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GATSBY REVIVED THROUGH MEMES

by

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B.A. University of Florida, 2018

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates what memes of the 2013 film *The Great Gatsby* do to F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel within the digital landscape. Meme images of *The Great Gatsby* began becoming popular on Tumblr.com. Typically they consist of often humorous text that incorporates an image from the 2013 movie in order to elevate the text into a communally shared in-joke. For example, the use of the "Jay Gatsby raising a glass" meme is commonly used on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr even ten years after the fandom's creation. In the film, the imagery is used to introduce Jay Gatsby to Nick Carraway, however, through the use of memes the meaning warps to whatever the creator wishes. Often the meme is used to convey raising one's glass to a bad idea. This paper examines memes as "kitsch" and considers the negatives and positives of commodifying classic literature. This paper looks at memes through the lens of adaptation studies in order to find out how the "memefication" of classic lit affects its legacy.

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INTRODUCTION: *THE GREAT GATSBY*, KITSCH AND ADAPTATION STUDIES

In 2013 F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby* was given a new twist through Baz Luhrmann's 2013 film adaptation. *The Great Gatsby* novel itself was published over 80 years prior and was set in the 1920's just as the movie was. The novel plays with themes of love, longing, and The American Dream. Jay Gatsby longs for Daisy Buchanan, a rich girl who lives across the river. Jay goes through extreme lengths win her affections and pines for her. This is all presented from the point of view of Nick Carraway, Jay's new neighbor and Daisy's cousin. Despite the novel's publishing date of 1925, it did not become a booming success until 1941 when the novel was given to World War II soldiers (Contributor). The novel has been an enduring interest to scholars and audiences alike due the novel's portrayal of The Roaring Twenties with extremely wealthy characters that flaunt their luxurious lifestyles in dangerous excess.

Baz Luhrmann's adaptation is also set in the 1920's and works hard to immerse the viewer in the scenery. Luhrmann explains how he wanted the audience to feel when watching the movie, "We knew we had to unlock for the audience a way of letting them feel what it was like to read Fitzgerald's book in the 1920s – to be in New York City at that time" (Ohneswere). Baz utilized similar moves that Fitzgerald had in the novel and altered them for modern times. In his interview with *Life and Times* magazine he explains how he used music to parallel Fitzgerald's work,

...one of the things Fitzgerald did very successfully was take all things new and modern, take pop-culture and put those in his novel. Particularly he utilized the then new African-American street music – jazz, which was called a “fad” by many, and placed it in the novel, to help tell story. To do something similar for today’s audience was our challenge.... So, it was a natural fit to translate the African-American music that came from the streets called hip-hop, and weave it into a jazz language. When you are talking hip-hop, collaboration, and storytelling, the first person I think of is JAY Z (Ohneswere).

Baz Luhrmann used his distinct style as a director in order to not only adapt *The Great Gatsby* but to pay homage to Fitzgerald’s stylistic moves. Along with music choice, Luhrmann was careful to make sure the film portrayed important scenes from the novel. His goal was to “reveal the book” by including staple scenes and remove only what would not serve the film. Luhrmann’s adaptation is significant because it shows us what Gatsby’s world looks like and lets us in through the visual medium.

The film provides a modern visual medium for audiences and led to the development of *The Great Gatsby* fandom on Tumblr. The title of Fandom was originally used for sports and theater fans before moving on to science fiction fans. According to Francesca Coppa, author of *A Brief History of Media Fandom*, science fiction fans began contacting each other through the letters to the editor page in magazines such as *Amazing Stories* (Coppa). Eventually these groups of fans evolved to the online space. While it is not clear which media fandom was the first, Star Trek fans turned the act of contacting and meeting up with other fans into a “phenomenon” (Coppa). Tumblr is a social media platform known for its microblogging capabilities. This means that users of this website are able to post short bits of text and pictures and circulate it around the

site. This is in contrast to regular blogs that has long posts and aren't typically shared around (Webster). Tumblr launched in 2007 and had since then become a home for creative communities to convene and share thoughts, ideas, and memes. A New Yorker interviewee explained how she felt when Tumblr began rising in popularity,

It was right at a time when everyone was getting cell phones; “you could take a picture from your phone and post it on the Tumblr app,” Sharon Butler, a painter who used Tumblr for her art blog, Two Coats of Paint, said. “You could have more text than on Twitter, but it was a cooler community than Facebook (Chayka).

Tumblr's culture was one that cultivated fandom as longer posts allowed for more communication and more ideas to be shared. Likewise, Tumblr users were able to share images and comment on them directly on the post. Once it was shared again, that communication would be carried to the next post. This is very similar to the way that memes work, as they build on previous existing information.

2013 was around the same time that the *Gatsby* fandom began developing on the website. This fandom would be the one that created one of the many popular memes on Tumblr. Many scholars have attempted to define memes. One such scholar compared different definitions and names that memes have been given,

Particularly in the study of digital culture, memes are considered a key manifestation of participatory culture, both in the original creative vernacular sense but also in antagonistic trolling and other darker forms of participation (Nagle, Citation2017; Tuters

& Hagen, Citation2020). In this respect, memes are considered a communication genre (Wiggins, Citation2019), requiring ‘new literacies’ (Knobel & Lankshear, Citation2007) for recognition but also for in-group participation (Milner, Citation2016). While research has focused on the social and cultural aspects of the phenomenon, looking at memes as ‘piece of culture, typically a joke’ (Davison, Citation2012), ‘apparently insignificant embodiments of silliness and whimsicality’ (Shifman, Citation2014) or ‘common tongue’ of the internet (Rogers).

