Nick ends up accompanying Tom on an impromptu visit to the city with his mistress. Tom refers to her as "his girl" and you are given the feeling in both works that the whole idea of the affair excites him (Fitzgerald 28). To me, this is one of the best chapters in the book. Fitzgerald writes it in a way that is completely unpredictable, giving you details that seem arbitrary but end up being the only things that you really need to know about what is occurring. The day that Nick spends in the apartment downtown with Tom, his mistress and an assortment of others was portrayed exactly as I imagined while reading. The whole scene had an absurdity to it and the way everyone put on a charade for one another was a theme that resonated in the film and in the novel. Despite being out of sequence, the film did an excellent job of replicating the mood and atmosphere created by Fitzgerald.

The film also made you feel like the characters you imagined have come to life. Fitzgerald did a wonderful job of creating characters that reflected pieces of people you knew but were also nothing like anyone you would ever meet. I think that Mia Farrow really captured Daisy's essence. Fitzgerald wrote her in a way that seemed so fragile and yet full of emotion in a way that makes her also seem strong. Farrow spoke and interacted with her costars in a way that seemed uniquely like the Daisy alive in the pages of the book. Tom was exactly as the novel described him both, physically and in attitude. He came across as powerful, selfish and completely "careless." Jordan Baker was the only character that disappointed me because Fitzgerald wrote that she was "jaunty" and to me that seemed like an unattractive quality (Fitzgerald 185). The film gave a very different grasp of Jordan's character. She was physically attractive and not the jarring woman described in the novel. However, this could simply be my personal interpretation and not a deliberate attempt by the director to create more romance between Jordan and Nick than was intended by the author.

As a novel, The Great Gatsby is considered wonderful for not only because of the dialogue and character development but also because of Fitzgerald's use of symbolism. The ever watchful eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg were referenced several times throughout the novel. His large eyes, all that was left on the old billboard advertising his services, served as a reminder of the forces watching over the "valley of ashes" that is our life. The doctor's eyes were emphasized in the film and were shown at various critical moments, hinting at the idea that the plot was about to twist. Another symbol used in the film but not present in the book were images of birds. Birds are shown between various scenes in the film and were used to foreshadow the action that was to come. For example, after Daisy and Gatsby connect after many years apart, we leave them in Nick's home and the film cuts to a shot of a male and female robin eating seed together. To me, this was a "cheesy" way of foreshadowing their future together. Later on, Nick has a conversation with Gatsby on his pier. This scene is also present in the novel but what is not included is the image of a dead seagull washed up against the rocks. Again, a bird image was used to foreshadow events to come. Gatsby, like the bird, ends up dead and floating in his own

beautiful pool. Fitzgerald, however, did not use images like these. Instead, he had Nick make a statement about Gatsby's lights not going on one Saturday night and the reader is meant to know that Gatsby may not be around in the future (Fitzgerald 155).

All filmmakers begin a project hoping to create something that people will remember. Even harder than that is creating something new, in another form, from something that people already treasure in its original state. A novel like The Great Gatsby will continue to be appreciated and revered for years to come and the film version took on a task that could have ended in complete failure. Instead, it stayed true to the work that it was based on and did the very best possible job of creating a new masterpiece without defacing the old. Although some creative liberties were taken, and the film did not follow the exact sequence laid out in the novel, all in all, I am content with the film version of one of my favorite stories. To me, this film is an amazing achievement because making a successful film is hard enough on its own and even more difficult when people expect to get the same feeling from a movie as they did from a great piece of literature.

Works Cited

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