Memes are seen as methods of communication, in-jokes, a means for trolling, and as the language of the internet (Rogers). In laymen terms, a meme often includes imagery, and some text in order to say something. Often that thing is meant to be funny.

One of these memes was the “I’m Gatsby” meme. We can tell that this meme is popular due to the fact that it has been reblogged and shared hundreds of thousands of times. More significant, however, is the reblog from the blog “heritageposts.” “Heritageposts” is a blog that will often go around and reblog posts for their sociocultural impact on Tumblr.com. They will reblog posts for their popularity, infamy, or timeliness of content. What started as a reaction gif, a moving image often used as a way to express a feeling online, became an ever-changing chameleon that social media users altered to become whatever they saw fit. Often reaction images stay just that, to be used to react when something is funny or scary etc. However, the “I’m Gatsby” meme is different in that it was altered to be used in different ways. One of which would be a post with a still image and text. These kinds of memes are not really for reacting, but for commenting. The meme shows Leonardo DiCaprio as Jay Gatsby, holding up a glass of

champagne and smiling. In this role, Jay Gatsby is portrayed with slicked back blonde hair, piercing blue eyes, and smart suits. In this scene Jay is wearing a black and white tuxedo. Tumblr's version, this meme is gif, or a soundless animated videos that play on a loop (meetsoci). However, when the meme is moved to other platforms it is a still image.

Luhrmann wanted to keep the essence of the novel alive when adapting Gatsby. When Nick meets Jay, most of the dialogue is very similar, however the scenery is slightly different. In the novel, Nick is sitting with a group of people, "two finger-bowls" deep in champagne (38). He then looks over at a man who asks him a series of questions,

Your face is familiar," he said, politely. "Weren't you in the

Third Division during the war?"

"Why, yes. I was in the Ninth Machine-gun Battalion."

"I was in the Seventh Infantry until June nineteen-eighteen. I

knew I'd seen you somewhere before."

We talked for a moment about some wet, gray little villages

in France. Evidently he lived in this vicinity, for he told me that

he had just bought a hydroplane, and was going to try it out in

the morning.

"Want to go with me, old sport? Just near the shore along the

Sound."

“What time?”

“Any time that suits you best.” (38).

It is then that Nick is asked if he is having a good time, to which he replies that he is doing much better and that it is an unusual party that he is at. Looking at the man he says he hasn't even met the host. Fitzgerald describes the next instance as thus,

For a moment he looked at me as if he failed to understand.

“I'm Gatsby,” he said suddenly.

“What!” I exclaimed. “Oh, I beg your pardon.”

“I thought you knew, old sport. I'm afraid I'm not a very good host.” (38,39).

Nick then goes on to explain Gatsby's expression. He makes note that Gatsby looks at him and smiles in a way that makes him feel totally understood and seen,

He smiled understandingly — much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced — or seemed to face — the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just so far as you

wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey (39).

Baz took this moment and gave a visual to this elusive expression. In his scene, Nick is walking about the party, milling about a sea of people when he hears an unfamiliar voice say, “Your face is familiar. Weren’t you in the Third Division during the war?” (Luhrmann). The rest of the exchange is a paraphrased version of the dialogue above, cutting a few sentences short but the sentiment stays the same. Nick doesn’t get good look at Gatsby as they are wading through people and speaking to one another until finally Nick says that he lives next door and he hasn’t met the host yet. He then says, “No one has met him! They say he’s second cousin to the Kaiser and third cousin to the devil” (Luhrmann). Gatsby then turns around saying he hasn’t been a very good host for see, “I’m Gatsby!” In this moment the music blares to signify Nick’s faux pas of unknowingly speaking to the host all along. Then Gatsby raises his glass and smiles, and Nick explains, just as in the novel how Jay’s smile made him feel (Luhrmann).

While Luhrmann keeps much of the novel’s essence, the meme versions alter the image and eliminate most of this interaction. Early examples of this meme use a gif of this scene as a reaction implying “raising a glass in congratulations” or “welcome to the club.” Some simply used the gif when referencing the movie. There are a few reasons why someone would create these memes that will be dissected later in this thesis. Typically, the intent when creating these memes is either humor, commentary, or connection. Either users want to create something funny

to share with their community, have the opportunity to comment on something, or simply share in their interest in a topic.



Figure 1: I'm Gatsby

These memes of *The Great Gatsby* have introduced a younger generation to important portions of this classic novel. This thesis will be analyze variations of Gatsby memes. I will also consider how the “memefication” of classic literature can affect its longevity. This thesis will consider the positives and negatives of “memefication” and whether or not it can be considered a bastardization of classic literature. I will extend Clement Greenberg’s essay “Avant- Garde and Kitsch” to argue that memes should be considered “kitsch” or a type of work that takes a form of art and turns it into widely used commodity (9). Specifically, I contend that Gatsby memes constitute what I call “double kitsch” as they take something that is already kitsch, this being Luhrmann’s adaption, and kitchifies it again. As I explain, since Luhrmann engages with the source material in a whole new way, his work falls into the category of kitsch as well.

Background

My analyses of Gatsby memes relies on recent theories from two major fields: kitsch studies and adaptation studies. As explained above, kitsch is a popular, commodified art (10). Repeatedly, in the field of adaptation studies, scholars investigate film adaptations as translations and transformations of another text (Venuti; Bacchilega, Raw). This thesis will also look at the argument through the lens of adaptation studies. In particular I will be expanding upon Katerina Perdikaki's argument that film adaptations are "creative translations" from one medium to another, which constitutes a "cultural transformation" taking place. She uses the phrase "cultural transformation" to explain the phenomenon of adaptations being influenced by the "sociocultural context" surrounding it and how this transformation "enriches the meaning of the adapted narrative" (170). I will take her discussion of adaptation further by arguing that memes are a creative and cultural transformation of Baz Luhrmann's film as well as Fitzgerald's novel. *Gatsby* memes are a creative transformation as they change medium. Despite my argument of memes as kitsch, argue for their importance and relevance while also investigating how they take on a cultural transformation as they adapt and change across the sociocultural contexts.

The Great Gatsby in Meme Form

2013 was the perfect year for *The Great Gatsby* film to be introduced to Tumblr.com. This is the year that the film was released in theaters and during a time that Tumblr fandoms were beginning or gaining popularity. This website has touted the slogan "Home of the Fandom" and this holds true. While unfortunately, the slogan has been wiped from the Apple app store, for a while this slogan was featured right underneath the app. Fandom, is defined by Mark Duffet as,

“a sociocultural phenomenon largely associated with modern capitalistic societies, electronic media, mass culture and public performance (5). From 2012-2016 Tumblr users began some of the most prominent fandoms online today such as the *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and *Sherlock* fandoms. Fans especially clung to adaptations or reiterations of old stories. *Sherlock* was a modern-day adaptation, *Doctor Who* was a reboot of a classic series, and *Supernatural* rehashed stories of folk monsters and later turned to biblical tales. *The Great Gatsby*'s tie to the past and fixation on 1920's aesthetics may be an allure for Tumblr users already interested in established stories.

There is no doubt that memes are an important form of communication on social media platforms today. Memes are important because they are a vessel to reach other people online without requiring a massive following. Memes can be found on any social media site that offers image support. Different social media sites have different conventions for what is expected of a meme. Twitter will often have text above an image while Tumblr may use gifs with text on them. This thesis will analyze different iterations of Gatsby memes and explain how they transform across platforms.

This was no different in 2013 when *The Great Gatsby* film became popular on Tumblr. The sociocultural landscape on Tumblr made Gatsby the perfect contender to be taken and “kitchified” over and over again. Hartman et al. argue that memes can be a way in which students can study literature. They explain that “artistic response” can be a way that students can interact with literature and reflect on it by using visual arts such as drawing, sculptures, and painting but can also include drama and music (Hartman et al.). In their words, they define memes as “a text that inspires the creation of other texts that follow, build upon, or parody the

form of the original” (Harman et al.). In the case of *Gatsby*, Tumblr users became inspired by the stunning visuals and iconic quotes from the movie enough. To replicate imagery from the film and remix it into their own creations. While some of these memes directly interacted with *The Great Gatsby* others evolved to the point of only slight recognition. Accordingly, this thesis analyzes various memes across different contexts and social media platforms in order to understand the sociocultural relevance and the significance of this commentary. While memes have brought new eyes and new takes to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s work, it is also possible that the memefication of classic works bastardizes the original story. Taking from the “Kitsch vs Avant Garde” discourse, memes could be seen as cheap commodification of a classic work that adds no real value (Greenberg). Cheap, in this instance means devoid of depth and artistry.

Commodification here means something that is distributed widely. However, memes can bring a new generation of readers to *The Great Gatsby*. They can bring a certain accessibility to reading these classic stories. Students especially can benefit from the bite-sized story telling that memes offer by summarizing key points into humorous image and text. Most importantly, I argue that memes give students a pop cultural reference to refer back to when encountering this text that may be new to them. Memes bring a new point of view that students would not have considered in a more formal setting. On the flip side, however, memes could act as the negative sides of kitsch, and remove meaning from the original work. Instead of being bite-sized pieces of the Avant-Garde, memes could be seen as a stripping of the original material. Just a cheap copy from a creator who is not inspired by but rather poorly imitating a piece of work. This thesis will consider these issues and argue that memes ultimately provide a positive future for literature. Memes are not meant to replace literature, nor are they meant to be read as such. However, they

can be useful tools for understanding classic literature and interacting with it in a casual and artistic fashion. Memes take bits of these stories and turn them into inside jokes for social media users to pass between one another.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 will explore the birth of *The Great Gatsby* memes as well as their creative evolution. I consider the importance of memes in the digital age and relate this importance back to Fitzgerald's legacy. This chapter explains the relevance of Baz Luhrmann's place on the *Gatsby* adaptation evolution by explaining how its visual qualities inspired online users to create memes. This chapter dedicates some time to describing some of memes that have been created by online fans as well as the motivation behind creating a meme in the first place. I will be applying Greenberg's essay to my research to help identify memes as kitsch. This chapter will begin to analyze some of the positive aspects of kitsch and examples of other classic literature using kitsch in the same way. Finally, the chapter explains that *Gatsby* memes "transform and translate" the classic story to new audiences with an awareness of the sociocultural landscape surrounding it (Perdikaki). I will be extending Perdikaki's argument to show that memes are "creative adaptations" that should be considered apart from the original text, and not directly compared. While applying adaptation studies, this chapter also considers memes as a form of parody, and what this means when considering them as adaptations.

Chapter 2 takes the idea of memes as kitsch into question even further and examine the ways that *Gatsby* memes strip the source material to create a new piece of "art." I will dive deeper into Clement Greenberg's essay to help me analyze the memes that do not engage with

the source material so closely. This chapter ultimately defends whether or not Fitzgerald's work is being reimagined and revitalized or instead copied and defaced. I will argue the negative implications of memes as kitsch and take into account how memes can possibly alter classic literature in a negative way, such as reducing it to a simple joke. This chapter ultimately defends the meme as a net positive in terms of continuing Fitzgerald's legacy. It explains how the simplification and far reach of memes can inspire social media users to find classic literature. It also provides evidence of students that have found it easier to connect to course materials through pop culture references.

Finally, this thesis includes a conclusion that addresses the memefication of classic literature and how scholars might further investigate this issue. There is always the chance that things will become lost in translation within any adaptation, and that is no different when it comes to memes. However, memes create a way for social media users to connect with classic literature in a way that they would not be able to by remix the novel and the film into often humorous images and text. Finally, I will extend a question for future scholars - How do new social media sites like TikTok and the changing conventions of memes impact our understanding of classic novels and their contemporary resonances in American society? At present, memes have established their place in the digital world as a means of communication. My conclusion shows that even if they minimize the original text, there is reason to study them as they are a vessel for sharing ideas online.

CHAPTER 1: THE BIRTH OF THE GATSBY MEME

The Great Gatsby novel is no stranger to reimagination and adaptation. There are at least four adaptations of the film and multiple books inspired by the novel, as well as many translations. Memes, by nature, are imaginative and adaptive of some kind of source material. Not only this but memes are an engaging and popular way for people to communicate online. Most if not all social media sites share memes. While *The Great Gatsby* has been adapted multiple times, memes are the new iteration of adaptations of F. Scott Fitzgerald's story. In the article "The Power of Memes" Blackmore et al describe memes as "stories, songs, habits, skills, inventions and ways of doing things that copy from one person by imitation" (Blackmore et al). On the internet memes are often seen as funny images or videos that remix on some previous work. Similar to a comic strip competition, memes are like when a comic strip is removed of its caption and edited over and over again by different people. Memes have evolved over time and continue to alter as audiences continue to play with them. In their article, Blackmore et al explain that memes do not really die out. "Memes are thus true replicators, possessing all three properties-replication, variation, selection-needed to spawn a new Darwinian evolutionary process" (Blackmore et al).

Memes often derive from an image or a visual source material. When *The Great Gatsby* was once again adapted into a film by Baz Luhrmann, social media users were given a visual medium with which to create. The social media platform that housed one particularly popular meme is Tumblr.com. Tumblr, the self-proclaimed "home of the fandom" website, is known to be a digital safe harbor for fandom communities. Tumblr mixes blogging with the shareability of

Twitter and Instagram, making it a popular destination for collaborative art. In 2013, the year of the film's release, other fandoms based on older properties were rising in popularity as well. *Sherlock* and *Doctor Who* were becoming noticeably prolific on the website due to recent re-adaptations. *The Great Gatsby* film enthralled modern audiences with its use of Baz Luhrmann's bright spectacular styles, modern music, and prolific actors. Thus, *The Great Gatsby* film fandom was born, and with it the memes.

Memes are often used as a way of communication online. They are a vessel for conversation that can use other properties as a means of expressing something. Figure one shown in the introduction is one of the most popular instances of this is Tumblr user *nannajane*'s post often called the "I'm Gatsby" meme. The meme has been shared over two hundred thousand times and even has a page on KnowYourMeme.com. This website acts as a meme encyclopedia or dictionary. In the Tumblr post, different users have a conversation that ends in the use of a *Gatsby* meme. In this instance, the meme is being used as a reference. The first user mentions that in 7 years it will be the 20's again and that we should bring back the 20's era aesthetic. Seeing as *The Great Gatsby* is broadly known for its use of 1920's aesthetics, the next user referenced it with a *Gatsby* quote "You can't repeat the past" (Fitzgerald). Finally, the image was added to the original post. The image is a gif of Jay Gatsby portrayed as Leonardo DiCaprio raising a glass, behind him is a grand party and fireworks going off. This image would eventually become the most widely used image for *Great Gatsby* memes. The use of the image here is used in addition to the quote "Can't repeat the past? Why, of course you can! Of course, you can" (Fitzgerald). In this instance it is being used to add to the text and solidify the reference with an image. However, as the memes evolve, the more the image is remixed.

Memes are not a stagnant piece of art. They are communal and ever-changing. There is a term that Tumblr users have coopted that explains the meme economy online. Since memes are often created without any credit towards the original owner, and changed and added to by other anonymous users, internet folk have called this phenomenon meme communism. Meme communism is the act of posting a meme for the a community with no intention of receiving anything in return. While some do it for internet fame, more often than not memes become anonymous through sharing. Some may have watermarks, but most are posted and then reposted with no way of finding the original poster. However, in some instances, social currency is what is being obtained by creating these memes. Still, this is different from making a Youtube video with one's face on it. In the instance of memes, the artist takes a backstep when memes are created and remixed, and the focus is put on the actual meme and its message. Memes are not meant to serve as a work of art or a literary piece, but rather a means of communication amongst internet users. They are quick and bite sized in order to make a point quickly, typically just an image with a bit of text. Despite their small nature, memes travel far. This is no exception for memes of *The Great Gatsby*. Even though the fandom presence was strong on Tumblr, these memes have traveled to other social spaces such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.



Figure 2: Started From the Bottom

The I'm Gatsby image is taken from a scene from Baz Luhrmann's adaptation in which Nick is introduced to the novel's namesake himself. There are a few different versions of *The Great Gatsby* meme that display the remixes these memes go through. Figure 2 is a meta reference to Leonardo DiCaprio playing Jay Gatsby. When online fans realized the similarities between Jay Gatsby and his character in *Titanic*, they began creating memes that refer to both movies. The top of the image is of Leonardo DiCaprio in his role as Jack from *Titanic*. This part of the image has the text "started from the bottom" taken from Drake's song "Started from the Bottom". The bottom image is of the "I'm Gatsby" meme with bottom text that reads "Now We're Here," referring to the same song (Drake et al). While at first, users saw the image referring to the film directly, eventually users altered the text in ways that did not comment directly on the film or story.



Figure 3: Here's to You

For example, figure 3 remixed the image to have Jay Gatsby raising his glass in congratulations with the following text: “Here’s to those who are seeing how long they can freeze before turning on the heat for the first time”. While the image remained the same, online users began shaping Gatsby’s expression to fit the narrative they were trying to achieve. Eventually the meme transcended the full image but found its way back to commenting on the story.



Figure 4: I Know This and I Love You

In figure 4, a meme creator took a scene from a popular television series called *Parks and Recreation* and replaced the faces of two characters. The meme has one character, whose face has been replaced with Gatsby's, say, "I have never done anything wrong in my life," and the next character whose face has been swapped with Nick's say, "I know this, and I love you" (Schur). While the only imagery from the film that is being shown are the character's faces, the text reflects an aspect of the story that lets the reader of the meme learn about the characters. The memes eventually evolved to the point where one did not even need to cite the source image for the reader to understand it.

The Great Gatsby (2013)



Figure 5: Lazy Town

While the figure 5 does not display any imagery at all from the film, it does refer to it by text. In this instance, one meme uses imagery that harkens back to Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* and pokes fun at the otherwise dramatic scene of a character being hit by a car. A scene from children's show *LazyTown* shows a puppet character driving a miniature car over a gown man. The caption on top reads, "Baz Luhrmann's Gatsby 2013." This meme takes an absurd moment from a children's show and remixes it into a parody of *The Great Gatsby*. By remixing the film's images and creating memes, social media users bring new life into F. Scott Fitzgerald's work. After the Gatsby Tumblr Fandom was given a visual medium to work with, Fitzgerald's story gained a new life.

Certain versions of the Gatsby memes require an understanding of the plot of the story, while others simply play with imagery. Through this playful remix, social media users adapt

classic literature into the digital world. Memes are a short way for users online to share ideas and their viral nature makes the ideas spread quickly. Before ingesting an entire novel, or even watching a film, memes provide a little bit of context and some idea of the story in just one image. Memes take certain aspects of the story and exaggerate them in order to poke fun or make a point. They turn classic literature into a commodity and allow all audiences to tackle the material regardless as to whether or not they read the novel or watched the movie. Some critics believe this process diminishes the original work and tears down integral parts of the story so it can be shared quickly to the masses. This paper will delve into this possibility in the next chapter. First, it is important to understand how memes work as a form kitsch and how memes “transform and translate” the classic novel for new audiences (Perdikaki).

When looking at *The Great Gatsby* memes and their source material, one can see the connection to kitsch and the avant-garde and how memes commodify source materials which allows for mass consumption. Clement Greenberg defined kitsch as something that takes on a form of art and transforms it into a cheap, widely used commodity and avant-garde as art with a “superior consciousness” (Greenberg). According to Greenberg’s definition Baz Luhrmann’s adaptation acts as kitsch. Greenberg placed Hollywood movie under the category of kitsch as well, explaining that it is a popular and commercial art, “Popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc” (Greenberg). If this is the case then memes are a double kitsch, taking not just from the source material but from the adaptation of the source material. Double Kitsch, as I define it, is the kitchification of something that is already kitsch. Memes of the film then, are commodified even further, and shrunken down even more in

order to reach a wider audience. In Greenberg's article he explains where kitsch comes from and how it developed, "Kitsch is a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy" (Greenberg). Memes technically have been around before the internet as people have shared visual in-jokes outside of online spaces. However, I argue the popularity of memes on a mass scale are largely facilitated by the internet. Just as the industrial revolution produced kitsch, the Digital Revolution popularized memes. Greenberg expresses his distaste for kitsch in his article by stating that it is "formulaic" and "the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times" (Greenberg). He expresses that kitsch is demanding of nothing but the money of its customers (Greenberg). As mentioned above, the meme economy online is often considered a communist one. Typically, there is no financial gain to be made from memes. However, I do note that clout or internet fame could be a motivating factor behind creating a meme.

The commodification of classic literature through the use of memes can be beneficial the source material. As Greenberg's article implies, kitsch is a low form of art. The critical conversation around kitsch has also had its debates with some scholars suggesting "everyone is to do 'his thing,' high middle, or low" (149). There are positive sides to memes falling into the category of kitsch. Kitsch is widespread and for the masses, meaning it is accessible to most people. Memes can cross barriers such as language and education levels with their use of simple imagery and minimal wording. Because of the mass appeal of memes, anyone can create one. There is no barrier for entry as there would be with a published novel for instance. All anyone needs is a social media account and access to a photo editor which are typically available for free online. The motivation to create the meme is not incentivized though greed but the desire to

share an idea or joke. Memes also allow anyone access to comment on a topic such as classic literature. Sparknotes.com often utilizes memes on their Instagram account to appeal to young students who may not have read classics such as *Pride and Prejudice*. By doing this they are able to reach a wider audience that may otherwise not be interested in this literature. Although SparkNotes is an official website, social media users will often create their own memes in order to comment on situations or characters in classic literature that they want to bring attention to. Memes allow anyone to join the public discourse about any given topic. Memes as kitsch impact popular culture positively by encouraging engagement with source materials such as *The Great Gatsby*. By embracing kitsch, we encourage the use of memes as popular ways to share information.

Memes are popular with today's youth online, and if a source material such as *The Great Gatsby* is trending as a meme it means that it is forward facing in the cultural zeitgeist. The memeification of classic literature allows users to look at it from a current standpoint and allows them to play with concepts from the novel. One has to have some kind of intimate knowledge of the source material in order to create a meme in order to make light of it or comment on it in some way. However, other internet users can then see the meme and understand a bite sized version of the original work and make their own interpretations.

The Great Gatsby memes “transform and translate” Baz Luhrmann’s adaptation and thus the novel for new audiences and encourage collaboration on different social media platforms. Memes act as another method of adaptation for the original source material. While Baz Luhrmann’s film adapted the book for modern movie goers and film enthusiasts, memes adapt the film and by extension the book for online users and new audiences. Perdikaki refers to

Georges Bastin's quote on adaptation in her essay that refers to adaptation as a translation rather than a direct copy, "Therefore, adaptation is posited as a translation technique which takes place under a set of specific conditions, and which ultimately aims at relevance rather than accuracy" (11). Perdikaki further argues that due to the collaborative nature of film, "the message of the source material is filtered through the creative outlook of the adapter(s) and is projected reinterpreted on a different medium and platform (Perdikaki). In this case memes are no different. Hundreds of people work on movies in order to produce one product. While the same can't be said for one meme, there is certainly still a collaborative nature to memes. Memes are collaborative in their formatting. Trends rise and fall in the types of memes that are popular with internet folk at any given time. Memes are often distributed with the knowledge that there are formatting conventions specific to the social media platform they reside in. For example: Tumblr users are particularly fond of Gif formatted memes, while Twitter users prefer an image embedded into a tweet and a caption up top. Memes serve as an adaptation just as films do, however, as Perdikaki explains, commercial film has an economic motivator:

For instance, a well-known cast may serve as a preamble of financial success and, depending on the budget of the production, the film may feature numerous promos and trailers at frequent points until the release date. Paratexts such as the film trailer and interviews of the cast and crew may indicate the economic reasons behind certain decisions made in the film (Perdikaki).

Commercial movies will make certain rhetorical moves such as casting big name actors or hosting a promotional tour in order to get butts in seats (Perdikaki). There is a capitalist element to movie adaptations that are not ignorant to the need to be widespread in a profitable way. One

can argue that this takes away from the creativity or variety from an adaptation, even if Perdikaki herself does not. One could receive internet clout if one is known for having created a meme, but that is a rare occurrence online especially when one takes account of anonymous usernames. Memes do of course have to make rhetorical moves that are either funny, interesting, relatable, etc. In other words, they have to make some kind of move to become viral, but that is not always the intent behind a meme. Often times, especially in Tumblr communities, creators become upset when their posts become “too viral” and escape the online community they were meant to stay within. Still, the intent is most often to share the meme, and so users must follow certain conventions such as the ones mentioned above. Memes of classic literature then are creative adaptations that are created with an understanding of the story and characters and offers something of substance such as humor or insight. They are not adaptations that have to consider economic factors, they are simply meant to be shared and enjoyed. Memes strengthen a community and empower young people online to become creators of interactive media. Memes are a halfway point between creating and socializing, which brings us to the following question (Brennan et al).

What do memes do to *The Great Gatsby*'s legacy? Memes are the born and shared from community, whether it be urban legends passed down such as Big Foot, inside jokes drawn on the doors of public bathrooms, or a cartoon frog creating political uproar on Facebook (Blackmore et al). Memes are also mini adaptations of their source material. In the case of *Great Gatsby* memes, they are little scenes from the film that are cut up and glued back together to make some kind of point. Many users online are young people, some of which might be reading *The Great Gatsby* in their high school classes, some may not be. Memes are funny, they're short.

Memos shared amongst young people spark an interest. One could see a meme about *The Great Gatsby* and suddenly want to get a bit more context as to why said meme is mentioning someone humorously getting run over by a car. Memos affect the life of classic literature such as *The Great Gatsby* by making it a relevant topic, and a part of the cultural zeitgeist.

CHAPTER 2: REMIXED OR RUINED?

I have discussed the benefits of the memeification of classic literature such as reaching a broader and newer audience. The question that remains, however, is whether this is worth it. In this chapter, kitsch is given deeper speculation and criticism while applying it to the legacy of *The Great Gatsby*. While we previously considered the pros of memes as an adaptation, we will now explore the cons. Is the memefication of classic literature a positive evolutionary step in adaptation or does it bastardize the original form?

The majority of *Gatsby* memes have similar intents which are either to satirize or to give commentary about the story. Memes in general have the convention of being humorous. This then categorizes a majority of *Gatsby* memes as comedic adaptations of the original work. By adapting Fitzgerald's work into pastiche, it is understandable why memes can be seen as a net negative. Even the memes that are meant to give commentary to *The Great Gatsby* use humor as a rhetorical move.

SparkNotes is a company built on educating students about literature by translating texts using wording that is easier to understand. Their social media posts on Twitter and Instagram take scenes from popular shows such as *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *New Girl* and connect dialogue with references to literature. In one instance, SparkNotes references *Gatsby*'s devotion to Daisy Buchanan by using a scene from *New Girl* in which a character establishes that their intense need for something. SparkNotes is trying to draw comparisons to something relevant for younger audiences who may be fans of this show. Note, however, that even when SparkNotes is trying to be informative, they are still using humor to engage with audiences.

Memes are intrinsically humorous adaptations of literature that poke fun either at the imagery or story of *The Great Gatsby*, that means memes are a form of parody.

Parody has had its own issues in being seen as a serious art, being seen as “static” and “trivial” by literary scholars (Chambers xi). Robert Chambers argues that “parody, except when the work is shoddy, is not inherently derivative, parasitic, or unoriginal” and I argue the same thing about memes (Chambers). Chambers’ defense of parody goes against some ideas of kitsch which is a commodified, often unoriginal photocopy of an original work and photocopied into oblivion. However, while memes take inspiration from some original work, like parody, that doesn’t necessarily make them unoriginal in their reinterpretation. I’ve mentioned before that commodification can be a positive thing as memes have the power to reach anyone. However, there is the issue of diminished artistry. While the avant-garde “detaches” from society, kitsch embeds itself in society and becomes something obtainable (Clement). What does this do for the artistic value of classic literature if it is allowed to be ripped apart and appropriated by anyone with a computer? Is it disrespectful to the artists intention? Perdikaki discusses a similar situation in her article when looking at adaptation as a creative translation:

Adaptation in this sense can be viewed as creative translation in that the message of the source material is filtered through the creative outlook of the adapter(s) and is projected reinterpreted on a different medium and platform. Such definition removes the focus away from equivalence between the two texts (a preoccupation with which has led to the fidelity debate in Adaptation Studies) and onto the subjectivity and creativity at work in the adaptation process. Adopting such an approach to the analysis of adaptation can allow for a more holistic understanding of the adaptation process (Perdikaki).

Looking at memes as a “creative translation” filtered through the eyes of the adapter helps to erase the need for comparing two pieces of work (Perdikaki). Instead of memes becoming the new *Great Gatsby* they are instead new products molded by new people that pay homage to the original. We should look at them as separate entities and take into account what message the adapter is trying to add to it. I argue that just because memes of *The Great Gatsby* exist, they don’t necessarily take away from the source material.

If memes are parody adaptations, are they “shoddy” ones? (Chambers). Baz Luhrmann’s film is an adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* novel which garnered admiration and interest due to its bold stylistic choices. Luhrmann is known for his flashy lights, audacious use of music, and beautiful imagery. His adaptations add style and interest for new audiences. It does not poke fun at the original work like *Gatsby* memes do. Scholars like Chambers have argued that parody, unless badly made, is not worthless. However, are memes well made? Do they add something worthwhile to the original work to make it a good adaptation and a good parody? As mentioned before, we are looking at memes through the creativity and lens of the creators (Perdikaki). They are separated from the original and shouldn’t necessarily be directly compared but instead seen as translations of the original text. However, they can be assessed as worthwhile adaptations in a different way, or rather they can be viewed as well-made or badly made. Are memes shoddy parody or good parody? Do they hold their own as adaptations? Memes are kitsch after all, so they are cheap and easy to produce commodities. It can be argued that they diminish the beauty of the original art, but if we are to separate it and look at it as its own creation, we must reassess the intent of memes.

Memes have the power to deliver a quick and efficient message, but they do not have the bandwidth to support an entire novel's worth of storytelling. Nor can memes display every nuance shown in the film adaptation, although there are memes that contain entire movies in gif form. These are the exception however, and still do not contain music or audio. There is a lot of nuance when looking at memes as parody adaptations of the original works. For instance, one cannot compare them directly to their predecessors as they are entirely new objects being dealt with. However, they are still adaptations and must include some semblance of the originals to be properly called adaptations. Memes lack the time that film or book adaptations have, and so along with losing some visual and auditory artistry, they also lose depth. A meme can display Jay Gatsby's image and reference the novel or film, but it could never tell the entire story with the same level of detail. Memes as adaptations certainly run the risk of being too minimalist in their approach and reducing deeper meanings. Refer to the often memeified scene in which Daisy runs Myrtle over with her car. This is meant to be a dramatic scene that highlights Daisy's carelessness (Fitzgerald) but instead becomes a joke about the absurdity of the situation. Memes run the risk of being surface level and reductive by moving away from all of the meaning and depth behind a scene. The memification of *The Great Gatsby* risks losing many of the layered themes present in the novel as well. Typically, even a parody film could include these elements, but a still image or Gif cannot.

Memes use bold and easy to read font, are often one to four images, and sometimes cut up different images to create a new product. One can say that this completely ruins Luhrmann's adaptation by removing beautiful imagery and music and reducing it to a single cheap image and a funny reference. It is true that *Gatsby* memes often take one image or scene from its source

which can offer a shallow reading to those who interact with the meme. However, as stated before, memes are not meant to replace the book or film adaptation but rather extend them to new audiences by means of short, commodified materials. The lack of aesthetic beauty does not remove a memes creativity or artistry, the goals are simply different. While Luhrmann wanted to bring the novel to life through film by using his iconic style, memes intend to comment on, or reference said novel and film. Memes utilize the imagery or story of their sources to begin new conversations.

Mememes are a community affair. They are inside jokes shared across the internet. As mentioned before, memes help students bridge the gap between the content they hold personally dear to them, and literature they are learning in school. Hartman et al describe a scenario in which English Language Arts teachers have noticed that students connect subjects in school with popular memes,

For instance, our students frequently referred to current memes in order to draw parallels with what we were studying. This often was followed by half of the class laughing or gasping while the other half glanced around in confusion. The benefit of students making these types of connections to popular culture, in this case memes, was that students who made the connections had to explain the contexts and purposes of the memes, as well as how the memes' creators conveyed the messages (Hartman et al).

The intent then for memes, is not to replicate perfectly, but to reference, and to instill an interest. Students can read Fitzgerald's work and not necessarily gain the novel's worth of information, but rather, the spark or recognition. Popular culture is very important to the youth. It helps young

students relate what could possibly be difficult information to something in their day to day lives. Memes are an excellent gateway drug into the world of classic literature. While some may argue that memes reduce the literature, I argue that memes introduce the literature in a simple and perhaps funny way. The intent of the meme is not to provide another version of *The Great Gatsby*, but to make commentary in a quickly accessible and humorous way.

The argument of whether or not memes are “good” adaptations lays in the intent and effect of the meme. If we follow Perdikaki’s advice, we shouldn’t be expecting faithfulness from adaptations such as memes (Perdikaki). So then, if not by faithfulness, how do we judge that a meme is a well-made adaptation? Perdikaki quotes Bastin to argue that adaptation is a “translation technique” that “ultimately aims at relevance rather than accuracy” (Bastin 2011 as quoted in Perdikaki). Thus, when considering the validity of memes, I argue that the relevancy that Perdikaki writes about is what we should consider. Memes are relevant through pop culture online. They are a way in which young people communicate, joke, spread news, and as mentioned before, draw connections to classic literature (Hartman et al). Memes have proven their social relevancy by becoming the method users online prefer to communicate in. There is rarely an online community that doesn’t utilize memes as some form of communication. There is of course, relevance to the original work that must be considered. *Great Gatsby* memes use either imagery or reference to the novel or the film. If a meme did not incorporate some kind of reference back to the source material, I could argue that it is not a good adaptive meme. However, if a meme refers back to the source material in a format that is understandably received as a meme through online communities, then it is a serviceable meme. Not every *Gatsby* meme is a parody adaptation, but every *Gatsby* meme works as an adaptation that furthers the legacy of

the novel. Ultimately, some may argue that *Gatsby* memes bastardize the original work in some way as memes can be seen as reductive and devoid of any depth. However, memes extend the life of classic literature by reaching young audiences and give them a connection to pop culture that they can relate to.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began by demonstrating how *Gatsby* memes began on social media sites like Tumblr.com after the initial trailer of the 2013 Baz Luhrmann adaptation. Memes such as the “I’m Gatsby” meme affect the legacy of Fitzgerald’s work in different ways. Online users were able to comment on Fitzgerald’s work within an online space. The medium of memes meant that any social media user could create this kind of content without an existing platform. Memes are a reflection of popular culture online and have their function of being means of communication. *Gatsby* memes have gone through multiple iterations online. Some memes are strictly referential or educational such as the kind of content that Sparknotes.com produces. Others take more liberty with the meme format by altering text and visuals. This alteration of the original source gives a new meaning that helps the author communicate some kind of commentary on Fitzgerald’s work or remixes the content to create a new work. This transformation of Fitzgerald’s work shows us how users online feel about his work and how they like to interact with it.

This thesis has explored Luhrmann’s adaptation as kitsch and memes as “double kitsch.” This leads to questions to be explored beyond this thesis such as if there is a place beyond memes. Will *Gatsby* be commodified further and further? Or are memes the last stop? With the rise of new social media platforms such as TikTok, one can certainly consider where *Gatsby*’s online presence can go from here. Currently, memes are the vessel with which people are interacting with *Gatsby* online. Memes have the ability to reach wide audiences despite a large audience. This gives online users the chance to insert their own take on the classic novel and start

a conversation online. Memes connect with students especially. They correlate the subjects that they learn in school with pop culture and online media. This sparks interest in topics such as classic literature and develops a deeper understanding of the text. Not by providing a novel's worth of information in a meme, but by explaining a scene in humorous and very basic formatting. In a sense, memes can act as a form of advertisement for classic literature such as *The Great Gatsby*. Humorous little snippets of remixed content that highlight notable scenes from the film give just enough to pique the interest of young audiences. This brings Fitzgerald to audiences that may have not been as interested in his context. Even if schools introduce his work to students, memes can ensure that those students care in the first place.

Memes as kitsch brings up interesting questions about the bastardization of classic literature. In Greenberg's definition, it is implied that kitsch means that something isn't really art (Greenberg). Memes can be reductive of the original source as they are distributed in short visual forms that must condense ideas. Additionally, the humor that is inherent in meme formats means that dramatic scenes may become jokes and ruined in some way. However, as I've argued, despite these things memes are a net positive to *Gatsby's* longevity. The sense of community that memes draw together can keep Fitzgerald's work socially relevant in the digital age.

Memes are adaptations that should be seen as parody when humorous (which is often). I've used Katerina Perdikaki's arguments on adaptation studies to argue that memes "translate and transform" Fitzgerald's work (Perdikaki). Memes, like adaptations, shouldn't be viewed as new versions of *The Great Gatsby* per se, but mini adaptations that highlight the creator's message. They should be read with the author's creative intent instead of being searched for holes and missing text. Memes just aren't the kind of vessel that movies or plays are for instance.

Memes are just small enough to get a message across, and they should be judged on how well they do this, and how they are relevant to the original source (Perdikaki).

Gatsby memes have been important in Fitzgerald's legacy. Memes are evidence that the internet is interested in something in some capacity. This matters in the grand scheme of Fitzgerald's legacy because the internet is an ever-growing host for communities and communication. Memes have sparked interest in *Gatsby* for students while also potentially introducing the novel to some. While there are drawbacks to memes, there is no denying that they are important on social media, and they only seem to evolve as time goes on. There may be an eventual shift to short form video content when it comes to *Gatsby*'s online presence, but it is evident that memes such as the "I'm Gatsby" meme are still a part of our digital lives. Despite their issues, memes certainly should not be pushed to the side when it comes to interpreting and evaluating classic literature in the future. Their footprint online gives us proof that digital communities engage with Fitzgerald's work and want to be a part of the conversation.

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